Service Quality and Customer satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Customer Delight

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mediating role of customer delight in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction within the tourism and hospitality sector. Drawing on data collected from 400 valid questionnaires distributed to international tourists in Antalya, Turkey, the proposed model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The findings confirm that multiple dimensions of service quality significantly influence customer delight, which in turn enhances customer satisfaction. Moreover, delight mediates the relationships between employee attitudes and behaviors, waiting time, and satisfaction, highlighting its role as an emotional bridge that transforms service encounters into more impactful customer outcomes. The results reinforce the idea that delight is not merely an extension of satisfaction but a distinct construct that plays a crucial role in shaping loyalty and long-term engagement. For managers and practitioners, the study emphasizes the importance of focusing on service quality elements such as safety, sociability, responsiveness, and staff behavior to foster delight, improve satisfaction, and encourage repeat patronage. By integrating customer delight into the service quality–satisfaction framework, this research extends SERVQUAL theory and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional responses drive competitive advantage in tourism and hospitality.

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Delight, Customer Satisfaction, Marketing, Tourism and Hospitality
JEL Classifications: M1, M3

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality sector has long been recognized as a cornerstone of global economic growth, where the delivery of service quality is critical to sustaining competitive advantage. In today's dynamic environment, characterized by rapidly evolving customer expectations, service quality has emerged as a decisive factor influencing customer experiences, satisfaction, and loyalty (Subadra, 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Defined as the organization's ability to consistently meet or exceed customer expectations, service quality is no longer an optional attribute but an imperative for businesses seeking sustainable performance and long-term differentiation (Agustian et al., 2023). Within the tourism and hospitality industry, service quality holds heightened importance due to the sector's reliance on intangible offerings, where customer perceptions are shaped by experiences, interactions, and emotions rather than tangible products (Ali et al., 2021).

In this context, the concept of customer delight has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Going beyond mere satisfaction, customer delight reflects an enhanced emotional response—characterized by joy, surprise, or amazement—that arises from the provision of exceptional service experiences (Torres et al., 2021). Studies highlight that customer delight strengthens customer retention, stimulates positive word-of-mouth, and fosters deeper emotional connections with service providers (Torres et al., 2021; Nwokah et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the relevance of service quality and delight, as travelers increasingly demand personalized, safe, and trustworthy experiences that align with their evolving expectations (Anderson, 2025).

Dimensions such as tangibles, empathy, reliability, assurance, and responsiveness thus become crucial in creating not only satisfaction but also memorable and delightful encounters that contribute to sustainable customer relationships (Amerta and Madhavi, 2023).

Despite this growing recognition, significant gaps in the literature remain. While substantial research has examined the direct relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, most studies have overlooked the mediating role of customer delight (Hutagaol and Basbeth, 2021). Although the concept of delight has gained theoretical attention, empirical evidence exploring its mediating influence is still limited (Al-Gasawneh et al., 2021). Furthermore, existing studies often adopt a narrow scope, focusing on specific sub-sectors such as luxury hotels or airlines, thereby neglecting other segments of the tourism and hospitality industry and limiting the generalizability of findings (Biscaia et al., 2023; Bhowmik et al., 2024; Goswami and Sarma, 2019; Provotorina et al., 2020). Methodological limitations also persist, as many studies rely on cross-sectional data, which constrains the ability to capture the dynamic nature of service quality, delight, and satisfaction over time (Sun and Pan, 2023).

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the mediating role of customer delight in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the tourism and hospitality sector. This research contributes to theory by integrating delight into established service quality and satisfaction frameworks, offering a more nuanced understanding of customer experiences (Stange et al., 2025). From a practical perspective, it provides data-driven insights for industry stakeholders, enabling them to design strategies that enhance service quality, create exceptional experiences, and foster sustainable customer satisfaction (Amerta and Madhavi, 2023).

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:
1. How does service quality influence customer satisfaction in the tourism and hospitality sector?
2. What role does customer delight play as a mediator in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction?
3. Do specific dimensions of service quality (e.g., assurance, empathy, reliability) exert a stronger influence on customer delight and, consequently, on customer satisfaction?

By answering these questions, this study positions customer delight as a critical psychological mechanism that links service quality to satisfaction. The paper proceeds with a review of the relevant theoretical frameworks and hypotheses development, followed by the research methodology, analysis and results, and concludes with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Theoretical Underpinnings
The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) remains one of the most influential frameworks for evaluating service quality, as it examines the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. Its five dimensions—tangibles (Al Khattab and Aldehayyat, 2011), empathy (Jaber and Islam, 2012), responsiveness (Karunaratne et al., 2011), reliability (Raspor, 2010), and assurance (Minh et al., 2015)—offer a comprehensive means of assessing physical infrastructure, the accuracy and consistency of service delivery, employee courtesy, and personalized care (Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022). In tourism and hospitality, where service encounters are intangible and experiential, the SERVQUAL framework is particularly relevant, as it emphasizes dimensions that directly shape customers' emotional evaluations (Liang et al., 2021). For example, tangible aspects such as cleanliness and aesthetics, or reliability in reservation accuracy, play a vital role in how guests evaluate service quality (Rather et al., 2022). Similarly, responsiveness and assurance foster confidence and trust in service providers, while empathy ensures services are tailored to individual needs (Ünal et al., 2020).

Applying SERVQUAL in the tourism and hospitality sector provides not only a diagnostic tool to identify service gaps but also a foundation for employee training and strategic improvements. Studies confirm that businesses that prioritize these dimensions are more likely to achieve higher satisfaction and loyalty (Singh et al., 2023). Beyond the traditional SERVQUAL dimensions, hospitality research has extended the model to incorporate context-specific factors such as safety and security, which address both physical risks and customer perceptions of authenticity and trust (Pooya et al., 2020; Setiawan et al., 2020). Other elements, such as sociability—the social interactions and shared experiences that contribute to meaningful relationships—have also been highlighted as predictors of service quality and customer satisfaction (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Azis and Che Ahmat, 2022). Similarly, front desk quality, encompassing efficiency in check-in, problem-solving, and guest service, represents a crucial touchpoint shaping first impressions and overall evaluations of service quality (Hartline et al., 2003; Bharadwaja et al., 2018; Xie and Sun, 2021).

Employee-related factors further strengthen the theoretical basis for examining service quality outcomes. Employee attitudes and behaviors have been shown to significantly affect customer experiences (Wu and Ko, 2013; Kattara et al., 2008). Positive employee behaviors—such as accuracy, friendliness, and responsiveness—enhance satisfaction, while negative behaviors diminish perceived quality (Azis and Che Ahmat, 2022). Likewise, waiting time is a critical dimension: predictable and efficient waiting times improve perceptions of service quality, while delays are often perceived as frustrating and damaging to satisfaction (McDougall and Levesque, 1999; Lee and Cheng, 2018). Effective waiting time management has thus been linked to higher levels of both satisfaction and delight (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Azis and Che Ahmat, 2022).

In this study, customer delight is positioned as a key mediating construct that explains how service quality influences customer satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2010). Delight arises when service delivery exceeds expectations, evoking joy, amazement, or surprise—emotions that are more powerful than satisfaction alone (Torres et al., 2021; Hassan and Magdy, 2025). Scholars argue that

delight not only amplifies the effect of service quality on satisfaction but also strengthens both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Ahrholdt et al., 2019; Barnes and Krallman, 2019). Empirical studies consistently show that delight is strongly associated with positive outcomes such as repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth, and higher perceived value (Wardi et al., 2022). Thus, positioning delight as a mediator offers a more nuanced understanding of customer experiences in tourism and hospitality, bridging service quality and satisfaction in ways that advance both theory and practice (Anabila et al., 2022; Mouzaek et al., 2021).

2.2. Conceptual Models of Service Quality in Tourism and Hospitality

The tourism and hospitality sector is intrinsically dependent on service quality as a driver of customer experiences, satisfaction, and long-term loyalty. Among the conceptual frameworks available, the SERVQUAL model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) has been extensively applied to measure and improve service delivery. The model identifies five critical dimensions—tangibles (Al Khattab and Aldehayyat, 2011), empathy (Jaber and Islam, 2012), responsiveness (Karunaratne et al., 2011), reliability (Raspor, 2010), and assurance (Minh et al., 2015)—which collectively capture both functional and relational aspects of service encounters. For example, tangibles highlight the cleanliness, décor, and physical appearance of service environments, reliability addresses accuracy in bookings and timeliness of services, responsiveness reflects the efficiency of staff in handling requests, while assurance and empathy underscore employees' competence, trustworthiness, and ability to offer personalized care (Yuen and Thai, 2015; Zariman et al., 2022; Yeboah, 2025).

Applying SERVQUAL in the hospitality context provides organizations with a structured means of identifying service gaps and aligning offerings with customer expectations. Research demonstrates that the model not only helps improve tangible facilities but also emphasizes the training of employees in soft skills such as empathy and responsiveness, both of which are crucial for multicultural and diverse tourist markets (Naylor, 2024; Amerta and Madhavi, 2023). This adaptability reinforces SERVQUAL as a robust conceptual tool in tourism research, capable of enhancing service excellence and strengthening customer relationships.

Building on SERVQUAL, this study integrates additional dimensions relevant to the hospitality sector, including safety and security, sociability, front desk quality, employee attitudes and behaviors, and waiting time. These factors resonate with the reliability and responsiveness dimensions of SERVQUAL and are hypothesized to shape customer outcomes (Ali et al., 2021). Specifically, safety and security (H_1), sociability (H_2), front desk quality (H_3), employee attitudes and behaviors (H_4), and waiting time (H_5) are expected to positively influence customer delight. Employee attitudes and behaviors (H_6) and waiting time (H_7) are further hypothesized to impact customer satisfaction directly. In addition, customer delight is theorized to serve as a mediator between these service quality dimensions and satisfaction (H_9 and H_{10}), while also directly contributing to satisfaction (H_8). By

embedding SERVQUAL into this extended framework, the present study advances a more holistic understanding of how service quality influences both delight and satisfaction, thereby enriching customer experiences in tourism and hospitality (Tai et al., 2021).

2.3. Service Quality and Customer Delight

The SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) remains one of the most widely used frameworks for assessing service quality, as it evaluates the gap between customer expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance across five dimensions. This expectations–performance gap, conceptualized through the model of Zeithaml et al. (1996), enables organizations to diagnose service quality issues effectively. SERVQUAL is therefore considered a comprehensive and reliable instrument for measuring service quality (Naz et al., 2021). Within this framework, service quality does not only fulfill customer expectations but, when managed strategically, can exceed them, leading to customer delight.

The distinction between satisfaction and delight is essential in hospitality research. Satisfaction results when services meet expectations, whereas delight occurs when services surpass them, creating emotions such as joy, surprise, or amazement (Christ-Brendemühl and Schaarschmidt, 2020; Jiang, 2020). While surprise may heighten delight, scholars argue that consistently exceeding expectations and fostering authentic customer relationships provides a more sustainable strategy for generating delight (Barnes et al., 2011). Recent conceptualizations extend the notion of delight beyond surprise and joy to include positive emotions such as gratitude, emphasizing that organizations can create stronger bonds by delivering service experiences that feel personal, meaningful, and emotionally resonant (Finn, 2012; Ball and Barnes, 2017; Barnes and Krallman, 2019).

Several dimensions of service quality have been identified as significant contributors to delight in tourism and hospitality. Safety and security remain fundamental expectations, encompassing both physical safeguards (e.g., surveillance, lighting, trained personnel) and operational protections such as data security and hygiene protocols. These measures foster emotional reassurance and elevate customer experiences, particularly in uncertain contexts such as pandemics (Kaushik et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2024). Sociability, characterized by warm and engaging interpersonal interactions, is another relational driver of delight. Positive staff behaviors such as personalized greetings or small conversations, alongside peer-to-peer exchanges in settings like Airbnb, foster trust and create a sense of belonging (Christian, 2024; Sallaku, 2021).

Other service encounters also act as critical touchpoints. Front desk quality strongly shapes first impressions, with efficiency in check-ins, courteous interactions, and effective problem-solving being linked to heightened delight (Delcourt, 2024; Whalen et al., 2024). Similarly, the attitudes and behaviors of employees play a central role, as empathetic actions, active listening, and professionalism under pressure consistently leave lasting positive impressions on customers (Bitner et al., 1990; Eskola, 2024). Finally, waiting time—often associated with dissatisfaction—can be managed in ways that transform it into a neutral or even delightful experience.

Providing amenities or entertainment during waits, alongside transparent queue management, has been shown to mitigate frustration and elevate customer emotions (Davis and Heineke, 1994; Arveson et al., 2025).

Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1: Safety and security have a positive impact on customer delight.

H_2: Sociability has a positive impact on customer delight.

H_3: Front desk quality has a positive impact on customer delight.

H_4: Attitude and behavior of employees have a positive impact on customer delight.

H_5: Waiting time has a positive impact on customer delight.

2.4. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Understanding the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been a central focus of tourism and hospitality research, as satisfaction is a key driver of loyalty, repeat visitation, and positive word-of-mouth. Tourism scholars emphasize that customer attitudes and decision-making processes provide valuable insights into how experiences are formed and how they ultimately shape satisfaction (Suhartanto et al., 2020; Oliver, 1997). Oliver's (1997) framework identifies four phases of customer loyalty—cognitive, affective, conative, and action—where attitudinal dimensions (cognitive, affective, and conative) evolve into behavioral outcomes (action). This progression highlights the importance of service quality in influencing not only satisfaction but also long-term loyalty (Lesmana et al., 2021). Within this framework, the attitudes and behaviors of employees have been recognized as critical predictors of customer satisfaction and tourism revenue (He et al., 2011). However, limited research has investigated the interconnected role of employee interactions in shaping customer attitudes and behaviors, highlighting a gap that warrants deeper examination (Amoako et al., 2019; Agyeiwaah et al., 2022).

In the hospitality sector, responsiveness to customer needs and expectations is particularly significant in enhancing satisfaction. The SERVQUAL dimension of responsiveness emphasizes prompt and helpful service, which not only minimizes waiting times but also signals respect for customers' time and concerns (Taylor, 1994). Timely and attentive responses foster positive experiences, strengthen loyalty, and contribute to business success (Shyju et al., 2023). Similarly, tangible aspects of service, such as modern facilities and equipment, have been shown to increase satisfaction by effectively meeting customer expectations (Iqbal et al., 2023; Tee, 2022). Research demonstrates that customers in the hospitality industry report high satisfaction when physical facilities are up to date, and when employees' appearance and grooming convey professionalism and reliability (Mouzaek et al., 2021). Together, these findings underscore that both intangible factors (e.g., employee behavior and responsiveness) and tangible elements (e.g., facilities and physical presentation) contribute significantly to customer satisfaction.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_6: Attitude and behavior of employees have a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

H_7: Waiting time has a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.5. Customer Delight and Customer Satisfaction

Customer delight is increasingly recognized as a critical construct that extends beyond satisfaction by exceeding expectations and generating strong positive emotions. It is shaped by multiple factors, including emotional connection, interpersonal interactions, effective problem-solving, sensory experiences, proper timing, and offering customers a sense of control over their encounters (Parasuraman et al., 2021). In highly competitive markets, delight serves as a strategic resource, forging deeper emotional bonds between service providers and customers, thereby enhancing long-term loyalty (Dey et al., 2017). Within the tourism industry, its significance is heightened by the growing demand for ethical and sustainable practices. Companies are expected to integrate employee well-being, community support, and environmental stewardship into their service delivery, positioning delight as a mechanism that links superior service quality with broader social value (Mihalic, 2016; Luo et al., 2020; Bhat et al., 2024).

The relationship between delight and satisfaction has been well-documented, with the SERVQUAL framework suggesting that meeting customer expectations results in satisfaction, while exceeding them produces delight (Fatma and Kumar, 2024). Magnini and Crotts (2011) define delight as an emotional response that goes beyond satisfaction, creating unanticipated value and memorable experiences. This non-linear relationship means that while satisfaction stabilizes expectations, delight can amplify customer responses and lead to disproportionately positive outcomes (Eisenbeiss et al., 2014). Although some studies present mixed findings, the consensus is that delight plays a complementary role to satisfaction, with both constructs jointly fostering customer loyalty (Ahrholdt et al., 2019; Tai et al., 2021). Importantly, delight has been shown to generate stronger behavioral outcomes than satisfaction alone, including repeat patronage, advocacy, and higher tolerance for service failures.

Taken together, these insights highlight that delight is not merely an extension of satisfaction but a distinct emotional construct that strengthens customer-provider relationships and enhances satisfaction levels. By consistently creating delight, organizations in tourism and hospitality can differentiate themselves in crowded markets and achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_8: Customer delight has a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.6. Mediating Role of Customer Delight

In the competitive hospitality sector, customer satisfaction is often regarded as a minimum requirement, while customer delight has emerged as the differentiating standard that fosters stronger emotional bonds with customers. Delight not only elevates the service experience but also acts as a mediating mechanism that links service quality dimensions to satisfaction outcomes. Prior studies highlight that both satisfaction and delight are essential drivers of business growth and sustainability, reinforcing their role in achieving long-term competitive advantage (Barnes and Krallman, 2019). Hospitality providers increasingly rely on innovative service delivery across multiple touchpoints,

emphasizing employee attitudes and behaviors as well as operational efficiency. The integration of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and data analytics has further enabled firms to design personalized experiences, thereby enhancing satisfaction and differentiating services in a competitive market (Padma and Ahn, 2020; Naung, 2024). Moreover, consistent evidence shows that SERVQUAL dimensions remain central to satisfaction, as higher levels of service quality correlate directly with improved customer outcomes (Gounaris et al., 2010; Anabila et al., 2022).

Within this context, customer delight is positioned as a crucial mediator that strengthens the link between service quality and customer satisfaction. High-quality service delivery that produces memorable experiences significantly enhances both satisfaction and delight (Su et al., 2015). Empirical findings suggest that tourists' delight directly shapes their perceptions of value, destination image, and overall fulfillment, reinforcing the importance of managing delight alongside satisfaction (Prayag et al., 2013; Alsiehemy, 2023; Tosun et al., 2024). Recent research emphasizes that delight functions as an emotional construct that goes beyond basic satisfaction, positively influencing loyalty, word-of-mouth, and other customer-related outcomes (Handarkho et al., 2023; Wardi et al., 2022). As Oliver et al. (1997) and Hassan and Magdy (2025) argue, delight often generates stronger emotional experiences than satisfaction alone, intensifying customer attachment and commitment.

Specific service dimensions, such as employee interactions and waiting time, illustrate the mediating role of delight. Employee attitudes and behaviors, when characterized by empathy, professionalism, and consistency, have been shown to foster delight, which in turn strengthens satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990; Eskola, 2024). Similarly, while long waiting times traditionally diminish satisfaction, effective queue management, technological solutions such as self-service kiosks, and transparent communication can mitigate frustration and even generate delight (McDougall and Levesque, 1999; Nunkoo et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, investments in contactless technologies streamlined operations, minimized waiting times, and enhanced both safety and customer experience, further demonstrating the mediating role of delight in translating service improvements into satisfaction (Bonfanti et al., 2021; Azis and Che Ahmat, 2022).

Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_9: Customer delight mediates the relationship between employee attitudes and behaviors and customer satisfaction.

H_{10}: Customer delight mediates the relationship between waiting time and customer satisfaction.

2.7. Conceptual Model

Drawing on the SERVQUAL framework and related extensions, this study develops a comprehensive model linking service quality dimensions to customer delight and satisfaction. Five service quality attributes—safety and security, sociability, front desk quality, employee attitudes and behaviors, and waiting time—are hypothesized to positively influence customer delight (H_1-H_5), as prior studies demonstrate their critical role in fostering emotional reassurance, positive social interactions, and memorable service encounters (Kim et al., 2024; Christian, 2024; Delcourt, 2024; Bitner et al., 1990; Davis and Heineke, 1994). In addition, employee attitudes and behaviors and waiting time are expected to directly influence customer satisfaction (H_6-H_7), highlighting the importance of both interpersonal quality and operational efficiency in shaping customer evaluations (He et al., 2011; Mouzaek et al., 2021). Beyond these direct effects, customer delight is conceptualized as a distinct emotional construct that not only directly enhances satisfaction (H_8) but also serves as a mediator between service quality dimensions and satisfaction. Specifically, delight is hypothesized to mediate the relationships between employee attitudes and behaviors and satisfaction (H_9), as well as between waiting time and satisfaction (H_{10}), thus underscoring its bridging role in translating service quality into stronger customer outcomes (Barnes and Krallman, 2019; Handarkho et al., 2023). Together, these hypotheses form the basis of the proposed conceptual framework, which is illustrated in Figure 1 research model.
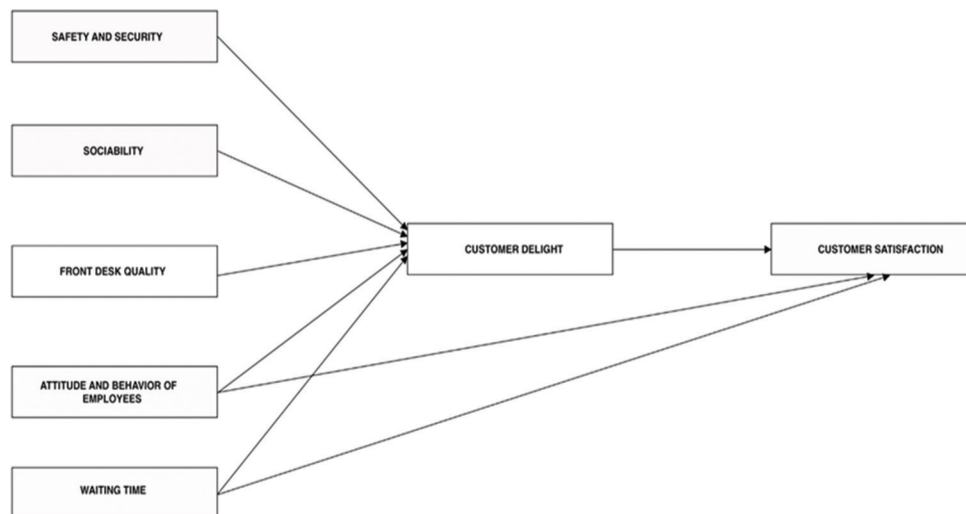
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection process for this study was conducted in Antalya, Turkiye, one of the most prominent tourist destinations in the country, known for its natural beauty, historical sites, and hospitality services (Dortyol et al., 2014). Antalya attracts a significant number of international and domestic tourists, making it an ideal location to examine service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry. Antalya hosts approximately 673 of the 3,371 accommodation facilities in Turkey, highlighting its critical role in the tourism sector (Ergun et al., 2023). Moreover, the region received around 13.5 million tourists in 2022, accounting for nearly one-third of the total tourist arrivals in Turkey (Candan and Dölarslan, 2023). This steady influx of visitors and the diversity of tourist nationalities, including Middle Eastern, German, Russian, and Ukrainian travelers, made Antalya a suitable context for this study.

To select the sample, a convenience sampling method was employed due to its practicality and cost-effectiveness when targeting large populations. Convenience sampling enables researchers to reach accessible and cooperative respondents efficiently (Samarah et al., 2021). Data collection involved both personal interviews and the drop-and-collect method, which is widely recommended for tourism studies as it facilitates the collection of data from a large sample at a relatively low cost (Alashiq and Aljuhmani, 2025; Malhotra et al., 2017). This method was particularly useful in cases where hotel businesses did not permit questionnaire administration within their premises (Dedeoglu et al., 2018). Consequently, alternative locations such as beaches and restaurants in key tourism areas, including Alanya, Kemer, and Belek, were utilized to access a broader range of tourists.

The target population comprised international tourists aged 18 and above who visited Antalya between March and September

Figure 1: Conceptual model

2024. The minimum sample size was determined based on statistical guidelines, which suggest that a sample size of at least 384 participants is sufficient for populations exceeding 100,000 (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). In total, 1,000 questionnaires were distributed, of which 426 were returned. However, 26 questionnaires were excluded due to incompleteness or straight-lining responses, in line with Hair et al.'s (2013) recommendations. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 400 valid questionnaires, yielding a net response rate of 40%. This sample size aligns with previous studies in tourism research and is deemed sufficient for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing (Al-Geitany et al., 2023; Aljuhmani et al., 2023; Atsız et al., 2024; Nasr et al., 2022; Saltik and Akova, 2024).

3.2. Measurements
The measurement of the variables in this study was based on validated scales from previous literature to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed to measure all items. The questionnaire was prepared in five languages: Turkish, English, Russian, German, and Arabic. The initial questionnaire was developed in English and subsequently translated into the target languages using the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1986). This method enhances the accuracy and cultural relevance of the translated versions (McGorry, 2000). Bilingual experts translated the questionnaire into the four languages, and independent bilingual experts blindly back-translated the questionnaire into English. During the back-translation process, synonyms were used to maintain the meaning of the original items while ensuring linguistic accuracy. A pilot test with 25 tourists fluent in one of the five languages was conducted to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. Based on the feedback received, minor edits and revisions were made to the questionnaire, and the final version was prepared.

The service quality construct included five dimensions: safety and security (SS), sociability (SO), front desk (FD), attitude and behavior of employees (AB), and waiting time (WT). These items were adapted from previous studies (Akbaba, 2006; Alrwashdeh

et al., 2020; Choi and Chu, 2001; Martínez Caro and Martínez García, 2008; Nunkoo et al., 2020; Wu and Ko, 2013). Each dimension was treated as an independent variable to evaluate its unique contribution to customer satisfaction.

The customer delight construct was measured using 10 affect-based and motivational items such as joy, thrill, exhilaration, and exuberance, adapted from Torres et al. (2020). The scale design aligns with previous research on customer delight, emphasizing esteem-fulfilling experiences (Torres and Kline, 2013; Torres and Ronzoni, 2018).

Customer satisfaction was assessed using three items adapted from Deng et al. (2013) and originally developed by Fornell et al. (1996). These items measured the overall performance of the accommodation service provider, the degree to which services met customers' expectations, and the extent to which services corresponded to customers' ideal standards.

3.3. Data Analysis and Model Specification
To analyze the data and test the hypothesized relationships, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was employed using SmartPLS 4 software (Ringle et al., 2022). The PLS-SEM method is widely recognized for its capability to estimate complex models with multiple constructs, particularly in exploratory and predictive research settings (Ali et al., 2018). This approach is suitable when the primary objective is to predict key target constructs rather than to confirm theoretical models, making it particularly relevant for the current study (Hair et al., 2019). Unlike covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM), which focuses on model fit, composite-based PLS-SEM prioritizes the optimization of endogenous constructs' prediction (Dash and Paul, 2021). The data analysis proceeded in two stages: first, the measurement model was assessed to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs, followed by the structural model to examine the hypothesized relationships (Al'Ararah et al., 2024; Hair et al., 2024). To ensure the robustness of the results, the bootstrapping resampling method with 5000 subsamples was applied to estimate the significance of the path coefficients (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1. Sample Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1, offering a comprehensive overview of the sampled population. The majority of participants were female (67.0%), while 33.0% were male, indicating a higher representation of female tourists. In terms of age distribution, the largest proportion of respondents (54.3%) were between 25 and 34 years old, followed by other age groups. The sample also revealed a high educational background, with 50.7% of participants holding an undergraduate degree, reflecting the significance of education among tourists. Furthermore, 52.3% of the respondents were single, making them the dominant marital group. These demographic characteristics provide valuable insights into the target population and contribute to the study's understanding of tourists' social composition. A detailed summary of the sample profile is depicted in Table 1, supporting the robustness of the data analysis.

4.2. Common Method Bias Test

Given that this study employed self-reported questionnaires to gather data from respondents, it was essential to assess common method bias (CMB), which can arise when both independent and dependent variables are obtained from a single source (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To minimize the likelihood of CMB, the study implemented procedural remedies by ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidentiality, thereby encouraging honest and unbiased responses (Awwad et al., 2022). Additionally,

Harman's single-factor test was applied as a statistical remedy, as recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003). The unrotated exploratory factor analysis in SPSS extracted seven factors that jointly explained 82.2% of the total variance, with the first factor accounting for 31.5% of the variance—significantly below the 50% threshold, indicating that CMB does not substantially impact the study's results. This outcome confirms the reliability of the collected data for further analysis.

4.3. Assessment of the Measurement Model

To ensure the robustness of the measurement model, a comprehensive assessment of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity was conducted following established guidelines (Hair et al., 2019). Table 2 presents the results of the outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). The outer loadings for all measurement items surpassed the recommended 0.70 threshold, demonstrating indicator reliability (Enbaia et al., 2024; Hair et al., 2024). Additionally, the CA and CR values exceeded the 0.70 cut-off point, confirming the internal consistency reliability of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally, 1978). The AVE values were above 0.50, indicating that each construct

Table 1: Sample profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	132	33.0
Female	268	67.0
Age (years)		
18-24	11	2.8
25-34	217	54.3
35-44	114	28.5
45-54	38	9.5
Above 55 years old	20	5.0
Marital status		
Single	209	52.3
Married	147	36.8
Divorced	30	7.5
Widowed	14	3.5
Level of education		
Less than high school	6	1.5
High school	46	11.5
College	82	20.5
Undergraduate degree	203	50.7
Postgraduate degree	63	15.8
Type of accommodation		
1 star hotel	15	3.8
2 stars hotel	19	4.8
3 stars hotel	73	18.3
4 stars hotel	185	46.3
5 stars hotel	98	24.5
Others	10	2.5
Was it your first visit?		
Yes	116	29.0
No	284	71.0
Total	400	100

Table 2: Measurement model assessment

Construct	Items	Outer loadings	VIF	CA	CR	AVE
Safety and security (SS)				0.867	0.909	0.715
	SS1	0.862	2.488			
	SS2	0.815	1.877			
	SS3	0.883	2.757			
	SS4	0.819	1.800			
Sociability (SO)				0.888	0.920	0.817
	SO1	0.921	2.143			
	SO2	0.910	2.004			
	SO3	0.880	2.114			
Front desk (FD)				0.893	0.923	0.815
	FD1	0.883	2.317			
	FD2	0.914	2.886			
	FD3	0.915	2.651			
Attitude and behavior of employees (AB)				0.792	0.880	0.710
	AB1	0.751	1.316			
	AB2	0.879	2.447			
	AB3	0.891	2.452			
Waiting time (WT)				0.948	0.967	0.906
	WT1	0.951	2.591			
	WT2	0.955	3.158			
	WT3	0.950	2.960			
Customer delight (CD)				0.934	0.944	0.629
	CD1	0.833	2.860			
	CD2	0.856	2.345			
	CD3	0.869	2.978			
	CD4	0.890	2.805			
	CD5	0.714	2.908			
	CD6	0.736	3.089			
	CD7	0.724	2.249			
	CD8	0.777	2.410			
	CD9	0.738	2.566			
	CD10	0.773	2.957			
Customer satisfaction (CS)				0.907	0.942	0.843
	CS1	0.905	2.724			
	CS2	0.931	2.366			
	CS3	0.919	2.986			

Variance inflation factor (VIF), Average variance extracted (AVE), Composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (CA)

captured a substantial portion of the variance in its indicators, thus confirming convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Neiroukh et al., 2025).

For discriminant validity, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) was applied, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2015) and Hair et al. (2017). The results, presented in Table 3, show that all HTMT values were below the 0.85 threshold, suggesting that the constructs were empirically distinct (Henseler et al., 2015). These findings collectively indicate that the measurement model possesses satisfactory reliability and validity, thereby supporting its suitability for the subsequent structural model evaluation.

4.4. Model Fitness and Explanatory Power

The model's fitness and explanatory power were assessed using multiple fit indices, including the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), normed fit index (NFI), and R-squared (R^2) values, to ensure the model's robustness in line with PLS-SEM recommendations (Hair et al., 2019). The SRMR, which measures the discrepancy between observed and predicted correlations, returned values of 0.059 for the saturated model and 0.057 for the estimated model, both below the threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit (Hair et al., 2024). Similarly, the NFI values of 0.818 and 0.827 exceeded the recommended cut-off of 0.80, demonstrating that the proposed model fits better than a baseline model (Slil et al., 2025). Additionally, the model's explanatory power was evaluated using the R-squared (R^2) values, which measure the proportion of variance explained in the endogenous constructs (Cohen, 1988). The results indicated that the model explained 67.4% of the variance in customer delight (CD) and 63.9% of the variance in customer satisfaction (CS), reflecting substantial predictive accuracy (Hair et al., 2019). These combined results, presented in Table 4, affirm that the model exhibits both goodness-of-fit and predictive relevance, supporting its suitability for testing the hypothesized relationships in tourism and hospitality research (Ali et al., 2018).

Table 3: Discriminant validity assessment using HTMT criterion

	AB	CD	CS	FD	SO	SS	WT
AB							
CD	0.682						
CS	0.728	0.780					
FD	0.452	0.630	0.561				
SO	0.614	0.769	0.684	0.569			
SS	0.721	0.797	0.702	0.611	0.650		
WT	0.690	0.727	0.780	0.544	0.728	0.746	

Safety and security (SS), Sociability (SO), Front desk (FD), Attitude and behavior of employees (AB), Waiting time (WT), Customer delight (CD), Customer satisfaction (CS)

Table 4: Model fitness and explanatory power indices

Model fit indices	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.059	0.057
NFI	0.818	0.827
Endogenous constructs	R-square	R-square adjusted
CD	0.674	0.670
CS	0.640	0.637

4.5. Structural Model Assessment

After confirming the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. The bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples was conducted to test the statistical significance of the path coefficients (Ali et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2024). The results of the direct path relationships are depicted in Figure 2.

The findings demonstrated that safety and security positively influenced customer delight (β = 0.299, t = 6.183, P < 0.001), and sociability also had a significant positive effect on customer delight (β = 0.307, t = 7.064, P < 0.001). Additionally, front desk quality positively impacted customer delight (β = 0.151, t = 3.385, P < 0.010), while the attitude and behavior of employees significantly influenced both customer delight (β = 0.112, t = 2.335, P < 0.050) and customer satisfaction (β = 0.188, t = 3.958, P < 0.001). Furthermore, customer delight positively affected customer satisfaction (β = 0.358, t = 7.072, P < 0.001), and waiting time had a significant positive impact on both customer delight (β = 0.134, t = 2.705, P < 0.010) and customer satisfaction (β = 0.367, t = 6.576, P < 0.001). These results confirmed the acceptance of all direct effect hypotheses (H_1-H_8), providing robust empirical support for the theoretical model. The detailed path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels are presented in Table 5.

4.6. Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect effects hypothesized in H_9 and H_{10}, utilizing a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples to generate 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) (Cheung and Lau, 2008). Bootstrapping is widely recommended in mediation analysis due to its ability to provide more accurate estimates of indirect effects without assuming normal distribution (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). The results, presented in Table 6, revealed that customer delight significantly mediated the relationship between attitude and behavior of employees and customer satisfaction (β = 0.040, 95% CI = [0.007, 0.078], P < 0.050), supporting H9. Similarly, customer delight significantly mediated the relationship between waiting time and customer satisfaction (β = 0.048, 95% CI = [0.012, 0.087], P < 0.050), supporting H10. The absence of zero in the confidence intervals indicated that both mediation effects were significant, aligning with previous studies that emphasized the importance of customer delight in service quality assessments (Ji and Prentice, 2021; Stange et al., 2025). These findings highlight the crucial role of customer delight as a mediating mechanism that enhances customer satisfaction in tourism service settings.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the relationship between service quality, customer delight, and customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector, and the results strongly support the proposed model. The findings confirm that multiple dimensions of service quality significantly influence customer delight, which in turn enhances satisfaction, in line with prior research emphasizing the positive

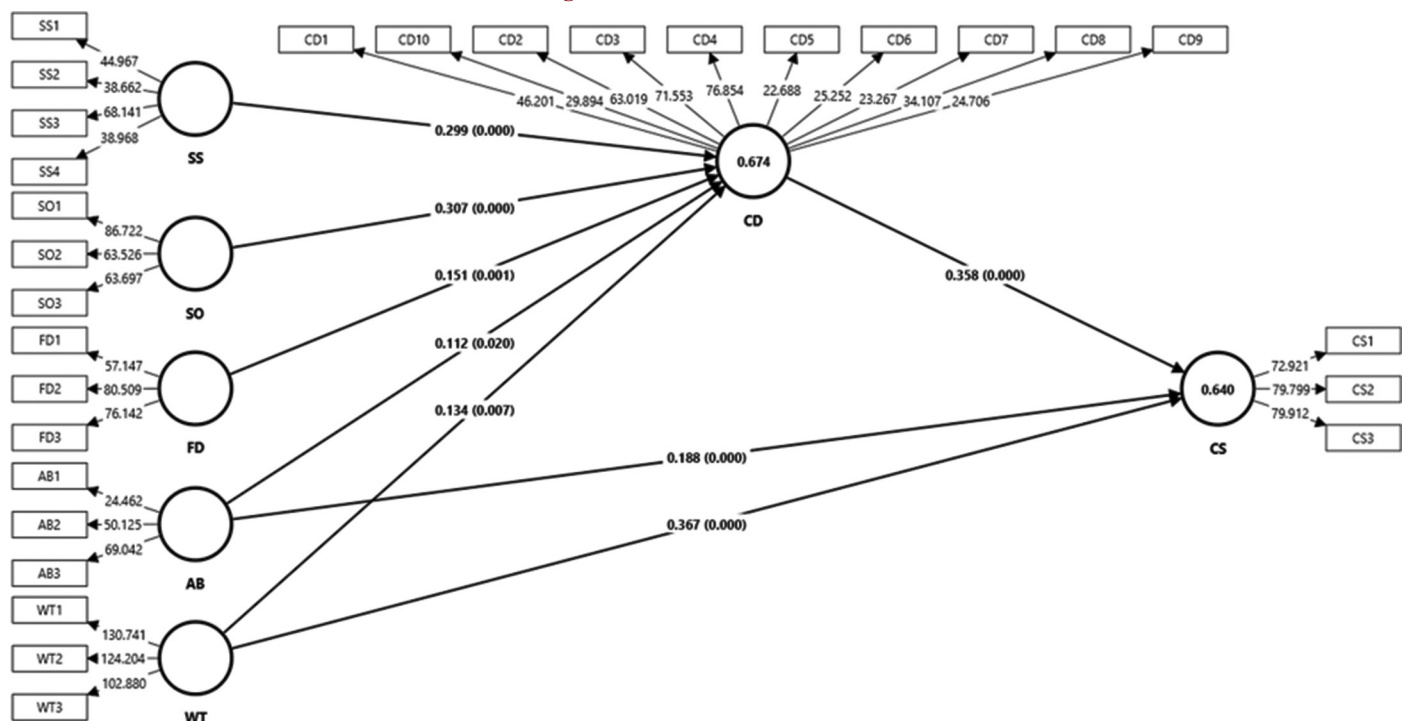**Table 5: Results of structural model path coefficients**

Hypothesis	Relationships	Sample Estimate	Standard Error	T-statistics	P- values	Decision
H_1	SS→CD	0.299	0.048	6.183	0.000	Supported
H_2	SO→CD	0.307	0.044	7.064	0.000	Supported
H_3	FD→CD	0.151	0.042	3.385	0.001	Supported
H_4	AB→CD	0.112	0.047	2.335	0.020	Supported
H_5	WT→CD	0.134	0.050	2.705	0.007	Supported
H_6	AB→CS	0.188	0.046	3.958	0.000	Supported
H_7	WT→CS	0.367	0.056	6.576	0.000	Supported
H_8	CD→CS	0.358	0.051	7.072	0.000	Supported

Safety and security (SS), Sociability (SO), Front desk (FD), Attitude and behavior of employees (AB), Waiting time (WT), Customer delight (CD), Customer satisfaction (CS)

Table 6: Mediation analysis results

Indirect relationships	Sample estimate	Standard error	T-statistics	P-values	CIs		Decision
					2.5%	97.5%	
AB→CD→CS	0.040	0.018	2.228	0.026	0.007	0.078	H_9 Supported
WT→CD→CS	0.048	0.019	2.567	0.010	0.012	0.087	H_{10} Supported

Attitude and behavior of employees (AB), Waiting time (WT), Customer delight (CD), Customer satisfaction (CS), Confidence intervals (CIs)

Figure 2: Structural model results

link between service quality and customer delight (Anabila et al., 2020; Yasir et al., 2024). These results underscore that delight, rather than satisfaction alone, represents a higher-order outcome of superior service delivery in competitive tourism and hospitality contexts.

Among the service quality dimensions, safety and security emerged as a critical factor in generating delight. Features such as data protection, risk management, safeguarding possessions, and efficient security systems create trust and reassurance for customers, making safety a central determinant of both delight and satisfaction (Chauhan et al., 2018; Wu and Ko, 2013; Jouda et al., 2022). Sociability also significantly influenced delight, as warm and engaging interpersonal interactions with staff and peers foster trust, strengthen community ties, and contribute to emotional

bonding. This finding supports earlier work showing that positive social experiences enhance customer evaluations and long-term loyalty (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Azis and Che Ahmat, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Qin et al., 2024).

Front desk quality was identified as another major determinant of delight. Efficient check-in and check-out procedures, professional handling of luggage, and prompt problem-solving were all shown to improve customer perceptions of service quality. These results are consistent with studies demonstrating that front-line employees play a decisive role in shaping first impressions and overall satisfaction (Hassan, 2018; Jang et al., 2018; Jouda et al., 2022). Similarly, the attitudes and behaviors of employees were shown to significantly impact delight and satisfaction. Traits such as politeness, empathy, willingness to help, and attentiveness foster

positive emotional experiences, while poor employee attitudes undermine service evaluations. This reinforces previous evidence that employee engagement and service-oriented behaviors are critical to hospitality success (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Awasthi et al., 2020; Jouda et al., 2022; Grönroos, 2024).

The findings also highlight the role of waiting time. While excessive waiting has traditionally been associated with dissatisfaction (McDougall and Levesque, 1999), this study shows that effective management of waiting times contributes positively to delight and satisfaction. Providing transparent communication, reducing delays, or using innovative solutions such as robotics and self-service kiosks enhances service efficiency and minimizes frustration, consistent with recent research on hospitality technologies (Lee and Cheng, 2018; Jouda et al., 2022; Wirtz and Pitardi, 2023; Wijesekera and Fernando, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023).

Beyond these direct effects, the results confirm that customer delight itself exerts a strong positive influence on satisfaction, echoing prior studies that distinguish delight as a construct that exceeds satisfaction by creating memorable and emotionally engaging experiences (Oliver et al., 1997; Handarkho et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Hao and Chon, 2022; Hassan and Magdy, 2025). This finding reinforces the "surprise and delight" paradigm, which emphasizes that exceeding expectations creates stronger customer satisfaction outcomes than merely meeting them.

Finally, the study provides evidence for the mediating role of customer delight. Delight mediates the relationship between employee attitudes and behaviors and satisfaction, as well as between waiting time and satisfaction, confirming its role as an emotional bridge between service quality and customer evaluations. This aligns with prior research showing that delight goes beyond fulfillment by creating positive surprise and emotional engagement, which significantly strengthens service quality outcomes (Roberts-Lombard and Petzer, 2018; Elias-Almeida et al., 2016; Petzer and Roberts-Lombard, 2021; Bisui et al., 2021; Chand and Slath, 2018). Together, these results highlight that delight should be conceptualized not simply as an outcome but as a strategic mediator that explains how service quality translates into stronger satisfaction and loyalty outcomes.

In summary, the findings affirm that service quality is foundational to customer satisfaction, but its true potential is realized when it creates delight. By exceeding expectations and fostering emotional engagement, hospitality providers can transform ordinary service encounters into memorable experiences, thereby enhancing satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term competitiveness (Alsiehemy, 2023).

5.2. Theoretical Contributions
This study offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on service quality, customer delight, and customer satisfaction in the tourism and hospitality sector. First, the findings reaffirm that service quality is a fundamental driver of tourist satisfaction, supporting prior research that emphasizes its central role in shaping perceptions and behaviors (Alsiehemy, 2023). While satisfaction reflects the fulfillment of expectations, the study highlights that

delight represents a higher-order emotional response that arises when expectations are exceeded, thereby advancing theoretical discussions that distinguish between these two constructs.

Second, the study contributes by demonstrating that customer delight and satisfaction act as complementary yet distinct mediators in the relationship between service quality and customer experiences. This adds depth to the SERVQUAL literature by showing that delight does not simply extend satisfaction but serves as an independent affective mechanism that can enhance customer outcomes more strongly. Importantly, the findings suggest that while service quality primarily drives satisfaction, perceived trip value plays a more significant role in eliciting delight, reinforcing the need to incorporate both cognitive and emotional dimensions into theoretical frameworks of service evaluation (Alsiehemy, 2023).

Third, the research advances the ongoing debate on the relative importance of satisfaction versus delight in influencing customer loyalty. While satisfaction has long been regarded as a predictor of revisiting intentions, the findings highlight that delight generates stronger emotional bonds and behavioral outcomes, including word-of-mouth advocacy and long-term commitment (Ahrholdt et al., 2019; Tai et al., 2021). This positions delight as a distinct and powerful construct that enriches traditional satisfaction-based models of loyalty.

Finally, the study contributes theoretically by emphasizing the role of perceived value as a bridge between service quality, satisfaction, and delight. Tourists who perceive alignment between pricing and service offerings are more likely to experience both satisfaction and delight, indicating that value perceptions should be integrated as an antecedent in service quality models. By highlighting these dynamics, the study extends existing theories of service quality and proposes a more holistic framework for understanding customer evaluations in tourism.

5.3. Practical Implications
The findings of this study carry several important implications for hospitality managers and tourism policymakers. First, the results reaffirm that service quality is a decisive factor in shaping both satisfaction and delight, underscoring the need for hotels and restaurants to maintain consistent excellence across all touchpoints. Elements such as ambiance, facilities, staff appearance, promptness of service, and employee courtesy are not merely operational details but crucial levers for cultivating customer delight and, ultimately, satisfaction (Yasir et al., 2024). Managers should therefore develop comprehensive service strategies that go beyond meeting expectations to exceed them, transforming routine encounters into memorable experiences that strengthen customer loyalty.

Second, the study demonstrates that delight acts as a mediating mechanism between service quality and satisfaction, meaning that customers who are emotionally engaged are more likely to translate positive experiences into stronger behavioral outcomes. For practitioners, this implies that delight should not be treated as an incidental by-product of good service but rather as an integral part of service design. By investing in personalized experiences,

anticipating customer needs, and embedding flexibility in service delivery, hospitality providers can create the conditions for delight that drive repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth (Alsiehemy, 2023).

Finally, the findings highlight the strategic importance of perceived value in sustaining tourist satisfaction and delight. Customers who perceive alignment between pricing and service offerings are more likely to feel satisfied and delighted, which enhances their willingness to revisit and recommend destinations. This suggests that both managers and policymakers should prioritize value-based pricing strategies, ensuring that service quality and customer experiences justify costs. At a broader level, focusing on service quality, memorable trip experiences, and perceived value can help the tourism sector cultivate sustainable growth by fostering not only satisfied but delighted customers who act as long-term ambassadors for destinations.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between service quality, customer delight, and customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector, several limitations should be acknowledged, which also pave the way for future research. First, the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot in time, restricting the ability to capture temporal changes or establish causal relationships, suggesting that future studies should employ longitudinal designs to trace how tourist perceptions and behaviors evolve across different stages of their experiences (Alsiehemy, 2023). Second, reliance on self-reported data, while useful, may be influenced by recall errors or social desirability bias, and future research could strengthen validity by incorporating multi-source evidence such as managerial assessments, observational methods, or online review data. Third, the study's focus on a specific sample limits its broader generalizability, highlighting the need for research across more diverse demographics, service settings, and cultural contexts to capture cross-national variations. Finally, the possibility of unmeasured latent variables—such as cultural orientation, prior travel experience, or individual value systems—affecting perceptions of delight and satisfaction cannot be excluded; thus, adopting mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews may uncover deeper emotional and cognitive mechanisms underlying these relationships.

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