Service Convenience and Customer Loyalty among Non-Rated Hotels in Murang'a County, Kenya

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Abstract
Service environment is characterised by intense competition as organisations rival each other for customers. This underlines the significance of customer loyalty, as it is vital for a firm's survival and growth. Building a loyal customer base has not only become a major marketing goal, but it is also an important basis for developing a sustainable competitive advantage. Keeping customers has been a challenge among hotels in the hospitality sector. Customers will continue to defect from one hotel to another, which has cost implications for the customer and the hotel itself. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effects of service convenience on customer loyalty in hotels in Murangá County, Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to establish the effects of SERVCON scale dimensions (access convenience, decision convenience, transaction convenience, benefit, and post-benefit conveniences) on customer loyalty. The study targeted establishments that are hotels in the County. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used. Data was collected from customers dining in the hotels through self-reported questionnaires. Moreover, 384 respondents were conveniently selected. Variables were measured using adapted and modified constructs from previous research. Questionnaires were pretested in one hotel in Kiambu County to assess their usability for the study. Content validity was used to assess the validity of the questionnaire. The reliability of the constructs was examined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient technique. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (multiple linear regression analysis) were used to analyse quantitative data. The study revealed that service convenience dimensions have a significant positive influence on customer loyalty. The study results provide strong evidence that service convenience influences customer loyalty positively. This finding has great implications for managers of hotels in Murang'a County. Foremost, there is a need to ensure that information regarding the hotel is accessible via different platforms to ease customers' decision-making. This can be done through an investment into available social media platforms and hiring sales representatives to keep the platforms active and up to date. Secondly, managers of hotels in Murang'a County need to ensure that it is easy to locate and access the hotels. To this end, there is a need to use crystal clear sign boards and lobby Murang'a County to ensure that access roads are updated to tarmac standards and maintained.

1. Introduction

The hospitality sector at large is categorised under the service sector, whose aim is to offer services and products such as accommodation, food, and beverages. In the current era, global hospitality organisations have to deal with multiple challenges in an environment in which high competition, rapid changes in technology, and the dynamic choices of customers are of great importance (Zahra, Ahmad, & Ismail, 2016). Service convenience is recognised to be overly imperative to customers. According to Chang and Polonsky (2012), service convenience (ServCon) is the ability to reduce customers' intangible costs (that is, time, effort and energy) when purchasing or using goods and services. Colwell et al. (2008) noted that providing greater convenience may make organisations more competitive, especially those operating in homogenous markets where services are almost identical and cannot differentiate organisations.

In the hospitality industry, hotels have been facing severe competition and customers' moving from one hotel to another. These organisations are not only competing with each other but also with other establishments offering similar services. Competition has even intensified due to the homogenous nature of the products and services provided by hospitality establishments. Most products and services are easily duplicated and identical; therefore, hotels can differentiate based on price and quality (Magasi, 2016). There have been increased low levels of customer retention, which have not been profitable for hotels and customers. In light of this statement, Manickavasakam (2012) argues that customer loyalty is potentially an effective tool that hotels can use to gain a strategic advantage and service in today's ever-increasing hotels' competitive environment.

Intense competition and ever-increasing consumer demands have led hotels to identify drivers of customer loyalty (Lenka, Suar, & Mohapatra, 2009). The key to success in the changed environment is a hotel's ability to reach the customer at their doorstep and provide products and services in a tailored way (Bedi, 2010). An extensive understanding of marketing concepts is needed in the hospitality sector to distinguish hotels from their competitors and provide their customers with more convenient services to satisfy them (Kaura, 2013). Customers are opting for those hotels that provide better service and convenience.

Offering service convenience, a consumer's perception of minimised time and effort to obtain service (Berry et al., 2002), has become important for an organisation to be competitive. Benoit et al. (2016) argue that dynamic customers' sociocultural and socio-demographic characteristics of consumers further fuel the demand for service convenience. This demand for service convenience is crucial to service providers, including hotels: it influences the organisations consumers choose to patronise and their service experience perceptions. In addition, it contributes to customers' experience and satisfaction and thus represents a key research priority (Ostrom et al., 2015).

Service environment is characterised by intense competition as organisations rival each other for customers. This underlines the significance of customer loyalty, as it is vital for a firm's survival and growth. Building a loyal customer base has become a major marketing goal and an important basis for developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Mandhachitara&Poolthong, 2012). Therefore, loyalty is key in delivering long-term corporate profitability, as profits can be increased over a customer's lifetime through retention (Oberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Murphy, 2013). The hospitality industry experience challenges in attracting and maintaining. Customers will continue to defect from one hotel to another, which has cost implications not only for the customer but also for the hotel itself (Caroline & Elizabeth, 2014). In this vein, the inability of hotels to retain customers highlights the factors that result in customer defection and affect the hotels' ability to increase future business growth.

Several researchers have tested many constructs thought to be determinants of customer loyalty, such as service quality (Zaithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996), customer satisfaction (Chandrashekaran, Rotte, Tax, & Grewal, 2007), customer trust and commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). These constructs influence customer repurchase decisions to varying degrees depending on the industry. This means the determinants of one industry cannot be generalised to other industries. While this is the case, research assessing the influence of service convenience on customer loyalty in Kenyan hotels is scanty, and more so in Murang'a County. This study sought to fill this gap by looking into the effects of service convenience on customer loyalty, focusing on non-rated hotels in Murangá County, Kenya. Particularly, the study sought to answer the question: How does service convenience influence customer loyalty in non-rated hotels in Murang'a County?

2. Abridged Literature Review

2.1 Service Convenience
The concept of service convenience began with products. Copeland (1923) suggested a classification of consumer products in which convenience goods were defined as intensively distributed products that require minimal time and physical and mental effort to purchase. Other definitions of convenience also focus on resources, such as the time and effort the customer requires to shop for a product (Brown, 1990). While convenience is important in products, it is equally important in services. As conceptualised by Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002), service convenience refers to the customers' time and effort perceptions about buying or using a service. Colwell, Aung, Kanetkar, and Holden (2008) have demonstrated that service convenience can add value to consumers by reducing the time and effort a consumer must expend on the service. From a hotel's point of view, service convenience may refer to the time a customer uses when booking for accommodation, the check-in process and placing and receiving an order at the restaurant.

Different scholars have described service convenience differently. Savings of effort and time are the two crucial aspects of convenience (Anderson, 1971). Yale and Vankatesh (1986) propose six classes of convenience: time utilisation, accessibility, portability, appropriateness, handiness,

and evasion of horribleness. While this is the case, Berry et al. (2002) have criticised this framework – it lacks the theoretical underpinning and means of measurement.

Brown (1989) suggested five types of convenience: time, place, acquisition, use, and execution. Shopping convenience has been examined by Seiders, Berry, and Gresham (2000), who developed a convenience model associated with customer shopping speed and ease. Berry et al. (2002) have theorised five dimensions of service convenience: decision convenience, access convenience, transaction convenience, benefits convenience, and post-benefit convenience. According to Berry et al. (2002), decision convenience concerns customers' decisions on whether to self-perform or purchase a particular service and from which supplier. Access convenience encompasses the customers' perceived time and effort expenses to start a service delivery. For example, customers may initiate service in person, such as in a hotel, remotely (making a call) or via both means (calling to book a room and going to the hotel for accommodation).

Transaction convenience entails customers' perceived expenditures of effort and time to make and complete a transaction, such as placing and receiving menu orders in the restaurant. Benefit convenience is customers' perceived time and effort to experience the benefits of a service, such as having dinner at a restaurant or a massage at a hotel spa. Post-benefit convenience entails customers' perceived time and effort expenditures to regain contact with the organisation after the benefit stage. This convenience may take different shapes, such as a customer calling back the organisation because of service failure. In a hotel scenario, a customer may call reception to communicate a breakage in the room requiring fixation.

Although these conceptualisations of service convenience based on the consumption process have received some concerns pertaining linear accumulation of judgments of convenience across stages, it is the only framework that has been considered in research to date (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009). Berry et al.'s (2002) five service dimensions were used by Colwell et al. (2008) through the ServCon scale in Canadian cellular and internet services. They found service convenience to significantly predict overall customer satisfaction and loyalty. This is further supported by Seiders, Voss, Godfrey, and Grewal (2007), who argued that service convenience impacts customer satisfaction and repeat purchases from a service organisation.

While Colwell et al. (2008) study revealed important findings on the effects of ServCon on customers' satisfaction and loyalty, it was conducted in Canadian cellular and internet services. It was, therefore, important to conduct the current study focusing on hotels in a developing nation like Kenya and Murangá County, which is still in the growth process. The findings of this study would help to conclude whether the ServCon model has similar effects on hotels' customer satisfaction and loyalty, just like in the cellular and internet services sector.

Another study by Aagja, Mammen, and Saraswat (2011) used the ServCon scale in the Indian-organised food and grocery retail context. Aagja et al. (2011) found that the higher the perceived service convenience level, the greater the effect on customer satisfaction and shoppers' behavioural intentions. This study targeted shoppers as participants, raising questions about

whether results can be generalised to other sectors, such as hotels, which was the present study's target.

In addition, Kaura (2013) has used the ServCon scale in the Indian banking sector and found that service convenience significantly impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty. It is apparent from the literature review that most studies on the influence of service convenience on customer satisfaction and loyalty have been conducted in non-hotel sectors such as telecommunications, banking, and cellular, to name a few. The current study also used Berry et al. (2002) conceptualisations of service convenience while trying to establish the influence of service convenience on customer satisfaction and hotel loyalty.

2.2 Theoretical Review
The study was based on the ServCon model. This model was developed by Seiders et al. (2000) and empirically validated the service convenience construct in the context of a retail chain with approximately 100 stores situated in all major geographic regions of the United States of America. This model has five dimensions of service convenience: decision convenience, access convenience, transaction convenience, benefit convenience, and post-benefit convenience. The servCon model was used in the current study to establish the relationships between its dimensions and customer loyalty and in the development and design of the questionnaire.

3. Methodology

3.1 Location of Study
The study was descriptive. The survey was carried out in Murangá County, Kenya. Murang'a County is one of the five counties in the Central region of the Republic of Kenya. It is bordered to the North by Nyeri, to the South by Kiambu, to the West by Nyandarua and to the East by Kirinyaga, Embu and Machakos counties. Due to the untapped tourism potential in the County, there are no classified tourist hotels or restaurants, according to First County Integrated Development Plan 2013-2017, published in 2014. This is because the available tourism packages are often irregular, and the tourists usually visit the County during the day and then reside in hotels in other regions. However, several unclassified hotels and restaurants exist in the County (for example, Hotel Nokras, Fortune Green and Golden Palm hotel).

3.2 Target Population and Sample
The study targeted all hotels in Murang'a County. According to Murangá County First County Integrated Development Plan 2013-2017, published in 2014, there are eighteen (18) accommodation facilities in the County, of which 66.7% (12) are hotels. The sample for this study consisted of hotel customers. A self-administered questionnaire was employed to collect data. The questionnaires were issued to customers through the help of line managers of the selected hotels. Data for the study was collected from customers, particularly during service. A total number of 384 customers was selected from the twelve hotels. From each hotel, a total number of 32 customers were selected to participate in the study

3.3 Reliability Analysis

A total of six α coefficients were computed for SERVCON dimensions (decision convenience, access convenience, transaction convenience, benefit and post-benefit convenience), customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty constructs. As indicated in Table 1, all α coefficients were above the cut-off of .70 (Nunnaly& Bernstein, 1994) and were considered reliable for further analysis.

Table 1: Reliability Results

Construct	No. of items	Chronbach's α
Decision convenience	3	.790
Access convenience	5	.887
Transaction convenience	3	.881
Benefit and post-benefit convenience	4	.877
Customer satisfaction	3	.857
Customer loyalty	3	.903

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed to customers. The returned questionnaires were 340, accounting for 88.5% of the total questionnaires distributed. Nine questionnaires were discarded based on incomplete data yielding 331 (86.2%) questionnaires for further analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the study to analyse quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequencies, mean, standard deviations and mean rankings, were used to clarify and describe the characteristics of the variables of interest in a situation (Sekaran, 2010). For inferential statistics, simple and multiple linear regressions were used to test the study hypotheses. To test hypotheses $H_{01} - H_{04}$, simple linear regressions at a 95% confidence level were used to establish the influence of ServCon model dimensions on customer loyalty. To test the relative contribution of each ServCon model dimension to customer loyalty, a multiple linear regression at a 95% confidence level was performed. In all regressions, a coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to establish the percentage of variance in customer loyalty due to each regression model's predictor(s).

4. Results

4.1 Profile of the Sample

The analyses of the gender distribution of the respondents in the study sample revealed that 174 (52.6%) were male and female respondents accounted for the rest. Concerning age, 118 (36.5%) of the respondents were between 26 and 35 years, followed by those aged between 18 and 25 years (83, 25.1%). Concerning the level of education completed, the majority, 154 (46.5%), had completed a college education, followed by 109 (32.9%) with a university education. Only 8 (2.4%) had completed primary education. Those who had completed high school education were 46 (13.9%). On the number of times, a customer had visited the hotel, the majority, 122 (36.9%), had visited the hotels more than four times, 67 (20.2%) four times, 49 (14.8%) two

times and 48 (14.5%) for three times. Only 45 (13.6%) respondents had visited the hotels for the first time.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

4.2.1 Decision convenience
The decision convenience construct comprised three items. The descriptive results in Table 2 show the means of the three items ranging from 3.89 to 3.98. This demonstrated that the respondents in the study agreed with all the items.

Table 2: Decision convenience

Statements	Mean	*SD*
I can easily determine before choosing the hotel whether it will offer what I need	3.98	.986
Deciding the choice of the hotel to visit is quick and easy	3.92	.961
I can quickly find information before I choose the hotel to decide if the hotel has what I am looking for	3.89	1.022

Notes:*SD* = Standard Deviation, N = 331, 5-Point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

As shown in Table 2, the highest mean of 3.98 was recorded on 'I can easily determine before choosing the hotel whether it will offer what I need' with a standard deviation of .986. Respondents recorded a lowest mean of 3.89 on 'I can quickly find information before I choose the hotel to decide if the hotel has what I am looking for' with a standard deviation of 1.022.

4.2.2 Access Convenience
The access convenience constituted five items, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Access convenience

Statements	Mean	SD
The hotel is at a convenient location	4.26	.962
It did not take much time to reach the hotel	4.13	.981
I was able to get the hotel's location quickly	4.12	.971
The hotel offers convenient service hours	4.11	.977
It was easy to contact the hotel	4.05	1.011

Notes:*SD* = Standard Deviation, N = 331, 5-Point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

As indicated, the means of all items ranged from 4.05 to 4.26, demonstrating that respondents agreed with the items. The lowest mean of 4.05 was recorded on 'It was easy to contact the hotel' with a standard deviation of 1.011, indicating a greater variation in the responses provided by the respondents. On the other hand, the highest mean of 4.26 was recorded on 'the hotel is at

a convenient location' with a standard deviation of .962, showing lower variation in respondents' responses on this item.

4.2.3 Transaction Convenience
Table 4 presents the descriptive results (means and standard deviations) of the analysis of the three items measuring transaction convenience.

Table 4: Transaction convenience

	Mean	SD
The hotel service staff made it easy for me to complete my purchase	4.12	.994
I was able to complete my purchase quickly	4.11	1.025
I did not have to make much of an effort to pay for the service	4.04	1.067

Notes:SD = Standard Deviation, N = 331, 5-Point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

As indicated, the range of means was from 4.04 to 4.12. The results revealed that the respondents agreed with all the items of transaction convenience. The highest mean of 4.12 was scored on 'The hotel service staff made it easy for me to complete my purchase' with a standard deviation of .994. This showed a lower variation in the respondents' responses on this item. Nonetheless, a lower mean of 4.04 was scored on 'I did not have to make much of an effort to pay for the service' with an *SD* of 1.667, showing greater variation in the responses.

4.2.4 Benefit and Post-Benefit Convenience
Table 5 exhibits the analysis results of the items measuring benefit and post-benefit convenience.

Table 5: Benefit and post-benefit convenience

	Mean	SD
When I had a question about my service, employees were able to resolve it	4.13	.982
The service was easy to use	4.08	.923
It took little effort to arrange a follow-up service	4.05	.864
I was able to get the benefits of service with little effort	4.00	.936

Notes:SD = Standard Deviation, N = 331, 5-Point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

As shown in Table 5, all the means ranged from 4.00 to 4.13, demonstrating agreement on all the items. The highest mean of 4.13 was reported on 'When I had a question about my service, employees were able to resolve it' with an *SD* of .982, reflecting a lower variation in the responses provided by the respondents. However, respondents scored a lower mean of 4.00 on 'I was able to get the benefits of service with little effort' with a standard deviation of .936.

4.2.5 Customer Loyalty

Table 6 shows the results of the analysis of the customer loyalty construct.

Table 6: Customer loyalty

	Mean	SD
I will visit this hotel again	4.33	.936
I will recommend this hotel to other people and friends	4.30	.877
I will choose this hotel as my first choice again	4.04	1.055

Notes: *SD* = Standard Deviation, N = 331, 5-Point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

Table 6 shows that the means of all the items were above 4.00, showing that respondents agreed with the items. The highest mean of 4.33 with an *SD* of .936 was reported on 'I will visit this hotel again', indicating that most respondents in the study were willing to visit the hotel in future. The lowest mean of 4.04 with an *SD* of 1.055 was reported on 'I will choose this hotel as my first choice again', showing greater variation in the responses provided.

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

The objectives of the study were achieved by testing the respective null hypotheses. The study set out to test five null hypotheses (H_{01}, H_{02}, H_{03}, and H_{04}), each addressing an objective. The test of hypotheses was accomplished through multiple linear regression analysis. Tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to examine the independent variables for multicollinearity. Tolerance values less than 0.1 and VIF values exceeding ten, as suggested by Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (1995), were used as thresholds to establish the problem of multicollinearity in the regression model predictors (*SERVCON* dimensions).

Table 7: Regression Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.720	.490		1.470	.042		
DC	.144	.051	.136	2.844	.005	.461	2.171
1 AC	.196	.036	.302	5.490	.000	.349	2.866
TC	.063	.052	.066	1.220	.223	.358	2.796
BPC	.335	.043	.403	7.697	.000	.386	2.589

Notes: a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty (CL), DC = Decision Convenience, AC = Access Convenience, TC = Transaction Convenience, BPC = Benefit and Post-benefit Convenience, N = 331, R^2 = .656

As indicated in Table 7, all tolerance and VIF ranged from .349 to .461 and 2.171 to 2.866, respectively. This demonstrated that multicollinearity was not a problem when conducting multiple linear regression analysis in this data set. The results revealed a significant multiple linear regression model (F [4, 326] = 155.086, p = .000) demonstrating the model's explanatory power towards customer loyalty. The multiple regression coefficient of determination (R^2) was

.656, indicating that 65.6% of the variance in customer loyalty could be explained by the regression model containing all the dimensions of the *SERVCON* framework.

As seen in Table 7, the three dimensions of the *ServCon* model (DC, AC and BPC) were statistically significant $p < .05$). Nonetheless, the contribution of transaction convenience to customer loyalty as the outcome variable was not statistically significant ($p = .223$). The overall multiple linear regression model equation (Y [CL] = β_0 + β_1DC + β_2AC + β_3BPC + ε) is expressed as follows:

Y (CL) = .720 + .144DC + .196AC + .335BPC

The study's results resonated well with those of Colwell et al. (2008) study of Canadian cellular and internet services, where decision convenience significantly influenced overall customer satisfaction and loyalty. Also, the study's results supported those of Seiders et al. (2007), who revealed that access convenience as a dimension of service convenience influenced customer satisfaction and guests' willingness to purchase from the service organisation in future. Along similar lines, Aagja et al. (2011) study on service convenience on customer satisfaction in Indian organised food and grocery retail context reported similar results. Nonetheless, transaction convenience as a dimension of service convenience was not a significant predictor of customer loyalty. And as so, the study's results were discordant with those of Kaura's (2013) study, which found that all the dimensions of service convenience significantly influenced customer satisfaction.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions
The study advances our understanding of the influence of service convenience on customer loyalty and the mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between the two variables in the context of Murang'a County hotels. The study underscores the importance of service convenience and customer satisfaction to realise customer loyalty for the hotels in Murang'a County.

5.2 Recommendations for Practice
The study results provide strong evidence that service convenience influences customer loyalty positively. This finding has great implications for managers of hotels in Murang'a County. Foremost, there is a need to ensure that information regarding the hotel is accessible via different platforms to ease customers' decision-making. This can be done by investing in social media platforms and hiring sales representatives to keep the platforms active and up to date. Secondly, managers of hotels in Murang'a County need to ensure that it is easy to locate and access the hotels. To this end, there is a need to use crystal clear sign boards and to lobby the County to ensure that access roads are updated to tarmac standards and maintained. Lastly, customers need to see value for money and easily access hotel services. Thus, there is a need to ensure that customers' complaints are addressed, and services are easily accessible.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, methodologically, data was collected in Murangá County, a setting that might not reflect hotel customers' satisfaction and resultant loyalty in a different environment and context. Thus, caution must be observed when generalising results to other hotels in the country and beyond. In addition, the study addressed the influence of SERVCON model dimensions on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction; thus, prudence must be considered when generalising the results. For instance, results need to be interpreted within the scope of the five dimensions of SERVCON and customer satisfaction. The use of a descriptive cross-sectional research design also poses a limitation to the study. The essence of the research design is to establish the current status of customer loyalty due to the influence of SERVCON model dimensions and customer satisfaction. Thus, future changes in customer loyalty are not part of the study. Other researchers should consider replicating the study in other regions of Kenya and beyond to enhance the generalisation of the results.

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