

Increasing Customer Retention Through Employee Competence and Service Innovation with Brand Image as a Mediation Variable (Empirical Study at Rumah Sakit Islam Kendal)

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Abstract. *The hospital industry faces significant challenges in maintaining patient loyalty, particularly in customer retention. Customer retention, or in the hospital context, Patient Retention, can be defined as the efforts undertaken by hospitals to retain and attract patients who have used their services, preventing them from switching to other hospitals. This study aims to determine how to improve customer retention through employee competence and service innovation, with brand image as a mediating variable. This research is quantitative with an explanatory approach. This research is quantitative with an explanatory approach. The data collection technique used a questionnaire. The respondents used in the study were 222 outpatients at the Kendal Islamic Hospital polyclinic. The data collection technique used a questionnaire. In this study, data analysis used the SEM-PLS method with SmartPLS (Partial Least Square) software. The results of the study: 1) Employee competence has a positive and significant impact on brand image. 2) Employee competence has a positive and significant impact on customer retention. 3) Service Innovation has a positive and significant impact on Brand Image. 4) Service Innovation has a positive and significant impact on Customer Retention. 5) Brand Image does not have a significant impact on Customer Retention. The results of mediation tests show: 1.) Brand Image is unable to mediate the relationship between Service Innovation and Customer Retention. 2) Brand Image cannot mediate the relationship between Employee Competence and Customer Retention.*

Keywords: *Brand Image; Customer Retention; Employee Competence; Service Innovation.*

1. Introduction

The hospital industry faces significant challenges in maintaining patient loyalty, particularly in customer retention. Customer retention, or in the hospital context, patient retention, is

the practice of hospitals. Hospitals' efforts to retain and attract existing patients who do not switch to other hospitals is called patient retention.(Khotib et al., 2024). Customer retention is very important in the healthcare industry, where patient retention can increase hospital revenue, increase market share and can build mutually beneficial relationships between hospitals and patients.(Ishumael et al., 2019)

Previous research has highlighted the important role of Employee Competence and service innovation in influencing Customer Retention in hospitals.Ramadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022)found that the quality and ability of medical personnel, including doctors and nurses, greatly influences patient perceptions of the hospital and will subsequently influence the level of Customer Retention.Besides that,Khotib et al., (2024) found that patient satisfaction with the capabilities of medical personnel can increase customer retention. Patient retention is also influenced by service innovation. A good patient experience is greatly influenced by service innovation. In this study,Fatima et al. (2021)Service innovation, whether in the form of interactive service innovation or supportive service innovation, can increase customer retention. In relation to hospitals, Service innovations can include digital-based hospital management systems, telemedicine, and the use of advanced diagnostic technologies. These innovations can improve the patient experience and increase patient retention. In contrast to these results,Purwanti & Pasaribu (2024)found that innovation did not have an impact on increasing repurchase intention in the advertising industry. However, according toPurwanti & Pasaribu (2024)AndSun et al (2024)Innovation has an effect on improving corporate brand image, meaning that improvements in service innovation have an impact on improving the company's brand image.

Furthermore, brand image greatly influences patients' choice of hospital services. According to Aaker (1991), brand image is a customer's perception of a particular brand, shaped by their experiences and interactions with the brand.

Research conducted byRamadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022)confirmed that a positive brand image can increase patient retention and influence how they view the services provided. In line with the research findings,Budiman & Riorini (2023)stated that a strong hospital brand reputation supported by good service quality and patient satisfaction has an impact on patient loyalty so that they do not move to other hospitals.

This study examines how employee competency, service innovation, and brand image can influence customer retention. The study was conducted at Kendal Islamic Hospital and aimed to provide a better understanding of the variables that influence patient retention in the hospital. Given the importance of customer retention for the sustainability of hospital operations, a decrease in the percentage increase in the number of recorded outpatient visits is crucial. Therefore, it is important to understand how the relationship between employee competency, service innovation, and brand image plays a role in improving customer retention.

One of the assets of the Muhammadiyah organization is the Kendal Islamic Hospital. Established based on Decree No. Hk. 03.05/3102/2012, the Kendal Islamic Hospital is a type C hospital located at Jalan Ar Rahmah No. 17, Ngasinan Village, Weleri District, Kendal Regency,

Central Java. This hospital is responsible for providing high-quality, professional, and Islamic health services while taking into account social, economic, and da'wah functions of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar. The socio-religious mission is achieved through caring for the underprivileged, while the health mission is achieved through the provision of high-quality services. Kendal Islamic Hospital has also been designated as a referral center for health services. Kendal Islamic Hospital must always provide good and affordable healthcare services to the community because it functions as a referral center for healthcare services. Kendal Islamic Hospital has enormous potential in future healthcare services. To gain public trust, Kendal Islamic Hospital must continuously improve its services in line with increasing patient needs. Kendal Islamic Hospital has made various efforts to improve the quality of its healthcare services, but the phenomenon there shows a significant decline in Customer Retention. This can be concluded from data on clinic visits, which are an activity driver for hospital service performance. Table 1 shows clinic visit data for 2022–2024.

Table Data on visits to the Kendal Islamic Hospital polyclinic in 2022-2024

TYPE OF SERVICE	2022	2023	2024
OTHER INSURANCE	1,309	1,669	2,038
GENERAL	23,320	25,105	24,014
BPJS	120,240	149,889	178,294
AMOUNT	144,869	176,663	204,346
Percentage Increase	23%	18%	14%

Data source: IT Kendal Islamic Hospital 2024

Table 1 above displays internal data from Kendal Islamic Hospital, indicating that general outpatient visits have declined in recent years. Patient visits fell by 23% in 2022, to 18% in 2023, and again to 14% in 2024. This decline indicates a problem with customer retention, which can be caused by a variety of factors, including service quality, patient trust, or changes in patient perceptions of the hospital.

Previous research has more often addressed the direct influence of employee competence and service innovation on customer retention, or the indirect influence of these two variables on customer retention through customer satisfaction (Civita & Spiller, 2018; Sohail and Riaz, 2020). Continuing previous research, Ramadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022) A study on paramedic competency in improving customer retention in hospitals concluded that paramedic competency indirectly influences customer retention. The study did not examine the direct influence of paramedic competency or employee competency on improving customer retention, therefore, there is still a research gap that needs to be filled. Further research is needed. Ramadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022), Customer Retention is only directly influenced by brand image with an R² value of 0.366. This means that the increase in customer retention is only influenced by brand image by 36.6% and the rest is not studied. This value is very small, so in this study, in addition to including Brand Image, also includes Employee Competence and service innovation as variables that influence customer retention.

Based on the gap and research gap phenomena described above, to further understand how to improve Customer Retention in the context of Kendal Islamic Hospital, this thesis research is proposed with the title: Improving Customer Retention Through Employee Competence and Service Innovation With Brand Image as a Mediating Variable (Empirical Study at Kendal Islamic Hospital)

2. Research Methods

This research uses a quantitative approach called an explanatory approach. This method was chosen because the primary objective of this study is to test the proposed hypothesis and measure the relationship between the existing variables: customer retention, employee competence, service innovation, and brand image. This study will examine the impact of each variable on patient retention at Kendal Islamic Hospital. It will also examine how brand image functions as a mediating variable.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Respondent Description

Patients at Kendal Islamic Hospital who do not have BPJS were the respondents for this thesis research. To obtain data, questionnaires were distributed to 250 selected respondents, but 222 respondents, or 88.8 percent, of the questionnaires were returned and could be analyzed. Detailed descriptions of the respondents are presented in Tables through below.

Gender

No	Information	Amount	Percentage
1.	Man	72	32.5%
2.	Woman	150	67.5%
	Total	222	100%

Source: Processed primary data, 2025

Based on the data presented in Table, it can be concluded that the dominant results of this study were women, 150 (67.5%) respondents, and men, 72 (32.5%) respondents.

Age

Table Respondent Description Based on Age

No	Information	Amount	Percentage
1.	<17 years	7	3.1%
2.	18 – 30 years old	100	45.1%
3.	31 - 40 years old	70	32.5%
4.	> 40 years	43	19.4%
	Total	222	100%

Source: Primary data processed in 2025

According to the data, the characteristics of respondents under the age of 17 years amounted to 7 respondents or 3.2%, aged 18-30 years amounted to 100 respondents or

45.1%, then at the age of 31-40 years amounted to 70 respondents or 32.5%, and finally the age of 40> amounted to 43 respondents or 19.4%. Based on the data above, it can be shown that this research was conducted with respondents who were in the productive age, namely between 18-30 years with a percentage of 45.1%.

Destined Polyclinic

Table Description of Respondents Based on the Polyclinic Visited

No	Information	amount	percentage
1.	CHILD	29	13.1%
2.	SURGERY	7	3.2%
3.	IN	26	11.7%
4.	PHYSIOTHERAPY	1	0.5%
5.	TOOTH	8	3.6%
6.	HEART	1	0.5%
7.	SOUL	6	2.7%
8.	SKIN	33	14.9%
9.	EYE	11	5.0%
10.	CONTENT	47	21.17%
11.	ORTHOPEDICS	3	1.4%
12.	PSYCHOLOGY	2	0.9%
13.	NERVE	2	0.9%
14.	NERVES AND INTERNAL	1	0.5%
15.	NERVES AND EYES	1	0.5%
16.	ENT	14	6.3%
17.	GENERAL	3	1.4%
18.	UROLOGY	7	3.2%
19.	ultrasound	3	1.4%
20.	WITHOUT EXPLANATION	1	0.5%
TOTAL		222	100%

Source: Primary data processed in 2025

Based on data on respondent characteristics, the most frequently visited polyclinics by non-BPJS patients are obstetrics polyclinics with a percentage of 21.17%, followed by skin polyclinics with a percentage of 14.9%, followed by pediatric polyclinics at 13.1%. For internal polyclinics, the percentage is 11.7%, ENT polyclinics 6.3%, eye polyclinics 5%, and dental polyclinics 3.6%, while the remaining 26% are other polyclinics including surgery, physiotherapy, heart, psychiatry, orthopedics, psychology, neurology, general, and urology.

Duration of Treatment

Table Description of Respondents Based on Length of Treatment

No	Information	Amount	percentage
1	< 1 year	137	61.7%
2	1-5 years	52	23.4%
3	> 5 years	15	6.8%
4	Without explanation	18	8.1%
Total		222	100.0

Source: Primary data processed in 2025

Based on respondent characteristics, 61.7% of non-BPJS patients had been receiving treatment for less than a year. This indicates a high level of public interest in Kendal Islamic Hospital over the past year. Treatment durations of 1-5 years accounted for 23.4%, and those longer than 5 years accounted for 6.8%. Furthermore, 8.1% of patients wrote "no information."

Visit Rate

Table Description of Respondents Based on Visit Level

NO	Information	Amount	Percentage
1	1-5 times	160	72.02%
2	6-10 times	23	10.26%
3	>10 times	38	17.11%
4	Without explanation	1	0.61%
Total		222	100.0

Source: Primary data processed in 2025

Based on data on respondent characteristics, the rate of patient visits 1-5 times was 72.02%, for 6-10 times it was 10.26%, and for more than 10 times it was 17.11%. This shows similarities with the table of length of treatment, thus it can be concluded that the number of non-BPJS patients has increased at Kendal Islamic Hospital very much over the past one to two years.

Level of education

Table Description of Respondents Based on Education Level

N o	Information	Amount	Percentage
1.	SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	114	51.35%
2.	D3	22	9.9%
3.	S1	40	18%
4.	S2	6	2.7%
5	Other	40	18.05%
Total		222	100.0

Source: Primary data processed in 2025

Based on data collected from the characteristics of respondents, the level of high school education was 51.35%, D3 was 9.9%, S1 was 18%, S2 was 2.7% and others were 18.05%.

3.2. Influence Employee Competence (Medical Personnel) Regarding Brand Image.

Employee Competence has been proven to have a positive and significant influence on Brand Image. This means that the higher the employee's competence, the higher the brand image will be. The employee competency variable is built by indicators of good medical personnel communication skills, expertise in handling patients, ability to understand patient conditions, interpersonal skills, and technical skills in providing care. Meanwhile, the brand

image indicators are perceptions of service quality, perceptions of medical services, hospital professionalism, quality of hospital facilities and environment, and perceptions of the quality of medical services. The results of the employee competency variable description obtained an index score of 82.82, so it is included in the high category, as well as brand image getting a high category as well.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that employee competence can influence the hospital's brand image as a quality hospital. This finding supports the theory that employees with high competence, whether in technical, communication, or professionalism, can improve patients' positive perceptions of the hospital's brand image. Employees who possess the skills to handle patients appropriately will build the hospital's credible and professional reputation in the eyes of patients. These results align with research. Ramadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022) who argues that the competence of medical personnel influences the hospital's brand image.

3.2.1. The Influence of Employee Competence on Customer Retention

Employee competence has been proven to have a positive and significant impact on customer or patient retention. This means that the higher the employee's competence, the greater the customer retention rate.

The employee competency variable is built by indicators of good medical personnel communication skills, expertise in handling patients, ability to understand patient conditions, interpersonal skills, and technical skills in providing care. Meanwhile, patient resistance indicators include whether they will return for treatment if they are sick, not looking for alternative treatments elsewhere, making Kendal Islamic Hospital their first choice, continuing to use hospital services in the future, and then recommending them to others. The results of the employee competency variable description obtained an index score of 82.82, so it is included in the high category, as well as customer resistance getting a high category as well.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that employee competence can influence customer retention. This finding supports the theory that employees with high competence, whether in technical, communication, or professionalism, are able to increase positive patient perceptions of customer resistance. This finding aligns with research findings. Ramadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022) with the conclusion that the ability of medical personnel to provide appropriate care and full attention to patients greatly influences the level of patient retention in the hospital so that they are likely to return to use hospital services.

3.2.2. The Influence of Service Innovation on Brand Image

Service innovation has a positive and significant impact on brand image. This means that the higher the service innovation, the greater the brand image.

The service innovation variable is constructed from indicators such as Use of Medical Technology, Speed and Accuracy of Service, Digital-Based Information Systems, Service Accessibility, and Wait Time Reduction. Meanwhile, the brand image indicators include

Perception of Service Quality, Perception of Medical Services, Hospital Professionalism, Quality of Hospital Facilities and Environment, and Perception of Medical Service Quality.

The results of the description of the service innovation variable obtained an index score of 81.184, so it is included in the high category, as well as the brand image getting a high category too.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that service innovation can influence brand image. This finding supports the theory that high service innovation, whether in terms of technology use, speed and accuracy of service, or accessibility, can actually increase patients' positive perceptions of brand image. This proves that the results of this study align with the results of other studies.(Li & Tapsai, 2024; Sun et al., 2024)

which concludes thatService innovation can improve brand image.

3.2.3. The Impact of Service Innovation on Customer Retention

Service Innovation has a positive and significant impact on Customer Retention. This means that the more Service Innovation, the higher Customer Retention will be. The service innovation variable is built by indicators of Medical Technology Use, Service Speed and Accuracy, Digital-Based Information Systems, Service Accessibility and Waiting Time Reduction. Meanwhile, patient resistance indicators include will return for treatment if sick, Not looking for alternative treatments elsewhere, making Kendal Islamic Hospital the first choice, Continue using hospital services in the future, and will recommend to others. The results of the service innovation variable description get a high score as well as customer resistance with an index of 79.016 which also gets a high category.

This demonstrates that the hospital's efforts to innovate services and update medical equipment at Kendal Islamic Hospital can improve the patient experience, thereby increasing their desire to continue using the hospital's services. Innovation that keeps pace with current developments, while consistently providing fast and accurate service, will increase customer retention rates. This aligns with research byFatima et al. (2021),which states that developmentService innovation, whether in the form of interactive service innovation or supportive service innovation, can increase customer retention..

3.2.4. The Influence of Brand Image on Patient Retention

Research findings indicate that brand image has no effect on customer retention at RSI Kendal. This suggests that, despite a positive hospital brand image, it is unable to influence patients' decisions to return to the hospital.

From the explanation above, we can conclude that patient retention is not influenced by brand image, but rather by other variables. In this study, patient retention was influenced by service innovation and employee competence.

These results are not comparable to research conducted byRamadhany Erlinda & Ratnawati (2022)which concluded that a positive brand image can increase patient retention, is also different from researchBudiman & Riorini (2023)which states that a strong hospital brand

reputation supported by high-quality services has an impact on customer loyalty so that they do not move to other hospitals.

3.2.5. The influence of brand image on mediating variables

The results of the research mediation test show that brand image does not function as a mediating variable in the relationship between employee competence and customer retention or between service innovation and customer retention. This indicates that brand image cannot significantly mediate the influence of employee competence or service innovation on customer retention. This is because patients tend to come because they utilize service innovation and employee or medical personnel competence, regardless of the hospital's brand image. Brand image is less significant because other variables may be influential, but this study did not examine these factors, such as service rates, distance, or hospital location, which could be used as future research variables.

4. Conclusion

Based on the conclusions presented above, several suggestions are expected to be useful for the hospital's progress. These suggestions are: 1. Employee competency requires training and development, including ongoing, routine training relevant to their respective fields. Furthermore, career development through job rotations, promotions, and other development opportunities is also essential. Periodic competency tests are also needed to assess employee abilities and identify areas of work. Mentoring and coaching can also be implemented to help employees learn from their seniors and develop their potential. 2. Improving the effective communication system that we are building requires that information be conveyed well to all people, so that to produce effective communication, strong collaboration between fellow employees is required. 3. Some of the innovations made include making it easier to find information either through websites, social media or hospital applications through various electronic media. 4. Informative services serve to provide comprehensive information about the various hospital services through digital channels, while informative services function through digital marketing. It's crucial for hospitals to provide information about services in language that's easy to understand and clear to the public, so they can easily find the information. 5. In order to increase customer retention for a hospital, it is important for the hospital to provide good service and an experience that patients can feel satisfied with so that they will continue to return to the hospital.

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