How service quality, guest trust and guest satisfaction affect a five-star hotel's reputation in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand has climbed in the global tourism ranking to the 10th spot, and is now expected to greet up to 40 million foreign guests in 2019. Given this significance, the authors undertook a study to investigate the opinions of 542 five-star rated hotel guests across six provinces and metropolitan areas of Thailand. The LISREL 9.1 software program was used to analyse the guest's opinions on how a Thai five-star hotel's reputation (RP) was affected by service quality (SQ), guest trust (TR), and guest satisfaction (ST). Results from the study's six SEM hypotheses determined that the factors most important were SQ, TR, and ST, with total effect (TE) values of 0.89, 0.71, and 0.60, respectively. Finally, from the study's questionnaire, 15.87% of the guests viewed their relationship status as 'other', suggesting that five-star hotels need to pay close attention to non-traditional travellers and guests. Also, a significant percentage of Chinese and Indian travellers have been reported as booking a Thai four or five-star hotel, so hotel management must be culturally aware of these guest's needs and wants so as to drive sustainable operations.

Keywords: First class, luxury hotel, non-traditional travellers, Southeast Asia, tourism.

Introduction

Thailand today is the tenth most popular destination in the world (Figure 1), with foreign tourist visitors expected to reach nearly 40 million in 2019 (TTG Asia, 2019). The Economist (2019) also reports that the Thai tourism sector generates more than a fifth of Thailand's gross domestic product (GDP). Foreign travellers who visit Thailand also spend more money per visit than anywhere else in Asia, which has made Thailand the world's fourth-most-profitable tourism destination (Ekstein, 2018). Also, the Thai travel and tourism sector contributed $82.5 billion in 2016 to the economy, with the tourism sector supporting over 15% of Thailand's total employment, which represents over 5.7 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017).

Figure 1. Thailand's tourist arrivals 2009-2018.
Source: The Economist (2019).

Understanding the importance of these statistics and the impact they have on Thailand, its economy, and business development, the authors opted to undertake a study on what factors affect a five-star hotel's reputation. However, first, we need to understand just what a 'five-star' hotel is. Callan (1993) reported that a hotel rating system is composed of two parts. The first part contains a basic registration standard which details the minimum quality and physical requirements that a hotel must meet. The second part is the evaluation criteria which are an extension of the criteria for qualitative and intangible services, allowing a hotel to be compared to other hotels.

There is also a common misconception around the world that there is an international standard for a hotel with 'five-stars', but in reality, there is not (Amey, 2015), as hotel ranking criteria can differ significantly from nation to nation. However, there are some generally agreed upon aspects that make a hotel a 'five-star' hotel. These include a hotel's service quality, amenities, cleanliness, room sizes, location and price, with the 'star' ranking system beginning with the Forbes Travel Guide in the U.S. in the 1950s. However, in the U.K., tourist associations such as VisitScotland and VisitBritain are tasked with star rankings today (LaRock, 2018). Additional research complications arise from the fact that between 1994 and 2014, there were 70 qualified scholarly research articles which used a variety of terms used to discuss the high-end hotel industry (Chu, 2014). These terms included 'high-end hotels,' 'luxury hotels,' 'deluxe hotels,' 'upscale hotels,' 'palace hotels' (France), and 'four- or five-star hotels.' Furthermore, one can find in hotel guides and academic papers the terms 'upscale' in China (Hsu et al., 2011), 'first class' in Scandinavia (Mattsson, 1994), 'moderate deluxe,' 'deluxe,' and 'superior deluxe' (Sanyal, 2008).

However, from a search of the Crossref database using the phrase "five-star hotel", 225,423 entries were returned. A search of Google using the same search phrase returned 12.7 million results. Therefore, from this analysis, the authors selected the phrase *'five-star hotel'* to describe a property wherein the services and standards are at the highest level available within Thailand.

The phrase 'five-star' hotel was also adopted in 2004 for the start of the Thailand Hotel Standard program (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008; Thailand Standards Hotel Directory, 2017). This program and its assessment committee began with members from the Thai Hotels Association [THA], the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the Association of Thai Travel Agents, and university hotel management programs. Individuals from these groups were called upon to conduct a voluntary annual assessment and certification inspections (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008), with participant hotels being evaluated and ranked based on one to five stars. The ranking process included the hotel's construction and facilities, maintenance, and service. Furthermore, starting in 2011, inspections started to be undertaken by no less than four individuals representing a minimum of three organizations, whose standard's criteria was approved by the Thailand Hotel Standard Task Force (Thailand Standards Hotel Directory, 2017).

As a comparison, in the United Kingdom, five-star hotels must also have spa and fitness facilities, valet parking, butler and concierge services, 24-hour reception and room service, and a full afternoon tea. In France, however, the standards are regulated by the French Government (Amey, 2015). In 2012, the French government overhauled their ranking system, and today a five-star hotel must have air-conditioned guest rooms of at least 24 square meters, valet parking, room service, a concierge, and a bellboy at the time of check-in (Chavanne, 2019). The staff is also required to have fluency in English and one other language.

The significance of a five-star hotel's staff was revealed in a Bangkok study in which the authors stated that employees play an essential role in making a hotel's brand 'come alive' (Kimpakorn &

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Tocquer, 2009). Gotsi and Wilson (2001) also added that a staff's role is essential in each department's corporate reputation management process. Service as an intangible and highly individualised thing should correspond to the guests" expectations and satisfy their needs and requirements and in fact, exceed these where possible. It is the customer who decides what is good or bad quality, even when he/she is wrong (Ramphal & Nicolaides, 2014).

With Thailand rising to become the tenth most popular tourist destination in the world, has also come the importance of four-star and five-star hotels to Thailand's tourism sector as 60% of Chinese and 55% of Indians book four-and-five star hotels ("US remains top source," 2019). International travellers from the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and South Africa have also emerged as high-value markets for hotels, as 70% of total bookings made by these nationalities were in four-star and five-star hotels. These statistics support the Thai government's focus on attracting more high-end arrivals. Thailand, therefore, has become a very attractive global tourism brand, and as a consequence, has been transformed into a major world tourist destination (Marukatat, 2018), which is now projecting 65 million visitors within a decade (Chuwiruch, 2019). The International Standard Organisation (ISO) defines service as part of the total production concept. Services are often "invisible" and for this reason it is difficult for a supplier to explain and for a guest to describe. Quality must, however, always be considered from the guests' perspective, because this forms the awareness of quality and eventually determines whether or not a guest is satisfied beyond expectation or unhappy. The perception of the outcome judges the service a guest experiences (Ramphal & Nicolaides, 2014).

Nicolaides (2008) states that hotels that have embraced the service quality concept have shown an increased growth in their guest satisfaction and in due course improved their profitability. This highlights the value of good interrelationships with stakeholders and especially the guests. Nicolaides highlighted that customer service and the attitude of service personnel is the most overriding attribute used by guests in evaluating their stay at a hotel. Nicolaides (2016) has also asserted that hotel service providers need to assess the ethicality of their current service conditions from a customer's perspective. While they may have codes of ethics in place, these can in no way imaginably cover every possible eventuality. Nonetheless the good judgment of the employees, based on ethics in the workplace, is crucial to the delivery of service quality excellence. Therefore, the study aims to investigate the importance and interrelationships of guest satisfaction (ST), the hotel's service quality (SQ), and a guest's trust (TR) on a five-star hotel's reputation (RP). Additionally, the paper aims to contribute to the existing research by identifying which factors play the most significant role in a Thai five-star hotel's reputation. It reports on a survey of both Thai and foreign guests distributed across six regions within the Kingdom.

Furthermore, the paper is divided into five main sections. Additionally, underlying theory was investigated to obtain the variables and the creation of the hypotheses and a conceptual model shown in Figure 1. The materials and methods are detailed in section two, which includes the population and sample, the research tools, data collection, and data analysis. In section three, are the results followed by section four's discussion. Finally, section 5 has the study's conclusion.

Research Objectives

1. The authors wished to develop a structural equation model [SEM] of factors to analyse how guests perceive a five-star hotel's reputation.

2. To compare the interrelationships of these factors and determine their importance to hoteliers and their guests.

Research hypothesis

After an examination of the literature, authors determined that the hotel's reputation (RP) was affected by guest satisfaction (ST), the hotel's service quality (SQ), and a guest's trust (TR). From this, six hypotheses and a conceptualized framework were developed (Figure 2):

H1: SQ influences directly ST.
H2: SQ influences directly TR.
H3: SQ influences directly RP.
H4: ST influences directly TR.
H5: ST influences directly RP.
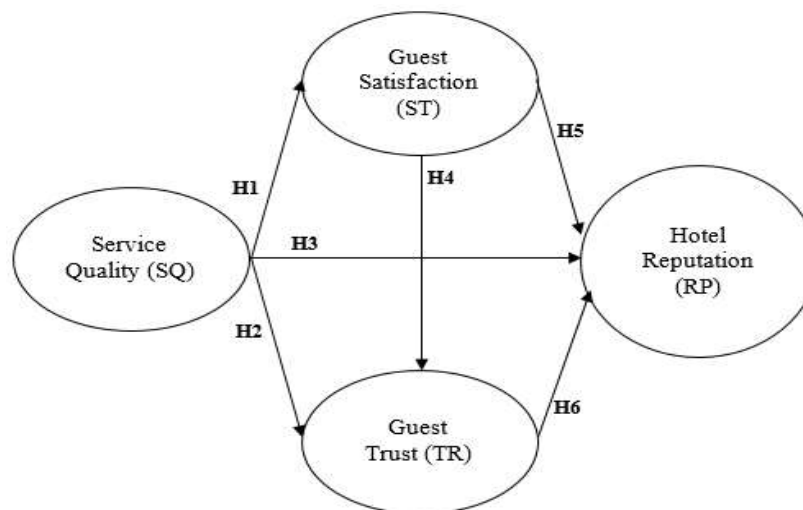*H6: TR influences directly RP.*

Figure 2. Conceptual Model.
Source: Authors' model concept

Materials and Methods

A quantitative method was adopted for the data's collection, which used a questionnaire survey technique to test the theoretical model's variables influencing a Thai five-star hotel's reputation.

Population and Sample

Thai and foreign guests staying in one of ten five-star hotels spread throughout six regions in Thailand constituted the study's population. From the use of statistical sample size theory, it was determined that a common method for determining a sample's size was to use a multiple times the number of observed variables, with the multiple ranging from 10-20 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). Therefore, after allocating for sampling and questionnaire non-response errors, a target of 600 Thai and foreign guests was initially set (Table 1), whose sample was selected by use of systematic random sampling. The survey was started in November 2017 and lasted through February 2018.

Table 1. Target sample sizes by region.

Regions	Sample		
	Thai	**Foreign**	**Total**
North East (Isan)	50	50	100
Northern	50	50	100
Central	50	50	100
Eastern	50	50	100
Southern	50	50	100
Bangkok	50	50	100
Totals	**300**	**300**	**600**

Questionnaire development

From the focus group session conducted in the university library, five academic, hotel, and tourism industry experts shared their views on what constitutes a hotel's reputation (RP), as well as factors involved in guest satisfaction (ST), the hotel's service quality (SQ), and what factors relate to a guest's trust (TR). Furthermore, from the most current version of the Thailand Standard Hotels database, hotels in each of Thailand's six regions were investigated and suggested (Table 2).

Table 2. Five-star hotels and their survey location.

Hotel/Resort	Location
Anantara Chiang Mai Resort	Chiang Mai
Centara Grand at Central Plaza Ladprao	Bangkok
Conrad Bangkok	Bangkok
Dusit Thani Hua Hin	Hua Hin
JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa	Phuket
Paradee Resort Ko Samet	Rayong
Pullman Khon Kaen Raja Orchid Hotel	Khon Kaen
Royal Muang Samui Villas	Koh Samui
Sheraton Hua Hin Resort & Spa	Hua Hin
The Sukhothai Bangkok	Bangkok

Source: Thailand Standards Hotel Directory (2017).

Research development tools

The tools used to collect data in this research consisted of a structured interview as well as the analysis and synthesis of research from the theoretical and conceptual framework. From the structured expert interview, four main areas were identified. These included general information about the hotel guest's gender, age, education, and relationship status. After the development of the structured interview questionnaire, confirmation of the validity and content format of the questionnaire was evaluated by the five experts to determine if the items were simple and easy to understand, after which, improvements and editing were based on the expert's feedback. Part 2 through part 5 used a 7-level scale to access the guest's opinion on each of the various items.

Data Analysis

Preliminary item reliability testing was obtained by using Cronbach's α. The scores from the 5-expert focus group were calculated from 0.96 – 0.98, which was ranked as 'excellent'. This included part 2's SQ with five items (α = 0.98), part three's ST with four items (α = 0.97), part four's TR with four items (α = 0.96), and part five's four items concerning the hotel's reputation

(RP) (α = 0.96). Each part's manifest variables, their CFA results and α's reliability test results can be found in Tables 3 and 4.

Results

The research results are as follows:

Information about the hotel guest

Table 3 shows the details the hotel guest questionnaire. Results showed that 59.78% were men. Hotel guest age was nearly evenly distributed across three groups, with 21-30, 31-40, and 41-50, is 21.03%, 31.37%, and 29.70%, respectively. Also, single guests represented 34.32%, while those that were married represented 33.39%. Finally, a significant number (15.87%) viewed their relationship status as 'other', suggesting that high-end hotels need to pay close attention to non-traditional travellers and guests.

Table 3. Hotel guests characteristics (n=542)

Gender	Guests	%
Male	324	59.78
Female	218	40.22
Total	542	100
Age		
21-30	114	21.03
31-40	170	31.37
41-50	161	29.70
51-60	87	16.05
Over 60	10	1.85
Total	542	100
Level of Education		
Primary school	17	3.14
Lower secondary school	97	17.90
High school	96	17.71
Vocational Certificate / Diploma	130	23.99
Bachelor's Degree or higher	202	37.27
Total	542	100
Relationship status		
Single	186	34.32
Married	181	33.39
Divorced/widowed	89	16.42
Other	86	15.87
Total	542	100

Source: The study's authors.

Goodness-of-fit (GoF) analysis

The study's CFA analysis and SEM used LISREL 9.10. If the chi-square ($\chi2$) statistic is non-significant ($p \geq 0.05$), the model fits the data (Voerman, 2003). Suggested approximate fit indexes also include the goodness of fit index [GFI], adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI), with each having values ≥ 0.90 to indicate a good model fit (Bentler and Bonett, 1980; Hooper et al., 2008; Satorra and Bentler, 2001; Schumacker and Lomax, 2010). Furthermore, authors have suggested the use of both the

RMSEA and GFI as two other absolute fit indices (Voerman, 2003), with RMSEA values ≤ 0.05 indicating a good fit (Byrne, 1998).

The GFI statistic, however, indicates a better fit the higher it becomes, with a cut-off point of .90 being suggested (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The comparative fit index (CFI) statistic is also suggested as an incremental fit measure (Bentler and Bonett, 1980). Also, the root mean square residual (RMR) should have a value of ≤ 0.05, which suggests an acceptable model (Byrne, 1998). Results showed that $\chi2 = 0.82$ which was non-significant. Therefore, from the GoF analysis, $\chi2/df = 0.83$, RMSEA = 0.0000, GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.97, RMR = 0.01, SRMR = 0.01, NFI = 0.99, and CFI = 1.00 all passed. Finally, the values for α = 0.96-0.98, which were considered excellent.

CFA results

Some scholars have suggested the use of a two-step analysis on both the internal and external variables when a measurement model's analysis (Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). Therefore, from the use of LISREL 9.10, both a CFA (Table 4) and SEM were conducted (Jöreskog et al., 2016) (Figure 2).

Table 4. CFA results.

External latent variable	α	AVE	CR	Manifest variables	loading	R^2
Service quality (SQ)	0.98	0.90	0.98	Tangibles (SQ1)	0.96	.93
				Reliability (SQ2)	0.99	.97
				Responsiveness (SQ3)	0.96	.93
				Assurance (SQ4)	0.90	.81
				Empathy (SQ5)	0.94	.89
Internal latent variables	α	AVE	CR	Manifest variables	loading	R^2
Guest Satisfaction (ST)	0.97	0.87	0.96	Pleased with accommodations and facilities (ST1)	0.85	.73
				Excellent service (ST2)	0.97	.94
				Happy about hotel choice (ST3)	0.94	.89
				Service staff (ST4)	0.97	.95
Guest Trust (TR)	0.96	0.88	0.95	Hotel reliability (TR1)	0.89	.79
				Good service quality (TR2)	0.96	.92
				Honouring commitments (TR3)	0.96	.92
Hotel Reputation (RP)	0.96	0.84	0.96	Good reputation (RP1)	0.93	.87
				Corporate social responsibility (RP2)	0.91	.84
				Trustworthy (RP3)	0.92	.85
				Appealing facilities (RP4)	0.92	.84

(Source: CFA results are from the authors of the study.)

Correlation coefficient (*r*) results

Table 5 shows the values from the *r* testing (Ratner, 2009), as well as the results from the direct effects (DE), indirect effects (IE), and the total effects (TE) analysis (Ladhari, 2009). Ranked in importance, factors influencing RP were SQ, TR, and ST, with total effect (TE) values of 0.89, 0.71, and 0.60, respectively.

Table 5. Correlation coefficient *r* results.

Dependent variables	R^2	Effects	Independent variables		
			SQ	ST	TR
Guest Satisfaction (ST)	.87	DE	0.93**		
		IE	-		
		TE	0.93**		
Guest Trust (TR)	.81	DE	0.19**	0.76**	
		IE	0.71**	-	
		TE	0.90**	0.76**	
Hotel Reputation (RP)	.79	DE	0.19**	0.07	0.71**
		IE	0.70**	0.53**	-
		TE	0.89**	0.60**	0.71**

*Sig. ≤ .05, **Sig. ≤ .01 (Source: Results are from the authors of the study.)

SEM results

All the SEM's causal variables had a positive influence on a five-star hotel's reputation (RP), which can be combined to explain the shared variance of the factors affecting RP (R^2) by 79% (Table 5). Furthermore, Table 6 further supports the reliability of the SEM's results as all factors showed excellent levels of internal consistency, as their composite reliability (CR) is between 0.95 and 0.98. Figure 3 shows the SEM final model.

Table 6. SEM s*tandard coefficients for the variables that affect RP.*

Latent Variables	MC	BV	BQ	ST
Service quality (SQ)	**1.00**			
Guest Satisfaction (ST)	.91**	**1.00**		
Guest Trust (TR)	.85**	.91**	**1.00**	
Hotel Reputation (RP)	.85**	.89**	.90**	**1.00**
ρ_V (AVE)	0.89	0.89	0.88	0.84
ρ_C (Construct Reliability)	0.98	0.97	0.95	0.96
Square root of the AVE	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.92

**Sig. ≤ .01 (Source: Results are from the authors of the study.)

Hypotheses testing results

Table 7 shows the results of hypotheses testing.

Table 7. The SEM's hypotheses testing results.

Hypotheses	Coefficient	t-test	Consistency
H1: SQ influences directly ST	0.93	24.60**	consistent
H2: SQ influences directly TR	0.19	3.06**	consistent
H3: SQ influences directly RP	0.19	3.28**	consistent
H4: ST influences directly TR	0.76	11.07**	consistent
H5: ST influences directly RP	0.07	0.88	inconsistent
H6: TR influences directly RP	0.71	10.64**	consistent

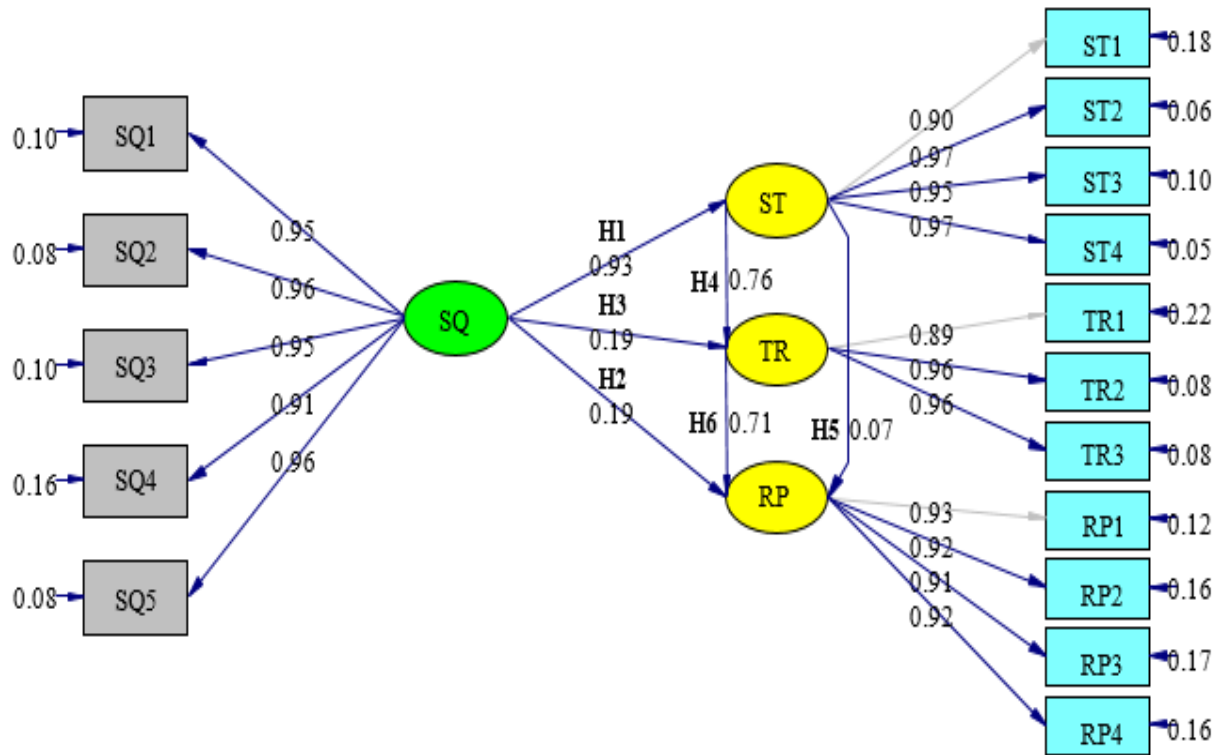*Sig. < .05, **Sig. < .01 (Source: Results are from the authors of the study.)

Figure 3. Final Results of the SEM for a Thai Five-Star Hotel's Reputation. (Source: Compiled by the study's authors)
Note: Chi-Square = 49.92, df = 60, p-value = 0.81996, RMSEA = 0.000

Discussion

Service quality (SQ)

The SEM analysis results showed H1 had a strong and positive interrelationship between SQ and ST, as $r = 0.93$, t-value = 24.60, and $p \leq 0.01$ (Table 8). However, H2's relationship between SQ and TR was weak but positive as $r = 0.19$, t-value = 3.05, and $p \leq 0.01$. Finally, the relationship between SQ and RP examined in H3 was shown to also be direct and positive as $r = 0.19$, t-value = 3.28, and $p \leq 0.01$.

Numerous studies have verified the importance of these interrelationships. In Southeast Asia, international guests view personal care, friendliness, and personal warmth and acknowledgment as important elements in SQ (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012). In Israel, hotels were reported to use ratings as a pricing tool, as the number of 'stars' often times was a significant predictor of hotel pricing (Israeli & Uriely, 2000; Lollar, 1990). Therefore, a hotel ranking system is related to hotel performance and SQ improvement (Lollar, 1990). Additionally, hotel competitiveness demands local and international hotels to seek standards and tools to reflect their SQ (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008).

Guest satisfaction (ST)

Furthermore, H4 also established a positive and strong interrelationship between ST and TR, as $r = 0.76$, t-value = 11.07, and $p \leq 0.01$. However, H5's interrelationship between ST and RP was determined to be unsupported.

Other research has also confirmed the value of ST within the hotel industry (Karunaratne & Jayawardena, 2011), with ST a crucial concept for a hotel to understand if it wants to remain competitive and grow. Therefore, a sustainable competitive advantage requires that hotels deliver high-quality service (Angelova & Zekiri, 2011), while understanding the specific guest interest that influences their hotel booking decision (Untari & Satria, 2019).

As the foundation for any successful firm is ST, which creates repeat purchases, a customer's positive word of mouth, and eventually, customer brand loyalty (Seeman and O'Hara, 2006). However, hoteliers should be aware that ST does not equal hotel loyalty (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). This is in agreement with Skogland and Siguaw (2004), which also determined that in big-city hotels, ST did always equal repeat business (hotel loyalty), as business travelers are the least loyal.

In Thailand, it has been suggested that hotel entrepreneurs should use staff development programs and modern technologies to maximize ST (Mingkhwansakul & Rungsawanpho, 2018). This is consistent from the findings concerning the Italian hotel industry in which it was suggested that innovation, technology implementation, and supplementary services drive value creation and international competitiveness (Capocchi, 2014).

Guest trust (TR)

Finally, the interrelationship between TR and RP examined in H6 was shown to also be strong and positive as *r* = 0.71, t-value = 10.64, and *p* ≤ 0.01. Support for this interrelationship strength can be found in the SERVQUAL Model's 'assurance', which entails an employee's knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire confidence and trust (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). It has also been stated that TR has a direct influence on guest loyalty and a hotel's effectiveness (Skogland & Siguaw, 2004). Word-of-mouth also plays a significant role in TR (Zeba & Ganguli, 2016), with TR playing a significant role in determining commitment between guests and hotels (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Hotel reputation (RP)

A five-star hotel's reputation (RP) was originally conceptualized to be influenced by its good reputation (RP1), its participation in community corporate social responsibility (CSR) (RP2), the trust placed in the hotel by the guest (RP3), and finally, how appealing the facilities were to each of the guest (RP4). The results showed that all four factors were nearly equally matched in their importance by the survey participants (0.91-0.93). Specifically, CSR over the years has become an influential factor in RP, with CSR shown to have positively influenced Tehran four and five-star hotels' financial and non-financial performance (Ghaderi et al., 2019). It appears, therefore, that a hotel's performance, profits, and value are enhanced by CSR engagement activities (Orlitzky et al., 2003).

Also, exceptional reputations depend on efficient and effective hotel operations that surpass a guest's expectations, which increase the hotelier's profitability (Singh et al., 2017). Other research has suggested that a guest's expectations of hotel hospitality are influenced by the gender of the guest, the reason for staying, and the nationality of the guest (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012). Finally, hotels are not certified by any global authority (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008), so 'five-star' on one continent might be considerably different from 'five-star' on another continent.

Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the factors that influenced a five-star hotel guest's opinions in Thailand. From the factors analysed in the study's six hypotheses, service quality was judged to

be the most important factor. Not far behind in importance was guest trust and guest satisfaction. Finally, from the study's questionnaire, 15.87% of the guests viewed their relationship status as 'other', suggesting that five-star hotels need to pay close attention to non-traditional travellers and guests. Also, a significant percentage of Chinese and Indian travellers have been reported as booking a Thai four or five-star hotel, so hotel management must be culturally aware of these guest's needs.

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