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The Influence of Service Marketing Mix on Customer Loyalty Towards Travel Agents Post Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the service marketing mix on customer loyalty towards travel agents in Oman after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study seeks to comprehend the influence of the service marketing mix (7Ps: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence) on customer loyalty to travel agents in Oman in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in a swiftly changing market. The study uses a quantitative research methodology, sending a self-administered survey questionnaire to travel agencies in Oman. The data are examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the presented hypotheses. The results are anticipated to demonstrate substantial correlations between different components of the service marketing mix and client loyalty, offering valuable insights for travel firms to improve their strategic marketing endeavours. This study enhances our comprehension of consumer loyalty dynamics in the travel sector, providing practical insights for enhancing service quality and implementing client retention tactics in the aftermath of the epidemic.

1.0   Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic has greatly impacted the entire tourist business, resulting in unprecedented difficulties for travel agents and agencies. The extensive closing of international borders and the implementation of stringent health norms resulted in a significant decrease in travel demand, causing a substantial reduction in the revenue of tourism-related enterprises and necessitating the closure of many establishments. For the businesses that continued to operate, the level of competition grew more intense, making it increasingly challenging to retain consumers, especially those who were loyal (Morgeson III et al., 2020; Rane et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the tourist sector had a significant decline in employment, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of workers in the business to 30,000 (Naseer et al., 2023). Nevertheless, as mobility restrictions are gradually lifted and the number of COVID-19 instances decreases, there are indications of a rebound in the tourism industry. This is evident when international crossings reopen, and there is a noticeable increase in tourist numbers (Abou-Shouk et al., 2024). The global trend has required travel companies, especially in places like Oman, to make substantial changes in their strategic approaches due to the similar influence on the travel sector.

The pandemic has made it so that the tourism industry in Oman must keep up with ever-changing market dynamics and client needs. The service marketing mix of Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical evidence (7Ps) has become crucial to adjusting to new market realities. It helps companies deliver services that are relevant for today's customers (Jahmani et al., 2023; Rumiyati & Syafarudin, 2021). These changes in strategy are prompted by three factors an increased emphasis on domestic tourism, growing demand for personalized travel options, and a heightened focus on safety and flexibility considerations. Post-pandemic challenges can be overcome only if travel agencies in Oman are quick enough to adapt their tactics according to these developments because modified service offerings have now become the mainstay of customer loyalty in this era (Bhatia & Audichya, 2022; Jahmani et al., 2023).

Customer loyalty has become a significant concern in Oman, especially in the travel and tourist industry, due to the substantial transformations induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic substantially altered travel behaviours, consumer expectations, and market dynamics, leading to changes in customer perceptions and interactions with travel agencies (Arif et al., 2023). Due to heightened competition, an escalating dependence on digital platforms, and shifting client tastes, maintaining customer loyalty has become progressively difficult. Travel agents in Oman must now undertake the dual challenge of rebounding from the downturn and re-establishing trust and enduring connections with clients (Bakar et al., 2024). These issues underscore the necessity of examining client loyalty in the present market landscape. Comprehending the reasons for the decline in loyalty can assist travel agents in refining their strategy to better correspond with post-pandemic customer expectations (Zhai et al., 2021).

The 7Ps of the marketing mix (Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence) are well-established notions, although the dynamics governing these elements have transformed, particularly in a post-pandemic context. Travel agents in Oman need to reassess these elements, considering the significant changes in consumer behaviour and market requirements. The pandemic has underscored emerging preferences, including the augmented significance of digital procedures (online reservations, virtual customer support) and elevated expectations for safety and flexibility in travel plans (Al Maamari, 2020; Al Raisi & Krishnan, 2023). Comprehending the impact of each component of the 7Ps on consumer decisions is crucial for organisations to maintain competitiveness and address these changing needs. Consequently, an intensified emphasis on the interaction of these marketing mix elements can yield significant insights for travel companies to refine their strategy, enhance service delivery, and ultimately cultivate more client loyalty in a swiftly evolving industry.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, this research is conducted in Oman to examine how the service marketing mix affects customer loyalty in travel agencies during the post-COVID-19 period. This study also seeks to analyse the current changed business environment where people are loyal based on different factors of marketing mix such as product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical methods used

towards gaining loyalty from customers (Rumiyati & Syafarudin, 2021; Seyfi et al., 2023). This study aims to investigate the impact of the service marketing mix (7Ps: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical) on customer loyalty to travel agents in Oman in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. The study aims to analyse the impact of evolving marketing mix components on customer behaviour and loyalty within the travel industry, which has seen considerable disruptions owing to the pandemic. This research investigates the correlation between the 7Ps and client loyalty, aiming to furnish travel companies with strategic insights to augment their marketing initiatives for customer retention in a competitive and dynamic industry. The principal research question of this study is: How do the many elements of the service marketing mix affect customer loyalty in the travel industry, and why is it crucial for companies to adjust these elements in light of new market conditions?

2.0   Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism industry worldwide, leading to unprecedented challenges for travel agents and requiring them to shift their marketing strategies drastically. In this changed scenario, service marketers must comprehend how their actions related to various service marketing mix components affect customer loyalty. Product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence are among those elements. This paper reviews past literature concerning their relationship with post-pandemic customer loyalty mainly through empirical analysis based on a hypothesis derived from the literature.

2.1   Theoretical Framework

Customer Value Theory (CVT) is a conceptual framework that underscores the significance of providing value to consumers in return for their loyalty, contentment, and ongoing patronage (Kumar, 2024). This theory asserts that consumers make purchase decisions based on the value perceived from a product or service, which involves a trade-off between the advantages received and the costs or sacrifices incurred (Huang et al.,

2023). Customers' perceived value can be multifaceted, encompassing functional, emotional, social, and economic dimensions. Customer Value Theory posits that consumers select products or services that provide the greatest perceived value, hence affecting their loyalty and subsequent purchasing decisions. The COVID-19 epidemic has significantly transformed client expectations and behaviours, especially in the travel sector, where safety, flexibility, and digital convenience have emerged as primary concerns (Amegbe et al., 2023; Rasaki et al., 2020). As travel agents in Oman strive to recuperate from the pandemic's effects, comprehending and providing exceptional consumer value has become increasingly vital.

The 7Ps of the service marketing mix Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical are critical components that enhance the overall value experienced by customers. The product (travel packages and services) must increasingly prioritise safety, flexibility, and customisation to satisfy emerging client demands (Atulkar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2023). The pricing should represent fair value, particularly during a period when consumers are increasingly price-sensitive due to economic uncertainty. Promotion methods must articulate value distinctly, addressing customer apprehensions over safety, convenience, and reliability in post-pandemic travel (Ebrahim, 2020). Moreover, staff and customer service representatives are crucial in providing personalised experiences, which can markedly augment perceived emotional and social value. The delivery of services, particularly via digital platforms, must be seamless and efficient to satisfy the heightened need for convenience. Ultimately, tangible evidence, like the presentation of travel companies, their websites, and branding, can influence a customer's overall assessment of the service's professionalism and dependability (Habes et al., 2022).

CVT posits that travel agents in Oman should prioritise augmenting perceived value across all aspects of the marketing mix to cultivate customer loyalty. Customers evaluate the advantages of convenience, safety, and personalised service against monetary and non-monetary expenses; therefore, travel agencies who optimise their marketing mix to enhance perceived value will likely experience increased client retention and loyalty (Huang et al., 2023). By guaranteeing that every marketing mix component enhances positive value perception, travel agents can more effectively address the changing requirements of their clientele and establish enduring loyalty,

particularly amid the unpredictable post-pandemic landscape (Amegbe et al., 2023). Customer Value Theory is an essential framework for comprehending how travel agencies in Oman can bolster customer loyalty by providing exceptional value through an effectively optimised service marketing mix. This theory emphasises the necessity of synchronising each element of the marketing mix to enhance perceived customer advantages, which is crucial for sustaining competitive advantage and cultivating consumer loyalty in the post-COVID-19 travel sector (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

2.2   Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty has emerged as a critical focus for businesses, particularly in service industries like travel, where competition is high and customer retention is key to long-term profitability. Loyalty is generally defined as a customer's favourable attitude and commitment to a brand or service provider, which leads to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth (Sudari et al., 2019). In the context of the travel industry, customer loyalty has become increasingly important, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, as travel companies need to rebuild trust and maintain long-term relationships with customers in a market that has been disrupted by health concerns, travel restrictions, and economic uncertainty (Abd Wahab et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to customer loyalty, such as the 7Ps of the service marketing mix, is essential for travel agents in Oman, where post-pandemic consumer behaviour is still evolving (Abd Wahab et al., 2016; Othman et al., 2021).

Previous research by Abd Wahab et al. (2016); Al Hakim (2023); Budianto (2019); Habes et al. (2022); Muharam et al. (2021), has shown that various components of the service marketing mix particularly product, price, promotion, and people play a significant role in influencing customer loyalty. For instance, a study by Nuseir and Elrefae (2022) found that service quality and the perceived value of a product strongly impact customer loyalty in service industries. In the context of travel agents, the quality of travel packages (product), competitive pricing (price), and effective promotional strategies (promotion) are crucial in shaping customer perceptions and encouraging repeat business. Additionally, the "people" aspect, which involves the interactions

between staff and customers, is a significant determinant of loyalty, particularly in service sectors where personalized service can greatly enhance customer satisfaction (Naini et al., 2022). Given the importance of these factors, the current study aims to explore how each of the 7Ps influences customer loyalty in Oman's travel industry.

Customer loyalty has been widely studied in various industries, but its relevance in the post-pandemic travel sector is an emerging area of research. Recent studies indicated that consumer expectations and behaviours have shifted dramatically due to the pandemic, leading to new challenges for businesses trying to retain loyal customers. For example, Rivaldo et al. (2022) suggest that the heightened importance of safety and flexibility in travel services has changed how customers evaluate service providers, making factors like process efficiency and digital interactions even more crucial to maintaining loyalty. Furthermore, trust and transparency have become critical, with customers more likely to remain loyal to companies that demonstrate flexibility in cancellations and refunds, transparent communication, and adherence to safety protocols (Iglesias et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study will also examine how these post-pandemic concerns intersect with the traditional 7Ps to influence customer loyalty in the travel industry in Oman.

Finally, despite the extensive research on customer loyalty in other service sectors, there is still a gap in understanding how the service marketing mix affects loyalty, specifically in the travel industry in Oman, particularly in the post-pandemic context. Most existing studies have focused on sectors such as retail, hospitality, and banking, but the dynamics in the travel industry, where customer experiences are often more personalized and involve higher stakes in terms of financial and emotional investment, require further exploration (Budianto, 2019). This study contributes to the literature by investigating how travel agents in Oman can leverage the 7Ps to foster loyalty among their customers, offering practical insights that could help the industry navigate the post-pandemic recovery phase and enhance long-term customer relationships.

2.3   Relationship between Product and Customer Loyalty

The importance of product offerings in boosting customer loyalty cannot be overemphasized, especially within the dynamic and competitive travel industry. Products' diversity and customization are among the key drivers for attracting as well as retaining clients (Naini et al., 2022). Agents should provide a broad selection of travel goods so that the company can meet different needs and wants, and packages, accommodations, or experiences should be included (Dalilah et al., 2020). According to various studies, this enhances perceived value, leading to greater satisfaction. Personalization only serves to deepen this connection since people tend to feel more satisfied with services delivered when those meet their specific expectations during travelling (Rane et al., 2023).

Another thing is no single customer will want to leave without a product that suits their taste, hence the need for more customized options (Naini et al., 2022; Widayati et al., 2023). The fact remains that people love it better if you provide them with what they really like most, and nobody even thinks about going elsewhere once such an experience has been offered to them. After understanding these demands posed by individuals, organizations should strive towards meeting them because failure may result in the shift of preferences among consumers during the post-pandemic era. Additionally, quality is essential for any business looking forward to increasing customer loyalty, but this statement becomes truer when it comes into play within the tourism sector, where service provision matters a lot. Good products are those that can be trusted at all times regardless of location, mode used, or even time taken while in transit (Budianto, 2019). What matters is not just providing good things once but ensuring consistency throughout so as not to lose faith from buyers who might have started developing trust already due to previous encounters with the brand name established.

However, the interaction between product and client loyalty has been extensively examined, especially within the service sector, where the quality and pertinence of product offers profoundly influence loyalty. In the realm of travel agencies, 'product' denotes the assortment, personalisation, and adaptability of travel services offered, encompassing travel packages, client assistance, safety protocols, and booking

flexibility. Research indicates that when products fulfil or are beyond client expectations, loyalty tends to rise, as satisfied customers are more inclined to return and endorse the service (Al Hakim, 2023; Naini et al., 2022). Recent studies (Abdelfattah et al., 2024; Al Hakim, 2023; Forti et al., 2023; Hassan, 2021) indicate that product quality, service reliability, and alignment with customer expectations are essential for cultivating customer loyalty, particularly in a post-COVID-19 context where safety and adaptability are critical. The pandemic has shifted customer demands, placing increased importance on health, flexible cancellation policies, and the assurance of a safe travel experience (Naini et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that during periods of uncertainty, such as the pandemic, the perception of a product as safe, responsive, and conducive to consumer well-being enhances the probability of repeat patronage (Hassan, 2021; Sudari et al., 2019; Trihatmoko & Novela, 2022). Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2020) assert that customised and innovative travel solutions can improve happiness and loyalty, especially when consumers want value-congruent products. To cultivate consumer loyalty in the post-COVID-19 era, travel agencies must modify their offerings to meet changing expectations, emphasising flexibility, safety, and personalization factors that have continually demonstrated their importance in the literature for enhancing loyalty in the travel sector.

Furthermore, another thing that cannot fail to be mentioned here regarding the relationship between items offered by sellers and the loyalty exhibited among patrons concerns technological advancements, which have shaped our world today in many ways, including the traveling industry (Khan et al., 2022). Therefore, travel agents need to come up with new, exciting products from time to time since failure might lead to boredom creeping into the minds of potential clients, thus causing them to lose interest completely (Parihar & Dawra, 2020). In fact, it has been found out through surveys conducted post-pandemic era that people love travelling but only if such tours are made lively by use of virtual reality (VR) technology where customer can feel as though part of the experience being shown rather than just watching everything happening around without touching anything (Rane et al., 2023)

Hypothesis 1: Product positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.4   Relationship between Promotion and Customer Loyalty

COVID-19 has made it crucial to promote and retain loyal customers within the travel industry. In order to attain strong clients' trust and be recognized with a well-known brand, effective promotional strategies incorporate various practices such as advertising, sales promotions, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing. New travel experiences, safety, and flexibility are among the things brands have been considering for their advertisement (Ebrahim, 2020). Therefore, travel agency adverts should depict health measures taken in their duties, as this will build customer confidence while enhancing loyalty (Haudi et al., 2022). On the other hand, sales promotions such as discounts offered through fidelity programs or special deals can attract new clients while still maintaining the old ones. This means personalized customer-driven promotions make consumers feel that more value is being added to what is on offer; hence, consumers keep using it over time (Nuseir & Elrefae, 2022). Personal selling is a one-on-one relationship between salespeople representatives and buyers who could become more satisfied, thus staying longer and becoming more loyal to the organization's offerings (Wongsansukcharoen, 2022).

Promotion is crucial in fostering consumer loyalty, particularly in the post-COVID-19 travel sector, when reassurance and trust are important. Previous research has shown that marketing strategies emphasising safety, flexibility, and value can markedly affect customers' loyalty intentions (Rivaldo et al., 2022). Trihatmoko and Novela (2022) discovered that promotions highlighting safety precautions, including flexible cancellations and health-oriented travel options, bolster customer trust, a fundamental component of loyalty. Furthermore, marketing communication that utilises digital platforms and focuses on customer-centric communications has demonstrated an increase in engagement, resulting in enduring loyalty (Abbas, 2021; Abdullah et al., 2023). In a post-pandemic environment, promotional programs that are informed and upfront regarding service modifications might alleviate customers' increased apprehensions about travel uncertainties (Alhawamdeh, 2023). Research indicates that interactive marketing, including social media participation and personalised offers, cultivate a more profound emotional bond with customers, hence enhancing loyalty (Cha et al., 2009; Darmawan & Baker, 2024). Moreover, Anees-ur-Rehman and Johnston

(2019) and Elgarhy and Mohamed (2023) contended that explicit promotional communications concerning refund policies and travel updates are growing esteemed, rendering them a factor in the recurrence of service utilisation. Consequently, enhancing the promotional strategy to be tuned to customers' changing requirements in the post-COVID-19 period can reinforce loyalty by fostering confidence and satisfaction. These findings underscore the efficacy of meticulously crafted, adaptive promotional techniques in fostering loyalty within the travel industry, particularly when customers cater to the distinct requirements of a post-pandemic market.

In a related vein, public relations should consider transparency, especially on safety measures during pandemic times combined with destination-specific information related to health requirements in order for people's trust to be restored after the COVID-19 era (Li et al., 2021; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022). The integrated marketing communication approach combines these promotion techniques and creates unity at all touchpoints, resulting in increased customer loyalty at different levels (Huang & Kim, 2023).

Hypothesis 2: Promotion positively affects customer loyalty.

2.5   Relationship between Place and Customer Loyalty

The 'Place' element in the marketing mix of services, such as distribution channels and physical locations, has been widely recognized for its contribution towards building customer loyalty, especially during the post-pandemic period in the history of the travel industry. The geographical location of travel agencies has always played a major role in impacting consumer choice since people tend to remain loyal to those firms that are easily reachable or conveniently positioned (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this year's outbreak radically accelerated digitalization, underlining the need for a strong web presence; hence, agencies that extended their online recording systems increased clientele faithfulness rates (Othman et al., 2020). These virtual platforms must be user-friendly and functional because clients expect them to work seamlessly at every step, whether making reservations or seeking help while on their trip.

However, previous research by Abdullah et al. (2023); Ahmed et al. (2022); Ebrahim (2020); and Habes et al. (2022) highlights that place denoting the accessibility of services and convenience profoundly impacts consumer loyalty. Abd Wahab et al. (2016) and Darmawan and Baker (2024) discovered that clients exhibit more loyalty toward service providers that facilitate seamless access via different channels, particularly digital platforms. The transition to online contacts prompted by the epidemic has highlighted the significance of place in sustaining client loyalty. Jahmani et al. (2023) have shown that internet accessibility and user-friendly websites significantly influence consumer happiness and loyalty, particularly when customers desire the convenience of arranging vacation plans from home. Furthermore, Lim et al. (2020) emphasise that clients anticipate travel agents to provide prompt and adaptable access to information and services, hence improving their entire experience and fostering repeat usage. In post-pandemic circumstances, Mehraj and Qureshi (2020) discovered that clients favour agencies offering seamless digital interfaces and accessible contact alternatives, as these elements alleviate apprehensions regarding possible travel difficulties. A thorough analysis of this research reveals a recurring theme: the improved digital accessibility and convenience offered by travel agencies significantly contribute to customer retention and loyalty. By enhancing digital place services, travel agents can address the transformed requirements of post-pandemic travellers, fostering a loyal and enduring customer base. This literature analysis emphasises the necessity for future research to investigate place-related aspects as essential elements of loyalty strategies within the changing travel industry context.

Moreover, creating an omnichannel strategy that combines all customer touch points into one system that consists of physical locations such as offices/branches, websites, mobile apps, and social media, among others, is also essential. This helps ensure that every person can communicate with a representative through the preferred channel, thus maintaining consistency across the interaction process (Alzoubi et al., 2022). To illustrate this point, for example, somebody may begin by looking through choices online, then inquire on a mobile application and end up in person via seamless connectivity. Such flexibility also saves time and speeds up things because it means convenience on a personal level, resulting in more devotion.

Hypothesis 3: Place positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.6   Relationship between People and Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty in the travel industry depends on human touch, such as customer service, employee expertise, empathy, and communication. Moreover, research has indicated that customers are more loyal to travel agents who provide quick, helpful services that address problems (Muharam et al., 2021). For instance, Mekawy et al. (2022) stated that other safety measures and regulatory requirements needed while travelling will still force people to always stick around for those who can give them up-to-date information about attractions of their destination. After the pandemic period in which individuals demand more, it might be necessary to keep training them so that agents can meet changing demands from different types of guests. Personalization becomes a must for achieving client satisfaction amid uncertain situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to cancellations, refunds, and rescheduling, among others, due to its utmost importance in loyalty. Also, in such a situation, companies or consultants dealing with travel should have some level of sympathy where the company would show their clientele that, indeed, by understanding what each one of them might be going through, hence coming up with unique resolutions that suit individual needs rather than generalizing everything (Sidorkiewicz & Orfin-Tomaszewska, 2022).

Furthermore, previous research by Othman et al. (2021), Rasaki et al. (2020), and Sudari et al. (2019) indicates that proficient, sympathetic, and customer-focused personnel substantially influence consumers' views of service quality, trust, and satisfaction, which are critical antecedents to loyalty. In the realm of travel companies, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, the "People" element has gained paramount importance due to increased client apprehensions over safety, flexibility, and dependable assistance. Research by Bhatia and Audichya (2022) and Sidorkiewicz and Orfin-Tomaszewska (2022) reveals that service providers exhibiting authentic concern and flexibility cultivate more robust customer relationships, hence augmenting loyalty. Moreover, Darmawan and Baker (2024) posit that human encounters with personnel foster trust, particularly in high-involvement transactions such as travel, where

consumers demand affirmation and tailored assistance. Othman et al. (2021) contend that adequately trained personnel who respond to consumers' changing requirements, including health issues following the pandemic, can increase loyalty by demonstrating concern for their well-being. Research indicates that personnel who adeptly manage complaints and provide prompt solutions enhance satisfaction and loyalty (Wongsansukcharoen, 2022; Zhai et al., 2021). The pandemic has intensified the demand for proactive communication and empathy from travel agencies, underscoring the necessity for competent staff who can offer adaptable solutions and reassurance (Zhang et al., 2020). Consequently, the function of "People" extends beyond service delivery to encompass the cultivation of emotional ties, indicating that travel firms prioritising staff training and customer engagement are poised to attain enhanced client loyalty in the post-pandemic market.

Hypothesis 4: People positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.7   Relationship between Process and Customer Loyalty

Process, the service marketing mix element involving booking procedures, service delivery, support for clients, and flexibility, contributes significantly to customer loyalty in the travel industry. Following convenience and reliability, which are vital during the current period after the coronavirus pandemic, time-saving reservation processes are highly appreciated by consumers. According to Al Zadjali (2021), agents dealing with travelling services should have websites that are easy to navigate when making reservations or managing trips using mobile phones, thereby raising their loyalty levels. Service distribution is another critical component of establishing strong relationships with customers who are returning for more. To retain patrons, businesses must always meet and exceed personalized standards during this stage (Sadiqe Ali Mohsen, 2023). Any slight mistake made at any given point can lead to dissatisfaction, hence losing clients' trust forever; therefore, promises must be kept and responded to promptly enough so that happiness may prevail among them at all times. Long-term relationships between such a company and its consumer base shall never break easily because effective customer care ensures higher retention rates than before (Akaak et al., 2023).

The relationship between process and customer loyalty has been thoroughly examined in service marketing literature, highlighting how efficient, transparent, and customer-centric processes can profoundly impact customer retention and satisfaction. Process, within the service marketing mix, denotes the procedures, mechanisms, and sequence of actions through which services are provided to clients. In the realm of travel companies, the processes of booking, payment, cancellation, and post-service support are essential for facilitating a seamless customer experience, particularly in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting, where flexibility and reassurance are much esteemed (Abd Wahab et al., 2016; Cha et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2020). Research conducted by Nuseir & Elrefae, (2022) and Rehman (2020) indicates that optimised procedures diminish customer anxiety and elevate perceived value, resulting in increased loyalty. Recent research, including Rumiyati & Syafarudin (2021) and Sidorkiewicz & Orfin-Tomaszewska (2022), indicates that customers are more inclined to demonstrate loyalty when they encounter efficient, reliable, and flexible processes, particularly in unstable industries such as travel and tourism. Similar to Bhatia and Audichya (2022), who demonstrate that transparent cancellation and refund procedures, customised schedule modifications, and proactive communication can alleviate the risks linked to travel delays, thus fostering trust and loyalty. This corresponds with Haryati et al. (2021), who contend that consumer loyalty in service sectors following the pandemic is significantly influenced by the adaptability and responsiveness of service operations. These studies emphasise the necessity for travel agents to invest in efficient process management systems, which are vital for fulfilling customer expectations and fostering long-term loyalty through consistent and reliable service in an unpredictable travel environment.

Hypothesis 5: Process positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.8   Relationship between Price and Customer Loyalty

Price is a very important component of the service marketing mix, and it significantly impacts customer loyalty, especially in the travel industry. In a market where customers are highly price-sensitive, competitive pricing strategies are necessary to attract and retain them. It has been observed that travel agents who give their prices as competitive

or lower than those of competitors enjoy higher levels of customer loyalty (Darmawan & Baker, 2024). When customers feel justified by quality service and think the charges are worth it, they will likely remain loyal because this perceived value for money is also an essential driver for retention (Haryati et al., 2021).

Promotional offers like discounts and loyalty programs also significantly foster customer loyalty. For instance, agents who offer incentives frequently, such as discounts on the next booking, points awarded per night, or exclusive promotions, among others, are more likely to attract new clients while still keeping old ones (Rehman, 2020). However, there should be a balance between promotional activities and profitability; so much dependence on these can make customers view regular prices as high or services as undervalued, which may lead to a lack of loyalty during non-promotional periods (Abou-Shouk et al., 2024). Customer trust is built through price transparency. Agents must communicate what they charge and all other costs involved in their service provision, including hidden fees, if any, so as not to break the relationship with them (Bernarto et al., 2020). This way, misunderstandings are avoided, creating an atmosphere where long-term loyalty thrives on trust.

Hypothesis 6: Price positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.9   Relationship between Physical Evidence and Customer Loyalty

Customer perspectives and loyalty within the company are influenced mainly by physical evidence. This includes location, atmosphere, cleanliness, infrastructure, and branding, among others, for travel agencies. The physical environment, such as location and interior design, can heavily affect the choices of a travel agency's customers. More loyal customers tend to be attracted by those situated at easily reachable places near them. This is because when it comes to customer experience, convenience concerning where the facility is located matters most (Bhatia & Audichya, 2022). Furthermore, layout lighting systems, the general mood setup, etcetera that constitute ambience also ensure that clients feel comfortable enough to return next time (Intravisit, 2022).

Hygiene is paramount, especially during the post-COVID era, because individuals would not want to compromise their health while visiting any physical place. Those agencies that maintain high standards of cleanliness will be trusted more by their clientele, thus earning even greater loyalty from them (Hassan, 2021). Also, modern facilities coupled with the latest technology form part of an agency's physical structure, influencing how frequently or infrequently people become loyal customers. Good service delivery points should offer certain basic needs like comfort brought about through maintained buildings with good washrooms, among other necessary amenities so that these users can have positive experiences. Hence, they may end up being attached forever, but once someone finds out that what they thought was a quality establishment turns out otherwise, they may withdraw their allegiance due to poor services offered (Al Raisi & Krishnan, 2023).

Signs placed outside or inside buildings can affect the level of loyalty among customers served as it says much about what is expected when dealing with different businesses just because of this factor without having prior knowledge about them, which does not show any positive or negative attitude towards their customers (Aziz et al., 2020). Travel agencies need to invest in professional branding that would build a strong brand presence and ensure that customers are trusted by clients who may come looking for the same service at a future date, as well as refer others, thus increasing repeat business over time and guaranteeing a steady stream of income for the organization. Customers' perception of travel agencies depends on their physical environments and the brands create.

Hypothesis 7: Physical evidence positively affects the customer loyalty.

2.10   Conceptual Framework of the Study

The diagram below gives a visual representation of the conceptual framework to be used in this study. Structured under 7Ps, which include Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence, the study will look at how these elements make up the core components of the marketing mix and how customers interact with each other

to shape the overall outcomes of the research. Price is a crucial consideration, as affordability and value-for-money have gained significance for consumers who may be more prudent regarding travel expenditures following the economic repercussions of the epidemic. A just pricing plan, along with fee transparency, can favourably impact customer loyalty by improving consumer satisfaction. The location highlights the availability and ease of access to services. As digital channels have become the primary point of contact, travel agents must ensure that their online presence is user-friendly, reliable, and accessible. Promotion includes advertising and communication methods that educate and comfort consumers. Promotions in the post-COVID era must prioritize safety, flexibility, and customer-centric advantages, as these factors have become increasingly significant. Effective promotional methods can enhance consumer relationships by harmonizing with their existing beliefs and requirements.

Individuals emphasize the significance of personnel in providing the service. Skilled, empathetic, and responsive staff can make a significant difference in customer experiences, especially when dealing with uncertainties or travel changes due to pandemic-related restrictions. The process encompasses the efficacy and dependability of booking, cancellation, and refund protocols. Facilitating seamless and adaptable processes can enhance customer trust and satisfaction. Finally, Physical Evidence refers to tangible aspects, such as the appearance of online platforms and office spaces, that contribute to customer perception of quality and professionalism.

This framework integrates the 7Ps to explore their direct impact on customer loyalty. Customer loyalty, in this study, is understood as the likelihood of customers repeatedly choosing the same travel agency and recommending it to others. By examining each element of the service marketing mix, the study aims to understand which aspects most significantly impact loyalty in the context of the transformed travel landscape post-pandemic. Past studies support the relevance of the 7Ps in customer loyalty studies, as each element offers a dimension through which service providers can differentiate and add value, ultimately contributing to a stronger, more loyal customer base.
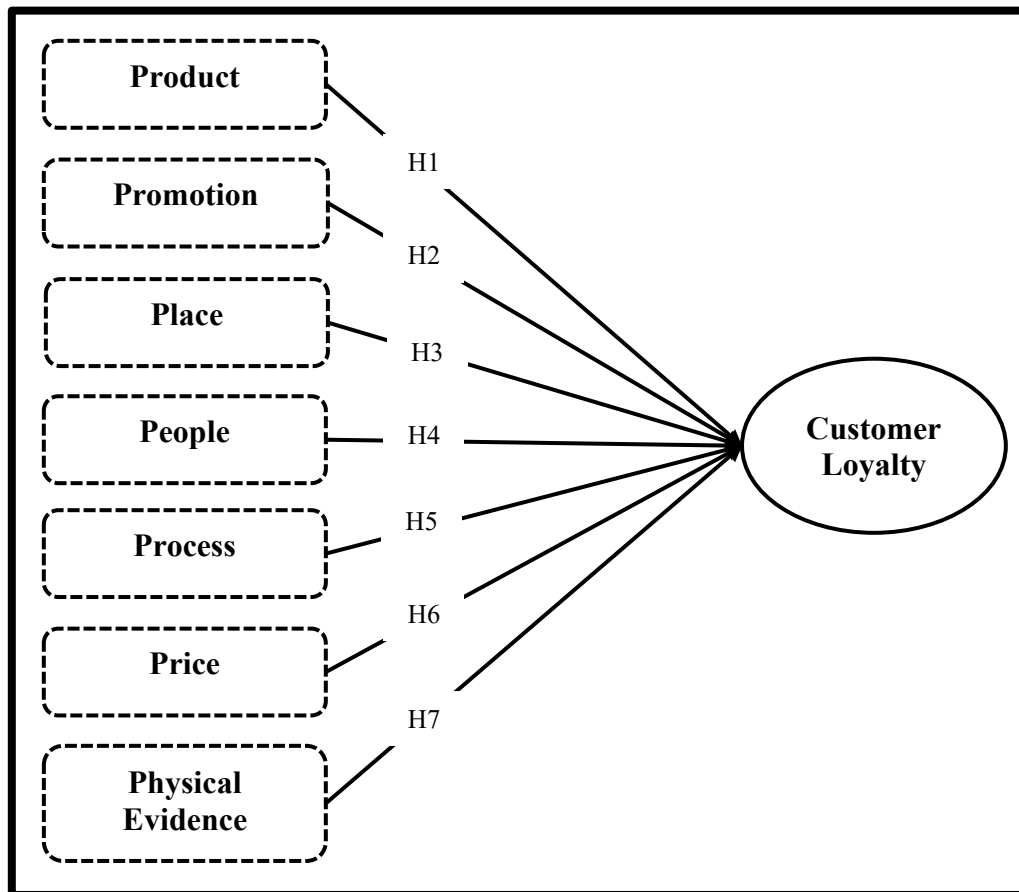
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

3.0   Methodology

3.1   Research Methodology

This study uses quantitative research methodology to investigate the effect of the service marketing mix on customer loyalty toward travel agencies in the post-COVID-19 period. The study's design is based on positivism, which seeks to discover cause-and-effect relationships through empirical observation and statistical analysis while emphasizing objectivity (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Mohajan, 2020). The quantitative technique is most appropriate for this study because it helps gather and analyze numerical data to test the proposed hypotheses and explore relationships among variables under study (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Mohajan, 2020). This research takes a cross-sectional

approach by collecting data at one point in time, which is suitable given that it examines the current dynamics of customer loyalty in the travel agent industry.

3.2   Population and Sampling

The population for this study is comprised of travel agencies within Oman that are actively involved in offering travel-related services and have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the significant rise in online bookings and digital interactions in the travel industry, it is plausible that respondents with prior experience using online travel agencies (OTAs) may perceive the 7Ps of the marketing mix differently compared to those without such experience. Therefore, narrowing the focus to two distinct groups those with prior OTA experience and those without—would allow for a more nuanced analysis. This segmentation would enable the study to explore whether the service marketing mix elements impact these two groups differently, thus providing valuable insights into how travel agents can tailor their strategies for both experienced and inexperienced consumers in a competitive digital environment (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018; Jahmani et al., 2023; Sidorkiewicz & Orfin-Tomaszewska, 2022). By distinguishing between these groups, the research can more accurately assess how previous online experiences shape customer loyalty and provide more targeted recommendations for travel agencies.

Additionally, a cluster sampling technique would identify distinct consumer groups based on their travel intentions, preferences, and behaviours. This approach allows for the segmentation of respondents into meaningful clusters, offering insights into how different types of customers value various elements of the marketing mix. The sample size is determined based on established guidelines for quantitative research to achieve strong samples that ensure the reliability and generalizability of findings (Kang, 2021). According to the power analysis, it is advisable to have a minimum of 153 observations to attain a statistical power of 95% for a medium effect size (0.15) at a significance level of 5% (0.05) for a structural model with a maximum of seven indicators (Kang, 2021). According to Hair et al. (2010), a suitable sample size for the study would range from 350 respondents, contingent upon the number of survey items included to

assess the 7Ps of the marketing mix and customer loyalty. Targeting a sample size nearer to 350 would yield more reliable results, particularly for multivariate analysis or structural equation modelling, as larger samples improve the dependability of the outcomes. So, this study will collect data from 350 participants.

3.3   Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire will be used to collect data from selected travel agents as part of this research process. The designed survey instrument will focus on various aspects of the service marketing mix and client loyalty. The survey is divided into different sections; the first section gathers information about respondents' demographics, while the following sections concentrate on key variables such as product offerings, pricing strategies, promotional activities, and service delivery methods. In order to simplify the conduction of the survey and ensure reliability in collected responses, a five-point Likert scale will be used to measure the opinions and attitudes of respondents (Bell et al., 2022). The questionnaire will be pre-tested and pilot-tested with a few individuals before the primary data collection exercise to ascertain the tools' clarity and relevance validity (Nayak & Narayan, 2019).

3.4   Data Analysis

Smart PLS 4.0 will be used in the analysis of collected data. The analysis process involves several steps, beginning with data cleaning to address missing values, outliers, and other biases. Descriptive statistics are generated to describe the characteristics of the sample before more advanced statistical techniques are employed to test hypotheses and assess relationships between components of the service marketing mix and customer loyalty. The study model is evaluated through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with a focus on the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) approach because it is able to deal effectively with complex models and is appropriate for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2021). In this regard, measurement model evaluation is mainly conducted during the analysis stage to ensure construct reliability and validity while simultaneously checking

hypothesized correlations through structural model examination, thereby determining the model's overall fit.

4.0   Conclusion

In summary, this research project examines how a service marketing mix influences customer loyalty toward travel agencies in Oman during the post-COVID-19 era. The study will evaluate how these elements contribute to customer loyalty by considering all components of the 7Ps, including Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence. The results would provide pragmatic recommendations for marketing strategies that need to be refined by travel agencies better to serve their clients' changing requirements after COVID-19.

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Appendix A: Research Instruments

Variable	Items	Sources
Product	1. The travel products offered by the travel agent meet mypost-COVID-19 travel needs. 2. The travel agent provides a variety of travel packagesthat cater to different preferences. 3. The quality of travel products offered by the travel agent has improved after the COVID-19 pandemic. 4. I find the travel products offered by the travel agent tobe reliable and trustworthy. 5. The travel agent offers innovative travel products that attract me to use their services	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)
Price	1. The pricing of travel packages is reasonable consideringthe services provided. 2. I am satisfied with the value for money I receive fromthe travel agent's offerings. 3. The travel agent offers attractive discounts and promotions post-COVID-19. 4. The pricing strategy of the travel agent influences myloyalty towards them. 5. I believe the travel agent offers competitive prices compared to other travel agents.	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)
Place	1. The travel agent's office locations are convenient and accessible. 2. The travel agent's online booking system is user-friendly and efficient. 3. I find it easy to get in touch with the travelagent for any queries or issues. 4. The travel agent has a strong presence in locations	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)

	that are important to me. 5. The availability of the travel agent's services through multiple channels influences my loyalty.	
Promotion	1. The travel agent's promotional campaigns are effective in capturing my interest. 2. I am regularly informed about new offers and promotions by the travel agent. 3. The travel agent uses social media effectively to communicate with customers. 4. The travel agent's promotional activities have increased my loyalty towards them. 5. I am influenced by the travel agent's promotional messages when making travel decisions.	(Cha et al., 2009; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)
People	1. The travel agent's staff are knowledgeable and provide helpful information. 2. I am satisfied with the customer service provided by the travel agent. 3. The staff of the travel agent are professional and courteous. 4. The travel agent's staff make me feel valued as a customer. 5. My interactions with the travel agent's staff positively influence my loyalty	(Cha et al., 2009; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)
Process	1. The booking process with the travel agent is straightforward and hassle-free. 2. The travel agent handles complaints and issues promptly and effectively. 3. The travel agent's processes are transparent and easy to understand. 4. I find the travel agent's processes to be efficient and timesaving. 5. The smooth process of service delivery by the	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)

	travel agent enhances my loyalty.	
Physical Evidence	1. The physical facilities of the travel agent are clean and well-maintained. 2. The travel agent provides clear and professional documentation for travel services. 3. The travel agent's website is visually appealing and easy to navigate. 4. The physical appearance of the travel agent's office reflects the quality of their services. 5. The physical evidence provided by the travel agent reassures me of their reliability.	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)
Customer loyalty	1. I prefer to use the same travel agent for my travel needs. 2. I am likely to recommend the travel agent to my friends and family. 3. I feel a strong sense of loyalty towards the travel agent. 4. I am willing to pay a premium for the services of this travel agent. 5. I would choose this travel agent over others even if their prices are slightly higher.	(Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020)