
Forging Loyalty in Non-Metropolitan Hospitality Through Service Quality and Satisfaction

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Abstract: This study examines how service quality influences long-term customer loyalty through the mediating role of satisfaction within the distinct setting of non-metropolitan hospitality. Focusing on four-star hotels in Pangkalpinang, Indonesia, the research responds to the limited empirical evidence from emerging tourism destinations outside major urban centers. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed using partial least square structural equation modeling to analyze data collected from 340 hotel guests through structured questionnaires administered in leisure and dining areas. Reliability and validity assessments were conducted prior to evaluating the structural relationships. The findings reveal that satisfaction fully mediates the effect of service quality on loyalty, underscoring the central role of guest experience in shaping enduring behavioral intentions. Among the dimensions of service quality, empathy and tangibles emerge as the most influential drivers in strengthening satisfaction and fostering loyalty in non-metropolitan hotel settings. The study contributes to hospitality theory by demonstrating the mechanisms through which service quality translates into loyalty in regions with developing tourism ecosystems. For practitioners, the results highlight the strategic importance of enhancing personalized attention and physical service elements to build sustainable competitive advantage. The novelty of this research lies in its contextual focus and empirical evidence showing that satisfaction acts as a pivotal pathway linking service quality to loyalty in non-metropolitan hospitality environments.

Keywords: customer loyalty; customer satisfaction; non-metropolitan hospitality; service quality

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INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry plays an essential role within the broader tourism sector, making a substantial contribution to regional economic growth while enriching visitors' overall travel experiences (Li et al., 2018; Nikolskaya et al., 2018). Within this context, service quality is regarded as a fundamental determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty, acting as a key factor in sustaining competitive advantage in an increasingly dynamic service environment (Setó-Pamies, 2012; Baumann et al., 2017). The SERVQUAL model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) has been extensively validated as an effective predictor of positive customer outcomes across numerous service contexts, including hospitality (Ladhari, 2009; Salazar et al., 2010; Saleh & Ryan, 1991). Evaluating these dimensions remains a crucial step in assessing the operational performance of hotels.

Prior research indicates that customer satisfaction often mediates the link between service quality and customer loyalty, encapsulating both the cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions shaped by guests' service experiences (Khawaja et al., 2021; Keshavarz & Jamshidi, 2018). Satisfied customers are generally inclined to display loyalty behaviors, such as repeat patronage and offering positive recommendations to others (Marcos & Coelho, 2022; Ali et al., 2020). Although the mediating influence of satisfaction has been widely examined in urban and international hospitality contexts, empirical investigations into this relationship within emerging non-metropolitan destinations remain limited. Pangkalpinang—the capital of Indonesia's Bangka Belitung Province—represents one such city, where tourism growth is being fueled by natural attractions, cultural heritage, and supportive policy initiatives (Antaranews, 2023). However, comprehensive studies assessing hotel service quality and its impact on guest satisfaction and loyalty in this non-metropolitan setting are still relatively rare.

This study seeks to fill the identified gap by examining the influence of the five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) on customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction acting as a mediating variable in this relationship. Empirical evidence derived from hotel guests in Pangkalpinang is expected to offer valuable theoretical contributions and practical guidance for enhancing service quality in non-metropolitan hospitality contexts.

Tourism destinations differ according to their position within the spatial hierarchy of tourism systems. Metropolitan areas typically operate as growth poles supported by agglomeration economies, diversified demand, and standardized service structures, whereas secondary or peripheral destinations are characterized by smaller markets, lower accessibility, and developing tourism ecosystems where visitor evaluations rely more on direct interpersonal encounters and tangible service evidence (Romão, 2020; Styliadis et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2021). Consequently, non-metropolitan hospitality can be defined as hotel service environments located in such peripheral destinations, where customer loyalty is shaped primarily by actual service experience rather than established destination image or brand familiarity. Pangkalpinang reflects these characteristics as a medium-sized island city with predominantly domestic visitation and dependence on air and sea connectivity, making guest perceptions strongly influenced by the quality of on-site service interactions.

The SERVQUAL framework (Figure 1) defines service quality through five principal dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Each of these dimensions reflects a unique aspect of the customer experience and has been empirically supported across diverse cultural settings and service industries (Ladhari, 2009; Wu & Ko, 2013).

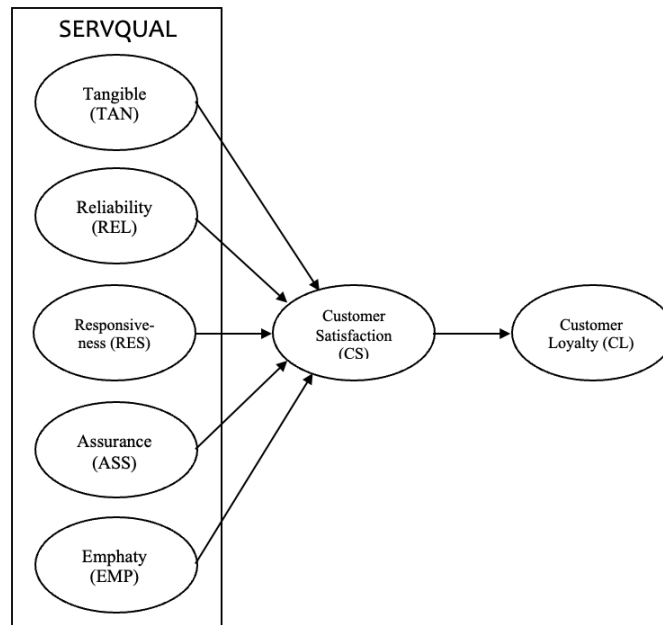


Figure 1. Research Model

Source: Created by author, 2025

Tangibles refer to the physical aspects of facilities, equipment, and personnel, functioning as the most immediate and visible cues customers use to assess service quality (Ali & Amin, 2014; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021). A thoughtfully designed physical setting not only enhances visual appeal but also conveys professionalism and meticulous attention to detail. In the hospitality sector, where physical elements often constitute the first point of contact, tangibles are instrumental in shaping guests' initial perceptions (Baker et al., 2002). Therefore, H1: Tangibles positively influence customer satisfaction.

Reliability, defined as the ability to consistently and accurately deliver promised services, underpins trust-based relationships with customers (Devi Juwaheer, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008). Hotels that reliably meet service commitments, such as prompt check-ins, accurate billing, and maintaining cleanliness, demonstrate operational excellence, thereby improving guest satisfaction (Wong et al., 2024). Thus, H2: Reliability positively influences customer satisfaction.

Responsiveness, understood as the willingness to assist guests and provide timely service, represents a crucial component in fast-paced service encounters, especially in hotels (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Yeong et al., 2022). Prompt problem resolution, attentive interactions, and proactive service delivery contribute directly to higher satisfaction levels (Cheng et al., 2019). Hence, H3: Responsiveness positively influences customer satisfaction.

Assurance—covering staff competence, courtesy, and the ability to instill trust and confidence, assumes heightened importance in service contexts where guests face uncertainty or risk (Shams et al., 2021; Ampong et al., 2021). Well-trained and knowledgeable employees can reduce customer anxiety and foster perceptions of safety and trust, supporting H4: Assurance positively influences customer satisfaction.

Empathy, reflecting personalized and caring attention to guests, is vital for creating emotionally satisfying experiences (Han & Hyun, 2015; Ndubisi, 2006). Within the hospitality industry, empathy is expressed through tailored services, attentiveness to individual needs, and accommodating special requests, all of which are linked to greater satisfaction. Therefore, H5: Empathy positively influences customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction represents an overall assessment of service experiences, indicating the extent to which expectations are fulfilled or surpassed (Cetin, 2020). A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates that satisfaction exerts a strong influence on customer loyalty, which includes

the intention to return and to endorse the service provider to others (Camilleri & Filieri, 2023; Cheng et al., 2019). Accordingly, H6: Customer satisfaction positively affects customer loyalty.

In addition to its direct role, customer satisfaction operates as a mediating factor that connects service quality with customer loyalty. When guests perceive superior service quality, they tend to feel more satisfied, which subsequently strengthens loyalty-oriented behaviors (Caruana, 2002; Kandampully et al., 2015). This mediating effect has been consistently confirmed across diverse service industries and remains a cornerstone in hospitality consumer behavior models. Therefore, H7a-e: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationships between each of the five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and customer loyalty.

METHODS

Adopting a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach, this research examined the impact of five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) on customer loyalty using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), with customer satisfaction positioned as a mediating variable. The study was carried out in Pangkalpinang, Indonesia, targeting guests of four-star hotels. These hotels were chosen due to their intricate service structures, enabling a more thorough evaluation of service quality. As highlighted by Ladhari (2009), complex service settings such as four-star hotels provide an ideal context for effectively applying the SERVQUAL framework. Data were gathered over an eight-week period, from March 15 to May 15, 2025, employing a non-probability convenience sampling technique. However, this approach may introduce selection bias, and findings should be interpreted as representing participating guests rather than the entire hotel customer population. In total, 340 valid responses were collected. Surveys were administered to hotel guests in parking areas and hotel restaurants, as these venues offered a more relaxed and accessible environment for engaging participants. Research assistants were on-site to facilitate respondent comprehension and ensure the completeness of survey responses.

The survey instrument comprised 32 items, covering five service quality dimensions, each represented by five indicators adapted from SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), four indicators measuring customer satisfaction (Caruana, 2002), and three indicators assessing customer loyalty (Kim et al., 2004). All questions employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A pilot test involving 30 participants was conducted to verify the instrument's clarity and reliability. Data analysis utilized SmartPLS 4.0, an appropriate tool for predictive modeling, examining complex causal relationships, and handling latent constructs with multiple indicators (Hair et al., 2017). The analytical process followed a two-phase PLS-SEM approach: first, the measurement model was assessed for internal consistency, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and multicollinearity; second, the structural model was evaluated using a bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples. Ethical protocols were observed, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of all respondents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data were collected from 340 individuals who had recently stayed at four-star hotels in Pangkalpinang (Table 1). The sample showed a nearly even gender split, with 52% male and 48% female respondents. The predominant age group was 25–34 years (45%), followed by 35–44 years (30%), 18–24 years (15%), and 45 years or older (10%). In terms of educational attainment, 40% held a bachelor's degree, 35% had completed senior high school, 15% possessed postgraduate qualifications, and 10% had an education level of junior high school or below. Occupationally, 38% were employed in the private sector, 25% were students, 20% were entrepreneurs, and the remaining 17% included government employees, freelancers, and other professions. The majority of guests (60%) visited for leisure purposes, 25% for business, and 15% for other reasons. Most reported stays lasted between one and three nights (70%).

Table 1. Respondents Profile

Respondent Characteristics	Frequency (n=340)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	177	52
Female	163	48
Age Group		
18 – 24 years	51	15
25 – 34 years	153	45
35 – 44 years	102	30
45 years and above	34	10
Education Level		
Junior High School or below	34	10
Senior High School	119	35
Bachelor's Degree	136	40
Postgraduate	51	15
Occupation		
Private Sector Employee	129	38
Student	85	25
Entrepreneur	68	20
Others (Govt. employees, freelancers, etc.)	58	17
Purpose of Stay		
Leisure	204	60
Business	85	25
Others (family visits, etc.)	51	15
Length of Stay		
1 – 3 nights	238	70
More than 3 nights	102	30

Source: Created by author, 2025

The model achieved an acceptable fit, with an SRMR of 0.036 and an NFI of 0.923, signifying a strong overall model fit (Henseler et al., 2014). The measurement model demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Figure 2). Outer loading values ranged from 0.774 to 0.928, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017). All constructs recorded composite reliability (CR) scores above 0.85, indicating high internal consistency (Table 2). The average variance extracted (AVE) values, which ranged between 0.645 and 0.840, confirmed the presence of convergent validity. Multicollinearity was not an issue, as variance inflation factor (VIF) values were within the range of 1.597 to 4.628. Additionally, discriminant validity was supported, with heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios remaining below the conservative threshold of 0.9 (Table 3).

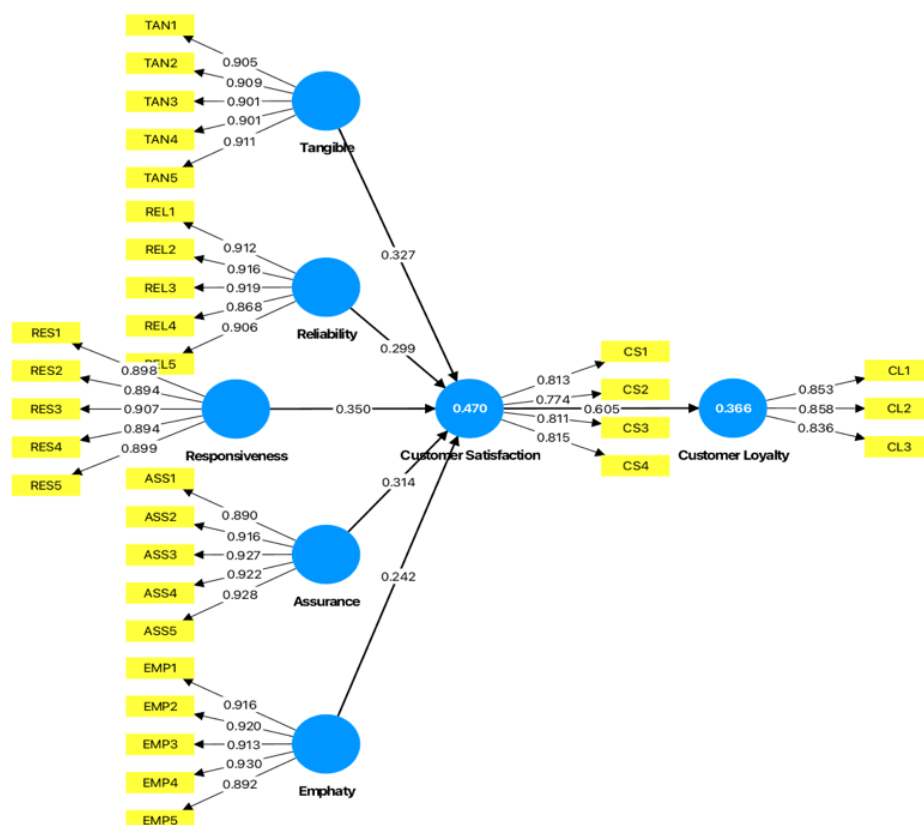


Figure 1. Measurement Model
Source: SmartPLS v.4 result, 2025

Table 2. Outer Loadings, CR, AVE, and VIF

Indicators	Outer Loadings	CR	AVE	VIF
TAN1. The hotel facilities look modern and well-maintained.	0.905	0.946	0.840	3.576
TAN2. Hotel equipment and tools are in good condition and work well.	0.909			3.730
TAN3. Hotel staff look neat and professional.	0.901			3.608
TAN4. The hotel's layout and decoration are attractive and comfortable.	0.901			3.470
TAN5. The cleanliness of public areas is well-maintained.	0.911			3.863
REL1. The hotel provides services as promised.	0.912	0.949	0.721	3.914
REL2. Check-in and check-out are done accurately.	0.916			3.938
REL3. Room service is delivered on time as requested.	0.919			4.198
REL4. Bills and payments are always accurate.	0.868			2.878
REL5. The hotel handles requests consistently.	0.906			3.503
RES1. Hotel staff respond quickly to guest requests.	0.898	0.947	0.807	3.520
RES2. Guest problems or complaints are solved quickly.	0.894			3.216
RES3. Hotel staff are always ready to help guests.	0.907			3.441
RES4. Services are given on time according to guest needs.	0.894			3.533
RES5. The hotel gives clear and quick information when needed.	0.899			3.299
ASS1. Hotel staff have enough knowledge to answer guest questions.	0.890	0.953	0.840	3.204
ASS2. Hotel staff are polite and friendly.	0.916			4.058

Indicators	Outer Loadings	CR	AVE	VIF
ASS3. Staff can build guest trust.	0.927			4.628
ASS4. Staff make guests feel safe during their stay.	0.922			4.359
ASS5. The hotel keeps guests' personal information secure.	0.928			4.608
EMP1. Staff give personal attention to guests.	0.916			3.935
EMP2. The hotel understands guests' special needs.	0.920			4.348
EMP3. Staff are patient when serving guests.	0.913	0.973	0.836	4.244
EMP4. The hotel tries to adjust services to guest preferences.	0.930			4.103
EMP5. Staff understand each guest's situation and condition.	0.892			3.491
CS1. I am satisfied with my overall stay at this hotel.	0.813			1.764
CS2. The service I received met my expectations.	0.774	0.818	0.645	1.597
CS3. Staying at this hotel was the right decision.	0.811			1.726
CS4. This hotel gives good value for the money I spent.	0.815			1.738
CL1. I plan to stay at this hotel again in the future.	0.853			1.785
CL2. I will recommend this hotel to other people.	0.858	0.806	0.721	1.889
CL3. This hotel will be my first choice when visiting this city.	0.836			1.629

Source: Created by author, 2025

Table 3. HTMT Result

	ASS	CL	CS	EMP	REL	RES	TAN
ASS							
CL	0.343						
CS	0.370	0.745					
EMP	0.136	0.156	0.213				
REL	0.047	0.205	0.352	0.050			
RES	0.059	0.303	0.388	0.034	0.054		
TAN	0.070	0.314	0.371	0.090	0.040	0.042	

Source: Created by author

The structural model exhibited strong explanatory capacity (Table 4). Customer satisfaction accounted for 47% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.470$), while customer loyalty was explained by service quality dimensions and satisfaction, with 36.6% of the variance captured ($R^2 = 0.366$). As shown in Table 5, path coefficients for the five service quality dimensions, tangibles ($\beta = 0.327$, $t = 8.552$, $p < 0.001$), reliability ($\beta = 0.299$, $t = 7.485$, $p < 0.001$), responsiveness ($\beta = 0.350$, $t = 9.749$, $p < 0.001$), assurance ($\beta = 0.314$, $t = 8.633$, $p < 0.001$), and empathy ($\beta = 0.242$, $t = 6.603$, $p < 0.001$)—were all positive and statistically significant predictors of customer satisfaction, thereby supporting H1 to H5. Customer satisfaction demonstrated a strong positive influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.605$, $t = 16.367$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H6. Furthermore, mediation analysis revealed that customer satisfaction significantly mediated the effects of each service quality dimension on customer loyalty, supporting H7a-e.

Table 4. R-square Result

	Original sample	Standard deviation	t-statistics	p-values
Customer Loyalty (CL)	0.366	0.044	8.226	< 0.001
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	0.470	0.035	13.372	< 0.001

Source: Created by author, 2025

Table 5. Direct Effect and Indirect Effect Result

	Original sample (β)	Standard deviation n	t- statistics	p-value s	Hypothesis
TAN -> CS	0.327	0.038	8.552	< 0.001	H1 Accepted
REL -> CS	0.299	0.040	7.485	< 0.001	H2 Accepted
RES -> CS	0.350	0.036	9.749	< 0.001	H3 Accepted
ASS -> CS	0.314	0.036	8.633	< 0.001	H4 Accepted
EMP -> CS	0.242	0.037	6.603	< 0.001	H5 Accepted
CS -> CL	0.605	0.037	16.367	< 0.001	H6 Accepted
TAN -> CS -> CL	0.198	0.027	7.323	< 0.001	H7a Accepted
REL -> CS -> CL	0.181	0.025	7.186	< 0.001	H7b Accepted
RES -> CS -> CL	0.212	0.026	8.225	< 0.001	H7c Accepted
ASS -> CS -> CL	0.190	0.026	7.249	< 0.001	H7d Accepted
EMP -> CS -> CL	0.147	0.025	5.983	< 0.001	H7e Accepted

Source: Created by author, 2025

Findings of this study indicate that all five dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) exert significant positive impacts on customer satisfaction in four-star hotels located in Pangkalpinang. This outcome is consistent with the foundational SERVQUAL framework introduced by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which has been extensively validated in hospitality research (Ladhari, 2009; Wu & Ko, 2013; Salazar et al., 2010; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Ezech et al., 2022). Of the five dimensions, empathy emerged as the most influential factor, underscoring the critical role of personalized service and emotional connection in guest interactions (Han & Hyun, 2015). This finding reinforces earlier studies highlighting that emotional engagement and tailored attention substantially elevate overall guest satisfaction (Caruana, 2002; Sofi et al., 2025).

Tangibles, encompassing the physical setting and staff appearance were also found to be significant predictors of satisfaction, corroborating prior research that highlights the influence of hotel facilities on both initial impressions and sustained customer perceptions (Ali & Amin, 2014; Cheung et al., 2022). Reliability and responsiveness likewise played important roles, suggesting that consistent service delivery and timely customer support are essential to fulfilling guest expectations (Ali et al., 2021; Yeong et al., 2022). Furthermore, assurance reflecting employees' expertise and courteous behavior—proved crucial in building guest trust and alleviating perceived risks throughout the service experience (Boadi et al., 2022; Şen Küpeli & Özer, 2020). The positive relationship observed between customer satisfaction and loyalty is in line with extensive evidence from hospitality research, reinforcing the notion that satisfaction serves as a key precursor to loyalty behaviors, such as repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Caruana, 2002; Marcos & Coelho, 2022). This outcome further emphasizes the psychological connection between customers' cognitive and emotional assessments of service experiences and their subsequent behavioral intentions.

Mediation analysis revealed that customer satisfaction serves as a full mediator between each service quality dimension and customer loyalty. This result aligns with prior studies that underscore satisfaction's role in transforming perceived service quality into loyal customer behaviors (Lin, 2022; Chan, 2022). Satisfaction acts as a pivotal cognitive and emotional process through which guests convert favorable service experiences into loyalty intentions (Sottolichio et al., 2025; Ghorbanzadeh, 2021). Such mediation effects have been consistently documented in hospitality research, reinforcing the notion that improvements in service quality influence loyalty predominantly by enhancing customer satisfaction (Ahrholdt et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2015).

In contrast to many metropolitan hotel studies, where reliability, responsiveness, and brand-supported assurance frequently dominate satisfaction formation due to standardized procedures and strong destination image (Ladhari, 2009; Ahrholdt et al., 2017; Kandampully et al.,

2015), the findings of this research show that in Pangkalpinang's non-metropolitan context empathy and tangibles become the most influential drivers, and service quality affects loyalty only indirectly through satisfaction. This indicates a shift from system-based evaluation to encounter-based evaluation: guests in peripheral destinations rely less on brand expectations and more on personal interaction and physical service evidence, consistent with research showing smaller destinations emphasize relational experience and on-site perception rather than pre-visit image (Stylidis et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2021; Nunkoo et al., 2020). Therefore, the novelty highlighted by the results is that SERVQUAL operates differently across spatial contexts, metropolitan hospitality tends to produce mixed or partial mediation due to brand equity and habitual loyalty, whereas non-metropolitan hospitality produces experience-dependent loyalty with full mediation by satisfaction, indicating loyalty is constructed during the stay rather than before arrival.

IMPLICATION

This study contributes to the service quality and hospitality literature by offering empirical support that the SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) are significant determinants of customer satisfaction in four-star hotels situated in non-metropolitan areas. By validating the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between service quality and loyalty, the study strengthens and extends theoretical models that position satisfaction as a central psychological driver of loyal behavior (Caruana, 2002; Oliver, 1999). In addition, the findings expand the body of evidence demonstrating the relevance of the SERVQUAL framework beyond international and metropolitan hotel contexts, enhancing its applicability within regional hospitality markets.

For hotel managers, particularly those overseeing premium properties in emerging tourist destinations like Pangkalpinang, these results highlight the critical importance of maintaining excellence across all five dimensions of service quality. Prioritizing empathy through tailored and attentive service can substantially boost customer satisfaction while fostering deeper emotional bonds with guests. Equally, allocating resources to tangible aspects, such as the upkeep of facilities and professional staff appearance, is vital for creating favorable first impressions. Enhancing reliability and responsiveness by equipping staff to deliver consistent, timely assistance further contributes to guest satisfaction. Strengthening assurance through knowledgeable and courteous personnel can mitigate perceived risks and build customer confidence in the service. Collectively, sustained attention to these dimensions can increase customer loyalty, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth—both essential for achieving long-term competitiveness in the hospitality sector.

CONCLUSION

Findings demonstrate that each SERVQUAL dimension significantly contributes to enhancing customer satisfaction, which in turn positively influences customer loyalty. Furthermore, customer satisfaction was found to fully mediate the relationship between service quality and loyalty, underscoring its essential role in converting service perceptions into sustained loyal behaviors. These outcomes offer meaningful insights into the interplay between service quality and customer loyalty in non-metropolitan hospitality contexts. However, several limitations should be noted. First, the focus on four-star hotels in Pangkalpinang may restrict the applicability of the findings to higher-tier properties or different geographic contexts. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the research limits the capacity to infer causal relationships among the variables. Third, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias. Lastly, the study did not include other potential determinants of loyalty, such as price perception or brand image, which could further influence customer behavior.

Future research can overcome these limitations by incorporating a broader spectrum of hotel classifications and diverse geographic locations to enhance the generalizability of findings. Utilizing longitudinal research designs would enable more robust causal inferences. Moreover, including additional variables such as perceived value, trust, or electronic word-of-mouth could provide a

more comprehensive view of the factors influencing customer loyalty in the hospitality industry. The use of qualitative approaches may also offer richer insights into guests' experiences and expectations.

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