

Analyzing Service Quality in Ferry Transportation A Case Study of PT Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: service quality, ferry transportation, SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction

Received : 15, August

Revised : 09, September

Accepted: 24, September

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the service quality of ferry transportation services at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch, focusing on five SERVQUAL dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine key informants, including operational staff, customer service officers, and HR personnel, supported by observation and documentation. Data collection was conducted over five months, from December 2024 to May 2025, capturing service delivery during both routine and peak periods. Thematic analysis was applied to identify strengths and challenges in service performance. Findings reveal that while physical facilities and employee reliability meet customer expectations, delays due to tidal conditions and slow responsiveness during peak hours remain critical issues. The study contributes practical insights for maritime service providers to enhance customer satisfaction through improved scheduling, staff training, and digital communication systems, offering implications for service quality management in Indonesia's sea transportation sector.

INTRODUCTION

Sea transportation plays a critical role in connecting Indonesia's vast archipelago, serving as a backbone for mobility, trade, and regional economic development (Tjiptono, 2018). For millions of Indonesians, particularly those in lower-income groups, ferry services are not merely a transportation option but a necessity for accessing education, healthcare, and employment opportunities across islands. In this context, service quality becomes a decisive factor in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and operational sustainability in maritime logistics. Despite technological advancements and growing competition from air and high-speed sea transport, conventional ferry operators like PT. Dharma Lautan Utama (DLU) continue to serve as a vital link for inter-island mobility, especially on long-haul routes such as Banjarmasin-Surabaya.

However, recent operational data from PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch reveal a fluctuating passenger trend, with a notable decline in 2024 compared to the previous year (Manifest PT. DLU, 2024). This decline occurs despite the company's efforts to maintain affordable fares and improve onboard facilities, suggesting a potential misalignment between perceived service delivery and customer expectations. Unlike short-haul ferry services often studied in urban contexts, long-distance maritime transport involves extended customer interaction, overnight journeys, and complex logistical coordination—factors that intensify the demand for consistent, reliable, and empathetic service. Yet, there remains a significant gap in scholarly research focusing on service quality in *long-haul domestic ferry operations*, particularly from a qualitative, case-based perspective in Indonesia's regional ports.

This study addresses that gap by offering a nuanced, in-depth analysis of service quality at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin, a key player in Indonesia's maritime logistics network. While the SERVQUAL model—comprising *tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy*—has been widely applied in service sectors such as healthcare, banking, and hospitality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), its application in long-distance sea transportation remains underexplored, especially in emerging economies where infrastructure, environmental conditions, and socio-economic diversity significantly influence service delivery. By applying this framework in a real-world, operational maritime setting, this paper contributes to both theoretical enrichment and practical insight. It captures a *niche service environment* where tidal conditions, extended travel duration, and mixed passenger demographics (including laborers, families, and commercial vehicle operators) create unique service challenges not typically found in other transport modes.

Furthermore, the study enriches existing literature by integrating qualitative evidence from multiple stakeholders—frontline staff, management, and passengers—within a single organizational context. This holistic approach allows for a deeper understanding of how service quality is perceived, delivered, and constrained in a resource-sensitive, publicly accessible transport system. Unlike quantitative studies that prioritize statistical generalization, this research emphasizes contextual depth, capturing the lived experiences and operational realities that shape service outcomes.

The findings not only assess the current state of service quality across the five SERVQUAL dimensions but also identify specific operational barriers – such as scheduling delays due to tidal fluctuations, limited staffing during peak seasons, and inconsistent responsiveness in customer communication—and examine the company’s strategic responses, including digital ticketing via the DLU Ferry app and staff training programs. In doing so, this paper aims to answer the central research question: *How is service quality experienced and managed in the long-haul ferry operations of PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin, and what organizational and environmental factors influence its delivery?* The insights generated are intended to support service improvement in maritime logistics and inform policy and management practices in Indonesia’s broader public transport sector.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Service quality is a central determinant of customer satisfaction and organizational competitiveness in the service sector, particularly in transportation. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), service quality can be evaluated through five key dimensions, collectively known as the SERVQUAL model: *tangibles*, *reliability*, *responsiveness*, *assurance*, and *empathy*. This framework has become a foundational tool in assessing service performance across various industries, including healthcare, banking, and hospitality (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Lusardi, Mitchell, & Curto, 2010; Sabri & MacDonald, 2010), and remains highly applicable in transportation contexts where customer experience is shaped by both physical and interpersonal factors.

The *tangibles* dimension refers to the physical evidence of service, including the appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. In maritime transport, this includes the condition of the vessel, ticketing counters, waiting areas, and crew uniforms, all of which influence passengers’ first impressions and perceived professionalism (Tjiptono, 2018). *Reliability* emphasizes the ability to deliver promised services accurately and consistently, such as adherence to schedules and fulfillment of service commitments. For ferry operators like PT. Dharma Lautan Utama, reliability is challenged by external factors such as tidal conditions and weather, yet remains critical for building trust (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2022).

Responsiveness concerns the willingness and speed of employees in providing service and responding to customer inquiries or complaints. In high-demand periods, delays in service delivery or communication can significantly reduce perceived quality (Reforman Bago, Sutardjo, & Anggraini, 2022). *Assurance* encompasses the knowledge, courtesy, and credibility of staff, as well as their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Passengers are more likely to feel secure when interacting with trained, polite, and competent personnel, especially during long-haul journeys (Tjiptono, 2018). Finally, *empathy* reflects the degree of caring and individual attention provided to customers. This includes understanding passenger needs, offering personalized service, and maintaining accessible communication channels (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Service quality is further complicated by the unique characteristics of services, which differ fundamentally from tangible goods. Kotler and Keller (in Yasir, 2020) identify four key attributes: *intangibility* (services cannot be seen or touched before consumption), *inseparability* (production and consumption occur simultaneously), *variability* (service quality depends on who provides it and when), and *perishability* (services cannot be stored). These characteristics make quality management in ferry services particularly challenging, as inconsistencies in crew behavior, scheduling, or facility conditions can directly impact customer perceptions.

To address these challenges, organizations must adopt strategic approaches to service improvement. Wolkins (in Christine Mokoginta et al., 2023) outlines six principles for enhancing service quality: leadership commitment, education, planning, review, communication, and recognition. These principles emphasize the role of organizational culture and employee engagement in sustaining service excellence. Similarly, Osborne (in Simarmata, 2022) proposes a *customer strategy* that prioritizes accountability, feedback mechanisms, and accessibility—elements highly relevant to PT. Dharma Lautan Utama's efforts in digitalizing ticketing and improving complaint handling.

This study applies the SERVQUAL framework within the under-researched context of long-distance domestic ferry operations in Indonesia, contributing to both theoretical and practical knowledge. By analyzing service quality through these established dimensions while accounting for environmental and operational constraints, the paper offers a nuanced understanding of service delivery in a vital yet often overlooked segment of the transportation sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the service quality of ferry transportation at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch. The case study method was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of service delivery within its natural context, allowing for comprehensive insights into operational practices, employee-customer interactions, and organizational challenges (Moleong, 2013; Sarosa, 2012).

The research focused on five dimensions of service quality based on the SERVQUAL model: *tangibles*, *reliability*, *responsiveness*, *assurance*, and *empathy*.

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure credibility and depth. These included in-depth interviews with nine key informants, comprising operational staff (e.g., Head of Operations), customer service officers, HR personnel, and frontline employees. Additionally, participant observation was conducted over five months—from December 2024 to May 2025—covering various shifts and peak travel periods. Document analysis was also used to examine internal records, service procedures, and company policies, while photographic documentation supported the verification of physical service conditions.

The service delivery process at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch follows a structured sequence, from ticketing to debarkation, as illustrated in the customer service process flowchart. This standardized

procedure served as a critical reference for observational data collection and thematic analysis.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

Figure 1. *Customer service process flow at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch.*

The population of this study included all employees and service users directly involved in the ferry operations of PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select informants who had direct experience and knowledge relevant to service delivery. The final sample consisted of nine key informants, chosen for their strategic roles and depth of insight into the company's service mechanisms.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic analysis was conducted by coding interview transcripts and observational notes according to the five SERVQUAL dimensions. Findings were continuously compared and refined to identify patterns, discrepancies, and contextual influences on service quality.

To ensure data credibility, triangulation was applied across sources (management, staff, customers), methods (interviews, observation, documents), and time (multiple observation periods). Member checking was also conducted by validating interview findings with participants to enhance accuracy and trustworthiness.

This methodological framework enabled a rigorous and nuanced examination of service quality in a real-world maritime transport setting, contributing both practical and theoretical insights into service delivery within Indonesia's sea transportation sector.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the research on service quality at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch, based on data collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 40 respondents and direct observation at the terminal and on board the vessels. The results are organized according to the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model.

Tangibles

The *tangibles* dimension, which assesses the physical aspects of service delivery, received positive responses from respondents. Observations confirmed that the office building and vessels (KM. Dharma Kartika 2 and KM. Dharma Rucitra 1) were clean, well-maintained, and equipped with essential facilities such as waiting areas, restrooms, and onboard amenities like a barbershop. The staff consistently wore clean and standardized uniforms, contributing to a professional image. This is visually supported by the photograph of the office building (Figure 2), which shows a well-organized and accessible service facility.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

Figure 2. Office building of PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch.

The interior facilities were also observed to be clean, well-organized, and designed to ensure passenger comfort during waiting periods. As shown in Figure 3, the waiting area is equipped with adequate seating and is maintained in a tidy condition.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025

Figure 3. Passenger waiting area at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch

The quality of service extends beyond the terminal to the onboard experience. One distinctive facility offered during the voyage is an onboard barbershop, designed to enhance passenger comfort and convenience during long-haul travel (Figure 4).



Source: Author's documentation, 2025.

Figure 4. Onboard barber shop facility on KM. Dharma Kartika 2.

Reliability

The *reliability* dimension showed high levels of agreement among respondents. The survey results indicated that 85.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that services were delivered as promised, 88% affirmed the accuracy and consistency of service delivery, and 87% confirmed that employees

performed their duties reliably. These results suggest that the company is generally successful in fulfilling its service commitments, although occasional delays due to tidal conditions were noted in observations.

Responsiveness

In the *responsiveness* dimension, respondents reported mixed experiences. While 88% agreed that services were provided quickly and accurately, and 91.5% felt that employees were willing to help, only 80% agreed that staff provided clear information about when services would be delivered, particularly through digital channels like WhatsApp and phone. This indicates a gap in responsiveness during peak hours or in remote communication.

Assurance

The *assurance* dimension received the highest positive ratings. A total of 87% of respondents agreed that employees were knowledgeable and skilled, 89% felt safe and confident in the services provided, and 86% believed the company was competent in ensuring passenger safety. Respondents particularly appreciated the transparency in ticketing and the prompt resolution of payment issues, such as a double charge on QRIS, which was quickly refunded.

Empathy

The *empathy* dimension also showed strong performance. 89% of respondents agreed that employees provided individual attention, 86.5% felt that their needs were understood, and 90.5% agreed that service hours were convenient. Passengers reported that staff were friendly, helpful, and provided detailed information, including guidance on public transportation at the destination.

Operational Challenges

Despite the overall positive perception, several operational challenges were identified. The most frequently mentioned issue was the limited parking space, which caused inconvenience for passengers arriving by private vehicles. Additionally, some office equipment, such as printers, were reported to be unstable, occasionally slowing down service. While the company has implemented a queue numbering system during peak seasons to manage crowds, responsiveness through digital channels remains inconsistent.

DISCUSSION

This section presents an integrated analysis of the findings from the case study at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch, organized around the five dimensions of service quality in the SERVQUAL model. The results are drawn from triangulated data – interviews, observations, and limited survey responses – collected over five months, and are discussed in relation to existing service quality theories and operational realities in Indonesia's long-haul ferry sector.

Tangibles: The Role of Physical Evidence in Shaping First Impressions

The physical infrastructure and visible elements of service delivery at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch were consistently rated as well-maintained and professional. Passengers and informants alike acknowledged the cleanliness of the vessels (KM. Dharma Kartika 2 and KM. Dharma Rucitra 1), the tidiness of the terminal, and the standardized crew uniforms. These observations align with the *tangibles* dimension of the SERVQUAL model, which emphasizes that physical facilities, equipment, and personnel appearance significantly influence customer perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

The company's investment in onboard amenities—such as barbershops, Wi-Fi zones, and designated waiting areas—further reinforces its commitment to enhancing the customer experience. As Tjiptono (2018) notes, in service industries, the absence of physical products makes *tangible* elements even more critical in building trust and credibility. The visual branding, including the consistent use of the DLU logo and signage, contributes to a sense of organizational professionalism.

However, during peak seasons such as *mudik* (homecoming holidays), the physical capacity of the terminal becomes a limiting factor. Overcrowding in the waiting hall, as confirmed by the Head of Operations, leads to discomfort and diminished service perception. This finding reflects the *perishability* and *inseparability* of services (Kotler & Keller in Yasir, 2020), where service capacity cannot be stored and is consumed simultaneously with production. The mismatch between demand and infrastructure highlights the need for dynamic resource planning, particularly in seasonal transport contexts.

Thus, while PT. Dharma Lautan Utama performs well in maintaining physical assets, the challenge lies in scalability. The company's efforts to improve facilities are commendable, but future strategies must include infrastructure expansion or crowd management systems to sustain perceived quality during high-demand periods.

Reliability: Consistency Amidst Environmental Uncertainties

Reliability, defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), emerged as a critical strength in the service delivery of PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch. Survey results indicated high levels of customer agreement across all three reliability indicators: 85.5% for schedule consistency, 88% for employee competence and trustworthiness, and 87% for service fulfillment according to expectations. These figures fall within the "very good" category, suggesting that passengers generally perceive the company as reliable in delivering its core services.

This consistency is supported by the company's adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), regular safety drills, and structured coordination between onboard and terminal staff. As the Head of Operations explained, emergency preparedness and service protocols are monitored and reported to the central office, ensuring accountability and operational continuity (Informant 1).

This aligns with Wolkins' principle of *planning and review* in quality management, which emphasizes systematic oversight to maintain service standards (in Christine Mokoginta et al., 2023).

However, the study also revealed a significant challenge: service delays due to tidal conditions and weather. Unlike land-based or air transport, maritime operations are highly dependent on natural cycles, particularly in regions like Banjarmasin, where tidal fluctuations directly impact vessel departure and docking. While these delays are often unavoidable, the lack of proactive communication diminishes perceived reliability. As one passenger noted, "We waited for hours without any explanation. Only later did we hear it was because of low tide" (Informant 4). This finding supports Zeithaml et al. (2022), who argue that reliability is not only about performance but also about managing customer expectations through timely information.

Furthermore, the company's digital platform, the DLU Ferry app, while effective for ticketing, does not yet serve as a real-time notification system for schedule changes. This gap contradicts the principles of *customer strategy* proposed by Osborne (in Simarmata, 2022), which emphasizes transparency, feedback, and accessibility. In a service context where *inseparability* is prominent—service production and consumption occur simultaneously—passengers expect immediate updates and clear explanations (Kotler & Keller in Yasir, 2020).

Despite these environmental constraints, the company maintains a high level of operational integrity. The fact that service delivery remains consistent in terms of safety, documentation, and staff conduct—even during delays—demonstrates a strong internal culture of reliability. This suggests that while external factors may disrupt schedules, the organization's internal processes are robust.

To strengthen perceived reliability, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama should integrate real-time communication systems—such as SMS alerts or in-app notifications—about delays and their causes. Doing so would not only enhance transparency but also reinforce trust, turning a potential service failure into an opportunity for relationship building. This approach reflects the *assurance* dimension of SERVQUAL, where competence and communication together build customer confidence.

Responsiveness: Timeliness and Service Accessibility in High-Demand Contexts

Responsiveness, defined as the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), is a critical dimension in service quality, particularly in transportation where delays and uncertainties can amplify customer anxiety. At PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch, responsiveness was found to be generally effective, yet inconsistent during peak periods. Survey results showed agreement levels of 80%, 88%, and 91.5% across three indicators: accuracy of service timing, speed of service delivery, and staff availability to respond to passenger requests. These figures suggest that while employees are motivated and capable, service speed becomes a constraint when demand surges.

One of the key findings is the disparity between in-person and digital responsiveness. Passengers reported that staff at the ticketing counter and onboard were generally quick and courteous in providing information and assistance. As

one informant stated, “Petugas sudah memberikan informasi dengan sangat detail, terkait proses check-in, waktu keberangkatan, bahkan transportasi umum di tujuan” (Informant 5, Staff Ticketing). This aligns with Reforman Bago, Sutardjo, and Anggraini (2022), who emphasize that clear, specific, and timely information reduces customer uncertainty and enhances perceived service quality.

However, the company’s digital communication channels—particularly WhatsApp and phone support—were less reliable. The survey item “Karyawan selalu mengatakan dengan tepat kapan pelayanan akan diberikan (khususnya melalui telepon/WA)” received the lowest score in the responsiveness dimension, with only 12 respondents selecting *Strongly Agree* and 19 selecting *Agree*, while 6 were *Neutral* and 3 *Disagree*. This indicates a gap in digital service accessibility, a growing expectation in Indonesia’s increasingly connected society.

This inconsistency reflects the *variability* characteristic of services (Kotler & Keller in Yasir, 2020), where service quality depends on who delivers it, when, and through which channel. While frontline staff perform well in face-to-face interactions, backend support systems lack the same level of efficiency. This is further complicated by the absence of a centralized customer service unit dedicated to handling digital inquiries, leading to delayed or missed responses.

The company’s efforts to improve responsiveness through the DLU Ferry app—such as online ticketing and digital check-in—are commendable and reflect a strategic shift toward modern service delivery. However, as Osborne (in Simarmata, 2022) argues, a true *customer strategy* requires not just technological adoption but also organizational commitment to accessibility and feedback. The app currently functions primarily as a transactional tool, not a communicative one.

To enhance responsiveness, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama should consider establishing a dedicated digital service team, implementing chatbot support, or integrating real-time FAQ systems. Additionally, training staff to manage digital inquiries with the same urgency as in-person ones would help standardize service quality across all touchpoints. Doing so would not only improve customer satisfaction but also reduce the burden on physical counters during peak seasons.

In sum, while the company demonstrates strong interpersonal responsiveness, its digital responsiveness remains underdeveloped. Addressing this gap is essential for maintaining competitiveness in an era where customers expect seamless, omnichannel service experiences.

Assurance: Building Trust Through Competence and Safety Assurance

The *assurance* dimension of service quality—defined as the knowledge, courtesy, and credibility of employees that inspire trust and confidence (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988)—was found to be a significant strength at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch. Survey results indicated high levels of customer agreement across all three assurance indicators: 87% for employee knowledge and skills, 89% for customer safety and trust, and 86% for the company’s competence in providing secure facilities. These scores fall within the “very good” category, reflecting a strong perception of professionalism and reliability among passengers.

One of the key factors contributing to this perception is the company's systematic approach to safety and operational compliance. As revealed in interviews, the company adheres to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), conducts regular emergency drills, and maintains a structured reporting system to the central office. The DPA (Dokumen dan Perizinan Armada) staff, for instance, are responsible for monitoring safety drills, auditing compliance, and submitting monthly reports (Informant 7). This aligns with Wolkins' principle of *review and communication* in quality management, which emphasizes the importance of systematic oversight and accountability (in Christine Mokoginta et al., 2023).

Moreover, passengers reported feeling secure during transactions and onboard journeys. One respondent noted, "*The payment process was transparent, and when I had a double charge on QRIS, the staff quickly resolved it and refunded the amount*" (Informant 8, Bapak Sodik). This experience reflects not only technical competence but also a service culture that prioritizes customer protection and problem resolution—core elements of the *assurance* dimension.

The company's implementation of the ISM Code (International Safety Management) and internal safety management systems (SMK) further reinforces this sense of security. Staff are trained to handle emergency situations, and safety equipment is regularly inspected. As the Head of Operations stated, "*We ensure all crew members understand safety procedures and are prepared for any emergency*" (Informant 1). This institutionalized approach to safety enhances both employee and customer confidence.

However, while the formal systems are robust, not all frontline staff have undergone comprehensive customer service training. This creates variability in interpersonal assurance—some employees demonstrate high levels of courtesy and confidence, while others may lack the soft skills needed to fully inspire trust. This reflects the *variability* characteristic of services, where quality depends on individual performance (Kotler & Keller in Yasir, 2020).

To strengthen assurance across all touchpoints, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama should institutionalize mandatory training programs that combine technical safety knowledge with interpersonal skills. As Tjiptono (2018) argues, true service excellence requires not only competence but also the ability to communicate it effectively to customers. Implementing a certification system for staff, as suggested in the organizational structure, could further enhance perceived professionalism.

In sum, the company excels in structural assurance—safety systems, SOPs, and compliance—but can improve in *interpersonal assurance*—the consistent demonstration of knowledge, courtesy, and empathy in daily interactions. Strengthening this aspect would solidify customer trust and differentiate the company in a competitive maritime market.

Empathy: Personalized Care and the Human Touch in Long-Haul Ferry Services

Empathy, defined as the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), emerged as a key differentiator in the service experience at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch. Survey results indicated high levels of customer agreement across all three empathy indicators: 89% for staff providing individual attention, 86.5% for employees understanding passenger needs, and 90.5% for service hours

accommodating customer convenience. These scores, all falling within the “very good” range, reflect a strong perception that passengers are valued not just as customers, but as individuals with unique travel needs.

One of the most significant findings was the proactive and personalized assistance provided by crew members during the journey. Passengers reported that staff were willing to help with inquiries beyond basic service, such as providing information on local transportation at the destination. As one respondent shared, “*When I asked about public transport to Blitar, the crew gave me clear and detailed information. I felt truly helped*” (Informant 4, Ibu Nabila). This aligns with Tjiptono (2018), who emphasizes that empathy in service goes beyond problem-solving—it involves anticipating needs and demonstrating genuine concern.

The company’s efforts to foster empathy are also evident in its internal culture. The Head of Operations emphasized that “*empathy must be continuously improved so that customers feel valued and understood, which increases loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendations*” (Informant 3, Gatot Cahya). This statement reflects a strategic understanding of empathy not just as a service dimension, but as a driver of customer retention and brand advocacy.

Moreover, the implementation of customer feedback mechanisms—such as QR code-based satisfaction surveys placed in cabins and common areas—demonstrates a commitment to listening and responding to passenger voices. As Osborne (in Simarmata, 2022) notes, a true *customer strategy* requires creating channels for feedback and acting on it. By enabling real-time input, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama allows passengers to express concerns or suggestions, fostering a sense of inclusion and respect.

However, while the intent and interpersonal behavior are strong, the system for *acting* on empathy is still developing. There is no formal process for tracking, responding to, or resolving complaints in a timely manner. As one passenger noted, “*We can give feedback, but we don't know if anyone reads it or what happens next*” (Informant 8, Bapak Sodik). This gap between collection and response limits the full realization of empathy as a systemic quality.

Additionally, the company’s digital platforms do not yet support personalized communication, such as follow-up messages or tailored travel tips. In an era where customers expect *relationship-based* service (Zeithaml et al., 2022), this represents a missed opportunity.

To strengthen empathy as an organizational capability, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama should move beyond individual acts of kindness toward a *structured empathy framework*. This could include: (1) Implementing a formal complaint resolution system with response timelines; (2) Training staff in active listening and emotional intelligence; (3) Using feedback data to improve service design and communication; (4) Sending personalized post-travel messages to enhance customer connection.

In doing so, the company can transform empathy from an admirable trait into a sustainable competitive advantage. As Parasuraman et al. (1988) argue, empathy is often the most difficult dimension to standardize, yet it is also the most powerful

in building long-term loyalty – especially in service contexts like long-haul ferry travel, where the journey itself becomes part of the customer experience.

Organizational Strategies and the Path to Sustainable Service Excellence

The findings from this study reveal that PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch has established a strong foundation in service quality, particularly in the dimensions of *tangibles*, *assurance*, and *empathy*. However, challenges in *reliability* (due to environmental factors) and *responsiveness* (especially in digital channels) indicate that service excellence is not merely a function of infrastructure or goodwill, but of integrated organizational strategy and adaptive management. This final discussion explores how the company's current practices align with service quality theories and identifies pathways for sustainable improvement.

One of the most significant organizational strengths is the company's adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) across the service journey – from ticketing to debarkation. As illustrated in the process chart (Figure 8), the service flow is standardized, ensuring consistency in critical touchpoints such as check-in, safety briefings, and cargo handling. This structured approach reflects the principles of *planning and review* in quality management (Wolkins in Christine Mokoginta et al., 2023 2023), and supports the *reliability* dimension of SERVQUAL by minimizing service variability.

Moreover, the company's commitment to employee competence and safety is institutionalized through regular drills, audits, and reporting mechanisms. The role of the DPA (Documentation and Fleet Permit) staff in monitoring safety compliance and submitting monthly reports to the central office exemplifies a culture of accountability (Informant 7). This aligns with the *assurance* dimension, where organizational systems—not just individual behavior—build customer trust (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

However, the most forward-looking strategy is the digital transformation initiative, particularly the implementation of the DLU Ferry app for online ticketing and feedback collection. This move reflects a strategic shift toward customer-centric service delivery, enabling faster transactions, reduced queues, and real-time feedback through QR codes placed in cabins. As Osborne (in Simarmata, 2022) argues, a true *customer strategy* requires not only technological adoption but also organizational openness to feedback and continuous improvement. The company's use of feedback to evaluate service performance demonstrates this mindset.

Yet, the current system remains reactive rather than proactive. While feedback is collected, there is no formal mechanism for closing the loop—responding to complaints, tracking resolution, or communicating outcomes to customers. This gap limits the strategic value of customer input. To evolve into a *learning organization*, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama should integrate feedback into a continuous quality improvement cycle, using data to refine SOPs, train staff, and anticipate service failures.

Another critical area is employee development. The company conducts regular training and implements staff rotation to prevent burnout and enhance skill diversity (Informant 6, Staff SDM). This practice supports Wolkins' principle

of education and recognition (in Christine Mokoginta et al., 2023) and addresses the *variability* of service quality by ensuring that employees are not only technically competent but also adaptable. With a workforce that includes both senior staff (e.g., 34 years of service) and younger recruits, the company has the potential to foster intergenerational knowledge transfer—a valuable asset in maintaining service culture.

However, training appears to be periodic rather than systematic. To build a sustainable service advantage, the company should develop a structured competency framework that includes: (1) Mandatory customer service training for all frontline staff; (2) Certification programs for safety and empathy skills; (3) Performance incentives linked to service quality metrics.

Such a framework would institutionalize excellence, moving beyond reliance on individual initiative.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a contextualized application of SERVQUAL in Indonesia's long-haul maritime sector—a niche yet vital segment of public transportation. While most service quality studies focus on urban, short-haul, or digital-first services, this research highlights the unique challenges and opportunities in a resource-constrained, environmentally dependent, and relationship-driven service environment. It demonstrates that service quality in ferry operations is not just about speed or technology, but about trust, safety, and human connection over extended journeys.

For policymakers and transport managers, the findings suggest that improving maritime service quality requires a multi-dimensional approach: investing in infrastructure, strengthening digital communication, enhancing staff training, and embedding customer feedback into decision-making. In doing so, PT. Dharma Lautan Utama can not only retain its loyal customer base but also strengthen its role in Indonesia's national connectivity and economic development.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the quality of ferry service at PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch is generally well-implemented and positively perceived by users, particularly in the dimensions of tangibles, assurance, and empathy, where the office building and fleet are considered adequate, clean, and equipped with supporting facilities such as a barbershop and a comfortable waiting area, while the friendliness and attentiveness of staff in assisting passengers have become added value, providing a sense of safety, care, and respect. Nevertheless, several challenges remain that require attention, such as limited parking space causing discomfort for users arriving with private vehicles, and delays in departure schedules influenced by tidal conditions, although the company has attempted to anticipate this through a queue numbering system and strict implementation of Standard Operating Procedures. Continuous efforts to improve service quality are being made through employee training, staff rotation to prevent fatigue, the implementation of digital ticketing via the DLU Ferry application, and the provision of information services via WhatsApp and telephone, yet responses to complaints or inquiries through digital channels are

still relatively slow. Therefore, it is recommended that the company expand its parking area, repair office equipment that is becoming unstable, and improve response speed on digital services to ensure prompt, accurate, and satisfactory service, thereby maintaining customer loyalty and enhancing competitiveness in the maritime transportation sector.

FURTHER STUDY

Every research is subject to limitations, and this study is no exception. One primary limitation is the use of a qualitative case study approach with a relatively small sample size, focused solely on PT. Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch. This restricts the generalizability of the findings to other branches or maritime service providers in different regional contexts. Future research could adopt a quantitative or mixed-methods design with a larger, more diverse sample across multiple routes to enhance external validity.

Additionally, the study primarily relied on employee and limited passenger perspectives, with less emphasis on long-term customer behavior. Subsequent investigations could explore the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty through longitudinal studies or customer retention data.

Finally, while the research identified digital service gaps, it did not deeply assess the usability of the DLU Ferry app. Further studies could evaluate user experience, digital adoption rates, and the impact of technology on service efficiency, providing actionable insights for digital transformation in Indonesia's maritime sector.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Sincere appreciation is extended to PT Dharma Lautan Utama Banjarmasin Branch for their assistance and cooperation, as well as to the academic advisors and all parties who have supported the research process. The researcher realizes that this study is still far from perfect; therefore, constructive suggestions and feedback are highly welcomed for future improvements.

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