

Evaluating service quality in Indonesian rural tourism: The RURALQUAL model approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — *The purpose of this study is to evaluate service quality using the RURALQUAL model and examine its relationship with customer satisfaction and customer experience.*

Method — *The research method employed in this study is quantitative research using Structural Equation Modeling, specifically Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM). The variables investigated include service quality (X) as the independent variable, customer experience (Y) as the intervening variable, and customer satisfaction (Z) as the response variable. The population for this study consists of tourists visiting Wanayasa Rural Tourism in Purwakarta. The sampling method used to select participants is non-probability sampling, specifically the purposive sampling technique. A total of 344 Wanayasa tourists were included as samples in this study.*

Result — *This study discovered that there is a notable impact on customer experience and customer satisfaction when it comes to service quality. Additionally, customer experience can act as a mediator between service quality and customer satisfaction.*

Novelty — *This research applies RURALQUAL model approach to measure service quality in rural tourism in Wanayasa, Purwakarta, Indonesia.*

Keywords: customer experience, customer satisfaction, RURALQUAL model, service quality, tourism

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is a key driver of Indonesia's development, generating foreign exchange and creating new jobs for local communities (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). It is one of the largest economic activities and has the potential to boost economic growth (Hasibuan et al., 2023) (Wardana et al., 2021). Research by Risso (2018) has shown that increased tourist arrivals have a significant impact on the country's economy. Tourism has three main impacts: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural (Fang, 2020).

Rural tourism is an emerging form of tourism that utilizes the natural resources of the countryside to attract tourists (Hardianto, 2018). According to Fang (2020), rural tourism encompasses any tourism that showcases rural life, arts, culture, and cultural heritage in rural locations. In other words, rural tourism provides economic and social benefits to local communities and allows for interaction between tourists and locals, creating a more enriching tourism experience. Essentially, rural tourism takes place in rural areas (Fang, 2020).

Rural tourism faces two main challenges: inconsistent service quality and a lack of proper service orientation (Choi et al., 2018). There has been a growing interest in measuring service quality, especially in tourism activities, resulting in various service quality models (Marković & Šebrek, 2020). The focus has shifted from mass tourism to destination- or quality-focused tourism (Wardana et al., 2021). Service quality is recognized as a crucial factor in differentiating service products and improving competitiveness in the tourism industry (Choi et al., 2018). Providing quality services will undoubtedly lead to satisfaction among service users (Mulyo et al., 2021).

In a competitive market, service quality is important for sustainability, and satisfied travelers are more likely to recommend and return to rural attractions (Marković & Šebrek, 2020). Hurst,



Niehm, and Littrell's research (2009) acknowledges the significant economic contribution of rural tourism and emphasizes the role of service delivery and customer service segmentation in enhancing the success of rural tourism retail. Despite the increasing literature on measuring the quality of tourist destinations, experts have doubts about which methods hold the highest validity (Ryglová et al., 2017).

Hurst et al. (2009) conducted a study using a modified version of the SERVQUAL scale. This scale measures two constructs of perceived service quality that are important to local customers and retailers, as well as one construct of perceived service quality for tourist customers. Other studies (Keni & Sandra, 2021; Makanyeza & Mumiriki, 2016; Mulya Handayani et al., 2020) have also used the SERVQUAL scale to measure service quality. However, it was found that the original SERVQUAL scale was not suitable for evaluating the small size of facilities in rural tourism (Choi et al., 2018). To address this, a new measure called RURALQUAL was developed based on the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The RURALQUAL scale includes two sets of items based on the SERVQUAL scale: one set to measure expectations before using the lodging, and another set to measure perceptions before leaving. Additionally, Reichel et al. (2000) developed and used a new measurement based on SERVQUAL for rural accommodation in Israel. This measurement reduced the number of items to better evaluate small size facilities in rural tourism.

In the study conducted by Marković and Šebrek (2020), they developed the RURALQUAL model as an extension of the previously widely used SERVQUAL model. The researchers utilized a principal component analysis and the Promax rotation method to condense 27 variables into 5 factors, namely Safety, Tourist Relations and Rural Surroundings; Tangibility and Basic Demand; Price and Reservation; Professionalism; and Empathy. This study adopts the RURALQUAL approach established by Šebrek and Marković (2020). It is worth noting that no previous research on rural tourism in Indonesia, particularly in Wanayasa Purwakarta, has employed the RURALQUAL model to assess service quality.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer experience, as well as the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction. Additionally, we will explore the connection between customer experience and customer satisfaction and examine whether customer experience can act as a mediator between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction.

METHOD

The research methodology utilized in this study is quantitative research, employing both primary and secondary data. Primary data is directly collected from respondents through the use of questionnaires. On the other hand, secondary data is sourced from various relevant sources such as books, journals, scientific papers, and websites.

To determine the selected sample for this study, a non-probability sampling technique known as purposive sampling was employed. The population of interest in this study consisted of Wanayasa Rural Tourists in Purwakarta. A total of 344 Wanayasa tourists were included as samples in this study. The data collected was processed using SmartPLS 3 software.

This study utilized the structural equation modeling partial least square (SEM-PLS) method. The PLS-SEM model consists of two components: the structural model (inner model) and the measurement model (outer model). The structural model illustrates the relationship between constructs, while the measurement model reveals the relationship between constructs and indicators. The variables employed in this study include service quality (X) as an independent variable, customer experience (Y) as an intervening variable, and customer satisfaction (Z) as the response variable. These three variables cannot be directly observed; hence, the PLS-SEM model is employed to analyze their relationship. Table 1 showcases the latent variables and their corresponding indicators for each construct.

Table 1. Latent variables and indicators

Latent variables (constructs)	Indicators
Service Quality (X) (Marković & Šebrek, 2020)	Empathy (X1)
	Price and reservation (X2)
	Professionalism (X3)
	Safety, tourist relations and Rural surrounding (X4)
	Tangibility and Basic demand (X5)
Customer Experience (Y) (Muskat et al., 2019)	Experience (Y1)
	Happiness (Y2)
Customer Satisfaction (Z) (Marković & Šebrek, 2020)	As expected (Z1)
	Happy with Cultural (Z2)

Source: Authors' compilation (2024)

Hypotheses development

Service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction

The impact of service quality on customer satisfaction is well-established in the field of marketing and consumer behavior. Numerous theoretical frameworks and models have been developed to understand this relationship. In the realm of tourism, service quality plays a crucial role in enhancing customer satisfaction (Mulya Handayani et al., 2020). Customer-focused organizations rely heavily on their ability to deliver high-quality services that create value for the business and increase customer satisfaction (Makanyeza & Mumiriki, 2016). It has been observed that high service quality leads to high levels of tourist satisfaction (Šebrek & Marković, 2020).

H1: Service quality (RURALQUAL) has an impact on customer satisfaction

Service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer experience

The company's success is greatly attributed to its commitment to providing the best quality products and services. This is particularly evident in the initial stages of the purchasing process, where the company strives to create a positive emotional impression on customers. According to Yosephine Simanjuntak & Purba (2020), this plays a crucial role in shaping the overall customer experience. As Srivastava & Kaul (2014) suggest, the customer experience plays a vital role in determining whether their expectations are met by the company. A positive experience leads to customer satisfaction, while a negative experience results in disappointment (Fajri & Ma'ruf, 2018). Therefore, in order to meet customer expectations, it is essential to provide high-quality service that enhances the customer experience. This study aims to explore the relationship between service quality, as measured by the rural qual approach, and customer experience. The RURALQUAL model approach is chosen because the research is conducted in a rural tourism setting.

H2: Service quality (RURALQUAL) affects customer experience

Customer experience and customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a complex concept that involves the expectations and experiences of consumers (Karnowati et al., 2021). According to Gomoi et al. (2021), customer satisfaction refers to a person's feelings after comparing their perceived performance or results with their expectations. The level of customer satisfaction can be influenced by the experiences formed through interactions with service providers (Hwang & Seo, 2016). Consumers who have positive

experiences are more likely to be satisfied, while those who have negative experiences are likely to be disappointed (Karnowati et al., 2021).

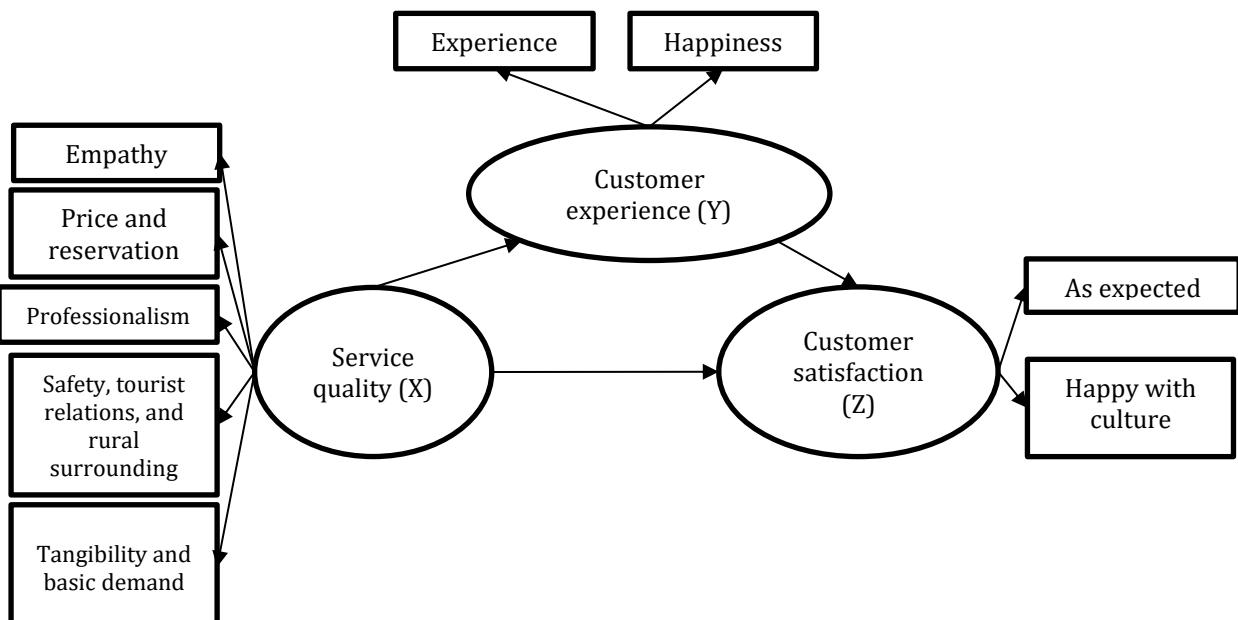
H3: Customer experience affects customer satisfaction.

Customer experience mediates the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction

High service quality has a direct impact on tourists' positive feelings and leads to high tourist satisfaction (Šebrek & Marković, 2020). Conversely, consumers who have a positive experience will feel satisfied, while those who have a negative experience will feel disappointed (Karnowati et al., 2021). It is crucial to pay attention to customer experience as it plays a significant role in shaping consumer satisfaction. This research aims to examine whether customer experience can act as a mediator in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

H4: Customer experience mediates the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction.

Figure 1. Research framework



Source: Compiled from various sources by the authors (2024)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The estimation of the SEM-PLS model provides us with an empirical way to measure the relationship between indicators and latent variables, as well as the relationship between latent variables themselves. These estimates help us evaluate the effectiveness of our measurement and determine whether the model adequately explains and predicts the target construct. The evaluation of the model involves assessing both the measurement model and the structural model.

Evaluation of the measurement models

Indicator reliability

To evaluate the measurement model, the first step is to check the outer loading values of the indicators. A high outer loading value indicates a strong correlation between the indicator and the latent variable. This is often referred to as indicator reliability. According to Hair (2022), indicators with an outer loading value greater than 0.7 are considered significant and should be retained. On the other hand, if the outer loading value is less than 0.7, the indicator may be considered for deletion. The results of the indicator reliability measure are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicator reliability

Latent variables (constructs)	Indicators	Outer loading	Result
Service quality	Empathy (X1)	0.869	Significant
	Price and reservation (X2)	0.863	Significant
	Professionalism (X3)	0.897	Significant
	Safety, tourist relations and Rural surrounding (X4)	0.867	Significant
	Tangibility and Basic demand (X5)	0.874	Significant
Customer experience	Experience (Y1)	0.940	Significant
	Happiness (Y2)	0.936	Significant
Customer satisfaction	As expected (Z1)	0.915	Significant
	Happy with Cultural (Z2)	0.892	Significant

Source: Processed data (2024)

Table 2 shows that all indicators have an outer loading value > 0.7 , indicating statistical significance for the indicators on the three constructs. This suggests that there is a consistent relationship among all indicators within each variable or construct, which can be represented by the construct.

Internal consistency reliability

The next criterion to be evaluated is internal consistency reliability. One way to measure this is through Cronbach's Alpha. In addition to Cronbach's Alpha, the PLS-SEM model's internal consistency reliability can also be assessed by examining composite reliability. According to Hair et al. (2020), both Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability criteria are considered acceptable, particularly within the range of 0.6-0.7 for exploratory research. In further research, values between 0.7-0.9 can be considered satisfactory. The results of the internal consistency reliability are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Internal consistency reliability

Latent variables (constructs)	Cronbach alpha ≥ 0.7	Composite reliability > 0.7	Result
Service quality	0.923	0.942	Reliable
Customer experience	0.863	0.936	Reliable
Customer satisfaction	0.776	0.899	Reliable

Source: Processed data (2024)

Table 3 demonstrates that both Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability are greater than 0.7 for all constructs or latent variables, namely customer experience, customer satisfaction, and service quality. As a result, it can be concluded that all constructs exhibit good internal consistency reliability.

Convergent validity

Convergent validity is used to assess how well a measure correlates with other measures that evaluate the same construct. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is a commonly used measure to establish convergent validity at the construct level. An AVE value of 0.5 or higher indicates that, on average, the construct explains more than half of the variation in its indicators. Therefore, if the AVE value is 0.5 or greater, we can conclude that the construct or latent variable is valid. Table 4 presents the results of the convergent validity criteria.

Table 4. Convergent validity

Latent variables (constructs)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Criteria	Result
Service quality	0.764	0.5	Valid
Customer experience	0.879	0.5	Valid
Customer satisfaction	0.817	0.5	Valid

Source: Processed data (2024)

According to Table 4, it is evident that all constructs (service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer experience) have an AVE greater than 0.5. This indicates that the three constructs meet the criteria for convergent validity as they explain more than half of the variance in their respective indicators. Notably, customer experience has the highest AVE value of 0.879.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity refers to how distinct a concept is from other concepts according to empirical standards. In other words, if discriminant validity is established, it means that a concept is unique and captures a phenomenon that is not represented by other concepts in the model. One way to determine discriminant validity is by using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This criterion compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with the correlation between latent variables. Specifically, for each concept, the square root of its AVE must be greater than the highest correlation with any other concept. The Fornell-Larcker method is based on the idea that a concept's associated indicators showcase more variability than those of other concepts. Table 5 presents the measurements obtained using the Fornell-Larcker method.

Table 5. Discriminant validity

Latent variables (constructs)	Customer experience	Customer satisfaction	Service quality
Customer experience	0.938		
Customer satisfaction	0.848	0.904	
Service quality	0.821	0.821	0.874

Source: Processed data (2024)

Table 5 demonstrates that the three constructs or latent variables, specifically customer experience, customer satisfaction, and service quality, have an AVE square root value that exceeds the highest correlation value of the other constructs. Thus, it can be concluded that the criteria for discriminant validity are met. This indicates that the customer experience construct is distinct from both the customer satisfaction and RURALQUAL constructs.

Evaluation of the structural model

Once the measurement model has been evaluated and it has been determined that the construct measures are valid and reliable, the next step is to evaluate the structural model. The first step in evaluating the structural model is to test for collinearity. This can be done using the VIF value. It is important to note that the VIF value for the predictor construct should be below 5, and preferably below 3, to ensure that collinearity does not have a significant impact on the estimate of the structural model. The results of the Inner VIF Values can be found in Table 6.

Tabel 6. Inner VIF values

Latent variables (constructs)	Customer experience	Customer satisfaction	Service quality
Customer experience			1.00
Customer satisfaction	2.59		
Service quality		2.59	

Source: Processed data (2024)

Based on Table 6, we can conclude that all VIF values are below 3 and no VIF value exceeds 5. Therefore, there is no collinearity in the structural model, and it can be confirmed that collinearity does not have a significant impact on the estimation of the structural model. As a result, we can proceed with further testing.

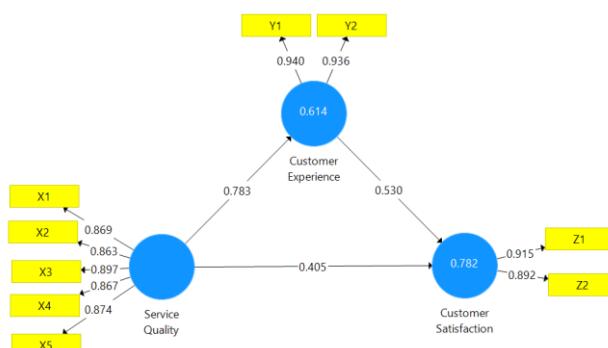
The next step after assessing collinearity is to test the significance of the structural model. This can be done by examining the t-value or the P-values associated with the path coefficient in the bootstrapping results. The criteria for the test are as follows: if the t-value exceeds the critical value from the t-table (1.96 for two-tailed at a 5% significance level (α)), or if the P-values are lower than the 5% significance level (α), we reject the null hypothesis (H_0). Table 7 presents the results of the path coefficient test, and Figure 2 also illustrates the results of the path coefficient.

Table 7. Testing path coefficients

Hypothesis	Path coefficients	t-values	P-values	Result
Customer experience \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	0.530	10.76	0.000	Significant
Service quality \rightarrow Customer experience	0.783	8.16	0.000	Significant
Service quality \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	0.405	27.61	0.000	Significant

Source: Processed data (2024)

Figure 2. Path coefficients



Source: Processed data (2024)

The results of testing the path coefficient, as shown in Table 7 and Figure 2, indicate that service quality has a positive influence of 0.783 on customer experience. This means that a one-unit increase in service quality will result in a 0.738 increase in customer experience. Additionally, service quality has a positive influence of 0.405 on customer satisfaction. This means that a one-unit increase in service quality will lead to a 0.405 increase in customer satisfaction. Furthermore, customer experience has a positive influence of 0.530 on customer satisfaction. This means that a one-unit increase in customer experience will result in a 0.530 increase in customer satisfaction.

The significance test of the path coefficient, as shown in Table 7, demonstrates that there is an effect of service quality on customer experience, and customer experience also impacts customer satisfaction. Based on these results, a hypothesis can be formulated that customer experience mediates the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. To test this allegation, the indirect effect is examined in Table 8.

Table 8. Significance test of indirect effect

Hypothesis	Coefficient	t-value	P-values	Result
Service quality → Customer experience → Customer satisfaction	0.415	10.71	0.000	Significant

Source: Processed data (2024)

According to table 8, service quality has a statistically significant positive indirect effect on customer satisfaction through customer experience at a significance level of 5%. The indirect effect is measured at 0.415, which is greater than the direct effect of service quality on customer satisfaction, which is 0.405. Therefore, it has been statistically proven at the 5% significance level that customer experience mediates the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction. This mediating effect optimizes the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction.

After conducting the significance test, the next step is to assess the strength of the predictor model. One way to measure the strength is by using the coefficient of determination (R^2), which indicates how much variance in the endogenous variables can be explained by the exogenous variables. A model is considered strong if the R^2 value is ≥ 0.75 , moderate if the value is between 0.25 and 0.75, and weak if the value is ≤ 0.25 . In structural model 1, the R^2 is 78.2%, indicating a strong model. This means that 78.2% of the variance in customer satisfaction can be explained by customer experience and service quality, while the remaining 21.8% is accounted for by other factors outside the model. In structural model 2, the R^2 is 61.4%, suggesting a moderate model. This indicates that 61.4% of the variance in customer experience can be explained by service quality, while the remaining 38.6% is influenced by other latent variables not included in the model.

Discussion

Service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction

The results of the SEM-PLS analysis indicate that service quality (RURALQUAL) has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. This is evident from the calculated t value (27.607), which is higher than the critical t value (1.96) at a 5% significance level (α), and the p-value (0.000), which is smaller than α (0.05). These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Marković and Šebrek (2020), Karnowati et al. (2021), Muskat et al. (2019), and Makanyeza and Mumiriki (2016).

The study reveals a strong correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction. Although these two constructs are distinct, it is crucial for service providers to consider them separately (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). Tourism management should not only focus on

enhancing customer satisfaction but also strive to improve service quality. In other words, continuous efforts to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction are essential as these two aspects are interrelated. To attract more tourists, it is vital to create a positive impression and cultivate a favorable image by offering quality services that meet customer satisfaction (Silvestri et al., 2017).

Contrary to the findings of Surahman et al. (2020) and Mamoun et al. (2016), the results of this study suggest that service quality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction. The research conducted by Surahman et al. (2020) indicates that the quality of services provided by tourist villages, timeliness of service, and attention to visitors do not significantly increase customer satisfaction and may even lead to a significant decline.

Service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer experience

The results of the SEM-PLS analysis indicate that service quality (RURALQUAL) significantly influences customer experience. This is evidenced by the calculated t value (10.759), which exceeds the critical t value (1.96) at a 5% significance level (α), and the P-value (0.000), which is smaller than $\alpha = 5\%$. These findings support previous research by Fajri & Ma'ruf (2018) and Yosephine Simanjuntak & Purba (2020).

Customer experience serves as a useful guide for enhancing customer service. When customers are aware of the quality of service, it reflects their satisfaction with the service received, meeting their expectations, and generating a positive experience. This positive experience, in turn, has the potential to strengthen the brand (Nobar & Rostamzadeh, 2018). Therefore, in the pursuit of improving service quality, companies should focus on management and infrastructure enhancements, emphasizing customer-oriented processes and service improvements (Faruk Ulum & Muchtar, 2018).

Customer experience and customer satisfaction

The results of the SEM-PLS analysis indicate that customer experience has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. This is demonstrated by the calculated t-value (8.158), which is greater than the t-table value for a two-tailed test at a 5% significance level (α) (1.96), as well as the P-value (0.000) which is lower than the α value of 5% (0.05). This finding is consistent with previous research by Yosephine Simanjuntak & Purba (2020), Fajri & Ma'ruf (2018), and Keni & Sandra (2021), all of which also found a positive and significant relationship between customer experience and customer satisfaction. When customers' expectations align with what they actually receive from a company, they have a positive experience with the products or services offered, leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Fajri & Ma'ruf, 2018).

In the context of tourism destinations, customer satisfaction can be understood as customers' evaluation of their expectations for a specific product and their actual experience with the product delivery process. Since tourism products typically involve multiple service touchpoints that customers encounter before, during, and after their trip, positive experiences can greatly enhance overall customer satisfaction. Therefore, tourism managers should carefully assess the strengths and weaknesses of their service products and prioritize customer satisfaction by addressing customer complaints, criticisms, and improving aspects related to human resources, marketing, and financial situations (Nobar & Rostamzadeh, 2018).

Customer experience mediates the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction

The results of SEM-PLS reveal that service quality indirectly affects customer satisfaction through customer experience, with a significance value of 0.415. When compared to the direct effect of service quality on customer satisfaction, which is 0.405, the indirect effect is shown to

be greater. Therefore, it has been statistically proven at a 5% significance level that service experience can act as a mediator between service quality and customer satisfaction. Previous studies have also used customer experience as an intervening variable (Fajri & Ma'ruf, 2018; Putri et al., 2023).

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction (SQCS) have attracted significant attention from academics and researchers in the field of tourism and hospitality research (Shyju et al., 2023). This study highlights the major impact of service quality on consumer satisfaction. Additionally, service quality plays a crucial role in providing positive experiences for tourism visitors. Furthermore, positive consumer experiences directly influence customer satisfaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that effective service quality provided by tourism managers leads to positive consumer experiences, ultimately increasing customer satisfaction. The mediating effect of customer experience enhances the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. Therefore, tourism managers should prioritize providing excellent customer experiences and continually improving service quality to maximize customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer experience, service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction, customer experience and customer satisfaction, and whether customer experience can mediate the relationship between service quality (RURALQUAL) and customer satisfaction. The findings of this study indicate a significant impact of service quality on customer experience, as well as a significant influence of service quality on customer satisfaction. Additionally, customer experience also has a significant effect on customer satisfaction. Customer experience can potentially act as a mediator between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Based on these findings, the management of Wanayasa's rural tourism in Purwakarta should prioritize quality aspects in their management practices as it directly affects customer experience and satisfaction. Efforts should be made to enhance employee professionalism, promote tourism awareness, and improve security through collaboration between all stakeholders, society, and tourism actors. This will ensure that tourists can enjoy a comfortable and peaceful holiday experience. Furthermore, stimulating positive customer experiences in rural tourism will contribute to increasing overall customer satisfaction.

For future research, it is recommended to include additional variables such as tourists' intention to revisit. Additionally, the rural-qual model should be further developed to measure service quality in a broader range of rural tourism settings. The role of customer satisfaction as an intervening variable between service quality and customer experience can also be explored in more detail.

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