

How Quality of Services Offered by Community Pharmacy Retain their Customers? The Mediating Role of Sales Promotional Tools. A Cross-Sectional Study of the Pharmaceutical Sector of Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to estimate how community pharmacy customers are retained by considering the quality of services in Thailand and how the sales promotional tools mediate this relationship. For this purpose, the data was collected through the questionnaire designed by the self-administering approach. Community pharmacy chain stores were selected on a random sampling basis from larger cities of Thailand and 720 responses were collected from the customer visiting the sampled community pharmacy store. The dependent variable of this study was pharmacy customer's retention while the independent variable was quality of service measured by reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. To estimate the mediation interaction between the dependent and independent variables, sales promotional tools like price cuts, free samples and buy-one-get-one-free were used. Structural equation modelling technique was used to analyze this study using SmartPLS software. The estimation of this research investigation involved respondent's demography, estimations of outer loadings, estimation of the outer model, construct reliability and validity analysis, discriminant validity analysis, estimation of SEM model and estimation of the inner model. The direct effects of the study show that reliability and tangibility as the dimensions of quality of service strongly enhances customer retention in the community pharmacy chains of Thailand. On the other hand, responsiveness is

enhancing customer retention with insignificant value. The direct effect further indicates that service quality dimensions like reliability, responsiveness and tangibility are depicting positive and highly significant relationship with sales promotional tools. The specific indirect effects show that sales promotion coupled with reliability, responsiveness and tangibility strongly mediate customer retention positively. It is recommended to the policymakers of community pharmaceutical sector of Thailand that customer retention in this sector can be enhanced by reliability and tangibility most importantly. In addition, customer retention can be more enhanced by considering the promotional techniques like price discounts and free samples. Future research in this domain may be considered for other sectors by carefully analyzing the literature.

Keywords: Customer retention, service quality, Sales promotional tools, pharmaceutical sector, Thailand economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Ali, et al. [1] stated that retaining the customer in the main issue being faced by service-providing industries and organizations. Most of the organizations are struggling hard to retaining their existing customer for their survival and sustainable growth. Retaining a customer refers to making a person regularly buy the product and services from an organization which not only helps to enable an organization to get a constant profit but also increase the number of customers every day as referred by the existing satisfied customers. There are a large number of pharmacy stores and chains in Thailand but the most common and reliable pharmacy chains are community pharmacy [2]. The types of product and services provided by community pharmacists include providing and dispensing of prescribing pharmacy to their customers [2]. Community pharmacist is provided and a list of dangerous pharmacy drug so that they can provide a huge number of pharmacy based on this list to cure for minor diseases to their customers in Thailand. Unfortunately, most of the pharmacy chains have not the local production units of quality pharmacies so they normally import these pharmacies from abroad and charge a heavy price which is unaffordable for most of the people due to their earning and family income level. However, most of the people prefer to purchase the costly pharmacy due to the quality of medicine and the quality of service provided at the community pharmacy chain. In the modern era, it is more challenging to retain a customer in the presence of competitors. The benefit of retaining a customer results in

constant profit and growth of an organization while those firms who could not compete in today's world for retaining customer cannot survive in the long run. Nsiah and A Mensah [3] stated that the success of the service sector is mainly dependent upon retaining the customers. The most prominent determinant for retaining the customer in the modern world is providing a high quality of service in terms of reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, assurance and empathy. It is also stated that the quality of service with all its dimensions has proven beneficial in retaining the customers. The pharmacy sector is facing challenges in this regard to retain its customers in the long-run because most of the branded pharmacies and pharmacy chain provide the services and drugs that are not affordable for a common man but when it comes to public health and safety the people cannot compromise price in place of quality of drugs and services. So, the statement of the problem is as follows:

“ To examine the effect of quality of services offered by pharmacy chains in Thailand to retain their customers”.

The present research aimed to estimate the direct effect of quality of services offered by pharmacy chains in Thailand in the form of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility for retaining their customers. In addition, the study also required to estimate the indirect effect of sales promotional tools like price cuts, free samples & buy-one get one free to mediate the relationship between customer retention and service quality at the pharmacy shops of Thailand. The following specific objectives can be established to make the study more specific:

1. To explore the direct effect of service quality for customer retention in the pharmacy chains of Thailand.
2. To identify the indirect effect of sales promotional tools in mediating the relationship between service quality and customer retention of pharmacy chains in Thailand.
3. To conclude the implications through the estimated findings of the study for providing the guidelines regarding customer retention in the pharmacy chains of Thailand.

The objectives of this study can be accomplished by following the scientific sequence of research through research question exploration in the following form:

- (i) How the quality of service directly affects the customer retention of pharmacy chains in Thailand?
- (ii) Do the sales promotional tools play the mediator role significantly for the relationship between service quality and customer retention in the pharmacy chains of Thailand?
- (iii) What are the implications of direct and indirect effects of the study to boost customer retention for the policymakers of pharmacy chains in Thailand?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a pack of large number of studies available that discuss the relationship between service quality factors and their impact of customer's retention in different sectors like banking, airline, tourism, hotel, telecommunication, etc.

Ali, et al. [1] executed their research in the domain of customer retention based on service quality in the cellular industry of Pakistan. They concluded that customer retention in the cellular sector is determined and enhanced by reasonable price structure and voice clarity during the call. Ahmad, et al. [4] conducted a study based on a similar domain found that service quality dimensions are positively related to customer retention with reference to SMS service excluding the dimension of empathy. Edward and Sahadev [5] explored that customer satisfaction or customer retention can be boosted up with improved service qualities. Towler, et al. [6] examined the interaction of customer retention as the mediator in their study. They identified that the relationship between customer satisfaction and the performance of the firm becomes strongly significant and positive due to the mediating interaction of customer retention. Danesh, et al. [7] established an exploratory research study for hypermarkets in Malaysia for considering customer retention based on customer satisfaction, customer trust as well as the customer switching behaviour. They concluded their exploration with the findings of direct relationship between customer satisfaction and trust with significant impact. Padmanabhan, et al. [8] proposed customer retention based on an advance approach of business intelligence in addition to quality of service factors and customer demography. They argued that the use of

business intelligence in resolving issues relating to business operations may lead to greater customer satisfaction that ultimately increases customer retention. Hasan, et al. [9] documented that findings with the estimations that the retention of banking customer can be enhanced by providing better service quality of ATM. They suggested that the operational manager of banks should focus on enhancing the better ATM services according to customer desires if they want to enhance customer retention. Boohene, et al. [10] discovered that customer retention is mainly affected by the customer switching behavior. In addition, customer trust and customer commitment also plays a significant positive role in customer retention. Fullerton [11] tried to examine the interaction of normative commitment as the moderation for the relationship between quality of service and retention of customers. He concluded with significant findings of both direct as well as indirect effects of this study with positive coefficients. Nsiah and A Mensah [3] investigated a study in the Ghana banking industry for determining customer retention on the basis of service quality. They concluded that in order to ensure customer retention in the banking sectors, the management needs to focus on providing services with the level of high quality. Zangmo, et al. [12] considered a study in the same domain for Bhutan airline industry. The discovered evidence indicated a positive and statistically significant link between the quality of service in the airline industry and their customer retention. Al-Tit [13] investigated an exploratory research of Jordan restaurant industry. The conclusive findings suggested that customer retention can be enhanced by providing high-quality food as well as high-quality customer service with the significance mediation of customer satisfaction. Tawinunt, et al. [14] conducted an exploratory research for the tourism industry of Thailand. They concluded that new tourist can be retained in the tourism activities by providing better service quality. Bhatti, et al. [15] proposed a framework of customer retention in telecommunication sector of Australian nation. The concluded evidences supported that improving the customer service quality can decrease the complaints of customer that leads to enhance the customer best experience as a result the customer satisfaction and customer retention can be enhanced to dramatic level in this industry. Similar findings of positive link between customer retention and quality of service could be found in the past studies like [16-28]. There is a huge literature available regarding the service quality and customer retention available for other sector and industries but according to the best of researcher's review of the literature and huge literature gap is found for this domain in case of pharmacy sector. So, it is evident that a research is needed in this domain to fill this gap by considering the service quality effect on customer retention in the community pharmaceutical chain of Thailand with the mediation role of sales and promotional tools.

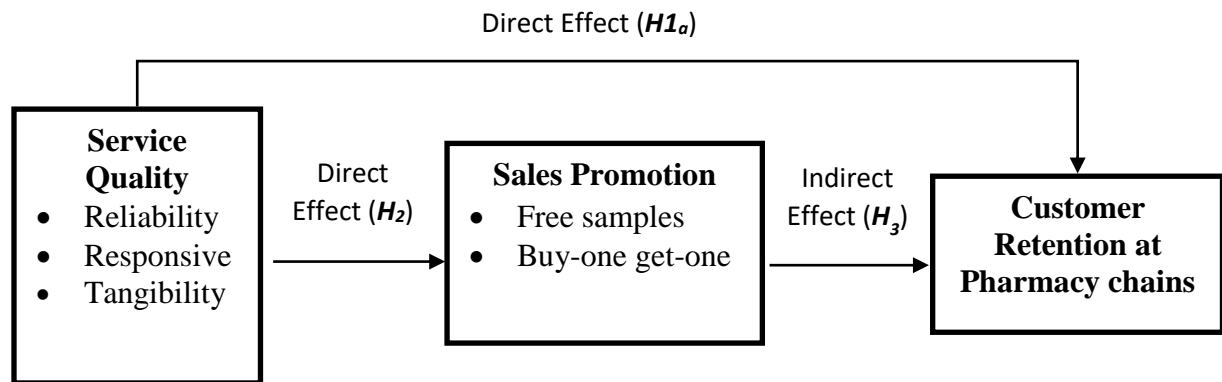


FIGURE 1: Theoretical Model

Figure 1 indicates the theoretical model indicating the direct and indirect effects of the study. The direct effect was indicated between service quality dimensions like reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibility and customer's retention at community pharmacy chains. This relationship is indicated by H_a . The indirect effect is shown by including the sales promotional tools as the mediator between the relationship of service quality and customer retention of community pharmacy chains.

The hypothesis of the study:

The following hypothesis is established to investigate the direct and indirect relationships of study as indicated in figure 1.

H_1 = Quality of services significantly affects the retention of pharmacy chain customers in Thailand.

H_2 = Quality of services significantly influences the sales promotional tools at the pharmacy chains in Thailand.

H_3 = Sales promotional tools (Price discount and free samples,) significantly mediates the relationship between quality of service and customer's retention at the pharmacy chains of Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

This research study tries to investigate the direct effect of the quality of services offered by community pharmacy chains in Thailand for retaining their customers. In addition, the study also required to estimate the indirect effect of sales promotional tools for the relationship between customer retention and service quality at the pharmacy shops of Thailand. For this purpose, the data was collected through the questionnaire designed by the self-administering approach. Community pharmacy chain stores were selected on a random sampling basis from larger cities of Thailand and 720 responses were collected from the customer visiting the sampled community pharmacy store. The appropriate sampling technique for this purpose is a cluster based random sampling technique due to the fact of data collection from different geographical locations of Thailand. The dependent variable of this research investigation is customer retention at the pharmacy shops. The independent variables are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility; as the measure of qualities of service provided by a community pharmacist chain in Thailand. In

addition, sales promotional tools were used as the mediating variable which is measured in terms of price discounts, free samples buy-one-get-one-free. All the variable was measured using a Five-Point-Likert scaling. The detailed dimensions of each latent variable is as follows:

Customer Retention

Ahmed, et al. [26] stated that an effort made by an organization to enhance customer loyalty to make that customer a constant one. In addition, it also includes the repurchase behaviour of a customer with the intention of revisiting that organization due to the feelings of service quality delivery in the best manner with ideal locality and prices according to the customer's requirements and expectations is known as customer's retention.

Service quality

- Reliability refers to the ability of accurate and dependable performance of services by an organization [26, 27]. In other words, the right and timely delivery of service with accuracy and correction in record keeping and billing with consistent performance is known as reliability [23].
- Responsiveness refers to the prompt delivery of services and willingness on the part of helping the customers by an organization and its employees [26, 27]. In other words, "the responsiveness refers that the employees are ready and willing to serve the customers in a timely and prompt manner and dealing them with care and responding manner [23].
- Empathy refers to the delivery of customer's attention individually and make them feel cared for by the employee of an organization [26, 27]
- Assurance refers to the customer's confidence, establishing trust on them, dealing with courtesy with the employees give them knowledge about the product and service being provided [26, 27]
- Tangibility refers to personnel appearance, equipment as well as the physical facilities as provided by an organization [26, 27]. In other words, the facility of services provided to customers in physical form is known as the tangibility [23].

Sales Promotional Tools

It refers to the tools a service firm applies to enhance its customer retention coupling with service quality. It mainly includes price discounts, providing free samples to customers and offering promotional tools like buy-one-get-one-free.

- Price discounts

It refers to providing service at a cut-price or discounted rate to retain the customers.

- Free samples

It refers to providing free samples of the products to existing and new customer for the purpose of customer retention.

- Buy-one-get one free

It refers to providing one free product to the specific category of promotional product when a customer buy one unit of that product.

ESTIMATION RESULTS

This research study tried to explore the direct effect of quality of services offered by community pharmacy chains in Thailand for retaining their customers along with the indirect effect of sales promotional tools as the mediator between customer retention and service quality. For achieving the objective of estimation of this investigation through direct and indirect effect required the use of structural equation modelling for which SmartPLS SEM modelling was applied due to its variance-based approach for the purpose of analyzing such a study. The estimation of this research investigation involves respondent’s demography table 1, estimations of outer loadings table 2, estimation of outer model figure 2, construct reliability and validity analysis table 3, discriminant validity analysis table 4, estimation of SEM model table 5 and estimation of inner model figure 3. The detailed analysis and their interpretation is given below under their relevant heads.

TABLE 1: Respondent’s Demography

Variables	Categorization	Frequency	Per cent
Gender	Female	376	52.2
	Male	344	47.8
Age	Below 18 years	121	16.8
	18 - 23 years	117	16.3
	24 - 29 years	119	16.5
	30 - 39 years	107	14.9
	40 - 49 years	141	19.6
	Greater than 50 years	115	16.0
Marital Status	Single	80	11.1
	Engaged	104	14.4
	Married	238	33.1
	Separated	170	23.6
	Divorced	128	17.8
Family Members	1 - 2 Persons	197	27.4
	3 - 4 Persons	225	31.3
	5 - 6 Persons	187	26.0
	7 or more persons	111	15.4
Family Income (per month)	Less than 10,000 Baht	151	21.0
	10,000 – 14999 Baht	142	19.7
	15000 – 19999 Baht	147	20.4
	20,000 – 24999 Baht	117	16.3
	More than 25000 Baht	163	22.6

The above table 1 indicating the demographic factors and their relevant frequency in the dataset of the present

investigation. The frequency values with their percentage were estimated using SPSS software.

TABLE 2: Estimations of Outer loadings

	Reliability	Responsive	Tangibility	Retention	Sales Promotion
RELB1	0.946				
RELB2	0.745				
RES1		0.856			
RES2		0.814			
TAN1			0.989		

TAN2			0.987		
TAN3			0.980		
RET1				0.852	
RET2				0.960	
RET1				0.852	
BG1					0.924
BG2					0.934
FS1					0.944
FS2					0.935
FS3					0.925
FS4					0.885

The above table 2 representing the estimated values of outer loadings by using the PLS Algorithm and subsequently factor analysis option from the SmartPLS software. Initially, the analysis of outer loading indicates that a lot of observed values were less than 0.70 and a large number of observed factors were also less than 0.50 so those factors were excluded from the model. As a result, two latent variables

like assurance and empathy were completely excluded from the model. The remaining latent variables like reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, retention and sales promotion with the final and significant observed values of greater than 0.70 were included in the model and then estimated was finalized for outer loading.

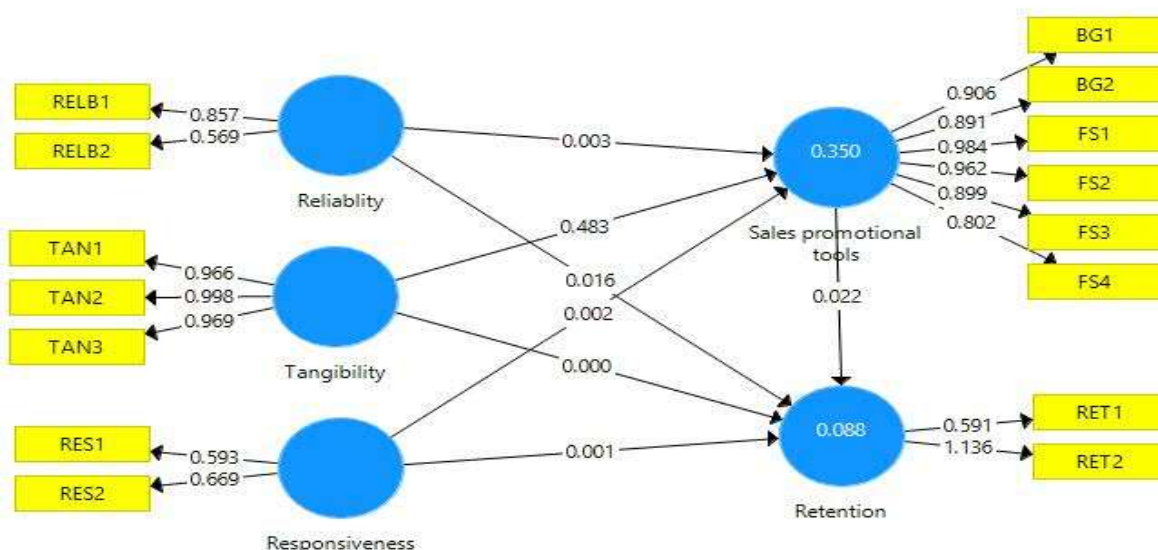


FIGURE 2: Estimation of the outer model

Figure 2 depicts the outer model of the study. It shows that in what form and way the observed values of each latent variables connected and latent variables connected with each other to indicate the direct as well as indirect effects of

this investigations. Only those observed factors and latent variables are reported in figure 2 which are significant while the remaining were excluded due to insignificant values.

TABLE 3: Construct Reliability and Validity analysis

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Extracted (AVE)	Variance
Reliability	0.756	0.894	0.838	0.725	
Responsiveness	0.768	0.773	0.822	0.698	
Retention	0.803	1.037	0.903	0.824	
Sales promotion	0.966	0.969	0.973	0.855	
Tangibility	0.985	0.986	0.990	0.971	

The reliability of latent variable finalized for this investigation is based on Cronbach's alpha value (greater than 0.70) and composite reliability (greater than 0.70) while the validity of the same is assessed through AVE (greater than 0.50). The reported estimates of reliability and

validity for the latent variables like reliability, responsiveness, customer's retention tangibility are above the acceptable range which proves that the final latent variables are reliable as well as valid.

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity analysis

	Reliability	Responsive	Retention	Sales promotion	Tangibility
Reliability	0.751				
Responsive	0.609	0.735			
Retention	0.221	0.176	0.708		
Sales promotion	0.146	0.094	0.124	0.725	
Tangibility	0.101	0.140	0.112	0.530	0.785

The above table 4 depicts the discriminant validity of this research investigation for the finalized latent variables like reliability, responsiveness, customer's retention, sales promotional tools and tangibility. The validity is confirmed by the correlation value of the relevant variable that should

be less than 0.80 for the purpose of discriminant validity. Here, the discriminant validity for all the selected latent variable indicating that these latent variables are externally valid and consistent due to their correlation estimations less than 0.80.

TABLE 5: Estimation of SEM Model

Total Affect	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Reliability -> Retention	0.178	0.179	0.046	3.829	0.000
Reliability -> Sales Promotion	0.155	0.155	0.038	4.088	0.000
Responsive -> Retention	0.056	0.058	0.050	1.118	0.264
Responsive -> Sales promotion	0.077	0.078	0.037	2.109	0.035
Sales promotion -> Retention	0.161	0.161	0.045	3.601	0.000
Tangibility -> Retention	0.086	0.089	0.039	2.219	0.027
Tangibility -> Sales promotion	0.556	0.558	0.025	22.533	0.000
Specific Indirect Affect					
Reliability -> Sales promotion -> Retention	0.025	0.025	0.010	2.548	0.011
Responsive -> Sales promotion -> Retention	0.013	0.012	0.007	1.909	0.057
Tangibility -> Sales promotion -> Retention	0.090	0.090	0.025	3.563	0.000
R-square	0.703				
Adjusted R-square	0.695				

The above table 5 indicating the direct as well as an indirect effect of this investigation. The direct effects of the study show that reliability and tangibility as the dimensions of quality of service strongly enhances the customer retention in the community pharmacy chains of Thailand with the coefficient values as 0.178 and 0.086 respectively. On the other hand, responsiveness is enhancing customer retention with insignificant value having the coefficient as 0.056. The direct effect further indicates that service quality dimensions like reliability, responsiveness and tangibility are depicting positive and highly significant relationship with sales promotional tools with the coefficient of 0.155, 0.077 and 0.556 respectively.

The specific indirect effects show that sales promotion coupled with reliability, responsiveness and tangibility strongly mediate customer retention in a positive direction with the mediating coefficient values as 0.025, 0.013 and 0.090 respectively. The coefficient of determination value of R-square is 70% approximately. It indicates that customer retention of community pharmacy chains in Thailand is 70% determined by the quality of service in terms of reliability, responsiveness and tangibility along with the mediation effect of sales promotional tools while the remaining 30% variation in the customer retention is due to other factors not included in the model.

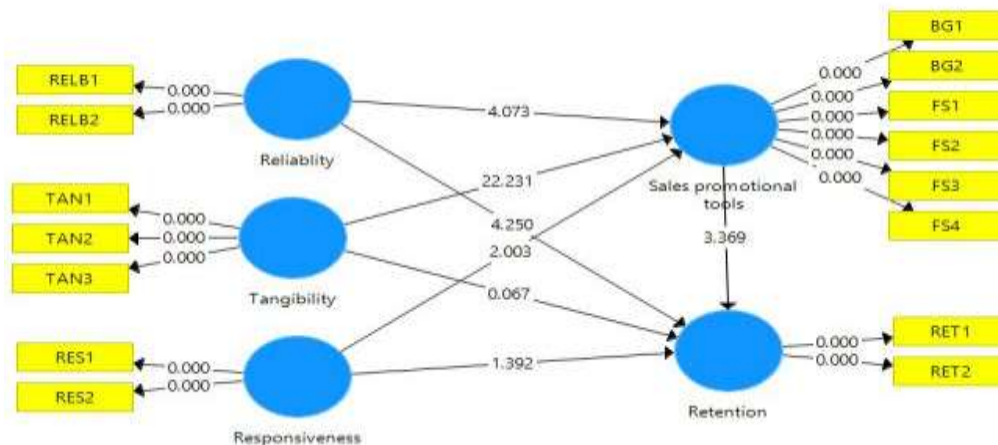


FIGURE 3: Estimation of Inner Model

The structure model of the study is depicted above as figure 3 also known as the inner model of the research investigation. For estimating the inner model, SEM bootstrapping technique was applied, it resulted in the t-value of the final latent variables selected for this investigation. All the latent variables of this investigation are significantly connected with other latent variables as the resulted t-values are greater than 1.96. The direct and indirect effect showing the significant connection between all the connected latent variables.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study tried to explore the direct effect of quality of services offered by community pharmacy chains in Thailand for retaining their customers along with the indirect effect of sales promotional tools as the mediator between customer retention and service quality. For this purpose, the data was collected through the questionnaire designed by the self-administering approach. Community pharmacy chain stores were selected on a random sampling basis from larger cities of Thailand and 720 responses were collected from the customer visiting the sampled community pharmacy store. The appropriate sampling technique for this purpose is cluster-based random sampling technique due to the fact of data collection from different geographical locations of Thailand. The dependent variable of this research investigation is customer retention at the pharmacy shops. The independent variables are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility; as the measure of qualities of service provided by a community pharmacist chain in Thailand. In addition, sales promotional tools were used as the mediating variable which is measured in terms of price discounts, free samples buy-one-get-one-free. For achieving the objective of estimation of this investigation through direct and indirect effect required the use of structural equation modelling for which SmartPLS SEM modelling was applied due to its variance-based approach for the purpose of analyzing such a study. The estimation of this research investigation involved respondent's demography, estimations of outer loadings,

estimation of the outer model, construct reliability and validity analysis, discriminant validity analysis, estimation of SEM model and estimation of the inner model. The direct effects of the study show that reliability and tangibility as the dimensions of quality of service strongly enhances customer retention in the community pharmacy chains of Thailand. On the other hand, responsiveness is enhancing customer retention with insignificant value. The direct effect further indicates that service quality dimensions like reliability, responsiveness and tangibility are depicting positive and highly significant relationship with sales promotional tools. The specific indirect effects show that sales promotion coupled with reliability, responsiveness and tangibility strongly mediate customer retention positively. It is recommended to the policymakers of community pharmaceutical sector of Thailand that customer retention in this sector can be enhanced by reliability and tangibility most importantly. In addition, customer retention can be more enhanced by considering the promotional techniques like price discounts and free samples. Future research in this domain may be considered for other sectors by carefully analyzing the literature.

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