International Review of Management and Marketing

ISSN: 2146-4405

available at http: www.econjournals.com

International Review of Management and Marketing, 2027, 17(1), 667-679.

Service Experience and Student Loyalty in Private Higher Education: The Roles of Service Quality, Perceived Value, Trust, and Customer Satisfaction

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Received: 04 July 2026 **Accepted:** 26 September 2026 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.24963

ABSTRACT

Service organizations operate in increasingly competitive environments where maintaining customer loyalty requires more than delivering satisfactory services. Service quality, customer satisfaction, trust, and relationship quality are important factors that may influence customers' long-term behavioral intentions, yet their interrelationships require further examination within an integrated framework. This study aims to examine the causal relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, trust, relationship quality, and customer loyalty, and to determine the effects of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction and the subsequent effects on customer loyalty. A quantitative research approach was employed using a structured questionnaire developed from established measures of service quality, customer satisfaction, trust, relationship quality, and customer loyalty. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling to examine the proposed causal relationships and direct and indirect effects among the constructs. The findings indicate that service quality, particularly reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, has positive effects on customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction positively influences customer loyalty, while trust strengthens customer relationships and contributes to loyalty. The results further indicate that relationship quality provides an important link between customers' perceptions of service performance and their behavioral outcomes. The findings provide practical guidance for service managers to improve service delivery by strengthening reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible service elements. Managers should also develop strategies that enhance customer satisfaction and trust to establish stronger relationship quality and encourage customer loyalty. The study contributes to service marketing literature by integrating service quality, satisfaction, trust, and relationship quality into a comprehensive framework for explaining customer loyalty in service organizations.

Keywords: Service Quality, Perceived Value, Trust, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty
JEL Classifications: L8

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Importance of the Problem

Higher education institutions are undergoing substantial transformation as a result of globalization, intensifying competition, technological advancement, and increasing student expectations. Universities are increasingly expected to operate not only as educational institutions but also as service-oriented organizations that deliver reliable academic, administrative, and support services. In this environment, service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty have become important dimensions for understanding how students evaluate their relationships with universities. The ability to provide quality services, create meaningful value, and establish institutional trust can influence students' satisfaction and their willingness to maintain long-term relationships with an institution. These issues are particularly important for private universities because students have multiple educational alternatives, while continued enrollment and positive recommendations can contribute to institutional competitiveness and sustainability (Kotler and Keller, 2016;

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Parasuraman et al., 1988; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007). Service quality represents an important basis for students' evaluations of their university experience. It encompasses the extent to which educational and supporting services are delivered reliably, responsively, professionally, and with appropriate attention to students' individual needs. The SERVQUAL perspective identifies reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles as important dimensions of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In higher education, these dimensions can be reflected in teaching effectiveness, administrative services, academic support, communication, learning facilities, and the overall service environment. When universities consistently deliver services that meet students' expectations, students are more likely to develop favorable evaluations of their educational experience, which can contribute to both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Perceived value provides another important perspective for understanding students' evaluations of higher education services. Perceived value reflects students' overall assessment of the benefits obtained from university education in relation to the costs and sacrifices involved, including tuition fees, time, effort, and other resources invested in their studies (Zeithaml, 1988). Students may evaluate value through the quality and usefulness of their education, personal development, career opportunities, institutional reputation, and the overall learning experience. When students perceive that the benefits received exceed the sacrifices required, they are more likely to develop favorable evaluations of the university. Thus, perceived value may contribute not only to customer satisfaction but also to customer loyalty by strengthening students' willingness to maintain their relationship with the institution. Trust is also essential to the development of sustainable relationships between students and universities. Trust refers to students' confidence that the university is reliable, honest, competent, and committed to fulfilling its responsibilities and promises. In higher education, trust can be developed through transparent communication, consistent academic standards, dependable administrative processes, and fair institutional policies. Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized the central role of trust in developing and maintaining successful long-term relationships. When students believe that their university operates with integrity and acts in their interests, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the institution. Consequently, trust can contribute to customer satisfaction and strengthen customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction represents students' overall evaluation of their experiences with the university. It reflects the extent to which academic services, administrative support, facilities, and other aspects of the educational experience meet or exceed students' expectations (Oliver, 1999). Satisfaction is important because it can translate students' evaluations of service quality, perceived value, and trust into behavioral and relational outcomes. Students who are satisfied with their university experience may be more willing to continue their relationship with the institution, recommend it to others, and maintain positive connections with the university. Accordingly, customer satisfaction serves as an important factor in understanding the development of customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty represents the long-term relational outcome of students' experiences and evaluations. In the higher education context, loyalty may be reflected in students' willingness to continue their relationship with the university, recommend the institution to prospective students, participate in university activities, and maintain a positive relationship after graduation. Loyalty is particularly important for private universities because strong student relationships can support positive word-of-mouth, institutional reputation, and long-term competitiveness. Previous research has indicated that service quality, perceived value, trust, and satisfaction are important factors associated with customer loyalty across service contexts (Cronin et al., 2000; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The private higher education sector in China provides an important context for examining these relationships. The expansion of private higher education and increasing competition among institutions has created greater pressure for universities to differentiate their educational services and strengthen their relationships with students. Yunnan Province, located in southwestern China, has experienced development in its private higher education sector, creating a relevant setting for examining how students evaluate the services and relationships provided by private universities. In such an environment, institutions need to understand not only whether students are satisfied but also how service quality, perceived value, and trust contribute to satisfaction and subsequently to loyalty. Despite the importance of these factors, further empirical examination is needed to understand how service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty interact within private higher education. Examining these five variables within an integrated structural model can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying student evaluations and long-term relationships with private universities. Therefore, this study examines the structural relationships among these five constructs among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on higher education service management and relationship marketing while providing practical insights for university administrators seeking to improve service quality, strengthen perceived value and trust, enhance customer satisfaction, and develop sustainable customer loyalty.

1.2. Research Question

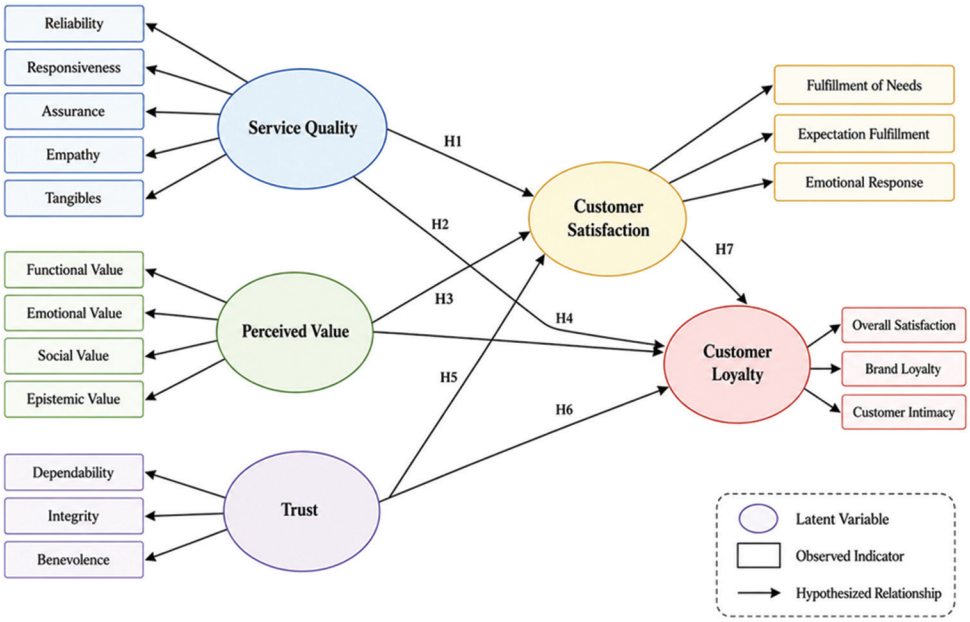
Based on the background and significance of the problem, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do service quality, perceived value, and trust influence customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China?
2. How do service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction influence customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China?
3. What is the structural relationship among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in the context of private higher education institutions?

1.3. Research Objective

In order to address the research questions and provide a systematic analysis of the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, this study establishes the following research objectives:

Figure 1: Research framework



1. To examine the influence of service quality, perceived value, and trust on customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China
2. To analyze the influence of service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China
3. To develop and test a structural model illustrating the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in private universities in Yunnan, China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Related Concepts and Theories

2.1.1. Service quality

Service quality is one of the most important constructs in service management and marketing research. It refers to customers' overall evaluation of a service based on the comparison between their expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. Parasuraman et al. (1988) conceptualized service quality as the difference between customer expectations and perceptions of service performance. When perceived service performance meets or exceeds expectations, customers are more likely to evaluate the service favorably. In contrast, when service performance falls below expectations, customers may perceive the service as inadequate. The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) is one of the most widely used frameworks for examining service quality. The model consists of five dimensions: Reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Reliability refers to the ability of a service provider to perform promised services dependably and accurately. Responsiveness concerns the willingness of employees to assist customers and provide prompt service. Assurance involves employees' knowledge, courtesy, and ability to convey trust and confidence. Empathy refers to caring and individualized attention provided to customers, while tangibles concern physical facilities, equipment, and the appearance of personnel. In the context of higher education, service quality can be reflected in teaching effectiveness, administrative services, academic support, communication between faculty members and students, learning facilities, and the overall educational environment. Students evaluate whether academic and administrative services are reliable, whether university personnel respond appropriately to their needs, and whether the institution provides adequate facilities and professional support. Universities that consistently provide high levels of service quality are more likely to create favorable student experiences and positive perceptions of institutional performance. The importance of service quality is particularly evident in private universities because students have multiple educational alternatives and can compare the services provided by different institutions. High-quality academic and supporting services can strengthen students' evaluations of the university and contribute to favorable relational outcomes. Previous research has indicated that service quality is significantly associated with students' perceptions, satisfaction, and loyalty toward educational institutions (Helgesen and Nesset, 2007). Therefore, service quality represents an important factor in understanding customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the private higher education context.

2.1.2. Perceived value

Perceived value is an important concept in marketing and consumer behavior research. It refers to customers' overall assessment of the benefits received from a product or service in relation to the costs and sacrifices involved in obtaining it. Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived value as consumers' evaluation of the utility of a product or service based on their perceptions of what is received and what is given. Accordingly, perceived value represents an evaluation of the relationship between benefits and sacrifices from the customer's perspective. Perceived value may involve several dimensions, including functional value, emotional value, social value, and epistemic value. Functional value refers to the practical benefits and usefulness of a service. Emotional value concerns the feelings and emotional experiences generated by the

Table 1: Respondents classified by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	174	43.50
Female	226	56.50
Total	400	100.00

Table 2: Respondents classified by age

Age group	Frequency	Percentage
18-20 years	128	32.00
21-23 years	186	46.50
24 years and above	86	21.50
Total	400	100.00

Table 3: Reliability analysis of research constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Service Quality	5	0.887
Perceived Value	4	0.861
Trust	4	0.903
Customer Satisfaction	4	0.914
Customer Loyalty	4	0.896

Table 4: Convergent validity and construct reliability

Construct	Factor Loading Range	Composite Reliability	AVE
Service Quality	0.714-0.842	0.890	0.620
Perceived Value	0.731-0.856	0.864	0.614
Trust	0.748-0.891	0.905	0.705
Customer Satisfaction	0.762-0.903	0.916	0.731
Customer Loyalty	0.728-0.878	0.898	0.689

service experience. Social value relates to social recognition or approval associated with the service, while epistemic value refers to novelty, knowledge, or learning obtained from the experience (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). In higher education, perceived value may be reflected in students' evaluations of the quality and usefulness of their education, career opportunities, university reputation, personal development, and overall learning experience. Students may also consider the tuition fees, time, effort, and other resources invested in their education when evaluating the benefits received. When students perceive that the benefits obtained from their university experience are appropriate relative to the costs and sacrifices involved, they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the institution. Previous studies have found that perceived value has a positive influence on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Cronin et al., 2000). In private higher education, where students make substantial financial and personal investments, the evaluation of educational benefits relative to costs is particularly important. Students who perceive greater value from their educational experience are more likely to feel satisfied and develop stronger relationships with their university. Therefore, perceived value is an important factor for understanding customer satisfaction and customer loyalty among students at private universities.

2.1.3. Trust

Trust plays a fundamental role in relationship marketing and the development of long-term relationships between customers and service providers. It refers to the belief that another party is reliable, honest, competent, and capable of fulfilling its promises. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined trust as the confidence that one party has in the reliability and integrity of another party within a relationship. Trust reduces uncertainty and provides a foundation for developing stable and mutually beneficial relationships. In service contexts, trust is particularly important because services are intangible and customers may experience uncertainty regarding service performance. Customers therefore rely on the credibility, competence, reliability, and integrity of service providers when evaluating their experiences. In higher education, students invest substantial amounts of time, money, and effort in their education, making trust an important consideration in their relationship with a university. In private universities, trust can be developed through transparent communication, consistent academic standards, reliable administrative services, fair institutional policies, and the university's commitment to students' academic and personal development. When students believe that the university is dependable, acts responsibly, and fulfills its commitments, they are more likely to develop confidence in the institution. This confidence can contribute to favorable evaluations of the university and strengthen students' relationships with the institution. Previous research has emphasized the importance of trust in maintaining long-term customer relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Students who have confidence in their university may be more likely to remain committed to the institution, maintain positive attitudes, and recommend the university to others. Therefore, trust represents an important factor in understanding customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in private higher education.

2.1.4. Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to customers' overall evaluation of their experiences with a product or service. Oliver (1999) defined customer satisfaction as a pleasurable fulfillment response that occurs when customers perceive that a service experience meets or exceeds their expectations. Customer satisfaction therefore reflects the extent to which actual experiences correspond with or exceed customers' expectations. In higher education, customer satisfaction represents students' overall evaluation of their educational and institutional experiences. Students may evaluate teaching quality, academic support, administrative services, communication, learning facilities, campus environments, and other services provided by the university. When these aspects meet or exceed students' expectations, students are more likely to develop favorable evaluations of the institution. Customer satisfaction is important because it represents an overall outcome of students' experiences with the university. Satisfied students may be more willing to continue their relationship with the institution, recommend the university to prospective students, communicate positively about their experiences, and maintain favorable relationships with the university. Consequently, customer satisfaction can play an important role in the development of long-term relationships between students and private universities. Previous research has indicated that customer satisfaction is associated with service quality and perceived value and can contribute to behavioral and relational outcomes (Cronin et al., 2000). In the present study, customer satisfaction is positioned as an important construct for explaining how students' evaluations of service quality, perceived value, and trust contribute to customer

Table 5: Correlation matrix of research variables

Variable	Service Quality	Perceived Value	Trust	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty
Service Quality	1.000				
Perceived Value	0.584**	1.000			
Trust	0.617**	0.641**	1.000		
Customer Satisfaction	0.672**	0.695**	0.758**	1.000	
Customer Loyalty	0.624**	0.689**	0.706**	0.774**	1.000

P<0.01

Table 6: Structural model fit indices

Fit index	Value	Recommended value	Interpretation
χ^2/df	2.184	<3.00	Good Fit
GFI	0.934	>0.90	Good Fit
AGFI	0.912	>0.90	Good Fit
CFI	0.957	>0.90	Excellent Fit
TLI	0.948	>0.90	Excellent Fit
NFI	0.926	>0.90	Good Fit
RMSEA	0.055	<0.08	Good Fit

loyalty. Understanding customer satisfaction is therefore essential for explaining the development of student relationships with private universities.

2.1.5. Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty refers to a customer's commitment to continue a relationship with a preferred service provider and maintain favorable behavioral intentions despite the availability of alternative options. Oliver (1999) described customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to repurchase or continue patronizing a preferred product or service. Customer loyalty can therefore involve both customers' continued behavioral intentions and their favorable attitudes toward a service provider. In higher education, customer loyalty may be reflected in students' willingness to continue their relationship with the university, recommend the institution to prospective students, communicate positively about the university, participate in institutional activities, and maintain relationships with the institution after graduation. Loyal students may also contribute to the university's reputation through positive word-of-mouth and continued engagement with the institution. Customer loyalty is particularly important for private universities because strong and lasting relationships with students can contribute to institutional competitiveness and sustainability. Students who have positive experiences, perceive strong value, and have confidence in their university may be more likely to maintain favorable relationships with the institution. In this context, service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction can contribute to the development of customer loyalty by shaping students' overall evaluations and relationships with their university. Therefore, customer loyalty represents an important outcome in the present study. Examining customer loyalty together with service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction provides an integrated perspective on how students' evaluations of private universities may develop into long-term relationships. Understanding these relationships can assist private universities in developing strategies to improve service delivery, strengthen student experiences, enhance institutional relationships, and support long-term institutional sustainability.

2.2. Literature Surveys

Previous studies have extensively examined the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty across service industries, including higher education. The existing literature generally indicates that students' evaluations of service performance, the value they receive, and their confidence in the institution are important in shaping satisfaction and longer-term loyalty. However, the strength and structure of these relationships may vary across educational contexts, institutional types, and national settings. Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model as a framework for evaluating service quality through five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. The model established an important foundation for subsequent research on service evaluation and has been widely adapted to higher education. In the university context, these dimensions can be reflected in academic services, administrative support, communication, facilities, and interactions between students and university personnel. The SERVQUAL framework therefore provides a theoretical basis for examining how students evaluate the quality of services provided by their institutions. Cronin et al. (2000) examined the relationships among service quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions and demonstrated that service quality and perceived value are important determinants of satisfaction and subsequent behavioral outcomes. Their findings are particularly relevant to higher education because students evaluate not only the quality of services provided but also whether the benefits obtained from their education justify the financial, time, and effort-related costs involved. This perspective supports the inclusion of both service quality and perceived value as important factors in explaining customer satisfaction.

Helgesen and Nesset (2007) investigated relationships involving students' perceptions of university services, satisfaction, and loyalty. Their findings indicated that students' evaluations of the university experience are associated with both satisfaction and loyalty. The study demonstrates the importance of understanding students not only in terms of their immediate satisfaction but also in terms of their longer-term relationship with the institution. This provides support for examining customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as interconnected constructs in higher education. Research has also provided direct evidence concerning the relationship between service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty in higher education. Abdullah (2006) developed the HEdPERF framework specifically for measuring service quality in higher education and emphasized the importance of academic and non-academic aspects of the educational service experience. Similarly, Sultan and Wong (2013) demonstrated the importance of service quality dimensions in understanding students' evaluations of

Table 7: Structural path analysis and hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship	Standardized Estimate (β)	C.R.	P-value	Result
H_1	Service Quality→Customer Satisfaction	0.236	4.286	<0.001	Accepted
H_2	Perceived Value→Customer Satisfaction	0.281	5.014	<0.001	Accepted
H_3	Trust→Customer Satisfaction	0.419	7.328	<0.001	Accepted
H_4	Customer Satisfaction→Customer Loyalty	0.351	6.174	<0.001	Accepted
H_5	Service Quality→Customer Loyalty	0.142	2.761	0.006	Accepted
H_6	Perceived Value→Customer Loyalty	0.254	4.683	<0.001	Accepted
H_7	Trust→Customer Loyalty	0.267	4.897	<0.001	Accepted

higher education institutions. These studies indicate that higher education service quality involves more than classroom teaching and includes a broader range of academic, administrative, and institutional services. Sultan and Wong (2014) further examined the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction in higher education and emphasized that service performance should be considered from the students' perspective. Such findings are consistent with the view that improvements in service delivery can strengthen students' evaluations of their educational experience. In addition, Chandra et al. (2018) found significant relationships among service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty in higher education, reinforcing the importance of service-related experiences in the formation of student loyalty.

The role of perceived value has also received substantial attention in service research. Sweeney and Soutar (2001) conceptualized perceived value as a multidimensional construct involving functional, emotional, social, and epistemic considerations. Their framework provides a basis for understanding why customers may evaluate services favorably when the benefits received are perceived to justify the sacrifices involved. In higher education, this perspective is particularly relevant because students evaluate the benefits of education in relation to tuition fees, time, effort, career opportunities, learning experiences, and other outcomes. Research by Cronin et al. (2000) further supports the importance of perceived value in explaining customer satisfaction and subsequent behavioral outcomes. The relationship between trust and student loyalty has also been examined in higher education. Morgan and Hunt (1994), through their commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, established trust as a fundamental mechanism for developing and maintaining successful long-term relationships. In higher education, trust can develop when students perceive that universities are reliable, transparent, competent, and committed to fulfilling their responsibilities. Yousaf et al. (2020) examined trust and loyalty in higher education and found that dimensions of institutional trust can contribute to student loyalty. Their findings suggest that universities seeking to develop long-term student relationships need to establish credibility, reliability, and integrity in their interactions with students. Ismanova (2019) further examined student loyalty in higher education and considered the roles of satisfaction, trust, and commitment in the relationship between perceived service quality and student loyalty. The study emphasized that student loyalty is an important outcome for institutional sustainability and that relational factors can contribute to the development of longer-term relationships between students and universities. This evidence supports the inclusion of trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty within an integrated higher education model.

More recent research has provided particularly relevant evidence concerning the combined relationships among the variables examined in the present study. Latif et al. (2021) investigated student loyalty in a university context using service quality, student satisfaction, and student trust and found that these factors were important in explaining student loyalty. Their study demonstrated that students' perceptions of service quality can contribute to satisfaction and trust, which subsequently support loyalty toward the university. Similarly, research conducted in a private university in Nigeria found a significant relationship between service quality and student loyalty, with customer satisfaction playing an important mediating role. The findings suggest that providing quality services alone is insufficient unless those services also generate satisfactory student experiences. Research in higher education has also demonstrated that service quality and perceived value are important antecedents of satisfaction and loyalty, further supporting the need to examine these constructs within an integrated structural framework. Recent evidence from university students in China and Thailand is also directly relevant to the present research model. Li et al. (2025) examined service quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty among university students and found that perceived value significantly influenced satisfaction and trust, while these factors contributed to loyalty. In addition, Li and Kohsuwan (2022) examined service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in a service-learning context and demonstrated the relevance of these five constructs for explaining customer responses.

Overall, the reviewed studies provide substantial evidence that service quality, perceived value, and trust are important factors associated with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The literature also suggests that customer satisfaction can serve as an important mechanism through which students' evaluations of university services and relationships are translated into loyalty. Nevertheless, much of the existing research has examined these relationships in different national, institutional, or educational settings, and relatively limited empirical evidence has focused specifically on the integrated relationships among these five variables in private universities in Yunnan, China. Therefore, the present study addresses this contextual gap by examining the structural relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students in private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical foundations and findings from previous empirical studies, this study proposes a conceptual framework

found in Figure 1 to examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in the context of private universities. The framework focuses on how students' evaluations of service quality, perceived value, and trust influence customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, while customer satisfaction is examined as an important factor contributing to customer loyalty. The proposed framework provides a structured basis for examining the direct relationships among the five variables and for developing and testing the causal model of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4. Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical foundations, previous empirical studies, and the conceptual framework presented in this study, seven hypotheses are proposed to examine the relationships among Service Quality, Perceived Value, Trust, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.1. Service quality and customer satisfaction

Service quality represents students' evaluations of the reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible aspects of university services. When universities provide services that meet or exceed students' expectations, students are more likely to develop favorable evaluations of their educational experiences. Previous research has demonstrated that service quality is an important determinant of customer satisfaction in service organizations, including higher education institutions (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007; Cronin et al., 2000). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_1: Service quality has a positive and significant influence on Customer Satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.2. Perceived value and customer satisfaction

Perceived value reflects students' evaluation of the benefits received from their university education relative to the costs and sacrifices involved. When students perceive that the educational benefits, learning experiences, career opportunities, and other institutional benefits justify their financial and personal investment, they are more likely to experience satisfaction. Previous research has identified perceived value as an important determinant of customer satisfaction and behavioral outcomes (Zeithaml, 1988; Cronin et al., 2000; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_2: Perceived value has a positive and significant influence on Customer Satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.3. Trust and customer satisfaction

Trust reflects students' confidence in the reliability, integrity, competence, and commitment of their university. When students believe that the institution is dependable, transparent, and committed to fulfilling its responsibilities, they are more likely to develop positive evaluations of their university experience. Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized the importance of trust in developing successful relationships, while previous higher education research has demonstrated the relevance of trust to students' satisfaction and institutional relationships. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_3: Trust has a positive and significant influence on Customer Satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.4. Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

Customer satisfaction represents students' overall evaluation of their experiences with the university. Satisfied students are more likely to maintain positive attitudes toward the institution, continue their relationship with it, recommend it to others, and engage in favorable behaviors. Previous studies have identified satisfaction as an important predictor of loyalty in service and higher education contexts (Oliver, 1999; Cronin et al., 2000; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_4: Customer satisfaction has a positive and significant influence on Customer Loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.5. Service quality and customer loyalty

In addition to its influence on satisfaction, service quality may directly influence customer loyalty. Students who consistently receive reliable, responsive, professional, and supportive university services may develop stronger relationships with the institution and become more willing to recommend and maintain their relationship with the university. Previous research has provided evidence that service quality can contribute directly to loyalty as well as indirectly through satisfaction (Cronin et al., 2000; Helgesen and Nesset, 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_5: Service quality has a positive and significant influence on Customer Loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.6. Perceived value and customer loyalty

Perceived value can also contribute directly to customer loyalty when students believe that the benefits obtained from their university experience are worthwhile relative to the costs and sacrifices involved. Students who perceive strong value may be more willing to maintain their relationship with the university and recommend it to others. Previous research has demonstrated that perceived value can influence behavioral intentions and loyalty-related outcomes (Zeithaml, 1988; Cronin et al., 2000). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_6: Perceived value has a positive and significant influence on Customer Loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

2.4.7. Trust and customer loyalty

Trust is an important foundation for maintaining long-term relationships between students and universities. When students trust their institution, they are more likely to believe in its commitments, maintain positive relationships, and demonstrate loyalty toward the institution. Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized the central role of trust in relationship commitment and long-term relational outcomes. Higher education research has likewise indicated that institutional trust can contribute to student loyalty. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H_7: Trust has a positive and significant influence on Customer Loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. A quantitative approach is appropriate because it enables the researcher to measure the five constructs systematically and statistically examine the relationships specified in the conceptual framework. Creswell (2014) stated that quantitative research provides a systematic approach for testing theoretical assumptions and hypotheses through the collection and analysis of numerical data. The research design was explanatory in nature, as the study aimed to examine the relationships among the variables and test the hypotheses derived from the theoretical foundations and previous empirical studies. Explanatory research is appropriate when researchers seek to understand how and to what extent independent variables are associated with particular outcomes within a theoretical framework. In this study, the explanatory design was used to examine the relationships of service quality, perceived value, and trust with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The study also employed a cross-sectional survey design, in which data were collected from respondents at a single period of time. Cross-sectional survey research is widely used in social science and management research because it enables researchers to collect standardized information from a relatively large number of respondents efficiently (Hair et al., 2019). The data collected through the survey were used to evaluate the measurement model and test the structural relationships specified in the conceptual framework. The conceptual model consists of five main constructs: Service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Service quality, perceived value, and trust were specified as exogenous variables, customer satisfaction was specified as an endogenous mediating variable, and customer loyalty was specified as the final endogenous outcome variable. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the relationships among these constructs and to test the seven research hypotheses.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of students enrolled in private universities in Yunnan Province, China. These students represent an important group for examining the quality of educational and supporting services provided by private universities because they directly experience academic, administrative, and institutional services. Their evaluations of service quality, perceived value, and trust are therefore relevant to understanding customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Because it was not feasible to collect data from all students enrolled in private universities throughout Yunnan Province, a sample was selected for the study. Purposive sampling was employed to identify respondents who met the predetermined criteria relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were that respondents must be currently enrolled students at a private university in Yunnan Province and must have sufficient experience with the university's academic, administrative, and supporting services to provide informed responses to the questionnaire. The study targeted approximately 400 respondents. This sample size was considered appropriate for conducting the planned multivariate statistical analyses and Structural Equation Modeling. The respondents were selected from different academic years and fields of study to obtain variation in students' educational experiences and perceptions. Including students with different academic backgrounds also helps provide a broader representation of the student population within the selected private universities.

3.3. Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed from established theoretical concepts and measurement scales reported in previous studies concerning service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceptions of the five constructs included in the conceptual framework. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section collected demographic information about the respondents, including gender, age, academic year, and field of study. These characteristics were used to describe the demographic profile of the respondents and provide an overview of the sample. The second section contained measurement items for the five research constructs: service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Multiple measurement items were used for each construct to capture different aspects of the corresponding concept. The items were adapted from established measurement scales in previous studies and revised to suit the context of private higher education in Yunnan, China.

All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The five-point Likert scale was selected because it enables respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements concerning their experiences and perceptions of the university. Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts to assess the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the measurement items. A pilot test was subsequently conducted with a small group of respondents who possessed characteristics similar to those of the target population. The pilot test was used to identify unclear wording and assess the preliminary reliability of the measurement scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to evaluate the internal consistency of the items measuring each construct.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire survey from students enrolled in private universities in Yunnan Province, China. Both online and offline questionnaire distribution methods were employed to increase accessibility and obtain responses from students with different academic backgrounds. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were provided with information about the purpose and nature of the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that the information provided would be treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes. Respondents were also

informed that they could decline to participate or discontinue their participation without any negative consequences. For the offline data collection, questionnaires were distributed directly to eligible students at selected private universities. For the online data collection, the questionnaire was distributed through an online survey platform. The researcher monitored the data collection process to ensure that respondents met the established inclusion criteria. After the questionnaires were collected, the responses were examined for completeness and consistency. Questionnaires containing substantial missing information, incomplete responses, or responses that did not meet the study criteria were excluded from the analysis. The valid responses were subsequently coded and entered into the statistical software for data analysis.

3.5. Statistics Used for Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to examine the characteristics of the respondents, assess the quality of the measurement model, and test the hypothesized relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS and AMOS.

3.5.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the general characteristics of the research variables. Frequency and percentage were used to describe categorical demographic characteristics, while mean and standard deviation were used to summarize respondents' perceptions of service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

3.5.2. Reliability analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement items for each research construct. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to evaluate the reliability of the scales. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered an acceptable indication of internal consistency for the measurement scales.

3.5.3. Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model and determine whether the observed measurement items adequately represented their respective latent constructs. The analysis examined factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted to assess the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs. Discriminant validity was also examined to determine whether the five constructs represented distinct concepts. Model fit indices were considered to evaluate the adequacy of the measurement model before proceeding to the structural model analysis.

3.5.4. Structural equation modeling

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the structural relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. SEM was appropriate for this study because it allows multiple relationships among latent constructs to be examined simultaneously within an integrated theoretical model. The structural model was used to test the seven hypotheses proposed in the study. Specifically, the analysis examined the effects of service quality, perceived value, and trust on customer satisfaction; the effects of service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty; and the overall structural relationships among the five constructs. Model fit was evaluated using appropriate goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square statistic, Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The standardized path coefficients, critical ratios, and significance levels were examined to determine the direction, strength, and statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. Through these statistical procedures, the study aimed to provide empirical evidence regarding the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. The results were used to evaluate the proposed conceptual framework and determine whether the empirical evidence supported the seven research hypotheses.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative data analysis conducted to examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan Province, China. The analysis was conducted in accordance with the conceptual framework and the seven research hypotheses developed from the theoretical foundations presented in the previous chapter. The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design using a structured questionnaire administered to students enrolled in private universities. The analytical procedures were conducted using SPSS and AMOS. The analysis consisted of several stages, including descriptive analysis of respondent characteristics, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, assessment of convergent and discriminant validity, correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling. The purpose of the analysis was first to evaluate the quality of the measurement model and determine whether the observed variables adequately represented their respective latent constructs. Subsequently, the structural model was examined to determine the direct effects of service quality, perceived value, and trust on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, as well as the effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty.

4.2. Data Analysis of the Quantitative Data

The quantitative data analysis was conducted using valid responses collected from 400 students enrolled in private universities in Yunnan Province, China. The respondents were selected according to the established inclusion criteria and represented students with direct experience of academic, administrative, and supporting services provided by their universities. The data analysis was conducted in five stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Second, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were examined to assess the internal consistency of the measurement

scales. Third, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the measurement model. Fourth, correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the major constructs. Finally, structural equation modeling was employed to test the hypothesized causal relationships.

4.2.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that female respondents represented the larger proportion of the sample, accounting for 56.50%, while male respondents accounted for 43.50%. The distribution indicates that both male and female students were adequately represented in the study.

From Table 2, the majority of respondents were between 21 and 23 years old, representing 46.50% of the sample. Respondents aged between 18 and 20 years accounted for 32.00%, while those aged 24 years and above represented 21.50%.

4.3. Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the measurement items used to measure the five research constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable.

The results found in Table 3 show that all five constructs achieved Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.80. Customer satisfaction demonstrated the highest level of internal consistency, with a coefficient of 0.914, followed by trust at 0.903. The results indicate that all measurement scales possessed satisfactory internal reliability and were appropriate for further analysis.

4.4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the measurement model and determine whether the observed variables adequately represented the five latent constructs. The analysis examined standardized factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted.

The results found in Table 4 demonstrate that all standardized factor loadings exceeded the recommended level of 0.50. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.864 to 0.916, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, all average variance extracted values were >0.50. These findings indicate satisfactory convergent validity and construct reliability. Therefore, the measurement items were considered appropriate for representing their respective latent constructs.

4.5. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

The results indicate positive and statistically significant relationships among all five research constructs shown in Table 5. Customer satisfaction demonstrated the strongest correlation with customer loyalty, followed by the relationship between trust and customer satisfaction. The findings suggest that students who perceive higher levels of service quality, greater value, and stronger institutional trust are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty toward their universities.

4.6. Structural Equation Modeling Results

Structural equation modeling was employed to examine the hypothesized causal relationships among the five latent constructs. Before interpreting the path coefficients, the overall goodness-of-fit of the structural model was evaluated.

The results demonstrate that the proposed structural model achieved satisfactory goodness-of-fit with the empirical data found in Table 6. The chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio was 2.184, which was below the recommended threshold of 3.00. The values of GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, and NFI were all above 0.90. In addition, the RMSEA value of 0.055 indicated an acceptable level of approximation error. Therefore, the structural model was considered appropriate for testing the proposed hypotheses.

4.7. Hypothesis Testing Results

The standardized path coefficients, critical ratios, and probability values were examined to determine whether the proposed hypotheses were supported shown in Table 7.

The results indicate that all seven hypotheses were supported.

Service quality had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.236$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_1. This finding indicates that students who perceive university services as reliable, responsive, professional, and supportive tend to experience higher levels of satisfaction. Perceived value had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.281$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_2. This indicates that students who believe that the benefits of their university education justify the costs, time, and effort involved are more likely to experience satisfaction. Trust demonstrated the strongest influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.419$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_3. The finding suggests that students' confidence in the reliability, integrity, and competence of their universities plays an important role in determining their overall satisfaction. Customer satisfaction had a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.351$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_4. This indicates that satisfied students are more likely to maintain positive relationships with their universities, recommend the institution to others, and remain engaged with the institution. Service quality also had a positive and significant direct effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.142$, $P = 0.006$), supporting H_5. Although the effect was smaller than those of other predictors, the result indicates that positive service experiences contribute directly to the development of student loyalty. Perceived value had a significant positive influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.254$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_6. Students who perceive greater benefits from their educational experience are more likely to develop favorable attitudes and long-term loyalty toward their universities. Finally, trust had a significant positive influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.267$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H_7. This finding confirms the importance of institutional credibility, reliability, and integrity in developing sustainable relationships between students and universities.

4.8. Summary of the Results

This chapter presented the results of the quantitative analysis conducted to examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan Province, China. The demographic analysis was based on 400 valid respondents. Reliability analysis demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for all five research constructs, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold. The confirmatory factor analysis also demonstrated satisfactory factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted values, confirming the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model. The correlation analysis showed that all five constructs were positively and significantly related. Customer satisfaction demonstrated the strongest correlation with customer loyalty, indicating that students' overall satisfaction represents an important factor associated with the development of long-term relationships with their universities. The structural equation modeling results demonstrated that the proposed model achieved a satisfactory fit with the empirical data. All seven hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. Among the factors influencing customer satisfaction, trust demonstrated the strongest effect, followed by perceived value and service quality. This finding highlights the importance of institutional credibility, transparency, and reliability in shaping students' evaluations of their university experiences. Customer loyalty was significantly influenced by customer satisfaction, trust, perceived value, and service quality. Customer satisfaction demonstrated the strongest direct effect on customer loyalty, indicating that students who are satisfied with their overall educational experiences are more likely to maintain positive relationships with their universities and recommend them to others. Overall, the findings support the proposed theoretical framework and demonstrate that student loyalty is influenced by a combination of service performance, perceived educational value, institutional trust, and customer satisfaction. The results provide empirical support for the importance of improving service quality, strengthening perceived value, developing institutional trust, and enhancing student satisfaction as strategies for fostering long-term customer loyalty in private higher education.

5. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. The study was conducted in accordance with three main research objectives. The findings provide empirical evidence regarding the factors that contribute to student satisfaction and the development of long-term student loyalty within the context of private higher education.

The first objective was to examine the influence of service quality, perceived value, and trust on customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. The results demonstrated that all three factors had positive and significant influences on customer satisfaction. Among these factors, trust demonstrated the strongest influence on customer satisfaction, followed by perceived value and service quality. The findings indicate that students are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction when they perceive university services as effective and responsive, believe that their educational experience provides worthwhile value, and have confidence in the reliability and integrity of their universities.

The second objective was to analyze the influence of service quality, perceived value, trust, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. The findings demonstrated that all four variables had positive and significant influences on customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction had the strongest influence on customer loyalty, followed by trust, perceived value, and service quality. These findings indicate that the development of student loyalty depends not only on the direct quality of services provided by universities but also on students' overall satisfaction, perceptions of educational value, and confidence in their institutions.

The third objective was to develop and test a structural model illustrating the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in private universities in Yunnan, China. The structural equation modeling results demonstrated that the proposed model achieved satisfactory goodness-of-fit with the empirical data. All seven hypothesized relationships were statistically significant and supported. The findings confirmed that service quality, perceived value, and trust contribute to customer satisfaction and that these factors, together with customer satisfaction, contribute to customer loyalty.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that customer loyalty among students in private universities is influenced by a combination of service-related and relationship-related factors. Service quality provides an important foundation for positive student experiences, while perceived value influences students' evaluations of the benefits obtained from their educational investment. Trust strengthens students' confidence in their universities and plays an important role in developing both satisfaction and loyalty. Customer satisfaction represents a particularly important factor in translating positive educational experiences into long-term loyalty. Therefore, private universities should adopt an integrated approach that simultaneously improves service quality, strengthens perceived value, builds institutional trust, and enhances customer satisfaction in order to develop sustainable customer loyalty.

5.2. Discussion

The discussion of the findings is presented according to the seven research hypotheses developed for this study.

5.2.1. H_1: Service quality has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction

The results demonstrated that service quality had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. This finding indicates that students are more likely to experience satisfaction when they perceive university services as reliable, responsive, professional, and capable of meeting their expectations. The quality of academic services, administrative procedures, communication, facilities,

and student support services can collectively influence students' overall evaluations of their university experiences. The findings suggest that service quality represents an important foundation for developing positive relationships between students and private universities. When universities consistently provide effective and responsive services, students are more likely to perceive that the institution is committed to meeting their needs. Consequently, improvements in service delivery can contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction.

5.2.2. H_2: Perceived value has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction

The results demonstrated that perceived value had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. This finding indicates that students are more likely to be satisfied when they believe that the benefits obtained from their educational experience justify the financial costs, time, and effort invested. Perceived value is particularly important in the context of private higher education because students evaluate not only the quality of educational services but also the overall benefits received from their investment. These benefits may include academic knowledge, professional development, employment opportunities, personal development, and access to institutional resources. When students believe that their universities provide meaningful benefits, their evaluations of satisfaction are likely to become more positive. The findings therefore suggest that private universities should focus on increasing the overall value perceived by students. Universities should ensure that tuition fees and other educational investments are accompanied by high-quality academic experiences, effective support services, and meaningful opportunities for student development.

5.2.3. H_3: Trust has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction

The results demonstrated that trust had a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. Trust also demonstrated the strongest influence on customer satisfaction among the three antecedent variables examined in the study. This finding indicates that students' confidence in the reliability, competence, integrity, and credibility of their universities plays an important role in determining their overall satisfaction. Students are more likely to develop positive evaluations of their universities when they believe that institutional policies are fair, information is communicated honestly, and university personnel act consistently and responsibly. Trust can reduce uncertainty and strengthen students' confidence in their relationships with their institutions. The findings highlight the importance of transparency and institutional credibility in private higher education. Universities should therefore maintain clear communication, provide accurate information, implement policies consistently, and demonstrate genuine commitment to student interests. These practices can strengthen trust and subsequently contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction.

5.2.4. H_4: Customer satisfaction has a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty

The results demonstrated that customer satisfaction had a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. Customer satisfaction also demonstrated the strongest direct influence on customer loyalty among the variables included in the structural model. This finding indicates that satisfied students are more likely to maintain positive relationships with their universities, recommend their institutions to others, and develop long-term attachment to the university. Students who have positive experiences throughout their educational journey are more likely to evaluate their universities favorably and demonstrate stronger loyalty. The findings suggest that customer satisfaction serves as an important mechanism for developing sustainable student relationships. Private universities should therefore continuously evaluate student experiences and identify areas requiring improvement. By responding effectively to student expectations and concerns, universities can enhance satisfaction and encourage stronger customer loyalty.

5.2.5. H_5: Service quality has a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty

The results demonstrated that service quality had a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. Although the direct effect was smaller than the effects of customer satisfaction, trust, and perceived value, the findings confirm that service quality contributes directly to the development of student loyalty. This result indicates that students may develop stronger loyalty when they consistently experience reliable and effective services from their universities. Positive service experiences can encourage students to maintain favorable attitudes toward their institutions and increase their willingness to recommend the university to prospective students. The findings emphasize that service quality should not be considered only as a factor influencing immediate satisfaction. Consistent improvements in service quality can also contribute directly to the development of long-term relationships and customer loyalty.

5.2.6. H_6: Perceived value has a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty

The results demonstrated that perceived value had a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty among students at private universities in Yunnan, China. This finding indicates that students who perceive greater benefits from their educational experiences are more likely to develop long-term loyalty toward their universities. Students may evaluate value by comparing the benefits they receive with the financial, personal, and time-related resources invested in their education. When students believe that their universities provide meaningful academic, professional, and personal benefits, they are more likely to maintain positive attitudes and demonstrate loyalty toward their institutions. The findings suggest that private universities should continuously strengthen the benefits offered to students. Enhancing educational quality, career opportunities, student support, and opportunities for personal development may improve perceived value and contribute to stronger customer loyalty.

5.2.7. H_7: Trust has a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty

The results demonstrated that trust had a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty among students at private

universities in Yunnan, China. This finding indicates that students who have confidence in the reliability, honesty, and competence of their universities are more likely to develop long-term loyalty. Trust represents an important relationship-based factor because students often interact with universities over an extended period. During this relationship, students develop expectations regarding institutional behavior and the quality of services provided. When universities consistently fulfill their commitments and demonstrate integrity, students are more likely to develop confidence and remain positively connected to the institution. The findings therefore emphasize the importance of building and maintaining institutional trust. Private universities should establish transparent policies, communicate honestly with students, respond effectively to concerns, and consistently demonstrate commitment to educational quality. Such practices can strengthen trust and contribute to the long-term development of customer loyalty.

5.3. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for private universities in Yunnan, China. Private universities should continuously improve service quality across academic, administrative, and student support functions by developing effective systems for responding to student needs, reducing unnecessary administrative difficulties, improving communication, and ensuring that services are delivered consistently. Regular evaluations of student experiences can help universities identify weaknesses and improve overall service performance. Universities should also focus on strengthening perceived value by ensuring that students recognize the benefits obtained from their educational investment. This can be achieved through improvements in academic quality, career development services, practical learning opportunities, professional training, and student support programs. In addition, universities should communicate the benefits and expected outcomes of their educational programs clearly to students. Private universities should strengthen institutional trust through transparency, consistency, and effective communication. University administrators should provide accurate and timely information regarding institutional policies, academic requirements, tuition fees, and student services. Transparent decision-making and the consistent implementation of institutional policies can help students develop greater confidence in their universities. Furthermore, universities should establish systematic approaches to monitoring and improving customer satisfaction through regular student satisfaction surveys, feedback systems, and effective communication channels. The information obtained from these mechanisms should be used to identify student expectations and concerns, improve services, and address problems in a timely manner.

Private universities should also develop long-term strategies for strengthening customer loyalty by recognizing that loyalty is developed through continuous positive experiences rather than through a single service encounter. Institutions should create opportunities for meaningful student engagement, strengthen relationships with students, and encourage positive word-of-mouth communication. For future research, further studies should examine the relationships among service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in different higher education contexts. Future research may compare public and private universities, investigate differences among academic disciplines, or examine additional factors that may contribute to student loyalty. Longitudinal research may also provide a deeper understanding of how student satisfaction and loyalty develop over time. Overall, private universities in Yunnan, China, should adopt an integrated management approach that emphasizes service quality, perceived value, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. By continuously improving these interconnected factors, universities can strengthen their relationships with students and support the sustainable development of private higher education.

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