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A CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP MODEL OF FACTORS INFLUENCING CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN PRIVATE HOSPITALS IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were 1) to study the causal factors that directly and indirectly influenced customer experience management, service quality and customer satisfaction towards customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand and 2) to develop a causal relationship model of factors influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand. This study is mixed-method research that utilizes quantitative research methods as the main approach and qualitative research methods to expand the confirmatory testing of the study results. This is a mixed method research. The quantitative research method was mainly used, and the qualitative research method was also used to expand the verification of the study results. The sample group in the quantitative research was 450 private hospital customers, which are 138 private hospitals and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand. The data was collected using a multistage sampling method. The used tool is a questionnaire using causal relationship analysis and the statistics of the structural equation model with the LISREL program to test the research hypothesis in terms of qualitative research from interviewing a group of 14 key informants. The results of the study revealed that the causal variables that directly influenced customer loyalty were customer satisfaction, service quality, and customer experience management. The study also found that the causal factors indirectly influencing loyalty through hospital customer satisfaction were service quality and customer experience management.

Keywords: Private Hospitals, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty

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Introduction

In an era of technological growth resulting from free trade, rapid information transmission, and high-speed communication, there are abundant options for customers to choose from in terms of goods and services. Organizations that can retain existing customers and attract new ones will ensure their survival. This is crucial in a competitive environment, especially service businesses that need to create impression, satisfaction, and loyalty in the minds of service users in order to build a customer base and stability for the organization. The private hospital business is a highly competitive and expanding industry. It is expected that in the year 2022, there will be an additional 2,000 beds (Ninkitsaranont, 2020). Hospital management trends are expected to become more challenging, particularly due to the scarcity of specialized medical professionals and medical personnel, higher operating costs, and increased investments. Therefore, hospitals need to evaluate the factors that impact their operations (Ninkitsaranont, 2020) such as reputation, image, service quality, cost reduction, customer base expansion, location, expertise, and medical credibility, including reasonable pricing. These factors present challenges for private hospital businesses in the future, leading to a trend of networking, consolidation, and market expansion to various cities. Considering the issues faced by private hospital businesses in Thailand as mentioned above, there is a keen interest in studying customer satisfaction in the private hospital sector in Thailand because customer satisfaction is of utmost importance to hospital businesses. It ensures the long-term sustainability of the business by generating profits (Salim & Rodhiah, 2022).

Based on these reasons, the researcher is interested in studying the causal factors that influence the creation of customer satisfaction regarding customer experience management, service quality, and customer satisfaction which are the core of service businesses that can create customer satisfaction leading to continuous service utilization (Chavengsup et al., 2021). The study will focus on exploring customer satisfaction in the private hospital sector in Thailand as it is considered a highly competitive industry with high investments and constant adaptation to the situation. The target group will consist of middle to high-income individuals who have access to hospitals and network hospitals nationwide. According to the literature review in Thailand, despite the continuous research on customer satisfaction in hospitals, no in-depth studies have been conducted to develop models of the aforementioned variables and study them in a holistic approach to private hospitals across Thailand. The results of this study will contribute to the establishment of strategies for creating customer satisfaction in the private hospital industry through customer experience management and a focus on service quality, aiming to generate positive influence, build trust, and create satisfaction within the customers. Additionally, it will identify weaknesses and develop improvement strategies to enhance competitiveness in future business competition.

Literature Review

Customer Experience Management

Based on the ideas of Meyer & Schwager (2007), customer experience management refers to responding to the needs within customers' minds and providing anticipatory responses based on the specific characteristics of individual customers, both directly and indirectly. Direct responses include customers' purchases and various services received from the organization, while indirect responses include recommendations from employees, word-of-mouth compliments, criticism from users, advertising, and news reports. This concept is correspondent with Phongjirakhorn et al. (2020) who discussed customer experience management based on the work of Klaus et al. (2013). They stated that perceiving customer experiences, which can be categorized into "brand experience" (pre-purchase), "service experience" (during purchase), and "post-purchase experience" significantly impact the overall quality of customer experiences. These experiences, in turn, have significant positive effects

on marketing outcomes, such as customer spending, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth communication. Additionally, Wigraisakda & Kittisaknawin (2019) emphasized the importance of customer experiences in service businesses, identifying 4 dimensions; pre-service experiences, in-service experiences, post-service experiences, and product experiences. The research findings showed that effectively managing customer experiences can enable businesses to navigate crises with strength and create new marketing phenomena that foster strong customer brand loyalty. This is achieved through valuable life experiences, expressing commitment by sharing positive experiences with others, impressing and satisfying consumers. From the literature review, it is evident that various components of customer experience management share similarities. Therefore, a new grouping of components that aligns with the context of hospital businesses was proposed. The researcher selected components related to managing customer experiences based on the concept of Wigraisakda & Kittisaknawin (2019) and focused on 3 dimensions; pre-service experiences, in-service experiences, and post-service experiences.

Service Quality

The study of service quality based on the concept of Parasuraman et al. (1985) is widely cited in numerous research studies due to the Service-Quality Model, which emphasizes important customer expectations and the delivery of expected service quality. Service quality refers to the excellence in service provided by service providers that captures and delivers a sense of satisfaction to customers, generating positive relationships and customer loyalty. It also stimulates customers to consistently repurchase products or services and contributes to a sustainable and positive customer base. The SERVQUAL model includes five dimensions of service quality; reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. This agrees with Kalhor et al. (2021) stating that the Service Quality which encompasses positive attitudes towards service in the context of private hospitals consists of; 1) Tangibles, which are physical elements such as facilities, medical equipment, and amenities that patients can perceive; 2) Responsiveness, which refers to easy, convenient, and prompt access to services without delays; 3) Assurance, involving the confidence in healthcare providers, medical personnel, and supporting staff who possess knowledge, abilities, and service skills; and 4) Empathy, demonstrated through the ability to care, provide comfort, show concern, and immediately response to customer needs. The research conducted by Pandee et al. (2020) investigated factors influencing patient satisfaction with nursing services in private hospitals in the central region of Thailand. The study identified the following 5 components; tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy. The research result revealed that the factor of perceived service quality and the perceived price of nursing services directly and indirectly influenced the loyalty of inpatient customers. The indirect path influenced through satisfaction, and it was found that satisfaction directly influenced inpatient customer loyalty.

Through a literature review, it was observed that several components of service quality share similarities, prompting the grouping of related components to align with the hospital business context. The researcher carefully selected and examined the components relevant to service quality based on the concepts proposed by Pandee et al. (2020). These components include tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy.

Customer Satisfaction

Areerattanasak et al. (2020) discussed the concept of customer satisfaction, stating that it is a feeling and opinion related to the attitudes of individuals that arise from the experiences of customers entering service-providing establishments. Customer satisfaction can vary based on different factors and experience. According to Kotler & Keller (2016), customer satisfaction refers to the personal feeling when receiving what is desired or experiencing disappointment, which results from comparing perception with expectations. If the perception of receiving what is desired aligns with the customer's expectations, satisfaction will be achieved. This agrees

with Chavengsup et al. (2021) stating that customer satisfaction is an attitude of individuals towards various aspects, an internal state that relates to the feelings of individuals who have achieved success in both quantity and quality aspects of their work. It arises from the driving forces within individuals that result from their efforts to achieve certain goals in order to fulfill existing needs or expectations. When these goals are achieved, satisfaction occurs, reflecting back to the starting point and continuing in a cycle. Therefore, customer satisfaction is the heart of a service-providing business, as it creates satisfaction that will bring customers back for service again in the future. Any business or organization that fails to create customer satisfaction will ultimately face competition or indifference from customers, resulting in no repeat usage. Based on the research conducted by Soonthonsmai (2020) studying the causal model of satisfaction in terms of service quality and health-oriented tourism, all 8 components were examined, including product, price, location, promotion, service provider, result and quality, service process, and physical characteristics. The study found that the developed model is consistent with empirical data.

According to the literature review, several components of customer satisfaction were found to possess similar characteristics. Therefore, these components were grouped together to be more consistent with the context of the hospital business. The researcher considered and selected the components related to customer satisfaction based on the ideas of Soonthonsmai (2020) resulting in six dimensions; product, price, promotion, service provider, physical characteristics, and service process.

Customer Loyalty

Alismaili et al. (2021) stated that customer loyalty refers to consistent satisfaction to the extent that customers may repeatedly purchase the same company's products. The importance of customer loyalty lies in the fact that when customers are loyal to a brand, it can maintain and increase its market share. If customers are loyal to a brand, they tend to make repeat purchases or continuously purchase products from that brand. Furthermore, customer loyalty can also help reduce marketing costs for businesses because customers who are loyal to a brand often recommend or refer to acquaintances to purchase the products and services of that brand. In measuring customer loyalty in the hospital business, it has been improved based on the study of Kotler & Keller (2016) which includes 5 components; positive attitude, word-of-mouth, intention to repurchase, reduced alternatives, and top-of-mind.

From the literature review, the researcher has considered and selected to study 3 variables influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals, with the customer satisfaction variable selected as the intermediate variable. From the study, it was found that there were people who studied the satisfaction variables by designating them as dependent variable of both variables. The linkage from the literature review can be summarized to form a research conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1.

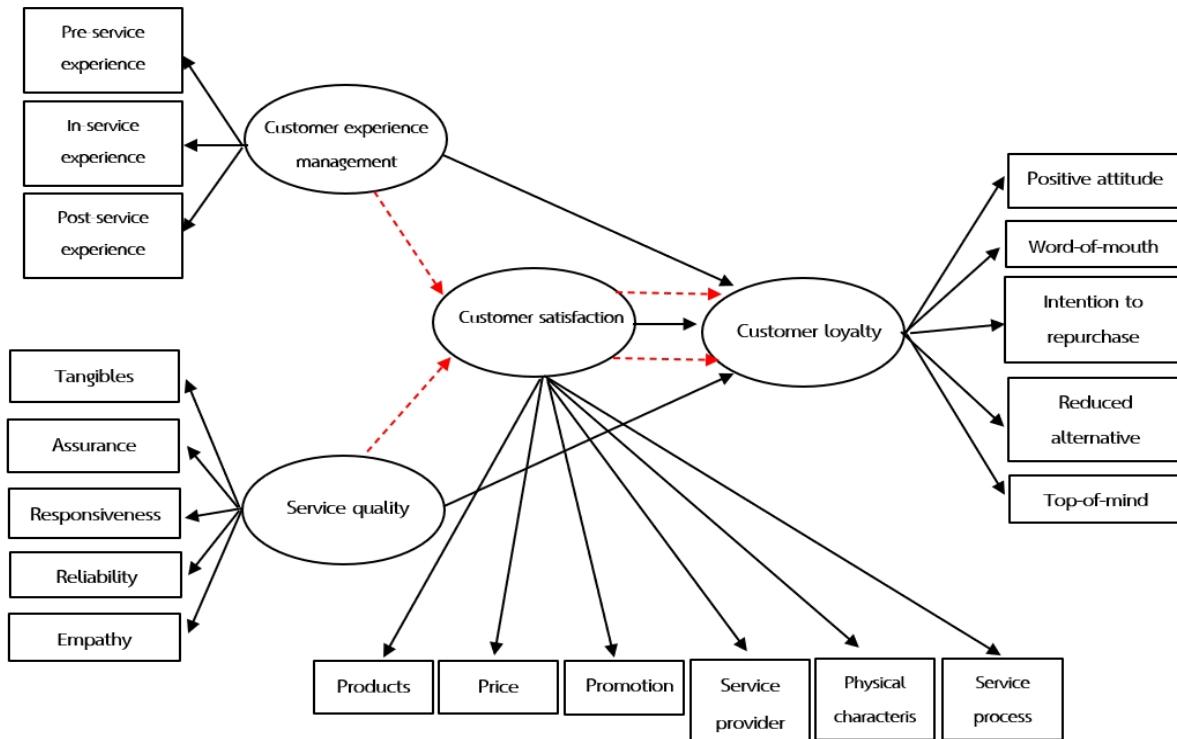


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

This is mixed method research. The exploratory sequential method can be divided into 2 phases to achieve the research's objectives. The first phase of the research was quantitative. The researcher selected a quantitative research methodology to test the hypothesis and the conceptual framework of the causal relationship model of factors influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand. The second phase of the research was qualitative research to bring consensus on various factors related to customer loyalty variables. It confirms the results of the quantitative research study with qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with key informants.

First Phase of the Research: Quantitative Research

The population is private hospital customers which are 138 private hospitals and affiliated hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand. The exact number is unknown. The sample group for this research was customers who used the services of private hospitals continuously and regularly in the past 12 months. The period of study and data collection started from March-November 2022. The researcher has determined the sample size using Multivariate Analysis Technique. From the concept of Structural Equation Modeling for Estimation Technique for linear structural equation analysis with the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE), Hair et al. (2019) suggested that the sample should be greater than 400 units because it is a consistent method, efficient and independent of measurement in order to make the data analysis results have confidence in the test. In addition, from the Rule of Thumb, it is defined that sample size per number of variables observed in the model that are sufficient for data analysis should have a ratio of 10-20: 1. In this research, there were 19 observed variables. The observed variables must have a sample number of at least 380 people to prevent Incomplete Questionnaire possibly occurring in the collection of questionnaire data. The researcher therefore collected from a sample of 450 people in this research.

The researcher requested a letter from the Graduate School, Rattana Bundit University, in order to issue a letter requesting assistance from private hospital administrators for collecting data for research purposes. Then, the coordination was made with the private hospital that was the sample in the research to send a letter of support via email or contact by phone to clarify the purpose, describe the procedure for data collection, and ask for permission to collect data. The researcher delivered the questionnaire as an online survey. The sample group conducted an online questionnaire by scanning a QR Code to answer the questionnaire via mobile phone or other communication devices for the hospital customers and document forms for customers who are not comfortable answering questionnaires online.

For random sampling to collect data from quantitative research, the researcher conducted multi-stage sampling with the following steps.

Step 1: Stratified random sampling was used by dividing the stratum into 4 regions using criteria consistent with the division of the Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior to classify by location of the private hospitals that were sampled as shown in Table 1. Step 2: The researcher uses a simple random sampling method by drawing lots omitted to select private hospitals by segmented regions and collecting data with customers in proportion to the size.

Table 1 Population used in quantitative research

Regions	Number of hospitals	Samples
Northern region	18	59
Southern region	13	42
Central region	95	310
Northeastern region	12	39
Total	138	450

Step 3: Convenience Sampling was used to collect data from customers from private hospitals drawn in each region as shown in Table 2 until the desired number was reached.

Close-Ended Questionnaire was used to be divided into 6 parts; part 1: general information of the respondents as a questionnaire about the general information of the respondents with the free-elective questions, part 2: Customer Experience Management referring to the concept of Wigraisakda & Kittisaknawin (2019), part 3 is Service Quality based on the concept of Pandee et al. (2020), part 4 is Customer Satisfaction referring to the concept of Soonthonsmai (2020) while part 5 is Customer Loyalty based on the concept of Kotler & Keller (2016). In parts 2-5, the significance level was used as Rating Scale of Likert in 5 levels. The last one is part 6, additional suggestions, which are open-ended questions.

The questionnaire that passed the quality verification process of the research tool was content validity to determine the consistency between the question and the operational definition of IOC: Item Objective Congruence (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1997), including all 5 experts with a total mean of 0.937. The Try Out was performed to find the Reliability of 30 sets. The statistical value obtained was between 0.761-0.972.

Second Phase of the Research: Qualitative Research

The researcher chose qualitative research methodology because he wanted to support the results obtained from quantitative research and add details of the study. It is a collection of Field Research with a sample group of key informants related to the loyalty of private hospital customers in Thailand. The researcher defined the research method as follows. The population was people involved in the private hospital business in Thailand. Regarding the group of key informants, the researcher selected from representatives, namely those involved with experience in the field and private hospital customers in Thailand. The exact number of the population is unknown, divided into 3 groups. The 1st group is 5 private hospital administrators

in Thailand with at least 5 years of work experience responsible for creating success and management of the organization to follow the vision including giving advice and supporting personnel in the organization. The 2nd group is a group of 5 practitioners working in private hospitals in Thailand with at least 5 years of work experience who are responsible for hospitality and customer care. The 3rd group is 4 regular customers of private hospitals in Thailand. This is a total of 14 people. The purposive random sampling was used. The tool used for data collection was Semi-Structural Interview which consists of 3 parts. Part 1 is personal information about interview respondents. Part 2 is information on knowledge and understanding of research variables based on respondents' perceptions. Part 3 is recommendations and verification on Credibility of the qualitative data using the Triangulation method. The Data Triangulation is to prove that the data has been obtained correctly or not. The data source was examined. The source to be considered in the verification is the time source. It is to consider whether the data at different time will be the same or not. The location source is to consider whether the data from different places are the same or not. The person source is to consider whether the data will be the same when the person giving the data changes or not (Silverman, 2021).

Regarding the quantitative data analysis, 450 sets of collected data were validated in this study prior to data recording and terminology validation of the given data. The modifications were performed, and the data were processed according to the research's objectives. The preliminary data analysis is to find descriptive statistics for general characteristics of the samples for each variable, namely frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis and correlation coefficient. Then, the analysis was conducted with the Confirm Factor Analysis (CFA) to check the consistency of the measurement model in all variables. The latent causal structure relationship model was analyzed with LISREL program.

The qualitative data analysis was made with Content Analysis starting with organizing the data in terms of content to be in the form of documents that are organized and systematic. Then, all the organized data were broken down into smaller units according to the specific meaning of each unit (Silverman, 2021).

Research Findings

Quantitative Research Results

For the general data of most respondents, 58.0% were female, 82.0% were single, 47.1% has the age range of 31-40 years, 69.3% had the education level of bachelor's degree. Most of their occupations were employees/ private company employees representing 60.7% with an average monthly income of 30,000-50,000 baht or 68.4%.

The results of analysis to test the research hypothesis about the confirmation factor analysis of the structural equation model influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand had a statistical p-value of 0.05243, higher than alpha 0.05. The main hypothesis had to be accepted to show that the hypothesis is consistent with the empirical data. The statistical values were considered from the processing results through the following criteria. (1) Chi-squared ratio (χ^2/df) was 1.846, GFI was 0.97, the concordance index (GFI) was 0.97, Adjusted (AGFI) was 0.96, Comparative Conformity Index (CFI) was 0.98, SRMR was 0.0399.

It shows that the hypothesis is consistent with the empirical data by considering the statistical values from the processing results through the specified criteria as follows. (1) Chi-squared ratio equals to 1.846, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) equals to 0.97, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) equals to 0.96, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) equals to 0.98. SRMR was 0.0399. The Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.0479. The Critical N (CN) was 527.11. All of which met the specified criteria. It shows that the hypothetical structural equation model influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand developed by the researcher is consistent with the empirical data and research hypothesis testing. The analytical

findings accept assumptions made to clarify conclusions and provide a better view of the trajectories of relationships. This study explains that the causal factor most influencing the loyalty of private hospital customers in Thailand is the influence of customer satisfaction followed by the service quality factor. The least is Customer Experience Management Factors as shown in Figure 2.

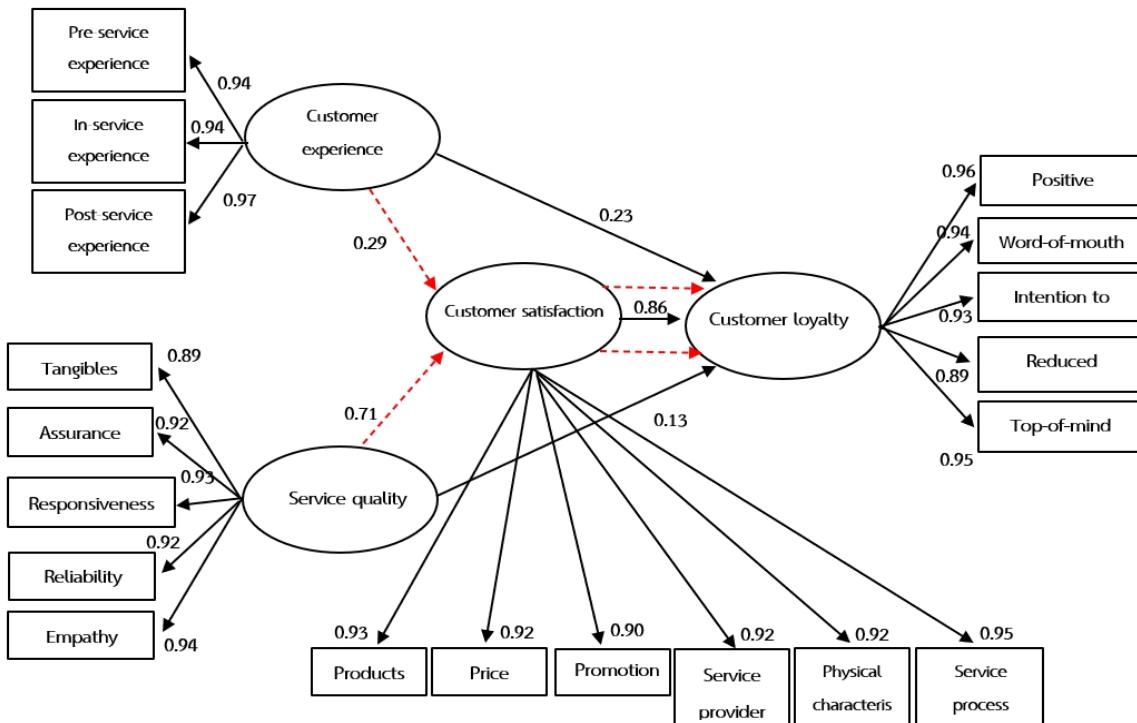


Figure 2 Influence weights and forecast weights structural equations influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand

The analysis of direct, indirect and overall influences between the cause and effect factors by means of path analysis can be divided into the following issues:

Direct Influence: The causal factor most directly influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand was customer satisfaction with the direct influence forecast weight of 0.86, followed by the customer experience management factor with direct influence forecast weight of 0.23. The least was the service quality factor with a direct influence of 0.13. For the factor of customer satisfaction, the direct influencing causal factor was the service quality factor. The direct influence forecasting weight was 0.71, followed by the customer experience management factor. The direct influence prediction weight was 0.29.

Indirect Influence: The causal factor that indirectly influenced customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand the most was service quality. The direct influence forecasting weight was 0.610, followed by the customer experience management factor. The direct influence prediction weight was 0.2494 and was the least.

Overall Influence: From the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, it is known that the overall causal factors influence customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand. The largest combined causal influence on customer loyalty of private and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand was the overall influence on customer satisfaction. The overall influence weight was 0.86, followed by the service quality factor with a total influence weight of 0.74. The least is the customer experience management factor with the overall influence weight of 0.479.

Table 2 Direct, indirect and overall influences of factors influencing customer loyalty of private and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand.

Factors	Customer satisfaction			Customer loyalty		
	(DE)	(IE)	(TE)	(DE)	(IE)	(TE)
Customer experience management	0.29	-	0.29	0.23	0.2494	0.4794
Service quality	0.71	-	0.71	0.13	0.610	0.74
Customer satisfaction	-	-	-	0.86	-	0.86

Qualitative Research Findings

According to the qualitative data analysis by phenomenology methodology, the researcher considers the selection of key informants who are stakeholders. There are 14 stakeholders in the private hospital business and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand, divided into 3 groups as shown in Table 4. The researcher used a purposive sampling method.

Table 4 shows the number of key informants of the qualitative research.

Groups	Key Informants	Number
1	Executives of private hospitals and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand	5
2	Practitioners in private hospitals and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand	5
3	Regular customers of private hospitals and network hospitals listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand	4
Total		14

The qualitative research results provided information to support the quantitative research findings both following and against the hypotheses. In conclusion, for the qualitative research, the opinions of the three groups of key informants were consistent and supported the results of the quantitative research hypothesis testing. The causal factors influencing customer loyalty is the customer satisfaction factor, service quality factor and customer experience management factors with a positive influence on customer loyalty. In addition, the qualitative research findings helped the researcher write the definition of the terminology of the studied variables. In the context of private hospital business in Thailand, the meaning can be given in the context of the study with greater clarity.

Conclusion and Discussion

From the research objective 1) to study the factors directly and indirectly influencing customer experience management, service quality and customer satisfaction towards customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand. The study found that the path equation of the relationship between the Independent Variable with Direct Effect on the Dependent Variable in the developed and Adjust Model shows that the causal variables have a direct influence on the loyalty of private hospital customers, including customer satisfaction factor, service quality factor, and customer experience management factor.

From the study, the researcher found that service process satisfaction is the most important indicator that influences building customer loyalty. This is consistent with Chavengsup et al. (2021) discovering that the satisfaction of service users of Chularat 3 Hospital which was entirely at the highest level was the aspect of providing services that were convenient. Customers with higher levels of satisfaction can have an influence on increasing customer loyalty levels. The consensus was that satisfaction directly influenced patient loyalty. Patients with higher satisfaction levels also had higher levels of hospital loyalty. A study by Salim &

Rodhiah (2022) indicates that brand loyalty occurs after customer satisfaction and there will be a tendency to return using the same brand continuously due to familiarity.

In terms of service quality, the results of the study are consistent with the research of Nakhonsi (2018) and Charoenlertsiri & Rammanust (2020) discovering that the factors of service quality and customer satisfaction affects customer loyalty. Iqbal et al. (2018) also studied service quality and hospital customer loyalty. The study found a significant positive relationship between service quality and loyalty directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction. According to Sholeh & Chalidyanto (2021) stating that the effect of service quality has a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty, hospitals need to improve service quality to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Regarding the Customer Experience Management Factors, the research findings agree with the study of Wigraisakda & Kittisaknawin (2019) finding the importance of customer experience in service businesses to create a competitive advantage in the future world market. In addition, Scherpen et al. (2018) found that Customer Experience Management can improve customer loyalty and thus drive long-term growth for the organization. This is correspondent with research by Hasfar et al. (2020) discovering that customer experience management has a positive and significant influence on increasing customer loyalty levels.

From the research objective 2) to develop a causal relationship model of factors influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand, the study found the factors that can increase hospital customer loyalty. The factors are 1) customer satisfaction, 2) service quality, and 3) customer experience management. All three variables influenced the degree of increasing loyalty of private hospital customers in Thailand with statistical significance at the .05 level.

Recommendations and Future Research

- 1) According to the analysis and development of the relationship model of factors influencing customer loyalty in private hospitals in Thailand, it was found that all the theoretical causal variables studied by the researcher jointly explained the variance in customer loyalty of private hospital customers in Thailand. Therefore, in the next research, other causal variables that may influence customer loyalty, such as corporate image, unified marketing communications marketing activities, marketing mix, service innovation and digital innovation should be studied.
- 2) The scope of the study should be expanded on customer loyalty in other similar hospitality industries in Thailand such as hotel, restaurant and tourism businesses to check whether the model is consistent with the empirical data or not.
- 3) As this research studied only a sample of Thai customers, in the next study, a sample of foreigners visiting private hospitals in Thailand should be studied in order to increase the diversity and insights from the research.

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