Hotel Repeat Guest Delight

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Abstract

Hotel guest delight is an essential component in the hospitality industry since it leads to a greater hotel success. This research was conducted to determine what specific hotel experience attributes have the ability to delight guests on their repeat stay at the hotel. Hundred and seven participants from various demographic groups were surveyed based on the customer delight typology, while descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon one tailed signed rank test were used in analysis. The results shows that intangible experience attributes are more effective than tangible ones in delighting guest on their next visit.

Keywords: guest delight, guest experience, repeat visit, authenticity, empowered employees

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The hotel industry heavily depends on providing tailored service to the guests. Due to increased hotel market competition, hotels are compelled to place their guests on the top of their priority lists, i.e., fulfilling their needs and meeting their expectations, because otherwise they would most likely not survive (Jamal & Bayar, 2021). Hotel amenities and visuals (entertainment facilities, lobby, superior pools, etc.), are nowadays considered a standard (Torres & Kline, 2013) while the main competitive battleground became memorable experiences based on emotional guest relationships. These experiences become the locus of value creation, because emotions and memories are not perishable and stick with hotel guests for a very long time (Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

As guests are becoming increasingly demanding and sensitive (Jamal & Bayar, 2021), hotels should focus on implementing appropriate strategies for delivering experiences and delight. This involves the expected core service which should be provided combined with unexpected additional features that will surprise the guest thus creating a preferable image. If successfully done, this will, at least in theory, ensure that the guests will want to come back (Goswami & Sarma, 2011). However, as this is easier said than done, it is questionable whether always exceeding guests' expectations is a sustainable strategy. This is far from certain, because, after delight is experienced, the bar of guests' expectations inevitably goes higher. This in turn means that the hotels are compelled to come up with new delighters which is, in reality, quite costly and can affect profitability.

In other words, it is necessary to explore the limitations of how far hotels can realistically go with providing delightful experiences in their attempts to secure repeated visits, before they start hurting their bottom line.

1.1 Rendering Authenticity

Customers are increasingly becoming aware of the "fake" offerings and are longing for something that is more genuine, original and authentic that will engage them in a more personal way while creating memorable experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2007, p. 1). Since contemporary customers are more demanding, educated and are seeking better quality, authenticity is becoming an important

business aspect (Yeoman & McMahon, 2005). Companies, therefore, must excel at rendering authenticity which consists of providing a higher quality of their services and goods (Pine & Gilmore, 2007, p. 3). However, the current issue with marketing messages is that brands describe themselves as "authentic" and "real", which rejects customers and makes them doubt whether this statement corresponds with their acts, because educated and experienced customers are not so ready to believe the company propaganda. If a brand believes that they do provide such experience there is no need for excessive marketing, because the customers will spread the word through the electronic Word of Mouth (Pine & Gilmore, 2007, p. 43).

Experiential marketing relies on the assumption that customer value lays not only in the functional and utilitarian benefits, but also the hedonic and experiential ones that create the mental/emotional environment in which the service is experienced and thus market position, differentiation and loyalty is established (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013).

1.2 Customer satisfaction as an antecedent to customer delight

Research topics in the hospitality field frequently focus on the topic of customer satisfaction which is defined as an overall evaluation phase where customers compare their previous expectations with the quality of service delivered (Skogland & Siguaw, 2004). If the delivered service fails to fulfill guests' needs, it will result in dissatisfaction (Torres & Kline, 2013). Additionally, Skogland and Siguaw (2004) have denied the strongly believed creed that customer satisfaction leads to loyalty, because their research showed a weak connection between the two.

When hotels deliver service that surpasses guests' basic expectations, it will lead to delight which Paterson (1997) explains as the phenomenon occurring when service providers deliver an extraordinary performance which consequently results in positive emotions. Additionally, it has been proven that emotions associated with being delighted comprise of joy and surprise or a blend of these two. Furthermore, it is also believed that customers who experience delight will maintain the relationship with the service provider in the future (Kumar & Olshavsky, 2001), because delight inspires stronger emotions than satisfaction and those emotions stick with the guests (Hicks & Page , 2005). Hence, guest delight can be an indicator of authentic experience. Hotels, therefore, should add value to their services by including a touch of personalization to create memorable experiences. In this line of thinking, customer satisfaction is simply not enough to bring customers

back, because satisfaction does not invoke the same emotions as delight does (Torres & Kline, 2006) and satisfaction is based on perceptions while delight is more emotional (Berman, 2005).

1.3 How delight connects to loyalty

Service providers have realized a long time ago that satisfying guests constitutes only the basis of a service. Since they should go beyond the bare minimum, guest delight becomes key to success (Whittaker, 1991) (Schlossberg, 1990). Research shows that the most common outcomes of experiencing delight is increased loyalty, repurchase, emotional commitment and relative price insensitivity (Barnes & Webster, 2010). With increasing loyalty, guests' numbers, hotel's profitability also increases by approximately 7% relative to their competitors with less loyal guests (Paterson, 1997).

Delighted guests were also more inclined to provide positive word of mouth to others about their experiences due to joy and surprising factors. Thus, this results in lower promotional costs (Berman, 2005). Other positive consequences of delight are the emotional and relationship base which is a competitive advantage that cannot be easily imitated by current or potential competitors under any circumstances (Rust & Oliver, 2000). Hicks and Page (2005) show that guest delight is an important element that leads to repurchasing intentions. All this implies that firms must go beyond providing the ordinary service and create the "wow" effect which is, ultimately, delight.

1.4 Staff impact on guest delight

Employees play an important role in delivering a service and representing the company (Wang & Lou, 2017). Since the guests-employee interaction, if properly done, can lead to experiencing delight, it is important to have empowered employees (Barnes & Webster, 2010)**.** Frontline employees thus constitute the backbone of an organization, as their service performance will determine the quality of service provided and ultimately guests loyalty and profitability. According to Henkoff (1994), frontline employees in the service sector should focus more attention to how they control emotions rather than policies to strengthen the relationships with guests, which implies that they need to be empowered to improvise and personalize. Verma (2003) established that interpersonal skills, i.e., politeness, respect, friendliness, understanding the customer and personalization are highly important in terms of providing delight. Similarly, Torres & Kline

(2013) identified five attributes that play a role in delighting customers which are (1) problem resolution delight, (2) professional delight, (3) comparative delight (4) charismatic delight and (5) fulfillment delight. Nikolic & Mitrović (2021) added an additional attribute which is (6) guests' willingness to recommend the hotel, which, essentially, connects with experiential marketing inspired by delight.

Wag and Lou (2017) proved through their research that employees and managers of upscale hotels believed that staff professionalism and sincerity are pivotal in leading to guest delight. In sum, delightful services require employees to recognize guests' emotional needs, caring behavior and willingness to go the extra mile to delight their guests. This then establishes an emotional relationship rather than a transactional guest-employee relationship. In order for this to work out, managers must also provide timely feedback to their employees regarding their performance with guests (Wang & Lou, 2017).

1.5 Empowering employees

This all implies that empowering employees can be a perfect strategy that will help to differentiate hotels from their competition. Since very often service is completely intangible, it can be said that in those cases employees are the service and their empowerment becomes a very critical component. Empowered employees can build a strong relationship with their guests and properly provide individualized service. Empowerment also implies that managers must minimize their authority by allowing employees to act independently, while in turn employees will find the job more meaningful and will allow employees to act quickly to provide customers with what they want (Lawler & Bowen , 1992). Therefore, hotels should focus on hiring employees with strong interpersonal skills, integrity and willingness to delight individuals. Along with that, training is also a necessary element that can help employees to maintain and strengthen those skills (Torres & Kline, 2006). Consequently, employees who have received supervision, training and rewards took better care of the guests (Lawler & Bowen , 1992).

1.6 Managing repeat guest delight through three types of delight

The core problem with providing guests delight seems to be that guests tend to set their expectations higher after every stay. The next problem is that hotels cannot keep on innovating

new delightful features that will please their returning guests without hurting their profitability and survivability (Goswami & Sarma, 2011). It is neither realistic that hotels continue to innovate new features without a stop, since this process will eventually reach its inevitable limitations.

However, Rust & Oliver (2000) developed a three-type delight typology based on human memory which can help solve this conundrum:

- **Assimilated delight:** Guests accept delight features as part of the core service and therefore they become standardized. This also implies that guests' expectations increase and that hotels cannot use the same delight feature on the same guests during next stay, because delight impact will not happen.

- **Reenacted delight:** In some cases, emotion fades away with time, but memory is retained when the guests reexperiences the same delight feature/service. This type of delight is not unexpected, but the remembrance of the unexpected is. Hotels can thus win guests' loyalty if/when they renew the memories of delight.

- **Transitory delight:** As this type of delight is entirely forgotten, it can be repeated. To better understand this occurrence, Rust and Oliver (2000) explain it through an example of a child getting a lollipop after the doctor's visit. When the child receives the lollipop on the consecutive visit the child will be pleasantly surprised again.

With these delight typologies, Oliver & Rust (2000) suggest that hotels should avoid using the assimilated delight, because this requires hotels to continue innovating new delight features that can increase the cost of the innovations. After hotels implement the guest delight strategy, it is not possible to go back to the initial service quality, however, reenacted and transitory delight is the best choices to maintain the consistency of delight since it does not require hotels to spend on new service/feature innovations (Goswami & Sarma, 2011). We would also suggest that these delights are intangible in nature and revolve around employee-guest interactions, rather than on tangible hotel amenities and/or facilities.

1.7 Research goal

The above secondary research showed that customer satisfaction is not enough to generate the desired success. Therefore, hotels must go beyond these service basics by focusing on delighting their guests'. However, this could become an issue for the hotels because guests' expectations will increase on every consecutive stay. Yet, studies have raised concerns about the sustainability of delighting repeat hotel guests', because this can result in potential costs for the hotel.

The purpose of this research is to shed more light into this conundrum in terms of what specific tangible and intangible elements of hotel service will be the most effective in delighting repeat guests in order to ensure their loyalty and, if possible, without hurting profitability.

2. METHOD

The data collection instrument applied for this study was a questionnaire created by the attributes in the customer delight typology based on Torres and Kline (2013) (problem-solution, professional, comparative, surprise, charismatic and fulfillment delight) and a delight attribute (recommendation) subsequently added by Nikolić and Mitrović (2021). The questionnaire has been produced in order to be suitable for discovering repeat hotel guest delight. The questions were posed in a hypothetical form where it required the participant to think of how they would handle a situation that could possibly occur on their repeated visit at the hotel.

The questionnaire consisted of twelve questions that have been divided into three sections. Two sections of the questionnaire were five-point Likert scale type of questions where participants could choose from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". We used Likert-scale preference questions because they are very useful for understanding the most important features/issues to a respondent and how they relate to each other (Roberson, Shema, & Mundfrom, 1995).

The first section of the questionnaire was based on tangible elements in the hotel (free gifts, food and beverage, facilities, etc.) and whether these elements have the propensity to delight again on the second visit. The second section of the questionnaire was related to intangible elements, based on the customer delight typology (professional, problem solution, fulfillment, charismatic, surprise, recommendation delight and the intent to visit the hotel again). This was also measured by the five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The third section of the

questionnaire was an open-ended question, where participants were asked to name the most memorable hotel where they had been delighted. The last three questions were related to the demographic characteristics of the participants, i.e., gender, age, education and nationality.

We used 16 hotel attributes which are made of the tangible and intangible attributes. These 16 attributes were grouped into professional delight, fulfillment and charismatic delight, amenities and surprise groups. Subsequently, we used the repeat delight attributes (recommend the hotel, come back to the hotel, write positive reviews, become emotional attached with the hotel and create a personal relationship with the hotel) where we wanted to measure the level of repeat guests' loyalty towards the hotel.

Our survey was created on Google Forms in English and distributed in Facebook groups related to luxury hotels, via LinkedIn and Viber. Through these platforms we aimed at business and leisure travelers staying in upscale hotels.

The data was collected from March 30, 2022 to April 14, 2022. Our primary intention for this questionnaire was to collect a minimum of 50 respondents, but the response was greater than expected and, in the end, we collected 107 respondents. After the data was received, it was entered in to an Excel sheet after which the descriptive statistical analysis was applied to calculate the means and standard deviations of the customer delight attributes by the PSPP statistical software.

We also used Wilcoxon sign test (one tailed) which is believed to be appropriate and simple to apply in typical preference situations which are presented in Likert scales (Derrick & White, 2017) (Roberson, Shema, & Mundfrom, 1995), which we also performed with the help of the PSPP software. With the Wilcoxon sign test (one tailed) we wanted to test whether there are differences between the two groups of answers. If the value of p is greater than 0.05 then there is no significant difference between the answers, i.e. there is no connection. If the p is smaller, there is a significant difference between the answers and there is correlation between the two.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Respondent demographic

Our sample has 107 respondents, and their specific characterization will be explained in the following tables:

Table 3.1: Respondents age

Age	Number	Percentage
18-24	27	25.2%
25-34	29	27.1%
35-44	16	15%
45-54	25	23.4%
55-64	10	9.3%

Table 3.2: Respondents gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	57	53.3%
Female	50	46.7%

Table 3.3: Respondents educational level

Education	Number	Percentage
High school	23	21.5%
Bachelor's degree	43	40.2%
Master's degree	29	27.1%
Other	12	11.2%

Table 3.4: Respondents use of hotel

Hotel Usage	Number	Percentage
Once a week	2	1.9%
Once a month	10	9.3%
Once in 6 months	17	15.9%
Once a year	23	21.5%
Rarely	55	51.4%

Table 3.5: Hotel category (expressed in stars)

Hotel Star	Number	Percentage
3-star	10	9.3%
4-star	40	37.4%
5-star	57	53.3%

Table 3.6: Respondents nationality

Country	Number	Percentage
Croatia	45	42.06%
Germany	8	7.48%
Canada	5	4.67%
UK	5	4.67%
Slovenia	5	4.67%
Montenegro	4	3.74%
USA	4	3.74%
Italy	3	2.80%
Serbia	3	2.80%
Sweden	2	1.87%
Hungary	2	1.87%
Spain	2	1.87%
India	2	1.87%
Macedonia	2	1.87%
Albania	2	1.87%
Poland	1	0.93%
Singapore	1	0.93%
Turkey	1	0.93%
Czech	1	0.93%
Russia	1	0.93%
Switzerland	1	0.93%
Korea	1	0.93%
Netherlands	1	0.93%
Latvia	1	0.93%
Romania	1	0.93%
Egypt	1	0.93%
Bulgaria	1	0.93%
Unknown	1	0.93%
Total	**107**	

3.2. Means of attributes analysis

Table 3.7 shows the Likert scale results including the means (first row) and standard deviation (second row) for 16 attributes which were grouped in four groups (visuals and exceptional food quality, professional and problem solution delight, fulfillment and charismatic delight, and surprise delight) and 5 repeat delight factors which were put in a separate group (recommendation, writing positive reviews, emotional attachment to the hotel, enjoy coming back to the hotel and having a personal relationship with the hotel).

The mean identifies whether a particular delight attribute was perceived as positive, negative or neutral. None of these hypothetical attributes were perceived as negative and the distance from 3 (neutral) in the direction of 5 (maximum) indicates the intensity of the guest's delight in the positive direction. Furthermore, we calculated the average (Attribute Composite Mean) for each group of attributes (Tables 3.9 and 3.10).

Table 3.7: Likert-scale results (means of delight attributes)

Exceptional F&B quality	Mean	4.07
	SD:	1.02
Physical Appearance of the Hotel	Mean	4.01
	SD:	1.12
Recreational Facilities	Mean	3.62
	SD:	1.35
Received Free Gifts	Mean	3.19
	SD:	1.27
Received Discount	Mean	3.36
	SD:	1.22
Received Free Upgrades	Mean	3.6
	SD:	1.32
Staff proactively solves my problems	Mean	4.4
	SD:	0.82
Staff thinks outside of the box in solving my problems	Mean	4.17
	SD:	0.87
Staff acted like they truly cared	Mean	4.36
	SD:	0.86
Staff has attention to details	Mean	4.21
	SD:	0.84
Staff is knowledgeable	Mean	4.24
	SD:	0.83
Staff is non-intrusive	Mean	4.24
	SD:	0.83
Staff has a can-do attitude	Mean	4.28

	SD:	0.81
Staff is eager to please me	Mean	4.18
	SD:	0.96
Staff is extremely accommodating	Mean	4.21
	SD:	0.95
Staff treats me like a special person	Mean	4.20
	SD:	1
Recommend this hotel	Mean	4.47
	SD:	0.79
Write positive review about this hotel	Mean	4.18
	SD:	1.09
Emotionally attached to this hotel	Mean	3.59
	SD:	1.21
Enjoy coming back to this hotel	Mean	4.4
	SD:	0.9
Have a personal relationship with this hotel	Mean	3.58
	SD:	1.31

We also present the attributes' means in the ranked order:

Table 3.8: Hotel attributes in ranked order

Hotel attributes	Means
Staff proactively solves my problems	4.40
Staff acted like they truly cared	4.36
Staff has a can-do attitude	4.28
Staff is non-intrusive	4.24
Staff is knowledgeable	4.24
Staff has attention to details	4.21
Staff is extremely accommodating	4.21
Staff treats me like a special person	4.20
Staff is eager to please me	4.18
Staff thinks outside of the box in solving my problem	4.17
Exceptional F&B quality	4.07
Physical appearance of the hotel	4.01
Recreational facilities	3.62
Received free upgrades	3.60
Received discounts	3.36
Received free gifts	3.19

Table 3.9: Repeat delight attributes

Delight attributes	Means
Recommend the hotel	4.47
Enjoy coming back (to the hotel)	4.40

Write positive reviews	4.18
Emotional attachment	3.59
Personal relationship with the hotel	3.58

Table 3.10: Group attributes ranking

	Group attributes	Means
1	Professional	4.27
2	Fulfillment and charismatic	4.20
3	Amenities	3.90
4	Surprise	3.38

Table 3.11 shows the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank analysis (one tailed) by which we tried to establish the statistical correlation between the hotel attributes and repeat delight factors. The following paragraph provides a brief summary:

- Problem Solving and Truly Caring Staff have a significant impact on Recommend Hotel.

- Problem Solving, Recreational Facilities, Free Gifts, Discounts and Upgrades have a significant impact on Write Positive Review.

- Problem Solving, Discounts and Upgrades are the only attributes not impacting Emotional attachment.

- Problem Solving, Can-do Attitude and Special Treatment are the only attributes not significantly impacting Enjoy Coming Back (to the hotel).

- Recreational Facilities, Gifts, Discounts and Upgrades are the only attributes not significantly impacting only Personal Relationship (with the hotel).

Table 3.11 : Correlation between hotel attributes and repeat delight factors

	Recommend Hotel		Positive Review		Emotionally Attached		Enjoy Coming Back		Personal Relationship	
	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p
Exc. F&B	-4.11	0.000	-0.91	0.181	-3.36	0.0005	-3.17	0.001	-3.11	0.001
Physical app.	-4.23	0.000	-1.43	0.077	-2.51	0.006	-3.20	0.0005	-2.70	0.0035
Rec. facilities	-5.98	0.000	-3.55	0	-0.21	0.417	-5.09	0	-0.19	0.423
Prob-solving	-0.93	0.175	-2.02	0.0215	-5.62	0	-0.15	0.441	-5.29	0
Out of box	-3.73	0	-0.19	0.4245	-4.36	0	-2.72	0.003	-4.1	0
Truly care	-1.50	0.067	-1.72	0.043	-5.23	0	-0.56	0.2875	-5.11	0
Att. to detail	-3.31	0.0005	-0.03	0.4865	-4.60	0	-2.23	0.0125	-4.37	0
Knowledge	-2.99	0.0015	-0.37	0.3555	-4.83	0	-1.91	0.028	-4.63	0

	Recommend Hotel		Positive Review		Emotionally Attached		Enjoy Coming Back		Personal Relationship	
	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p	Z	p
Non-intrusive	-3.06	0.001	-0.51	0.305	-4.86	0	-1.89	0.0295	-4.6	0
Can-do att.	-2.66	0.004	-0.64	0.261	-5.15	0	-1.60	0.0545	-4.57	0
Eager to pls.	-4.06	0	-0.25	0.4015	-4.26	0	-2.88	0.002	-4.07	0
Ex. accom.	-3.29	0.0005	-0.22	0.414	-4.47	0	-2.34	0.095	-4.16	0
Spec. person	-3.34	0.0005	-0.09	0.465	-4.39	0	-2.30	0.11	-4.03	0
Gifts	-7.60	0	-5.76	0	-2.60	0.0045	-6.80	0	-2.29	0.11
Discounts	-6.83	0	-5.07	0	-1.49	0.0675	-6.25	0	-1.12	0.113
Upgrades	-5.56	0	-3.61	0	-0.17	0.431	-4.80	0	-0.21	0.417

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review and our interpretations of the descriptive statistical results, we would definitely recommend hotels to put a particular focus on the non-material attributes. While hotel amenities and surprise attributes, i.e., gifts, discounts and upgrades, may be still important, the results imply that they are, comparatively, significantly less important than the professional and charismatic attributes of the hotel or, rather, of the staff. Out of the 16 attributes, the first ten are such non-material attributes which revolve around the staff's interactions with guests. Even the eleventh is F&B quality, which heavily depends on the staff competence and interaction.

The other measured factors are also important, particularly those pertaining to amenities/ facilities, but they are definitely ranked lower on the priority list. It seems they are more taken for granted and thus add less to delight, which is consistent with Torres & Kline (2013). It is interesting to note that receiving gifts, discounts and upgrades are not huge delighters, which would imply that delighted guests are less price sensitive and are motivated primarily by the quality of service. This all taken together means that the staff is the service and they have to be empowered, well paid, trained, motivated and composed of long-termers. These results are also consistent with Rust and Oliver's (2000) findings who explained that the tangible elements of service quickly become assimilated once the guests experience them. This all implies that hotels should invest less in over-the-top tangible features, because it is not sustainable, it could easily be copied by the competition and it is not such a great delighter relative to the non-tangible features.

Our results are consistent with Berman (2005) who stated that delighted guests are more inclined to provide a positive word of mouth to others, which is the essence of experiential marketing which in turn depends on delight. However, our results also imply writing positive reviews will by no means be guaranteed, probably because that requires time and effort, and may be a question of lifestyle. Although our descriptive statistics shows that repeat hotel guests highly value when staff solves their problem and act that they truly care, our results also show that these actions do not impact guest's willingness to return and recommend the hotel. On the other hand, it seems that the guests who are more likely to write positive reviews are motivated by problem solving, but some physical amenities as well as gifts, discounts and upgrades, although these material aspects appear lower on the ranking of popular hotel attributes. These are some curiosities that should be further studied.

However, the delighted guests will be ready to verbally recommend the hotel and will enjoy coming back, which means that the guest delight is linked with repeat visits. However, it is interesting to note that personal and emotional attachment to the hotel will not be strongly developed in spite of the rendered delight. This would imply that repeat visits are more a question of comfort and high expectations, and much less a question of emotional attachment. This is important to note, because the guests will not be very emotionally invested and thus not very loyal, regardless of the effort, and will probably leave as soon as their expectations are no longer fulfilled. These findings contradict Pine & Gilmore (2013) who stated that memorable experiences create emotional attachments and loyalty, which is something that should be definitely studied more.

The dominant group of respondents who have experienced some kind of delight took place in a five-star hotel (53.3%). This could be explained by the fact that employees in upscale hotels are more trained and educated to act independently, thus they do not have to see their supervisor for every problem that occurs during the employee-guests interaction. Upscale hotels also have more employees per guest. This, therefore allows staff to more easily personalize guest service, which results in a delightful experience.

5. LIMITATIONS

Similar to any research project there is at least one potential limitation concerning the result of this study that must be addressed. The limitation is that the sample size of the questionnaire was

relatively small and most of the respondents were from Croatia (42.06%). If the sample size was more diverse this could give us a broader picture of the preferences of different nationalities and, by doing so, we would be able to compare the differences. Therefore, this implies that future studies should focus on a larger sample size.

Another sample weakness was a relative inconsistency in the market place of hotels the respondents were referring to. We recommend the next study to be conducted in separate market segments in order to check whether there are discrepancies between how delight is perceived in separate market segments.

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