

## **THE INFLUENCE OF SERVICE QUALITY AND BRAND EQUITY ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY TO 5 STAR HOTELS IN THE YUNNAN PROVINCE OF CHINA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

From 2007 to 2017, the number of tourists visiting Yunnan province from home and abroad increased from 91.30 million to 580.33 million. During the same time period, tourism revenue for the province increased from 58.98 billion yuan to 692.22 billion yuan. The hotel business is rapidly developing due to growing demand for such services as well as growing opportunities for travel. Hotel developments currently grow very rapidly. The emergence of new hotels increases the competition in the hospitality industry. Yunnan tourism revenue will break through 600 billion yuan this year and, at the same time, will intensify the building of high-end hotels and brands introduced as part of the key work of this year. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of service quality, brand equity, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in 5 star hotels in the Yunnan Province of China. The mixed method called sequential explanatory design was used in this study. It includes quantitative and qualitative methods. With the quantitative method, the researcher focuses on collecting data for analysis. With the qualitative method, the researcher focuses on collecting the words that support the hypothesis of this research. A total of 796 questionnaires were collected from 5 stars hotels' customers in the Yunnan province of China and statistically analyzed with SEM techniques by SmartPLS 3.0. The results of the study demonstrate that service quality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty; brand equity has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty; and customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty. Meanwhile, service quality and brand equity directly and indirectly affect customer loyalty through mediators customer satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Service quality, brand equity, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, 5 star hotels in Yunnan province

## **Introduction**

Quality of service is a determinant factor of customer satisfaction because service and good product quality will create customer satisfaction. Basically, the purpose of a hotel is to create a satisfied customer. The creation of customer satisfaction can provide several benefits, such as the relationship between the company and the customer becoming more harmonious, providing a good foundation for repeat purchases and the creation of customer loyalty, and generating word-of-mouth recommendations that are profitable for the hotel (Nuridin, 2018).

Service quality in the hospitality industry has become one of the most important factors for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage and customer confidence in a highly competitive marketplace, and therefore service quality can give the hospitality industry a great chance to create competitive differentiation for organizations. It is thus considered to be a significant core concept and a critical success factor in the hospitality industry. A successful hotel delivers excellent quality service to customers, and service quality is considered the life of hotel (Al-Ababneh, 2017). The hotel industry, in particular, and all businesses whose service depend on building long term relationships, need to concentrate on maintaining customer loyalty. To achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace, one has to value the importance of building, using, and maintaining brands. For this reason, academics and practitioners have studied the concept and measurement of brand equity for more than a decade (Kim, Kim, & An, 2003).

According to the Tourism Bureau of Yunnan province, in 2017 the province of Yunnan, 580.33 million people brought revenue of 69.22 billion Chinese Yuan, but most visitors just stay briefly in Yunnan, and then go to other provinces (Tourism Bureau of Yunnan Province, 2017). In order to make more tourists stay in Yunnan, the construction of high-end hotel is undoubtedly an important measure. On the one hand, a lot of international hotel brands are coming to Yunnan. On the other hand, local Yunnan hotels are consistently seek breakthroughs. Today, as regards 4 star and 5 star hotels in Yunnan, the

majority of enterprises are facing aging hardware, personnel flow, when a run in with the international brands can no longer turn their own innovative marketing idea into a differentiated development pattern (Tourism Bureau of Yunnan Province, 2017). In the face of international brand hotel occupancy and rapidly expanding economy hotels, 5 star hotels should adjust their marketing measures and seek breakthroughs in the running-in and pain, delve into the market, study younger people's consumption psychology, and, with marketing strategy and management services, accurately grasp the new generation of consumer demands. At the same time, the enterprise should put forward accurate positioning, personality prominent, and lay out reasonable development plan. Hotels should strengthen the improvement of employee morale by using a humane way of working and management methods, improving the staff's humanities concern, and, as far as possible, letting marginal employees stay. Hotels should also upgrade existing brands, promote the transformation and upgrading of Yunnan tourism reform and development, and make substantial progress, thereby finally achieving leap-forward development.

## **Objective of the study**

To examine the influence of service quality, brand equity and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in 5 star hotels in Yunnan Province of China.

## **Literature review**

### **Service quality**

Service quality can be seen as the gap as the between the expected service and the actual perceived service (Al-Ababneh, 2017). Service quality in service-marketing literature is the customer's sense of the disparity between their expectation and their perception of the performance of the service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988). Service quality studies have been proved by several researchers. Juwaheer and Ross (2003) evaluated the customer perceptions and expectations of service quality in hotels in Mauritius. Shiang-Lin et al. (2005) assessed the same objectives

of casino hotels in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Another study has been researched in luxury hotels of Pakistan (Mohsin, 2011) and the like. Various models were used across different service levels: Focus, Full, and Luxury. Service level is a term used in the industry to represent different qualities, affordability, and customer bases for the different types of hotel (Carroll, 2016).

Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) have indicated that service quality is the range of the disparity between customers' expectations and their perceived performance of a service. Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, which measures service quality using five primary dimensions: 1) Responsiveness: The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; 2) Reliability: The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; 3) Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of employee and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; 4) Tangible: The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials; and 5) Empathy: The caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

### **Brand equity**

Brand equity has multiple definitions, but the definitions provided by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) are currently the most accepted. Aaker (1991) defined it as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers." Keller (1993) denoted brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on the consumer response to the marketing of the brand." The following five categories of assets underlie brand equity: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and other proprietary assets. Brand equity is defined as one of the factors that affect brand value by moderating the impact of marketing activities on customer actions

(Kutlu, 2015). Brand equity, generally considered to be the differential in positive brand image and loyalty enjoyed by one brand as compared to that of a lesser known brand, is often attributed to the activities the firm undertakes to promote the brand and communicate its value or benefits (Lax, 2017).

### **Customer satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction is defined as a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment that results from comparing the product's perceived performance to their expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Like service quality, customer satisfaction has become very important. Excellent quality of service and high customer satisfaction are the most important challenges facing the service industry (Hung, Huang, & Chen, 2003). For today's hospitality environment, the true measure of a company's success lies in its ability to satisfy customer's needs continually and consistently. Customer satisfaction surveys produce undeniable results about the overall effectiveness of a hotel's staff and the perceived value of the establishment. Therefore, it is very important for a hotel to find a way to monitor customer service satisfaction. (Mace, 2015).

### **Customer loyalty**

The researchers on customer loyalty in the early years had the general sense that loyalty is a sort of perspective of human sense, or loyalty often comes from people's perspectives. (Shiang-Lin et al., 2005; Rundle-Thiele, 2005). And they suggest that loyalty involved a dual perspective. The customer loyalty is a sort of repeating behavior of the customers. It is characterized in terms of re-purchase or re-patronage intentions, recommendations, and word-of-mouth (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2006). Kim, Suh, and Eves (2010) indicated that creating new customer loyalty depends on achieving customer satisfaction, which is affected by expectations. Loyalty arises as a result of a customer feeling satisfied with an organization and its goods and/or services (Demir, Talaat, & Aydinli, 2015).

**Conceptual framework**

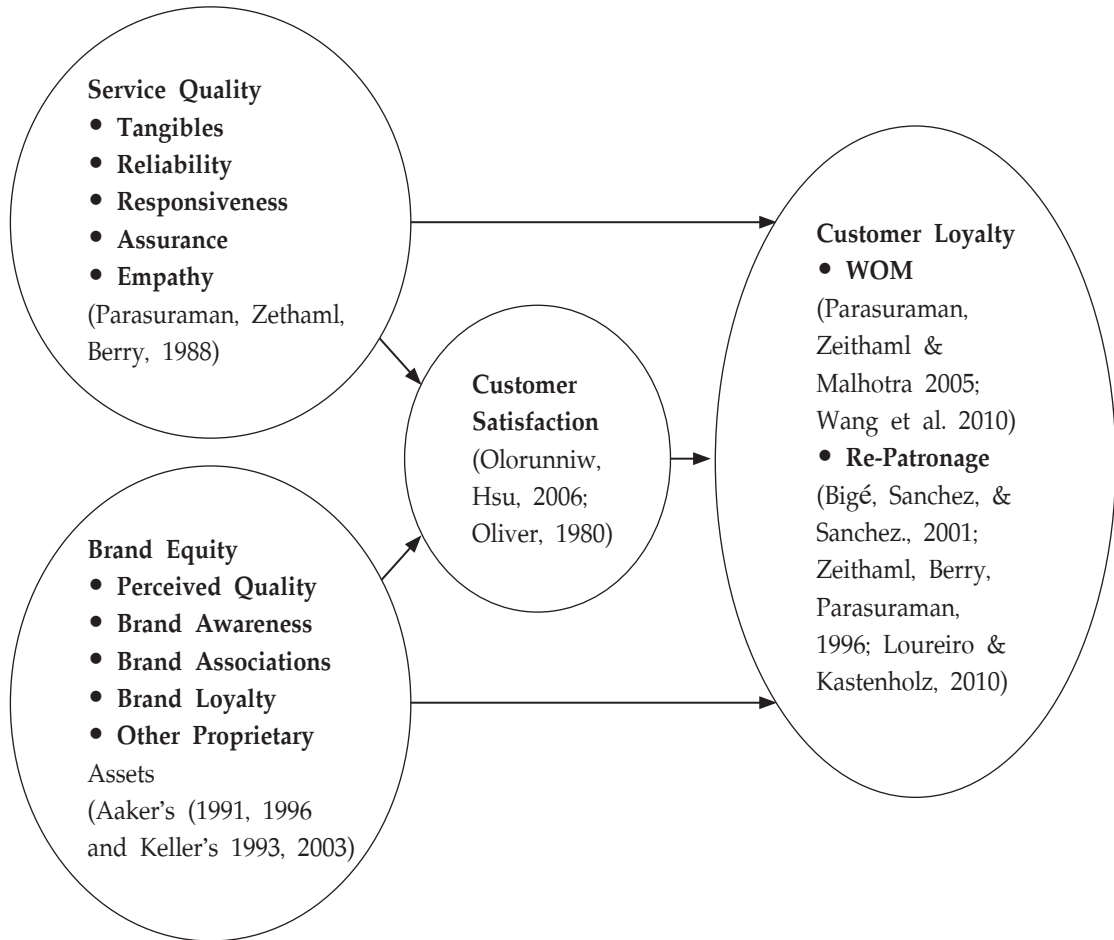


Figure 1 The framework of the research

**Hypotheses**

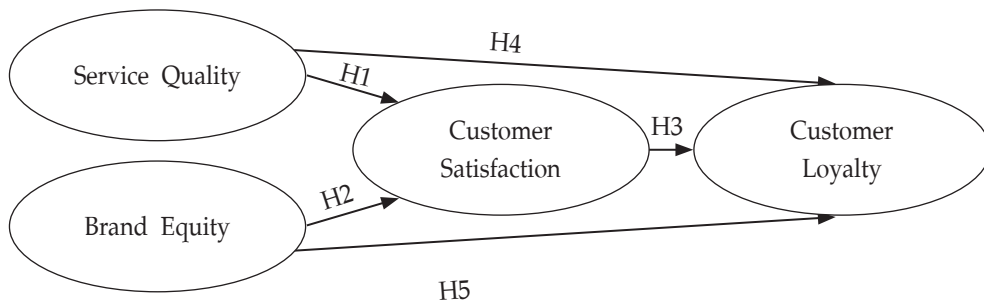


Figure 2 The direct hypothesis test model

1. Service quality has a direct influence on customer satisfaction.
2. Brand equity has a direct influence on customer satisfaction.
3. Customer satisfaction has a direct influence on

- customer loyalty.
4. Service quality has a direct influence on customer loyalty.
5. Brand equity has a direct influence on customer loyalty.



Figure 3 The indirect hypothesis test model

6. Service quality has an indirect influence on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

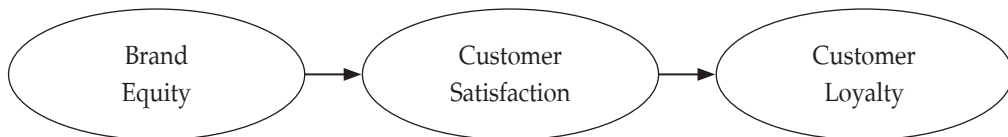


Figure 4 The indirect hypothesis test model

7. Brand equity has an indirect influence on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

**Research Methodology**

**Population and sample size**

The targeted population of this research is the customers who have experienced service provided by 5 star hotels in the Yunnan province of China. In this research, the author focused on all nineteen listed 5 star hotels in Yunnan province. They are in different of cities located in Yunnan (Tourism Bureau of Yunnan Province, 2017). In each hotel, the researcher negotiated with the manager of the room department, and asked the manager for help with the questionnaire administration. The guest survey adopted a simple random sampling, whereby the manager sent the questionnaire to patrons at random, and then the researcher received the research data. This research collected 926 data sets and chose to use 796 of the questionnaires, which is 86% of the questionnaires. There were 130 incomplete or missing data sets, and the researcher deleted them. Instrument

Related to the mixed methods research, the explanatory sequential design had been selected for this

particular research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), which includes quantitative and qualitative methods.

**Quantitative method**

Questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection. All items in the questionnaires were written separately in English and Chinese. There were main five parts, consisting of demographic information, service quality, brand equity, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The first part (demographic information), which asked for general information about the respondents, consisted of eight items. It included questions about gender, age, marital status, purpose of trip, nationality, monthly income (USD), occupation, and highest level of education. All issues were only single-choice questions. The second part (service quality) consisted of twenty items. The third part (brand equity) consisted of fifteen items. The fourth part (customer satisfaction) consisted of four items. The last part (customer loyalty) consisted of eight items. In total, there were forty-seven items for latent variables that measured on a five-point Likert type scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

**Qualitative method**

The researcher interviewed ten guests from nineteen

5 star hotels. The questionnaire took about twenty minutes per person within four aspects: service quality, brand equity, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The interview chose key customers, the 5 star hotel VIPs who often choose 5 star hotels on business or travel. Examples of these customers include guests who stay in the hotel presidential suite, guests who stay in the hotel business suite more than three times, and guests who stay in the

guest room more than ten times.

#### Validity and reliability

The reliability of the measurement items were verified by the Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha and the value should be higher than .70 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The researcher conducted a reliability sample size of 796 customers for 5 star hotels in the Yunnan province of China.

Table 1 Latent variable reliability and validity

Latent variable	$R^2$	CR	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
SQ		0.963	0.959	0.568
BE		0.954	0.949	0.582
CS	0.501	0.936	0.908	0.784
CL	0.698	0.855	0.946	0.726

Table 1 shows the Coefficients of the determination, composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and convergent validity. Composite reliability should be 0.7 or higher. If it is exploratory research, 0.6 or higher is acceptable (Hair et al., 2014). Fornell and

Larcker (1981) suggest that AVE should be at or above 0.5. The range of value should be between 0 and 1, with higher levels indicating higher levels of predictive accuracy (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014).

Table 2 Discriminant variability of construct

	BE	CL	CS	SQ
BE	(0.763)			
CL	0.812	(0.852)		
CS	0.827	0.881	(0.885)	
SQ	0.880	0.803	0.803	(0.754)

Table 2 shows the square root of AVE for each latent variable, which is in brackets. Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that the "square root" of AVE of each latent variable should be greater than the correlations among the latent variables. The square root of the AVE is higher than any of correlations involving that latent variable which means the measurements of this SEM were widely accepted criteria for discriminant validity assessment (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). From the table 2, the researcher found that SQ square roots of AVE is smaller than others, but the factor loadings and AVE of SQ were accepted and thus adopted.

#### Data analysis

The researcher use SPSS to analyze a frequency distribution and percentages to clarify characteristics of demographic data of hotel customers, also computed means and standard deviations for each latent variables measured by using statistical programs. The researcher focuses on the data analysis, the hypothesis testing and the result finding. The results of the model validation through the use of the SmartPLS 3.0 software specifically design to analyze Path Modeling Structural Equations Models.

## Results

### I Quantitative results

#### Descriptive statistics

Table 3 Demographic statistics of the 796 respondents

Measure	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	487	60.1%
	Female	318	39.9%
Age	Equal to or less than 20 years	97	12.2%
	21-30 years	169	21.2%
	31-40 years	137	17.2%
	41-50 years	273	34.3%
	More than 50 years	120	15.1%
Marital status	Single	194	24.4%
	Married	572	71.9%
	Others	30	3.8%
Purpose of trip	Business	109	12.7%
	Leisure	553	69.5%
	Meeting	90	11.3%
	Others	44	5.5%
Come from	Inside the province	198	24.9%
	Overseas (USA/ UK/ RUS/AUS)	149	18.7%
	Outside the province	276	34.7%
	Overseas (Others)	106	13.3%
	Hong Kong/ Macao/ Taiwan	67	8.4%
Monthly income (USD)	Equal to or less than 200	91	11.4%
	201-500	129	16.2%
	501-800	103	12.9%
	801-1100	180	22.6%
	1101-1400	142	17.8%
	More than 1400	151	19.0%
Occupation	Student	52	6.5%
	Academic staff/Professor/Instructor	121	15.2%
	Business owner	137	17.2%
	Public employee	85	10.7%
	Private employee	333	41.8%
	Others	68	8.5%
Highest level of education	Secondary school	110	13.8%
	Junior college	146	18.3%
	Undergraduate degree	349	43.8%
	Master degree	151	19.0%
	Doctor degree	40	5.0%

Table 4 Descriptive analysis of observed variables

Variables	Mean	S.D.	Variables	Mean	S.D.
SQ1	4.14	0.83	BE1	4.52	0.80
SQ2	4.54	0.75	BE2	4.26	0.71
SQ3	4.58	0.76	BE3	4.31	0.72
SQ4	4.51	0.80	BE4	4.25	0.74
SQ5	4.49	0.76	BE5	4.27	0.77
SQ6	4.53	0.77	BE6	4.29	0.77
SQ7	4.50	0.76	BE7	4.29	0.73
SQ8	4.48	0.81	BE8	4.47	0.81
SQ9	4.52	0.76	BE9	4.22	0.72
SQ10	4.42	0.80	BE10	4.30	0.76
SQ11	4.34	0.72	BE11	4.44	0.75
SQ12	4.42	0.82	BE12	4.04	0.97
SQ13	4.30	0.79	BE13	4.40	0.75
SQ14	4.32	0.74	BE14	4.28	0.72
SQ15	4.46	0.83	BE15	4.30	0.76
SQ16	4.48	0.80	CL1	4.49	0.75
SQ17	4.20	0.78	CL2	4.44	0.76
SQ18	4.20	0.77	CL3	4.46	0.71
SQ19	4.42	0.82	CL4	4.44	0.80
SQ20	4.19	0.76	CL5	4.42	0.74
CS1	4.47	0.78	CL6	4.41	0.80
CS2	4.49	0.79	CL7	4.44	0.74
CS3	4.47	0.81	CL8	4.49	0.77
CS4	4.50	0.73			

Table 4 shows the descriptive analysis of latent variables: service quality (SQ), brand equity (BE), customer satisfaction (CS), and customer loyalty (CL).

All latent variables ranged between 4.04 and 4.58, which were interpreted in high level (Field, 2005).



Table 5 Results of hypothesis test

Hypothesis	Relation	$\beta$	S.D.	t-statistics	p-value
Direct Effect					
H1	SQ→CS	0.334	0.051	6.585	0.000
H2	BE→CS	0.533	0.047	11.250	0.000
H3	CS→CL	0.639	0.039	16.421	0.000
H4	SQ→CL	0.179	0.038	4.761	0.000
H5	BE→CL	0.126	0.042	3.020	0.003
Indirect Effect					
H6	SQ→CS→CL	0.214	0.035	6.128	0.000
H7	BE→CS→CL	0.340	0.037	9.274	0.000

Table 5 shows the relationship between service quality, brand equity, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. According to the analysis done in H1, there is a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction ( $\beta=0.334$ ,  $t=6.585$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Similarly, the result showed a significant relationship between brand equity and customer satisfaction in H2 ( $\beta=0.533$ ,  $t=11.250$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Also, the result showed a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in H3 ( $\beta=0.639$ ,  $t=16.421$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The result showed a significant relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in H4 ( $\beta=0.179$ ,  $t=4.761$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The result showed a significant relationship between brand equity and customer loyalty in H5 ( $\beta=0.126$ ,  $t=3.020$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Moreover, in H6 there is a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. ( $\beta=0.214$ ,  $t=6.128$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). In H7 there is a positive relationship between brand equity and customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. ( $\beta=0.340$ ,  $t=9.274$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

## II Qualitative results

As regards service quality to customer satisfaction, all volunteers agreed that improved service quality would increase customer satisfaction. Regarding brand equity to customer satisfaction, seven volunteers agreed that building good brand

equity would increase customer satisfaction, two volunteers thought that brand equity plays a key role in customer decisions, and one volunteer thought that brand equity is the image of the hotel. With respect to customer satisfaction to customer loyalty, nine volunteers strongly agreed that customer satisfaction was the basis for them to repurchase, and one volunteer thought they would be loyal if their preferences were satisfied. As to service quality to customer loyalty, all volunteers strongly agreed that better service quality would increase customer loyalty. Regarding brand equity to customer loyalty, eight volunteers agreed that building good brand equity would increase customer loyalty, and two volunteers thought that brand equity would have a little bit of influence on customer loyalty. As regards service quality to customer loyalty through customer satisfaction, all volunteers strongly agreed that better service quality would increase customer loyalty, because they thought better service quality, higher level satisfaction and higher level customer loyalty. With respect to brand equity to customer loyalty through customer satisfaction, eight volunteers agreed that building good brand equity would increase customer loyalty through customer satisfaction, and two volunteers thought that brand equity would have a little bit of influence on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

## Discussion

The impact of perceptions of the tourists about service quality and perceived service quality on customer satisfaction for hotel guests was at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.33, and this is consistent with Tabaku & Cerri's study (2016) in the tourism and hospitality industry. A study of an assessment of service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel sector (Tabaku & Cerri, 2016) found that the quality that customers perceive from their experience with a hotel has an important impact on the creation of customer satisfaction. A Nurcahyo, Fitriyani & Hudda (2017) study of the influence of facility and service quality towards customer satisfaction and its impact on customer loyalty in Borobudur Hotel in Jakarta found that the facilities and quality of service have the positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Borobudur Hotel in Jakarta at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.303.

Brand equity positively influenced customer satisfaction of food industry in Iran at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.528, and this is consistent with Esmaeilpour and Barjoei (2016) in management and applied economics. The result of the effect of corporate image on customer satisfaction through brand equity (Esmaeilpour & Barjoei, 2016) showed that corporate image has a positive and meaningful impact on brand equity and customer satisfaction, and brand equity has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction positively influenced customer loyalty of a fast food restaurant chain at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.863, and this is consistent with the Kabir (2016) study of factors influencing customer satisfaction at a fast food restaurant chain: the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Kabir (2016) found that high scores on one variable are associated with high scores on the other variable. Therefore, if satisfaction goes higher, loyalty goes higher too. The Maxwell and Bright (2015) study of the mediating influence of passenger satisfaction on the relationship between passenger loyalty programs

and passenger loyalty found customer satisfaction has a significant impact on customer loyalty in the airline industry at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.7996.

Service quality has a direct influence with a path coefficient at 0.641 towards customer loyalty. On the contrary, there is 0.672 of indirect influence of service quality towards customer loyalty (Nurcahyo, Fitriyani & Hudda, 2017). The Nurcahyo et al. (2017) study titled "The Influence of Facility and Service Quality towards Customer Satisfaction and Its Impact on Customer Loyalty in Borobudur Hotel in Jakarta" found that indirect influence is bigger than direct influence. This means that if service quality is improved, customer loyalty will also improve and make an impact on customer loyalty.

The Huang, Yen, Liu and Chang (2014) study of the relationship among brand equity, customer satisfaction, and brand resonance to repurchase intentions of cultural and creative industries in Taiwan, found that brand equity has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.887. Then brand equity at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.731 and customer satisfaction at a significant level of 0.00 with a path coefficient at 0.733 both have significant positive effects on repurchase intentions.

## Recommendations

Build a beautiful environment and focus on hotel equipment quality. This will make customers feel comfortable in 5 star hotels. Warm service and friendly staff attitude will make customer satisfied with 5 star hotels. A safe environment and transactions can help customers build trust in 5 star hotels. When customers have problems, the hotel should show a genuine interest in solving them. The hotel should perform the service right the first time. Staff of the hotel should never be too busy to respond to patrons. Staff of the hotel should have enough knowledge to answer patrons. The hotel should give patrons individualized attention. Brand equity plays an important role in 5 star hotels. Building a strong brand equity that customers can first or quickly imagine the hotel

symbol or logo in their minds will influence their decisions. Catering to customer needs and desires and knowing customer habits will increase customer satisfaction, which will lead to good word-of-mouth recommendations and attract customer re-patronage. Meanwhile, from the qualitative analysis, the answers from volunteers suggested that 5 star hotels should consider offering Chinese-style services such as Chinese-style weddings and traditional Chinese-style baby feasts. As we know, Chinese-style service is famous for speed and convenience, and should focus on quality. The volunteers also hope Yunnan's 5 star hotels have traditional nationality style because Yunnan is the most nationality in China. The decoration style should be more nationality and provide nationality foods.

#### **Limitations and recommendations for further study**

The research only regarded service quality, brand equity, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty as the factors to research. There are other factors that influence the relationship of the four variables, such as relative attitude, brand image, behavioral intentions, the experience quality of customer, customer values, marketing, competition, and the like. Thus, the limitations of variables could not explain all the effects in real business activities. The effects of service quality on customer loyalty have been researched for many years. The theories are mature in many industries. The researcher did not study all theories in the period, so there is a limitation to support from references and theories in this research.

Meanwhile, the survey for this research was conducted in the Yunnan province of China; there are only nineteen 5 star hotels in Yunnan. The respondents may not reflect the attitudes of all customers in China. Thus, future researchers should consider conducting their surveys in other Chinese provinces that have a lot of 5 star hotels. Furthermore, this research focused on 5 star hotels. Future researchers may wish to consider focusing on other types of hotels for research and analysis.

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