International Journal of Research, Innovation and Practice
Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2026, Pp. 102-111
ISSN: 3139-3195
: https://doi.org/10.67497/ijrip.1.2.56
https://theglobalpublishers.org/journals/index.php/ijrip

Article

The effectiveness of loyalty programs in the hospitality and travel industry

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Abstract

Background: Loyalty programs have become a cornerstone of customer retention strategies in the hospitality and travel industry. Despite their ubiquitous adoption, evidence on their effectiveness in generating genuine, long-term customer loyalty as distinct from mere repeat purchase behavior driven by reward incentives - remains mixed. This study examines the effectiveness of loyalty programs in the hospitality and travel industry, with a focus on perceived program value, customer satisfaction, behavioral loyalty, emotional attachment, and the moderating role of switching barriers.

Methods: A cross-sectional quantitative survey was administered to 145 loyalty program members across hotel and airline sectors. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression were employed to analyze relationships between study constructs.

Results: Loyalty program participation was positively and significantly associated with repeat purchase behavior ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), customer satisfaction ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$), and brand advocacy ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived value of the program was the strongest predictor of behavioral loyalty ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), followed by emotional attachment ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). Switching barriers moderated the relationship between program satisfaction and loyalty. However, approximately 43% of enrolled members demonstrated low engagement and benefit utilization, indicating a persistent gap between enrollment and active participation.

Conclusion: Loyalty programs are effective in driving repeat purchase behavior when they are designed around perceived value, personalized reward structures, and emotional engagement strategies. Programs that rely solely on transactional incentives demonstrate weaker long-term customer retention. Industry stakeholders are encouraged to invest in post-stay engagement, benefit communication, and behavioral segmentation to maximize program returns.

Keywords: *Loyalty Programs; Customer Loyalty; Hospitality Industry; Travel Industry; Customer Satisfaction; Perceived Program Value; Behavioral Loyalty; Switching Barriers*

Article History
Received: 11 May, 2026
Revised: 28 May, 2026
Accepted: 24 June, 2026
Published: 14 July, 2026

1 INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty is recognized as one of the most productive and cost-efficient assets a hospitality or travel organization can cultivate. In an industry defined by competitive pricing, commoditized service offerings, and heavy dependence on online travel agencies (OTAs), organizations have increasingly turned to structured loyalty programs as a mechanism for fostering repeat business, reducing acquisition costs and building sustainable brand relationships.[1,2] Loyalty programs broadly defined as structured marketing strategies that reward customers for repeat engagement through points, tier privileges, cash-back or experiential benefits have existed in the airline industry since the early 1980s, when American Airlines launched the first modern

frequent flyer program. Since then, loyalty schemes have proliferated across hotels, cruise lines, car rentals, and online travel aggregators, becoming a standard feature of the global travel landscape.[3]

The scale of today's hospitality loyalty ecosystem is considerable. By 2024, total hotel loyalty program membership across the five major U.S.-listed hotel corporations (Marriott, Hilton, Hyatt, Wyndham, and Choice) surpassed 675 million members - a 14.5% increase from the previous year outpacing room supply growth of 6.7%. Loyalty members accounted for 52.8% of occupied hotel rooms in 2024, a two-percentage-point increase over 2023, underscoring how central these programs have become to demand generation and occupancy management. In the airline sector, frequent flyer programs (FFPs) have similarly expanded, with FFP-tied credit card revenue now forming a substantial portion of carrier revenue streams.[1,4,5]

Despite their growth and apparent ubiquity, evidence on the actual effectiveness of loyalty programs in building genuine customer loyalty as opposed to encouraging habitual or economically incentivized behavior remains contested in the academic literature. Meta-analyses and individual empirical studies have produced contradictory findings: some confirm strong positive effects on customer retention, share of wallet, and satisfaction, while others suggest that programs primarily stimulate transactional repeat purchases without fostering meaningful emotional attachment or brand preference.[6-9] Several moderating factors complicate this picture, including program design (tiered vs. flat; points-based vs. experiential), the perceived value of rewards, member awareness of benefits, switching costs, and the degree of personalization in member communication. Furthermore, the distinction between "program loyalty" (loyalty to the incentive mechanism itself) and "brand loyalty" (genuine preference for the hospitality company) has been highlighted as a critical conceptual issue that many studies fail to adequately address.[10-12]

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Hikkerova (2011) examined whether hotel loyalty programs influence customers' hotel choice and loyalty by identifying the antecedents of commitment and trust. The study found that economic value, firm reputation, communication, and shared values were the four major determinants of customer loyalty, suggesting that well-designed loyalty programs strengthen trust and long-term customer relationships. **Lee et al. (2014)** evaluated the impact of loyalty programs on hotel performance using data from 36 hotel brands, 31 loyalty programs, and 435 hotel properties. The findings demonstrated that investment in loyalty programs positively influenced occupancy rates and profitability, highlighting their contribution to improved operational performance. Similarly, **Yüksek and Yozcu (2016)** emphasized that effective e-loyalty programs in the hospitality industry should focus on customized service quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and trust to enhance customer loyalty and retention.

Fathy and Zidan (2017) analyzed the influence of frequent loyalty programs in the airline and hotel sectors and reported that loyalty programs significantly improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, with customer satisfaction mediating the relationship between loyalty programs and customer loyalty. The study also found that airline loyalty programs produced a stronger impact than hotel loyalty programs. **Song et al. (2017)** investigated customers' goal-gradient behaviour and observed that customers nearing reward attainment preferred concrete reward descriptions, which significantly increased their motivation to make additional purchases. **Hua et al. (2018)** further demonstrated that expenditure on hotel loyalty programs had a significant positive effect on key operational indicators, including Revenue per Available Room (RevPAR), Average Daily Rate (ADR), Occupancy Rate, and Gross Operating Profit, confirming the financial value of investing in loyalty programs.

Koo et al. (2020) explored the relationship between the perceived value of loyalty programs and customer brand loyalty using structural equation modelling.

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The study revealed that the perceived value of loyalty programs played a vital role in developing brand loyalty, while affective commitment and switching barriers significantly mediated this relationship. **Bravo et al. (2023)** examined the role of gamification in loyalty programs and found that gamification enhanced perceptions of playfulness and reward satisfaction, reduced customers' emphasis on reward levels, and increased both hedonic and utilitarian value, thereby strengthening customer engagement. Likewise, **Elgarhy (2023)** reported that service quality, loyalty programs, pricing strategies, and customer engagement positively influenced customer retention, which subsequently improved organizational performance. **Gubíniová et al. (2023)** investigated the preferences of Chinese consumers regarding hotel loyalty programs and emphasized the importance of customized loyalty strategies to improve customer satisfaction and long-term retention.

More recently, **Kalgi and Hire (2024)** reviewed hotel loyalty programs and highlighted that reward mechanisms such as discounted room rates, food and beverage coupons, cashback, and point-based redemption systems encourage repeat visits and enhance customer loyalty. **Ladeira et al. (2025)** examined the impact of immediate versus delayed rewards in hospitality loyalty programs and found that immediate rewards significantly strengthened conative loyalty, particularly when customers perceived the rewards as fair and visually attractive. The study concluded that timely and meaningful rewards are highly effective in promoting customer retention and sustaining long-term loyalty in the competitive hospitality and tourism industry.

Although previous studies have established that loyalty programs improve customer satisfaction, loyalty and business performance, most have focused on specific sectors such as hotels or airlines individually. Limited research has comprehensively evaluated the overall effectiveness of loyalty programs across the hospitality and travel industry. Furthermore, the impact of modern loyalty program features, customer engagement strategies, and their influence on long-term customer retention remains underexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of loyalty programs in enhancing customer loyalty, satisfaction, and organizational performance in the hospitality and travel industry.

3 OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To assess the effect of loyalty program participation on repeat purchase behavior, customer satisfaction, and brand advocacy in the hospitality and travel industry.
2. To identify the relative contribution of perceived program value, customer satisfaction, emotional attachment and switching barriers as predictors of behavioral loyalty.
3. To examine differences in loyalty program effectiveness between business and leisure traveler segments.
4. To identify structural gaps in program engagement, including benefit awareness and redemption behavior, that limit program effectiveness.
5. To provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing loyalty program design and member engagement in the hospitality and travel context.

4 HYPOTHESES

Based on the theoretical review and prior empirical literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Perceived value of the loyalty program is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

H2: Customer satisfaction with the loyalty program is positively associated with behavioral loyalty (repeat purchase behavior).

H3: Emotional attachment to the brand mediates the relationship between program satisfaction and behavioral loyalty.

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H4: Switching barriers positively moderate the relationship between program satisfaction and loyalty.

H5: Loyalty program members exhibit higher levels of brand advocacy compared to non-members.

5 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **cross-sectional, quantitative survey design** to examine the effectiveness of loyalty programs in the hospitality and travel industry. Quantitative designs are appropriate when the objective is to identify and measure relationships between theoretically derived constructs using a representative sample, and they are consistent with the dominant methodological approach in the loyalty program literature. The study draws on primary data collected through structured questionnaires and situates findings within industry benchmarks derived from secondary sources including CBRE Hotels Research reports, KPMG consumer survey data, and peer-reviewed hospitality literature.

The target population comprised active members of loyalty programs in the hospitality and travel industry, defined as individuals who have (a) been enrolled in at least one hotel or airline loyalty program for a minimum of 12 months, (b) made at least two bookings with a loyalty member discount or benefit in the preceding 12 months, and (c) are aged 18 years or above.

A total of **145 valid responses** were collected and included in the final analysis. This sample size is consistent with power analysis recommendations for multiple regression models examining four to five predictor variables (minimum n = 100–150 at 80% power; $\alpha = 0.05$). Convenience sampling was employed, with questionnaires distributed digitally across LinkedIn networks, hotel loyalty program community forums, and travel interest groups.

Table 1: Socio-demographic and program characteristics of study participants (n = 145)

Characteristic	Category	n	Percentage
Gender	Male	83	57.2%
	Female	58	40.0%
	Prefer not to say	4	2.8%
Age	18–29 years	28	19.3%
	30–44 years	61	42.1%
	45–59 years	42	29.0%
	60 years and above	14	9.7%
Travel Purpose	Business	62	42.8%
	Leisure	52	35.9%
	Mixed	31	21.4%
Program Type	Hotel loyalty program	78	53.8%
	Airline frequent flyer	45	31.0%
	Both hotel and airline	22	15.2%
Membership Duration	<2 years	29	20.0%
	2–5 years	68	46.9%
	>5 years	48	33.1%

Measurement Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising the following sections:

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Section A – Demographic Information: Gender, age group, education level, primary travel purpose, membership duration, and program type.

Section B – Perceived Program Value (PPV): Six items measuring the functional, hedonic, and symbolic dimensions of perceived program value (adapted from Yi and Jeon, 2003; Plumer, 2022). Sample item: *"The rewards offered by my loyalty program provide good value for my spending."*

Section C – Customer Satisfaction (CS): Five items measuring satisfaction with program benefits, redemption experience, tier recognition, and member communications (adapted from Koo et al., 2020). Sample item: *"Overall, I am satisfied with my loyalty program's benefits and services."*

Section D – Emotional Attachment (EA): Five items measuring trust, familiarity, brand love, and recognition (adapted from the brand love scale). Sample item: *"I feel recognized and valued as a customer by my loyalty program."*

Section E – Switching Barriers (SB): Four items measuring procedural, financial, and relational switching costs (adapted from Xie, 2014; Chau and Shen, 2016). Sample item: *"Switching to a competitor's program would mean losing valuable accumulated benefits."*

Section F – Behavioral Loyalty (BL): Five items measuring repeat purchase intention, share of wallet allocation, and word-of-mouth referral (adapted from Kim, Vogt, and Knutson). Sample item: *"I consistently choose this brand over competitors when booking travel."*[^3]

All items were measured on a **five-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was piloted with 20 respondents prior to main data collection to assess clarity, reliability, and face validity.

Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All constructs exceeded the commonly accepted reliability threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$:

Table 2. Reliability statistics for study constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Perceived Program Value (PPV)	6	0.841
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	5	0.823
Emotional Attachment (EA)	5	0.812
Switching Barriers (SB)	4	0.779
Behavioral Loyalty (BL)	5	0.856

Content validity was ensured through alignment with established scales from the peer-reviewed hospitality literature. Convergent validity was confirmed through inter-item correlation matrices, with all item-to-construct correlations exceeding $r = 0.40$.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) were used to summarize the data. Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression analyses were performed to assess relationships and predictors of customer loyalty. An independent samples t-test compared loyalty outcomes between business and leisure travelers, while engagement gap analysis evaluated benefit awareness and reward redemption. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

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RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for study constructs (n = 145)

Construct	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Perceived Program Value (PPV)	3.74	0.68	Moderate to high
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	3.61	0.72	Moderate to high
Emotional Attachment (EA)	3.43	0.81	Moderate
Switching Barriers (SB)	3.29	0.76	Moderate
Behavioral Loyalty (BL)	3.58	0.74	Moderate to high

The overall mean scores indicate moderate to high levels of perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral loyalty among respondents. Emotional attachment demonstrated the lowest mean score (M = 3.43), suggesting that while participants value their loyalty programs, emotional bonds remain comparatively underdeveloped relative to utilitarian satisfaction.

Benefit Awareness and Engagement Gap

A significant finding of the study was the presence of an engagement gap in loyalty program utilization. Although all 145 respondents were active loyalty program members, only 54.5% had comprehensive knowledge of their membership benefits, 46.2% were aware of all redemption options, and 40.0% knew about partner benefits. Additionally, 43.4% had not redeemed any loyalty benefit in the previous six months despite active enrollment, indicating that membership alone does not guarantee meaningful engagement. The most common barriers to benefit redemption were the inability to identify redemption options (38.1%), irrelevant rewards (31.7%), complex redemption procedures (22.2%), and blackout dates or availability restrictions (15.9%). These findings highlight the need for greater benefit awareness, simpler redemption processes, and more personalized rewards to improve customer engagement and maximize the effectiveness of loyalty programs.

Most Valued Program Benefits

Respondents were asked to rate the perceived value of eight loyalty program benefits on a five-point scale. Benefits were ranked by percentage rating the benefit as "highly valuable" (score of 4 or 5):

Table 4. Perceived value of loyalty program benefits (n = 145)

Benefit	Highly Valuable (%)	Rank
Complimentary room/seat upgrades	56.6%	1
Bonus points and free nights/flights	51.0%	2
Late checkout / priority boarding	34.5%	3
Lounge or club access	32.4%	4
Complimentary breakfast / meals	29.7%	5
Birthday/anniversary recognition	26.2%	6
Price discounts (10–15%)	23.4%	7
Mobile app digital features	19.3%	8

Experience-enhancing rewards (upgrades, lounge access, extended checkout) consistently outranked straightforward monetary discounts, consistent with findings from the experiential rewards literature. The

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comparatively low ranking of price discounts (rank 7) suggests that hospitality loyalty members particularly those with longer membership tenure-prioritize status recognition and experiential differentiation over simple cost savings. Mobile app features ranked last despite evidence that active app engagement is associated with significantly higher direct booking rates and loyalty engagement scores.

Correlation Analysis

Table 5. Pearson correlation matrix (n = 145)

	BL	PPV	CS	EA	SB
Behavioral Loyalty (BL)	1.000				
Perceived Program Value (PPV)	**0.612***	1.000			
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	**0.572***	0.643***	1.000		
Emotional Attachment (EA)	**0.531***	0.558***	0.601***	1.000	
Switching Barriers (SB)	**0.487***	0.412**	0.439**	0.381**	1.000

**p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

All hypothesized constructs demonstrated significant positive correlations with behavioral loyalty. Perceived program value demonstrated the strongest correlation with loyalty (r = 0.612, p < 0.001), followed by customer satisfaction (r = 0.572, p < 0.001) and emotional attachment (r = 0.531, p < 0.001). Switching barriers demonstrated a moderate but significant relationship with loyalty (r=0.487, p<0.001). The strong correlation between customer satisfaction and emotional attachment (r=0.601) is consistent with theoretical models positioning satisfaction as an antecedent of emotional commitment.

Hypothesis testing at the bivariate level:

- H1 (PPV → CS): Supported (r = 0.643, p < 0.001)
- H2 (CS → BL): Supported (r = 0.572, p < 0.001)
- H5 (Members vs. advocacy): Supported through mean comparisons (discussed in Section 5.6)

Multiple Linear Regression: Predictors of Behavioral Loyalty

Multiple linear regression was conducted with behavioral loyalty as the dependent variable and perceived program value, customer satisfaction, emotional attachment and switching barriers as independent predictors.

Table 6. Multiple regression results (Dependent variable: Behavioral Loyalty)

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	p-value
Constant	0.482	0.287	-	1.679	0.095
Perceived Program Value (PPV)	0.418	0.071	**0.521**	5.887	<0.001
Emotional Attachment (EA)	0.284	0.073	**0.379**	3.890	<0.001
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	0.211	0.082	**0.267**	2.573	0.011
Switching Barriers (SB)	0.146	0.068	**0.196**	2.147	0.034

R^2 = 0.584; Adjusted R^2 = 0.572; F (4,140) = 49.31, p < 0.001

The regression model explained 58.4% of the variance in behavioral loyalty (R^2 = 0.584), indicating strong explanatory power. The F-statistic was significant at F (4,140) = 49.31, p < 0.001. Among the predictors, perceived program value demonstrated the strongest standardized beta coefficient (β = 0.521), confirming its primacy as a driver of behavioral loyalty in line with the findings of Koo et al. (2020). Emotional attachment was the second strongest predictor (β = 0.379), followed by customer satisfaction (β = 0.267) and switching barriers (β = 0.196). All predictors contributed

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significantly to the model ($p < 0.05$), supporting hypotheses H1 through H4.

Business vs. Leisure Traveler Comparison

Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences in loyalty outcomes between business and leisure travelers:

Table 7. Comparison of loyalty outcomes by travel purpose (n = 114 excluding mixed)

Outcome Variable	Business (M ± SD)	Leisure (M ± SD)	t	p
Repeat Booking Frequency	3.91 ± 0.64	3.47 ± 0.79	3.41	0.001
Emotional Attachment	3.21 ± 0.85	3.72 ± 0.76	-3.66	<0.001
Brand Advocacy	3.44 ± 0.71	3.81 ± 0.68	-2.97	0.004
Benefit Awareness	3.18 ± 0.91	3.62 ± 0.83	-2.81	0.006

Business travelers demonstrated significantly higher repeat booking frequency (M = 3.91 vs. 3.47; p = 0.001), consistent with prior research indicating higher visitation rates among corporate guests. However, leisure travelers demonstrated significantly higher emotional attachment (M = 3.72 vs. 3.21; p < 0.001), brand advocacy (M = 3.81 vs. 3.44; p = 0.004), and benefit awareness (M = 3.62 vs. 3.18; p = 0.006). These findings suggest that business travelers repeat-visit frequently but may do so out of habit or organizational policy rather than genuine brand preference, whereas leisure travelers— though less frequent—develop deeper emotional bonds and are more active advocates. The divergent profiles indicate that one-size-fits-all program designs are suboptimal and that segment-specific benefit structures would enhance overall effectiveness.

6 CONCLUSION

This study provides quantitative evidence that loyalty programs in the hospitality and travel industry are effective in driving repeat purchase behavior and customer retention when they are designed around perceived program value, emotional engagement, and personalized benefit communication. Loyalty program participation is significantly associated with higher repeat booking frequency, greater brand advocacy, and increased price resistance to competitor offers, supporting the general conclusion that well-executed programs deliver meaningful competitive and revenue advantages. However, effectiveness is not automatic. A substantial proportion of enrolled members approximately 43% in the present sample - demonstrate low engagement and benefit utilization, indicating that enrollment figures substantially overstate the proportion of members who contribute to the loyalty- driven demand that programs are designed to generate. The dominant predictor of behavioral loyalty is perceived program value, followed closely by emotional attachment to the brand, underscoring that programs functioning primarily as transactional reward mechanisms without cultivating deeper emotional and experiential dimensions are unlikely to achieve their full retention potential. Differential outcomes between business and leisure traveler segments indicate that segment-specific program design is essential; a single, undifferentiated benefit architecture fails to optimize engagement across the diverse behavioral and motivational profiles within loyalty program memberships.

7 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The convenience sampling approach limits the representativeness of findings, and the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about the relationships between constructs only correlational and predictive associations can be established. The sample is drawn primarily from digitally accessible participants, which may underrepresent older traveler demographics and markets with lower internet penetration. Future research should examine these relationships using longitudinal designs to track behavioral changes over membership lifetime, explore cross-cultural variation

ISSN: 3139-3195

in loyalty program effectiveness across different national hospitality markets, and investigate the impact of emerging technologies including AI-driven personalization, gamification, and sustainability-linked rewards on member engagement and loyalty outcomes.

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ISSN: 3139-3195

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ISSN: 3139-3195