The Impact of Relationship Marketing on Millennial Customer Loyalty in the Bangkok Hotel Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate and explore the effects of relationship marketing and demographic characteristics on millennial customer loyalty in the hotel industry in Bangkok. Questionnaires were used to collect data from 440 millennial travelers who stayed in Bangkok hotels during 2019. Analysis showed that most elements of relationship marketing—trust, commitment, communication, service quality, products, pricing, technology, and the social network—had a significant effect on millennial customer loyalty. However, customer courtesy did not have a significant effect on customer loyalty. There was no significant effect of gender or marital status on loyalty; however, education level, income, and occupation had significant effects on it. It is thus recommended that hotel management should recognize the importance of millennial customers and put their efforts into understanding the unique characteristics and preferences of this generation. They might implement relationship marketing to create good relationships with these clients and cultivate customer loyalty. Future research efforts might expand the scope of the sample to represent more millennial customers in Thailand. To reach different generations, such as Generations X and Z, other independent variables than those used in this study–such as social networks, online marketing, and mobile marketing–might be successfully employed.

Keywords: *Relationship marketing, millennial, customer loyalty, hotel industry*

Introduction

The tourism industry has been recognized as an outstanding source of revenue by many countries. According to the United Nations Tourism Organization (2020), in 2019 the tourism industry had grown by 4% from the previous year to 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals. Due to the growth of global tourism, Thailand welcomed some 39.8 million tourists in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2019). This has made the country the fourth in terms of global tourism revenue (BLT Bangkok, 2020).

However, in 2020 the world's tourism growth has been halted due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which has threatened the health and lives of people and the global economy. Many businesses have been affected directly or indirectly, and especially the tourism industry. After the coming of the Coronavirus, most countries decided to go into lockdown to stop transmission of the disease. International airports in many countries were closed and outbound traveling was restricted to special cases under stringent rules and regulations, including state quarantine (Bangkokinsight, 2020). The cessation of international travelling had a huge impact on the global and Thai tourism industries. It is estimated that, if the outbreak continues until the end of 2020, Thailand will lose about 30 million international tourists compared to those in the previous year (Bangkokbiznews, 2020).

However, due to the government's efficient epidemic control and management, the number of infections within Thailand dropped to zero starting from the end of May 2020 for 100 days. This has allowed the government to gradually deregulate the stringent regulations. Due to its effectiveness in responding to the COVID-19 transmission, Thailand was ranked sixth in terms of the global health security index, and number one in Asia. This ranking was conducted by Johns Hopkins University and the Nuclear Threat Initiative report in 2019. The country was also ranked first by the Global COVID-19 Index in terms of its responsiveness and recovery progress. This has recommended Thailand as a standard-bearer for COVID-19 safety measures and revival efforts (Panorama Destination, 2020).

Hotel businesses are expected to recover after Thailand controls the transmission of COVID-19. Due to the need to revive, hotel managers have developed marketing strategies that respond to customer needs and create customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gajjar, 2013). According to Thomas and Tobe (2013) loyalty is more profitable since the expenses to gain a new customer are much more than retaining an existing one. Moreover, loyal customers will encourage others to buy their preferred products. Engendering customer loyalty demands a well-developed marketing strategy using a customer-centric approach (Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1984). Relationship marketing is one of the marketing tools that underpins the customer-centric approach and is widely used to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships. According to Hennig-Thurau and Hansen (2000), relationship marketing is a paradigm shift in marketing philosophy emphasizing the importance of long-term relationships and retaining existing customers over acquiring new customers. Gummesson (2008), on the other hand, held that attracting and enhancing customer relationships is an intermediary step in relationship building, leading ultimately to increased customer loyalty. However, a complicating factor is that customer loyalty is influenced by demographic characteristics such as gender, age, income, and education (Afzal & Pakistan, 2013; Busakornruangrat, 2015).

Generations have been classified according to their year of birth and the significant events they have shared (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Their varied experiences could impact loyalty. By 2020, according to Catalyst Organization (2019), 41.0% of the global population will be 24 years old or younger (Gen Y and Gen Z). Moreover by 2025, millennials (reaching young adulthood by the beginning of the millennium) will comprise three-quarters of the global workforce. Since millennials will outnumber other generations shortly, cultivating their loyalty will help hotels retain potential customers. Moreover, apart from regular revisits to a hotel, these loyal guests will willingly spread positive information about it.

Although many studies have been conducted regarding relationship marketing, studies emphasizing millennial hotel customer loyalty are rare in Thailand. This study aimed to determine the impact of relationship marketing and demographic characteristics on the loyalty of millennials. The finding can be used by hotel businesses to develop strategies to create customer loyalty.

Literature Review
Relationship Management
The relationship marketing concept emerged within the fields of service marketing and industrial marketing (Bamfo et al., 2018). The aim of relationship marketing is to establish, maintain, and enhance profitable relationships with customers and other partners, so that the objectives of both parties involved are met. Relationship marketing is about healthy relationships, which are characterized by concern, trust, commitment, service quality, and customer courtesy (Arokiasamy, 2013). The key virtues that underpin relationship marketing are trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), commitment (Grossman, 1998), and communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Ibidunni (2012) proposed that relationship marketing has to be implemented through marketing elements, such as product/service, pricing, and distribution channels. By contrast, Ndubisi (2016) urged that modern technology and media, especially the social network can play important roles in relationship marketing. The elements involved in relationship marketing include trust, commitment, communication, service quality, products, pricing, customer courtesy, technology, and the social network.

Trust is a key element for relationship success. It has an important role in developing successful relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Buttle, 1996). There is an emerging consensus that trust has two essential elements; trust in partner honesty and in benevolence (Baumann et al., 2012).

Commitment is an enduring desire to maintain a relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It is based on the perceived structural constraints that bind the firm to its partner and not a cognitive consideration of possible future opportunities provided by the latter (Edward & Sahadev, 2011).

Communication in relationship marketing means keeping in touch with valued customers, providing them with timely and trustworthy information on services, and communicating proactively

with them if a delivery problem occurs. Communication also includes reaching satisfied and dissatisfied customers. When there is effective communication between an organization and its customers, a better relationship will result and their loyalty is more assured (Fraering & Minor, 2013)

Service quality is important for service industries, especially the hotel industry where services usually are delivered through personal exchanges between customer and service employees (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2015).

Product refers to the overall physical elements of the hotel. The first impression of the hotel is very important. Hotels must pay attention to the physical elements of their products, which includes both the exterior and interior appearance of the building (Ottenbacher, 2007). Customer concerns primarily revolve around hotel facilities and guest room amenities. Cleanliness is also a very important factor. Tangible features play an important role connected with customer satisfaction and have a direct impact on perceived value (Arokiasamy, 2013).

Price is the only element that generates revenue. Kandampully and Suhartanto's (2000) study of customer loyalty in the hotel industry showed that price plays an important role in determining whether customers will continue to repurchase and recommend the hotel to others.

Courtesy involves politeness, consideration, respect, and friendliness of the contact personnel (Dehghan, 2006). The courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust, confidence, and empathy reflects on the caring that a firm provides to its customers (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Technology, especially the information technology, plays an important role in collecting, processing and using customer information in order to attract, retain, and win back customers (Ahlert, 2000).

Social networks such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and Instagram have become crucial elements in building relationships with industry intermediaries and representatives of business organizations. Mass media has played a critical role in initiating and diffusing opinions. Social networking sites and blogs are most influential in regards to political and cultural issues (Liu et al., 2017).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty means that "the consumer will return/repurchase over time even when other alternatives are available and other firms competitively respond" (Morgan et al., 2000). Customer loyalty has two dimensions: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Al-Msallam & Alhaddad, 2016). Customer loyalty in the behavioral dimension refers to a customer's likelihood to make a repeat purchase, which indicates a preference for a brand or a service over time. The attitudinal dimension relates to the customer's intention to repurchase and recommend the products and services of a particular company to others (Osman et al., 2016).

Millennials

Generation Y or the so-called "Millennials" is the cohort of people who were born between 1981 and 2000. Growing up with high technology and smart phones, this generation were able to access the Internet at an early age and also are familiar with social networking (Bolton et al., 2013). Therefore, the most notable characteristic of millennials is that they are typically more technologically proficient than previous generations (Cekada, 2012). Additionally, millennials show their preference for working in groups and the ability to multitask (Deloitte, 2009). They are in high demand and have high expectations (Thompson, 2011). In order to create customer loyalty among millennial customers, hotel businesses should learn about their unique characteristics and preferences so that they can develop appropriate strategies to gain their loyalty.

Customer Loyalty of Millennials

For the hotel industry, it is crucial to develop customer loyalty. In order to do so, hotels need to understand the target customers and the specific factors that lead to the development of loyalty (Gilbert et al., 1999). Millennials' affinity for technology is reshaping the way to look at a brand, with product information, reviews, and price comparisons. For millennials, strong brand recognition is not

enough as this generation is less loyal. They usually turn to brands that offer maximum convenience and benefit at the lowest cost (Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research, 2014). Millennials are savvy consumers. They can discover the best deals and readily recognize dishonest marketing, which makes this generation less loyal to brand, product, and services. Clever advertising does not capture or have an impact on millennials as it did with previous generations (The Pixlee, 2020). Product and its price have significance, but for millennials the way they are being treated as valued customers is more important in gaining their loyalty. In order to generate customer loyalty, organizations need to provide value with the experience of their products and services (Power2Motivate, 2017). Millennials wish to engage with brands on social networks; if they can do this, they are more likely to become loyal customers. Millennials are often loyal to brands and organizations from which they currently purchase. Hence, it is crucial for these organizations to build strong relationships and deep connections with millennials to encourage them to continue purchasing. Millennials expect brands and organizations to be present on social networks and to engage and interact on network platforms. Engaging with social networking is vital in order to capture the attention and loyalty of millennials (Schawbel, 2015).

Factors Affecting Customer Loyalty

Many researchers have paid attention to customer loyalty and the factors affecting it (Cekada, 2012). However, this study emphasizes the effects of relationship marketing and demographic characteristics on millennial customers' loyalty.

Relationship Marketing and Customer Loyalty. Lan's (2015) study on customer loyalty in the airline industry showed that relationship marketing played a crucial role. Loyalty programs were recognized as essential factors contributing to customer loyalty. Similarly, Oteng's (2015) study on relationship marketing strategies in the hotel hospitality industry in Ghana revealed that relationship marketing had a positive effect on customer retention. These findings led to the generation of the first research hypothesis as follows:

H_1: Relationship marketing has an effect on the customer loyalty of millennial customers.

Demographic Characteristics and Customer Loyalty. Afzal and Pakistan (2013) conducted a study on customer satisfaction and the demographic factors influencing customer's loyalty in the banking sector in Pakistan. Their data revealed that gender, academic qualifications, and marital status had an impact on customer loyalty.

Along similar lines, Busakornruangrat (2013) conducted a study on factors impacting customer loyalty in Thonburi Hospital, Thailand. The result showed that gender, education level, and occupation affected customer loyalty; marital status, however, had no effect on it.

These findings led to the generation of the second research hypothesis as follows:

H_2: There are differences in loyalty levels among millennial customers with different demographic characteristics.

Research Framework

The research framework was developed using the literature review and the research hypotheses as the base line as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 *Research Framework*
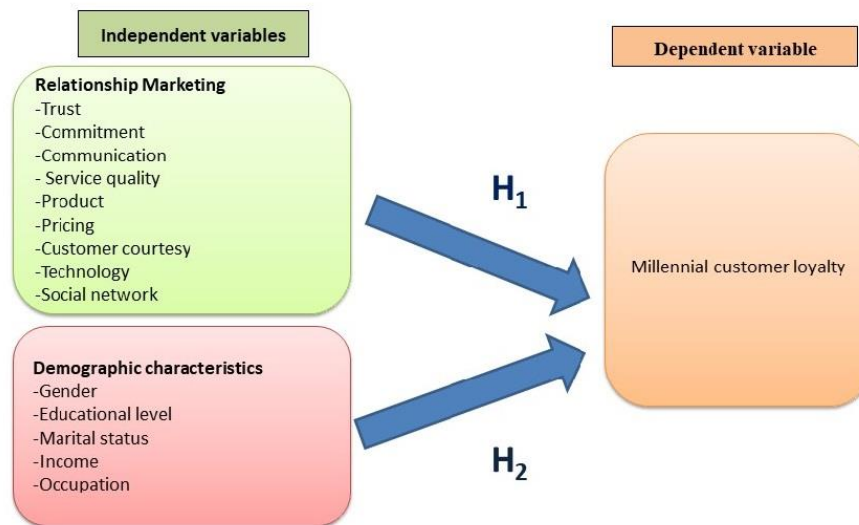
Methodology

Research Population and Sample Size

The population involved in this research consisted of international tourists aged between 30 and 40 years old who used to stay at hotels in Bangkok in 2019. The number of international tourists who stayed in hotels in Bangkok in December 2019 was 2,473,725 (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2020). The sample size target for this study was calculated from Yamane's sample size formula; $n = N/(1 + Ne^2)$, where n = corrected sample size, N = population size and e = margin of error = .05 (Yamane, 1973). Hence, the appropriate sample size was calculated as 400 units.

Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was used in this study. First a lot-drawing technique was used to select five districts from the 52 districts in metropolitan Bangkok. A similar technique was used to select a hotel from each district, which made five hotels from five districts of Bangkok. Convenience sampling was used to collect data from those willing to participate.

Research Instrument and Its Development

A four section, self-administered questionnaire was employed as a research tool for data collection. The first section involved demographic questions such as gender, marital status, and educational level. The second section consisted of closed-end questions concerning respondents' hotel staying behavior and traveling characteristics such as the purpose of travelling, reasons for choosing a hotel, length of stay, and hotel preference.

The third section addressed the respondent's attitudes toward the nine elements of hotel relationship marketing—trust, commitment, communication, service quality, product, price, customer courtesy, technology, and social media. The scales used were structured at six levels adapted from those developed by Al-Msallam and Alhaddad (2016). Each rating level was represented as follows: 1 = *not at all important*, 2 = *not important*, 3 = *slightly unimportant*, 4 = *slightly important*, 5 = *important*, and 6 = *extremely important*.

The final section incorporated questions concerning the respondent's loyalty toward hotels in Bangkok. The scales ranged over six levels and were adapted from the scales developed by Ahmed et al. (2019). Each rating level was represented as follows: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *somewhat disagree*; 4 = *somewhat agree*; 5 = *agree*; and 6 = *strongly agree*.

Research Instrument Testing

A draft of the questionnaire was reviewed by the thesis advisor for correctness and congruence with the research objectives (scale validity). The questionnaire was tested for reliability by conducting a pilot test on 30 millennial hotel guests. The collected data was analysed to obtain the Cronbach Alpha statistic. The result yielded a value of. 80, which was considered reliable (Ursachi et al., 2015).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

One hundred questionnaires were sent to each target hotel via email (N = 500). A total of 440 questionnaires were returned. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were compiled to describe respondents' demographic characteristics. Additionally, mean values and standard deviation (*SD*) estimates were used to indicate the levels of independent and dependent variables characterizing this study. Inferential statistics were used to assess the research hypotheses. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the effect of relationship marketing on millennial customer loyalty (H_1), while *t*-test and one-way ANOVA were used to assess the effect of demographic characteristics on millennial customer loyalty (H_2).

Results

The 95% confidence level and 5% sampling error were applied to the 440 questionnaires obtained from the five hotels in five districts in Bangkok. Outlier detection was performed using z-scores, with z-scores lower than -3 or higher than 3 (indicating more than three standard deviations from the mean) considered outliers. This left a final sample size of 419 available for this study. The relevant data pertaining to the research objectives are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables*

Independent Variables (Relationship marketing)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Trust	4.29	0.74	Slightly important
Commitment	4.29	0.75	Slightly important
Communication	4.26	0.74	Slightly important
Service Quality	4.32	0.74	Slightly important
Products	4.33	0.75	Slightly important
Pricing	4.31	0.73	Slightly important
Customer Courtesy	3.86	1.04	Slightly important
Technology	4.23	0.69	Slightly important
Social Network	4.31	0.71	Slightly important
Dependent Variable			
Customer Loyalty	4.29	0.74	Somewhat agree

The mean values for each element of relationship marketing (Independent variable)—trust, commitment, communication, service quality, products, pricing, customer courtesy, technology, and social network—showed a level of slightly important. The highest mean value among all elements was 4.33 for products. The item with the lowest mean value was 3.86 for customer courtesy. However, the standard deviation value of customer courtesy was 1.04, which was the highest value among the variables. Of all elements, the customer courtesy factor is considered less important when compared with the other factors. This table also presents the mean value of overall customer loyalty (4.29), which is at the somewhat agree level.

Hypothesis Test

The results of hypotheses testing in accordance with the research objectives are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Data in Table 2 addresses H_1 (Relationship marketing has a positive effect on customer loyalty of millennial customers). All elements except consumer courtesy had significant effects on millennial

customers. Among the other factors, communication, service quality, products, technology, and the use of social networks were significant at or less than the 1% level.

Table 2 *Coefficients—Relationship between Relationship Marketing on Customer Loyalty*

Independent Variables	Beta Coefficients	t-value	p-value
Constant		-2.68	.008
Trust	.08	2.25	.025*
Commitment	.13	-2.91	.004**
Communication	.14	4.22	.000***
Service Quality	.46	12.09	.000***
Products	.42	14.61	.000***
Pricing	-.08	-2.30	.022*
Customer Courtesy	.02	1.87	.062
Technology	.32	9.05	.000***
Social Network	-.21	-5.35	.000***
a. Dependent Variable: Loyalty—R^2 = .98; F = 2099.97; Sig. F = .000			

Note. *p-value < .05; **p-value < .01, ***p- value extremely significant

The standardized coefficients or beta coefficients (β) are used to investigate the relative strength of each element to the dependent variable. The data showed that service quality (β = .46) had the highest effect on customer loyalty, followed by product (β =.42), and technology (β = .32). The coefficient of determination (R^2 = .98) indicated that the overall elements of relationship marketing could explain up to 97.9% of the variation among millennials customers.

Table 3 presents a summary of the demographic factors involved in testing the H_2 hypothesis (i.e., There is a difference in loyalty of the millennial customers with different demographic characteristics). The data showed that there was no significant difference in customer loyalty of millennials with respect to gender and marital status ($H_{2.1}$ and $H_{2.3}$). However, there were extremely significant differences in customer loyalty of millennials associated with different educational levels, income, and occupation ($H_{2.2}$, $H_{2.4}$, and $H_{2.5}$).

Table 3 *Differences in Loyalty of Millennial Customers with Different Demographic Characteristics*

Demographic Factors	Testing	p-value	Result
($H_{2.1}$) Gender	t-test	.893	Not significant
($H_{2.2}$) Educational Level	One way ANOVA	.000***	Significant
($H_{2.3}$) Marital Status	One way ANOVA	.078	Not significant
($H_{2.4}$) Income	One way ANOVA	.000***	Significant
($H_{2.5}$) Occupation	One way ANOVA	.000***	Significant

Note. ***p-value extremely significant

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical evidence about relationships between the elements of relationship marketing on millennial customer loyalty, since they reveal that almost all elements of relationship marketing had significant effects on millennial customer loyalty. The relationships included trust, commitment, communication, service quality, products, pricing, technology, and social network. However, there was one factor that had no significant effect on millennial customer loyalty, namely customer courtesy. Though theoretically customer courtesy is a key part of relationship marketing (Gronroos, 2004), one reason why this may not be significant is that customer courtesy may not be noticeable to customers. They may view this factor as a standard service that a hotel should always provide, and therefore it may not influence their decisions. A previous study mentioned that customer courtesy and satisfaction do not automatically lead to loyalty; steps and processes must be taken to cultivate relationships that eventually lead to customer loyalty (Arantola, 2000).

Additionally, the findings indicated two elements that had negative effects on millennial customer loyalty. These were pricing and the use of social networks. Price is one element of the marketing mix that affects the purchase decisions of consumers. A reasonable price can make customers satisfied. On the contrary, a high price with low quality of product/service can lead to customer dissatisfaction and can easily lead to brand switching. Therefore, price can have a negative influence on customer loyalty in some cases. As for social networks, one possibility is that they may have a negative influence on customer loyalty in those customers who place a high value on social networking and social media. They may also be more extensive Internet users. Hence, they are more likely to seek out deals on the Internet rather than choosing to remain loyal to a hotel. The result of this study is somewhat consistent with the work of Abtin and Pouramiri (2016), who studied the impact of relationship marketing on the enhancement of customer loyalty. Their data revealed a significant relationship between loyalty as a dependent variable and relationship marketing (trust, satisfaction, management, communication, and competence) as independent variables. Such results are also consistent with those obtained in the study conducted by Husnain and Akhtar (2015) concerning relationship marketing and customer loyalty in the Pakistani banking sector. The data indicated that relationship marketing (trust, commitment, communication, and conflict handing) had a significant effect and predicted a good proportion of variance in customer loyalty.

From the research results, it is evident that hotel management should recognize the importance of millennial customers. They might make efforts to understand the unique characteristics and preferences of this generation, so that they can use the information to develop a marketing strategy that responds to the needs of millennial customers. Moreover, hotel management should implement relationship marketing to create good relationships with their millennial guests and cultivate customer loyalty among them. For instances, hotels need to ensure that customers get room types according to their needs and on the exact date that they want through online booking systems (preferred by millennials). This will enhance their trust in the hotel's online reservation system. Moreover, hotels could set up a membership program for younger customers to create commitment among them. They might set up a LINE official account to directly and continuously communicate with the Y Generation. To enhance guest experiences, the hotel could implement innovations, for example, an orange squeezing machine that enables the hotel guests to make fresh orange juice by themselves. Additionally, hotel management can use Facebook as a medium to launch reviews completed by celebrities or other guests connected with their experience in the hotel in an effort to create trust and customer loyalty among millennials.

The results of this study have contributed to the notion that relationship marketing can be used to cultivate customer loyalty. Future research is recommended to focus on creating customer satisfaction and customer loyalty among customers of different generations, such as Generations X and Z. They might also employ other independent variables that could affect customer loyalty, such as social networking, celebrity endorsement, and mobile-marketing.

Limitations and Implications

Many elements of relationship marketing have been studied in prior research. The components of relationship marketing investigated in this study probably do not cover all elements that affect millennial customer loyalty. Moreover, this research was conducted in the Bangkok area; therefore, to apply its finding to other areas or the entire of country of Thailand might not be reasonable. Additionally, the target group used for this study was only millennial hotel customers. Hence, the findings might not be applicable to other generations. The limited representativeness of the sample, due to restrictions in the source of data, might make it inappropriate to apply our conclusions to all millennial hotel customers.

Conclusions

The world population has been classified into generations by their year of birth and the significant events they share. Generation Y (the Millennials) were born from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s or

to the early 2000s. This cohort of people is expected to comprise three-quarters of the global workforce by 2025. Since Millennials will outnumber other generations in the near future, to cultivate their loyalty will help hotels to retain their potential customers.

In order to create customer loyalty among millennials, hotel management must understand the factors affecting them. This study aimed to examine the effect of relationship marketing and demographic characteristics on consumer loyalty of millennials.

The findings indicated that almost all elements including trust, commitment, communication, service quality, products, pricing, technology, and social network had significant effects on the loyalty of millennial customers. However, customer courtesy did not have a significant effect on customer loyalty. Additionally, there was no significant effect of gender and marital status on millennial customer loyalty. By contrast, there were significant effects of educational level, income, and occupation on customer loyalty.

From the research findings, the authors recommend that hotel management should recognize the importance of millennial customers and make efforts to understand their unique characteristics and preferences. They can use the information obtained from this study to develop marketing strategies that responds to the needs of millennial customers. Moreover, hotel management should implement relationship marketing to create good relationships with millennial clients and cultivate customer loyalty among them. As for future research, this might focus on factors affecting customer loyalty in different generations, such as Generations X and Z. Future researchers may employ different independent variables, such as social network, online marketing, and mobile marketing.

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