

# **INCREASING A RELATIONSHIP QUALITY TO ENHANCE CUSTOMER LOYALTY USING CONTACT FREQUENCY AS A MEDIATING VARIABLE**

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## **Abstract**

*Tour and Travel Agency (TTA) is one key player in the tight competition in the hospitality and tourism industry. The key success to win the competition is by creating an excellent relationship quality and loyalty with the customers. A good relationship depends on the ability of the organization to create customer satisfaction, increase customer trust and having a full commitment to serve the customers better. Long-term relationship will be created if the company able to establish communication system on a regular basis with customers by increasing contact frequency and leveraging advances in technology devices. The unit of analysis in this study was the entire customer of TTA. The population for this study was all the customer of TTA, which are members of ASITA (the Associate of Indonesia Travel Agent), located in Tangerang, Banten Province, Indonesia. In particular, the respondents were all the customers who have used the services of TTA more than more than 3 times. The data was collected directly from all the respondents using prevalidated structured questionnaire. This study described that the customer satisfaction has the greatest effect into customer trust. Both of these dimensions, which are also supported by customer commitment, will develop a good relationship quality between customer and TTA that will create a strong customer loyalty.*

**Keywords:** *Customer Satisfaction, Trust, Customer Commitment, Relationship Quality, Contact Frequency, Customer Loyalty*

## INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Indonesia is growing rapidly along with the strengthening purchasing power of Indonesian people. The tour and travel businesses as part of the tourism industry are also growing rapidly. The rapid developments are including the developments of information technology; increased price, intense competition and changing on customer's attitudes and preferences. The intense competition in the tourism industry challenges each player to create some marketing strategies to attract and retain customers. The tour and travel agency (TTA) must focus on delivering outstanding services to their customers and in the same time managing the customer relationship. Myhal (2008) stated that since customer is the most important aspect of the success of the company, its presence should be maintained and managed properly (Myhal, *et.al.*, 2008).

Strengthening the relationship and transforming to indifferent customer into loyal ones and serving customers as a client considered as other marketing goals. Customer loyalty can be created as long as TTA able to make an integrated marketing approach, which in not only rely on the internal capabilities of the company itself, but also involves marketing strategy that focuses on building relationships with customer (Chan, 2003). Relationship marketing management is a crucial factor in building success in the market because it influences and maintains customer loyalty in the business. Moreover, relationship quality captures the nature of a relationship, which in turn provides positive benefits to the customers (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997). Hence, loyalty, participation and cooperation from the customers are becoming more and more important elements in enabling the TTA to build long-term relationship with customer.

There are two main reasons why relationship marketing needs to be applied in the tour and travel industry: The characteristic of industry requires a highly human-contact and also a touch of tourism hospitality, and the customers need intensive approach to get complete information before making a buying decision.

Customer satisfaction, trust and commitment are basic concepts that develop the relationship quality definition. (Moliner, *et al.*, 2006). Customer satisfaction is a positive affective state resulting from customer's appraisal of all aspects of its working relationship with the company (Bajs, *et al.*, 2015). Trust defined as a belief of customer's trustworthiness that results from the expertise, reliability or intentionality of the company (Han, *et al.*, 2008). Meanwhile, commitment is an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Ravald & Gronroos, 1996). The stronger relationship quality between the customers and TTA, the higher the customer loyalty into the TTA. The loyal customers who are satisfied with the TTA will recommend their positive experiences into other people. (Ferguson, 2008). Relationship quality also becomes a

key factor to secure the loyal customer base and to reach a high level of profitability (Vieira, *et al.*, 2008).

Earlier research found that the relationship quality was built by three main constructs, namely: commitment, satisfaction and confidence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Moliner, 2006). This relationship quality must be supported by the level of frequency relationship, which is characterized by the frequency number of contacts made by the personnel of TTA. (Crosby *et al.*, 2003). A previous study also stated that the relationship quality will be succeed when the highly frequency contact was powered (Crosby, *et al.*, 2003).

Bajs (2015) in his study in tour operator industry got the conclusion that the expertise and friendliness of tour operator employees combined with the reputation of the tour operator itself will increase the customer's confidence in using their services. Meanwhile, the aspect of familiarity and politeness of the tour operator employees will lead to customer satisfaction. (Crosby, *et al.*, 2003).

Expertise, sincerity and reliability are also other factors that strengthen the customer relationship quality (Moliner, *et al.*, 2006). Another recommendation of the previous researcher said that there was a positive relationship between the skill (and ability/authority) and trust (Crosby, *et al.*, 2003).

Dagger (2009) in his research saw the influence of effects of customer contact frequency and it's duration of the *Customer-Reported Relationship Strength* (CRRS) with the consideration influence of variable satisfaction, trust, and commitment into the CRRS. The results showed that the frequency and duration of contacts relationship had a positive influence of the CRRS, and the duration of relationship become moderating variable which influence the frequency of contact.

This research chose tourism industry, specifically: TTA as a unit analysis. The significant findings on dimensions of satisfaction; trust; commitment into relationship quality and finally into customer loyalty will be highlighted and analyzed. This study also added a new variable, namely: frequency contacts as a moderating variable based on the fact that the TTA also has low switching barrier to maintain the customer.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to examine the dimensions of customer satisfaction, customer trust and customer commitment into relationship quality and finally creating customer loyalty by considering the contact frequency as a moderating variable.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Customer Satisfaction

The sense of customer satisfaction was conceptualized as a loyalty research in a thorough evaluation of the consumer experience with a service provider, not just specific transactions based on satisfaction of judgments (Oliver, 1999; Moliner *et al.*, 2006; Han, 2008). Satisfaction is the degree to which performance meets customer's expectations (Negi and Ketema, 2013). It also an emotional state that occurs in response to a positive evaluation of the interaction experiences (Chang and Ku, 2009). If customers are satisfied with a product, they increasingly tend to repurchase its products or services and become a loyal customer. Customer satisfaction is considered as one of the main factors that influence customer loyalty (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006).

### Customer Trust

Trust defined as willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman *et al.*, 1993); which means that there has be a belief in the other partner's trustworthiness that results from the expertise, reliability or intentionally of that partner (Han *et al.*, 2008). A key component of trust is the extent to which the customer believes that the organization has intentions and motives beneficial to the customer and is concerned with creating positive customer outcomes. The high level of trust enable each party to focus on long-term benefits of the relationship and willingness not try to exploit the new relationship at the expense of the long-term cooperation (Bajs, 2015).

According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment and trust together encourage marketers:

- To work towards preserving relationship investments by cooperating with exchange partners;
- To resist attractive short-term alternatives in favor of the long-term expected benefits of staying with existing partners;
- To view potentially high-risk actions more favorably because they believe that their partners will not act opportunistically.

The transaction service relies heavily on trust, because of the nature of service is not real yield uncertainty and risk for consumers is good for purchase or during use. Trust is defined as a willingness to rely on a business partner. Confidence in the credibility of the company based on how far the consumer trust the promise of the company, that the company is honest, and effective and reliable (Berry 1995; Crosby, *et al.*, 2003; Han, 2008).

### Customer Commitment

Commitment is an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Ortiz, *et.al.*, 2015). Commitment is positively related to loyalty and repeated purchase and an essential component of long-term loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 2004). Furthermore, he said that commitment towards a brand is based on three principal behavioral consequences:

- The repurchase of the brand
- Resistance to modifications generated from the competing universe
- Resistance to negative feelings generated by specific dissatisfactions.

Feelings about an emotional entanglement with a partner business, formed through the contact quenching and reflect a deep fondness, involves the dedication upon the maintenance of relationships (Moliner, *et al.* 2006).

### Relationship Quality

A key concept in relationship quality is the development of an individualized, one-to-one relationship with a customer that becomes increasingly relevant and focused, as the company learns about the customer needs and wants over time. As the relationship tie established and continue developed, customers started to feel safe and comfort, and thus trust in developing. Over the longer period, more and tighter ties were developed with its customer specific needs or wants and more on one-to-one relationship which emphasized on the relationship quality elements of trust, commitment and loyalty. Relationship quality was defined by Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997) as the degree of appropriateness of a relationship to fulfill the needs of the customers associated with the relationship. Better relationship quality is accompanied by greater satisfaction, trust and commitment (Bajs, 2015).

Relationship quality is also defined as a condition in which consumers rely on the integrity of the company and have the future performance of the company due to his past satisfactory performance levels on a consistent basis. Thus, between the company and the customer relationship patterns occur based on satisfaction, trust, and commitment that produce a feeling of interdependence. Therefore, it will be created an adaptability and mutual understanding situation of the role and the purpose of each party. At this kind of stage the purchase action done by the customer would happen automatically (Moliner, 2007; Han, 2008).

### Contact Frequency

Understanding customer needs is the best way to determine the optimal frequency of contact. The frequency of contact is the number of good communication between the salesperson and

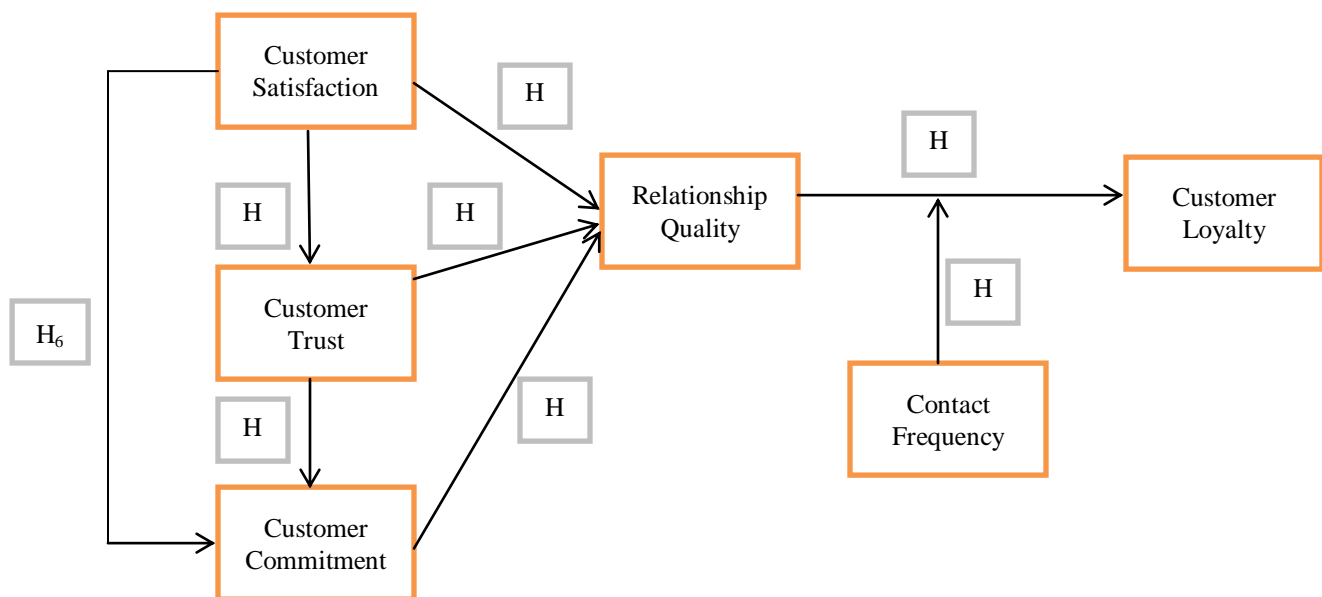
the customer or vice versa, and a large number of meetings/face-to-face contact between both of them (Crosby, *et al.* 2003; Dagger, 2009).

### Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is described as a deeply held commitment to re-buy or repurchase a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts are having the potential to cause switching behavior (Crosby, *et al.*, 2003). Customer loyalty will also show the degree in which the customer doing repeated buying behavior from the same service provider; have a positive attitude towards the service provider, and only consider using this service provider when needed. This aspect is seen as a deeper dimension and involves awareness of customers in the decision-making process at the time of evaluation of alternative choices before any purchase is made. Based on this definition, the characteristic of a very loyal customer is as follows:

- 1) Regularly use the service provided by the service provider;
- 2) Really liked the company and holds high about it; and
- 3) Never consider using another service provider (Berry, 1995; Parasuraman&Zeithaml, 1998; Han, 2008).

### Research Framework



## Research Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive effect of customer satisfaction into relationship quality.

H<sub>2</sub>: There is an effect of customer trust into relationship quality.

H<sub>3</sub>: There is a positive effect of customer commitment into relationship quality.

H<sub>4</sub>: There is a strong effect of customer satisfaction into customer trust.

H<sub>5</sub>: There is an effect of customer trust into customer commitment.

H<sub>6</sub>: There is a positive effect of customer satisfaction into customer commitment.

H<sub>7</sub>: There is a strong relationship quality into customer loyalty.

H<sub>8</sub>: There is the effect of contact frequency as moderating variable of the relationship between the relationship quality and customer loyalty.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### The Study

For the study purpose, a descriptive research design was adopted. The research questionnaires in this study consisted two parts. The first part was drawn for collecting demographic information profile of the respondents and the second part of questionnaire represented the main research questions is taken from the previous study which are adjusted with the current respondent. Each question will be measured base on Likert 5<sup>th</sup> option spectrum coded from: Scale 1 = Very Disagree, Scale 2 = Disagree, Scale 3 = Doubtful, Scale 4 = Agree and Scale 5 = Very Agree.

The research design in this study is hypotheses testing using cross-sectional time dimension; field study research, causality with individual as unit analysis using the Structural Equation Models (SEM) technique and the Lisrel Program.

Based on SEM rule of thumb, it's enough using comparison 5:1 with the minimum of sample = 200 respondents. For this study, the researcher distributed 215 questionnaires, with 15 questionnaires were used for the back-up.

### Sampling

The unit of analysis in this study is the entire customer of TTA. Meanwhile the population for this study is all the customer of TTA, which are members of ASITA (the Associate of Indonesia Travel Agent), located in Tangerang, Banten Province, Indonesia. In particular, the respondents were all the customers who have used the services of TTA more than more than 3 times. The data was collected directly from all the respondents. The respondents answered all the questions listed in the questionnaires. For the sample collection method, this study used one kind of non-probability sampling methods, also known as the convenience sampling. Even this

method offered easy accessible to get respondents, the researcher must be careful in making more generalized conclusion of the data analysis.

### **Measurement tools**

Satisfaction is the degree to which performance meets customer's expectation and consists of the following dimension: all products/services offered had met the customer's expectation; high-quality products/services and overall satisfaction in consuming the product or experiencing the services (Negi and Ketema, 2013).

The dimension of commitment was explained using a scale adapted from Zineldin&Jonsson (2003), which consists of: customer has a long-term relationship with the company; concern on the success of the company; proud buying the company's products/services; being a loyal customer of the company and willing to participate in company's activities.

The dimension of trust was measured by adapting Morgan & Hunt study (1994), namely: highly-integrity company; the company always keep on promises while delivering product/services; the company is trustable and the company is highly-trusted.

Beatson *et.al* (2008) conceptualized that the relationship quality composed of three dimensions: customer happy about the relationship with the company; an open and honest company and the company devotes sufficient time and effort to improve the relationship.

Meanwhile the aspect of loyalty is measured by variables developed by Wu (2011), which are consists of: customer will say positive things to others; recommend the company to others; encourage friends to meet the frontliners before making buying decision; willing to buy the product at normal price; and the company is the first choice for the customer in making buying decision.

The contact frequency was measured by the frequency of the sales agents make a contact with the customers on the regular basis; the kind of media was used in making contact and the updated information shared into the customers (Zineldin& Johnson, 2000).

### **Validity & Reliability Testing**

Validity was ensure by correlating among scores for each item in form of questions using Pearson correlation and the pre-test with critical  $t > 0.795$  showing that all items have greater correlation value and VALID.

For reliability, all values yielded alpha coefficient exceeded the values of 0.50 suggested by Nunnaly (1978). The pre-test showed that the alpha reliability value is greater than 0.795 and VALID.



## Model Estimation

### Test of Model Fit Measurement

In this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is used.

### Structural Model Fit Test

Evaluation on analysis of structural model includes examination of correlation of latent variables in this research. If significance degree reaches  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $t\text{-value} \geq 1.96$ , then significance of every coefficient that represents causal relation that is hypothesized can be tested systematically. The structural equations model which is using in this study will explain the relationship among six variables namely:

a. Three exogenous variables:

$\xi_1$  = customer satisfaction, which is measured by three dimensions ( $X_1, X_2, X_3$ )

$\xi_2$  = customer trust, which is measured by four dimensions ( $X_4, X_5, X_6, X_7$ )

$\xi_3$  = customer commitment, which is measured by five dimensions ( $X_8, X_9, X_{10}, X_{11}, X_{12}$ ).

b. Three endogenous variables:

$\eta_1$  = relationship quality, which is measured by three dimensions ( $Y_1, Y_2, Y_3$ )

$\eta_2$  = customer loyalty, which is measured by five dimensions ( $Y_4, Y_5, Y_6, Y_7, Y_8$ )

$\eta_3$  = contact frequency, which is measured by three dimensions ( $Y_9, Y_{10}, Y_{11}$ ).

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Test of Structural Model Fitness

From the Goodness-of Fit (GOF) test showed that all the covariance matrix of the data samples were suitable with the estimated covariance matrix of all population (Table 1). Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between research framework and the research theory was perfect.

Table 1. Design Summary for Goodness for Fit Testing Model

GOF Indicator	Estimated Value	Testing Result	Conclusion
<b>Absolute Fit Value</b>			
GFI	$GFI \geq 0.90$	0.90	Good Fit
RMSEA	$RMSEA < 0.08$	0.048	Good Fit
<b>Incremental Fit Value</b>			
NNFI	$NNFI > 0.90$	0.98	Good Fit
NFI	$NFI > 0.90$	0.97	Good Fit
AGFI	$AGFI > 0.90$	0.91	Good Fit
RFI	$RFI > 0.90$	0.96	Good Fit
IFI	$IFI > 0.90$	0.98	Good Fit
CFI	$CFI > 0.90$	0.98	Good Fit

*Analysis using LISREL 8.80*

## Hypotheses Testing

Table 2. Summary of Result of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	VARIABLES	Coefficient Standard	t-Value	Statistical Conclusion
H1	CS → RQ	0.88	6.26	Data Supported
H2	CT → RQ	-0.06	-0.38	Data Supported
H3	CC → RQ	0.02	0.19	Data Supported
H4	CS → CT	0.89	11.62	Data Supported
H5	CT → CC	0.88	3.48	Data Supported
H6	CS → CC	0.30	1.86	Data Supported
H7	RQ → CL	0.92	10.91	Data Supported
H8	CF → RQ into CL	-0.06	1.34	Data Supported

The result of all hypothetical tests indicates that all hypotheses tested on all respondents are supported by data. Following are the results of the description of each variable estimator:

- Customer Satisfaction:** Mostly all the responders are always satisfied with the average value = 4.73.
- Customer Trust:** The data showed that the highest indicator on the respondent's answer of customer trust dimension was the TTA always keep on promises while delivering product/services and may be relied upon for solving the customers problem, with the average value = 4.68.
- Customer Commitment:** From the long-term relationship, customer had a feeling of comfort because TTA is informative and treat them in personal ways, with the average value = 4.83.
- Relationship Quality:** All respondents prefer a valuable relationship with the TTA as long as the company devotes sufficient time and effort to improve the relationship, with the average value = 4.70
- Contact Frequency:** The highest value (=4.88) comes as employees of TTA visit the customers regularly to offer the company's product and services. The employees could keep in touch with their customers by sending email, SMS or bulletin.

- f. **Customer Loyalty:** All customers who are satisfied with the TTA will be loyal customers and said that specific TTA will be the first choice for them in making buying decision (the average value = 4.76).

## DISCUSSION

First hypothesis stated that customer satisfaction has a positive effect to the relationship quality with *the value component coefficient of 0.88 and the value of the t-value amounted to 6.26*. That means that the higher the value of the person's satisfaction in receiving product/services provided by the TTA will cause the higher level relational quality happens.

Second hypothesis also said that customer trust will have an effect to the relationship quality. From the results of the data analysis proves that this second hypothesis  $H_2$  is not proven by *the t-value -0.38 and component coefficient was -0.06*. This means that the aspect of customer trust did not significantly affect the relationship quality.

Third hypothesis stated that there is a good effect of the customer commitment into relationship quality. This research showed that significant influence does not occur between the dimension of customer commitment into the relationship quality with *a value of the t-value 0.19 and component coefficient was 0.02*. This means that an increase in customer commitment will not cause increased automatically the relationship quality. In other words, the relationship between customers with the TTA is not only caused by the satisfaction experienced by the customers.

Fourth hypothesis said that the customer satisfaction has positive influence against the customer trust. This study indicates that the hypothesis is proven to significantly with *a value of the t-value 11.62 and component coefficient 0.89*. This means that the stronger customer satisfaction will lead to an increase in customer trust to the TTA.

Meanwhile the fifth hypothesis declared that there is a positive effect of the customer trust into customer commitment. Authentication is done on the research indicates that the hypothesis is supported significantly the data with the *t-value 3.48 and component coefficient was 0.88*. This result means that the higher the customer confidence level will improve also their commitment to TTA.

The sixth hypothesis also stated that the customer satisfaction has positive effect against customer commitment. The result of this study indicated that there was no significant influence between the customer satisfaction and their commitment with a value of *the t-value 1.86 and component coefficient was 0.30*. This means that no change occurred *the customer commitment towards the TTA caused by the increase of customer satisfaction*.

The seventh hypothesis also stated that the relationship quality has the positive impact of customer loyalty. This hypothesis is supported significantly with the value of *the t-value 10.91 and component coefficient was 0.92*. This suggests that the higher the level of closeness of relationship will improve their consumer loyalty towards TTA.

The final hypothesis described that the contact frequency dimensions affects the relationship quality and customer loyalty. The evidentiary data indicated that a value of *the t-value that occurs is 1.34 with component coefficient of -0.06*. This means that the latent variable does not significantly affect the relationship between the relationship quality and customer loyalty. Along with the advances in technology, the company can take advantage in spreading the useful information to customers such as: e-mail, phone messaging, blackberry messenger or using social media like Facebook and Twitter to deliver information to customers.

## CONCLUSION

The existence of a positive influence of customer satisfaction into the relationship quality with the *t-value* amounted to 6.26 showed the data obtained support the  $H_1$ . The results of the study also showed that customer trust did not affect the relationship quality with the *t-value* -0.38. It can be concluded that the data obtained did not support the  $H_2$ . The absence of significant influence between the customer commitment into the relationship quality with the *t-value* 0.19 also showed that the data did not support the  $H_3$ . Meanwhile the data obtained support the  $H_4$  because customer satisfaction has a positive and significant effect into customer trust. Furthermore, variable customer trust also has a positive and significant impact on customer commitment with *t-value* 3.48 and this result support the  $H_5$ .

However, there was no significant influence between customer satisfactions into customer commitment, as evidenced by the *t-value* 1.86, do not support  $H_6$ . The variable of quality relationship has a positive and significant effect of customer loyalty with *t-value* of 10.91. This data obtained is support the  $H_7$ . Contact frequency has no effect and is not significant to the quality relationship and customer loyalty with the *t-value* of 1.34. It can be said the data obtained support the  $H_8$ , in which the contact frequency as a moderating variable between the relationship quality and customer satisfaction.

From all the variables discussed and tested in this research, it described that the customer satisfaction has the greatest effect into customer trust. Both of these dimensions, which are also supported by customer commitment, will develop a good relationship quality between customer and TTA that will create a strong customer loyalty.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

### The Theoretical Implications

The quality of the relationship between customers and TTA is affected by the level of customer satisfaction, trust and commitment. It also can be concluded that the dimensions of satisfaction, trust and commitment have positive effects on the relationship quality. Furthermore, it will also have a significant effect into customer loyalty. The commitment variable that occurs on the consumer at the TTA is caused by the presence of satisfaction and trust. In other words, commitment to the TTA is built upon the trust and satisfaction of the customers. If it developed continuously, it will have a positive impact into customer loyalty into TTA.

### The Managerial Implications

The present model can be considered as an empirical approach capturing the major part of customer responses of global tourism industry demonstrating the relationship between the related constructs and their direct or indirect influence on loyalty. From a managerial view, it is apparent that relationship quality lies on the heart of this specific model affecting directly satisfaction, trust, commitment. Thus, the customer loyalty is highly dependent on the dimension of relationship quality. Company should maintain their relationship quality with the customer by establishing frequent contact with the customers in order to foster a loyalty. A higher relationship quality will increase customer intention of repurchase.

The role of satisfaction, trust and commitment is also a strategic importance as they all directly associated with the creation of higher relationship quality and finally influencing directly behavioral intentions to buy the product/services. This result is consistent with the previous study from Morgan and Hunt (1994) who is stated that the companies should look beyond satisfaction, trust and commitment to develop customer loyalty in order to ensure long-term relationship.

The continuous customer satisfaction will lead to the construction of a good relationship. The customers tend to repurchase the products/services and also will recommend their good experience to their friends and relatives. TTA management needs to do a strategy to increase the satisfaction of its customers by improving service and knowledge of their employees in the buying interaction process. TTA management must keep trying to increase consumer confidence by improving employee's ability to understand the needs required by consumers; to help resolve customer problems; to fulfill the promise that has being made, to be honest and transparent in providing information, especially in pricing.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

First, the respondent of the study is limited in one specific industry who is customers of TTA in Tangerang region. As such, the applicability of the current findings to other industry contexts would need further research and should be extended to respondents from different industries. Future research should also test whether the issues and applications discussed here are applicable and helpful in other industry, especially in service industry such as hotels, airlines, local operators, restaurants, entertainment venues and more.

Secondly, this study concentrated only on customer side of the TTA-customer relationships. It focuses only what the customer perspectives on how the TTA deliver their products/services to them. Future studies may address another point of view by incorporating deeply on data collection form both customers and TTA staffs.

Thirdly, the study considers the contact frequency as a mediating variable that can affect the relationship quality and the customer loyalty. The result of the study is consistent with the previous research showing the importance of the contact frequency in a long term relationship. The future research could elaborate more another variables that influence the relationship quality, so it can be applied and contribute in management decision making.

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