

Customer Engagement in Strengthening Customer Loyalty in Hospitality Sector

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of customer engagement on affective commitment and customer loyalty in hospitality sector. Customer engagement has recently emerged in both academics and practitioners as an outstanding customer relationship construct and as a predictor of customer loyalty. However, empirical inquiry on customer engagement is comparatively nascent. As hospitality sectors have widely adopted customer engagement practices for managing customer relationships, further understanding of this concept is significant. Descriptive statistics, correlation, regression analysis and a sample of 230 service customers were used in the hospitality sector. Samples consisted of customers from four star hotels, (61%) and five star hotels, (39%) in Jammu and Kashmir, India. The findings suggest that customer engagement have significant and positive effects on customer loyalty and affective commitment in the hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir. The results can prove vital to practitioners in engaging customers while branding and marketing their goods and services so as to strengthen a loyal customer base. Further customer engagement acts as a useful tool in the relationship building strategies in hospitality sector.

Keywords: *Customer Engagement, Customer Loyalty, Affective Commitment, Customer Relationships, Hospitality Sector.*

Introduction

Customer engagement is expected to be among the highest priorities for firms (MSI, 2010; Verhoef et. al., 2010) and an advanced research perspective in service and marketing management in the coming years (Brodie et. al., 2011). As service sectors are inspired to make engaged customers as co-creators of their goods and services and further enhance customers service experience (Ostrom et. al., 2010), hospitality service sectors require pursuing practices steering customer engagement behaviors beyond transactions to sustain and nurture the customer base. One regularly used indicator of marketing practice success is the strength of customer's loyalty. The development and maintenance of customer loyalty has been the main goal of marketing activities of service organizations in many years. Customer loyalty has been considered a significant indicator of marketing success of firms in many industries, including tourism and hospitality (Yoo and Bai 2012). Customers beyond purchase connections with the brand significantly influence the formation of loyalty, supporting that customer engagement enhances customers

loyal brand relationship with a service provider (Hollebeek 2009; Patterson, Yu, and de Ruyter 2006). The tourism and hospitality literature widely supports the potential benefits of customer engagement. For example, leveraging customer engagement behaviors may allow hospitality organizations to attract and retain more customers, convert browsers to buyers, and gain additional insight into their business (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). For examples the actions that engaged customers will perform are: they provide ideas and suggestions, they do some of the work, they collaborate, co-create, they buy, they advocate a brand or product to family, friends or colleagues and they bring feedback (Iqbal, 2011). More recently, scholars found that engaged customers of a virtual brand community tend to display positive relationship quality barometers like increased satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013). Moreover, Fullerton (2003) stated that affective commitment to be in a long-term relationship provides to feelings of affection and identification with the brand or the firm. The essence of affective commitment is that customers return to accumulate an emotional attachment to their partner in a consumption relationship. Once customers involves to love (or, in some cases, like) brands or service providers, they are showing conditions of emotional state of affective commitment (Fullerton, 2003). The importance of developing and sustaining the strong and enduring customer relationships continues to be heavily documented within the academic literature and remains an indispensable focus for the hospitality sector (Bowden, 2009a). In today's highly competitive business environment, where keeping customers happy and maintaining a long-term brand relationship with them has been an important business strategy. There is substantial evidence that strong relationship result in greater customer retention, positive referral, an increased propensity to repurchase and most importantly, customer loyalty (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Palmatier et al. 2006). Therefore, it is essential for any hospitality business to seek opportunities to achieve a competitive advantage by adopting various marketing practices and strategies. Clearly, engagement encompasses a key place in contributing to an understanding of service performance and customer outcomes.

Customer engagement has emerged as a prominent construct in recent years and is increasingly gaining attention among practitioners and academics, mainly due to its potential influences to customer behavior (Brodie et al., 2013; Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010). Since limited research is conducted in customer engagement with respect to hospitality sector like (Bowden, 2009b and So et al. 2014), further understanding of this concept is important. Despite the growing interest in fostering customer engagement, empirical research is relatively scarce (Bolton 2011; Gummerus et al. 2012; Hollebeek, 2011a), and very little is known about the customer engagement in enhancing customer loyalty and affective commitment.

Therefore, there is a need to investigate the extent to which the customer engagement practices operate in the hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir. The hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir has emerged as one of the key drivers of growth and development and is one of the largest segments under the services sector of its economy. The survival and growth of respective four and five star hotels have therefore come under intense threat due to the growing competition in the sector. Against this background, hospitality sector is regularly re-appraising their business practices and strategies in evaluating various strategic options to ensure profitability and survival within the extremely competitive business surroundings. Thus, the need for this research in different geographical contexts of Jammu and Kashmir in our view is extremely necessary and timely. Our literature search indicates that there was no study of customer engagement in the hospitality sector notably in Jammu and Kashmir and particularly in India despite the fact that recent events indicate that the arena is very competitive. Therefore, this study is intended to address these research gaps with the purpose of to investigate the influence of customer engagement on affective commitment and customer loyalty in hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Literature Review

Concept of Customer Engagement (CE) and Hypotheses Development

Engagement recently emerged in customer management literature within the field of relational marketing (Verhoef et al., 2010). From marketing perspective, engagement refers to the strength of the behavioral tie the customer has with the company that surpass purchases and repurchases of a product and service, ensuring from different motivations of the individual (van Doorn et al., 2010). This tie not only serves to retain present customers by developing the relationship with the company but also to attract new ones (Bowden, 2009b).

Customer engagement in the marketing literature has also been separated into two classifications, uni-dimensional conceptualizations which are predominantly focusing on only behavioral aspect of customer engagement (Bijmolt et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2010), and multi-dimensional conceptualizations which comprise all the three dimensions including cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Mollen & Wilson 2010; Vivek et al., 2012; So, King, and Sparks, 2012). While several multidimensional conceptualizations of customer engagement have been proposed (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek 2011b, van Doorn et al. 2010, So, King, and Sparks, 2012), which provide a significant conceptual foundation for customer engagement, this study adopts the conceptualization proposed by So, King, and Sparks (2012), as it focuses specifically on hospitality services. Therefore, this research advances current understanding of beyond-purchase psychological and behavioral

connections with customer engagement and the influences of these connections (enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction and identification) on the development of affective commitment and customer loyalty.

It is obvious that none of the above dimensions are jointly exclusive. For example, research on customer engagement is fragmented and lacks a structured direction and replication. Different researchers used distinct frameworks depending on the interest. Although different approaches made a best atmosphere for the development of the concept, several of those dimensions lack enough empirical support to be used and transferred to a quantitative research.

Absorption: It is pleasant state which describes the customer as being fully concentrated, happy, and deeply engrossed while playing the role as a customer of the brand (Patterson, et. al., 2006), and an absorbed customer interacting with the brand or other customers perceives time as passing quickly. In the marketing domain, researchers have also suggested that strong engagement extends beyond concentrating on something to being absorbed or engrossed with it (Higgins and Scholer 2009).

Enthusiasm: is consistent with the dimensions of vigor (Patterson et al., 2006) and activation (Hollebeek, 2009), given that these dimensions signify a high level of energy while playing ones role, reflecting the feeling of enthusiasm. The literature suggests that the feeling of enthusiasm as a positive affectivity is a central indicator of a customer's engagement with a brand.

Attention: Engagement is equivalent to focused attention (Lin, Gregor, & Ewing, 2008), which captures a customer's level of attention toward a brand. A customer who is engaged with a brand is attracted to information related to the brand. For instance (So et al., 2012) a highly engaged customer of Marriott hotels is likely to focus a greater level of attention toward its brand information, such as news, advertising, or product information.

Identification: It is an individual's perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). Identification can help to explain customer's relationships with brands. Strong customer-company relationships are depends on customer's identification with the companies that assist them satisfy one or more important self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). These five underlying dimensions collectively reflect the psychological/emotional and behavioral aspects of customer engagement (So, King, and Sparks, 2012).

Interaction: It refers to a customer's online and off-line participation with the brand or other customers outside of purchase. Some researchers promote customer engagement as manifesting in behaviors, such as customer interactions (Bijmolt et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010), and others include customers

participation with the firm or other customers in exchanging information (Wagner and Majchrzak, 2007). For these reasons, interaction constitutes an important dimension of customer engagement, representing the behavioral manifestation of a customer brand relationship with the brand beyond traditional consumptive behavior (So et al., 2012).

Customer Engagement and Affective Commitment

Affective commitment is psychological attachment of an associate exchange partner to the other and is relies on feelings of identification, loyalty, and affiliation (Verhoef, Franses, and Hoekstra, 2002). In addition, affective commitment produces a stickiness that moderates attitudinal and behavioral responses under service failure conditions (Mattila, 2004). The interactivity represent by customer engagement also facilitates the process of building enduring intimate relationships that engender trust and commitment between the customer and the seller or brand, making emotional bonds in relationship exchanges with them (Sashi, 2012). Higher the benefits that result from engagement with an organization's offerings or activities will likely to produce greater affective commitment toward the firm (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). Other investigators also suggest that customer engagement results in favorable attitudes toward a product, company, or brand, such affective commitment and as trust (Vivek et al., 2012).

Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty

Loyalty involves repurchase intentions of customers relating to products or services and the outcomes of customer decision making processes (Zhou et al., 2013). Once customers are engaged with providers/brands, they may develop approach behaviors (Esch et al., 2006) given the strong emotive aspect of engagement. Marketing scholars identified that customer engagement may enhance customer loyalty and purchase decisions (Hollebeek 2009; Patterson et al., 2006) through a strong, enduring psychological connection accompanied by interactive brand experiences beyond purchase (Brodie et al., 2011). Customer engagement with a company/brand influences customer outcomes such as perceptions and attitudes, and therefore influences loyalty (Spratt, Czellar, and Spangenberg, 2009). So, King and Sparks (2014) examined the positive and significant influence of customer engagement and loyalty in tourism brands. Engaged individual is likely to develop more favorable attitudes toward a product, company, or brand and he or she associates with the engagement, and consequently, leading to loyalty towards the entity (Vivek et al., 2012).

Hypothesis Development

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: There exists a positive relationship between customer engagement and affective commitment.

H2: Customer engagement positively influences affective commitment.

H3: There exists a positive relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty.

H4: Customer engagement positively influences customer loyalty.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the influence of customer engagement on affective commitment.
2. To examine the influence of customer engagement on customer loyalty.
3. To suggest the relevancy of customer engagement practices in hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Research Methodology

Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire Design

The scale adopted for this study was based on the previous work of the author's viz., (So, King and Sparks, 2012, Fullerton, 2003). Proper modifications were made in order to suit the current research context and purpose. The questionnaire consists of two parts; part first consists of pre coded questions regarding the demographic information like age, gender, education and travel behavior of respondents like nature of visit, frequency of stay at hotel, duration of stay at a hotel etc. The second part consists of customer engagement scale followed customer loyalty and affective commitment scales respectively. Customer engagement and customer loyalty was measured with the scale operationalized by the authors (So, King and Sparks, 2012). Customer engagement scale is having 25 statements containing five dimensions viz., enthusiasm (5 statements), attention (5 statements), absorption (6 statements), interaction (5 statements) and identification (4 statements) and customer loyalty contains 4 statements respectively. Affective commitment scale was taken from the work of (Fullerton, 2003) contains 4 statements. All the three constructs that is customer engagement, loyalty and affective commitment was measured on 7-Point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree) to express the degree of agreement.

Sample and Data Collection

The questionnaire was pretested with 20 respondents randomly selected from 10 four and five star hotels to ensure that they understood the meaning and wording of the statements. This was helpful in achieving content validity. The geographical area for data collection was Jammu and Kashmir, India. This site has been chosen because there are five prominent cities situated in the areas namely Gulmargh, Srinagar, Phalgam, Jammu and Katra. Furthermore, all the four and five star hotels of Jammu and Kashmir, India are located in these five particular cities. The information was collected from those who had consumed services of various four and five star hotels located in Jammu and Kashmir, India. A self-administered survey has been conducted in four and five star hotels in Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Sample size is decided according to the number of items to be used to study customer engagement, loyalty and affective commitment. Every item requires minimum 5 respondents and maximum 10 respondents (Hair et al. 2008). As the study's construct contained 33 items, so it was decided to take 330 as the sample size. The study used simple random sampling techniques to collect the data in four and five star hotels. Out of 330 questionnaires, 230 (70%) completely filled questionnaires were received. A list of four and five star hotels operating in Jammu & Kashmir was procured from the Tourism Departments of Jammu and Kashmir respectively. The hospitality sector was selected for this research because, this sector allows for a high level of interpersonal interaction with the service provider, and it also allows the examination of customers based on their experience with the service provider.

On completion of field research the data were uploaded to SPSS (version 17). First, the frequency/percentages and variance were investigated and then correlation and regression analysis were applied.

Results of the Study

Description of Demographic and Travel Behaviour of Customers

The demographic information represents the majority of the customers were male (59%) followed by female (41%). In terms of age (15%) of respondents were between 20-30 years, (39%) were between 31-40 years, (29%) were between 41-50 years and (17%) were above 51 years. With respect to income of the respondents, below 3 lakh rupees were 9%, between 3-6 lakh were 23%, between 6-10 lakh were 17% and above 10 lakh were 51%. In terms of educational qualification, (4%) of the total respondents had matriculation degree, graduation were (32%), post-graduation were (59%) whereas others were (5%). About the nationality of the respondents, the majority of respondents were Indian (57%), followed by the USA (14%), UK (6.5%), Russia (5.7), Bangladesh and Dubai (3.5), Sri Lanka (2.8%), Saudi Arab (1.8) and Canada, Denmark, France, Indonesia (1.3%) each. About the nature of visit, most of the respondents were visited for recreation and entertainment purposes (60%) followed by adventure (27%), religious (8%) and official purposes (4%). In terms of source of information about the hotel, most of the respondents were informed through friends and relations (27%), followed by internet (25%), previous visit (22%). 61% are respondents are from four star hotels and 39% customers are from five star hotels respectively. The overall results are presented in table 1.

Table 1 - Demographics and Travel Behaviour of Customers

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage
Male	135	59	Matriculation	8	4
Female	95	41	Graduation	73	32
Age			Postgraduation	136	59
20-30	34	15	Others	13	5
31-40	91	39	Nationality of Customers		
41-50	67	29	Indian	131	57
Above 51	38	17	USA	33	14
Income (annual) INR lakhs			UK	15	6.5
Below	22	9	Russia	13	5.7
5 lakh – 10	52	23	Dubai	8	3.5
10 lakh – 15	39	17	Bangladesh	8	3.5
Above 15	117	51	Sri Lanka	6	2.8
Travel Behaviour of Customers			Saudi Arab	4	1.8
			Canada	3	1.3
			France	3	1.3
			Denmark	3	1.3
			Indonesia	3	1.3
Nature of Visit			Frequency of stay		
Recreation & Entertainment	140	60	First time	130	56
Adventure	61	27	Once in a year	80	34
Religious	18	8	Twice in a year	13	7
Official visit	9	4	More than twice in year	7	3
Others	2	1	Travel companion/s		
Source of information			Alone	8	4
Friends/Relations	62	27	Family	113	49
Previous visit	51	22	Friends	58	25
Tour operator / Travel agent	38	16.7	Relatives	13	6
Internet	58	8	Tout group	23	10
Tourist information centre	18	25			
Newspapers/TV	3	1.3	Revisit intensions		
Customer status			Yes	205	89
First time customer	130	56	No	9	4
Repeat customer	100	44	May be	16	7
Duration of stay (days)			Star category		
Less than 3	111	48	Four star	140	61
4– 6	108	47	Five star	90	39
More than 7	11	5			

Validity can be measured with the help of the KMO value which is higher or equal to 0.50. They are valid (Hair et al. 2008). KMO value for customer engagement dimensions was 0.888; Barlett's test chi-square = 3722.705, $df = 276$, $p = .000$ and for customer outcomes namely affective commitment and loyalty, KMO value was 0.827; Barlett's test chi-square = 803.586; $df = 21$; $p = .000$. So, data was valid. The results are presented in table 2.

Internal reliabilities of expected factors was performed in the form of Cronbach's alpha coefficient and shown in Table 4. For the purpose of this study a cut off value adopted was 0.6 (Hair et al., 2008) lower limit of acceptability and the acceptable benchmark value of item-to-total correlation was set above 0.3 (Hair et al., 2008). Following the decision relating to the internal reliability and in line with Hair et al. (2008), the factors were respecified. The internal consistency of all the factors were computed and shown in Table 4. 2 out of the original 33 variables were deleted, one item from interaction and one item from affective commitment respectively due to low item-total correlations.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 contains the descriptive statistic of the dependent and independent variables. The mean values of the variables of absorption range from (4.56 to 5.83). This means that most of the statements have moderate loadings. The mean values of enthusiasm range from (5.42 to 6.13). This means that most of the statements have greater loadings. The mean values of the variables of attention range from (5.45 to 5.80), this means that most of the respondents have moderate loadings. The mean values of interaction range from (3.61 to 5.87), that give the idea that the most of the respondents was somewhat agree on its variables and the mean values of identification range from (3.83 to 5.38), which also indicated that the respondents was somewhat agree on its variables. With regard the mean values of affective commitment variables which range from (4.63 to 5.77) and have moderate loadings. The mean values of customer loyalty range from (5.55 to 6.23) which shows greater averages. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's test for Customer engagement

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.888
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3722.705
	df	276
	Sig.	.000

KMO and Bartlett's Test for Customer Loyalty and Affective Commitment

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.827
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	803.586
	df	21
	Sig.	.000

Table 3: Customer Engagement (Descriptive Statistics)

Variables	M	SD	t	P (two tailed)
Absorption*				
When I am interacting with this hotel, I forget everything else around me	4.56	1.20	57.32	0.000
Time flies when I am interacting with the hotel	5.00	1.12	67.32	0.000
When I am interacting with hotel, I get carried away	4.97	1.07	69.82	0.000
When interacting with the hotel, it is difficult to detach myself	4.58	1.19	58.18	0.000
In my interaction with this hotel, I am immersed	5.40	0.84	97.01	0.000
When interacting with the hotel intensely, I feel happy	5.83	0.64	137.72	0.000
Enthusiasm*				
I am passionate about this hotel	5.42	1.00	82.03	0.000
I am enthusiastic about this hotel	5.68	0.93	92.56	0.000
I feel excited about this hotel	5.97	0.68	132.02	0.000
I love this hotel	6.13	0.62	149.39	0.000
I am heavily into this hotel	5.63	0.67	126.70	0.000
Attention *				
I pay a lot of attention to anything about this hotel	5.80	0.83	105.91	0.000
I like to learn more about this hotel	5.70	0.88	97.42	0.000
Anything related to this hotel grabs my attention	5.80	0.82	107.27	0.000
I concentrate a lot on this hotel	5.45	0.75	110.17	0.000
I like learning more about this hotel	5.73	0.86	101.07	0.000
Interaction*				
In general, I like to get involved in hotel discussions	4.90	1.35	54.85	0.000
I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the hotel	5.86	0.87	102.10	0.000
I am someone who likes actively participating in hotel discussions	3.61	1.08	50.41	0.000
In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the hotel	5.87	0.81	108.86	0.000
I often participate in activities of this hotel	4.99	1.26	59.87	0.000
Identification				
When someone criticizes this hotel, it feels like a personal insult	3.83	1.16	49.89	0.000
When I talk about this hotel, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	4.22	1.15	55.59	0.000
This hotel successes are my successes	4.57	1.10	62.85	0.000
When someone praises this hotel, it feels like a personal compliment	5.38	0.70	115.57	0.000

Variables	M	SD	t	P (two tailed)
Customer Loyalty*				
I would recommend this hotel to someone who seeks my advice with this hotel	6.23	0.58	162.72	0.000
I would encourage friends and relatives to do business	6.19	0.58	159.79	0.000
I would say positive things about this hotel to other people	6.10	0.55	165.68	0.000
I would do more business with this hotel in the next few years	5.51	0.81	102.80	0.000
Affective Commitment*				
I feel a strong sense of identification with this hotel	5.77	0.74	117.93	0.000
I am emotionally attached to this hotel	5.07	1.01	75.52	0.000
I feel like part of a family as a customer of this hotel	5.58	0.88	95.51	0.000
This hotel has a great deal of personal meaning for me	4.63	1.13	61.81	0.000

Note : Note: *7 point Likert scale was used (1—Strongly Disagree, 2—Disagree, 3 – Some What Disagree, 4—Neither Disagree Nor Agree,5—Some What Agree 6—Agree, 7—Strongly Agree), SD= Standard Deviation, M= Mean, P=significance, df= degree of freedom= 299.

Table 4: Internal Consistency and Final Revised Structure

Variables	Item-total-correlation	α -value	Decision
Absorption		0.903	Retained
When I am interacting with this hotel, I forget everything else around me	0.756		
Time flies when I am interacting with the hotel	0.837		
When I am interacting with hotel, I get carried away	0.791		
When interacting with the hotel, it is difficult to detach myself	0.804		
In my interaction with this hotel, I am immersed	0.677		
When interacting with the hotel intensely, I feel happy	0.615		
Enthusiasm		0.872	Retained
I am passionate about this hotel	0.740		
I am enthusiastic about this hotel	0.797		
I feel excited about this hotel	0.703		
I love this hotel	0.674		

Variables	Item-total-correlation	α -value	Decision
I am heavily into this hotel	0.663		
Attention		0.861	Retained
I pay a lot of attention to anything about this hotel	0.680		
I like to learn more about this hotel	0.699		
Anything related to this hotel grabs my attention	0.717		
I concentrate a lot on this hotel	0.582		
I like learning more about this hotel	0.718		
Interaction		0.842	Retained
In general, I like to get involved in hotel discussions	0.749		
I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the hotel	0.636		
In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the hotel	0.677		
I often participate in activities of this hotel	0.745		
Identification		0.822	Retained
When someone criticizes this hotel, it feels like a personal insult	0.725		
When I talk about this hotel, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.674		
This hotel successes are my successes	0.630		
When someone praises this hotel, it feels like a personal compliment	0.619		
Customer Loyalty		0.838	Retained
I would recommend this hotel to someone who seeks my advice with this hotel	0.738		
I would encourage friends and relatives to do business	0.800		
I would say positive things about this hotel to other people	0.616		
I would do more business with this hotel in the next few years	0.605		
Affective commitment		0.785	Retained
I feel a strong sense of identification with this hotel	0.636		
I am emotionally attached to this hotel	0.645		
I feel like part of a family as a customer of this hotel	0.623		

Note: Two items were deleted due to the low item-total correlations.

Correlation and Regression Analysis

The results reveal that there is a positive correlation between the customer engagement, customer loyalty and affective commitment which supports the H1 and H3 as shown in table 5. The study also examined that customer engagement contributes significantly towards affective commitment ($\beta = 0.686$, $t = 14.242$, $p = .000 < .05$) which accepts H2. An R-squared of 0.471 indicates that the customer engagement explained 47.1% of affective commitment. Moreover the regression model indicate that there is a significant relationship between overall customer engagement and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.606$; $F = 132.632$, $p < .05$) which supports H4. An R-squared of 0.368 indicates that the overall customer engagement explained 36.8% of customer loyalty. This means absorption, enthusiasm, attention, interaction and identification collectively determine customer loyalty. Enthusiasm dimension was found to have the greatest influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.565$, $t = 10.330$, $p = .000 < .05$) implying the passion, enthusiasm, excitement and love of customers about hotels can influence customer loyalty. This is followed by Interaction ($\beta = 0.472$, $t = 8.804$, $p = .000 < .05$) implying that, in general, customers like to get involved in hotel discussions, they enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the hotel and in general, they like to participate in activities of hotel can also effects customer loyalty. Moreover, Attention was also found as a significant determinant of customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.465$, $t = 7.926$, $p = .000 < .05$) implying that customers attention related to the hotel, their learning interests and concentrate about hotel also influences customer loyalty. Similarly, Absorption was also found a significant predictor of customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.444$, $t = 24.430$, $p = .000 < .05$) that implies customers interactions with hotel (staff, guests etc), their immersion, happiness can effect customer loyalty. In addition, Identification was found also a vital factor influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.435$, $t = 7.298$, $p = .000 < .05$) which implies personal compliments of customers, success of the hotel. It is also significant to note that all the hypotheses were supported by the analysis. The results are presented in table 5 and 6.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Analysis

	Customer Engagement	Customer Loyalty	Affective Commitment
Customer Engagement	1	0.606**	0.686**
Customer Loyalty	0.606**	1	0.585 **
Affective Commitment	0.686**	0.585 **	1

Note : **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Table 6: Regression Analysis

Dependent variable	Independent variable	R2	Adjusted R2	F	B	Beta	P-Value
<i>CL</i>	<i>ABS</i>	0.197	0.194	56.019	0.276	0.444	0.000*
<i>CL</i>	<i>ENU</i>	0.319	0.316	106.705	0.459	0.565	0.000*
<i>CL</i>	<i>ATT</i>	0.216	0.213	62.827	0.368	0.465	0.000*
<i>CL</i>	<i>INT</i>	0.223	0.219	65.353	0.274	0.472	0.000*
<i>CL</i>	<i>IDN</i>	0.189	0.186	53.266	0.271	0.435	0.000*
<i>CL</i>	<i>CE</i>	0.368	0.365	132.632	0.528	0.606	0.000*
<i>AC</i>	<i>CE</i>	0.471	0.468	202.832	0.841	0.686	0.000*

Note. CE= customer engagement; CL = customer loyalty; AC = affective commitment, ABS= Absorption, ENU= Enthusiasm, ATT= Attention, INT= Interaction, IDN= Identification. R2= R square, B= unstandardized coefficient, (* $p < .05$).

Discussion and Conclusion of the Study

This study adds to the hospitality literature by investigating the relationships between customer engagement, affective commitment and customer loyalty. Descriptive statistic, validity test, reliability test and finally correlation and regression analysis was used to test the relationships. Descriptive statistics of absorption, enthusiasm, attention, customer loyalty and affective commitment shows that all the variables have moderate to high mean values. The mean values of interaction and identification of the respondents was somewhat agree on its variables. The findings demonstrate that there is a positive and significant correlation between the customer engagement, customer loyalty and affective commitment. One of the objectives of this study was to examine the influence of customer engagement on affective commitment (R2=47.1) in hospitality sector. Customer engagement proved to be an important determinant of affective commitment as both the constructs influences highly and significantly with each other. Hence, hospitality managers should also personalized services to meet customer needs, wants and desires where necessary. As, Mattila (2006) investigated that affective commitment is developed through the enhancement of emotional bonds with customers. Another objective was to investigate the influence of customer engagement on customer loyalty. We found a significant and positive relationship between customer engagement dimensions and customer loyalty that support theoretical studies done by van Doorn et al. (2010), Brodie et al., (2011) and Bowden, (2009b) and the empirical study done by (So, King, and Sparks, 2012 and 2014).

All of five dimensions of customer engagement were found to be significant in

influencing customer loyalty and affective commitment. This result recommends that, when attempting to develop customer engagement practices, hotel operators should focus on the enhancement of each of the five customer engagement dimensions to enhance loyalty and affective commitment, with equal emphasis on absorption, interaction, enthusiasm, attention and identification and given their highest beta coefficients as stated in the regression model. The findings demonstrated that absorption, enthusiasm, attention, interaction and identification collectively determine customer loyalty. Enthusiasm dimension was found to have the greatest influence on customer loyalty implying the passion, enthusiasm, excitement and love of customers about hotels can influence customer loyalty and affective commitment. This is followed by Interaction implying that, in general, customers like to get involved in hotel discussions, they enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the hotel and in general, they like to participate in activities of hotel can also effects customer loyalty. Moreover, Attention was also found as a significant determinant of customer loyalty implying that customer's attention related to the hotel, their learning interests and their concentration about hotel also influences customer loyalty. Similarly, absorption was also found a significant predictor of customer loyalty that reveal customers interactions with hotel (staff, guests etc), their immersion, and happiness can affect customer loyalty. In addition, Identification was found also an essential factor influence on customer loyalty which implies personal compliments of customers, success of the hotel. It is also significant to note that all the hypotheses were supported by the analysis. The results imply that customer engagement construct which is related to customer relationship marketing area is proven to be an essential construct to enhance customer loyalty in the hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir.

The findings of this study illustrate that hospitality sectors need to integrate these different engagement practices in order to win customer loyalty and affective commitment. For instance, enthusiastic customers are more likely to explore the offering/activity and experiment with it. Their enthusiasm towards the use of the focus makes them live in the moment when they are engaged (Vivek, 2009). Similarly to enhance customer attention, hoteliers need to provide information their customer groups may find relevant and interesting, as personal, relevant knowledge or information can induce attention (Celsi & Olson, 1988). Likewise, in situations where the customers are engaged, the services sectors facilitate the customer absorption of the engaged customers (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Furthermore, service providers need to generate opportunities for customer interaction as well as incentives, such as recognition and reward schemes to encourage customer participation (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). Likewise in building and maintaining strong customer identification, hotel managers must create a unique

and clear identity that is desired by the target customer segments because it allows a sustainable differentiation of the offering and helps to enhance customer's identification with the service/brand (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). All these actions collectively, help customers to immerse themselves in the interactive experience with the service provider/brand, thereby developing greater levels of engagement.

Implications of the Study

This study has theoretically conceptualized and empirically investigated the customer engagement in building affective commitment and customer loyalty in the hospitality sector. The results offers customer relationship management knowledge by expanding the current understanding of customer engagement, customer loyalty and affective commitment, which suggests that loyalty and affective commitment is developed through enhancement of engagement dimensions. Practically hoteliers should establish or maintain the presence of their products and services on various social media platforms and connect with their customers regularly via newsletters, customer interactions, customer participations and product or offer information. Given the significant influence and potential reach of social media, marketers should also encourage sharing and recommendations on social media platforms to complement traditional forms of engagement, such as word of mouth, because some engaged customers would enjoy the opportunity to have personal social interaction to share their experience with others and to express the sense of pride derived from the service/brand (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1995; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). Research suggests that customer's attitudes, tastes, and preference toward the services offerings are changing. Customers prefer offerings in which active participation, interaction, and possibly co-creation occurs (Styven, 2010).

However, given that the conceptual and practical research work investigated in this study was grounded within the relationship marketing literature, it is expected that the results are broadly applicable to a relatively wide range of service sectors. The practical implication to hospitality managers is that, they must place a lot more emphasis on the building and maintenance the valued based relationships through emotional attachments apart from customer evaluations and customer experiences. Further, hotels must allocate resources effectively to foster customer engagement, generate positive customer identity, induce customer attention, enhance customer interaction and participation, generate customer enthusiasm and customer absorption derived from engagement enabled strategies to enhance customer loyalty and affective commitment with their customers. In developing the integrative research work of customer engagement, affective commitment and customer loyalty, this investigation provides vital insight in the process of building successful customer relationships which remains a fundamental objective for the

hospitality sector. Therefore, the results of this study generates insights for building the customer relationships encompassing customer engagement practices reflected by absorption, enthusiasm, attention, interaction and identification, and their influence on affective commitment and loyalty in hospitality sector of Jammu and Kashmir.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this study need to be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, since simple random sampling was used in this study, results cannot be generalized. For example the findings should be interpreted with caution when applied to different industries or different category of hotels. This study was conducted on four and five star hotel guests only. Future studies might investigate hotels from different categories. Restaurants, airlines and attractions might also be areas of future study.

Despite its limitations, this investigation suggests several areas for future research. In testing the role of customer engagement in developing customer loyalty, the study has addressed calls for more research on customer engagement to further the understanding of this emerging construct (Bolton 2011; MSI 2010). Sawhney et al. (2005) and Ramaswamy's (2009) notion of "engagement platforms" provides a useful avenue to explore managerial applications of the consumer engagement concept. Literature suggests that customer engagement may affect aspects such as customer equity, long-term reputation of the firm, brand recognition, and financial outcomes (van Doorn et al. 2010) and involvement (Hollebeek 2011a). Finally, future studies should also investigate the moderating role of variables such as gender, income, education, and age, frequency/stay at hotels in building customer engagement, affective commitment and customer loyalty.

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