

Service Quality and Customer Loyalty of Airline Enterprises: A Dual-Intermediary Model

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Abstract

This article aims to improve the service quality of China airlines and increase customer loyalty, which is based on the service quality model, with enterprise trust and corporate image as the dual-intermediary model, discussing the impact on customer loyalty and constructing a research model that affects customer loyalty. To further reveal which aspects of airline customer loyalty are affected, this article deepens the research on airline customer loyalty. This is a quantitative study with a sample of 449 Chinese passengers appearing on Chinese airlines, and a convenience sample of paper-based questionnaires at the airport. The result of this study is the development of a causal model consisting of four components: service quality, enterprise trust, corporate image, and customer loyalty, which is largely consistent with empirical data. Statistical results show chi-square statistical goodness-of-fit test $\chi^2/df=2.34$, GFI=0.92, AGFI=0.90, RMR=0.046, RMSEA=0.06. The final result is a predictive coefficient of 0.68, indicating that the variables in the model can explain 64% variance of customer loyalty. The results show that airline service quality, enterprise trust, and corporate image can significantly improve customer loyalty; In particular, while airline service quality has a significant impact on enterprise trust, corporate image, and customer loyalty, the service quality of airlines can indirectly affect customer loyalty through enterprise trust and corporate image. This paper applies the theory to airlines, verifies the relationship between airline service quality and loyalty, and demonstrates that corporate the dual intermediary role of enterprise trust and corporate image, providing relevant advice for Chinese airlines.

Keywords: Service Quality; Enterprise Trust; Corporate Image; Customer Loyalty

Introduction

In recent years, China has become more connected to overseas, and people's daily life standards have also improved. More and more people are choosing to travel by air (Huang et al., 2022). Kotler et al. (2015) argue that effective marketing does not require professional marketing knowledge, and emphasize the importance of strengthening communication and services. In the fierce competition in China's air transportation market, in order to seize customer resources and maintain their position in the international market, enterprises need to pay more attention to customer requirements, improve the quality management capabilities of enterprises, comprehensively improve the quality of aircraft operation services, and increase aviation competitiveness factor (Huang et al., 2019). Different from traditional transportation, based on the characteristics of urban rail transit such as comfortable travel and convenience presented by airplanes, the corresponding ticket price is also greatly increased compared with traditional rail transit products. Therefore, when consumers choose such product with more capital investment, they will make higher demands in terms of psychological needs, price reflection, information needs, service means, service methods, and evaluation standards as well (Moslehpour et al., 2020).

China's theory on the air transport service industry lags behind, and research on the theoretical basis lags behind that of Western developed countries (Li et al., 2022). Research on the service quality of the air transport service industry and its enterprise trust and image has become of great theoretical value (Song et al., 2019), and the core content of the service industry is customer service, which has great impact on customer loyalty. In today's new era of consumption upgrading and personalized development, the research on the main influencing factors of customer consumption behavior has begun to become the source of the core competitive advantage of enterprises (Dewi et al., 2021). In the post-epidemic era, significant changes are taking place in various service sectors in China, and the global business structure is also changing. In the current transportation service industry, there is great unpredictability in its developing trend, where competition pressure is increasing day by day (Jiang, 2020). Customers are the foundation of an enterprise's survival, and for airline enterprises, how to obtain customer loyalty with excellent service quality, so as to form their own competitive advantages, is the main strategic measure to ensure that air transport companies can achieve sustainable development (Li & Liu,

2019). How to improve customer loyalty and what factors affect customer loyalty have become issues that airline enterprises need to understand urgently.

Tantisereerut and Akkawanitcha (2022) have studied the influencing factors of customers' loyalty to Johnson & Johnson in the Bangkok metropolis and find that the corporate image of Johnson & Johnson will increase customer satisfaction, and customer satisfaction will increase customer loyalty, but the lack of corporate image has no direct effect on customer loyalty. Lexcharoen and Uttamasiriseni (2022) have conducted a research based on consumers who buy food in Bangkok and its surrounding areas, and find that the service quality perceived by customers can not only directly increase customer loyalty, but also indirectly affect customer loyalty through enterprise trust. Saranrom (2022) has conducted a research based on consumers of home vacation services and find that service quality, price, image, etc. can significantly predict consumer loyalty.

In summary, service quality, corporate image, and enterprise trust may generate consumer loyalty in China's air transport service industry. Of the numerous research papers on customer service quality, trust, brand, and customer loyalty, most of them were directly applied to the service industry (Dam & Dam, 2021). But in the aviation industry, empirical research in this area is just beginning (Han et al., 2019). In order to find out the reasons for the formation of customer loyalty in airline enterprises, and put forward corresponding rectification measures, this paper sorts out the relevant literature on service quality theory, and conducts an empirical analysis on the relationship among service quality, corporate image, enterprise trust and customer loyalty of airline enterprises, so as to promote the further development of the theory in the field of Chinese management.

Research Objectives

In summary, this paper proposes the following seven research objectives.

1. To explore the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty of airline enterprises.
2. To explore the relationship between service quality and enterprise trust of airline enterprises.
3. To explore the relationship between service quality and corporate image of airline enterprises.

4. To explore the relationship between enterprise trust and corporate image of airline enterprises.

5. To explore the relationship between enterprise trust and customer loyalty of airline enterprises.

6. To explore the relationship between corporate image and customer loyalty of airline enterprises.

7. To explore the mediating role of enterprise trust and corporate image of airline enterprises.

Literature Review

Service Quality and Customer Loyalty of Airline Enterprises

Most scholars maintain that service quality has a direct impact on customer loyalty. The analysis of Nguyen et al. (2020) shows that repeated needs and recommendation intentions will be positively affected by service quality. Zeithaml's (1988) research points out that service quality has a positive impact on customer price loyalty. Scholars Parasuraman et al. (1994) have found that the relationship between service quality and consumer behavior preferences varies with each industry. However, Zameer et al. (2019) have conducted in-depth research on industries such as hypermarket retail, movie theaters, health care, and amusement parks, and have found a positive correlation between service quality and customer loyalty. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H1: The service quality of airline enterprises has a positive impact on customer loyalty.

Service Quality and Enterprise Trust of Airline Enterprises

Enterprise trust means that the brand will behave in a specific way and provide services and commitments that will bring reliability and practicality to consumers through consistent product performance, appropriate price plans and actions (Kalia et al., 2021). Boonlertvanich (2019) believes that trust is a unique characteristic of consumers' confidence in a brand, such as the brand's quality service consistency, authenticity, reliability, and honesty and responsibility. Nusjirwan et al. (2020) have found from the perspective of marketing that enterprise service productivity can be improved by consumer participation. Consumers play an important role as company employees and can actively participate in the product manufacturing process and service delivery process. Production is achieved under the influence of the joint efforts of company

employees and consumers. Melián-Alzola and Martín-Santana (2020) believe that by improving the utilization of consumer participation activities, service companies can innovate service value, thereby realizing the development of new niche markets, and on this basis, a new model based on consumer engagement influencing firm performance can be obtained. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H2: The service quality of airline enterprises has a positive impact on enterprise trust.

Service Quality and Corporate Image of Airline Enterprises

The concept of brand image has not been unified so far, but from the definition of brand image by Chinese and Western scholars, most scholars agree that brand image includes two attributes: functional attributes (hard attributes or tangible attributes) and emotional attributes (soft attributes or intangible attributes) (Keller, 2003). Among them, the functional attribute part includes consumers' perception of service quality, and for service products, perceived service quality is a key functional attribute (Berthon et al., 1999).

Aaker et al. (2013) construct a cause-and-effect model of perceived quality. The antecedents of perceived quality include specific intrinsic and extrinsic attributes, and the outcomes of perceived quality include brand attitude, perceived value, and brand image. Asnawi et al. (2019) research shows that the higher the consumer's perception of the quality of goods or services, the more positive it is to the company's image. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H3: The service quality of airline enterprises has a positive impact on corporate image.

Enterprise Trust and Corporate Image

Brand image is an intangible asset of an enterprise (Ali et al., 2020). Especially, the product image is the physical carrier of the enterprise brand. The subjective views and attitudes of the company's market performance are presented in the mind, a good brand image often makes consumers think that it has the ability to meet their needs and fulfill their commitments, and has strong reliability, thereby improving consumers' perception of the brand. The recognition of the brand strengthens consumers' attitudes towards the brand and forms enterprise trust (Alam et al., 2020). Facing the complicated market environment and intensified market competition, consumers often receive, analyze and store brand product information and enterprise information through mass media, newspapers, magazines, website information and other channels, so as to enhance

their ability to judge and reduce consumer purchase risk, and ultimately increasing consumer trust (Lai, 2019). Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H4: Enterprise trust has a positive impact on corporate image

Enterprise Trust and Customer Loyalty

Enterprise trust is the display of consumers' brand credibility and product reliability, and has a direct positive impact on customer loyalty (Islam et al., 2021).

However, in the actual aviation service, due to the large number of customers and the obvious differences in the service needs of different customers, it is difficult for flight attendants to provide targeted services through a full understanding of customer service needs, which leads to the lack of personalized service (Setiawan, 2021). Glaveli (2020) believes that the increased trust of consumers in the company will help consumers to increase their brand loyalty. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H5: Enterprise trust has a positive impact on customer loyalty.

Corporate Image and Customer Loyalty

Keller (1993) has said that brand image refers to the relevant knowledge reflected in the brand value association in consumers' memory, and brand association represents all the affairs linked to a certain brand in people's memory. Cholisati et al. (2019) believe that brand association is the core of establishing brand equity for enterprises and will further enhance brand loyalty. Establishing a good brand performance of an enterprise can help the enterprise improve its market competitiveness, enhance its social credibility, and attract more customers to consume (Maria et al., 2020). The improvement of brand image can improve customers' brand loyalty, and the possibility of customers buying the brand again will also increase (Lai, 2019). Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H6: Corporate image has a positive impact on customer loyalty.

The Mediating Role of Enterprise Trust

Nguyen et al. (2020) regard enterprise trust as the sense of security generated by customers in the process of interacting with enterprises, and it is the degree of confidence that customers expect from enterprises. Harimurti and Suryani (2019) believe that service quality will indirectly affect corporate loyalty through enterprise trust, which also means that customers will have an emotional connection with the company due to enterprise trust.

Kellogg et al. (1997) based on the viewpoint of social group influence, believe that when individuals are doing something, they will be subconsciously influenced by other people or things, and at this time, this other person or thing directly affects the final behavior of the individual on this matter. Personal relevance to work, achievement satisfaction, acceptability, and achievement perception all affect customers' job acceptance. It can be seen that an individual's acceptance of various things will be more or less affected by the surrounding people and things. Therefore, the willingness of customers to use air travel and the behavior of value co-creation will also be directly or indirectly affected by the trust of airline enterprises (Shiwakoti et al., 2022).

China Hainan Airline is promoting the super economy cabin business, which represents a higher cost performance. The addition of super economy class allows civil aviation airlines to meet the travel needs of different customers to the greatest extent. Customers are engaged because they trust this company. Elgarhy (2022) research also believes that in order to enhance customer loyalty to the brand, the premise is to obtain the trust of customers. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H7: Enterprise trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty.

The Mediating Role of Corporate Image

Having a good brand image can help consumers identify the quality of products and services, reduce the cognitive risk of purchase, and gain different feelings and satisfaction from it (Latif et al., 2020). A good corporate image can make customers have positive associations with service quality, and generate love and trust in the company's products and services, thereby stimulating customers' purchasing behavior and deepening the formation of customer loyalty (Chien & Chi, 2019).

Service Profit Chain (SPC) was proposed by Kamakura et al., (2002). From the "customer point of view", the economic value of the goods and services provided by the enterprise to customers is as important as the service function and service process quality provided by the enterprise to customers, and it is also related to the economic cost of the service selected by the customer and the cost in the purchase process. Other costs are linked to each other as well. Kurhayadi et al. (2022) research believes that customers have a positive corporate image of product and service quality, which will increase the perceived value of corporate image, and will affect customers' purchase intention and loyalty. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypothesis:

H8: Corporate image plays a mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty.

H9: Aviation service quality will indirectly affect customer loyalty through enterprise trust and corporate image

Conceptual Framework

In order to explore the influence mechanism of airline service quality on customer loyalty, this paper, on the basis of searching a large number of related papers, analyzes the situation of various factors of airline service quality, citing the theoretical model of service quality, and analyzes customer loyalty to airlines, and propose a causal relationship between the hypothesized variables. Considering the different service levels of various airline enterprises in China, when designing the model, the commonality among various airline enterprises is considered to ensure the understanding of the overall situation. Details are shown in Figure 1.

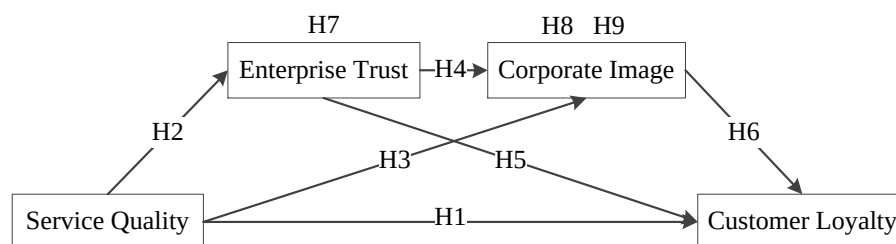


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Scale Design

According to the SERVQUAL scale of Parasuraman et al. (1985), the service quality of airline enterprises divides service quality into five dimensions, namely reliability (1–5 questions), responsiveness (6–9 questions), guarantee (10–13 questions), empathy (14–18 questions), tangibles (19–22 questions). A 7-point Likert scale is used, and the higher the score, the higher the consumer's perception of the airline company's service quality.

The enterprise trust scale is mainly based on the scale of Keller and Aaker (1992) and revised according to the purpose of this research, with a total of 6 items. A 7-point Likert scale is used, and the higher the score, the higher the consumer's perception of enterprise trust.

The corporate image scale is mainly based on the scale of Grönroos (1982) and revised according to the purpose of this research, with a total of 6 items. A 7-point Likert scale is used, and the higher the score, the higher the consumer's perception of corporate image.

The customer Loyalty Scale is mainly based on the scale of McMullan and Gilmore (2003) and revised according to the purpose of this research, with a total of 5 items. A 7-point Likert scale is used, the higher the score, the higher the degree of customer loyalty.

Questionnaire Survey and Sample Characteristics

A formal questionnaire survey was conducted from October 1, 2022 to October 30, 2022. Passengers who took a certain airline would receive and fill in the questionnaires by answering questions on board. The suggestions and question items were communicated and explained, and the respondents filled out the questionnaire in anonymous form. The distribution and recovery of the survey questionnaires are as follows. In the end, a total of 488 questionnaires were recovered, and 39 questionnaires with missing information and all items with the same serial number were excluded. Finally, 449 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 92.0%.

Among the respondents, the proportion of men is higher than that of women, reaching 67.9%; the proportion of the married group is higher than that of the single group, accounting for 63.5%; the age of the respondents is mainly concentrated in 23~30 years old, 31~40 years old, which are respectively accounting for 37.2% and 30.1%; the education level is mainly undergraduate/college, accounting for 68.2%; among the monthly income of the respondents, 33.4% have a monthly income of 10,000 to 20,000, followed by $\leq 10,000$, 20,000 to 30,000, 30,000 to 40,000, respectively accounting for 24.8%, 12.5%, and 19.1%; the top three occupations of the respondents are employees of private enterprises, employees of state-owned enterprises, and individual businessmen, respectively accounting for 24.6%, 23.7%, 17.5%. From the perspective of travel characteristics, most of the respondents are self-funded, accounting for 58.2% of all respondents, followed by public-funded passengers, accounting for 37.1%; 54.2% of the respondents travel by themselves, 45.8% of the respondents travel with a partner. Ordinary passengers account for 48.8%, followed by passengers holding ordinary cards account for 27.5%, passengers holding gold and silver cards are relatively small, accounting for only 20.6%; in terms of purchasing channels, online ticket purchases account for 68.9%, 21.5% of the tickets are

purchased from airlines' official websites/official accounts, and only a small part are purchased through other channels.

Research Results

Reliability

This study uses SPSS26.0 to test the Cronbach's α coefficient of the sample data. The reliability coefficient of the overall questionnaire scale reaches 0.969, which is greater than 0.9. The collected samples have good reliability and can be further analyzed.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Using AMOS for confirmatory factor analysis, the standardized factor loading of each variable is between 0.68 and 0.91, the CR value is between 0.80 and 0.86, and the AVE value is between 0.52 and 0.70, indicating good convergent validity, the square root of the average variance extraction value of each variable is greater than the correlation coefficient between variables, indicating that the variables have good discriminant validity, as shown in Table 1; in summary, the overall questionnaire has relatively good reliability, the fitting degree of the confirmatory factor measurement model is good as well, which can be used for further structural equation model analysis.

Table 1 Correlation analysis and discriminant validity

	Service Quality	Enterprise Trust	Corporate Image	Customer Loyalty
Service Quality	0.77			
Enterprise Trust	0.45***	0.80		
Corporate Image	0.41***	0.51***	0.72***	
Customer Loyalty	0.27***	0.49***	0.32***	0.84

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

Structural Equation Model Checking

Since the service quality is a second-order construct, the second-order construct is calculated as an observed variable by transforming variables for model validation, as shown in Figure 2. The fitting indexes of the model, such as $\chi^2/df=2.34$ (< 3), GFI=0.92, AGFI=0.90, RMR=0.06, RMSEA=0.06, CFI=0.94 (≥ 0.9), NFI=0.93, IFI=0.93, etc., all reach the standard, indicating that the fitting degree between the sample data and the model is good.

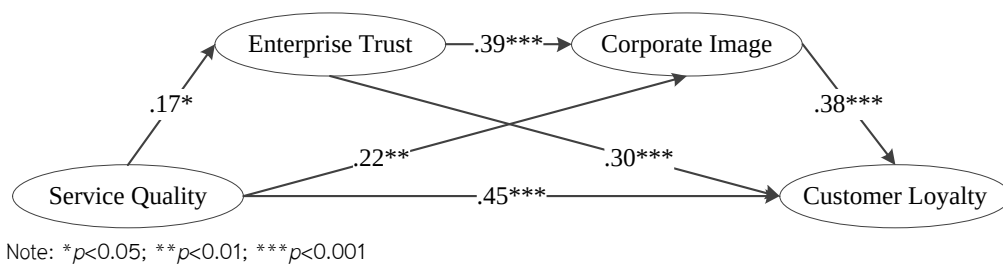


Fig.2 Path coefficient map

The results are shown in Table 2, where Estimate is the standardized regression path coefficient. When the t value is greater than 1.96 and the p value is less than 0.001, the path is statistically significant. The results show that service quality positively affects customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), and H1 is supported. Service quality positively affects enterprise trust ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$), and H2 is supported. Service quality positively affects corporate image ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$), H3 is supported. Enterprise trust positively affects corporate image ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$), and H4 is supported. Enterprise trust positively affects customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), H5 is supported. Corporate image positively affects customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), H6 is supported.

Table 2 Summary table of structural equation paths

Path	Estimate	S.E.	t	p	Result
Service Quality $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty	0.45	0.09	5.699	***	H1 support
Service Quality $\rightarrow$ Enterprise trust	0.17	0.08	2.285	0.022	H2 support
Service Quality $\rightarrow$ Corporate Image	0.22	0.08	2.446	0.003	H3 support
Enterprise trust $\rightarrow$ Corporate Image	0.39	0.07	5.347	***	H4 support
Enterprise trust $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty	0.30	0.05	4.922	***	H5 support
Corporate Image $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty	0.38	0.07	5.233	***	H6 support

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

5000 runs are set up in AMOS for Bootstrap and the upper and lower confidence interval limits are set to 95% respectively. The results are shown in Table 3. Service quality indirectly affects customer loyalty through enterprise trust ($\beta = 0.05$, [0.17, 0.45]), H7 is supported. Service quality indirectly affects customer loyalty through corporate image ($\beta = 0.08$, [0.24, 0.76]), H8 is

supported. Service quality indirectly affects customer loyalty through enterprise trust and corporate image ($\beta=0.03$, [0.03, 0.19]), H9 is supported.

Table 3 Indirect effects of the mediation model

Mediator path	indirect effect	CI 95%	Result
Service Quality → Enterprise trust → Customer Loyalty	0.05	[0.17, 0.45]	H7 support
Service Quality → Corporate Image → Customer Loyalty	0.08	[0.24, 0.76]	H8 support
Service Quality → Enterprise trust → Corporate Image → Customer Loyalty	0.03	[0.03, 0.19]	H9 support

Discussion

The higher the passenger's perception of the service quality provided by the airline, the higher the loyalty to the airline will be shown. consistent with Zeithaml's (1988), Parasuraman et al. (1994), Zameer et al. (2019), Nguyen et al. (2020) and other studies have similar results. In order to increase the service quality perceived by passengers, firstly, the service staff of airline enterprises should respond enthusiastically to customers, which will directly bring goodwill and satisfaction to the passengers, thus beating their peers in terms of sales skills and service methods.

Enterprise trust and corporate image have a significant impact on customer loyalty, and also have a mediating effect between airline service quality and customer loyalty, similar to the research results of Ali et al., (2020), Tantisereerut and Akkawanitcha (2022), Lexcharoen and Uttamasiriseni (2022), Saranrom (2022), etc., At the same time, enterprise trust and corporate image have a mediating effect between airline service quality and customer loyalty, similar to the results of Kamakura et al., (2002), Chien and Chi (2019), Kurhayadi et al. (2022), etc. In other words, the passenger's service quality to the airline company will affect his judgment on the relationship, trust and image of the airline company. In order to gain the trust of customers, airline enterprises need to carefully check product information, publish truthful airline information, refrain from false propaganda and false promises, and pay attention to passenger's complaints and grievances.

Conclusion

The service quality, enterprise trust, and corporate image of airline enterprises can significantly improve customer loyalty; among them, the service quality of airline enterprises can significantly improve enterprise trust, corporate image, and customer loyalty. At the same time, the service quality of airline enterprises can indirectly affect customer loyalty through enterprise trust and corporate image.

The theoretical significance of this article firstly lies in applying the theory to airline enterprises, verifying the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty of airline enterprises, and providing a certain theoretical basis for other scholars. Secondly, the related research model of experiential marketing and customer loyalty is expanded, adding double intermediary variables, and then confirming their path relationship according to empirical tests, which will help to improve the relevant theoretical basis related to the subdivided field of service quality marketing in the aviation industry. The practical significance of this paper is that by taking Chinese aviation companies as the research object, the empirical research can reveal the extent to which Chinese airline companies influence consumer loyalty and help them choose the right marketing strategy.

Recommendation

This study finds that Service Quality ($p = 0.000$), Enterprise Trust ($p = 0.000$) and Corporate Image ($p = 0.001$) all affect customer loyalty, and service quality can indirectly affect customer loyalty through enterprise trust and corporate image. Some recommendations can be made based on the findings. First of all, Chinese airline companies can provide a one-stop, full-process service experience. In order to gain customer trust, Chinese airline enterprises need to carefully check the information, publish real information about service content, aviation services, and booking prices, refrain from false propaganda and false promises, pay attention to consumer complaints and grievances, so as to increase customer loyalty. Secondly, airlines should establish corporate image and enterprise trust to enhance customer loyalty. The characteristics of enterprises and customers can greatly affect enterprise trust, and companies can cultivate enterprise trust of different customers and different products by implementing differentiated brand marketing strategy. Lastly, corporate image is an external manifestation of corporate spirit and culture. To establish a good image among the public, an enterprise must provide customers with

excellent products and services. At the same time, it should rely on the true communication to gain the trust of customers, thereby improving the corporate image. Only when Chinese companies have good service quality, enterprise trust, and corporate image can they effectively improve customer loyalty.

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