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Outpatient Loyalty and Its Determinants: The Roles of Service Quality, Hospital Image, Trust, and Digital Promotion at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, patient loyalty has gained increasing attention as hospitals face growing competition and rising patient expectations, particularly in outpatient services where first impressions are formed. This study explores how service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion influence outpatient loyalty at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital. The research focuses on outpatient care, considering its strategic role in shaping patients' decisions to return and recommend hospital services. A quantitative research design was adopted, using survey data collected from outpatients through structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using multiple linear regression to assess both individual and combined effects of the explanatory variables on patient loyalty. The results reveal that service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion each have a positive and statistically significant effect on outpatient loyalty. When examined simultaneously, these factors jointly exert a strong influence, indicating that patient loyalty is not driven by a single aspect of service, but rather by the overall experience created through consistent service delivery, credible institutional reputation, and effective communication. Notably, digital promotion emerges as the most influential variable, reflecting the growing role of digital platforms in shaping patient perceptions and engagement. These findings suggest that hospital management should view loyalty as a long-term outcome of integrated service quality improvement, trust-building practices, and meaningful digital interaction with patients.

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INTRODUCTION

Hospitals are increasingly required to compete not only on clinical competence but also on their ability to build sustainable relationships with patients. In outpatient services, where patient interactions are frequent and switching costs are relatively low, patient loyalty has become a crucial indicator

of hospital performance and service sustainability. Loyal patients tend to revisit the same provider, comply with medical recommendations, and engage in positive word-of-mouth, which strengthens institutional reputation and operational efficiency (Keller, 2021). However, rising patient expectations, increased service alternatives, and rapid digitalization have made loyalty more difficult to achieve and maintain.

Prior research consistently identifies service quality as a foundational driver of patient loyalty in healthcare settings. High-quality service reflected in reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and clarity of communication reduces uncertainty and enhances patients' perceived value (J. Joseph Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Mosallamy & Metawie, 2022). Empirical studies across different healthcare contexts confirm that service quality has a positive and significant effect on patient loyalty, either directly or through mediating mechanisms such as satisfaction and trust (Arman et al., 2023; Nurfitriani & Hidayah Nur, 2024). Nevertheless, as healthcare markets become more competitive and information-rich, service quality alone may no longer sufficiently explain patients' loyalty behavior.

Hospital image has also been widely acknowledged as an important determinant of patient loyalty. A favorable hospital image reflects professionalism, credibility, and consistency in service delivery, which shape patients' expectations and perceptions even before direct service encounters occur (Keller, 2021). Several studies demonstrate that a strong hospital image positively influences patients' decisions to revisit and recommend hospital services, particularly when patients have limited ability to evaluate medical outcomes objectively (Hakim et al., 2025; Widiarti et al., 2025; Yanuarista et al., 2025). In this sense, hospital image functions as a cognitive shortcut that reinforces patient confidence and loyalty.

Trust represents another central element in the patient-hospital relationship. Healthcare services are characterized by high information asymmetry and perceived risk, making trust essential for long-term relationships (Apriyani, 2025; Ramadhani & Sediawan, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). In hospital settings, trust emerges not only from technical competence but also from transparent communication, ethical conduct, and consistent service processes. Empirical evidence shows that trust significantly influences patients' intention to revisit and remain loyal to healthcare providers (Rampi et al., 2024; Shie et al., 2022). Despite its importance, many studies treat trust primarily as a mediating variable rather than examining its direct role alongside managerial and promotional factors.

More recently, digital promotion has gained prominence as hospitals increasingly adopt websites, social media, and online platforms to communicate with patients. Digital promotion extends beyond traditional advertising by enabling interactive communication, health education, and real-time engagement (Keller, 2021). Recent studies indicate that effective digital marketing can strengthen brand awareness, improve patient experience, and foster emotional attachment, which ultimately supports loyalty (Bahari et al., 2024; Rahmat & Kusumayati, 2024). However, empirical research examining the direct impact of digital promotion on patient loyalty particularly in public hospitals and outpatient services remains limited and fragmented.

Although the literature on patient loyalty is extensive, several gaps can be identified. First, many studies examine service quality, hospital image, trust, or digital promotion in isolation, resulting in a partial understanding of loyalty formation. Second, empirical evidence from public hospitals in developing regions is still relatively scarce, despite their unique challenges related to resource constraints and service demand. Third, research focusing specifically on outpatient loyalty where repeat visits and patient choice are most evident remains underrepresented, especially in the Indonesian context.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the combined effects of service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion on outpatient loyalty at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital. By integrating traditional service and relational variables with digital promotion, this research provides a more comprehensive perspective on loyalty formation in contemporary healthcare settings. The novelty of this study lies in its holistic analytical framework and its empirical focus on outpatient services in a public hospital context, where digital strategies are increasingly implemented but not yet rigorously evaluated.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to healthcare marketing and relationship management literature by extending loyalty models to include digital promotion as a strategic determinant. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer evidence-based insights for hospital managers seeking to design integrated strategies that combine service improvement, image strengthening, trust-building, and digital engagement to enhance patient loyalty sustainably.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze the partial and simultaneous effects of service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion on outpatient loyalty. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to outpatient respondents and analyzed using multiple linear regression (Gurajati et al., 2012;

Jr. et al., 2019). The study hypothesizes that each independent variable has a positive and significant effect on patient loyalty, both individually and collectively.

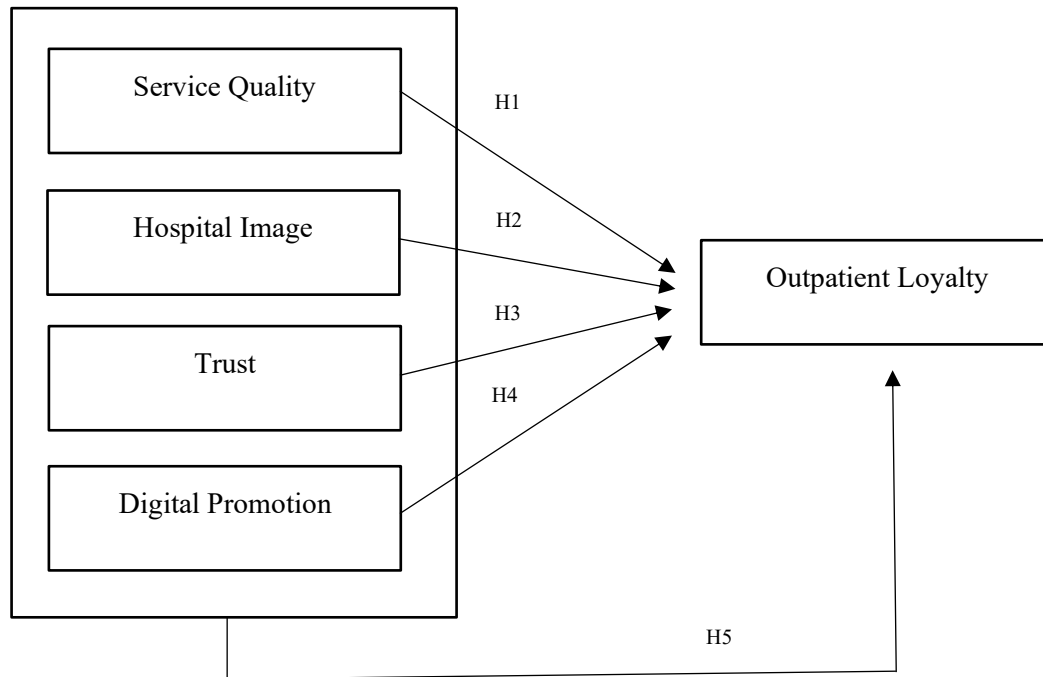
RESEARCH METHODE

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the determinants of outpatient loyalty at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for objective measurement of relationships among variables and hypothesis testing through statistical analysis (Ward Creswell, 2018). The focus on outpatient services was chosen due to the frequency of patient-hospital interactions and the greater likelihood of observing repeat-visit behavior, which is central to loyalty formation in healthcare settings (Keller, 2021).

The population of this study consisted of all outpatients who received medical services at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital during the data collection period. As the number of outpatients varied over time and could not be precisely determined, a non-probability sampling technique was applied. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with criteria including patients who had previously utilized outpatient services and were willing to participate voluntarily. This approach ensured that respondents possessed sufficient experience to evaluate service quality, hospital image, trust, digital promotion, and loyalty (Jr. et al., 2019).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on established theories and prior empirical studies. Service quality was measured using indicators adapted from the SERVQUAL model, encompassing reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility (Purwiningsih et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2024). Hospital image was assessed through indicators reflecting reputation, professionalism, and institutional credibility, as commonly applied in healthcare marketing research (Keller, 2021). Trust was measured based on patients' confidence in the hospital's competence, integrity, and consistency, consistent with relationship marketing theory (Rampi et al., 2024; Shie et al., 2022). Digital promotion was measured using indicators related to the hospital's use of digital media for information dissemination, interaction, and service promotion, following the concept of digital marketing in healthcare contexts (Palmatier et al., 2006, 2007). Outpatient loyalty was measured through indicators such as intention to revisit, willingness to recommend, and preference for the hospital over alternative providers, which are widely used in loyalty studies (Shie et al., 2022).

The conceptual framework of this study proposes that outpatient loyalty is influenced by service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion. These hypothesized relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.



Based on this framework, the hypotheses formulated in this study are as follows: service quality has a positive effect on outpatient loyalty (H1); hospital image has a positive effect on outpatient loyalty (H2); trust has a positive effect on outpatient loyalty (H3); digital promotion has a positive effect on outpatient loyalty (H4); and service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion simultaneously have a positive effect on outpatient loyalty (H5). These hypotheses reflect the assumption that loyalty in healthcare services is shaped by both experiential factors and relational and digital mechanisms, as suggested by previous studies (Keller, 2021; Palmatier et al., 2006; Shie et al., 2022; Yanuarista et al., 2025).

Questionnaires were administered directly to respondents after they completed outpatient services, ensuring that responses were based on recent service experiences. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for completeness and consistency. The data were then analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis to examine the partial and simultaneous effects of the independent variables on outpatient loyalty. Multiple regression was selected because it allows the estimation of the relative contribution of each predictor variable while controlling for the influence of others (Gurajati et al., 2012).

The regression model used in this study is expressed as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon$$

where Y represents outpatient loyalty, X_1 denotes service quality, X_2 represents hospital image, X_3 denotes trust, and X_4 represents digital promotion. The term α represents the constant, β_1 to β_4 are regression coefficients, and ε is the error term.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using t-tests to assess the partial effects of each independent variable and an F-test to examine their simultaneous effect, with a significance level of 5 percent. To ensure the robustness of the regression model, classical assumption tests including normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests were performed (Gurajati et al., 2012). Construct validity was assessed using item total correlation, while reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, following commonly accepted thresholds in social science research (Jr. et al., 2019).

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the study context, and the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in outpatient loyalty over time. Nevertheless, the methodological approach employed in this study provides sufficient rigor to address the research objectives and allows replication in similar healthcare settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis indicate that service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion have significant and positive effects on outpatient loyalty at M.M. Dunda Limboto Hospital. These findings confirm that outpatient loyalty is influenced by a combination of experiential, perceptual, relational, and digital factors. The regression coefficient results are presented in Table 1, which provides a clear overview of the direction, magnitude, and statistical significance of each independent variable in explaining patient loyalty.

Table 1.

Results of Multiple Linear Regression Coefficient Test

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	12.869	4.507	–	2.856	0.005	–	–
Service Quality	0.194	0.038	0.291	5.091	0.000	0.961	1.041
Hospital Image	0.264	0.048	0.326	5.449	0.000	0.882	1.134
Trust	0.155	0.040	0.224	3.836	0.000	0.924	1.083
Digital Promotion	0.279	0.041	0.398	6.890	0.000	0.943	1.060

Source: Primary data processed, 2025

As shown in Table 1, service quality has a positive and significant effect on outpatient loyalty ($\beta = 0.291$; $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that improvements in reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible aspects of service are associated with stronger patient commitment. In outpatient services, where interactions are frequent but relatively brief, service quality becomes a concrete signal of the hospital's professionalism and concern for patient needs. When services are delivered consistently and efficiently, patients develop confidence that encourages repeat visits and positive recommendations. This result is consistent with service quality theory, which emphasizes that perceived service excellence strengthens behavioral intentions in high-contact services such as healthcare (Palmatier et al., 2007; Purwiningsih et al., 2023; Shie et al., 2022). Similar findings have been reported in recent healthcare studies showing that service quality remains a key determinant of patient loyalty across different hospital contexts (Arman et al., 2023; Nurfitriani & Hidayah Nur, 2024).

Hospital image also shows a positive and significant influence on outpatient loyalty ($\beta = 0.326$; $p < 0.001$). This result suggests that patients' overall perceptions of the hospital's reputation, professionalism, and credibility play an important role in sustaining long-term loyalty. A positive hospital image helps reduce perceived risk and shapes patient expectations, particularly in healthcare services where outcomes are difficult to evaluate objectively. In public hospital settings, institutional image becomes an important differentiating factor that influences patients' willingness to remain loyal despite alternative service options. This finding supports previous research indicating that hospital image strengthens loyalty by reinforcing trust and confidence in service providers (J. Joseph Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Keller, 2021; Mosallamy & Metawie, 2022).

Trust is found to have a positive and significant effect on outpatient loyalty ($\beta = 0.224$; $p < 0.001$), highlighting its central role in patient-hospital relationships. Healthcare services involve high levels of uncertainty and information asymmetry, making trust essential for sustaining long-term relationships. Patients who trust the hospital's competence, integrity, and consistency are more likely to continue using its services even when they cannot fully assess medical outcomes. This finding aligns with relationship marketing theory, which positions trust as a core antecedent of loyalty in high-risk services (Palmatier et al., 2006, 2007). It also corroborates empirical evidence from recent healthcare studies demonstrating that trust directly enhances patient loyalty and strengthens the impact of service experiences on future behavioral intentions (Rampi et al., 2024; Shie et al., 2022).

Among all independent variables, digital promotion exhibits the strongest standardized effect on outpatient loyalty ($\beta = 0.398$; $p < 0.001$). This result reflects the growing importance of digital engagement in contemporary healthcare. Effective digital promotion enables hospitals to provide accessible information, communicate service availability, and maintain interaction with patients beyond face-to-face encounters. In outpatient contexts, digital platforms contribute to convenience, transparency, and perceived responsiveness, which are increasingly valued by patients. This finding is consistent with digital marketing literature, which suggests that digital communication enhances engagement and emotional connection, thereby supporting loyalty formation when aligned with service quality and institutional credibility (Hakim et al., 2025; Keller, 2021; Yanuarista et al., 2025).

The collinearity statistics reported in Table 1 indicate tolerance values above 0.10 and VIF values below 10, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. This suggests that service quality, hospital image, trust, and digital promotion independently contribute to explaining outpatient loyalty. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that outpatient loyalty is best understood through an integrated framework that combines operational excellence, positive institutional perception, relational assurance, and effective digital communication.

Overall, this study extends existing healthcare loyalty literature by empirically confirming the relevance of digital promotion alongside more established determinants such as service quality, hospital image, and trust, particularly within a public hospital context. The findings provide practical insights for hospital managers seeking to design comprehensive strategies that enhance outpatient loyalty while adapting to evolving patient expectations in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

Patient loyalty in outpatient services is not built through a single dimension of hospital performance, but through the cumulative experience patients have with the institution over time. The findings of this study show that loyalty emerges from the interaction between consistent service quality, a credible hospital image, trust-based relationships, and effective digital communication. Together, these elements shape patients' willingness to continue using hospital services and to recommend the institution to others, even in an increasingly competitive healthcare environment.

This study is important because it reflects the changing nature of patient behavior in the digital era. While service quality and trust remain central to

loyalty formation, digital promotion has become a meaningful channel through which hospitals communicate value, accessibility, and reliability. By integrating digital promotion into the loyalty framework, this research extends existing healthcare marketing perspectives and provides empirical evidence from a public hospital context, where such strategies are often applied but rarely evaluated systematically.

The conclusions drawn from this study are relevant for both scholars and practitioners. For researchers, the findings reinforce and refine existing loyalty models by demonstrating the need to consider digital engagement alongside traditional service and relational factors. For hospital managers, the results underline the importance of adopting an integrated approach that balances service improvement, reputation management, trust-building, and digital outreach. When these efforts are aligned, hospitals are better positioned to foster sustainable outpatient loyalty and strengthen their role in meeting community healthcare needs.

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