# The Moderating Role of Applied Sunnah in the Relationship between Service Quality and Student Satisfaction. A Conceptual Framework.

**Nurul Khofifah Abdullah[1*], Ros Syammimi Hamid[2], Fatimah Noni Muhamad[3], Siti Khalilah Basaruddin[4], Nabilah Wafa' Mohd Najib[5] & Naimah Abu Kassim[6]**

**[1,4,5,6]Faculty of Muamalah and Islamic Finance, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin**

**[2,3]Faculty of Business and Management Science, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin**

**\*Corresponding Author**

## ABSTRACT

This conceptual study develops a framework linking service quality to student satisfaction through the moderating influence of Applied Sunnah the practical embodiment of Islamic virtues such as *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), *ihsan* (excellence), *rahmah* (compassion), and *ikhlas* (sincerity). Drawing upon SERVQUAL theory, Islamic moral philosophy, and contemporary higher education research, the paper argues that daily Sunnah-based behaviour enriches tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy within institutional service delivery. The framework extends SERVQUAL by infusing ethical spiritual dimensions that align with Malaysia's Islamic educational mission, thereby offering a culturally grounded model for assessing quality and satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Service quality, student satisfaction, Applied Sunnah, SERVQUAL, Islamic ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance has become an imperative in global higher education. In Malaysia, educational excellence is intertwined with Islamic moral responsibility. Institutions must not only deliver efficient services but also manifest ethical integrity consistent with Qur'anic and Sunnah values. The SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman et al., 1988) remains the benchmark for evaluating service performance, yet it lacks a moral-spiritual lens. Applied Sunnah fills this gap by transforming routine service interactions into acts of stewardship.

Recent Malaysian studies confirm that SERVQUAL dimensions which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy will predict satisfaction and loyalty (Nordin et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2022). Nevertheless, satisfaction within Islamic institutions extends beyond functional performance to include ethical authenticity and emotional peace (*sakīnah*) (Hamid et al., 2023). Consequently, this study conceptualizes Applied Sunnah as a moderating variable that strengthens the positive link between service quality and student satisfaction by embedding ethical consciousness into institutional culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Service Quality in Higher Education

Service quality reflects the difference between expected and perceived performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Universities worldwide deploy SERVQUAL to gauge student experiences (Sultan & Wong, 2022). In Malaysia, Nordin et al. (2023) identified reliability and responsiveness as strongest predictors of satisfaction, while Ali et al. (2022) linked assurance and empathy to retention intention. Yet Western-based SERVQUAL ignores the moral dimensions vital in Muslim societies (Hassan et al., 2023). Incorporating Islamic ethics which are derived from *ihsan* and *amanah* and renders service quality spiritually meaningful (Ghazali & Ismail, 2024).

## Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is a multi-layered evaluation of educational experiences. Beyond physical facilities and staff competence, satisfaction arises when institutional values resonate with students' moral expectations (Dhawan et al., 2022). In Islamic settings, satisfaction includes feelings of justice, care, and sincerity (Amzat et al., 2024). The Applied Sunnah approach operationalizes these virtues, turning ethical intention into measurable service outcomes (Nasir & Khalid, 2022).

## Religiosity and Ethical Moderation

Abror et al. (2020) empirically showed that religiosity strengthens the service-quality and satisfaction link in Islamic banking. Bal et al. (2021) found similar moderating effects of religiosity on job satisfaction. Transposing this logic to education, Rahman and Alias (2024) demonstrated that Islamic values reshape how students interpret quality cues, suggesting that Applied Sunnah can moderate service-experience evaluations.

## The Malaysian Context

Malaysia's Higher Education Blueprint embeds *maqasid al-shariah* objectives within quality policy. Studies at IIUM, USIM, and KUIPs show that sincerity and fairness dominate satisfaction predictors (Chong et al., 2024). Cross-regional comparisons reveal that empathy and justice rank above tangibles for Muslim learners (Seitova et al., 2024). Thus, embedding Applied Sunnah into campus operations aligns with both national policy and international expectations for Islamic higher education.

## Deeper Critique of SERVQUAL in Islamic Contexts

Although SERVQUAL has been widely applied in higher education, its theoretical foundations have been repeatedly critiqued when adopted in non-western and religious contexts. Developed within a commercial service culture in the United States, SERVQUAL is rooted in secular, individualistic interpretations of customer expectations and perceived performance. This orientation stands in contrast to the **collectivist and value-driven worldview** that characterizes Islamic learning environments.

First, **the expectation-perception gap model** assumes that service users evaluate quality primarily through functional efficiency. However, in Islamic institutions students interpret service encounters through **ethical, spiritual, and communal lenses**, where virtues such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), compassion (*rahmah*), and fairness (*adl*) strongly influence satisfaction (Hamid et al., 2023). SERVQUAL does not account for these **non-material dimensions**.

Second, SERVQUAL treats **empathy** as merely individualized care, whereas Islamic contexts embed empathy within the broader moral concept of *rahmah*, a divine attribute and central component of Islamic leadership. This makes empathy **spiritually charged**, not simply interpersonal.

Third, SERVQUAL assumes quality dimensions are **universal**, but empirical studies in Muslim-majority countries show that students prioritise **ethical consistency, trust (*amanah*), and justice** more than tangibles (Chong et al., 2024). SERVQUAL's inability to capture these values limits its explanatory power in Islamic HEIs.

Thus, while SERVQUAL offers a useful structural backbone, its theoretical neutrality leaves a significant **value gap**. Integrating *Applied Sunnah* directly addresses this gap by embedding **ethical spiritual meaning** into quality metrics.

# THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

## SERVQUAL Model

SERVQUAL defines quality as the gap between expectation and perception across five dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). While robust, its secular roots omit ethical conscience. Integrating Sunnah virtues re-interprets each dimension as a form of *ibadah* (act of worship) performed with excellence and sincerity (Kaushal & Ali, 2022).

## Islamic Ethical Perspective

Islamic ethics emphasise *ihsan* which doing one's duty as if in the presence of God and *adl*, or justice. *Amanah* reinforces reliability, *rahmah* evokes empathy, and *ikhlas* ensures sincerity of purpose (Abu Bakar, 2022). Embedding these values transforms service quality from transactional efficiency to ethical stewardship. Figure 1 visualises this theoretical synthesis.

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for each SERVQUAL dimension positively influences of the student satisfaction. Applied Sunnah comprising *amanah, adl, ihsan, rahmah,* and *ikhlas* moderates these relationships, intensifying the effect of perceived quality on satisfaction.
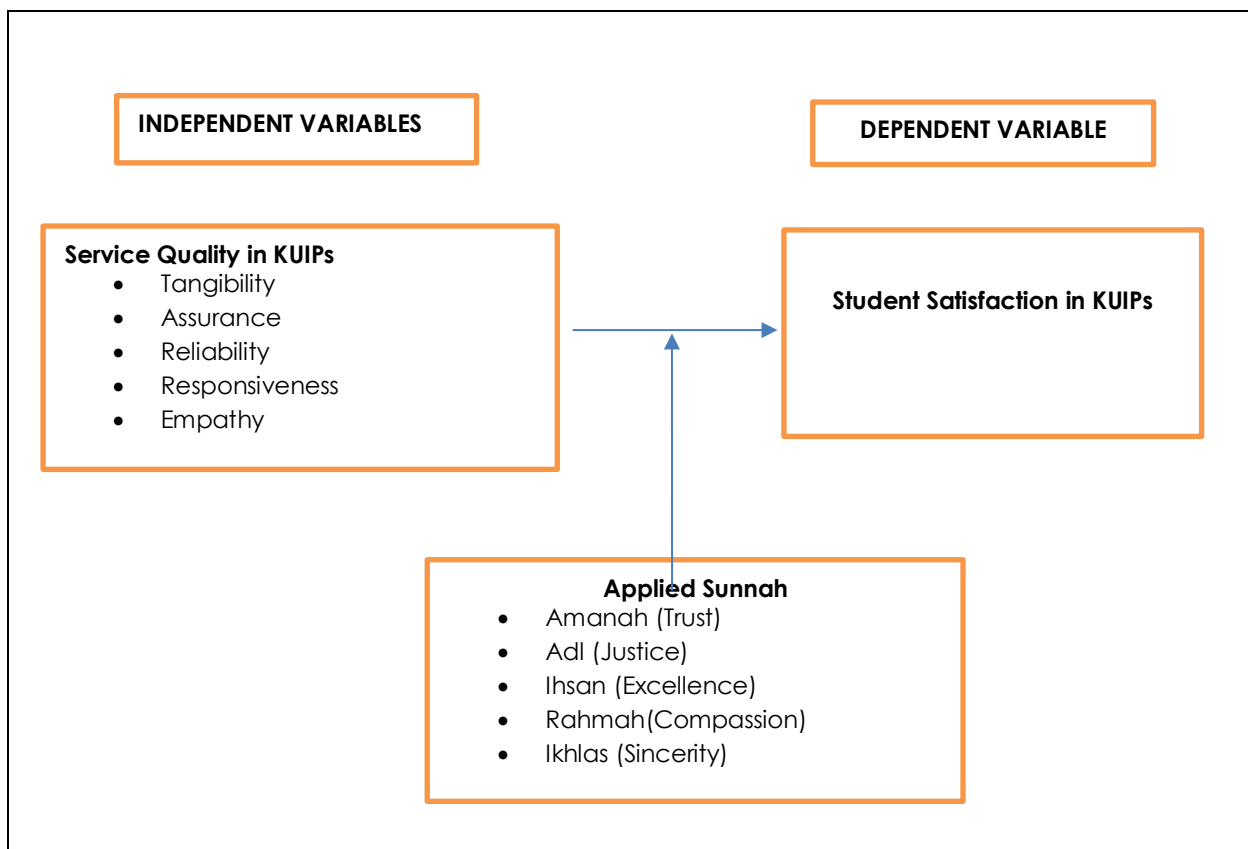


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

In order to strengthen the conceptual model, additional institutional-level factors should be considered as **moderators** or **mediators**, as they directly shape how Sunnah values are translated into daily service delivery.

## Organizational Culture (Moderator)

Organizational culture establishes the norms, behaviours, and shared meanings within an institution. A culture aligned with Islamic values reinforces the application of Sunnah-based behaviors among staff, thereby amplifying the moderating effect of Applied Sunnah on the service quality satisfaction relationship. Conversely, a weak or bureaucratic culture may dilute the impact of ethical values.

## Leadership Style (Mediator or Moderator)

Islamic-oriented leadership such as *qawwamah* (responsibility), *shura* (consultation), and *qudwah* (role-modelling) can enhance the internalization of Sunnah values among staff. Leaders who display fairness, compassion, and integrity model the very virtues that strengthen students' perception of service reliability and assurance.

## Institutional Policies and Governance

Policies that reward ethical service behaviours, mandate transparency or integrate Islamic values into performance evaluation frameworks can structurally support Applied Sunnah. When policies institutionalize Sunnah-based conduct, they reinforce the translation of values into observable service interactions.

Integrating one or more of these factors would greatly enhance the theoretical robustness of the model and align it with contemporary organizational-behavior literature.

# HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Grounded in SERVQUAL and Islamic ethical theory, this study proposes the following relationships:

**H1:** Tangibles have a positive effect on student satisfaction.

**H2:** Reliability has a positive effect on student satisfaction.

**H3:** Responsiveness has a positive effect on student satisfaction.

**H4:** Assurance has a positive effect on student satisfaction.

**H5:** Empathy has a positive effect on student satisfaction.

**H6–H10:** *Applied Sunnah* (*amanah, adl, ihsan, rahmah, ikhlas*) positively moderates each of the above relationships, such that the influence of service-quality dimensions on satisfaction is stronger when Islamic ethical values are practiced.

# DISCUSSION

### Moral Framing Mechanism

When students observe Sunnah-based conduct; honesty, fairness, empathy, they interpret institutional services as morally authentic. This ethical framing triggers gratitude and trust, magnifying satisfaction even when tangible facilities are modest (Rahman & Alias, 2024). Applied Sunnah therefore enriches the emotional component of satisfaction through ethical resonance.

### Authenticity and Trust

Reliability and assurance in higher education are inseparable from *amanah* (trustworthiness). Faculty who fulfil commitments exemplify this virtue, while compassionate administrators reflect *rahmah*. Such behaviours enhance credibility and deepen student loyalty (Nasir & Khalid, 2022; Rashid & Hussain, 2021). Applied Sunnah thus sustains long-term satisfaction through trust-building.

### Integration of Ethics and Performance

Incorporating Sunnah values bridges the gap between performance metrics and moral accountability. Quality becomes not only a managerial outcome but a form of ethical service (*khidmah*). This dual orientation distinguishes Islamic higher-education quality management from conventional systems (Hassan et al., 2023).

# THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

### Extension of SERVQUAL.

The framework embeds spiritual-ethical meaning into SERVQUAL, addressing cultural limitations in existing models (Sultan & Wong, 2022).

### Operationalisation of Applied Sunnah.

It identifies measurable virtues discipline, compassion, fairness, sincerity and linking theology with service theory (Nasir & Khalid, 2022).

### Faith-based Moderation.

Positions religiosity as an interaction term, advancing cross-disciplinary theory between marketing, education, and Islamic management (Abror et al., 2020).

### Holistic Satisfaction.

Expands the construct to encompass cognitive, affective, and spiritual fulfilment (Zulkifli et al., 2023).

A powerful way to strengthen academic positioning is to compare the Applied Sunnah Framework with established Islamic educational quality models:

### IIUM's Sejahtera Framework

IIUM's *Sejahtera* model emphasizes balance (*mizan*), harmony, and holistic well-being, aligning educational quality with spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions. Applied Sunnah aligns strongly with Sejahtera's ethical components, particularly in areas of compassion (*rahmah*), responsibility (*amanah*), and self-discipline (*mujahadah*). However, Sejahtera offers a macro-philosophical orientation, while Applied Sunnah provides **micro-behavioural mechanisms**, making the two frameworks complementary.

### Maqasid al-Shariah Based Evaluation Models

Maqasid emphasizes the preservation of faith, intellect, life, lineage, and wealth. In educational settings, maqasid-based quality emphasizes intellectual integrity and ethical development. Applied Sunnah can be positioned as the **behavioural enactment** of maqasid, translating higher-order objectives into daily actions that affect service quality.

### Tawhidic Educational Philosophy (USIM/ICR frameworks)

The Tawhidic paradigm emphasises unity of knowledge, integration of ethics and practice, and the spiritual accountability of educators. While Tawhid provides the metaphysical foundation, Applied Sunnah contributes the **operational tools**, offering observable indicators (e.g., punctuality, sincerity, empathy) for quality assessment.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

### Policy.

Include Sunnah-aligned indicators (punctuality, empathy, justice) in accreditation and quality-assurance audits.

### Training.

Design professional-development modules on ethical communication and service sincerity (*ikhlas*).

### Student Affairs.

Embed empathy-based service initiatives such as mentorship, welfare, outreach to cultivate satisfaction and belonging.

### Measurement.

Incorporate Applied Sunnah scales with SERVQUAL items for comprehensive evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper proposes *Applied Sunnah* as a moderating variable enriching the link between service quality and student satisfaction in Malaysian higher education. By integrating prophetic virtues into service design,

institutions transform efficiency into ethical excellence. The model need to be improved by invites empirical validation through PLS-SEM and cross-institutional comparison. Ultimately, embracing Applied Sunnah advances Malaysia's aspiration for morally anchored educational quality and student well-being.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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