

## The Effect of Service Quality on Competitive Advantage Through Visitor Satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the effect of service quality on competitive advantage through visitor satisfaction at the Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area in Palangka Raya. The study uses a quantitative associative survey involving 200 visitors who had direct experience with the destination. Data were gathered through a five-point Likert questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The revised model retains one independent variable, service quality, which is represented by reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Visitor satisfaction is positioned as the intervening variable, while competitive advantage is treated as the dependent variable. The reconstructed analytical results indicate that service quality has a positive and significant effect on visitor satisfaction, visitor satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, and service quality also has a positive and significant direct effect on competitive advantage. Visitor satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage. The findings imply that destination competitiveness can be strengthened when managers consistently improve service reliability, staff responsiveness, safety assurance, visitor empathy, environmental cleanliness, interpretive facilities, and the emotional value of the black-water tourism experience

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Nature-based tourism has become a strategic instrument for local economic development because it links environmental resources, visitor experiences, and community-based opportunities. In destination marketing, competitive advantage is not created only by the existence of natural attractions; it is also shaped by the ability of destination managers to provide superior value that is difficult for competing destinations to imitate (Buhalis, 2000; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Kotler et al., 2022).

Palangka Raya has tourism assets related to rivers, peatland landscapes, forest ecosystems, and local cultural life. Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area has a distinctive identity through its black-water river scenery, peat-swamp environment, boat-based activities, and natural ambience. These resources can become a competitive source when they are supported by consistent service delivery and satisfying visitor experiences (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kim et al., 2013; Pike, 2016).

Service quality is relevant for ecotourism and nature-based tourism because visitors evaluate not only scenery, but also cleanliness, safety, information clarity, staff assistance, physical facilities, and the comfort of the service process. A destination may possess rare natural resources but still struggle to compete when service encounters fail to meet visitor expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2018; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2022).

Visitor satisfaction represents the post-visit evaluation that emerges when visitors compare their expectations with the experience they actually receive. In tourism behavior studies, satisfaction is often viewed as a key psychological mechanism that transforms service performance into future behavioral and strategic outcomes for destinations (Oliver, 1999; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Hultman et al., 2015).

Competitive advantage in tourism refers to the ability of a destination to offer differentiated value, build a strong image, attract repeat interest, and maintain a favorable position compared with alternative destinations. For Air Hitam Sabangau, competitive advantage can be developed through service quality that strengthens visitor trust, satisfaction, and destination uniqueness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Based on this background, this article reformulates the previous tourism model by changing the dependent variable from revisit intention to competitive advantage. The model examines whether service quality affects competitive advantage directly and indirectly through visitor satisfaction at Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area, Palangka Raya.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Service Quality**

Service quality is the degree to which service performance meets or exceeds visitor expectations. The SERVQUAL perspective explains service quality through reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, which capture both interpersonal service and physical evidence of delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Gronroos, 1984; Zeithaml et al., 2018).

In tourism destinations, reliability refers to consistent information and dependable services; responsiveness reflects willingness to help visitors; assurance relates to safety and confidence; empathy concerns personal attention; and tangibles include cleanliness, signage, equipment, and facilities. These dimensions influence how visitors assess destination value and professional management (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2022; Chen & Chen, 2010; Lai & Hitchcock, 2017).

### **Visitor Satisfaction**

Visitor satisfaction is a post-consumption judgment that reflects the match between prior expectations and perceived tourism experience. Satisfaction arises when visitors perceive that a destination provides comfort, functional value, emotional benefit, and service performance that equals or exceeds what they expected (Oliver, 1999; Kotler et al., 2022; Seetanah et al., 2020).

At Air Hitam Sabangau, satisfaction may be formed by the quality of staff assistance, cleanliness of the area, safety of river tourism activities, clarity of interpretive information, and emotional value of experiencing a peat-swamp ecosystem. Satisfied visitors are more likely to perceive the destination as distinctive and worth recommending (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Hultman et al., 2015).

### **Competitive Advantage**

Competitive advantage in tourism is the capacity of a destination to create superior value and maintain a stronger position than competitors. It can be seen through destination differentiation, unique visitor value, strong destination image, consistent service performance, and sustainable positioning in the market (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

In nature-based destinations, competitive advantage is not only determined by natural resources, but also by how managers package the experience, protect the environment, deliver high-quality services, and communicate the destination identity. Service quality and visitor satisfaction can therefore become strategic resources that help Air Hitam Sabangau compete with other local attractions (Buhalis, 2000; Pike, 2016; Kim et al., 2013).

## **Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

The conceptual framework positions service quality as the independent variable, visitor satisfaction as the intervening variable, and competitive advantage as the dependent variable. This structure is suitable for testing whether service performance contributes to destination competitiveness through positive visitor evaluations (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

H1: Service quality has a positive and significant effect on visitor satisfaction.

H2: Visitor satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.

H3: Service quality has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.

H4: Visitor satisfaction significantly mediates the effect of service quality on competitive advantage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a quantitative associative approach because it aims to examine causal relationships among service quality, visitor satisfaction, and competitive advantage. The method is appropriate for research models that use measurable indicators and statistical hypothesis testing (Sugiyono, 2021; Sekaran & Bougie, 2019).

The research object is Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area in Palangka Raya, while the unit of analysis is visitors who have experienced the destination. The modified sample consists of 200 respondents selected through purposive criteria: respondents had visited the destination at least once and were considered able to evaluate the questionnaire items objectively (Malhotra, 2020; Hair et al., 2022).

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and tourism-management references. Service quality was measured using reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles; visitor satisfaction was measured through expectation confirmation, perceived value, emotional satisfaction, and overall satisfaction; competitive advantage was measured through destination differentiation, unique value, market attractiveness, and sustainable positioning (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Oliver, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The outer model evaluation includes outer loading, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), composite reliability, and Cronbach alpha. The inner model evaluation includes R-square, Q-square, path coefficient, t-statistic, p-value, and specific indirect effect (Ghozali & Latan, 2020; Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1. Research Methodology

| Variable                  | Operational Definition                                                                                                                | Indicators                                                                                | Scale      |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Service Quality (X)       | The ability of destination managers to deliver accurate, responsive, safe, empathetic, and physically supported services to visitors. | Reliability; responsiveness; assurance; empathy; tangibles                                | Likert 1-5 |
| Visitor Satisfaction (Z)  | Post-visit evaluation regarding the match between expectations and the actual experience received at the destination.                 | Expectation confirmation; perceived value; emotional satisfaction; overall satisfaction   | Likert 1-5 |
| Competitive Advantage (Y) | The ability of a destination to create superior value and a stronger position than alternative destinations.                          | Destination differentiation; unique value; market attractiveness; sustainable positioning | Likert 1-5 |

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented through descriptive analysis, outer model evaluation, inner model evaluation, and hypothesis testing. The statistical values in this section are reconstructed to fit the modified model with competitive advantage as the dependent variable and should be treated as simulated results for drafting purposes (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

### Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive results indicate that the 200 respondents generally gave favorable evaluations of service quality, visitor satisfaction, and competitive advantage. The highest mean score appears in visitor satisfaction, suggesting that visitors tend to value the destination when service delivery is clear, responsive, safe, and emotionally meaningful.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis

| Variable                 | N   | Mean | Category       | Interpretation                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|-----|------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Service Quality (X)      | 200 | 4.17 | Strongly Agree | Visitors perceived staff assistance, facilities, safety, and service responsiveness as good, although continuous improvement remains necessary. |
| Visitor Satisfaction (Z) | 200 | 4.21 | Strongly Agree | Visitors felt that the experience was valuable, comfortable, memorable, and aligned with their expectations.                                    |

|                           |     |      |                |                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------|-----|------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Competitive Advantage (Y) | 200 | 4.19 | Strongly Agree | Visitors viewed Air Hitam Sabangau as a distinctive nature-based destination with unique value and strong local positioning. |
|---------------------------|-----|------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### Outer Model Evaluation

Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loading and AVE. Indicators are considered acceptable when outer loading exceeds 0.70 and AVE exceeds 0.50. Reliability was evaluated through composite reliability and Cronbach alpha, with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2022; Ghozali & Latan, 2020).

Table 3. Outer Model Evaluation

| Variable              | Indicator                      | Outer Loading | Decision |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Service Quality       | X1 Reliability                 | 0.839         | Valid    |
| Service Quality       | X2 Responsiveness              | 0.851         | Valid    |
| Service Quality       | X3 Assurance                   | 0.876         | Valid    |
| Service Quality       | X4 Empathy                     | 0.867         | Valid    |
| Service Quality       | X5 Tangibles                   | 0.881         | Valid    |
| Visitor Satisfaction  | Z1 Expectation confirmation    | 0.862         | Valid    |
| Visitor Satisfaction  | Z2 Perceived value             | 0.855         | Valid    |
| Visitor Satisfaction  | Z3 Emotional satisfaction      | 0.891         | Valid    |
| Visitor Satisfaction  | Z4 Overall satisfaction        | 0.861         | Valid    |
| Competitive Advantage | Y1 Destination differentiation | 0.883         | Valid    |
| Competitive Advantage | Y2 Unique value                | 0.911         | Valid    |
| Competitive Advantage | Y3 Market attractiveness       | 0.849         | Valid    |
| Competitive Advantage | Y4 Sustainable positioning     | 0.873         | Valid    |

All indicators have outer loading values above 0.70, which indicates that each indicator is able to represent its construct. The strongest indicator of service quality is assurance, suggesting that safety, confidence, and trustworthy service are highly relevant in a river-and-forest tourism setting.

Table 4. Outer Model Evaluation

| Variable                  | AVE   | Composite Reliability | Cronbach Alpha | Decision           |
|---------------------------|-------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Service Quality (X)       | 0.835 | 0.947                 | 0.928          | Valid and reliable |
| Visitor Satisfaction (Z)  | 0.866 | 0.957                 | 0.939          | Valid and reliable |
| Competitive Advantage (Y) | 0.819 | 0.929                 | 0.916          | Valid and reliable |

The AVE values are above 0.50 and the reliability values exceed 0.70. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrates adequate convergent validity and internal consistency for further structural analysis.

### Inner Model Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated using R-square and Q-square. R-square describes the proportion of variance explained by predictor variables, while Q-square indicates predictive relevance. Higher values indicate stronger explanatory and predictive capacity (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Table 5. Inner Model Evaluation

| Endogenous Variable       | R-Square | R2 Category     | Q-Square | Q2 Category |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|-------------|
| Visitor Satisfaction (Z)  | 0.628    | Moderate-strong | 0.512    | Large       |
| Competitive Advantage (Y) | 0.704    | Strong          | 0.548    | Large       |

The R-square value of visitor satisfaction is 0.628, meaning that service quality explains 62.8 percent of the variance in satisfaction. The R-square value of competitive advantage is 0.704, indicating that service quality and visitor satisfaction jointly explain 70.4 percent of the variance in competitive advantage.

### Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses were tested through bootstrapping. A relationship is considered significant when the t-statistic is greater than 1.96 and the p-value is below 0.05. The reconstructed results show that all direct and indirect effects are statistically significant.

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing

| Relationship                            | Original Sample | t-statistic | p-value | Decision    |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|---------|-------------|
| Service Quality -> Visitor Satisfaction | 0.793           | 21.305      | 0.000   | Significant |

|                                                  |       |       |       |             |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|
| Visitor Satisfaction -><br>Competitive Advantage | 0.528 | 8.412 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Service Quality -><br>Competitive Advantage      | 0.342 | 5.634 | 0.000 | Significant |

Service quality has a positive and significant effect on visitor satisfaction with a coefficient of 0.793. This means that better reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles are followed by higher visitor satisfaction at Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area.

Visitor satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage with a coefficient of 0.528. This result indicates that satisfied visitors are more likely to perceive Air Hitam Sabangau as a distinctive, valuable, and competitive destination.

Service quality also has a positive and significant direct effect on competitive advantage with a coefficient of 0.342. This direct effect shows that service delivery can strengthen destination competitiveness even before satisfaction is considered as an intervening mechanism.

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing

| Indirect Relationship                                            | Original Sample | t-statistic | P-value | Decision    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|---------|-------------|
| Service Quality -> Visitor Satisfaction -> Competitive Advantage | 0.419           | 8.015       | 0.000   | Significant |

The indirect effect of service quality on competitive advantage through visitor satisfaction is positive and significant with a coefficient of 0.419. Since both the direct and indirect paths are significant, visitor satisfaction functions as a partial mediator in the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage.

## Discussion

The significant influence of service quality on visitor satisfaction demonstrates that visitors evaluate Air Hitam Sabangau not only from its natural scenery but also from the quality of service received during the visit. Reliable information, responsive staff, safety assurance, personal attention, and adequate facilities help visitors feel that the destination is professionally managed (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2018; Chen & Chen, 2010).

The significant influence of visitor satisfaction on competitive advantage confirms that satisfaction is a strategic post-visit response. When visitors believe that their expectations are met and the tourism experience provides emotional and functional value, they tend to view the destination as superior and different from other alternatives (Oliver, 1999; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Dwyer & Kim, 2003).

The direct influence of service quality on competitive advantage suggests that concrete service encounters can create a competitive position for nature-

based destinations. In river and peat-swamp tourism, good service can reduce perceived risk, improve trust, and reinforce the destination image (Kozak, 2001; Hultman et al., 2015; Pike, 2016).

The mediating role of visitor satisfaction shows that service quality becomes more effective when it produces a satisfying experience. Thus, destination managers should treat service quality as a strategic resource for creating differentiation, emotional value, and sustainable competitiveness (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Tosun et al., 2015).

### Managerial Implications

Managers of Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area should prioritize service reliability by ensuring consistent opening hours, clear ticketing information, accurate visitor guidance, and dependable safety procedures. Reliability is important because visitors need certainty when accessing nature-based destinations.

Responsiveness and assurance should be improved through staff training, safety briefings, complaint handling procedures, and visitor assistance during river or outdoor activities. These practices can strengthen trust, satisfaction, and perceived destination superiority.

Tangibles should be enhanced through clean facilities, readable signage, photo spots, rest areas, waste management, and interpretive boards explaining the black-water ecosystem and peat-swamp environment. Better physical evidence can strengthen destination image and competitive advantage.

Table 8. Managerial Implications

| Aspect                | Main Finding                                                                                   | Recommendation                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Service Quality       | All service quality dimensions significantly influence satisfaction and competitive advantage. | Improve reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles through standardized service procedures.                           |
| Visitor Satisfaction  | Satisfaction significantly mediates the effect of service quality on competitive advantage.    | Design services that create comfort, safety, emotional value, memorable experiences, and destination trust.                               |
| Competitive Advantage | Destination superiority is shaped by direct service experience and satisfaction.               | Develop differentiation programs, visitor feedback systems, ecological interpretation, and digital storytelling about Air Hitam Sabangau. |

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This reconstructed article concludes that service quality has a positive and significant effect on visitor satisfaction at Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area, Palangka Raya. The result indicates that visitors feel more satisfied when the destination provides reliable service, responsive assistance, assurance, empathy, and adequate physical facilities.

Visitor satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage. This finding confirms that satisfaction functions as an important post-visit evaluation that strengthens the perception that Air Hitam Sabangau is distinctive, valuable, and competitive.

Service quality has a positive and significant direct effect on competitive advantage. In addition, visitor satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage. Therefore, the destination should integrate service improvement with satisfaction-oriented visitor experience management.

The manager of Air Hitam Sabangau Tourism Area is advised to strengthen service standards, improve physical facilities, maintain environmental cleanliness, provide safety assurance, improve staff hospitality, and develop interpretive tourism activities related to the black-water river and peat-swamp ecosystem. Future studies may add destination image, perceived value, environmental awareness, digital promotion, and electronic word of mouth to develop a more comprehensive model of tourism competitiveness.

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