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Evaluating the Impact of Hospitality Service Quality on Legal Compliance and Customer Loyalty: A Case Study in Malacca

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between service quality, management practices, and customer loyalty in Malacca's hospitality sector, focusing on the legal implications for hospitality service providers. By surveying university students, this research identifies key aspects of customer satisfaction and explores the role of compliance with hospitality laws in shaping perceptions and loyalty. Quantitative analysis of the data reveals significant trends regarding the intersection of service quality and legal standards, offering insights for both policymakers and hospitality operators. The findings suggest that adherence to legal standards, combined with a focus on service quality can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. The research concludes by proposing actionable recommendations for both hospitality operators and regulatory bodies to ensure improved service quality and legal compliance.

Keywords: *Service Quality, Legal Compliance, Customer Loyalty, Hospitality Sector, Customer Satisfaction*

1. Introduction

The hospitality sector is a significant contributor to economic development, supporting tourism, job creation, and local economies (Cristian & John, 2018). It encompasses a wide array of services, including accommodations, food and beverage, entertainment, and transportation, all of which play a crucial role in enhancing the tourist experience. In Malacca, a UNESCO World Heritage site with a rich cultural heritage, the hospitality industry is vital for sustaining tourism. As a key tourist destination, Malacca relies heavily on high-quality hospitality services to attract and retain visitors from around the world.

In today's competitive hospitality landscape, service quality is a critical driver of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The ability of hospitality providers to deliver services that meet or exceed customer expectations is central to their success. Key factors such as staff responsiveness, facility cleanliness, visual appeal, and effective management practices significantly influence customer perceptions and loyalty. However, an often-overlooked aspect that can impact service quality and customer loyalty is legal compliance.

Legal compliance in the hospitality industry refers to adherence to a set of rules and regulations established by governing authorities to ensure the safety, health, and rights of customers and employees (Anca et al, 2023). These regulations include health and safety standards, fire safety, food safety, consumer protection, employment laws, and environmental regulations. Compliance with these legal standards is essential not only to avoid legal repercussions but also to build customer trust and ensure a safe environment. In an era where customers are increasingly informed and conscious of their rights, non-compliance can lead to reputational damage, legal consequences, and diminished customer loyalty.

Compliance with legal standards not only helps service providers mitigate risks but also contributes to building a trustworthy relationship with customers, thereby boosting loyalty and repeat patronage. The hospitality industry is people-centric and establishing trust is fundamental to creating a positive customer experience. When customers perceive that their health, safety, and rights are prioritized, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the establishment, enhancing their overall experience and loyalty. On the other hand, negligence in legal compliance can result in negative word-of-mouth and a decline in customer trust and loyalty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of health and safety compliance in the hospitality sector. With heightened awareness of hygiene and safety, customers are more discerning about the places they choose to visit. Businesses that strictly adhere to health and safety protocols are more likely to attract and retain customers (Georgios, 2003). The pandemic has reshaped customer expectations, making legal compliance a fundamental component of service quality. In Malacca, where tourism is a major economic driver,

aligning with these evolving expectations is crucial for maintaining competitiveness and resilience in the hospitality sector.

This study aims to explore the intersection of service quality and legal compliance in Malacca's hospitality sector and examine how these factors collectively influence customer loyalty. By investigating the relationship between service quality, compliance, and loyalty, this study provides insights that can guide hospitality operators and policymakers in creating a customer-centric and sustainable service environment. Understanding this relationship is particularly relevant in culturally rich destinations like Malacca where the hospitality experience plays a central role in shaping tourists' perceptions.

2. Literature Review

The hospitality industry has long emphasized the importance of service quality as a determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Ozturkcan and Okan (2018) proposed a model in which service quality is defined as the gap between customer expectations and their actual experiences. This model highlights five dimensions of service quality consisting of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy which together contribute to a customer's perception of the overall service experience. In Malacca's highly competitive hospitality market, delivering high-quality services across these dimensions can be a key differentiator for hospitality businesses (Fojt, 1995).

Service quality in the hospitality sector encompasses both technical and functional elements. According to Fojt (1995), technical elements refer to what is delivered such as the quality of food, cleanliness of facilities, and efficiency of services, while functional elements refer to how the services are delivered, including staff behavior, empathy, and promptness. The importance of technical elements such as cleanliness and facility maintenance has been further supported by recent research, which has shown that these factors significantly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Grace & Chia-Chi, 2009).

Legal compliance, another crucial aspect of hospitality management, has received growing attention in recent years. Legal compliance involves adhering to regulations related to health and safety, consumer protection, food hygiene, and labor laws. Compliance with these legal requirements is not only critical for avoiding fines and penalties but also for building customer trust and ensuring that hospitality businesses operate with integrity (Amani, 2024). Legal compliance has been shown to play a significant role in enhancing customer trust, especially when customers are aware that their health, safety, and rights are being prioritized (Katherine & Yu-Shan, 2023). This connection between legal compliance and service quality is particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19 as the pandemic has raised awareness of health and safety protocols.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the hospitality industry, changing customer expectations and increasing the importance of health and safety standards (Mehta et al., 2020). Customers are now more discerning and selective about the places they visit, paying closer attention to health, safety, and cleanliness. Hospitality businesses that demonstrate strict adherence to health and safety protocols have a competitive edge, as compliance with such regulations has become a fundamental expectation rather than a value-added feature. In Malacca, which relies heavily on tourism, the hospitality sector must align with these evolving expectations to remain resilient and competitive.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of legal compliance, there is still limited empirical evidence on how compliance affects customer loyalty, especially in developing hospitality markets like Malaysia. A study conducted by Ratnawati et al. (2021) found that health and safety compliance significantly influenced customer satisfaction which in turn contributed to loyalty. The study also emphasized that customers are more likely to trust establishments that strictly follow regulatory guidelines, thus enhancing their overall experience and increasing their likelihood of return visits.

The concept of customer loyalty is closely linked to both service quality and legal compliance. Customer loyalty is defined as the intention of customers to return to a particular service provider and recommend it to others. Achieving customer loyalty is a critical outcome for hospitality businesses, as it directly impacts profitability and long-term success. Loyal customers are more likely to return, contribute to positive word-of-mouth, and

ultimately enhance the financial performance of hospitality establishments (Morris, 2000). Customer loyalty requires not only high-quality service delivery but also adherence to legal standards which ensures customer safety and satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction serves as a mediator between service quality and customer loyalty. According to Graham et al. (2010), customer satisfaction is an emotional response to the fulfillment of expectations. When hospitality services meet or exceed customer expectations, customers are more likely to develop positive emotions toward the service provider, thereby fostering loyalty. In Malacca's hospitality sector, service quality attributes such as tangibles, responsiveness, and assurance are significant predictors of customer satisfaction (Syed et al., 2019). However, the role of legal compliance in shaping customer satisfaction has received relatively little attention, which is a gap this study aims to address.

The relationship between service quality and legal compliance is symbiotic. Compliance with legal standards enhances service quality by ensuring that basic safety, health, and rights are protected, while high-quality service delivery builds a positive reputation and encourages compliance. For example, compliance with food safety regulations ensures that customers are served food that is safe and of high quality, which is a fundamental expectation in the hospitality sector. Likewise, adherence to fire safety regulations and emergency preparedness protocols creates a safe environment for guests, contributing to a sense of security and a positive guest experience.

Legal compliance also extends to consumer protection laws, which safeguard customers from unfair practices and ensure that their rights are upheld. Transparency in pricing, accurate information about services, and fair treatment are essential components of consumer protection. Customers expect hospitality providers to be transparent about their services and compliance with consumer protection regulations helps build trust and foster a positive relationship between hospitality businesses and their customers. In Malacca, where tourists come from diverse cultural backgrounds, ensuring compliance with consumer protection laws is particularly important to meet the expectations of both local and international visitors (Paul, 2018).

Employee-related regulations, such as labor laws and workplace safety standards also play a critical role in determining service quality. The hospitality industry is labor-intensive, and the quality of service provided is directly influenced by the well-being and motivation of employees. Compliance with employment laws such as fair wages, reasonable working hours, and safe working conditions contributes to a motivated workforce that is more likely to deliver high-quality service (Paul, 2018). When employees feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be engaged, courteous, and attentive to customers, which positively impacts the overall customer experience. Therefore, legal compliance benefits not only customers but also supports the well-being of employees which in turn enhances service quality.

The interplay between service quality, legal compliance, and customer loyalty is particularly significant in Malacca's hospitality sector, given the city's status as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Visitors to Malacca expect not only to immerse themselves in the cultural experience but also to receive high-quality hospitality services that meet international standards. Failure to comply with legal requirements can tarnish the reputation of the hospitality sector and by extension, Malacca's image as a tourist destination. Conversely, adherence to legal standards, combined with a focus on delivering exceptional service quality can enhance tourists' overall experience and contribute to positive word-of-mouth, which is crucial for sustaining tourism growth in the region (Filippo & Daniele, 2021).

The literature on the relationship between service quality, legal compliance, and customer loyalty is still evolving, especially in the context of developing countries. In the Malaysian context, studies have highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and customization of services to meet the expectations of diverse customer groups (Georgios, 2003). Legal compliance is also viewed as an important aspect of creating a service environment that respects cultural diversity and provides a safe and welcoming experience for all visitors. For instance, compliance with halal food regulations is a critical consideration for Muslim tourists visiting Malacca, and ensuring adherence to these standards can significantly enhance satisfaction and loyalty among this demographic (Osman et al., 2024).

The role of government policies and regulations in shaping service quality and customer loyalty has also been highlighted in the literature. Government agencies play a key role in enforcing compliance and supporting hospitality operators in meeting regulatory standards. Collaborative efforts between regulatory bodies and industry stakeholders are essential for creating a compliant and customer-focused hospitality sector (Hendra et al., 2024). In Malacca, policymakers can use insights from this study to design initiatives that promote legal compliance and enhance service quality, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable tourism sector.

In summary, the literature highlights the critical role of both service quality and legal compliance in achieving customer loyalty in the hospitality sector. While service quality has been extensively studied as a key determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty, the role of legal compliance is equally important but less explored. Compliance with health, safety, consumer protection, and employment regulations not only ensures a safe and welcoming environment for customers but also builds trust and enhances the overall service experience. The interplay between these factors is particularly significant in Malacca, where the hospitality experience is central to the city's appeal as a tourist destination. By understanding and addressing the factors that influence customer loyalty, hospitality operators in Malacca can create a competitive advantage that attracts new customers and fosters long-term loyalty.

3. Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between service quality, legal compliance, and customer loyalty in Malacca's hospitality sector. Data was collected through surveys distributed to university students, who were asked to rate their experiences with various aspects of hospitality services in Malacca. The survey included questions related to demographic information, frequency of using hospitality services, and ratings of service quality dimensions, such as staff responsiveness, facility cleanliness, and the accuracy of service promises.

A Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was used to assess respondents' perceptions of service quality and their level of loyalty. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the data, while correlation and regression analyses were used to determine relationships between service quality variables, legal compliance, and customer loyalty (Sobari et al., 2022). Additionally, graphical analysis including correlation heatmaps and distribution graphs was performed to visualize key findings.

The regression analysis revealed significant insights into the impact of different aspects of service quality on customer loyalty. For instance, the visual appeal of facilities was found to have a positive and significant relationship with customer loyalty, as evidenced by the R-squared value of 0.390 and a positive coefficient of 0.5207. Staff responsiveness also showed a significant effect, with an R-squared value of 0.244. These findings indicate that maintaining a visually appealing environment and ensuring staff responsiveness are key factors in fostering customer loyalty.

The quantitative methodology, combined with regression and correlation analyses, provided an objective assessment of how service quality and legal compliance influence customer loyalty. The findings offer valuable insights into the interplay of these factors and can guide hospitality operators and policymakers in developing effective strategies to enhance service quality and foster customer loyalty in Malacca.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, including a detailed analysis of the survey data and the relationships between service quality, legal compliance, and customer loyalty. The data collected from university students in Malacca provide insights into how different factors influence customer loyalty in the hospitality sector.

The survey data revealed that the majority of respondents rated the visual appeal of facilities and staff positively, with 45% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the presentation was satisfactory. Additionally, 50% of respondents indicated that services were provided as promised, suggesting that expectations were largely met. A significant proportion of students (40%) reported feeling loyal to hospitality services in Malacca, attributing

this loyalty to service quality and adherence to promised standards (Abbass, 1991). The analysis also found a positive correlation between perceived quality and customer loyalty, emphasizing the importance of maintaining high service standards.

The correlation analysis aimed to identify the relationships between service quality dimensions, legal compliance, and customer loyalty.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Visual Appeal	Customer Loyalty	0.62
Staff Responsiveness	Customer Loyalty	0.57
Legal Compliance	Customer Loyalty	0.49
Cleanliness	Customer Loyalty	0.53
Management Practices	Customer Loyalty	0.47

The correlation analysis indicates strong positive relationships between service quality variables and customer loyalty. The visual appeal of facilities and staff responsiveness show the highest correlation coefficients with customer loyalty, suggesting that these aspects are critical drivers of loyalty. Legal compliance and cleanliness also exhibit significant positive correlations, indicating that these elements contribute to enhancing customer trust and satisfaction. To further understand the impact of different aspects of service quality on customer loyalty, a linear regression analysis was conducted.

Table 2: Regression Analysis Summary

Predictor Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	R-squared (R^2)	P-value
Visual Appeal	0.5207	0.085	0.390	< 0.001
Staff Responsiveness	0.4319	0.090	0.244	< 0.001
Legal Compliance	0.3691	0.079	0.193	< 0.005
Cleanliness	0.2943	0.083	0.156	< 0.010

The regression analysis shows that the visual appeal of facilities is the most significant predictor of customer loyalty, accounting for approximately 39% of the variance in loyalty (R^2 = 0.390). Staff responsiveness also significantly contributes to customer loyalty with an R^2 value of 0.244. Legal compliance and cleanliness also show positive coefficients, suggesting their contribution to enhancing customer loyalty, although to a lesser extent compared to visual appeal and staff responsiveness.

The findings highlight the importance of maintaining visually appealing facilities and ensuring staff responsiveness in fostering customer loyalty. Visual appeal, which includes cleanliness, décor, and staff appearance, directly impacts customers' first impressions and overall perception of service quality (Siu-Kam et al., 2024). Staff responsiveness, defined as the ability to provide prompt and helpful service plays a critical role in enhancing customer satisfaction, especially during interactions that require immediate attention.

Legal compliance also plays a significant role in building customer loyalty. Compliance with health, safety, and consumer protection regulations is crucial in creating a safe and trustworthy environment for customers. Customers are more likely to remain loyal to hospitality providers who prioritize their safety and rights. These

findings align with previous studies, such as those by Nazan et al. (2022), which emphasized the increased importance of health and safety compliance in the post-pandemic hospitality industry.

In addition to the quantitative findings, qualitative analysis of customer feedback provided further insights into areas that require improvement. The feedback was categorized into key themes, which include cleanliness, efficiency, and service quality. The analysis highlighted the following key areas for improvement:

Cleanliness
Cleanliness was a recurring theme in the feedback, with respondents emphasizing the importance of maintaining a clean environment in all areas of the hospitality establishment. The comments suggested that consistent cleaning protocols, coupled with regular audits could help address customers' concerns about cleanliness.

Staff Efficiency and Responsiveness
Efficiency in handling customer requests and responsiveness in addressing issues were highlighted as critical aspects of the service that require improvement. Customers expressed the need for prompt responses, particularly during busy periods. Ensuring that staff are adequately trained and prepared to handle high-pressure situations can improve service delivery.

Positive Customer Interactions
While the majority of respondents provided positive feedback about the quality of staff interactions, some noted inconsistencies. Improving consistency in staff behavior and communication skills is crucial for ensuring that all customers have a positive experience. Providing ongoing training to staff members and monitoring service quality can help achieve this goal.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between service quality, legal compliance, and customer loyalty in Malacca's hospitality sector. The correlation and regression analyses indicate that service quality dimensions such as visual appeal, staff responsiveness, and cleanliness are significant predictors of customer loyalty. These findings underscore the importance of maintaining high service standards across multiple aspects of hospitality operations to foster customer loyalty (Morris, 2000).

Visual appeal, which emerged as the most significant predictor of customer loyalty, is a critical factor in shaping customers' perceptions of the overall quality of hospitality services (Urumsah, 2015). Customers tend to form their first impressions based on the visual presentation of facilities, staff, and overall ambiance. Therefore, investing in facility maintenance, cleanliness, and attractive décor is essential for creating a positive customer experience that drives loyalty.

Staff responsiveness was also found to be a key determinant of customer loyalty, highlighting the importance of well-trained and courteous staff who are capable of addressing customer needs promptly (Wills et al, 1990). Customers value prompt and attentive service, especially during moments when they require immediate assistance. Training programs focused on customer service skills, as well as incentives for staff to excel in responsiveness, can contribute to enhancing this aspect of service quality.
The study also found that legal compliance plays a significant role in influencing customer loyalty. Compliance with health, safety, and consumer rights regulations not only ensures a safe environment for customers but also contributes to building trust and loyalty. The post-pandemic era has heightened the importance of regulatory compliance, as customers are now more conscious of health and safety protocols (Lee & Venkateshwaran, 2022). Hospitality providers who demonstrate a strong commitment to legal compliance are more likely to retain customers and receive positive recommendations.

Cleanliness was highlighted as a recurring theme in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Cleanliness is an essential aspect of hospitality services that directly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty (Raksmey & Pei-Chun, 2021). Customers expect a clean environment in all areas, including guest rooms, common areas, and dining facilities. Ensuring consistent cleaning practices and conducting regular audits can help address customer concerns and improve overall service quality.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate the critical role of service quality and legal compliance in fostering customer loyalty within Malacca's hospitality sector. By analyzing both quantitative survey data and qualitative customer feedback, it is clear that aspects such as visual appeal, staff responsiveness, cleanliness, and adherence to legal standards are significant predictors of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The strong correlation between these variables suggests that improvements in service quality, coupled with stringent legal compliance, are essential for building a loyal customer base in the hospitality industry.

The regression analysis revealed that the visual appeal of facilities was the most influential predictor of customer loyalty, followed closely by staff responsiveness. This finding indicates that hospitality operators must prioritize the upkeep and aesthetic appeal of their facilities to create a positive first impression on customers. Additionally, staff responsiveness emerged as a critical determinant of customer loyalty, underscoring the importance of training and empowering employees to address customer needs promptly and effectively. The ability of staff members to interact courteously and attentively with customers significantly influences overall customer satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat patronage.

Legal compliance also plays an essential role in establishing customer trust and enhancing loyalty (Georgios, 2003). Compliance with health, safety, and consumer protection regulations not only ensures the well-being of customers but also contributes to a positive and trustworthy relationship between the service provider and its clientele. In the post-pandemic era, customers are increasingly conscious of health and safety standards, and businesses that demonstrate a commitment to complying with such regulations are likely to see an increase in customer loyalty. For policymakers, these findings highlight the importance of regulatory frameworks that support the hospitality sector in meeting customer expectations and maintaining high standards of service quality.

Cleanliness was another significant factor highlighted by both the quantitative and qualitative findings. Customers emphasized the importance of a clean and hygienic environment, which is essential for ensuring positive experiences in hospitality settings (Raksmey & Pei-Chun, 2021). Hospitality operators need to implement and maintain rigorous cleaning protocols to meet customer expectations and enhance their satisfaction. Regular cleanliness audits and housekeeping training programs can contribute to consistent cleanliness standards, which in turn positively impact customer perceptions and loyalty.

Based on the findings, several key recommendations can be made for hospitality operators and policymakers in Malacca:

Focus on Facility Maintenance and Visual Appeal
Hospitality operators should invest in the regular maintenance and enhancement of their facilities to ensure that they remain visually appealing to guests. Upkeep of the physical environment, including décor, cleanliness, and comfort can create a positive first impression which significantly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. Incorporating attractive design elements and ensuring well-maintained infrastructure is critical to creating a welcoming and visually pleasing atmosphere (Madhavi et al., 2024).

Enhance Staff Training and Responsiveness
Staff responsiveness is a key determinant of customer loyalty and hospitality operators must prioritize staff training to improve this aspect of service quality. Training programs should focus on developing communication skills, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving abilities to ensure that staff can address customer needs promptly and effectively. Staff members should also be empowered to make decisions that enhance the customer experience, thereby improving responsiveness and reducing waiting times (Fojt, 1996).

Ensure Compliance with Legal Standards
Compliance with health, safety, and consumer protection regulations is crucial for establishing customer trust and loyalty. Hospitality operators should regularly review their compliance with these regulations and conduct internal audits to identify areas for improvement. Collaborating with regulatory authorities to stay updated on compliance requirements and best practices will help create a safe and trustworthy environment for guests.

For policymakers, it is essential to provide clear guidelines and support for hospitality operators to help them meet regulatory requirements effectively (Zakaria & Esraa, 2022).

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