

Research Article

The role of mediator variables in the relationship between service quality, brand identification and brand loyalty of boutique hotels in Bangkok

Pattraporn Jansuri ^{1*}, Daranee Artharn ²

¹College of Innovative Management, Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University under Royal Patronage, Prathum Tani Province, Thailand.

²School of Humanity and Tourism Management, Bangkok University, Thailand.

*Correspondence: pattraporn@vru.ac.th

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating role of emotional commitment in the relationship between service quality, brand identification, and brand loyalty among Thai tourists who made boutique hotel bookings under the Rao Tiew Duay Kan co-payment scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic. The population and sample consisted of 260 Thai tourists who had made such bookings. The data was collected through purposive sampling and analyzed using the Partial Least Squares approach to Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with IBM SPSS AMOS version 26 software. The data analysis included descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and inferential statistics, including the Ordinary Least Squares method and the bootstrapping technique in SEM. The results revealed that emotional commitment served as a mediator between service quality, brand identification, and brand loyalty among Thai tourists who made boutique hotel bookings under the Rao Tiew Duay Kan co-payment scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Service quality; Brand loyalty; Emotional commitment; Boutique hotels

1. Introduction

Tourism is a substantial industry that generates substantial revenue for a country. Thailand stands as a prominent tourist destination in Southeast Asia, attracting millions of tourists from around the world each year. From 2023 to 2025, Thailand's international travel and tourism industry has witnessed an average increase in international tourists. Notably, Thailand's annual compound growth rate of international visitors is projected to reach 36-39 million by 2025.

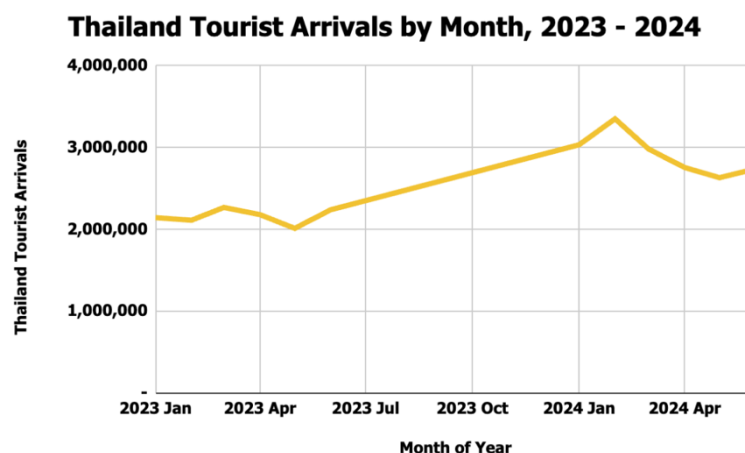


Figure 1. International tourist arrivals to Thailand Year 2023-2025.

Source: International tourist arrivals to Thailand Year 2023-2025

Boutique hotels emerged in the 1980s [1]. They are often referred to as “Highly Individual Places.” Various terms are used to describe these types of hotels, including townhouse hotels, lifestyle hotels, and designer hotels [1]. Boutique hotels are typically small establishments that offer exceptional service and provide authentic cultural or historic experiences and unique services to their guests [2]. These hotels offer an alternative option for tourists traveling.

The competitive landscape of the service industry, particularly in terms of service delivery and product quality, has compelled hotel businesses to increasingly focus on targeting niche markets. These markets typically consist of high-end consumers with substantial purchasing power and a strong desire for unique and novel experiences [3]. This trend aligns with the contemporary direction in hotel design, which emphasizes reflecting the personality, lifestyle, and identity of the guests an approach embodied in the concept of the boutique hotel. Boutique hotels are typically small-scale establishments characterized by distinctive and stylish interior design, aiming to attract guests seeking differentiated experiences compared to conventional hotel chains while still appreciating the luxury standards associated with five-star hotels. Boutique hotels can operate independently or as part of boutique hotel chains and are available across various price segments.

Boutique hotels, which set themselves apart from traditional hotels, are characterized by their unique ambiance and sensory experience. They boast distinctive and modern staff uniforms, meticulous attention to aesthetic details, and a warm, artful atmosphere that evokes the feeling of a refined home. Additionally, boutique hotels often provide modern in-room amenities and offer personalized, intuitive service. Unlike conventional luxury hotels that prioritize comprehensive and standardized services, boutique hotels prioritize services tailored to guests' lifestyles and individual needs, as well as attention to small details that exceed guest expectations [3].

Service quality is a crucial factor in determining the success of businesses in the service industry. This concept is evident in the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), which has gained widespread acceptance and continuous refinement. Trust, reliability, and brand loyalty have played pivotal roles in the growth of the hotel industry. From a demand-side perspective, businesses have shifted their focus to marketing strategies that prioritize customer orientation and creating meaningful experiences. When customers perceive service positively and feel satisfied, they are more likely to make repeat purchases, ultimately fostering customer loyalty. This loyalty directly contributes to positive cash flow, increased profitability, enhanced corporate image, and long-term market growth. Outstanding service quality can be a powerful driver of customer loyalty. This study aims to explore the behavior and perceptions of customers who utilize services provided by boutique hotels in the Bangkok metropolitan area.

Brand loyalty is a key business concept that has garnered significant attention from marketers, scholars, and entrepreneurs. Their interest lies in understanding repeat purchasing behavior and word-of-mouth referrals, which have long-term positive implications for brand performance. From a marketing relationship perspective, cultivating brand loyalty is considered more sustainable than continually striving to acquire new customers [4 & 5]

Brand loyalty has become a widely adopted strategy for creating competitive marketing advantages across various sectors, including industrial goods, consumer products, and service-based businesses. Prior research [6&7] has demonstrated that customer satisfaction is a key determinant in building strong relationships and fostering brand loyalty. Satisfaction also influences post-consumption behaviors within the tourism and service industries, both directly and indirectly. These behaviors include positive word-of-mouth communication, a willingness to pay premium prices, and resistance to negative information about the brand.

However, contemporary tourist behavior is increasingly characterized by a desire for active participation and the pursuit of novel and enriching experiences. This shift underscores the need for service providers to go beyond transactional satisfaction and cultivate emotionally engaging experiences that resonate with modern travelers. Similarly, in the hospitality context, customers regard hotels not only as places for rest but also as places for experience consumption [8]. When guests have positive, unique, and engaging experiences during their stay, they develop a deeper attachment to the property [9&10]. Positive emotions lead to increased guest loyalty, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations [11].

The discussion we had earlier underscores the importance of researchers exploring strategic approaches to enhance the competitive standing of hotel businesses by differentiating themselves and cultivating long-term customer relationships. This study aims to investigate the mediating role of emotional commitment among boutique hotel guests in the relationship between service quality, boutique hotel brand identity, and brand loyalty. The research focuses on tourists with prior experience staying at boutique hotels. The findings of this study are expected to offer practical implications for boutique hotel operators and academic scholars by providing insights into customer behavior and supporting the development of more effective service strategies.

2. Objective

2.1 1. To examine the relationships among service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty in the context of boutique hotels.

2.2 2. To investigate the influence of service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty on consumer behavior toward boutique hotels in Bangkok.

2.2.3 To explore the mediating role of brand identity in the relationship between service quality and brand loyalty in boutique hotels in Bangkok.

3. Hypothesis

Emotional commitment as a mediating variable in the relationship between service quality, brand identity and brand loyalty of boutique hotels in Bangkok.

4. Research Implications

The findings of this study enhance managerial understanding of the critical role that customers' emotional commitment plays in fostering brand loyalty toward boutique hotels. Furthermore, the results provide a foundation for developing and designing strategic approaches aimed at building long-term customer relationships by cultivating and promoting emotional attachment through various brand-related activities. Additionally, this research contributes academically by expanding the scope of knowledge regarding the evolving behavior of consumers.

5. Conceptual Framework

5.1 Independent Variables

5.1.1 Service quality of boutique hotels, measured across the following dimensions; (1) outcome Quality, (2) personnel quality, (3) servicescape quality, and (4) social quality.

5.1.2 Brand Identification

5.2 Mediating Variable; emotional commitment

5.3 Dependent Variable; brand loyalty

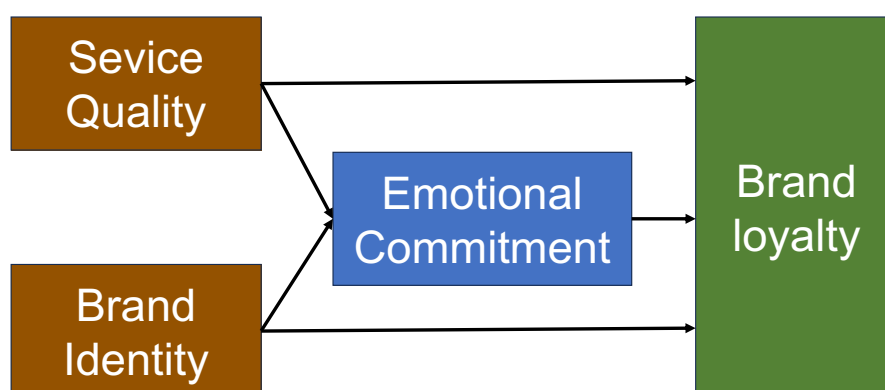


Figure 2. Research conceptual framework.

A. SERVQUAL Model and Service Quality

The SERVQUAL Model, pioneered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry in 1988 [12], serves as a foundational framework for comprehending service quality across healthcare and hospitality industries. In the rapidly evolving field of Hospitality and Hotel, this model assumes a nuanced and critical significance, providing profound insights into the intricate service expectations that tourists hold.

The model's four fundamental dimensions outcome quality, personnel quality, service quality, and social quality [13] offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine the intricate service dynamics specific to tourist consumers.

Perception of service quality arises from comparing customer expectations with the actual service received. The quality assessed is not solely determined by service measurement and evaluation tools, as defined by SERVQUAL [12]. The model's five fundamental dimensions tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy contribute to this assessment.

The concept of service quality is intricate, subjective, enigmatic, and abstract. It implies that service quality can vary from person to person. However, various definitions of service quality have been proposed in the literature. Parasuraman et al. [12] defined service quality as the discrepancy between customers' expectations and their impression of a particular service. Wilson (2016) [13] defined service quality as the customer's appraisal of the services provided. Prakash & Mohanty [14] referred to service quality as the guest's overall sense of the superiority or excellence of the service experience.

In essence, service quality perception involves customers comparing their evaluation of service quality to their needs or expectations before the service and their actual experience.

B. Emotional Commitment

Morgan and Hunt (1994). It has been said that consumer engagement with a brand is one aspect of the relationship between the brand and its consumers. This concept has received much attention and has been widely studied in understanding the relationship between consumers and brands. Previous research has demonstrated that consumer engagement is a critical factor in fostering long-term relationships and enhancing brand loyalty. Emotional commitment can be defined as a brand's intention to sustain a long-term relationship with its customers, which ultimately generates marketing value [13, 15, 16, & 17]. Bhattacharjee [18] categorized commitment into two distinct types: emotional commitment and calculative commitment. Emotional commitment refers to the emotional attachment that consumers develop toward a specific brand or retailer, based on a sense of identification and personal connection. According to Allen and Meyer (1990), emotional commitment reflects the consumer's affective involvement with a brand, leading to loyalty driven by genuine emotional bonds rather than transactional benefits. In contrast, calculative commitment is based on a rational evaluation of the benefits derived from maintaining the relationship. It reflects a cost-benefit consideration, where the consumer continues the relationship due to perceived advantages or the lack of better alternatives, rather than emotional attachment.

Understanding the distinction between these two types of commitment is essential for marketers and service providers, particularly in experience-driven sectors such as boutique hotels, where fostering emotional commitment can be a key strategy in building lasting brand loyalty. Emotional commitment, a core element separating true loyalty from spurious loyalty, predicts customer loyalty in various service contexts [19]. Emotional commitment, the most important relationship marketing dimension, directly influences relational and transactional loyalty outcomes. Emotional commitment is essential to true loyalty [19]. Mattila [20] also emphasized that emotional engagement is a critical tool for brands, particularly in the hotel industry, to build brand loyalty and increase their share of wallet compared to competitors through the continued use of hotel services. Emotional engagement is also an essential element in establishing successful long-term brand relationships [21]. Furthermore, noted that this review revealed that boutique hotels are defined by eight core attributes; these are (1) multiple ownership structures, (2) situatedness in a historic premises, (3) strategic locations, (4) thematized internal décor, (5) experience design, (6) high levels of personalization, (7) novelty in service provisions and (8) niche marketing strategies [22].

C. Boutique Hotels

Boutique hotels, as described by Lim & Endean [23], often have a luxurious ambiance that sets them apart from larger chain hotels and motels. They provide individualized accommodations and services that differentiate them. Buhagiar [22] noted that boutique hotels typically adhere to a specific theme or design and have a room count ranging from 3 to 100. They also have 24/7 available hotel personnel. Many boutique hotels offer on-site dining options, and most have public bars and lounges.

Researchers have proposed various definitions of boutique hotels. However, the majority of academics have agreed on a common definition that considers essential qualities such as location, size, architecture and design, services, and quality. Lim & Endean [23] observed that boutique hotels are commonly found in suburbs or metropolitan centers. They also noted that the boutique concept has been successfully applied to both resort locations and rural regions, attracting frequent visitors. Aggett [24] further emphasized that the majority of boutique hotels have fewer than 100 rooms. This room count allows the hotel to specialize its services to its guests while preserving the integrity of interactions between guests and staff.

4. Methodology

This research aimed to examine the impact of various aspects of boutique hotel service quality on emotional commitment and brand loyalty toward boutique hotels. It also investigated the mediating role of emotional commitment in the relationship between service quality and brand loyalty, with a focus on the behavior of service users. The study targeted a sample group of individuals with prior experience staying at boutique hotels in Bangkok. This study targeted tourist who has experienced in boutique hotel services in Thailand. The population of interest included both Thai tourists residing or traveling in the country. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined to be appropriate, based on the recommendation by Hair et al. [25] that suggests a minimum of 10 to 15 observations per estimated parameter for SEM.

A purposive and quota sampling strategy was employed. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who had experience or familiarity with boutique hotel services, this sampling approach aimed to capture the diversity of service contexts, accessibility infrastructures, and customer characteristics across Thailand, contributing to a richer understanding of experiences tourist have populations. The primary research instrument employed in this study was an online questionnaire, which included a screening question to confirm participants' prior experience with boutique hotels. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice items and statements rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/least agreement) to 5 (strongly agree/highest agreement). To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was evaluated by five experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) technique. Additionally, a pre-test was conducted with a sample of 50 respondents who shared similar characteristics with the target population, in order to assess the reliability and clarity of the instrument before its full deployment.

5. Results

The findings reveal that emotional commitment among boutique hotel guests serves as an intrinsic motivational force that significantly influences their psychological attachment to the hotel. Guests who exhibit high emotional commitment are more likely to return for future stays and recommend the hotel to others, thereby contributing to broader brand advocacy. This emotional bond is influenced by a combination of factors, including individual characteristics, the nature of the service provided, the structural attributes of the boutique hotel, the service delivery experience, the work environment, and the extent to which guest expectations are met. These factors demonstrate the dynamic interrelationships between service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty in the boutique hotel context. The results align with the framework proposed by Meyer et al. [26] who identified four key antecedents of affective commitment: work conditions, fulfillment of expectations, personal values, and perceived obligation or moral attachment.

In addition, the measurement of emotional commitment has been supported by prior instruments such as the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Mowday et al. [27]. Although the OCQ does not explicitly divide commitment into subdimensions, several items are indicative of affective attachment, such as a sense of pride in being associated with an organization. Previous studies have also developed hybrid measurement models by integrating items from both the OCQ and

affective commitment scales, enhancing their applicability in various service and consumer research contexts.

Table 1. Fit Indices of the Causal Relationship Model Between Service Quality, Brand Identity, and Brand Loyalty of Boutique Hotels in the Bangkok.

Index	Criteria	Result	Result
CMIN/df	< 3.00	2.575	Supported
GFI	≥ 0.90 (1.00)	0.855	Supported
AGFI	≥ 0.90 (1.00)	0.795	Supported
CFI	≥ 0.90 (1.00)	0.935	Supported
TLI	≥ 0.90 (1.00)	0.908	Supported
RMSEA	< 0.80 (0.00)	0.078	Supported

Based on the results of the model fit assessment presented in Table 1, the causal relationship model exhibits an acceptable level of goodness of fit. The relative Chi-square (CMIN/df) value is 2.575, which falls within the acceptable threshold of less than 3.00. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.078, which meets the recommended criterion of being less than 0.08. Furthermore, the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) values are 0.855, 0.795, and 0.935, respectively. While GFI and AGFI are slightly below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.90, the CFI exceeds the benchmark, indicating a reasonably good model fit at the 0.05 significance level.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of the marketing mix strategies affecting consumer's decision making on online purchasing.

Pathway	P-Value	Standardized Estimate	Relation
BI --> EC --> BL	0.004	0.886**	Indirect effect
COC --> EC --> BL	0.015	0.393*	Indirect effect
COD --> EC --> BL	0.201	-0.158	Indirect effect
TC --> EC --> BL	0.044	0.771*	Indirect effect
COCF --> EC --> BL	0.05	-1.006	Indirect effect
PRC --> EC --> BL	0.803	-0.008	Indirect effect
AC --> EC --> BL	0.211	-0.14	Indirect effect
CRC --> EC --> BL	0.265	0.214	Indirect effect

Note: ** indicates statistical significance ($P < 0.05$).

BI = Brand Identity , EC = Emotional Commitment ,BL = Brand Loyalty ,COC= Cleanliness-Oriented Service Quality ,COD = Design-Oriented Service Quality, TC = Technical Competence ,COCF = Confidence-Related Conditions of Service Quality , PRC = Price-Related Conditions of Service Quality CRC = Customer Recognition Capability ,AC= Accessibility, (1) Outcome quality) ,(2) Personnel quality,(3) Servicescape quality, (4) Social quality

According to the table of direct, indirect, and total effects on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok.

1. The findings revealed that brand identity (BI) had a statistically significant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services, mediated by emotional commitment (EC) and brand loyalty (BL). Specifically, the standardized regression coefficient (β) = 0.886, with a p-value of 0.004, indicating a strong and significant influence at the 0.05 level of significance.

2. Service quality in terms of cleanliness was found to play a significant role in influencing both emotional commitment and brand loyalty, which in turn affected the utilization of boutique hotel services in Bangkok. At the 0.05 level of statistical significance, the path coefficient was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.015 and a standardized regression coefficient (β) = 0.393*. This indicates a moderate indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services through the mediating roles of emotional commitment and brand loyalty.

3. Service quality in terms of design did not exhibit a statistically significant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok. The standardized regression coefficient (β) = -0.158, with a p-value of 0.201, which exceeds the 0.05 threshold for statistical significance. Although it was hypothesized that design-oriented service quality would positively influence emotional commitment and brand loyalty, the empirical evidence did not support this relationship within the current model

4. Service quality in terms of technical competence was found to have a significant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok through emotional commitment and brand loyalty. At the 0.05 level of significance, the path coefficient was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.044 and a standardized regression coefficient (β) = 0.771*, which has an indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok

5. Service quality related to confidence conditions was found to have a statistically significant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok through emotional commitment and brand loyalty. The path coefficient showed a standardized regression coefficient (β) of -1.006 with a p-value of 0.05, which has an indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok

6. Service quality in terms of price conditions was found to have an insignificant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok through emotional commitment and brand loyalty. The standardized regression coefficient (β) = -0.008 with a p-value of 0.803, indicating that the effect was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level which has an indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok

7. Service quality in terms of accessibility was found to have an insignificant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok through emotional commitment and brand loyalty. The standardized regression coefficient (β) = -0.14 with a p-value of 0.211, indicating that this effect was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level which has an indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok

8. Service quality in terms of acceptance was found to have an insignificant indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok through emotional commitment and brand loyalty. The standardized regression coefficient (β) = 0.21 with a p-value of 0.265, indicating that the effect was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level which has an indirect effect on the use of boutique hotel services in Bangkok

6. Discussions

The relationships among service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty in boutique hotels are significantly driven by customers' emotional commitment, which acts as an intrinsic motivational force. Specifically, dimensions such as outcome quality, personnel quality, services cape quality, and social quality play critical roles in fostering strong psychological attachment. Customers with a high level of emotional commitment are more likely to exhibit repeat usage of boutique hotel services and recommend them to others, thereby expanding the customer base through positive word of mouth.

This dynamic encompasses individual characteristics, the nature of the service offered by the boutique hotel, and the structural attributes of the hotel itself. Factors such as employees' work experience, the working environment, and the fulfillment of customers' expectations collectively contribute to

the interplay between service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty within the boutique hotel context.

The examination of the influence of service quality variables, brand identity, and brand loyalty on the usage of boutique hotel services in Bangkok revealed several significant findings. Brand identity was found to play a crucial role in enhancing emotional commitment and brand loyalty, which in turn positively affects customers' use of boutique hotel services. Additionally, service quality dimensions—including cleanliness, design, technical competence, confidence, price, and accessibility—were shown to influence emotional commitment and brand loyalty to varying degrees. Specifically, the study highlighted the importance of outcome quality, personnel quality, servicescape quality, and social quality as key factors that shape customers' emotional attachment and loyalty toward boutique hotel services. Furthermore, service quality related to acceptance was also identified as a contributing factor to emotional commitment and brand loyalty. Collectively, these findings suggest that multiple aspects of service quality, along with a strong brand identity, play vital roles in driving customer engagement and repeat patronage within the boutique hotel sector in Bangkok.

A hypothesis test was conducted regarding emotional commitment as a mediating variable in the relationship between service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty in boutique hotels in Bangkok. The indices indicating goodness-of-fit and model fit demonstrated the consistency and harmony of the causal relationships among service quality, brand identity, and brand loyalty in boutique hotels within the Bangkok metropolitan area.

6.1 Recommendation

(1) Boutique hotel operators should prioritize fostering emotional commitment among customers by building meaningful relationships, positive and memorable experiences, alongside maintaining high service quality, specifically in terms of cleanliness and technical competence. Additionally, cultivating a strong brand identity that resonates with customers' self-concepts is essential. This alignment can enhance long-term relationships and encourage repeat patronage.

(2) Future researchers interested in emotional commitment toward products may consider applying the presented framework as a guideline for developing long-term relationships with brands, thereby extending its applicability to brand management and customer loyalty studies.

7. Patents

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