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Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty as Influenced by Service Quality, Trust, and Perceived Value in Chinese Language Training Centers in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

Learning the Chinese language as a third language (after English as a second language) is trending among younger generations in Thailand, indicating the need for Chinese language training centers. In this study, five dimensions of service quality were investigated (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy), together with trust and perceived value, to observe their contribution to customer satisfaction at Chinese language training centers in Bangkok. Additionally, the influence of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and five dimensions of loyalty outcomes were examined—identification, exclusive consideration, advocacy, strength of preference, and share of wallet. Survey data was collected (*N* = 482) and analyzed using the structural equation modeling technique. The findings showed that the assurance dimension of service quality had a positive influence on customer satisfaction, and reliability and empathy of service quality had a positive influence on trust. Management could enhance trust through arranging appropriate Chinese classes, giving strong service support, and providing flexible class schedules. Customer satisfaction could be increased through hiring more experienced teachers and offering scholarship possibilities.

Keywords: *Service quality, perceived value, trust, customer responses*

Introduction and Literature Review

There is worldwide enthusiasm for learning the Chinese language. This has been shown also in Thailand (Siripetch, 2020). The purpose of this study was to analyze the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty at selected Chinese language training centers. The following research questions were asked:

1. What are the influences of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction at Chinese language training centers in Bangkok, Thailand?
2. What are the influences of perceived value and trust on customer satisfaction?
3. What is the influence of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty?

Service quality is the customer's judgment of overall excellence of a service (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The best-known model to study service quality is the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which provides a set of five dimensions for measuring customer service satisfaction. These dimensions are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The current study adapted the SERVQUAL model to measure the service quality of Chinese language training services.

Perceived value is one of the most important factors giving a competitive advantage in business (Parasuraman, 1997). According to Zeithaml (1988), perceived value is a customer's overall assessment of product utility based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. Buyers choose products based on perceived value, which comes from the tangible needs of quality, price, and convenience.

In the study of Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust was defined as "confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity." They considered it a key mediating construct in relationship exchanges. Trust arises when a customer can see that employees respond, and they recognize that this trust is different from other service-quality dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Trust is essential for building and maintaining long-term relationships (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000).

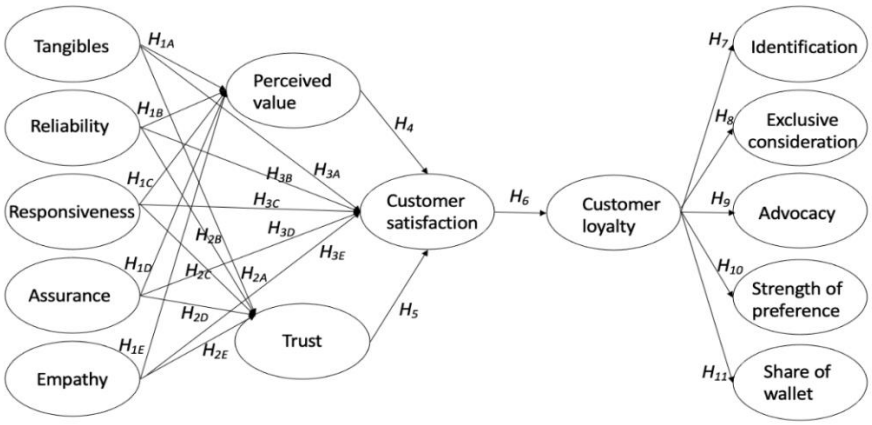
According to Kotler (2000), customer satisfaction is related to a person's positive or negative feelings after comparing the perceived performance of products or services with their expectations. In previous research, it was found that satisfied customers buy more products or services, recommend products to others, and were less price sensitive as a result (Homburg et al., 2005). By contrast, Oliver

(1997) considered customer satisfaction a perception that some needs had been fulfilled. Satisfaction is an evaluation that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, gives an appropriate level of fulfillment.

Customer loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a chosen product or service, regardless of situational influence or marketing activities that make consumers want to choose other products or service (Oliver, 1997). It is more cost effective to have loyal customers than to find new customers (Thomas & Tobe, 2013). In previous studies loyalty outcomes have been examined including repurchase intentions (Zeithaml et al., 1996), lower switching intentions (Keaveney, 1995), increased strength of preference (Dick & Basu, 1994), positive word-of-mouth or recommendations (Zeithaml et al., 1996), exclusive purchasing (White & Schneider, 2000), identifying with the service provider through exclusive affiliation (Butcher et al., 2001), and a willingness to pay a price premium for a given service (Zeithaml et al. 1996).

In this study, the research model illustrated in Figure 1 was used. It was proposed that five dimensions of service quality were the main drivers used to assess perceived value in Chinese language training centers. These five dimensions of service quality are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Cornin & Taylor, 1992).

Figure 1 *Theoretical Framework*



On the basis of the theoretical framework, the initial groups of hypotheses adopted for this study were as follows:

Group 1 Hypotheses—H_{1a}: The tangible dimension of service quality positively influences perceived value in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{1b}: The reliability dimension of service quality positively influences perceived value in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{1c}: The responsiveness dimension of service quality positively influences perceived value in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{1d}: The assurance dimension of service quality positively influences perceived value in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{1e}: The empathy dimension of service quality positively influences perceived value in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok.

The elements of quality in service were expected to affect trust directly. This is because the elements of service represent the best way to convey the trustworthiness of the system. Gefen et al. (2003) suggested that different determinants affected trust and showed that service quality had a positive influence on customer trust. Therefore, a further cluster of hypotheses was made:

Group 2 Hypotheses—H_{2a}: The tangible dimension of service quality positively influences trust in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{2b}: The reliability dimension of service quality positively influences trust in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{2c}: The responsiveness dimension of service quality positively influences trust in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{2d}: The assurance dimension of service quality positively influences trust in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{2e}: The empathy dimension of service quality positively influences trust in Chinese

language training centers in Bangkok.

A previous study indicated that customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, based on thinking or feeling, occurred when a customer had one or many service experiences (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Satisfaction is an emotional response after purchasing a product or service where the customer considers both perceived and expected quality. Iacobucci et al. (1995) conducted an empirical study of these two variables using qualitative techniques. They compared service quality and customer satisfaction, and found that the former was associated with managerial delivery of service, while the latter was related to customers' experiences with that service. They claimed that if the company made improvements contrary to what customers say their needed, the result would not be improved customer satisfaction. Thus, greater service quality leads to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Johns et al., 2004). Therefore, a third group of hypotheses was made as follows:

Group 3 Hypotheses—H_{3a}: The tangible dimension of service quality positively influences satisfaction in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{3b}: The reliability dimension of service quality positively influences satisfaction in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; $H_{3c:}$: The responsiveness dimension of service quality positively influences satisfaction in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok; H_{3d}: The assurance dimension of service quality positively influences satisfaction in Chinese language centers in Bangkok; H_{3e}: The empathy dimension of service quality positively influences satisfaction in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok;.

According to Zeithaml (1988), perceived value has a prior effect on buying intentions and actions, and a number of studies have empirically validated this proposition (Ennew & Binks 1999; Wakefield & Barnes 1996). According to a study by Glaveli et al. (2006), perceived value directly influences the level of customer satisfaction. Based on these previous studies, a fourth hypothesis was formulated.

H_4: Perceived value positively influences customer satisfaction in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok.

Researchers have established that trust is essential for building and maintaining long-term relationships (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). In some studies, it has been proposed that trust precedes satisfaction (Gul, 2014); at first, customers trust the service providers based on factors that exert effects on satisfaction. This led to the formulation of the fifth hypothesis for the model:

H_5: There is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and trust in Chinese language training centers in Bangkok.

Previous studies have shown that satisfied customers show loyalty by purchasing more products or services, recommending products to others, and being less price sensitive (Homburg et al., 2005). Throughout the literature, there are numerous studies that have indicated that there is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kuo et al., 2009). However, others (Seiders et al., 2005) noted that high customer satisfaction does not always indicate high loyalty. This led us to propose a sixth hypothesis adopted for the model:

H_6: Customer satisfaction positively influences customer loyalty.

Customers connect with a company as a result of involvement with it, their feeling of belonging, or their shared values with providers (Butcher et al. 2001). Iacobucci (1992) suggested that services, as opposed to goods, provided more incentive for customers to form a comparative identity because of their interpersonal nature. This led us to propose a seventh hypothesis adopted for the model.

H_7: Customer's level of loyalty positively influences identification.

One of the outcomes of customer loyalty is exclusive consideration. This refers to the range of a customer's consideration-set when purchasing a particular type of service (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990; Kardes et al. 1993). These authors also suggested that customers try to limit the buying choices to reduce the mental effort needed to decide which brands to purchase. According to Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), customers build loyal relationships with service providers to limit choice-set in much the same way they do with brand goods. This led us to propose an eighth hypothesis for the model.

H_8: Customer's level of loyalty positively influences exclusive consideration.

Loyal customers also are more likely to use word-of-mouth to suggest that their friends, relatives, and other potential customers buy products and services (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). A number of studies have linked service quality and satisfaction to consumer advocacy (Butcher at al. 2001; Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000). These previous studies indicated that as customers become more committed to a service provider, the likelihood of them becoming an advocate increased. This led us to propose a ninth hypothesis adopted for the model.

H_9: Customer's level of loyalty positively influences advocacy.

Strength of preference is about attitude and perception. In order for people to show strength of preference, they must display an attitude that reflects that they value the relationship between themselves and the company. Furthermore, they must show their loyalty to their preferred company and have a positive feeling (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Therefore, these studies showed that loyalty had an influence on how constructs, such as service quality, related to a consumer's strength of preference. This led us to propose a tenth hypothesis adopted for the model.

H_{10}: Customer's level of loyalty positively influences strength of preference.

Share of wallet is defined as a customer's desire to purchase what a service provider offers (Day, 1976). Reynolds and Beatty (1999) measured the effects of both loyalty to a store and to a salesperson based on share of wallet, and found a significant relationship. Thus, the literature supports the idea that customer loyalty drives share of wallet, leading to an eleventh proposed hypothesis for the model.

H_{11}: Customer's level of loyalty positively influences share of wallet.

Table 1 *Definitions Previously Used and Operational Definitions*

Variables	Definitions (Previous Studies)	Operational Definitions (This Study)
Service Quality	Service quality is a customer's judgment of overall excellence of the service or the difference between customer's expectation and the actual service performed or perceived. (Parasuraman et al., 1985)	A customer's recognition of the standard of service, or how actual service performed by the Chinese language training center differs from the customer's expectation.
Satisfaction	Customer satisfaction is defined as an overall evaluation based on total purchase and consumption experience with the good or service over time. (Fornell et al., 1996)	An overall estimation of the complete purchase and consumption experience with the Chinese language training center over time.
Perceived Value	Perceived value is the customer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. (Zeithaml, 1988)	A customers' overall measurement of the language training service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.
Trust	Trust is a customer's confidence that a service provider is dependable and can be relied upon to deliver on its promises. (Morgan and Hunt, 1994)	Trust is a customer's confidence that the Chinese language training center is dependable and can be relied upon to deliver on its promises.
Loyalty	A deeply held commitment to re-buy a preferred product consistently in the future, thus causing repetitive same brand purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior. (Oliver, 1999)	A strong intention to continue to purchase the Chinese language center's service in the future, in spite of any situational influence and marketing efforts that might cause switching behavior.

Methodology

The target population of this study were the people who paid for Chinese language training for themselves or others at eight branches of one Chinese language training center. A pilot study was conducted using 30 samples to test the reliability and validity of the instrument. After the pretest, the main data collection was conducted from a convenience sample of 600 who completed a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 482 usable questionnaires from respondents were analyzed after screening out incomplete questionnaires.

The questionnaire contained 22 items covering five dimensions of service quality adapted from work done by Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Parasuraman et al. (1988); six items about perceived value based on Zeithaml (1988); six items about satisfaction adapted from Fornell et al. (1996); nine items about trust adapted from Morgan & Hunt (1994); eight items about loyalty adapted from Oliver (1999) and 18 items about loyalty outcomes adapted from Ganesh et al. (2000). This study used five-point Likert scales to measure the constructs, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

There were three steps in the data analysis process. First, Cronbach's alpha was used to analyze the reliability of the scale used to measure variables. All variables ranged from .819 to .929. Second, the discriminant validity of the questionnaire was measured by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Third, the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was used to test the proposed model and assumptions. In the original set of questionnaires for this study, there were 69 items. Through the CFA and SEM processes, 32 items were deleted. In the final SEM model (see Figure 2 in the Results section), there were 15 scale items for service quality (22 original scale items), two scale items for perceived value (six original scale items), two scale items for trust (six original scale items), six scale items for satisfaction (nine original scale items), two scale items for loyalty (eight original scale items), and 10 scale items for loyalty outcome (18 original scale items).

Results and Discussion

In this study, 600 questionnaires were distributed and 482 (80.3%) responses were deemed fit for further analysis. The respondents came from eight districts of Bangkok. The demographic profile showed that respondents were 77.6% female and 22.4% male, and the dominant age group was 20 to 40 years (72.2%), followed by 41 to 60 years (24.7%), above 60 years (2.1%), and a few were under 20 years (1.0%). A majority of respondents had master's degrees (72.6%), followed by bachelor's degrees (18.7%), middle or high school diplomas (7.1%), doctoral degrees (1.0%), and a few held primary school training or under (0.6%). The majority of respondents had a monthly income of 40,001~60,000 Baht (51.9%) and of 20,001~40,000 Baht (40.0%), while 4.1% had a monthly income of 60,000~80,000 Baht, 2.5% had a monthly income above 80,000 Baht, and 1.5% had a monthly income under 20,000 Baht.

In order to confirm the hypothesized relationships among variables and their underlying constructs, CFA and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) approaches were used. Four groups were included in the measurement model, namely, Group (1) tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy; Group (2) perceived value and trust; Group (3) satisfaction and loyalty; and Group (4) identification, exclusive consideration, advocacy, strength of preference, and share of wallet. Each variable within a group related to one another, and thus it was faster to get acceptable model fit indices by looking at the modified indices.

Several fit indices were used to validate fitness of the proposed framework to the observed population, including standardized root mean square residual (SRMR < .09) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .06) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model fit options are presented in Table 2. The current research used RMSEA and SRMR to judge the quality of the model fit, as the data showed the most valid results with these indices.

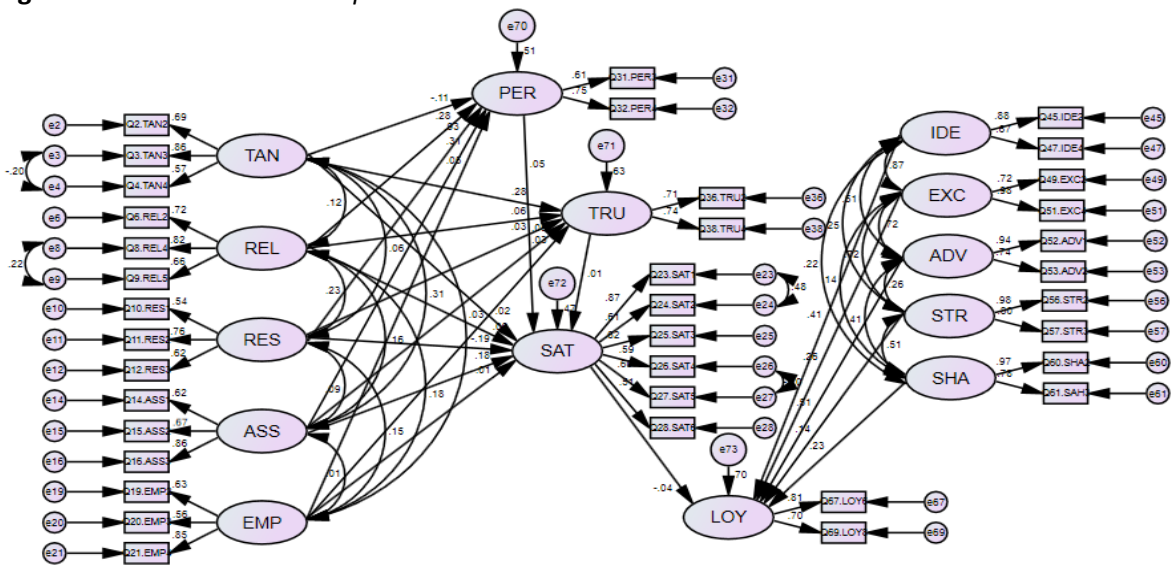
Table 2 *Model Fit Indices Obtained*

Item	CMIN/*df*	CFI	RMR	SRMR	RMSEA
Fit Criteria	<3.0	> .90	< .05	< .09	< .05
CFA Group (1)	1.234	.982	.024	.041	.022
CFA Group (2)	3.307	.973	.025	.045	.055
CFA Group (3)	1.250	.996	.013	.027	.023
CFA Group (4)	8.786	.914	.027	.053	.135
SEM	2.237	.881	.040	.051	.046

Note: CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMR = Root mean square residual; SRMR = Standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA= Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

In addition, in the CFA test, composite reliability (CR > .70) and average variance extracted (AVE > .50) values were obtained to confirm the validity and convergent validity of the scales (Bagozzi, 1980; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The level of fit to the SEM model is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 *Final SEM Model Adopted and Values Obtained*



Eleven hypotheses were supported by the data analysis as shown in Table 3. These were H_{1b}, H_{1d}, H_{1e}, H_{2b}, H_{2e}, H_{3d}, H_7, H_8, H_9, H_{10}, and H_{11}. In the H_1 group, it was hypothesized that a relationship existed among the five dimensions of service quality and perceived value. Reliability, assurance, and empathy were the dimensions that supported perceived value. These result are consistent with past research data (Azman et al., 2009; Cigdem & Berkehan, 2016), which showed that service quality had a significant influence on perceived value. Customers recognize perceived value from the Chinese language training centers and believe they can accurately fulfill service commitments, and provide knowledge and courtesy with a personalized focus on customers.

Table 3 *Summary of Testing Results*

	Path Hypothesis	Path Estimates	Standard Error	Significance Level (*p*-value)	Findings
H_{1a}	Tangible→Perceived Value	-0.126	0.08	.118	Not supported
H_{1b}	Reliability→Perceived Value	0.281	0.099	.005**	Supported
H_{1c}	Responsiveness→Perceived Value	-0.068	0.101	.503	Not supported
H_{1d}	Assurance→Perceived Value	0.233	0.114	.042*	Supported
H_{1e}	Empathy→Perceived Value	0.914	0.091	.033**	Supported
H_{2a}	Tangible→Trust	0.025	0.075	.734	Not supported
H_{2b}	Reliability→Trust	0.305	0.105	.004**	Supported
H_{2c}	Responsiveness→Trust	-0.123	0.1	.221	Not supported
H_{2d}	Assurance→Trust	0.16	0.113	.156	Not supported
H_{2e}	Empathy→Trust	0.185	0.092	.044*	Supported
H_{3a}	Tangible→Satisfaction	0.047	0.056	.403	Not supported
H_{3b}	Reliability→Satisfaction	0.027	0.071	.071	Not supported
H_{3c}	Responsiveness→Satisfaction	0.085	0.084	.311	Not supported
H_{3d}	Assurance→Satisfaction	0.151	0.075	.043*	Supported
H_{3e}	Empathy→Satisfaction	-0.012	0.066	.852	Not supported
H_4	Perceived value→Satisfaction	0.048	0.042	.257	Not supported
H_5	Satisfaction→Trust	0.002	0.01	.861	Not supported
H_6	Satisfaction→Loyalty	-0.053	0.056	.345	Not supported
H_7	Loyalty→Identification	0.26	0.076	***	Supported
H_8	Loyalty→Exclusive Consideration	0.956	0.12	***	Supported
H_9	Loyalty→Advocacy	0.597	0.096	***	Supported
H_{10}	Loyalty→Strength of Preference	0.138	0.056	.013*	Supported
H_{11}	Loyalty→Share of Wallet	0.226	0.082	.006**	Supported

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In the H_2 group, the relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and trust was investigated. The two dimensions that supported trust in this data were reliability and empathy. This implied that customers thought that the value of the Chinese language institution was the ability to fulfill its promised service and personal care.

In the H_3 group, the relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and satisfaction was tested. Assurance was found to support satisfaction, but the other four dimensions did not support customer satisfaction. Assurance was identified as courtesy and knowledge displayed by the Chinese language training center employees and their ability to convey trust. This implies that customers may think the most important criterion of satisfaction in Chinese language training industry is the knowledge of Chinese language teachers. Such a finding also was highlighted in research conducted by Hossain (2012). Tangibles did not support satisfaction, which represents a similar conclusion reached in an investigation completed in the United Kingdom holiday market by Ekinci et al. (2003). There they found that customers evaluated the importance of intangible elements of service quality higher than the tangible elements. The results also showed that responsiveness made an insufficient contribution to explain customers' satisfaction, which was confirmed in Azam's (2018) study. Reliability and responsiveness did not support customer satisfaction, which was similar to the finding of Tung (2004). This could be because consumers in Thailand considered a high level of reliability and responsiveness to be common to language training centers. Empathy was not significant in contributing to customer satisfaction, a finding similar to that found by Wang (2004).

In the H_4 group, perceived value did not have a signification influence on customer satisfaction, a finding consistent with Edward's (2015) findings. The investigation of H_5 indicated that customer satisfaction did not have a positive influence on trust, which is similar to the findings of Tooba et al. (2016). The result found in testing H_6 was compatible with the results of Jones and Sasser (1995), who reported that customer satisfaction does not always have a significant influence on loyalty. One

possible explanation may be that there is a low level of customer satisfaction in the centers. Therefore, no particular dimension could be assigned to satisfaction. Another reason could be that customers have many choices for language training in Bangkok, so they do not feel loyal to any language training center. The final five hypotheses were supported. They all showed a positive relationship between loyalty and loyalty outcomes, which agreed with the findings of Bourdeau (2005). This was an expected outcome since loyal customers naturally show these behaviors, namely, identification, exclusive consideration, advocacy, strength of preference, and share of wallet.

Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

First, this study revealed the dimensions of service quality (reliability, assurance, and empathy) that positively influence perceived value. According to this finding, managers may need to train employees to become more thoughtful, to always have the customer's best interests at heart, and to patiently listen to the needs of customers. A specialist Chinese curriculum consultation should be conducted so that an appropriate Chinese language course can be designed for the different levels of need displayed by customers. In addition, managers need to consider the most convenient business hours for clients and then offer a flexible class schedule. Second, the study confirmed that some service quality components (reliability and empathy) positively influenced trust. This means that staff in the Chinese training center should always be ready to respond to customer calls for assistance. Third, the findings of this study added to the existing literature regarding the link between customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, customer satisfaction does not always have a significant influence on loyalty (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Hick et al. (2005) also indicated that an approach focused solely on customer satisfaction may be not sufficient to induce customer loyalty.

Furthermore, the findings of this research also indicated that customer satisfaction in Chinese language training centers largely depended on assurance in service quality. This may inspire managers to hire more experienced and courteous Chinese teachers to deliver classes and to sign contracts with customers at the beginning to make them feel safe in their transactions. The managers also are urged to focus on reducing the cost of training and to improve the availability of learning materials.

The final theoretical implication of this study is that it supported the links between loyalty and loyalty outcomes: identification, strength of preference, and share of wallet (Bourdeau, 2005). This should encourage managers to identify customers who show loyalty to a particular Chinese learning center. When a customer is loyal to the Chinese language center, they are likely to repeatedly purchase courses and recommend others to attend the center, regardless of the price of Chinese courses on the market. This may inspire the managers to advertise among loyal customers so that more customers are attracted. Managers also could introduce some incentive polices to maintain customers. This might be in the form of offering a discount or in giving them the right to adjust courses or choose particular Chinese teachers.

Limitations and Conclusions

There were certain limitations associated with this study that should be considered in further research efforts. One limitation in the methodology was that some variables in the questionnaire were measured by just two questions. In order to find a good model fit, this study deleted some scales from the original items. Therefore in future studies, attention might be given to the original methodology as derived from previous studies. Another limitation in this study was that a quantitative design was used to study the influence of factors affecting service quality and customer loyalty. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches would deliver more comprehensive results. Also, because most literature is based on research conducted in Western countries, clients' feelings and opinions may be different when compared with those in Thailand. An alternative design, using in-depth interviews or focus groups, may have resulted in the identification of more significant factors contributing to customer loyalty.

The purpose of this study was to test the proposed framework of service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in the context of Chinese language training centers in Bangkok, Thailand. It was hoped to better understand the five phases of loyalty outcomes. Future

research, based on this study, should extend the model used by incorporating other factors that may influence customers' satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

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