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The Impact of Factors Forming Employee Service Attitude on Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty in the Hotel Industry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the effects of hotel employees' service attitude on service quality and examines the relationships among hotel employees' service attitude, service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach: A survey was administered to hotel employees in Tianjin, China. Factor analysis and regression analysis were used to test the effects and the relationships.

Findings: Results show that emotional intelligence and role clarity have significant effects on service quality and customer satisfaction. However, job satisfaction does not, which is quite different from previous studies observed other than hotel employees in Tianjin, China. It means job satisfaction for the hotel employee in this region is just a factor of basic requirement to work, not a factor of improving service quality. This study also finds that service quality and customer satisfaction have a significant influence on customer loyalty.

Research limitations/implications: This study was limited to hotel employees in Tianjin, China. This study concludes that hotel management needs to be more attentive to employees' emotional intelligence and role clarity in order to attract or retain loyal customers and keep them satisfied.

Originality/value: This study identified the relationship between employees' service attitude and service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty. Knowledge of these relationships can guide managers in China's new hotel market.

Keywords: Employee service attitude; Service quality; Customer satisfaction; Customer loyalty

1. Introduction

Hotel guests experience three important aspects of services: products, the environmental setting, and the service delivery system (Choi, 2011). Therefore, the quality of the guests' experience is crucial in the success of a hotel. Service excellence is a key

differentiation strategy for the hospitality industry (Prince & Simon, 2009) and a primary source of competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1998). The alignment of employee service values and behaviors with an organization's strategic service priorities and the service expectations of its customers is critical to organizational success (Boxall and Purcell, 2003).

According to China's National Tourism Administration (2016), inbound tourism grew through the first half of 2016. About 67.68 million overseas tourists visited China, a 3.8% rise over the same period in 2015.

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Supply for hotel properties also increased. However, a slowing domestic economy, coupled with global economic uncertainties and the protracted China-US trade war, China's hotel industry lagged in 2019. The weak growth of the hotel industry was exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak has brought the travel boom to a stop. As COVID-19 became a global pandemic, it grounded travel and tourism, striking all the budget, midscale and luxury segments of the hotel industry (Greater China Hotel Report, 2020).

In difficult situations like these, high-performing employees are invaluable, and after the crisis is over, they can help restore performance. Therefore, hotel companies should make efforts to secure employees (Hao et al., 2020). China's hotel market is expected to reach US\$136 billion (938 billion Yuan) by the end of 2023. Political and social stability, rapid economic growth, massive population base and natural resources have attracted many multinational hotels, including some of the world's leading hotel chains, to a potentially huge market in China Knight Frank Research (2020, May). No matter how much this market might grow, the core value of a hotel is still its employees. Therefore, the top priority must be develop high-quality, hard-working, knowledgeable and innovative employees with strong moral and ethical values.

In China, not many newly hired hotel employees have the required knowledge and training. The job is just a way to make a living. The low standards and quality of hotel services were the greatest impediment to the development of China's hotel industry. Even after it had been open to international tourists for more than 10 years, the hotel industry in China still had difficulty reaching international service standards. Without dramatic improvements in hotel services, international visitors to those hotels would remain dissatisfied (Qu & Tsang, 1998).

This study investigates the relationship among employee service attitude, service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in China's international hotels. This study explores the effects of employee service attitude on service quality and customer satisfaction in the international hotels in particular region named

Tianjin, China. This study also explores the way in which service quality and customer satisfaction influence customer loyalty.

II . Literature Review

A. Factors Forming Service Attitude and Service Quality

According to Lele and Sheth (1993), service attitude consists off the way in which sales employees present themselves when providing information and services to customers. Service attitude can be a behavioral intention that service staff have in their interactions with customers (Larsen & Bastiansen, 1991). Chen (1998) defined service attitude as the understanding, feeling and behavioral intention towards providing services that one has acquired from education, training, social processes and various situations. Because the success of service firms depends on frontline employees, prosocial behaviors (expected and extra-role customer service behaviors) by the employees have become a critical issue for the service industry (Chebat, Babin, & Kollias, 2002).

Numerous studies have shown that the service attitude of the employee is a very important factor in customer satisfaction (Kriegel, 2000). Geller (1985) and Tornow and Wiley (1991) described the importance of the service attitude and its relationship to customer satisfaction. One of the factors in an employee's service attitude is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a new field of research in areas such as business and management. Salovey and Mayer proposed their theory of emotional intelligence in 1990. Since then, theorists have generated several definitions of the term. According to Papoutsi et al. (2019) and Goleman (2001), emotional intelligence is the ability to understand, recognize and manage one's emotions, the emotions of others, and those of groups. Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) understand emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's emotions and those of others, to discriminate between them, and to use the

information to guide one's thinking and actions. From an organizational point of view, emotional intelligence can contribute to many areas that make up an organization such as satisfaction, turnover intentions, productivity, commitment, teamwork, leadership effectiveness and conflict management styles (Lee, 2017; Papoutsis et al., 2019). Very little empirical research analyzes the relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction, which has probably been the most extensively researched work attitude in the organizational behavior literature (Blau, 1999). Mustafa (2011) analyzed the emotional intelligence of employees and its effect their work attitudes, then concluded that emotional intelligence has a significant effect on the employees' work attitudes. Emotional intelligence affects employee commitment, teamwork, and development of talent, innovation, and quality of service and customer loyalty (Zeidner et al., 2004).

Job satisfaction is how people feel about their work (Spector, 1997). It motivates job performance and encourages employees to work beyond their assigned workloads (Guleryuz et al., 2008; Lee, 2017). It thus affects organizational functioning and performance (Rowden, 2002) and the success of an organization (Papoutsis et al., 2019). Satisfied employees keep their company's promise and provide better service than its competitors (Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004). However, there is no evidence that job satisfaction has a direct impact on customer satisfaction.

According to role theory, customer-contact personnel need clarity on how they are expected to perform their jobs (Bush & Busch, 1981). Role clarity is the degree to which an employee has the required information about the expectations of his or her job (Teas et al., 1979). For frontline employees, role clarity is not only desirable in terms of customer satisfaction, but is also linked to their job satisfaction, organizational commitment and performance (De Ruyter et al., 2001; Hosny & Mohamed, 2020). A lack of role clarity diminishes job performance (Churchill et al., 1985).

Gronroos (1984) noted that expectations or perceptions are influenced by traditions, ideology, word-of-mouth communication, and previous experience. A consumer's

perception of a service determines his or her perceived quality of service. As a result, accurate and reliable instruments that assess service quality are of interest to companies whose revenues come in whole or part from service delivery. Service quality evaluation is different from product quality evaluation. When purchasing something in a store, the consumer can easily judge its quality from its color, style, size, smell and feel. But when purchasing services, consumers have few such clues. As an intangible product, the quality of a service cannot be judged until it is finished.

On the one hand, researchers operationalize the service quality construct either as a disparity between the expectation of and the perceived performance of a service, or just perceived performance (Hurley & Estalami, 1998). On the other hand, service quality dimensions are the criteria to assess service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Service quality is a measure of how well the service delivered matched customer expectations. Therefore, delivering quality service means conforming consistently to customer expectations (Lewis & Booms, 1983). Higher service quality means a better chance of repurchase or of positive consumption behavior (Jo, 2017; Kim & Ji, 2016).

Geller (1985) demonstrated that among nine key factors in the successful running of a hotel, employee service attitude is the most important. Chebat, Babin and Kollias (2002) indicated the employee issue has become a critical one for the hospitality industry. Based upon these arguments and the prior studies of factors forming some attitude and service quality, we constructed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Factors in an employee's service attitude (emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, role clarity) have a crucial impact on service quality.

H1-1: The employee's emotional intelligence has a significant impact on service quality.

H1-2: The employee's job satisfaction has an impact on service quality.

H1-3: The employee's role clarity has an impact on service quality.

B. Factors Forming Service Attitude and Customer Satisfaction

The academic literature posits that customer satisfaction is a function of the discrepancy between a consumer's prior expectations and his or her perception regarding the purchase (Yi, 1990). Customers' satisfaction leads to loyalty, and customer loyalty contributes to a company's profitability, market share and return on investment (Reichheld, 1996). Given the psychological and physical closeness between employees and customers in service encounters, employees' attitudes often have a spillover effect on customer satisfaction (Lenka, Suar & Mohapatra, 2009). Improved service quality will result in greater customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1994).

When managers treat their employees well, employees treat their customers well (Gronross 1983). Numerous studies link job satisfaction closely to customer satisfaction (Spinelli & Canavos, 2000). Tornow and Wiley (1991) showed the relationship between service attitude and customer satisfaction in their studies. Employees' attitudes are reflected in the quality of service, since they are likely to be in the service interface. In addition, Kim and Ok (2010) and Lee et al. (2018) argued that the positive attitude of the employees created a sense of closeness with customers and was related to customer satisfaction. In other words, employees' service attitude is a factor in customer satisfaction. The following hypothesis were developed.

Hypothesis 2: Factors forming an employee's service attitude (emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, role clarity) has a crucial impact on customer satisfaction.

H2-1: The employee's emotional intelligence has an impact on customer satisfaction.

H2-2: The employee's job satisfaction has an impact on customer satisfaction.

H2-3: The employee's role clarity has an impact on customer satisfaction.

C. Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

A loyal customer is one who intends to repurchase from the same service firm, who maintains an optimistic attitude towards the service firm, and who recommends the service to others (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). The global market is now highly competitive; building brand is essential. A company's brand should guide critical business decisions and determine acceptable employee behaviors. A brand-driven approach to customer loyalty will lead to increased profitability and competitive advantage (Yazdanifard et al., 2011).

Customer loyalty is the key to better business performance. It has attracted significant attention in the service marketing literature because it has contributed to the creation of sustainable competitive advantage for service organizations (Lee & Cunningham, 2001). Loyalty research has expanded from early works on brand loyalty of tangible goods to include store, vendor and service loyalty (Caruana, 2002). According to Griffin (2002), a customer is a person who becomes accustomed to buying from a company. Without a history of contact and repeat purchase, a customer is actually a buyer. A true customer is cultivated. Recognizing the importance of customer loyalty to hotel profitability, most hotel chain operators have designed compensation and loyalty programs to attract and maintain guests (El-Adly, 2019).

According to Bowen and Chen (2001), managers should realize that having satisfied customers is not enough. It is important to know that customers should be extremely satisfied in order to make them loyal customers. This can be done by a positive service attitude of employees delivering customer values. Having loyal customers means taking lots of benefits. In addition to benefiting from the extremely satisfied customers' repeat patronage, hotel managers can save marketing expenses. Therefore, hotel managers should not be content with having satisfied customers. They need very satisfied employees who can create extremely satisfied customers.

Service quality has become an important topic because of its relationship to customer satisfaction

(Brady et al., 2002; Caruana, 2002) and consumer loyalty (Bowen & Chen, 2001; Caruana, 2002; Wong & Sohal, 2003). Customer satisfaction is customers' expected or experienced value and consequent perceived performance of service quality (Herington & Weaven, 2009).

Previous studies have shown that customer satisfaction is an important factor in customer loyalty. Selnes (1993) found that effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty appeared when customers were able to evaluate product quality through their experience with the service or product. Customer satisfaction is positively correlated with customer loyalty, according to Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000). According to Belas and Gabcova (2016), customer satisfaction is an essential prerequisite of loyalty in a service environment. These findings led to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Service quality has a significant impact on customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: Service quality has a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Hypothesis 5: Customer satisfaction has a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Figure 1 depicts the model that this study uses to describe the relationships among employee service

attitude, service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

III. Method

A. Data Collection and Analysis

This study investigates five-star international chain hotels in Tianjin, China. This case data was collected from international hotel chains. An international hotel chain has direct investments and other contractual agreements (such as franchises or management contracts) in more than one country (Dunning & McQueen, 1982).

To gather a sample of sufficient size, the data was collected from employees of 26 five-star hotels located in Tianjin. The survey was conducted from October 20 to November 10, 2016. A total of 220 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis after removing 20 incomplete and unusable responses from 240 questionnaires. For data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 was used. Factor analysis was used to measure reliability and validity. Regression analysis was used to find relationships among the variables in the research model.

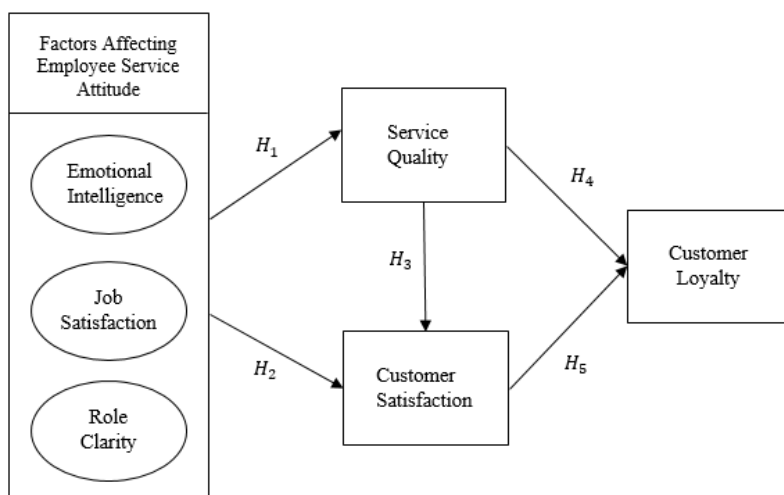


Figure 1. Research model.

IV. Results

A. Demographics

Demographic characteristics were collected for respondents' gender, age, marital status, educational background, position and salary. Of the 240 surveys were sent to the hotel employees, 220 were used. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information.

B. Test of Validity and Reliability

Table 2 shows that each factor was subjected to factor analysis.

Cronbach's alpha was used to identify reliability. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .863 to .881, and since they were higher than 0.6, were acceptable for this study.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Variables	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	98	44.5
	Female	122	55.5
Age	20-29	75	34.1
	30-39	92	41.8
	40-49	30	13.6
	Above 50	23	10.5
Marital Status	Single	89	40.5
	Married	131	59.5
Educational Background	High School	35	15.9
	College	80	36.4
	Undergraduate	72	32.7
	Graduate	33	15.0
Job Position	Staff	139	63.2
	Supervisor	32	14.5
	Manager	23	10.5
	General Manager	26	11.8
Salary	Below ¥2000	58	26.4
	¥2001-4000	79	35.9
	¥4001-6000	47	21.3
	¥6001-8000	14	6.4
	Above ¥8000	22	10.0
Total	220	100.0	

In Table 3, KMO of service quality was reported as .859 and total variance 75.831%. In the reliability analysis, Cronbach's alpha is .818, which is acceptable.

Validity of customer satisfaction was tested using factor analysis. KMO was .755, total variance was 68.831%. The result of reliability analysis is reported in Table 4. Cronbach's alpha value is .841.

Table 5 shows that for customer loyalty, the KMO is .710, total variance is 67.211 and Cronbach's alpha value is .836. Validity and reliability of each factor are acceptable.

C. Employees' Service Attitude Influencing the Quality of Service

The results of testing hypothesis 1 are shown in Table 6. According to the table, emotional intelligence is a significant variable in service quality ($P=.000$). Role clarity is a crucial variable in service quality ($p=.003$). However, job satisfaction does not have a significant effect on service quality. It means job satisfaction the hotel for employee in this region is just a factor of basic requirement to work not a factor of improving service quality.

D. Service Attitude Influencing the Satisfaction of the Customer

The results of testing hypothesis 2 are shown in Table 7. The table shows that role clarity is the only variable that affects customer satisfaction. Emotional intelligence and job satisfaction do not.

E. The Influential Relationships among Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Table 8 presents the results of testing hypotheses 3, 4 and 5. Service quality is identified as a significant variable in both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. In addition, customer satisfaction is a crucial variable in customer loyalty.

Table 2. Factor and Reliability Analysis of Employees' Service Attitude

	Questionnaire Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	Eigenvalues	Variance (%)
Emotional Intelligence	I am never depressed when performing my tasks.	.807	.863	3.610	24.064
	I can offer good quality service to a demanding customer.	.869			
	I offer good quality service even when I am depressed.	.878			
	My emotions influence my attitude when providing service to customers.	.663			
Job Satisfaction	I am satisfied with my salary.	.767	.878	3.271	21.808
	I am satisfied with the welfare provided by the hotel.	.763			
	I am satisfied with my working environment.	.830			
	My job is consistent with my interests.	.771			
	I am qualified for my position.	.703			
	I like the work assigned to me by my superiors.	.782			
	Hotel offers me good training.	.701			
Role Clarity	I am clear on my duties.	.786	.881	2.982	19.880
	I know exactly what the hotel expects me to do.	.823			
	I can finish the tasks given to me by my superiors.	.871			
	I can accurately finish the tasks assigned to me by my superiors.	.805			
Total Variance (%)				65.752	
K M O				.825	
Sig.				.000	

Table 3. Factor and Reliability Analysis of Service Quality

	Questionnaire Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α
Service Quality	My colleagues and I have never had a dispute with customers.	.708	.818
	There are hardly any employee grievances in the hotel.	.731	
	I am told to be neatly dressed and asked to use standard terms.	.900	
	I can solve the customers' problems quickly and to their satisfaction.	.924	
	I inquire into the problems of customers.	.914	
	The hotel I work in affords integrated personalization.	.991	
Total Variance (%)			75.831
K M O			.859
Sig.			.000

Table 4. Factor and Reliability Analysis of Customer Satisfaction

	Questionnaire Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α
Customer Satisfaction	I can solve customer problems immediately.	.735	.841
	I solve customer problems effectively.	.768	
	I can solve customer problems accurately.	.892	
	I can provide service to meet customer requirements.	.910	
Total Variance (%)			68.831
K M O			.755
Sig.			.000

Table 5. Factor and Reliability Analysis of Customer Loyalty

Questionnaire Items		Factor Loading	Cronbach's α
Customer Loyalty	Numbers of VIPs keep rising.	.819	.836
	Customers pay regular visits to hotel.	.776	
	Customers invite their friends and families to the hotel.	.818	
	Customers regularly stay in the hotel even though the price has increased.	.865	
Total Variance (%)		67.211	
K M O		.710	
Sig.		.000	

Table 6. Regression Analysis of H₁

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Service Quality	Emotional Intelligence	.258	.050	.350	5.144	.000*
	Job Satisfaction	.071	.046	.093	1.564	.119
	Role Clarity	.180	.060	.204	2.988	.003**
R=.496, , R ² =.246, Adjust R ² =.235, F=23.483, P<.000						

*p<.001, **p <.05

Table 7. Regression Analysis of H₂

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Customer Satisfaction	Emotional Intelligence	.100	.047	.152	2.138	.034**
	Job Satisfaction	-.020	.042	-.029	-.465	.642
	Role Clarity	.259	.056	.329	4.613	.000*
R=.424, , R ² =.180, Adjust R ² =.168, F=15.784, P<.000						

*p<.001, **p <.05

Table 8. Regression Analysis of H₃, H₄, H₅

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
Customer Satisfaction	Service Quality	.294	.057	.329	5.141	.000*
	R=.329, , R ² =.108, Adjust R ² =.104, F=26.434, P<.000					
Customer Loyalty	Service Quality	.389	.061	.394	6.334	.000*
	R=.394, , R ² =.155, Adjust R ² =.152, F=40.114, P<.000					
Customer Loyalty	Customer Satisfaction	.643	.061	.583	10.589	.000*
	R=.583, , R ² =.340, Adjust R ² =.337, F=112.124, P<.000					

*p<.001

V. Conclusion

A. Discussion

This study explored the relationships among the factors that form service attitude, service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty by observing employees of luxury hotels in Tianjin, China. The literature review proposes three attributes (emotional intelligence, job satisfaction, and role clarity) of service quality and customer satisfaction.

Five research hypotheses were tested and summarized in Table 9. The results of hypothesis 1 demonstrated a positive association between two factors affecting attitude (emotional intelligence and role clarity) and service quality, indicating that hotels with better employee service attitudes achieve higher levels of service quality. Quite surprisingly, job satisfaction does not have an impact on service quality. Contradicting previous research results (Guleryuz et al., 2008; Han et al., 2012), this study shows that job satisfaction is just a factor of basic requirement to work, not a factor of improving service quality. Hypothesis 2 also appears to be same way as only two factors in employee service attitude (emotional intelligence and role clarity) are supported. Thus, emotional intelligence is conducive to job satisfaction. Employees who are aware of their own feelings and those of others are more satisfied with their work. This finding is consistent with the results of a study of the relation-

ship between emotional intelligence and customer satisfaction (Tagoe & Quarshie, 2017; Uslu & Uslu, 2019). Consequently, service employees high in emotional intelligence who evaluated and expressed themselves and others' feelings and managed themselves and others' feelings succeeded in building constructive relationships with customers. As a result, service employees with high emotional intelligence can solve problems that directly affect the customer's evaluation of quality of service and make appropriate decisions (Şahin & Işık, 2020). Again, job satisfaction does not affect customer satisfaction. This means neither service quality nor customer satisfaction are influenced by employee job satisfaction.

Regarding hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4, this study found support for importance of service quality in explaining customer satisfaction and customer loyalty; these results are similar to those of Ha and Jang (2010) and Han and Hyun (2017). It can be inferred that higher quality in services can contribute to build higher levels of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the hotel business. Finally, consistent with prior studies, this study has demonstrated a positive link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty from H5. This is consistent with the research proposed by Heskett et al. (1994) showing that service quality leads to employee satisfaction and loyalty, which again leads to higher employee productivity and service values, higher customer satisfaction and loyalty, and ultimately to increased profits.

Table 9. Results of the Research Model

	Hypothesis Path	Standardized Coefficients	t-value	p-value	Result
H ₁	H ₁₋₁ : Emotional Intelligence → Service Quality	.350	5.144	.000	Supported
	H ₁₋₂ : Job Satisfaction → Service Quality	.093	1.564	.119	Not Supported
	H ₁₋₃ : Role Clarity → Service Quality	.204	2.988	.003	Supported
H ₂	H ₂₋₁ : Emotional Intelligence → Customer Satisfaction	.152	2.138	.034	Supported
	H ₂₋₂ : Job Satisfaction → Customer Satisfaction	-.029	-.465	.642	Not Supported
	H ₂₋₃ : Role Clarity → Customer Satisfaction	.329	4.613	.000	Supported
H ₃	Service Quality → Customer Satisfaction	.329	5.141	.000	Supported
H ₄	Service Quality → Customer Loyalty	.394	6.334	.000	Supported
H ₅	Customer Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty	.583	10.589	.000	Supported

B. Implications

This study may help to increase awareness of employees' emotional intelligence and role clarity. Management needs to invest in employee training, especially in emotional intelligence and role clarity. These actions can improve customer satisfaction and lead to the retention of loyal customers. Ultimately, such efforts can lead to higher sales and a better capacity to compete in the hotel market. Human resource managers should be mindful of the importance of hiring the right people for the right job. Although China's booming economy drives the promotion of hotel performance, the employees are responsible for the achievements.

C. Limitations and Future Studies

The sample was limited to hotel employees in Tianjin, China. Given the limited subject and sample, it would be worthwhile to perform additional research using wider samples and additional hotels in different areas in China. By doing so, future research could assist in generalizing the study results. One stimulating finding of this study is that the job satisfaction of hotel employees does not affect service quality or customer satisfaction. Although this study observes employees in a specific region in China, these results are quite interesting and deserve researchers' attention. A broader study is needed to explicate these findings.

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