Strategic transition from service quality to customer experience management: A conceptual framework for the Vietnamese hotel industry

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the strategic transition from Service Quality Management (SQM) to Customer Experience Management (CEM) in the Vietnamese hotel industry. While service quality remains a fundamental operational requirement, it is increasingly insufficient for creating a sustainable competitive advantage in a market where guests seek emotional and symbolic value. Using a qualitative-dominant research design grounded in an interpretivist orientation, we investigate how hotels reconfigure their managerial architectures to enable this shift. Our findings reveal that SQM continues to dominate managerial logic, often restricting experiential initiatives to fragmented, operational "safe zones". We identify four critical managerial integration mechanisms - cross-functional coordination, frontline empowerment, experience design routines, and digital adaptation - that serve as the strategic bridge between quality and experience. Furthermore, the study highlights that this transition is heavily conditioned by contextual factors such as cultural norms and human resource constraints. We conclude that CEM should be viewed as a context-dependent governance shift rather than a linear progression. These insights offer a theoretically grounded framework for hotels in transitional economies to move toward holistic experience-oriented strategies.*
Keywords: *Service quality management, Customer experience management, Strategic transition, Managerial integration, Vietnamese hotel industry, Emerging tourism economies*

I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, service quality has guided how hotels operate, evaluate performance, and ensure customer satisfaction [1]. It provides clear routines, standard procedures, and measurable metrics that help managers maintain consistency. Across emerging destinations, including Vietnam, these frameworks have supported rapid tourism growth and helped standardize services during periods of intense development. Still, service quality alone is no longer enough. We see that while it stabilizes operations, it struggles to create lasting competitive advantage in contexts where guests seek meaning, emotion, and symbolic value. Today's travelers care not only about functional service but also about how experiences are interpreted, remembered, and shared. For managers, this raises a strategic tension: operational excellence by itself may no longer ensure differentiation or relevance.

This tension becomes apparent when examining guest expectations. People increasingly judge hotels based on the entire experience - ambience, personalization, emotional resonance, and the impression that lingers after the stay. Incremental improvements in service quality, if disconnected from the broader experience, may fail to deliver perceived value. From our perspective, managing customer experience requires deliberate coordination and governance across the full service journey, rather than optimizing isolated interactions. Customer experience management (CEM) has emerged as a strategic orientation that extends beyond service delivery toward orchestrating integrated, multi-dimensional experiences [2], [3]. We interpret CEM not as a substitute for service quality, but as a way to embed it within a larger value-creation system shaped by guest journeys, local meanings, and experiential ecosystems. Its adoption is uneven, and hotels often struggle to translate experience-focused thinking into concrete managerial practices.

Hotels across Vietnam illustrate this challenge vividly. National policies, such as the Digital Transformation Program toward 2030, encourage higher-value tourism and experiential differentiation [4]-[5]. Managers also face cultural expectations rooted in Vietnamese hospitality traditions, where gestures of care,

attention to detail, and personalized interactions play a key role in guest perception. Despite improvements in service performance, many hotels still rely on fragmented indicators that insufficiently capture experiential value. The gap reflects not a lack of effort, but the misalignment between traditional management logics and evolving customer expectations. Prior studies on customer experience in hospitality provide useful insights [6]-[8], but most remain abstract or context-limited. They offer limited guidance for hotels trying to move from service quality management toward experience-centered strategies. In Vietnam, this gap is accentuated by scarce frameworks that integrate institutional conditions, market maturity, and organizational capabilities.

In this study, we address this gap by proposing a strategic framework for transitioning from SQM to CEM in Vietnamese hotels. Rather than reviewing abstract experience concepts or testing isolated determinants, we focus on how service quality and customer experience can be reconfigured within an integrated management architecture. Our goal is to contribute to hospitality theory while offering practical guidance, providing a structured foundation for hotels seeking to implement experience-oriented strategies in emerging tourism economies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. From service quality logic to experience-oriented value creation

In our reading of the literature, the service quality paradigm has long rested on an operational logic that prioritizes reliability, responsiveness, and standardization as the main drivers of customer satisfaction. Within hospitality studies, this approach has been operationalized extensively through performance-based assessments that focus on measurable service attributes and process consistency [1], [9]. These methods have proven effective in explaining outcomes where service encounters are relatively discrete, and value is assumed to emerge primarily from functional performance. Still, we observe that a growing body of research in hospitality and service management increasingly questions the explanatory reach of service quality when applied to contemporary consumption contexts. Drawing on service-dominant logic, scholars suggest that value is co-created through use, context, and interaction rather than residing solely in service outputs [10]. From this standpoint, service quality represents a necessary input but is insufficient to capture the full spectrum of customer-perceived value.

Interestingly, the literature shows that service quality and customer experience are often treated as adjacent, yet analytically separate, constructs. While service quality research continues to focus on evaluative judgments of individual service encounters, experience-oriented studies foreground phenomenological, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of consumption [3], [7]. This coexistence creates conceptual overlap but rarely leads to full theoretical integration. How one logic transitions into the other remains mostly implicit, leaving a crucial gap for both theory and practice.

2.2. Conceptual trajectories of customer experience management in hospitality

Customer experience management (CEM) has emerged as a response to this fragmentation, repositioning experience as a strategic object of managerial intervention rather than a by-product of service delivery. Early studies in hospitality emphasize the orchestration of customer journeys, touchpoints, and contextual cues to shape holistic perceptions of value [3]. Subsequent research extends this view by highlighting experience ecosystems, sense-making processes, and experiential coherence as central managerial concerns [6], [7]. Yet, in our assessment, convergence across these conceptualizations remains limited. Some studies treat CEM primarily as an outcome-oriented construct, focusing on experiential dimensions such as affect, memorability, or luxury perception [11]. Others define CEM as a process framework, concerned with experience design, monitoring, and optimization [8]. Both perspectives offer valuable insights, but they operate at different levels of abstraction, resulting in uneven strategic application.

More recent research introduces specialized experiential lenses - such as trauma-informed customer experience design - to account for emotional sensitivity and psychological vulnerability in hospitality contexts [12]. While these approaches enrich our understanding, they also illustrate a tendency for lateral expansion rather than strategic consolidation. This gap is seldom acknowledged directly in the literature, yet it is critical for practical implementation.

2.3. Strategic and managerial limitations in existing CEM frameworks

When examining existing CEM frameworks closely, we notice recurring limitations. One major issue is the implicit assumption that organizations are ready for experience-oriented transformation, which often underestimates managerial capability, resource constraints, and institutional contexts [8]. While this may hold in mature service economies, emerging tourism markets such as Vietnam present far less stability and predictability. Closely related to this is the under-theorized relationship between service quality management (SQM) and CEM. Scholars generally agree that service quality retains a foundational role, yet few explicate how quality-centric systems can be reconfigured - rather than simply replaced - to support experience-centered governance [6]. Consequently, SQM and CEM often coexist as parallel logics, sometimes appearing sequential but seldom fully

integrated. Lastly, empirical research frequently adopts a variable-centric approach, examining isolated relationships between service quality, experiential dimensions, satisfaction, or loyalty [13], [14]. These studies provide context-specific insights but offer limited guidance for hotels on redesigning managerial architectures to support experiential value over time. Our reading suggests that this narrow focus risks oversimplifying the organizational challenges that hotels face, particularly in transitional economies where resource scarcity, institutional legacies, and market heterogeneity coexist.

### 2.4. Contextual gaps in the Vietnamese hotel literature

In Vietnam, the literature has predominantly focused on service quality performance and its effects on customer satisfaction and commitment [13], [14]. This reflects a historical reliance on standardization and performance benchmarking, especially during the sector's earlier development stages. Experience, when considered, is often treated as a mediating or supplementary construct rather than a central managerial concern. At the same time, Vietnam's evolving tourism policy landscape increasingly emphasizes digital transformation, smart tourism, and experiential differentiation [4], [5], [15]. Hotels are now expected to integrate technology, culture, and service touchpoints to provide emotionally resonant experiences. Yet academic research has not kept pace with these shifts. In our observation, the gap between managerial intent and experiential outcomes remains tangible, particularly as domestic and international guest expectations diverge. This creates fertile ground for investigating how SQM and CEM might be strategically reconfigured in a Vietnamese context.

2.5. Identifying the conceptual gap

Taken together, the literature points to a persistent gap at the intersection of SQM and CEM. Service quality research provides robust operational tools but is strategically constrained when addressing experience creation. CEM research offers rich insights into phenomenology and emotion but remains fragmented and inconsistently operationalized at the managerial level. What is insufficiently theorized is the strategic transition bridging these two logics. Importantly, this is not a replacement of one by the other, but a coherent reconfiguration within a management architecture that accommodates both operational excellence and holistic experiential value. This gap is particularly pronounced in emerging markets such as Vietnam, where institutional conditions, managerial capabilities, and market heterogeneity complicate experience-oriented transformation.

2.6. Toward a conceptual framework for strategic transition from service quality to CEM

Based on this review, we argue that CEM should not be seen as a replacement of SQM, but as its strategic reconfiguration. In hotels across Vietnam, service quality systems - rooted in operational control, procedural consistency, and frontline performance - continue to provide a necessary foundation. Still, they are strategically insufficient when customer value increasingly depends on emotional resonance, cultural interpretation, and contextual authenticity. Our framework positions service quality systems as structural enablers rather than direct determinants of customer experience outcomes. The transition from SQM to CEM occurs through managerial integration mechanisms, including cross-functional coordination, experiential design capabilities, employee sense-making, and adaptive use of digital touchpoints. These mechanisms operate as transformational bridges, converting standardized service inputs into personalized, context-sensitive experiences.
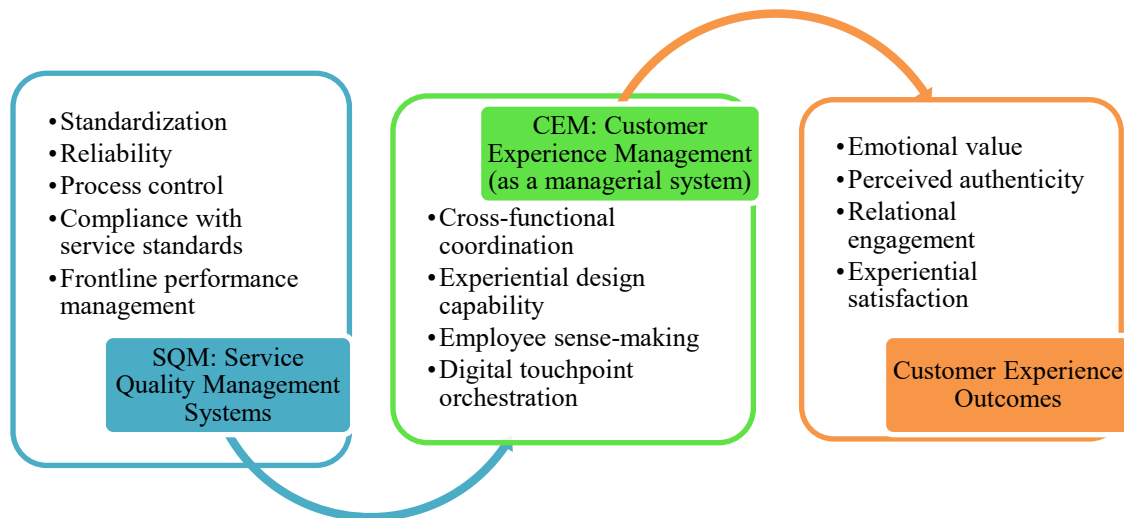
Figure 1 Conceptual framework for the strategic transition from service quality management to customer experience management in the Vietnamese hotel industry

Source: Author's synthesis and analytical interpretation, 2025

The framework theorizes this transition as a managerial reconfiguration in which standardized service systems become structural enablers, translated into context-sensitive experiential outcomes. Contextual embeddedness moderates both the form and effectiveness of the strategic shift. Cultural norms, the domestic–international customer mix, and institutional governance shape both the pace and form of transformation, ensuring that customer experience outcomes remain context-contingent.

Our proposed framework contributes in three ways. First, it reframes the SQM–CEM relationship as a dynamic strategic transition rather than a linear causal chain. Second, it foregrounds managerial integration mechanisms as the key locus of transformation, reconnecting experience outcomes to organizational processes. Third, by situating the framework within the Vietnamese hotel context, it extends customer experience theory beyond Western-centric formulations.

Overall, this framework provides a coherent foundation for understanding how hotels in transitional economies can strategically reposition service quality systems to enable sustainable CEM. It also offers a theoretically grounded basis for future empirical investigation into the mechanisms, contingencies, and outcomes of this transition.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and methodological orientation

We adopted a qualitative-dominant research design for this study, guided by an interpretivist and theory-building perspective. Our goal is not to test predefined causal relationships with statistics, but to understand how hotels in Vietnam interpret and enact the strategic shift from SQM to CEM.

Experience-oriented management in Vietnam is still emerging. It often appears in fragments, layered over older quality systems, rather than as a fully institutionalized paradigm. In this context, quantitative methods alone would likely miss the nuanced managerial reasoning, local constraints, and informal routines that shape strategic change. We therefore treat our hypotheses as guiding tools that help focus our analysis rather than as rigid parameters for verification.

This qualitative approach allows us to capture managerial sense-making, coordination practices, and contextual negotiation. By observing how hotel managers enact, reconcile, and adapt competing logics of service quality and experience management, we aim to reveal patterns that numbers alone cannot uncover. This approach also accommodates the fluid, context-dependent nature of these phenomena.

3.2. Conceptual research model

In our model (Figure 1), we present the strategic transition from SQM to CEM as a reconfiguration process, not a linear progression. Traditional service quality systems provide the operational foundation, while experience-oriented outcomes emerge through managerial integration mechanisms. These include cross-

functional coordination, experiential design capability, frontline sense-making, and adaptive use of digital interfaces.

CEM represents a downstream orientation, focused on designing and orchestrating customer experiences that carry emotional, symbolic, and co-creative value. The transition from SQM to CEM is not automatic. Instead, managerial mechanisms translate operational quality into context-sensitive experiential value.

Importantly, we do not assume universality. Contextual embeddedness—shaped by socio-cultural norms, market composition, and institutional structures—moderates how the transition unfolds and its effectiveness. Our model treats the SQM–CEM link as contingent, path-dependent, and sensitive to both organizational capabilities and environmental conditions.

3.3. Research questions

Our study is guided by four research questions, grounded in the conceptual framework:

1) **RQ1:** How is Service Quality Management currently conceptualized and implemented in Vietnamese hotels?
2) **RQ2:** Through which managerial mechanisms do hotels attempt to convert service quality into experiential value?
3) **RQ3:** How do contextual factors in Vietnam condition the strategic transition from SQM to CEM?
4) **RQ4:** How does this transition reshape the nature and sustainability of customer experience outcomes?

These questions prioritize processual understanding. Our primary interest lies in the *how* and *why*—questions that numbers alone cannot answer in the Vietnamese context.

3.4. Hypothesis development

Even though this is a qualitative study, we formulated hypotheses to guide our analytical focus. They are open to refinement as we engage iteratively with the data:

1) **H1:** Service Quality Management remains necessary but is not sufficient alone for effective Customer Experience Management in Vietnamese hotels.
2) **H2:** Managerial integration mechanisms mediate the relationship between SQM and CEM.
3) **H3:** Contextual embeddedness moderates the effectiveness of managerial integration mechanisms in facilitating the transition from SQM to CEM.
4) **H4:** In transitional hotel markets, customer experience outcomes are best understood as context-dependent co-creation processes rather than standardized outputs.

These propositions help us focus on moments of strategic translation and constraint, without assuming fixed causal paths.

3.5. Methodological implications

By linking the conceptual framework and hypotheses to our methodology, we align theory and empirical strategy from the outset. Figure 1 serves as an analytical scaffold to guide data collection, coding, and interpretation, rather than as a prescriptive testing tool.

This integrated approach ensures coherence between theoretical ambition and methodological execution. It preserves reflexivity and rigor while allowing us to examine how managerial mechanisms are enacted, constrained, and adapted in practice, drawing directly from the Vietnamese hotel context

IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section lays out the patterns that emerged from the qualitative investigation, using the framework in Figure 1 as a guide. Rather than presenting findings as isolated themes, the analysis is structured around the shift from SQM to CEM, focusing on how this change is enacted, constrained, and interpreted in Vietnamese hotels. Findings are discussed in conversation with the literature reviewed in Section 2 and the model outlined in Section 3.

4.1. The persistent dominance of service quality logic in hotel management practice

Across the interviews, service quality remained the main reference point for hotel management in Vietnam. Across the interviews, service quality remained the main reference point for hotel management in Vietnam. Managers described performance mainly in terms of operational reliability, procedural compliance, and consistency across service encounters, confirming how SQM is currently conceptualized and implemented in practice (RQ1). Managers described performance mainly in terms of operational reliability, procedural compliance, and consistency across service encounters. These measures were not seen as secondary or temporary—they were at the heart of how effectiveness was assessed and justified.

"To be honest, we're drowning in KPIs—cleanliness, response times, complaint handling, you name it. But when guests talk about their stay, they hardly mention these numbers. They mostly talk about how it felt, whether it really made sense to them" – General Manager, 4 ★ hotel, Da Nang. This comment shows a growing gap between internal performance metrics and the value perceived by guests. Service quality indicators still drive managerial control and accountability, yet they do not fully capture what makes an experience meaningful. This is not a failure of the system, but rather a strategic saturation: metrics are necessary for smooth operations, yet insufficient to generate lasting experiential value. This evidence supports H1: while SQM remains necessary for operational stability, it is clearly insufficient alone to generate meaningful experiential outcomes.

What stands out is not just the relevance of service quality, but how deeply embedded it remains. Even when managers talk about experiences, discussions often return to quality control. Experiential ambitions are thus structurally subordinate to operational logic. Looking at Table 1, the pattern is clear: experiential elements are recognized but rarely formalized as key performance indicators.

Table 1 Managerial emphasis in hotel performance evaluation

Managerial focus	Observed prominence	Qualitative prevalence*	Dominant evaluative logic	What managers actually say
Operational efficiency and SOP compliance	Very high	21/24 interviews	Control-oriented, compliance-driven	"We evaluate departments mainly through checklist completion and error minimization."
Service consistency across touchpoints	High	18/24 interviews	Standardization and risk avoidance	"Consistency matters more than creativity because guests expect stability."
Guest emotional engagement	Moderate	11/24 interviews	Intuitive, individual-dependent	"It depends on the staff's personality; we don't formally measure emotions."
Experience memorability	Low	7/24 interviews	Post-hoc, outcome-based	"We notice it only if guests mention it in reviews."
Symbolic or cultural meaning creation	Very low	4/24 interviews	Non-institutionalized, implicit	"Cultural elements are added when convenient, not as evaluation criteria."

Note: Qualitative prevalence refers to the number of interviews in which the theme emerged as a salient observation, not just frequency.
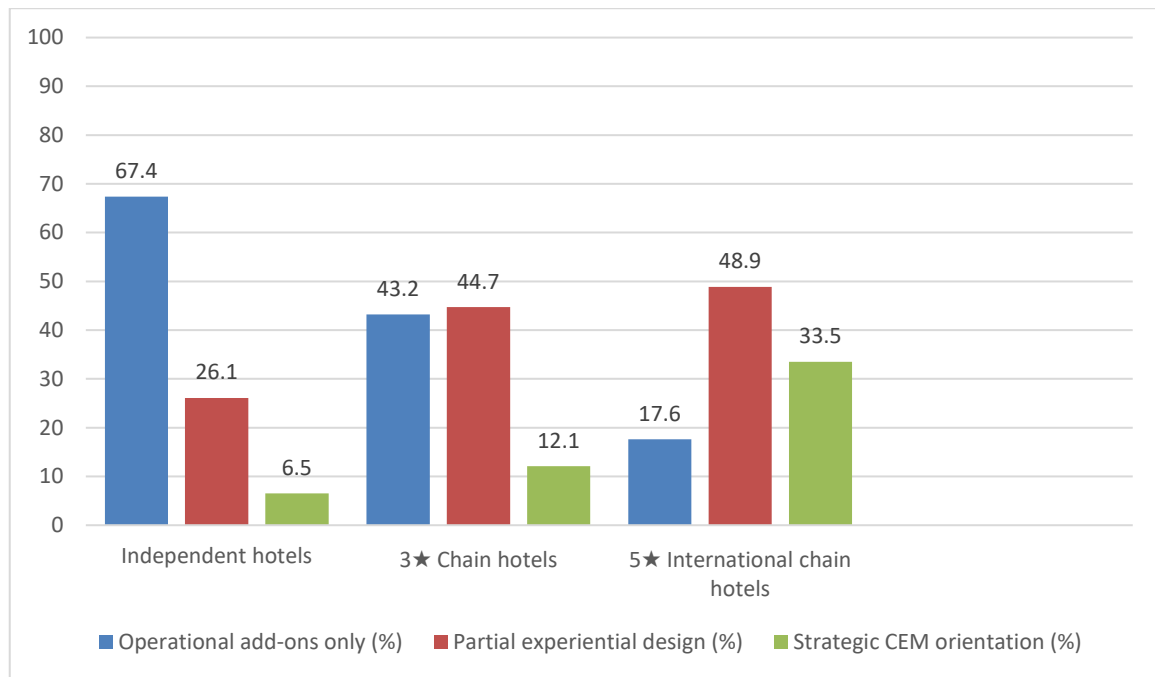
Source: Author's field survey, 2025

The table highlights a clear imbalance: while experiential elements are acknowledged, they rarely drive formal performance evaluation. This explains why improvements in service quality do not automatically enhance customer experiences—a tension documented in the literature but rarely contextualized in emerging markets [6].

4.2. Fragmented and uneven emergence of customer experience practices

Even though SQM dominates, some experience-oriented practices are emerging, but in a patchy way. These do not form a cohesive system; instead, they are layered on top of existing quality structures. Examples include aesthetic enhancements, welcome gestures, or occasional personalization efforts—often led by marketing rather than integrated into core operations.

High-end or international hotels show more systematic engagement with customer journeys, whereas independent or mid-range hotels take a piecemeal approach. Adoption depends on organizational capabilities, resources, and managerial interpretation. *"We try to design experiences, but each department still does its own thing. Front desk talks about emotions, operations talks about procedures. Getting them on the same page is really tricky"* – Operations Manager, 3 ★ chain hotel, Northern Vietnam. This highlights how organizational fragmentation can undermine experience initiatives. Experience-oriented language has entered management discourse but has not consistently translated into cross-functional routines. Integration mechanisms work more as negotiated practices than stable systems, vulnerable to silos and competing priorities.

Figure 2 Distribution of experience integration levels across Vietnamese hotels

Source: Author's field survey, 2025

This pattern aligns with prior studies that describe CEM adoption as a layered and non-linear process rather than a wholesale strategic shift [8]. However, the present findings add nuance by showing how legacy quality systems actively shape the form that experiential initiatives are allowed to take, often constraining them within operationally "safe" boundaries.

4.3. Managerial integration mechanisms as strategic translation devices

One important finding is that managerial integration mechanisms mediate the SQM–CEM relationship. Service quality alone does not automatically produce experiential value; translation occurs through practices that reorganize and interpret service inputs.

"International guests expect storytelling and personalization, but domestic guests just care about comfort and familiarity. One design never fits all" – Marketing Director, 5★ international chain, Hanoi. Customer experience emerges as context-dependent, shaped by cultural norms, market mix, and customer diversity. The managerial challenge is navigating these competing logics without fragmenting organizational coherence.

Four mechanisms were consistently observed: cross-functional coordination, frontline empowerment, experience design routines, and digital interface adaptation. These guide service quality toward experiential outcomes. Table 2 summarizes these mechanisms and their experiential implications.

Table 2. Managerial integration mechanisms linking SQM and CEM

Integration mechanism	Observed practice	Experiential effect
Cross-functional coordination	Operations–marketing alignment	Touchpoint coherence
Frontline empowerment	Discretion in guest handling	Emotional authenticity
Experience design routines	Journey mapping workshops	Experience consistency
Digital interface adaptation	Personalized digital contact	Perceived relevance

Note: The table synthesizes recurring integration mechanisms identified across managerial interviews and internal process observations, illustrating how operational service quality systems are strategically translated into experiential outcomes.

Source: Author's field survey, 2025

The four mechanisms identified—cross-functional coordination, frontline empowerment, experience design routines, and digital

interface adaptation—demonstrate how managers attempt to translate SQM into experiential value (RQ2). This finding directly supports the study's second hypothesis by empirically demonstrating that managerial integration mechanisms constitute the strategic "bridge" between quality and experience. These observations empirically confirm H2: managerial integration mechanisms act as mediators, bridging service quality inputs with customer experience outcomes. It also extends existing CEM frameworks by relocating the locus of transformation from abstract experience constructs to concrete organizational processes.

4.4. Contextual embeddedness and the conditional nature of experiential value

Integration mechanisms' success is strongly influenced by context: relational cultural norms, domestic–international client diversity, institutional standardization pressures, and HR constraints. The variations in relational norms, market composition, institutional pressures, and HR constraints highlight the moderating role of contextual embeddedness, answering RQ3 and supporting H3. Managers adapt experiential priorities to these contexts. Relational attentiveness often matters more than scripted personalization, and high turnover affects continuity. Table 3 outlines the key contextual dimensions identified and their empirical manifestations.

Table 3. Contextual conditions shaping customer experience management implementation in vietnamese hotels

Contextual dimension	Empirical manifestation	Indicative interview evidence	Qualitative prevalence*	Analytical implication for CEM
Cultural norms	Emphasis on relational warmth and informal hospitality	*"Guests expect friendliness as sincerity, not as a scripted behavior"* (GM, 4★)	14/18 interviews	Experience design must allow emotional flexibility beyond standardized scripts
Market composition	Divergent domestic vs. international expectations	*"What international guests call 'authentic', local guests often see as inconvenient"* (Marketing Director, 5★)	11/18 interviews	CEM outcomes are segmented and context-contingent
Institutional constraints	Compliance-driven standardization	*"Most procedures are written for audits, not for guest experience"* (Operations Manager, chain hotel)	13/18 interviews	SQM systems constrain experiential adaptation
Human resource structure	Limited experiential continuity due to staff turnover	*"Each shift delivers service well, but the experience feels disconnected"* (HR Manager, 3★)	10/18 interviews	CEM requires organizational memory and cross-shift coordination

Note: Qualitative prevalence refers to the number of interviews in which the theme emerged as a salient issue.
Source: Author's field survey, 2025

These findings lend empirical support to the argument that customer experience outcomes in transitional economies are best understood as context-contingent processes of value co-creation rather than standardized experiential outputs, reinforcing recent calls to decenter Western-centric CEM models [7].

4.5. Strategic implications: from service quality optimization to experience governance

The context-dependent and co-created nature of the experiences observed illustrates RQ4 and confirms H4: customer experience outcomes are emergent, contingent on managerial integration and local circumstances rather than standardized outputs. Taken together, the findings indicate that the strategic transition from SQM to CEM in Vietnamese hotels is neither linear nor complete. Instead, it unfolds as a gradual repositioning of service quality within a broader experience governance logic. Service quality remains foundational, but its strategic role shifts from being an end in itself to functioning as an enabling infrastructure for experiential value creation.

Figure 3 Strategic transition trajectory in Vietnamese hotels
Source: Author's synthesis and analytical interpretation, 2025

This trajectory reframes SQM–CEM as a process of strategic reconfiguration rather than a simple cause-effect sequence. Grounded in managerial practice and context, it provides a robust lens for understanding experience-oriented transformation in emerging hospitality markets. In conclusion, Vietnamese hotels are paying more attention to customer experience, but full strategic consolidation of CEM depends on organizational integration and contextual alignment. These insights advance theory by linking operational quality research with experience governance, while offering a practical pathway for experience-oriented strategic repositioning.

V. CONCLUSION

Our study deals with the tricky transition that hotels in emerging tourism economies face when moving from SQM toward CEM. Looking closely at hotels in Vietnam, we see that this shift does not happen automatically. The findings confirm the proposed hypotheses: SQM remains necessary but insufficient (H1), managerial integration mechanisms mediate the SQM–CEM relationship (H2), and contextual embeddedness moderates these mechanisms (H3). Furthermore, customer experiences are emergent and co-created in context-dependent ways (H4). It is not simply a replacement of quality with experience. Instead, it involves careful reconfiguration of existing practices, shaped by organizational routines and local conditions [1], [3]. Service quality remains central. Operational consistency, adherence to procedures, and standardized KPIs are still what managers rely on to keep the hotel running smoothly. In practice, traditional indicators such as SOP compliance or service reliability receive more attention than experiential metrics. Yet these systems alone cannot deliver the type of guest experiences that truly matter. They stabilize operations but fall short in creating memorable, co-created experiences [6], [7]. From our observations, SQM is necessary, but by itself it is not enough to achieve full customer experience management.

The transition toward CEM depends on several managerial integration mechanisms. Cross-functional coordination, empowering frontline staff, experience design routines, and adaptive digital tools all play a role [8]. Together, these elements turn service quality from a control-focused function into an enabling platform for managing experiences. What we notice is that experiential value emerges through how organizations coordinate and integrate these elements, not through incremental service tweaks. Local context shapes this process in very real ways. Staffing shortages, regulatory pressures, and socio-cultural norms all matter [4], [5]. Combined with the variety of guest expectations - both domestic and international - these factors heavily influence how CEM is implemented in practice. As a result, the customer experiences that emerge are not uniform products but context-specific, co-created processes. This shows that applying universal models of CEM without considering local conditions can be misleading.

From a theoretical standpoint, we make three key points. First, the relationship between SQM and CEM should be seen as a transition, not a simple cause-effect link [3]. Second, experience outcomes need to be connected to what managers actually do on the ground, not treated as abstract ideas [2]. Third, by situating our study in Vietnam, we show that governing customer experiences in transitional economies is more complex than suggested by theories built in Western contexts [7].

On a practical level, our findings suggest that hotels should not abandon existing quality frameworks. Instead, these systems should be strategically reshaped to support experience-focused goals. Managing experiences requires alignment across departments, ongoing learning, and adaptability to local conditions. Cosmetic improvements or isolated marketing efforts simply cannot replace a systematic, integrated approach. For policymakers, this implies that quality regulations should be paired with guidance that values cultural interpretation and operational integration [15].

We acknowledge some limitations. This study relies mainly on qualitative evidence. While it provides depth and insight, it does not allow for statistical generalization. Future studies could use mixed methods or longitudinal approaches to test and refine our framework. Comparative research across different emerging hospitality markets would help clarify which lessons apply more broadly. To conclude, moving from SQM to CEM is neither automatic nor uniform. It is a negotiated, contextually grounded process. Experiential value arises from the interplay of integration mechanisms, organizational practices, and local circumstances. By viewing it this way, we provide both a solid theoretical foundation and actionable guidance for experience-oriented management in emerging tourism economies.

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