

Understanding Customer Loyalty in Romanian Wellness Spa Tourism: Insights from TRA Research

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Abstract

The wellness spa industry has become one of the fastest-growing segments in the hospitality and tourism industry, with an increasing number of individuals seeking relaxation, rejuvenation, and wellness. Given the growing popularity of wellness spa services, it is important for businesses to understand the factors that influence customers' intentions to remain loyal to wellness spa services. In this vein, this study applied an extended Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) framework to examine the relationship between attitude towards wellness spa services, subjective norms, satisfaction, and the intention to remain loyal to the wellness spa services. The study utilized survey data collected from customers of a well-known wellness spa destination in Romania. The research results revealed that attitude and subjective norms positively influence customers' loyalty. In addition, the study found that satisfaction for spa services mediates the relationship between attitude towards spa services and the intention to remain loyal to the spa services. The findings of this study have important theoretical and managerial implications for tourism businesses seeking to enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction with wellness spa services.

Keywords

Spa, balneary, TRA, loyalty, tourism.

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Introduction

People continue to travel for the purpose of maintaining or improving health, and global health tourism revenues estimated by several authoritative global non-governmental organizations are high and growing. According to the 2022 Global Wellness Institute (GWI) report on spa and wellness tourism, the industry has seen significant changes on a global scale. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, the industry experienced a remarkable growth and was valued at \$720 billion. However, in 2020, it faced a considerable setback, with a decline to \$436 billion. Despite this, the report predicts a promising future, with the market expected to recover strongly, reaching \$817 billion in 2022 and an astounding \$1.3 trillion by 2025, this makes it the fastest-growing wellness market by 2025 (GWI, 2022).

In Romania, wellness spa tourism has become a popular choice, in 2021, according to Romanian Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism (RMET, 2023), 924.400 tourists stayed in spa resorts, interested to take advantage of the local spa resources (over 2500 of Europe's mineral and thermal springs; 43 spas) and the acceptable level of healthcare. In Romania this field has focused mainly on medical services rather than tourism, similar to western resorts in Europe (Nistoreanu and Aluculesei, 2021). However, the majority of health-related tourists, is fuelled almost exclusively by domestic demand. According to a memorandum for state aid in spa tourism industry, approved by the Romanian Government in 2023, 98,6% of the total number of tourists arriving in balneary resorts, are represented by Romanians (RMET, 2023).

On a national level, in 2020, the number of tourists that have chosen spa resorts, decreased by 46,9% compared to 2019, as the entire tourism sector experienced significant adverse impacts during the period of 2020-2021 due to the crisis caused by the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, but during 2022, as the lifting of restrictions occurred, an +53,7% upsurges of the number of tourists in local spas was registered (RMET, 2023). It can be considered that the pandemic situation has increased the degree of awareness of

the importance of health, and suddenly, the number of those for whom such services are curatively useful, not just prophylactically, will increase rapidly and considerably.

Loyalty as a construct, has been tackled in literature in a very homogeneous way (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2018). One of the most recent definitions for destination loyalty is given by Ilona-Niininen (2022, p. 870), and is described as “behavioral consistency of repeated visits to a destination fuelled by a psychological desire to visit the destination. Consumers’ loyalty is most coveted by managers, as finding new consumers involves costs. Developing customer loyalty has become an important marketing strategy because of the benefits associated with retaining existing customers (McMullan and Gilmore, 2008). Customer loyalty involves that the organization offer to consumers more than a product or service, in the same time is providing perceptions that make commitment, this aspect is viewed as the strength of the relationship between an individual’s relative attitude and repeat patronage (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Conventionally, the theory of loyalty has embraced three leading approaches (Moore, Rodger and Taplin, 2015): behavioural, attitudinal, and an perspective that combine both attitude and behaviour (Rundle-Thiele, 2005). Tourist behavioral loyalty is assessed by way of clear acts (returns to the destination), considering this, loyalty is mostly measured as the number of times a product or a service is bought, or the number of times a destination is visited (McKercher, Denizci-Guillet and Ng, 2012), while attitudinal loyalty is often used by researchers in tourism for measurements using psychological elements as intentions and willings, emotions and feelings, thoughts and beliefs (Oppermann, 2000).

Previous studies have analyzed the values, perception and attitudes of potential domestic medical tourists regarding the supply of Romanian medical tourism (Vasile, 2019). There is a lack of investigations based on theoretical models regarding what makes Romanian consumers remain loyal to wellness and spa tourism destinations, as well as a lack of research based on scientific evidence regarding attitude of Romanian residents towards loyalty in wellness and spa tourism, thus there is no scientific basis for proposing strategies to stimulate loyalty in this form of tourism. The purpose of this research is the application of an extended Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) framework to examine the relationship between attitude towards wellness spa services, subjective norms, satisfaction, and the intention to remain loyal to the wellness spa services in order to improve view of the knowledge about customer loyalty formation into an Romanian consecrate wellness and spa tourism destination, by using attitudinal approach. As a result of such developments, practical suggestions will result in concrete directions and strategic measures to develop the loyalty inside the Romanian wellness and spa tourism industry.

Literature review

The theory of reasoned action

Fishbein and Ajzen proposed the Theory of Reasoned Action model in 1975, its focus is on developing an observation system consisting of two variable groups, attitude and subjective norms. In the theory of reasoned action, attitude is defined as a person's overall evaluation or judgment towards a particular behavior, while subjective norm, is the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). TRA suggests that subjective norms can directly influence an individual's behavioral intentions, regardless of their attitude towards the behavior. If the individual perceives a strong social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior, this can lead to a corresponding increase or decrease in their intention to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Research model and hypotheses

The relationship between attitude towards wellness and spa services and behavioral intention to remain loyal to the wellness spa services

In numerous studies examining the relationship between attitude and intention, researchers rely on the conclusions drawn from Ajzen's research as a fundamental basis (1975, 1980, 1985, 1991). Within the field of hospitality and tourism research, emotional attitude is regarded as a comprehensive assessment of behavior (Kempf, 1999; Lam and Hsu, 2006; Sparks, 2007). Also, studies from related research areas conclude in similar directions, a study focusing on intention in medical tourism conducted in Malaysia, unequivocally concluded that attitude was a strong positive predictor for tourists' intention to seek medical tourism (Na, Onn and Meng, 2016). We have found more useful contributions for our research purpose in another research more focused on investigating attitude as a factor influencing loyalty in spa tourism, Kim et al. (2010) concluded that the potential of obtaining positive emotional attitudes is likely to encourage spa

visiting, and meeting and exceeding guests' needs would create, in those guests, positive attitudes to spa visiting. Based on these arguments, we propose the following:

H1 Customer attitude (Att) towards the studied spa has a positive influence on their intention to remain loyal;

The relationship between subjective norms and behavioral intention to remain loyal to the wellness spa services

As a parallel to the relationship between attitude and intention, in a vast majority of studies that integrate the relationship between subjective norms and intention, the pioneering work of Ajzen (1991) on the constituent factors of the TRA is widely cited. Research on loyalty in hospitality heavily exploits this relationship. In this context, it is important to mention the contributions of Lam and Hsu (2006), who found relevant importance of subjective norm in relation to Taiwanese tourists' intention to visit Hong Kong, and in the same study, they also determined that subjective norm have a positive impact in deciding about holiday destination choices. Furthermore, the study conducted by Na, Onn and Meng (2016) is noteworthy for demonstrating that subjective norms have a positive effect on purchase intentions in the field of medical tourism. With relevance to spa tourism, it is important to mention the contribution of Kim et al. (2010), who concluded in their study that subjective norms significantly influence the intention to revisit, as creating and maintaining positive word of mouth among spa-goers is recommended strongly. In this context we propose the following:

H2 Subjective norms (SbN) regarding the studied spa have a positive influence on customers' intention to remain loyal.

Satisfaction, as a mediator between attitude, subjective norms and behavioral intention to remain loyal to the wellness spa services

Research in tourism has shown that satisfaction can work as a mediator in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by influencing the relationship between an individual's attitude and their intention to engage in a behavior (Kim, Kim and Goh, 2011). In the perspective of TRA framework, "affect" can be interpreted as satisfaction experienced during the consumption of services or products, which can influence repurchasing behavior (Erickson, Johansson and Chao, 1984). Essentially, "affect" represents the emotional response towards the product. The level of satisfaction can be used to measure the "attitude toward the behavior" and "subjective norm" (Kim, Kim and Goh, 2011). Considering this instance, this study focused on measuring "satisfaction" for an "affective" vision of the TRA model. In this context, the following research hypotheses have been developed:

H3a Customer satisfaction (Sat) with the services provided by this spa mediates the relationship between Att and LyInt;

H3b Customer satisfaction (Sat) with the services provided by this spa mediates the relationship between SbN and LyInt.

Methodology

Measures and survey questionnaire

In order to study the influence of the evaluated factors in this study, scientifically validated constructs were used, based on previous researches conducted on loyalty in the hospitality sector (Kim, Kim and Goh, 2011; Han and Ryu, 2012; Han et al., 2017). These constructs were adapted and modified to fit the specificity of the present research. The questionnaire included 3 items to evaluate satisfaction regarding health tourism practiced within the studied spa (e.g. I think I made a good decision when choosing to use the services of this spa), 3 items to evaluate subjective norms (e.g. Most people who are important to me think I should come to this spa), 4 items to evaluate the attitudes consumers have (e.g. Returning to this spa would be delightful), and the intention to repurchase was evaluated using 4 items (e.g. I intend to be a frequent guest at this spa).

The construct validity of the measures used was verified by practitioners in the industry and by members of the academic community in the hospitality industry.

Data collection

The data collection was conducted by sending a personalized invitation via email to participate in this study. The questionnaire was sent only to spa service consumers within this tourist complex who were present between June 2022 and February 2023, enrolled in the internal loyalty program, and who, in accordance

with GDPR regulations, had given their consent to participate in surveys. This health tourism destination had a total of 4,334 unique customers during the specified period, of whom 450 were invited to respond to the questionnaire, and the first 90 responses received were used in the research.

The questionnaire was developed in Romanian language and was completed only by native speakers of the Romanian language. Respondents were not offered any prizes or benefits to be used during their return to the location.

Sampling profiles and measurement model

Among the respondents, 90.1% avail themselves of services offered by this spa for at least 6 days a year. The gender breakdown is significantly unequal, with 51.6% of respondents identifying as female. Moreover, 87% of respondents reported traveling a distance of over 200 km to reach this spa. Regarding age, 4.4% of respondents reported being under 35 years old, 10% reported being between 35 and 44 years old, 21.1% reported being between 45 and 54 years old, 32.2% reported being between 55 and 64 years old, 23.3% reported being between 65 and 74 years old, and 8.9% reported being over 75 years old. A question about income level was not included in the questionnaire. In terms of visit frequency, 7.8% of respondents reported visiting the location only once, 57.8% reported visiting once a year, and 34.4% reported visiting multiple times a year. The data collected was interpreted using SmartPLS 4 software, an advanced data analysis program that focuses on modeling relationships between variables to establish the degree of reliability and validity of confirmatory factor analysis.

Results

Data analysis and results

Measurement model

The measurement model displays the relationships between constructs and the indicators of variables. The first three indicators of the measurement model analyze the composite reliability, evaluated with: Cronbach's alpha, which reflects the degree of item coherence within the construct; Composite Reliability (rho_a), which uses the classical formula of composite reliability (Cronbach's alpha), but with a different method of calculating error variance, and Composite Reliability (rho_c), which reflects the degree of internal coherence of the latent constructs in the research model. These composite reliability indicators are based on different formulas and methods for calculating this indicator. The desirable limit criterion value for composite reliability is 0.60 (Ringle et al., 2020). Consequently, all latent constructs in the model possess composite reliability (see Table 1). The last component of the measurement model is convergent validity. The measure of convergent validity is Average Variance Extracted (AVE), for which the desirable limit value is 0.50 (Ringle et al., 2020). Therefore, the constructs possess convergent validity (see Table 1).

Table no. 1. Reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Att	0.920	0.926	0.943	0.807
LyInt	0.909	0.911	0.936	0.786
Sat	0.948	0.949	0.966	0.906
Sbn	0.981	0.981	0.987	0.963

To access the discriminant validity of constructs, the Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio procedure is used. According to Henseler et al. (2015), to verify discriminant validity, the most cautious threshold values of the HTMT ratio are less than or equal to 0.90. All HTMT values within this study are less than the threshold value of 0.90 (see table 2).

Table no. 2. Discriminant validity using HTMT

	Att	LyInt	Sat	SbN
Att				
LyInt	0.833			
Sat	0.736	0.886		
SbN	0.452	0.599	0.457	

Structural model

The structural model displays the relationships (paths) between the constructs in the proposed model. The "Original sample (O)" and "Sample mean (M)", express the path coefficient, abbreviated as " β ", which indicates the relationship between two variables in the model and shows the direction and strength of the influence that one variable has on the other. The standard deviation (STDEV) shows how much the values of a variable deviate from its mean value. The T statistics, abbreviated as "t", represent a measure of the statistical significance of β (path coefficient). The "P" values, abbreviated as "p", identify the relationships that are statistically significant, and when "p" < 0.05, it means that the hypothesis is null and can be rejected with a 95% confidence level (Ringle et al., 2020). The results showed that "Att" has a significant impact on "LyInt" ($\beta=0.329/0.332$, $t=3.569$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, H1 was accepted. H2 evaluates whether "SbN" has a significant impact on "LyInt" ($\beta=0.201/0.202$, $t=3.367$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, H2 was accepted (see Table 3).

Table no. 3. Hypothesis testing / Total direct effects

	Original sample (O)	T statistics	P values
H1:Att→LyInt	0.329	3.569	0.000
H2:SbN→LyInt	0.201	3.367	0.001
Sat→LyInt	0.506	5.543	0.000
Att→Sat	0.619	6.484	0.000
SbN→Sat	0.174	1.936	0.053

Mediation analysis

H3a evaluates whether "Sat" mediates the relationship between "Att" and "LyInt". The results show that the direct effect (H1) was found to be positive and significant ($\beta=0.329$, $t=3.569$). When the mediator was introduced into the model, the total effect remained significant ($\beta=0.642$, $t=8.104$), while the indirect effect, once the mediator was included in the analysis, was found to be significant ($\beta=0.313$, $t=4.182$, $p<0.05$), as shown in Table 4. Therefore, the results reveal partial mediation. This indicates that the effect of "Att" on "LyInt" partially passes through "Sat". Consequently, H3a is accepted.

H3b evaluates whether "Sat" mediates the relationship between "SbN" and "LyInt". The results show that the direct effect (H2) was found to be positive and significant ($\beta=0.201$, $t=3.367$). When the mediator was introduced into the model, the total effect remained significant ($\beta=0.289$, $t=3.815$), while the indirect effect, once the mediator was included in the analysis, decreased significantly ($\beta=0.088$, $t=1.757$, $p>0.05$), as shown in Table 4. Therefore, the results indicate that "SbN" directly influences "LyInt" through "Sat". Consequently, H3b is not accepted.

Table no. 4. Mediation analysis

Hypotheses	Total effects		Direct effects		Hypotheses	Indirect effects			
	Coef.	t-value	Coef.	t-value		Coef.	t-value	p value	
Att → LyInt	0.642	8.104	0.329	3.569	H3a	Att -> Sat -> LyInt	0.313	4.182	0.000
SbN → LyInt	0.289	3.815	0.201	3.367	H3b	SbN -> Sat -> LyInt	0.088	1.757	0.079

Conclusions

Theoretical Implications

The conclusions of this study suggest that a tourist's attitude towards spa services has a positive influence on their intention to remain loyal to the spa. Therefore, when tourists are considered physically and mentally balanced, refreshed, happy, and relaxed while experiencing spa services, they are more likely to assume the spa as their favorite choice, intend to be a loyal guest, recommend it to others, and speak positively about it to friends and family. In the context of this research, the positive influence of attitude towards spa services on loyalty intentions associates with the key components of TRA. According to TRA, an individual's behavior is influenced by their attitudes towards the behavior and the subjective norms surrounding that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the case of Romanian tourism spa services, the research reports that tourists' attitudes towards the service (feeling physically and mentally balanced, refreshed, happy, and relaxed) have a positive influence on their intention to remain loyal to the spa. These results are in line with the results of previous research regarding the relationship between customer attitudes and loyalty which reported that tourists who have positive attitudes towards a spa services or brand are more likely to engage in repeat

patronage and positive word-of-mouth (Han et al, 2017). Therefore, by offering excellent tourism spa services that stimulate positive attitudes in their clients, businesses can increase loyalty intentions.

Results and discussions

Analyzing the results of the proposed structural model

In the context of our research, subjective norms indicate the influence of the opinions of people who are important to an individual, such as friends and family, on their intention to remain loyal to the spa services. The research found that when tourists sense that most of the people who are important to them think they should come to the spa for treatments or would like to return to the spa for treatments, they are more likely to consider the spa their favorite choice, intend to be a regular guest, recommend it to others, and speak positively about it to friends and family. From a theoretical perspective, this research's results offer support for the concept that social influence can play a salient part in shaping tourists' attitudes and intentions. By concentrating on building positive social influence, tourism businesses can increase their customers' loyalty intentions. The result that subjective norms have a positive influence on the intention to remain loyal to the spa services is consistent with the research in tourism industry which reported that word-of-mouth referrals from friends and family are among the most influential factors in shaping customers' attitudes and behaviors (Kim et al., 2010).

The research finding that satisfaction for spa services partial mediates the relationship between attitude towards spa services and the intention to remain loyal to the spa services suggests that the positive effects of attitudes towards spa services on loyalty intentions are partially explained by customers' satisfaction with their spa experience. In other words, customers' attitudes towards spa services directly influence their satisfaction with the spa experience, which in turn influences their loyalty intentions towards the spa. The study suggests that tourists who have positive attitudes towards spa services are more likely to be satisfied with their experience and therefore more likely to remain loyal to the spa.

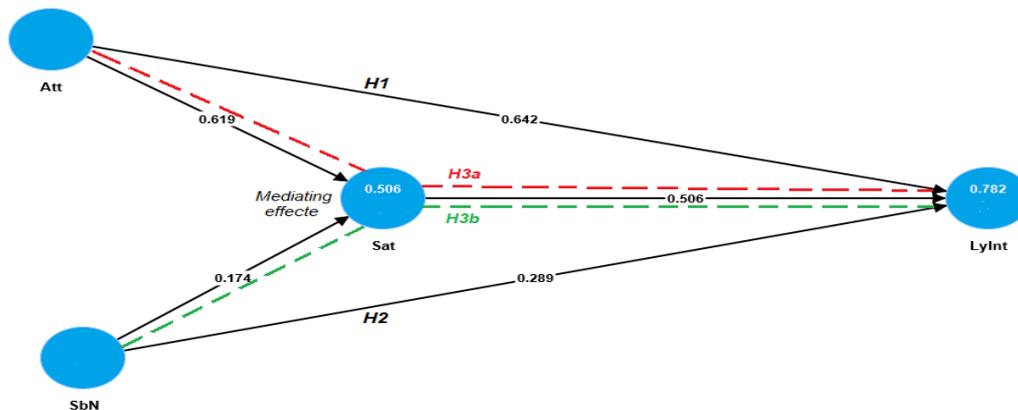


Figure no. 1. Proposed research model

Managerial implications

The research results have various managerial implications for tourism businesses providing spa services. One salient managerial implication is the need to offer excellent spa services that stimulate physical and mental balance, refreshment, happiness, and relaxation. This can be accomplished by investing in well-trained and experienced staff, utilizing quality products and equipment, and providing a clean and comfortable environment. Another managerial implication is the necessity to support positive word-of-mouth and customer recommendations. Tourism businesses can accomplish this by providing referral incentives, encouraging tourists to leave reviews, and emphasizing positive feedback from satisfied clients. More, tourism businesses can utilize tourists feedback to find areas for improvement and tackle any issues that may influence tourists' attitudes and loyalty.

The managerial implications of the finding that satisfaction for spa services mediates the relationship between attitude towards spa services and the intention to remain loyal to the spa services are significant for tourism businesses offering spa services. One key implication is the need for businesses to prioritize customer satisfaction in their service delivery. This can be achieved by ensuring that customers' expectations are met or exceeded during their spa experience. Businesses can achieve this by providing

personalized attention to customers, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere, and training staff to provide excellent customer service and according to the correlation with the information about the respondents' profile, these actions should focus especially on female customers through marketing campaigns or tailoring their services to meet female preferences, older age groups by offering services that appeal to their specific needs and preferences, and attract distant customers, as a significant proportion of respondents (87%) traveled a distance of over 200 km to reach the spa, indicating that the spa has a broad reach. The spa can capitalize on this by offering attractive packages that incentivize distant customers to visit more frequently.

Limitations and recommendations

There are several limitations to this study that should be taken into account. Firstly, the sample may not be representative of the entire population due to the unequal gender breakdown and the respondents' ages. The majority of respondents are middle-aged or elderly, so the results may not apply to younger generations. Moreover, the study was conducted only in one spa location, and the results may not be generalizable to other spa locations or other tourism industries. Additionally, the study did not collect information about the respondents' income levels, which could be an important factor in their loyalty and satisfaction levels. Moreover, the study relied on self-reported data, which could be subject to response bias or social desirability bias. The study only examined the mediating effect of satisfaction on loyalty intention in the context of subjective norms and attitudes, and other variables that may influence loyalty were not considered. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, and further research is needed to explore the complex relationships between different variables and loyalty in the spa tourism industry.

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