

GUEST COMPLAINT HANDLING THROUGH SERVICE RECOVERY TO IMPROVE SERVICE QUALITY AND GUEST SATISFACTION

Celiana Sari Yati¹, Atun Yulianto², Nova Yudha Adriansyah Putra³

Hospitality, Faculty of Economics and Business, Bina Sarana Informatics University Jl. Raya Kaliabang
No.8, North Bekasi
e-mail: sariyaticeliana@gmail.com

Abstract-This research explores the implementation of service recovery strategies by the guest service team in handling customer complaints related to room services at Holiday Inn Melaka, Malaysia. The main objective is to understand how the hotel addresses complaints and how these efforts impact guest satisfaction. A qualitative approach was used, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings reveal that hotel guests generally expect clean rooms, friendly service, and well-functioning facilities. When these expectations are not met, such as when equipment is faulty or staff service is lacking, complaints tend to arise. To address this, the hotel employs a structured service recovery process, including active listening, maintaining professionalism, offering apologies, and providing timely solutions. This approach not only resolves the immediate issues but also reinforces the hotel's commitment to delivering quality service and ensuring guest satisfaction.

Keywords: Complaint Handling Strategy, Service Recovery, Guest Service Center.

Introduction

The increasingly intense competition in the hospitality industry requires every hotel to maintain guest satisfaction as the key to building trust and customer loyalty (Yulianta, Naili, & Agung, 2014). In the digital era, guest complaints can quickly spread through social media and online reviews, directly influencing the hotel's image. Therefore, hotels must have strategies not only to resolve problems but also to restore customer satisfaction and loyalty (Suwarta, 2024).

The way hotel staff handle guests, particularly when complaints arise, is a crucial aspect of maintaining service quality. Guest dissatisfaction often occurs due to services that fail to meet expectations or inadequate facilities. If not properly addressed, complaints may damage the hotel's reputation. Conversely, complaints can also serve as valuable input for management to improve operational effectiveness and service quality (Pramadani Anta et al., 2024).

Customer complaints essentially reflect dissatisfaction caused by the gap between service expectations and reality. According to Kotler & Keller (2007, as cited in Sugiman & Puspa, 2023), complaints may be influenced by various factors, both from the guest's perspective and the employee's response. Thus, proper complaint handling is highly important to prevent issues from escalating. One approach used by hotels is the implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). SOPs serve as standardized guidelines for employees to handle complaints systematically, consistently, and professionally (Moekijat, 2008). Through SOPs, every complaint can be recorded, addressed, and monitored, for instance through a log book (Siddarth, 2017, as cited in Sugiman & Puspa, 2023). In addition to SOPs, the concept of service recovery has also become an essential strategy in the hospitality industry. Service recovery refers to efforts made by hotels to correct service failures in order to restore customer satisfaction. Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar (1998) explain that effective service recovery can improve guests' perceptions of service quality and even influence their decision to remain loyal to the hotel. A prompt response, sincere apology, and appropriate compensation are often key factors in successful service recovery.

Holiday Inn Melaka Malaysia, as part of an international hotel chain, implements service recovery strategies through its Guest Service Center (GSC). This unit functions as the central hub for complaint management, covering processes from receiving, documenting, following up, to resolving guest complaints, particularly regarding room services. Through this approach, the hotel aims to enhance responsiveness and effectiveness in complaint handling while maintaining guest trust. When complaints are managed effectively, negative experiences can be transformed into positive ones, thereby strengthening guest relationships with the hotel. However, in practice, not all hotels are able to perform service recovery effectively. Mishandled service failures may harm the hotel's reputation and discourage guests from returning. Although Holiday Inn Melaka adheres to global service standards, it still faces local challenges related to guest expectations, service culture, and operational conditions. Therefore, it is important to examine how service recovery strategies are carried out by the GSC, particularly in the context of room services, which involve high levels of direct interaction between guests and staff. Based on this background, this study aims to investigate the strategies for handling guest complaints through service recovery by the Guest Service Center (GSC) in improving room services at Holiday Inn Melaka Malaysia.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Guest satisfaction

Guest satisfaction is a fundamental indicator of success in the hospitality industry, as it directly shapes guest loyalty, repeat visits, and word-of-mouth communication (Li et al., 2020). In hotels, satisfaction reflects how well services meet or exceed expectations, and it strongly impacts reputation, occupancy rates, and financial performance. Several factors influence satisfaction, including service quality, cleanliness, comfort, and staff interaction. The role of frontline employees is particularly important since they represent the hotel and directly shape guest experiences. However, achieving high satisfaction remains challenging due to increasing guest expectations, diverse needs, and intense competition in the hospitality sector.

Service quality

Service quality is a key differentiator in a competitive hotel market. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985; 1988) introduced the SERVQUAL model, which measures the gap between expectations and perceptions of service performance. The model identifies five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In practice, these dimensions are reflected in physical facilities, staff reliability, speed of response, ability to instill confidence, and genuine care for guests. Consistency across these areas is essential, as poor performance in even one dimension may negatively affect guest perceptions and loyalty (Kasinem, 2020).

Complaint Handling Methods

Complaint handling is central to guest retention and loyalty. Ineffective responses to complaints can damage trust, while effective approaches can turn dissatisfaction into satisfaction. Two frameworks often applied in hospitality are ILEAD (Identify, Listen, Empathize, Apologize, Deliver Solution) and HEAT (Hear, Empathize, Apologize, Take Action). ILEAD emphasizes structured steps, beginning with identifying the problem and ending with delivering a solution (Nurrisa, Hermina, & Norlaila, 2025). HEAT focuses more on quick and empathetic responses, highlighting the importance of immediate action to resolve complaints (Kurnia & Wulandari, 2024). Both approaches underline empathy, interpersonal communication, and speed as vital components of effective complaint management.

Service Recovery

Service recovery is defined as the effort to address service failures and restore guestsatisfaction. It is not limited to solving problems but also aims to rebuild trust and strengthen the guest perceptions of the hotel's professionalism (Saraditya & Wijaya, 2018). According to Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar (1998), successful service recovery can transform dissatisfied guests into loyal customers. Essential strategies include prompt acknowledgment, empathetic communication, corrective measures, and sometimes compensation. When managed effectively, service recovery turns negative experiences into opportunities for enhancing guest relationships and brand image.

Guest Service Center (GSC)

The Guest Service Center (GSC) plays a pivotal role in managing guest complaints by serving as the main contact point between guests and the hotel (Rahman & Gestuti, 2024). Its functions include receiving, documenting, coordinating with other departments, and resolving complaints systematically. Within the framework of service recovery, GSC ensures problems are addressed quickly and consistently. Rosa (2015) identifies four important actions for effective service recovery through GSC: prompt response, clear communication, corrective action, and fair compensation. By adopting these practices, hotels can not only resolve issues but also prevent recurrence, thus enhancing guest trust and overall service quality.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) are guidelines designed to ensure that organizational operations run effectively (Sailendra, 2015). According to Moekijat (2008, in Setyawan, 2021), SOP consists of a series of steps explaining how, when, and by whom a task should be carried out. Similarly, Atmoko (2011, in Setyawan, 2021) describes SOP as a reference for implementing tasks based on technical, administrative, and procedural standards. Provide written instructions that outline processes, responsibilities, and timelines (Insani, 2010). The main purpose is to standardize repetitive tasks, improve efficiency, guide new employees, support supervision, and ensure synchronization across organizational functions.

METHOD

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how the Guest Service Center

(GSC) at Holiday Inn Melaka Malaysia handles guest complaints through service recovery strategies. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of real experiences, social interactions, and actual practices in the hotel environment.

Data were collected through three techniques:

1. In-Depth Interviews, were conducted with key informants, namely a Front Office staff member, the Chief Engineer, and the Duty Manager. These interviews aimed to obtain detailed explanations and perspectives regarding GSC's strategies in handling guest complaints.
2. Participant Observation, was carried out during six months of on-the-job training at the GSC. The researcher directly observed complaint-handling processes, particularly the application of the ILEAD (Identify, Listen, Empathize, Apologize, Deliver Solution) and HEAT (Hear, Empathize, Apologize, Take Action) methods.
3. Documentation, was used to support findings by collecting internal reports, SOPs, problem logs, and other related records, along with photographs and notes taken during fieldwork.

By combining these techniques, the study ensured data triangulation and provided comprehensive insights into the service recovery practices implemented by the GSC to improve guest satisfaction and service quality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Handling Complaints by the Guest Service Center(GSC)

The Guest Service Center (GSC) plays a strategic role at Holiday Inn Melaka in managing guest experiences, particularly when complaints arise. As the hotel's frontline, the GSC not only receives information and inquiries but also serves as the main unit responsible for addressing guest dissatisfaction. The findings show that GSC staff at Holiday Inn Melaka strive to respond with patience, empathy, and professionalism. This approach aligns with the HEAT method (Hear, Empathize, Apologize, Take Action) and ILEAD method (Investigate, Listen, Empathize, Apologize, Deliver), which emphasize active listening, expressing empathy, offering apologies, and providing timely solutions.

This practice reflects the service quality theory developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), particularly the dimensions of responsiveness and empathy. Quick responses and caring attitudes have been shown to influence guests' perceptions of service quality. This is consistent with Tax & Brown (1998), who found that effective complaint handling can mitigate negative dissatisfaction and even strengthen customer loyalty. Thus, the role of the GSC at Holiday Inn Melaka extends beyond resolving technical issues to building long-term guest relationships.

Implementation of Service Recovery in Complaint Handling

At Holiday Inn Melaka, service recovery is positioned as a key strategy to maintain guest trust. Complaints are not only treated as issues to be resolved but also as opportunities to improve service quality. GSC staff are expected to respond quickly and empathetically, whether the complaints are minor or more complex. In certain cases, management involvement becomes necessary to provide strategic solutions, such as direct apologies, compensation, or facility upgrades. The service recovery process follows a systematic flow: listening to and understanding the complaint, clarifying and apologizing, providing concrete solutions, and conducting follow-ups. The follow-up stage, often overlooked, is critical to ensuring that the solutions provided are effective. This process reflects the principles of the ILEAD method, which highlights continuous evaluation as part of service recovery.

However, several challenges arise in practice. First, language barriers are common due to the diverse backgrounds of guests. Second, differences in perceptions between guests and staff regarding service standards may cause misunderstandings. Third, difficulties occur when addressing complaints via social media, as they often lack reservation data. To address these issues, Holiday Inn Melaka has introduced several solutions, including enhancing staff foreign language skills, providing cross-cultural communication training, and creating dedicated channels for digital complaints. These strategies show the hotel's efforts to integrate service recovery theory with practical innovations in daily operations.

The Impact of Service Recovery on Guest Satisfaction

Effective service recovery has a direct impact on guest satisfaction. According to Kotler et al. (2013), consumer satisfaction occurs when the service provided meets or exceeds expectations. At Holiday Inn Melaka, indicators of satisfaction after complaint handling include concrete corrective actions (e.g., room upgrades or complimentary meals), shifts in guest perception from negative to positive, willingness to recommend the hotel, and a sense of being valued by management.

For example, TripAdvisor reviews show cases where check-in issues were resolved with a room upgrade and complimentary lunch, which not only resolved the problem but also transformed the guest's

perception positively, even leading to hotel recommendations. Conversely, negative feedback also emerged, highlighting delays in addressing simple needs such as room facility replacements. This suggests that while service recovery can enhance satisfaction, consistency in implementation remains a key challenge. From a theoretical perspective, the success of service recovery at Holiday Inn Melaka supports the concept of the service recovery paradox, in which customers who initially experience dissatisfaction can become more satisfied after receiving effective complaint handling (McCullough et al., 2000). This confirms that quick responses, concrete actions, and empathetic attitudes not only resolve issues but also strengthen guest loyalty and enhance the hotel's long-term positive image.

Integrative Analysis

Overall, the complaint-handling strategy through service recovery at Holiday Inn Melaka demonstrates high effectiveness in restoring guest trust. The GSC plays a central role by applying service recovery principles rooted in empathy, accountability, and measurable follow-up. Although challenges remain regarding service consistency, the hotel's initiatives in addressing language barriers, perception gaps, and digital complaints reflect its commitment to continuous improvement.

Thus, this study emphasizes that the success of service recovery depends not only on standard procedures but also on the ability of hotel staff and management to adapt theory into practice. Holiday Inn Melaka serves as an example of how the right strategies can transform negative experiences into opportunities to build guest loyalty while strengthening the hotel's competitiveness in the hospitality industry.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the guest complaint handling strategy through service recovery implemented by the Guest Service Center (GSC) at Holiday Inn Melaka, Malaysia, is effective in improving room service quality and guest satisfaction. The GSC plays a crucial role by applying empathy, responsiveness, and professionalism in line with the HEAT and ILEAD methods, successfully transforming negative guest experiences into positive ones. A systematic service recovery process, starting from listening to complaints to follow-up actions, strengthens guest trust and loyalty, despite challenges such as language differences and service perception gaps. The study emphasizes that successful service recovery relies not only on standard procedures but also on the adaptability of staff and management in integrating theories into operational practices. Thus, Holiday Inn Melaka has managed to leverage complaints as opportunities to enhance competitiveness and build long-term customer relationships in the highly competitive hospitality industry.

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