The Influence of Service Quality and Employee Quality on Customer's Loyalty towards Hotels in Perlis during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian hotels have suffered significant revenue losses because of the COVID-19 outbreak. As numerous different courses of action were pursued, including firing staff, closing hotels temporarily or permanently, and—in the worst case—filing for bankruptcy, many businesses were discovered to need to restructure their operations. By meeting customers' expectations, requirements, and wants, hotel owners can lessen the impact of the problem by altering their approach to client retention. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of personnel and service quality on patron loyalty to Perlis hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising quantitative techniques, a descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out. Google Forms was utilised by researchers to create and distribute electronic survey questionnaires. Researchers distributed their surveys through internet channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram using electronic survey questionnaires created using Google Forms. Out of the 111 surveys that were issued, a total of 107 replies were gathered, representing 69.15% of respondents. The research's outcomes and conclusions were discussed, and they are crucial for a hotel's sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the largest sectors of the global economy is the hospitality sector, which involves interactions between hosts and visitors. In essence, the hospitality sector offers housing to travellers who require daytime security. In comparison to hotels, resorts, inns, hostels, and other accommodations, the hospitality sector offers more choices to its customers worldwide. Over the past few years, the hospitality business in Malaysia has expanded in step with the expansion of the industry worldwide. As a result, the hotel sector has grown to be a significant economic pillar in the nation. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a condition brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Everyone is experiencing this for the first time because of how quickly the pandemic is spreading across the globe. Infections of the respiratory system can be brought on by the illness and COVID-19. It may also have an impact on a person's airways. According to Pathak (2020), who was referenced by Aqeela et al. (2020), it can affect the respiratory tract, including the sinuses, nose, throat, or lower respiratory tract, throat, and lungs.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that the COVID-19 epidemic has been classified as a global health emergency, raising concerns across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched 213 countries, according to WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, with 1,524,162 positive cases and 92,941 fatalities. This virus has the potential to quickly and widely spread over the planet, making it incredibly deadly. It spreads by person-to-person contact causing illnesses that can range from mild to fatal, just like other coronaviruses do. As of April 11, 2020, Malaysia was among the top 10 Asian nations with the largest proportion of COVID-19 cases, according to data from Worldometer (Aqeela et al., 2020). On 18 March 2020 Pandemic of COVID-19 affects Malaysia. In COVIDNOW 2022, the Ministry of Health of Malaysia (MOH) cites the most recent figures of 4,664,213 cases in 2022 that were confirmed to be positive for COVID-19 and 35,969 confirmed deaths in July of that year. Hotels in Malaysia that are centred on Perlis have experienced significant revenue losses as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak that occurred in Malaysia. In order to avoid insolvency, organisations have undergone restructuring such as firing staff and closing hotels temporarily or permanently (Chin, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Mahalingan, 2020a, 2020b as quoted in (Awan et al., 2020). A total of 170,084 hotel reservations were cancelled between 11 January and 16 March 2020, resulting in an RM68,190,364 loss in income. The loss was specifically caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, as stated in (Foo et al., 2021).

The hotel in Perlis needs to put in place measures like monitoring each person's body temperature as they enter the building, both personnel and customers are required to wear masks, hand sanitizer is provided, and there should be a one-meter social buffer between guests. The impact of this new SOP on customer loyalty to Perlis hotels will be on customer satisfaction. Instead of allowing guests to congregate in the lobby, some modern hotel practises employ social distancing (Maheen Iqbal Awan and Amjad Shamim, 2020). Since the hotel is using this new SOP, it won't have an impact on the level of service because the hotel is unable to meet the guest's expectations. Since the hotel must adhere to the SOP, the majority of activities there are restricted as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because they receive different services during the years pandemic than before the pandemic, this will have a small negative impact on the visitors' happiness with the hotel. The majority of hotels strive for client loyalty by providing exemplary service and exceeding expectations. As a result, the hotel in Perlis must be aware of its clients' expectations and work to satisfy them (Han and Hyun, 2017). The hotel sector needs to address issues and can enhance service performance from the perspective of the consumer, according to Wu and Ko (2013) as mentioned in Yu-Cheng Lee, Yu-Che Wang, Chih-Hung Chien, Chia-Huei Wu, Shu-Chiung Lu, Sang-Bing Tsai, and

Weiwei Dong. A Perlis hotel's capacity to set itself apart from its rivals and win repeat business depends on the quality of its service. In Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study tries to investigate the impact of service quality on patron loyalty to hotels. The COVID-19 circumstance necessitates that the hotel in Perlis raise the standards of its services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty, as defined by Bowen and Shoemaker 1998, as referenced by Salama Alketbi et al. (2020), increases the likelihood that a customer will stay at the hotel again. A devoted customer could feel an emotional connection to the hotel even during COVID-19. According to Baran, Galka, and Strunk (2008), customer loyalty refers to a consumer's attraction to a brand, infrastructure, service quality, or other entity based on favourable attitudes and behaviour like recurrent purchases. In order to maintain business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer loyalty is crucial for the hotel sector. The hotel industry can profit from customer loyalty. Regular customers won't be concerned about prices. Reduce marketing costs to draw in more clients and boost an organization's profitability (Zakaria et al., 2014, citing Rowley, 2005). Additionally, devoted consumers help hotels market themselves effectively by spreading word of mouth and making suggestions. Due to the intense competition, it has become crucial for service providers to ensure customer loyalty and build lasting relationships with their current clients (Meniawy, 2000 as quoted in Zakaria et al., 2014). According to (Hallowell, 1996), referenced in (Satti et al., 2020), service providers may benefit economically by keeping their current clients by boosting earnings, decreasing customer acquisition expenses, and decreasing customer price sensitivity. According to Reichheld and Sasser (1990, referenced in Zakaria et al. (2014)), retention has been suggested as an easier and more dependable source of higher performance and long-term profitability.

2.2 Service Quality

In this fiercely competitive environment, maintaining client confidence and gaining a durable competitive advantage depend on service quality. Additionally, it offers a great chance for the hospitality sector to develop competitive difference inside an organisation. Hotels that are successful in offering superior customer service as well as quality service are thought to have a long life. Service quality has a number of advantages, including enhancing customer pleasure, enhancing brand perception, fostering customer loyalty, and giving businesses a competitive edge. The performance of service quality might also differ; for instance, staff may have a higher perception of service quality than clients. Customer loyalty is greatly influenced by five key aspects of service quality, including tangibility, dependability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Customer loyalty to a hotel is influenced by the quality of the service. Another approach to set hotels apart from rivals is the calibre of the services they offer. Dekimpe et al. (1997), as referenced in Jr et al. (2007), claim that all research indicates that customer loyalty may be categorised as a habit, with the buying behaviour of customers observed for a specific period of time being one way to determine customer loyalty. Caruana (2002), referenced in Wigfield et al. (2013), asserted that behaviour is a complete statement of devotion to service excellence. The degree to which a service may satisfy a customer's wants and expectations is known as service quality, and it is conceptualized as the customer's total sense of the strength or excellence of a service. Service quality can be defined as the difference between what is provided and what is anticipated. This study examines the relationship between customer

loyalty and service quality in the hotel business before, during, and after the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The relationship between service quality and customer loyalty has been proven to occur in most of the literature (Sudigdo et al., 2019; Tariq et al., 2017) as cited in (Myo et al., 2019). There are also previous articles evaluating these two variables have a direct and indirect relationship (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000) as cited in (Ganesh et al., 2000), when quality the service is satisfactory, customers are willing to recommend the brand and buy more. Improving service quality is likely to increase loyalty attesting to this strong relationship by other academics without good quality consistency, the process may not reach the end destination of the market, customer loyalty. If the quality of hotel services is inconsistent or lower than the standard, customers may become dissatisfied sooner or later and will no longer buy again and huge losses for hotel sales (Khalifa, 2015; Sudigdo et al., 2019) as cited in (Myo et al., 2019) as the hotel industry continues grow. To maintain customer loyalty is very difficult and challenging as alternative hotel services are always emerging let alone in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when customers are satisfied with the hotel's services provide, they are more likely to be loyal and stay with the hotel.

2.3 Employee Quality

Employee quality is a behaviour displayed by employees' attitudes that benefits the company and is recognised. The hotel's ability to draw guests and maintain a high level of employee quality is also impacted. It is crucial for the hotel to have these high-caliber personnel if it is to continue to prosper. Along with focusing on client loyalty or customer happiness, quality relationships are a crucial component that distinguishes a company. Customers-facing employees are seen as a crucial component. Employees serve as the front page in this situation because services cannot be provided without their involvement (Zeithamlet et al., 1985), as referenced in Parasuraman et al. (1985). Due of the quality of the workforce, customers will remain loyal and visit again even during COVID-19 pandemic.

Employee quality is a behaviour shown by employees' attitude that has a positive impact on the organization and earns praise. Employee quality also affects the hotel to attract customers to stay in the hotel. Having these quality employees is very important for the hotel to continue to thrive. Quality relationships are a key element that differentiates a business as well as emphasizing customer satisfaction or loyalty. Employees who interact with customers are considered an important element. In this context, employees act as the front page when dealing with customers, as services cannot be delivered without their participation (Zeithamlet al., 1985) as cited in (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Due to the quality of employees can attract customer loyalty will return to again even though during COVID-19 pandemic.

The hospitality industry's intense competitiveness is reflected in declining profit margins and mounting demand to provide more and better services. Customers may easily get along with quality staff because they are friendly, informed when asked by them, and honest in their work. This article argues that studying visitors' views, attitudes, and cognitive structure is the only way to comprehend their loyalty. Therefore, loyalty can be first demonstrated cognitively, then emotionally, then behaviorally, and finally in a behavioural sense. With the goal of assisting hotel industry managers in implementing the ideas of loyalty and guest pleasure in hotel strategy, the study looked at the function of customer satisfaction and image.
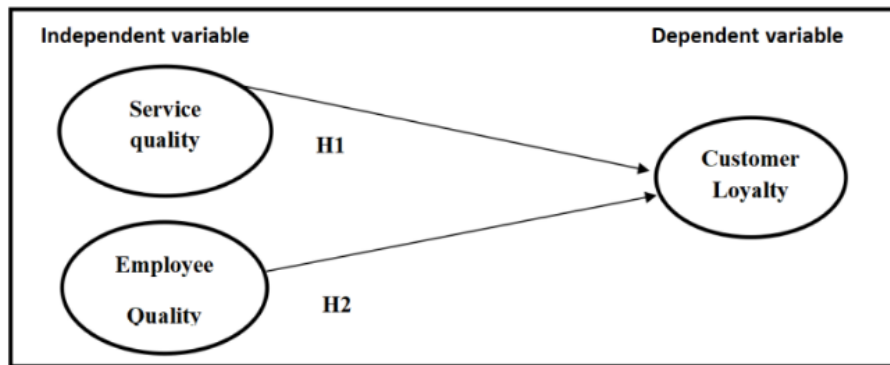
Figure 1: The theoretical model of the study

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

For this research, quantitative techniques were used, and a descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out based on the study's goal of analysing how customer loyalty and service quality impacted hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, statistical data were collected from a number of respondents. The COVID-19 pandemic condition necessitated the adoption of electronic survey tools like Google Forms by researchers. Researchers also used websites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram to distribute the surveys. The specifics of the research strategy and method(s) used by the author(s) to collect pertinent data should be reported and justified in full.

3.2 Sample and Population

This study uses probability sampling which means that everyone that is inside the population has the possibility to be selected. The type of sampling in this study is random sampling which means only customers who have experience staying in hotels in Perlis during COVID-19 pandemic. Total number of 12 hotels in Perlis with the star rating of 4 stars are selected for the sampling, as stated by the Ministry of Tourism, Perlis. The total sample size respondents were 74, which has been calculated using the software G*Power (Version 3.1.9.7). All the sample size had answered the screening question for validity that they have experienced.

3.3 Research Instrument

It has been stated that a questionnaire is the design of a set of written questions to obtain respondents. Use briefly defined alternatives to document their answers. The purpose is to evaluate the framework, goals, and coverage of research questions for the area of concern. Electronic questionnaires been created using Google Forms. There are 4 sections in this questionnaire. Section A question about demographic profile of the respondents. Question B about service quality using 6 items. Section C about employee quality using 6 items and Section D the dependent variable about customer loyalty was measured using 3 items. All questions have been measured using a 6 Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree". There are 5 questions asked related to the demographic profile, including gender, age, occupational sector, marital status, and have you visited hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected by distributing electronic survey via social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram with using google form to reach targeted respondents. Online survey distribution is thought to be feasible during a pandemic with social isolation orders and limitations. The total of data collected consist of 107 samples.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher performed data analysis by using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 to obtain data. Descriptive analysis such as mean, percentage, frequency, and standard deviation are also used in this study. The relationship variables between service quality, employee quality, and customer loyalty were analysed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and it was used to measure the correlation between the variables. After that, the researchers used regression analysis to conduct and determine the variables that most influence customer loyalty in hotels in Perlis during COVID-19 pandemic.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographics of the Respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile (n=107)

Items		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	45	42.1
	Female	62	57.9
Age	21-30 Years	45	42.1
	31-40 Years	46	43.0
	41-50 Years	12	11.2
	51-Above	4	3.7
Occupational sector	Government sector	31	29.0
	Private sector	43	40.2
	Self-employment	14	13.1
	Student	19	17.8
Marital Status	Single	52	48.6
	Married	55	51.4
Have visited in hotels Perlis	Yes	107	100

A total of 107 respondents were randomly selected consisting of customer's who had experience visited hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 45(42.1%) respondents were male while the remaining 62 people (57.9%) were female. Overall, the largest number of respondents by gender are female compared to male. This is because women are the most numerous genders among the respondents. The number of respondents based on age group among who had visited staying hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total 107 (100.0%) of respondents it shows majority of respondent are aged 21-30 years old which consist of 45 (42.1%) respondents, followed by aged 31-40 years old which 46 (43.0%) aged of 41-50 (11.2%) 12 respondents. The remaining 4 respondents (3.7%) aged 51 and above. It is evident that respondents aged in the range of 31-40 years have recorded the highest number of the total number of respondents aged in the range of 21-30, 41-50 years and 51-above. This is because respondents aged 31-40 years are the most experience staying hotels in Perlis among the respondents.

Respondents comprised of various types of occupational sector. A total of 31 respondents (29.0%) were from the government sector. The remaining 43 respondent (40.2%) is from the private sector, 14 respondents (13.1%) from their self-employment and 19 respondents (17.8%) from student. It is evident that, respondents who are the private sector have recorded the highest number of respondents who are government sector, self-employment, and student. Respondents comprised of various types of marital status. A total of 52 respondents (48.6%) were from the single. The remaining 55 respondent (51.4%) is from the married. It is evident that, respondents who are married have recorded the highest number of respondents. A total of 107 (100.0%) respondents every aged have filled in this questionnaire had experience visited in hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson Correlation Analysis to show direction, strength, and bivariate relationships of variables. Relationships between variables were measured using Pearson's Correlation for hypothesis testing. The result will be determined based on a rating between -1 and 1. A high correlation will show a result between 0.5 to 1.0 or -0.5 to 1.0. There is a positive relationship between all independent variables and customer loyalty. Correlations range from 0.827 to 0.920 with 2-tailed significant at 0.01. As a result of service quality and customer loyalty, the correlation coefficient value of 0.920 shows that service quality and customer loyalty have a positive relationship. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient value of 0.920. Next, the results for employee quality and customer loyalty, the correlation coefficient value of 0.827 shows that employee quality and customer loyalty have a positive relationship. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient value of 0.827. Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson Correlation analysis.

Table 2: Pearson's correlations between variables

		Service quality	Employee quality	Customer Loyalty
Service quality (H1)	Pearson Correlation	1	.827**	.920**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	107	107	107
Employee quality (H2)	Pearson Correlation	.827**	1	.895**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	107	107	107
Customer Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.920**	.895**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	107	107	107

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: IBM SPSS Statistics version 21

4.3 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Based on research question 2, Multiple Linear Regression Analysis test has been used to identify the most influencing factors between service quality and employee quality towards customer loyalty. Figure 2, it shows a diagonal line connects each point from bottom left to top right and displaying a sufficient level of normality. Figure 3 shows a results of scatterplot analysis in dependent variable. According to multiple regression analysis, table 4 coefficient value of the model, the model R Square value is 0.903. This model explains 90.3% of the variance in customer loyalty. Table 6 regression coefficient, the p-value of <0.01 is less than

the alpha value of 0.05. Service quality (= 0.568, p = 0.05), employee quality (= 0.425, p < 0.05), were significant in predicting influenced customer loyalty. Based on the table regression coefficient the higher score is service quality in customer loyalty. That means service quality most influence on customers loyalty at hotels in Perlis during COVID-19 pandemic.
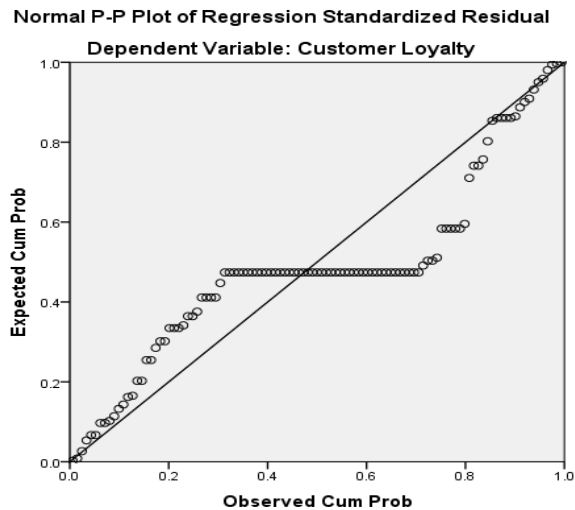

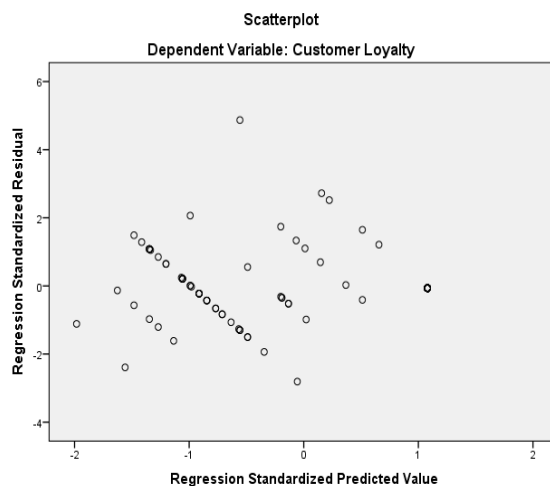Figure 2: Normal Probability Plot of Regression Standardized Residual of Dependent Variable

Figure 3: Scatterplot of Dependent Variable

Table 3: Coefficient Value of the Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.950[a]	.903	.901	.48635

a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee, Service Quality
b. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Table 4: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	227.868	2	113.934	481.682	.000[b]
	Residual	24.599	104	.237		
	Total	252.467	106			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

b. Predictors: (Constant), Employee, Service Quality

Table 5: Regression Coefficient

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.640	.459		-1.396	.166
	Service Quality	.310	.030	**.568**	10.432	**.000**
	Employee	.212	.027	.425	7.793	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Based on this study, correlation analysis and regression analysis have a positive relationship between all independent variable with customer loyalty. For the regression analysis, service quality significantly has influenced customer loyalty towards hotels in Perlis during COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from this study show that 107 respondents who have visited at hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic have practiced standard operating procedures. Hotels have improved their existing procedures to reflect the latest standard operating procedures by the government by following the new guidelines. Hotels that do not follow the guidelines will have to close their businesses for failing to comply with Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Therefore, hotels should take care of their customers regarding the COVID-19 procedures and ensure that SOPs are carried out well to their customers.

The majority of earlier studies that were discovered looking at customer loyalty and service quality characteristics were done before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and the stringent SOPs implemented by the government and hotel management have an impact on the quality of services offered by most hotels in Malaysia. The government and hotel owners may also benefit from knowing how much the study findings regarding service quality attributes affected patron loyalty. For the future research can take into related factors that including safety, value, hotel rating and other factors that can influence the relationships between service quality and customer loyalty. Additionally, the current study found that service quality is most influential predictor in predicting customer loyalty of the service quality among hotels in Perlis. During pandemic the hotel's entire operation modified to reflect the new normal. Some of the SOPs should be follow such as temperature inspection as an initial step of COVID-19 pandemic. Customers with high temperature are not allowed in and should seek medical attention immediately. Employees and guests must wear face masks before entering the hotel, the hotel also provides hand sanitizer and installs stickers for social imprisonment between guests. the preparation of this SOPs will give satisfaction to customers to avoid crowding before entering the hotel.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to determine whether service quality, employee quality, and customers' loyalty to hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will do so by pursuing the following two goals: i) determine whether service quality has a relationship with customers' loyalty to hotels in Perlis during the pandemic, and ii) determine whether this relationship exists. The study's goals were accomplished with success. The research describes 2 factors: customer loyalty as the dependent variable and service quality and employee quality as the independent variables. Customers who had stayed at hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 outbreak were asked to participate in an online survey as part of this study's quantitative research methodology. A Google form poll has been created by researchers to gather information from guests who stayed at hotels in Perlis during the COVID-19 outbreak. In this investigation, probability sampling is used. Random sampling is the method of sampling, hence only past guests of Perlis hotels were included in the study. Employees and lecturers from UiTM

Cawangan Pulau Pinang were given a pilot test at Permatang Pauh Campus. Researchers utilised IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 to analyse data for their study. Researchers wanted to determine if the COVID-19 epidemic will have an impact on how loyal customers are to Perlis hotels in terms of service quality. The significance of the study will help hotels enhance their capabilities and services to increase customer loyalty and service quality during the COVID-19 epidemic. The purpose of this study is to determine the effects that the COVID-19 epidemic had on the Perlis hotel industry. This study aids hotel managers in understanding the level of service that guests expect when they check in. Additionally, this study will contribute to the body of information in the hotel industry concerning the customer loyalty and service quality initiatives taken by the hotel. The hotel employs a variety of strategies to persuade guests to stay there again. For university students to gain a better understanding of the competencies associated to high-quality customer service and brand loyalty in the hotel sector. Additionally, it helps pupils comprehend the calibre of services supplied by hotels throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Formal analysis, NNMN and NMS; Investigation, FAH and NR; Data curation, NR; Writing review and editing, NNMN, NMS and JLW. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

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