Hotel rewards programs for different membership tiers

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of different types of hotel rewards programs on consumers' program loyalty depending on membership tier levels. The findings of the study indicated that high-economic/low-social rewards programs were the most effective for program loyalty regardless of membership tier levels. Also, there was a significant interaction effect between types of rewards programs and membership tier levels. When high-social/low-economic rewards were given, higher-tier members displayed greater program loyalty. The findings of this study may be implemented to help hotels develop effective rewards programs for members of various tiers and allocate resources efficiently.

Keyword: Hotel rewards programs, social rewards, economic rewards, program loyalty, membership tiers

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1. Introduction

Rewards programs are essential for building and sustaining long-term relationships with valued customers in the hotel business. In general, a reward program consists of two types of rewards; economic and social rewards. Economic rewards are signified by monetary rewards in return for desired behavior, while social rewards concern intrinsic enjoyment of the behavior (Melancon et al., 2011). Economic rewards are helpful for developing customer loyalty, especially among new members, by enhancing trust and commitment. Apart from economic rewards, rewards programs retain their members by providing social rewards such as preferential treatment and personalized recognition and attention (Gwinner et al., 1998).

Previous studies concluded that the best compromise is to offer a rewards program that balances economic and social benefits (Lee et al., 2015). However, the optimal balance between economic and social rewards that satisfies consumers and decreases customer loss through rewards programs remains unclear. Hotel rewards programs provide different types of rewards to their members based on membership tiers. Initiating tiered reward systems may be beneficial for hotels, as customers may be segmented, and benefits and services can be tailored to each tier level. Previous studies indicated that economic rewards are effective in establishing an initial relationship with consumers, but social rewards strengthen the relationship (Lee et al., 2015; Melancon et al., 2011; Peterson, 1995). Even though lower-tier members may be more interested in economic benefits in their initial stage of a relationship, social rewards play an important role in enhancing brand trust and commitment as they ascend to higher-tier levels. Therefore, hotels need to customize their rewards programs accordingly based on different membership tiers to allocate their resources more efficiently and satisfy consumers.

The current study aims to examine the effects of different hotel rewards programs on customers' program loyalty. Specifically, this study investigated how the effects of economic and social rewards on member program loyalty differ depending on membership tiers. While previous studies on hotel rewards programs have focused on the effects of types of rewards programs on customers' future behavioral intentions, our study examined membership tiers and investigated their moderating effect to provide practical implications. The findings of the study will assist hotels in developing effective rewards programs targeting customers in different membership tiers and gain a competitive edge in the hotel industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hotel rewards programs

In order to sustain long-term relationships with valued customers, many major hotel brands around the world establish attractive and well-organized rewards programs. Rewards programs provide preferential incentives to make customers feel special and important. In addition, switching costs are integral to rewards programs (Tanford, 2013). Han et al. (2011) made a distinction between monetary and non-monetary switching costs. Monetary switching costs refer to economic benefits such as point redemption, whereas non-monetary switching costs involve psychological costs such as loss of relationships. To increase switching costs, hotel rewards programs provide both economic and social rewards (Lee et al., 2015). For example, economic rewards are formed based on rewards program members' frequency of visitation. By receiving economic rewards, members accumulate points redeemable for complementary rooms, room upgrades, discounts, and free products and services. Previous studies have found that economic rewards are effective in establishing an initial relationship with customers due to monetary benefits (Peterson, 1995) and lead to program loyalty because program members do not want to lose points they have accumulated (Melancon et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015).

On the other hand, social rewards are associated with members' emotional commitment to the hotel brand. Previous studies have indicated that social rewards increase a sense of belonging and strengthen relationships with the hotel (Rosenbaum et al., 2005; Berry, 1995). For instance, rewards program members may expect special treatment through social rewards, such as member-exclusive services and personalized recognition (Gwinner et al., 1998). In addition, Lee et al. (2015) examined the different effects of economic and social rewards in a hotel reward program and found that social rewards facilitated relational behaviors in comparison to economic rewards, which motivated program members to support the preferred hotel through affective commitment.

2.2 Program loyalty

A previous study indicated that both economic and social rewards are significant drivers of program loyalty (Evanschitzky et al., 2012). Program loyalty refers to a positive attitude or emotional attachment toward the benefits of a reward program (Yi & Jeon, 2003). Program loyalty is fostered by the quality and value of a rewards program (Lee et al., 2015; Meyer-Waarden, 2007). When program rewards are attractive, customers are more likely to sustain their relationship with the program. An attractive rewards program provides well-balanced economic and social rewards which allows customers to perceive benefits from the program.

Even though both economic and social rewards significantly induce program loyalty, program loyalty is more economic reward-oriented in nature (Evanschitzky et al., 2012). Social rewards have a stronger connection to brand loyalty as opposed to program loyalty, as they increase a sense of belonging and strengthen relationships with the brand (Berry, 1995). However, economic rewards are more effective in promoting program loyalty because program members remain loyal toward the program due to their monetary benefits (Melancon et al., 2011). When considering the different natures of economic and social rewards, hotels should design effective rewards programs by offering appropriate levels of economic and social rewards, so customers maintain their program membership status. In this respect, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Programs with extensive economic rewards are more effective for program loyalty than programs with extensive social rewards.

2.3 Membership tiers

Hotel rewards programs provide different types of rewards to their members based on membership tiers. It is beneficial for hotels to establish tiered reward which allows hotels to segment their customers and tailor their services to each tier level. Within tier-levels, members build a sense of identity, which leads to brand commitment (MacCall & Voorhees, 2000).

Additionally, members develop feelings of status by comparing themselves to other members at different tier levels (Dréze & Nunes, 2009). For instance, higher-tier members feel superior to lower-tier members and would like to be treated with exclusive services through the rewards program (Tanford, 2013).

Tanford (2013) examined the impact of tier level on program members' loyalty and found that higher tier members had a greater emotional commitment to the preferred hotel brand and spend more at that hotel. The findings of the study also suggested that membership tiers motivate customers to consolidate their business with a single brand, which leads to greater spending at a preferred program hotel rather than other hotels where they do not have memberships (Tanford, 2013). Even though middle- and base-tier members visit the preferred program hotel less frequently, there are many possibilities for these members to advance to the next-tier level. Accordingly, it is important to build an initial relationship with consumers and provide attractive benefits so customers continue participating in the rewards program. Based on this notion, this study suggests the following hypothesis:

H2: Members' program loyalty varies based on the membership tier level.

Since membership tier levels are typically determined by the frequency of visitation, it is assumed that higher-tier members bring higher revenues to hotels. However, a previous study indicated that there is a weak link between hotel rewards programs and profitability (Shanshan et al., 2011). High-tier members are provided with more costly benefits than low-tier members, which would lead to increased operational costs. This indicates that hotels need to strategically design rewards programs to be more profitable. Previous studies have found that social rewards foster a sense of belonging and strengthen relationships with the hotel (Rosenbaum et al., 2005; Berry, 1995; Lee et al., 2015), whereas economic rewards are effective in establishing an initial relationship with customers (Peterson, 1995; Melancon et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015).

Once a relationship is established through economic rewards, it is critical to strengthen the relationship by providing social rewards (Melancon et al., 2011). Additionally, higher-tier members have an increased emotional commitment to the preferred hotel brand than lower-tier members do (Tanford, 2013; McCall & Voorhees, 2000; Dréze & Nunes, 2009). Accordingly, it is assumed that social rewards may be more appealing to higher-tier members than to lower-tier members.

H3: The relationship between the rewards program and the member's program loyalty is moderated by the membership tier level.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research instrument

A scenario-based survey was developed using the Qualtrics online survey system. To classify membership tiers, respondents were asked to indicate their membership tier level as a number (1 being the lowest tier) and include the total number of tiers of the preferred hotel rewards program. For example, Hilton Honors has a 4-tier structure: Member, Silver, Gold, and Diamond. If a participant belongs to the Silver tier for Hilton Honors, the respondent entered '2' for the membership tier level and '4' for the total number of tiers. An example was provided on the survey for respondents to accurately indicate their membership tier levels at the preferred program hotel.

To examine the effect of the types of rewards programs on customers' program loyalty, this study included two categories of rewards programs: high-social/low-economic rewards programs (extensive social rewards but limited economic rewards) and high-economic/low-social rewards programs (extensive economic rewards but limited social rewards). Since the actual hotel rewards programs consisted of both social and economic rewards, we developed scenarios including both types of rewards, making the scenarios more realistic. To manipulate these two types of rewards programs, the scenarios were constructed based on previous literature (Lee et al., 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Gwinner et al., 1998) and modified. The scenarios are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Each participant randomly received one of the two scenarios. After reading the assigned scenario, participants were asked to indicate program loyalty toward the hotel rewards program described in the scenario assuming that the rewards program described in the scenario was offered at their preferred program hotel. Three items related to program loyalty were adapted from previous studies and slightly modified (Lee et al., 2015; Evanschiitzky et al., 2012). The items include: “I will keep the membership of the reward program of this hotel”, “I will recommend the reward program of this hotel to other people”, and “I will share positive things about the reward program of this hotel”. They were measured based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 7 = “Strongly Agree”). The mean score of the three items measuring program loyalty was used as a dependent variable.

Please assume that you are a member of the rewards program of a franchised hotel. This rewards program provides members with highly personalized services, such as a member-exclusive club lounge, member-exclusive fitness club, member-exclusive concierge services, and invitations to special events. All those benefits are member-exclusive and are not available to non-members. However, this rewards program provides limited economic incentives. You can choose only one economic benefit from the following incentives: award points redeemable for a free room night, free room upgrade, free spa services, and free food and beverage. Once you choose one economic benefit, you cannot receive other economic benefits.

Figure 1. A scenario for high-social/low-economic rewards program

Please assume that you are a member of the rewards program of a franchised hotel. This rewards program provides members with various economic incentives, such as award points redeemable for a free room night, free room upgrades, free spa services, and free food and beverage. However, this rewards program provides limited member-exclusive services. You can choose only one preferential benefit from the following member-exclusive services: member-exclusive club lounge, member-exclusive fitness club, member-exclusive concierge services, and invitations to special events. Once you choose one member-exclusive service, you cannot receive other member-exclusive services.

Figure 2. A scenario for high-economic/low-social rewards program

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data collection was conducted using an online survey through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Because the target population for this study included general consumers with a membership in the hotel rewards program, Amazon’s Mechanical Turk was a suitable method to collect data. To ensure that only hotel rewards program members participated in the survey, we included a screening question asking whether the participant has a hotel rewards program membership. The online survey link was available on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk for two weeks, and a total of 184 hotel rewards program members participated in the survey. To test the proposed hypotheses, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sample profile

The current sample consisted of 58.2 percent male and 41.8 percent female participants. 56.1 percent of the respondents were between 26 and 35 years old. Over half (51.6 percent) of the respondents were married, and 34.2 percent were single. 76.1 percent of the respondents had a bachelor's degree or above, and 46.4 percent of the respondents' annual salary was between $25,000 and $75,000.

4.2 Manipulation check

To identify whether participants perceived the situation as intended (Shadish et al., 2002), a manipulation check for social rewards and economic rewards in each scenario was conducted (see Table 1). The item for social rewards used in this study was "The most substantial advantage of this rewards program is member-exclusive service". The item for economic rewards was "The most substantial advantage of this rewards program is economic benefits". The items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree). A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted as suggested in previous research (e.g., Lee & Cranage, 2014; Li et al., 2011; Park et al., 2017). Results indicated statistically significant differences in low and high levels of social rewards and economic rewards. This implies that participants perceived each scenario as intended.

Table 1. Manipulation check

Factors	Manipulation	N	Mean	t-value
Social rewards	High (Scenario 1)	89	5.45	26.006^{**}
	Low (Scenario 2)	95	1.74	
Economic rewards	High (Scenario 2)	95	5.98	23.283^{*}
	Low (Scenario 1)	89	2.31	

$^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$

4.3 ANOVA result

Each respondent's membership tier was categorized by comparing the respondent's membership tier to the total number of tiers of the preferred hotel rewards program. The structure of membership tiers varied across hotels, and the total number of membership levels for each hotel included in our survey ranged from 4 to 6. To standardize various membership levels across different hotels, we numerically ranked each membership level of a hotel in which 1 represents the lowest level offered by the hotel and categorized those membership levels into three tiers as follows (see Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of membership tier levels

Tier Structure	Low-tier	Middle-tier	High-tier
4-tier structure	Tier 1	Tiers 2 and 3	Tier 3
5-tier structure	Tiers 1 and 2	Tier 3	Tiers 4 and 5
6-tier structure	Tiers 1 and 2	Tiers 3 and 4	Tiers 5 and 6

The ANOVA results showed that the types of rewards programs had a significant main effect on program loyalty ($F = 6.608$, $P < 0.05$). This result indicated that when high-economic/low-social rewards were offered, customers demonstrated higher program loyalty (Mean High-economic/Low-social = 5.353) than when high-social/low-economic rewards were given (Mean High-social/Low-economic = 4.879). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the results. However, the membership tier levels did not have a significant main effect on program loyalty (Hypothesis 2 was rejected).

In addition to the main effects, a two-way interaction term was included in the model to analyze the possible interaction effect of independent variables. The results showed a significant interaction effect of types of rewards programs and membership tier levels ($F = 18.938$, $p < 0.001$).

When high-social/low-economic rewards were given, high-tier members' program loyalty was highest, followed by middle-tier members. However, when high-economic/low-social rewards were offered, low-tier members' program loyalty was highest, followed by middle-tier members. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The ANOVA result and diagram of the interaction effect are presented in Table 3 and Figure 3, respectively.

Table 3. ANOVA results

	SS	df	MS	F-value
Model	91.252	5	18.250	11.987***
Types of rewards programs (TRP)	10.061	1	10.061	6.608*
Membership tiers (MT)	6.859	2	3.429	2.252
TLP x MT	57.670	2	28.835	18.938***
Residual	271.015	178	1.523	
Total	362.267	183	1.980	

***p < .001, *p < .05

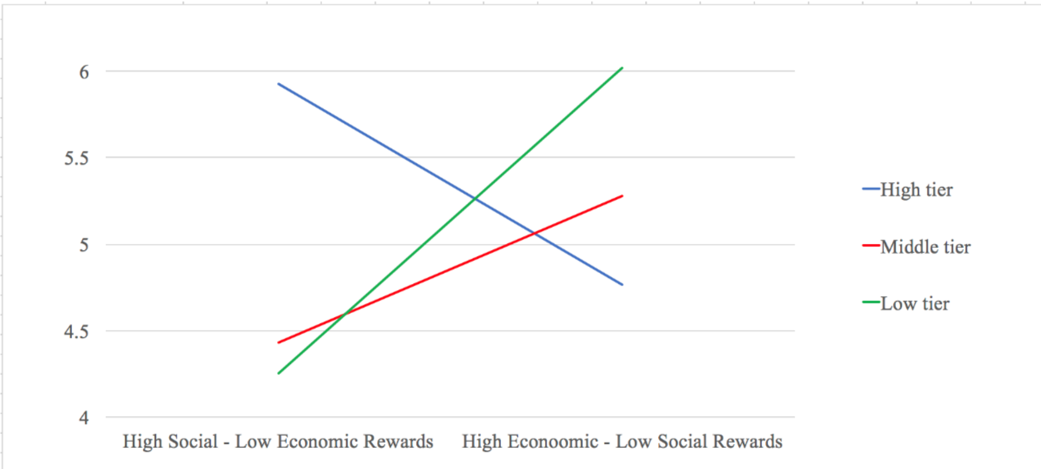

Figure 3. Interaction effect of types of rewards programs and membership tiers

4.4 Discussion

This study examined the relationship between the hotel rewards program and the member's program loyalty considering membership tiers to identify methods that allow efficient allocation of rewards to rewards program members. This study incorporated scenarios describing the high-social/low-economic rewards program and the high-economic/low-social rewards program to identify more effective rewards programs for members in various membership tiers. The results suggest that different types of rewards programs had a significant influence on program loyalty. Specifically, when high-economic/low-social rewards were offered, customers showed increased program loyalty. That is, providing more monetary rewards can be an effective method that encourages members to keep subscribing to the rewards program regardless of membership tier levels. This result is supported by previous literature indicating that economic rewards are a more robust facilitator of program loyalty than social rewards (Lee et al., 2015). However, program loyalty was not significantly different across different membership tier levels. This suggests that higher-tier members are not always loyal to membership programs. While it may be essential to have many high-tier members, there is greater importance in maintaining long-lasting relationships with valued customers through the rewards program. Therefore, hotels should continuously provide appropriate benefits for members in each tier to promote continued membership to the rewards program.

Even though the membership tier was not a significant main factor influencing program loyalty, there was a significant interaction effect on types of rewards programs and membership tier levels. That is, when high-social/low-economic rewards were given, high-tier members demonstrated higher program loyalty. This finding is consistent with previous research that argues that higher-tier members favor being treated with exclusive services through the rewards program as opposed to lower-tier members (Tanford, 2013). However, when high-economic/low-social rewards were provided, low-tier members displayed higher program loyalty. This suggests that low-tier members prefer receiving monetary benefits through the rewards program, which could lead to program loyalty.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributed to the existing body of literature by identifying the dynamic relationships between rewards programs and program loyalty by implementing a hypothetical scenario-based experimental design. Furthermore, the current study discovered that different types of rewards programs had a significant influence on program loyalty. Specifically, when high economic/low social rewards were offered, customers demonstrated higher program loyalty. The results are supported by a previous study indicating that economic rewards facilitate program loyalty more than social rewards (Lee et al., 2015). However, program loyalty was not significantly different across different membership tier levels.

The results of this study also confirmed findings from previous studies. For example, the outcomes indicate that when high-social/low-economic rewards were given, high-tier members' program loyalty was highest, followed by middle-tier members. That is, higher-tier members are more likely to receive member-exclusive services. In addition, social rewards motivate program members to support the preferred hotel through affective commitment (Lee et al., 2015). When considering that higher-tier members tend to have higher affective commitment than low-tier members (Tanford et al., 2011), this study confirmed that social rewards are more effective in promoting continued participation in the preferred hotel's rewards program among higher-tier members. However, when high-economic/low-social rewards were offered, low-tier members' program loyalty was highest, followed by middle-tier members. This result is consistent with a previous study that identified that offering economic rewards was effective in establishing an initial relationship with customers due to monetary benefits (Peterson, 1995). Therefore, even though lower-tier members do not frequently visit the preferred hotel, economic rewards could serve as an incentive for them to remain a member of the preferred hotel.

5.2 Practical implications

The results suggested that providing increased monetary rewards may be increasingly effective in retaining members in rewards programs regardless of membership tiers. It should be noted that higher-tier members are not always program loyal. While having an abundance of high-tier members is important, maintaining long-lasting relationships with valued customers through the rewards program should be considered a priority. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for hotel management to increase efforts in establishing long-term relationships with their guests. For example, hotel companies may allow customers to accumulate points through the purchase of goods and services with partners and earn additional points by making purchases every day with hotel-affiliated credit cards (e.g., World of Hyatt Visa Card; Marriot Bonvoy; Chase IHG Rewards Card). This daily relationship developed from combined interactions and efforts may enhance the bond between customers and the rewards program.

The unique contribution of this study creates a foundation for designing effective rewards programs for members in various tiers. The findings of this study may be helpful for hotels to develop effective rewards programs for members in different tiers and allocate resources efficiently. For instance, hotel management may consider providing additional customized and personalized services for higher-tier members. Moreover, special treatment or benefits that customers cannot receive at other hotels would be beneficial in maintaining long-lasting relationships with high-tier members. However, this does not mean that economic rewards are not important for high-tier members. As shown in the result of the main effect of different types of rewards programs, economic rewards are critical in maintaining program loyalty. For low-tier members, hotel management should offer various economic rewards in order to promote participation in the rewards program and improve the chances of moving up to higher-tier levels.

5.3 Limitations and future studies

Despite the valuable implications, this study is not free from limitations. As the study used scenarios related to hotel rewards programs, respondents had to rely on an imaginary situation to respond to the survey questions. Even though scenarios have been widely used in consumer studies (Ha & Jang, 2009; Ha et al., 2016; Ok et al., 2005), authentic situations may differ from the scenarios. Additionally, this study used membership tiers as a proxy of behavioral loyalty but did not consider attitudinal loyalty. Even though customers frequently visit a particular hotel, if they do not have an emotional commitment to the hotel, they would be more likely to switch to other hotel brands. Dick and Basu (1994) classified types of customer loyalty based on behavior and attitude. The types of loyalty include true loyalty (high attitude/high behavior), latent loyalty (high altitude/low behavior), spurious loyalty (low attitude/high behavior), and low loyalty (low attitude/low behavior). Future research may consider examining the effects of different rewards programs depending on the types of customer loyalty as a means to develop a better understanding of customers in different loyalty levels and offer customized services.

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