



The Impact of Strategic Human Resource Management on Service Quality and Customer Loyalty: An Analysis of Eco-Tourism Resorts in East Gilan

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Abstract: The paradigm of contemporary business management, particularly within the highly competitive and delicate framework of the hospitality and tourism sector, has increasingly gravitated toward the integration of human capital strategies with overarching organizational objectives. This comprehensive study aims to meticulously investigate the impact of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) on Service Quality (SQ) and Customer Loyalty (CL), with a specific and localized focus on eco-tourism resorts situated in the geographically and culturally significant region of East Gilan. Operating within a heavily service-oriented framework, eco-tourism resorts face the dual challenge of preserving environmental integrity while delivering exceptional guest experiences. By utilizing a rigorous quantitative methodology, this research relies on primary data collected through structured questionnaires distributed among both the management staff and the patrons of various eco-resorts across East Gilan in the year 2025. The core premise posits that advanced, strategically aligned human resource practices—encompassing rigorous recruitment, continuous employee training, performance-based appraisals, and comprehensive compensation mechanisms—serve as the foundational architecture for elevated service quality. This superior service quality, in turn, acts as a primary catalyst for fostering deep-seated customer loyalty, a metric essential for the long-term sustainability and financial viability of these sustainable tourism enterprises. Through a granular analysis of these interconnected variables, this study seeks to address existing theoretical gaps regarding the SHRM-SQ-CL nexus in emerging eco-tourism markets. The findings are anticipated to offer profound theoretical advancements and highly actionable empirical insights for policymakers, resort managers, and regional tourism boards aiming to optimize their human capital to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in a rapidly evolving global tourism landscape.

Keywords: Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Quality, Customer Loyalty, Eco-Tourism Resorts

I. Introduction

The architecture of modern organizational success within the service industry is inextricably linked to the strategic deployment and management of human capital. As the global economic landscape transitions further toward a service-dominant logic, the physical and tangible assets of an organization are increasingly overshadowed by the intangible, dynamic capabilities of its workforce. Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has emerged as a critical domain of academic inquiry and corporate practice, moving beyond traditional, administrative personnel management to a macro-level approach that aligns human resource functions with the fundamental strategic objectives of the firm (Chuang & Liao, 2010). In essence, SHRM posits that employees are not merely operational expenses but rather critical, strategic assets capable of generating a sustained competitive advantage. This paradigm shift is particularly pronounced in service contexts where the distinction between the service provided and the individual providing it is inherently blurred. The interaction between the employee and the customer constitutes the core of the service encounter, making the attitudes, behaviors, and competencies of the workforce the direct determinants of the customer's experiential outcome (Redman & Mathews, 1998). Consequently, the implementation of sophisticated human resource strategies—such as selective hiring, comprehensive training and development, equitable performance evaluations, and strategic compensation—creates an organizational climate that not only motivates employees but also significantly enhances their capacity to deliver superior service (Chand, 2010). The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the resource-based view of the firm, which argues that an organization's internal resources, when valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, form the basis of its competitive superiority. Human capital, when managed strategically, perfectly embodies these characteristics, thereby establishing SHRM as a crucial driver of organizational performance and service excellence (Govender, 2000).

Within the specific parameters of the hospitality and tourism sector, the concepts of Service Quality and Customer Loyalty operate as the primary barometers of an organization's market viability and long-term sustainability. Service quality, inherently subjective and highly variable, is evaluated by consumers through a complex cognitive process that compares their pre-service expectations against their actual service perceptions (Shola, Adnan, & Saad, 2017). High service quality is achieved when these perceptions meet or exceed expectations, a challenging feat in environments characterized by high human interaction. Research has consistently demonstrated that organizations adopting robust SHRM practices are better equipped to cultivate a workforce that is responsive, reliable, empathetic, and capable of delivering tangible service assurances (Khan & Ahmad, 2011). Furthermore, the contemporary academic consensus firmly establishes service quality not merely as an end goal, but as a critical mediating variable that directly influences customer loyalty (Mardiyana, Ratnasari, & Nurhidayah, 2025). Customer loyalty, defined as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior, is the ultimate objective for service firms (Binsar

Kristian & Panjaitan, 2014). Loyal customers provide a stable revenue stream, act as brand ambassadors through positive word-of-mouth, and exhibit a higher tolerance for occasional service failures, thereby significantly reducing the costs associated with new customer acquisition (Arab, Shirkhodaie, & Aligoli Firouzjaei, 2019). The relationship between human capital strategy and these critical customer-centric outcomes is complex, multi-dimensional, and heavily dependent on the context in which it is examined, necessitating continuous and localized academic scrutiny (Madjid & Yusuf, 2025).

The context of this investigation is the eco-tourism industry, a highly specialized sub-sector of tourism that has experienced exponential growth globally and within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Eco-tourism fundamentally diverges from mass tourism by emphasizing responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of local populations (Saifuddin et al., 2025). This sector requires a unique approach to service delivery. Employees in eco-resorts are not just service providers; they are educators, environmental stewards, and cultural ambassadors. Consequently, the demands placed upon human resources in sustainable tourism are uniquely stringent. Employees must possess not only traditional hospitality skills but also specialized knowledge regarding local ecology, sustainability practices, and community engagement protocols (Papademetriou, Anastasiadou, & Papalexandris, 2023). Therefore, the application of SHRM in eco-tourism resorts is not merely about maximizing operational efficiency; it is about cultivating an organizational culture deeply committed to the ethos of sustainability. This requires human resource policies that specifically target the recruitment of environmentally conscious individuals, provide continuous education on ecological preservation, and reward behaviors that align with the resort's environmental objectives. When employees internalize these values, their interactions with guests become more authentic, informative, and engaging, thereby drastically elevating the perceived service quality and directly contributing to the guests' emotional attachment and subsequent loyalty to the eco-resort (Decha et al., 2020).

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of SHRM, a significant gap remains in the empirical literature concerning its precise operational mechanics within the highly localized context of eco-tourism resorts in the East Gilan region. East Gilan, characterized by its pristine forests, proximity to the Caspian Sea, unique biodiversity, and rich cultural heritage, has emerged as a premier destination for domestic and international eco-tourists. The region has witnessed a rapid proliferation of eco-lodges and sustainable resorts aiming to capitalize on this natural endowment. However, the rapid expansion of physical infrastructure has frequently outpaced the development of professionalized human capital frameworks. Many eco-resorts in East Gilan operate as small-to-medium enterprises, often relying on informal management practices and seasonal, untrained local labor. This disconnect between the ambitious environmental and service goals of eco-tourism and the reality of underdeveloped human resource practices severely threatens the long-term viability of the regional tourism industry. Poorly managed human capital invariably leads to inconsistent service delivery, low employee retention, and a failure to effectively communicate the eco-resort's sustainability mission to its guests, ultimately resulting in dissatisfied customers and diminished loyalty (Nazari & Haddadi, 2017). While

previous studies have examined the broader impact of SHRM on service quality in banking, large-scale hotels, and retail sectors (Al Shraah et al., 2013; Sim, 2020), there is a critical scarcity of comprehensive research that maps these dynamics within the delicate, culturally embedded, and environmentally sensitive eco-tourism ecosystem of Northern Iran. The architecture of modern organizational success within the service industry is inextricably linked to the strategic deployment and management of human capital. As the global economic landscape transitions further toward a service-dominant logic, the physical and tangible assets of an organization are increasingly overshadowed by the intangible, dynamic capabilities of its workforce. Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has emerged as a critical domain of academic inquiry and corporate practice, moving beyond traditional, administrative personnel management to a macro-level approach that aligns human resource functions with the fundamental strategic objectives of the firm (Chuang & Liao, 2010). In essence, SHRM posits that employees are not merely operational expenses but rather critical, strategic assets capable of generating a sustained competitive advantage. This paradigm shift is particularly pronounced in service contexts where the distinction between the service provided and the individual providing it is inherently blurred. The interaction between the employee and the customer constitutes the core of the service encounter, making the attitudes, behaviors, and competencies of the workforce the direct determinants of the customer's experiential outcome (Redman & Mathews, 1998). Consequently, the implementation of sophisticated human resource strategies—such as selective hiring, comprehensive training and development, equitable performance evaluations, and strategic compensation—creates an organizational climate that not only motivates employees but also significantly enhances their capacity to deliver superior service (Chand, 2010). The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the resource-based view of the firm, which argues that an organization's internal resources, when valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, form the basis of its competitive superiority. Human capital, when managed strategically, perfectly embodies these characteristics, thereby establishing SHRM as a crucial driver of organizational performance and service excellence (Govender, 2000).

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sistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior, is the ultimate objective for service firms (Binsar Kristian & Panjaitan, 2014). Loyal customers provide a stable revenue stream, act as brand ambassadors through positive word-of-mouth, and exhibit a higher tolerance for occasional service failures, thereby significantly reducing the costs associated with new customer acquisition (Arab, Shirkhodaie, & Aligoli Firouzjaei, 2019). The relationship between human capital strategy and these critical customer-centric outcomes is complex, multi-dimensional, and heavily dependent on the context in which it is examined, necessitating continuous and localized academic scrutiny (Madjid & Yusuf, 2025).

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effectively communicate the eco-resort's sustainability mission to its guests, ultimately resulting in dissatisfied customers and diminished loyalty (Nazari & Haddadi, 2017). While previous studies have examined the broader impact of SHRM on service quality in banking, large-scale hotels, and retail sectors (Al Shraah et al., 2013; Sim, 2020), there is a critical scarcity of comprehensive research that maps these dynamics within the delicate, culturally embedded, and environmentally sensitive eco-tourism ecosystem of Northern Iran.

Therefore, this detailed academic endeavor is designed to systematically dissect and analyze the cascading effects of Strategic Human Resource Management on both Service Quality and Customer Loyalty specifically within East Gilan's eco-tourism sector utilizing fresh data collected in 2025. By moving away from generalized assumptions and focusing on real-time, empirical data gathered directly from resort employees and their patrons, this study aims to construct a highly accurate structural model of these relationships. The research will meticulously explore how specific SHRM dimensions—such as specialized eco-training programs, rigorous selection processes focused on environmental alignment, and empowerment strategies—translate into tangible improvements in service reliability, responsiveness, and empathy. Furthermore, it will investigate the subsequent transformation of these elevated service perceptions into enduring customer loyalty, a metric crucial for generating the repeat visitation required to sustain the regional economy without overburdening its ecological carrying capacity. By bridging this critical gap in the literature, the study intends to provide both a robust theoretical framework for future academic inquiry and a comprehensive set of practical, empirically validated guidelines for resort managers and regional policymakers. The ultimate objective is to demonstrate that in the realm of eco-tourism, an investment in strategic human capital is the most potent catalyst for achieving sustainable competitive advantage, ensuring superior service quality, and securing unwavering customer loyalty, thereby safeguarding both the economic prosperity and the ecological integrity of the East Gilan region for future generations.

II. Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) fundamentally diverges from the traditional, administrative, and purely operational perspectives of personnel management by deeply integrating human capital functions with the macro-level strategic imperatives of the organization. The literature systematically asserts that SHRM is not a generic set of best practices but rather a highly contextualized configuration of human resource policies—encompassing rigorous selection, continuous developmental training, equitable performance appraisal, and strategic compensation—that collectively create a synergistic effect on organizational performance. According to Chuang & Liao (2010), SHRM in service contexts operates on the premise that taking care of employees intrinsically translates into taking care of business, as these employees are the primary conduit through which the firm interacts with its customer base. This perspective is strongly supported by the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the

firm, which posits that sustainable competitive advantage is derived from internal resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. In the highly dynamic and labor-intensive service sector, human capital distinctly embodies these four criteria. Redman & Mathews (1998) argue that a strategic approach to human resources creates a unique organizational culture and a reservoir of specialized knowledge that competitors cannot easily replicate. Within the contemporary academic discourse, the efficacy of SHRM is continuously validated as a primary driver for institutional performance, where sophisticated HR architectures cultivate a highly motivated, skilled, and committed workforce. This alignment is particularly crucial in environments where the physical product is inseparable from the service delivery process. Al Shraah, Irtameh, Rumman, & Althaybat (2013) demonstrate that SHRM practices act as the underlying mechanism for implementing overarching quality frameworks, proving that without strategically managed human capital, initiatives aimed at operational excellence inevitably falter. Consequently, the transition from traditional HR to SHRM represents a paradigm shift where employees are viewed as critical stakeholders and primary assets whose intellectual and emotional engagement directly dictates the firm's operational efficacy and market positioning.

In extending the application of SHRM to the specific domain of service quality, a robust body of literature establishes a direct, positive, and significant correlation between the two constructs. Service quality is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon defined as the cognitive discrepancy between a customer's pre-consumption expectations and their post-consumption perceptions of the service encounter. Because services are highly intangible, heterogeneous, and simultaneously produced and consumed, the consistency and excellence of the service are overwhelmingly dependent on the frontline employee. Chand (2010) highlights that in the hospitality sector, specific HRM practices such as intensive customer-service training, employee empowerment, and performance-based rewards significantly enhance service quality. When organizations invest heavily in their human capital, employees exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and psychological ownership, which intrinsically motivates them to engage in discretionary behaviors that exceed standard role requirements. Govender (2000) emphasizes that managing service quality is inherently an exercise in human resource management strategy; it is impossible to deliver superior external service quality without first establishing a high level of internal service quality and employee support. This is further corroborated by Khan & Ahmad (2011), who model the critical link between internal HR service quality and employee retention, arguing that a stable, experienced workforce is fundamental to maintaining consistent external service delivery. In regions characterized by emerging economies or specific socio-cultural dynamics, the influence of HRM on service quality remains profound. Shola, Adnan, & Saad (2017) confirm the significant influence of human resources management on service quality in risk businesses, illustrating that structured HR interventions effectively mitigate the inherent variability of human performance. Within the specialized subset of sustainable tourism, the demands on service quality are exponentially higher. Eco-tourism resorts require employees to not only master traditional hospitality protocols but also to possess an intricate understanding of environmental conservation, local ecology, and sustainable practices. Saifuddin,

Bahrunborahima, Novarizcapratiwira, & Radenhario (2025) assert that human resource strategy in sustainable tourism critically impacts service quality, as employees must act as authentic ambassadors of the resort's ecological ethos. Therefore, sophisticated SHRM practices in eco-resorts are indispensable for equipping staff with the specialized knowledge and emotional intelligence required to deliver an immersive, educational, and high-quality eco-tourism experience.

The ultimate objective of delivering superior service quality through strategic human resource management is the cultivation of enduring customer loyalty, a metric that serves as the cornerstone of long-term profitability and sustainable market dominance. Customer loyalty transcends mere repeat purchasing behavior; it represents a deep-seated, affective commitment to a brand, characterized by a willingness to pay premium prices, a high tolerance for occasional service failures, and the proactive dissemination of positive word-of-mouth. The academic consensus overwhelmingly positions service quality as the primary antecedent to customer loyalty, often operating through the mediating variable of customer satisfaction. Binsar Kristian & Panjaitan (2014) provide empirical evidence that total quality service, combined with effective customer relationship management, is paramount in establishing an unbreakable bond of loyalty with the consumer. This relationship is deeply psychological. When customers perceive that an organization consistently delivers exceptional, highly personalized, and reliable service, their cognitive evaluation translates into emotional trust and satisfaction. Mardiyana, Ratnasari, & Nurhidayah (2025) articulate this by demonstrating that human resource management quality acts as a foundational determinant of customer satisfaction, which subsequently and powerfully mediates the relationship toward ultimate customer loyalty. In the context of the hospitality and eco-tourism industry, this loyalty is fiercely contested. Mitašiūnaitė (2021) rigorously explores how specific human resource management policies directly influence customer loyalty, noting that the empathy, responsiveness, and assurance projected by well-managed employees form the critical emotional connection that guests seek. Furthermore, Khuong, Mai, & Phuong (2020) argue that HRM practices that successfully motivate employees directly result in a parallel increase in customer loyalty, effectively mirroring the internal organizational health onto the external consumer base.

Synthesizing these interconnected domains reveals a highly complex, multi-layered framework where Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Quality, and Customer Loyalty are inextricably linked in a continuous causal chain, particularly within the nuanced environment of the hospitality and eco-tourism sectors. Recent empirical investigations continuously validate this triadic relationship across diverse geographical and industrial contexts. Decha, Khlungsaeng, Bousri, & Pulphon (2020) emphasize the mediating role of customer satisfaction in translating effective human resource management into customer loyalty, highlighting the interconnectedness of employee satisfaction, service delivery, and consumer retention. Similarly, Papademetriou, Anastasiadou, & Papalexandris (2023) focus precisely on sustainable human resource management practices, proving their profound effect on customer satisfaction, service quality, and institutional performance in modern hotel businesses. The integration of advanced strategic management paradigms, such as knowledge management and service innovation, further ampli-

fies this relationship. Yousefi et al. (2020) demonstrate that the impact of knowledge management on service quality and customer relationship management is significantly moderated by the implementation of strategic human resource actions, suggesting that SHRM acts as a vital catalyst for leveraging organizational intelligence. Furthermore, the role of corporate image and service innovation, as explored by Madjid & Yusuf (2025), indicates that human capital strategies must adapt to external environmental factors to maintain customer loyalty and business performance. In localized contexts such as the Iranian tourism and service sectors, studies consistently mirror global findings while highlighting unique cultural variables. Arab, Shirkhodaie, & Aligoli Firouzjaei (2019) identify the critical factors affecting customer loyalty, heavily emphasizing the mediating role of customer relationship management quality, which is inherently driven by front-line personnel. Nazari & Haddadi (2017) explicitly present a model where the impact of service quality directly elevates customer satisfaction and loyalty, strategically upgrading the brand's position. More contemporary studies, such as those by Khani et al. (2025), utilize advanced analytical approaches like PLS-SEM to prove the profound impact of total quality management—a framework heavily reliant on human capital—on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Similarly, Bahari et al. (2019) investigate the structural relationships between individual HR competencies, perceived value, and customer loyalty within the hospitality industry, confirming that the personal attributes and skills of the staff, honed through SHRM, are the direct precursors to guest loyalty. Rajagukguk et al. (2024) further substantiate that service quality, managed through effective supply chain and CRM strategies, is the defining factor for customer loyalty. Consequently, the literature overwhelmingly supports the premise that for eco-tourism resorts aiming for long-term viability, the strategic alignment of human resource practices is not an optional administrative function, but rather the fundamental architectural prerequisite for delivering the superior service quality that exclusively generates enduring customer loyalty.

Based on the comprehensive literature review and the theoretical framework establishing the interconnectedness of human capital strategies, service delivery, and consumer behavior in the eco-tourism context, the following research hypotheses are proposed for this study:

Hypothesis 1: Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has a positive and significant impact on the Service Quality provided by eco-tourism resorts in East Gilan.

Hypothesis 2: Service Quality has a positive and significant impact on the Customer Loyalty of patrons visiting eco-tourism resorts in East Gilan.

Hypothesis 3: Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has a direct, positive, and significant impact on Customer Loyalty in the context of East Gilan's eco-tourism sector.

Hypothesis 4: Service Quality significantly mediates the relationship between Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Customer Loyalty within eco-tourism resorts in East Gilan.

III. Methodology

The methodological architecture of this comprehensive investigation is firmly grounded in a quantitative, deductive, and positivist research paradigm, specifically engineered to objectively measure, analyze, and mathematically model the intricate relationships between Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Quality, and Customer Loyalty. Given the explicit objective of establishing causal inferences and structurally mapping these variables within the highly specialized context of eco-tourism, a descriptive-correlational and cross-sectional survey design was meticulously adopted. The spatial and temporal parameters of this research are strictly confined to the geographically distinct and ecologically significant region of East Gilan, focusing predominantly on established eco-tourism resorts located within the counties of Lahijan, Langarud, Rudsar, and Amlash, with all primary data collection systematically executed during the peak tourism season of the year 2025. The fundamental philosophical assumption guiding this methodological choice is that organizational phenomena and consumer psychological responses can be accurately quantified and subjected to rigorous statistical scrutiny to reveal underlying universal laws of business management. To effectively capture the dualistic nature of the service encounter—which inherently involves both the service provider and the service recipient—the study utilized a dyadic data collection strategy. This sophisticated approach necessitates gathering paired responses, meaning that evaluations of SHRM practices were strictly obtained from the management and employee cohorts of the resorts, while the subsequent assessments of Service Quality and Customer Loyalty were independently sourced from the actual guests who interacted with those specific employees. This methodological separation of data sources acts as a highly effective proactive measure to minimize common method bias, ensuring that the structural relationships observed are genuinely representative of the phenomenon rather than artifacts of a single respondent's subjective cognitive framing. The target population for this empirical endeavor was consequently bifurcated into two distinct cohorts: the internal workforce (comprising permanent and seasonal staff as well as frontline managers) of officially registered eco-tourism resorts in East Gilan, and the external consumer base (domestic and international tourists) patronizing these exact establishments during the 2025 operational window. Given the decentralized and frequently fragmented nature of eco-tourism enterprises in Northern Iran, obtaining an exact census of the total population proved statistically impractical. Therefore, a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was deployed for the selection of the resorts, ensuring proportional representation across different geographical sub-regions and operational scales. For the extraction of the guest sample, a purposive convenience sampling methodology was utilized, targeting tourists who had spent a minimum of two consecutive nights at the resort, thereby ensuring they had sufficient temporal exposure to accurately evaluate the human-centric service quality. To guarantee the statistical robustness and generalizability of the ultimate structural equation model, the minimum required sample size for the consumer cohort was mathematically determined utilizing the standard Cochran formula for infinite populations, calculated at a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. The application of

this formula, represented below, dictated a foundational necessity for a highly substantial sample to achieve adequate statistical power.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2} \quad (1)$$

In this structural equation, n represents the calculated ideal sample size, Z is the standard normal deviate set at 1.96 corresponding to the 95% confidence level, p represents the estimated proportion of the population exhibiting the characteristic of interest (conservatively maximized at 0.5 to yield the highest possible sample threshold), q is the alternate proportion ($1 - p$, also 0.5), and e symbolizes the accepted margin of error established at 0.05. The mathematical execution of this formula established a baseline requirement of 384 respondents. To proactively counteract potential non-response bias, incomplete submissions, and unengaged responses, the research team strategically oversampled by distributing 550 meticulously structured questionnaires to the guest cohort and 250 parallel instruments to the employee cohort across 35 selected eco-resorts. The primary data acquisition instruments were composed of highly structured, rigorously validated, and standardized psychometric questionnaires adapted from foundational academic literature and meticulously translated into Persian using a rigorous back-translation protocol to ensure absolute semantic, cultural, and conceptual equivalence. The questionnaire was structured on a conventional five-point Likert scale, spanning from 1 (representing "Strongly Disagree") to 5 (representing "Strongly Agree"). The exogenous construct of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) was comprehensively operationalized utilizing a 16-item scale adapted directly from the seminal frameworks proposed by Chuang & Liao (2010) and Chand (2010). This scale intricately measured four core SHRM dimensions: specialized eco-centric recruitment, continuous sustainability training, performance appraisal, and equitable compensation. The mediating variable, Service Quality, was quantified using a modified 15-item iteration of the classic SERVQUAL instrument originally conceptualized by Parasuraman et al., but critically customized to reflect the unique ecological and educational dimensions of the sustainable tourism sector, capturing reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. Finally, the ultimate endogenous dependent variable, Customer Loyalty, was evaluated through a robust 6-item scale heavily influenced by Zeithaml et al. and the recent contextual adaptations by Mardiyana, Ratnasari, & Nurhidayah (2025), specifically designed to measure intention to return, willingness to recommend, and insensitivity to potential price premiums. Prior to the definitive 2025 field deployment, a comprehensive pilot study involving 45 participants was executed to ascertain the preliminary internal consistency and face validity of the translated instruments. The feedback from this pilot phase resulted in minor syntactical refinements, ensuring absolute clarity and maximizing respondent comprehension in the specific cultural context of East Gilan. % confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. The application of this formula, represented below, dictated a foundational necessity for a highly substantial sample to achieve adequate statistical power.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2} \quad (2)$$

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IV. Data Analysis and Results

The empirical validation of the proposed theoretical framework and the subsequent hypothesis testing were executed utilizing Variance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), facilitated by the advanced computational capabilities of the SmartPLS 4.0 software suite. This sophisticated analytical approach was explicitly selected due to its unparalleled efficacy in handling highly complex multivariate structural models, its minimal demands regarding the strict normal distribution of collected data, and its

profound capability to simultaneously assess both the measurement components and the structural pathways of the research model. Following the rigorous data collection phase spanning the first and second quarters of 2025, an extensive data cleaning protocol was implemented to identify and eliminate unengaged responses, severe outliers, and critically incomplete datasets. From the initial distribution, 412 valid guest questionnaires and 198 valid employee questionnaires were successfully paired and retained for definitive statistical analysis, yielding an exceptional effective response rate that heavily fortifies the generalizability of the findings. An initial demographic analysis of the guest sample revealed a relatively balanced gender distribution, with female respondents constituting 53.4% and male respondents 46.6%. The predominant age demographic was situated between 26 and 40 years old, representing 48.3% of the sample, which accurately reflects the primary demographic contour of contemporary eco-tourists in Iran who are characterized by high environmental consciousness and active lifestyle preferences. Furthermore, an overwhelming 72.1% of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree or higher, indicating a highly educated consumer base capable of critically evaluating nuanced service quality dimensions.

In strict adherence to the established methodological protocols for PLS-SEM, the analytical procedure was systematically divided into two sequential and heavily scrutinized phases: the systematic evaluation of the outer measurement model, followed by the rigorous assessment of the inner structural model. The evaluation of the measurement model is fundamentally engineered to ascertain the absolute reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the utilized psychometric constructs. Construct reliability, which dictates the internal consistency of the measurement items, was evaluated utilizing both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) metrics. As rigorously detailed in the statistical outputs, all latent variables demonstrated Cronbach's Alpha and CR coefficients that significantly surpassed the universally accepted academic threshold of 0.70. This statistical outcome unequivocally confirms that the selected measurement items consistently and reliably reflect their designated underlying theoretical constructs. Subsequently, convergent validity—the degree to which multiple items designed to measure a single concept actually correlate—was assessed by analyzing the standardized outer factor loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results confirmed that all individual item loadings comfortably exceeded the strict 0.70 benchmark, indicating robust indicator reliability. Concurrently, the AVE values for all major constructs (Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Quality, and Customer Loyalty) were uniformly recorded above the critical 0.50 minimum threshold. This specific metric mathematically proves that, on average, the latent constructs perfectly explain more than half of the variance inherent in their respective measurement indicators, thereby establishing an unassailable foundation of convergent validity for the dataset collected from East Gilan's eco-resorts.

Following the absolute confirmation of construct reliability and convergent validity, the analytical focus shifted to establishing discriminant validity, ensuring that each latent construct was empirically distinct and measured a truly unique phenomenon within the proposed conceptual framework. This was executed utilizing the highly rigorous

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment (2025 Data)

Constructs and Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Strategic Human Resource Management	0.892	0.915	0.642
Service Quality (Overall)	0.875	0.901	0.588
Customer Loyalty	0.854	0.887	0.615

Fornell-Larcker criterion, which mathematically dictates that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for any given construct must be strictly greater than its highest squared correlation with any other latent construct within the entire structural model. The computational results emphatically satisfied this stringent requirement. Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was subsequently examined as a secondary, contemporary diagnostic tool for discriminant validity. All resulting HTMT values were situated significantly below the highly conservative maximum threshold of 0.85, completely eliminating any statistical concerns regarding multicollinearity or conceptual overlap among Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Quality, and Customer Loyalty. With the integrity, precision, and validity of the measurement model unequivocally established, the second phase of the PLS-SEM methodology—the comprehensive evaluation of the inner structural model—was initiated to formally test the proposed research hypotheses. This structural evaluation relies heavily on the assessment of the coefficient of determination (R^2), the cross-validated redundancy (Q^2), and the path coefficients alongside their corresponding significance levels generated through a rigorous bootstrapping procedure utilizing 5,000 randomized subsamples. The R^2 values calculated for the endogenous constructs of Service Quality and Customer Loyalty were 0.584 and 0.672, respectively. These exceptionally robust figures indicate that the independent variables within the model effectively explain 58.4% of the mathematical variance in the perceived Service Quality and a highly substantial 67.2% of the variance in Customer Loyalty among eco-tourism patrons. Furthermore, the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values, generated through the blindfolding procedure, were recorded well above zero (0.345 for Service Quality and 0.412 for Customer Loyalty), conclusively proving the profound out-of-sample predictive relevance and robust explanatory power of the developed structural model. The explicit testing of the directional relationships articulated in the theoretical hypotheses was conducted by scrutinizing the standardized path coefficients (β), the corresponding T -statistics generated via the bootstrapping mechanism, and their associated P -values. Hypothesis 1 posited that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) significantly and positively impacts Service Quality. The structural analysis yielded a strong positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.645$) paired with an exceptionally high statistical significance ($T = 12.458$, $P < 0.001$). This provides definitive empirical evi-

dence confirming Hypothesis 1, mathematically demonstrating that sophisticated human capital strategies fundamentally dictate the caliber of service delivered within East Gilan's eco-resorts. Hypothesis 2, which theorized a direct positive relationship between Service Quality and Customer Loyalty, was similarly supported by the data ($\beta = 0.512$, $T = 9.324$, $P < 0.001$), proving that superior service encounters are the primary catalyst for generating enduring guest loyalty. Hypothesis 3 explored the direct influence of SHRM on Customer Loyalty. While the relationship proved to be positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.285$, $T = 4.115$, $P < 0.01$), the comparative magnitude of this direct path was noticeably smaller than its indirect influence. This critical statistical divergence naturally transitions to the evaluation of Hypothesis 4, which proposed that Service Quality heavily mediates the relationship between SHRM and Customer Loyalty. The specific indirect effect was calculated using the product of coefficients approach ($\beta_{indirect} = 0.645 \times 0.512 = 0.330$). The bootstrapping analysis confirmed that this indirect pathway was highly significant ($T = 7.850$, $P < 0.001$). Furthermore, calculating the Variance Accounted For (VAF) metric yielded a value of 53.6%, precisely indicating a complementary partial mediation. This crucial finding solidly confirms Hypothesis 4, statistically proving that while strategic human resource practices have a direct positive influence on loyalty, their most profound and powerful impact on customer retention is fundamentally channeled and actualized through the radical elevation of frontline service quality.

Table 2: Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Structural Path (Hypothesized Relationship)	Path Co-efficient (β)	T-Statistics	P-Values	Empirical Decision
H1: Strategic Human Resource Management $\rightarrow$ Service Quality	0.645	12.458	0.000	Strongly Supported
H2: Service Quality $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty	0.512	9.324	0.000	Strongly Supported
H3: Strategic Human Resource Management $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty (Direct Effect)	0.285	4.115	0.001	Supported
H4: SHRM $\rightarrow$ Service Quality $\rightarrow$ Customer Loyalty (Indirect/Mediating Effect)	0.330	7.850	0.000	Supported (Partial Mediation)

V. Discussion

The primary objective of this empirical study was to rigorously investigate and structurally model the complex interrelationships among Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), Service Quality, and Customer Loyalty, specifically within the nuanced and ecologically sensitive context of eco-tourism resorts in East Gilan. The culmination of the data analysis, executed via sophisticated PLS-SEM techniques on a dyadic sample of 412 patrons and 198 employees, yields profound insights that simultaneously corroborate existing theoretical frameworks while offering critical, context-specific nuances vital for the localized management of sustainable tourism enterprises. The empirical validation of Hypothesis 1 ($\beta = 0.645, P < 0.001$) decisively confirms that the implementation of robust SHRM practices acts as the fundamental antecedent to superior service quality. This finding seamlessly aligns with the foundational assertions of Chuang & Liao (2010) and Chand (2010), reinforcing the paradigm that taking care of employees intrinsically translates to taking care of business. In the highly demanding environment of eco-tourism, where service delivery extends beyond basic hospitality to encompass environmental education and authentic cultural exchange, generic HR practices are insufficient. The data strongly suggests that when eco-resorts heavily invest in specialized recruitment targeting environmentally conscious individuals, provide continuous, rigorous training on both hospitality protocols and regional ecology, and institute equitable, performance-based compensation, they cultivate an exceptionally capable and motivated workforce. This strategic internal alignment directly manifests externally; employees empowered by these SHRM structures exhibit significantly higher levels of reliability, empathy, and responsiveness—the core dimensions of service quality that eco-tourists fundamentally demand.

Furthermore, the robust statistical support for Hypothesis 2 ($\beta = 0.512, P < 0.001$) unequivocally validates the critical theoretical link between perceived service quality and the ultimate formation of customer loyalty. This result closely mirrors the contemporary findings of Mardiyana, Ratnasari, & Nurhidayah (2025) and Khani et al. (2025), emphasizing that in competitive service landscapes, merely meeting basic expectations is inadequate for retention. Eco-tourists in East Gilan evaluate their resort experience through a complex, multi-dimensional lens that heavily weights the authenticity and excellence of the human interaction. When the frontline staff consistently delivers service that exceeds expectations—demonstrating deep local knowledge, proactive problem-solving, and genuine care—it triggers a powerful affective response in the guest. This elevated state of cognitive and emotional satisfaction intrinsically transforms into enduring loyalty, characterized by a high propensity for repeat visitation, a resistance to competitor pricing, and, critically for eco-tourism marketing, the proactive dissemination of positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

The exploration of the direct relationship between SHRM and Customer Loyalty (Hypothesis 3) yielded a positive and significant, albeit comparatively weaker, coefficient ($\beta = 0.285, P < 0.001$). While indicating that an organization's internal human capital strategy does exert some direct influence on consumer retention—perhaps through the visible projection of a healthy, ethical, and well-managed corporate image

as suggested by Madjid & Yusuf (2025)—the true architectural dynamic of the model is revealed through the testing of Hypothesis 4. The confirmation of partial mediation ($\beta_{indirect} = 0.330, P < 0.001, VAF = 53.6\%$) stands as the most critical theoretical contribution of this research. It statistically proves that the immense power of Strategic Human Resource Management to generate customer loyalty is not direct or automatic; it must be fundamentally channeled and operationalized through the enhancement of frontline Service Quality. In essence, sophisticated HR policies (the input) equip and motivate the workforce, but it is the actual, tangible delivery of exceptional service (the mechanism) that guests experience, evaluate, and ultimately base their loyalty upon (the outcome). This complex mediating effect underscores the critical necessity for eco-resort managers in East Gilan to avoid viewing HR and customer service as isolated departments. The data conclusively demonstrates that they are deeply interconnected stages of a single value-creation process, where human capital strategy provides the indispensable architectural foundation required for building enduring consumer allegiance in the sustainable tourism sector.

VI. Conclusion and Practical Implications

In conclusion, this comprehensive investigation successfully elucidates the critical strategic role of human capital in driving competitive advantage within the rapidly evolving eco-tourism sector of East Gilan. By transitioning away from theoretical assumptions and relying on robust, contemporary empirical data collected in 2025, the study conclusively maps a powerful structural model. The findings definitively prove that Strategic Human Resource Management is not merely an administrative overhead, but rather the most potent catalyst for establishing superior Service Quality, which, acting as a crucial mediating mechanism, subsequently secures deep-seated Customer Loyalty. The health, sustainability, and economic viability of eco-resorts in Northern Iran are fundamentally tethered to the intellectual and emotional engagement of their workforce. The research confirms that the complex demands of sustainable tourism—requiring staff to act simultaneously as service providers, environmental stewards, and cultural educators—necessitate highly sophisticated, strategically aligned HR architectures. Organizations that fail to systematically invest in specialized recruitment, rigorous ecological training, and equitable empowerment structures are mathematically proven to suffer from diminished service quality and an inability to retain a loyal customer base, jeopardizing their long-term survival in a highly competitive market.

Based on the empirical findings, several highly actionable practical implications are directly extended to the management structures of eco-tourism resorts, regional tourism boards, and policymakers in East Gilan. First, a fundamental paradigm shift is required regarding the recruitment protocol. Managers must prioritize cultural and ecological alignment over basic hospitality experience; hiring individuals with an intrinsic passion for sustainability and local heritage ensures a workforce that naturally internalizes the resort's ethos, drastically elevating the authenticity of service delivery. Second, continuous and highly specialized training programs must be instituted as mandatory operational

expenses, not optional luxuries. These programs must integrate standard service excellence with deep, region-specific ecological knowledge, empowering employees to act as confident educators capable of significantly enriching the guest experience. Third, to operationalize the critical mediating role of service quality, resorts must implement robust performance appraisal systems that specifically evaluate and reward discretionary, customer-centric behaviors and environmental stewardship. Finally, regional tourism authorities should recognize the foundational importance of human capital by providing structured support, standardized training modules, and certification programs to small and medium-sized eco-resorts, ensuring a universally high standard of service quality that solidifies East Gilan's reputation as a premier destination for sustainable and exceptional eco-tourism.

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