

# Exploring hotel identity by focusing on customer experience analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** Changing customer demands in the 21st century have led hotels to rethink their way of doing business. While most hotels operate with an internal focus, it is essential to examine interactions from the customer's perspective. This study explored what makes a hotel's identity through a customer experience analysis by interviewing nine customers using semi-structured interviews. The data was processed based on open, axial, and selective coding. The following themes emerged: the customer journey, hotel performance, physical and non-physical components, buying behaviour, and customer engagement. The findings show that guests reported positively about both hotels used in this study, and most of them stated that the overall experience exceeded their expectations. The determining factors in this outcome were the spacious rooms, unique interior design, and product quality. The hotel staff's excellent and personalised service mainly made most of their experience an exceptional stay. The study concluded that boutique-style hotels create a unique experience which could be a determinant for return guests.

**KEYWORDS:** customer satisfaction, guest service, hotel performance, service quality

## Introduction

Understanding customer experience and the customer journey over time is critical for any type of business. Customers interact with firms through various touchpoints in multiple channels (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Hence, customer experience is more than the result of one single touchpoint; it is the total sum of the customers' interaction process with a firm (Verhoef et al., 2009). With this, the importance of understanding the customer journey is stressed, but it proves to be a complex subject to research. Two customers can follow the same steps, procedures, and journey and still *feel* as if it was a different experience. Customer experience reflects the customer journey through all interactions with the firm – pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). For the hospitality industry, customer experience is not only derived from food and beverages, hotel rooms, or the facilities offered. The customer experience covers all supporting features and processes that are part of the customer journey: the on- and off-line interaction, amenities, ambiance, employee expertise, and more. Customer experience management is regarded as a difficult task for hospitality firms.

The changing customer demands in the twenty-first century have led firms to rethink their way of doing business. Profound changes in technology, social media, consumer lifestyles, and buying behaviour highlight the need for companies to adapt to their customers' new mindset and to re-evaluate the customer experience (Kandampully et al., 2015). The increased demand from customers for superior and personalised service underlines the importance of exploring the customer journey.

While internal communication is vital to ensure mutual understanding among employees (Sylvester, 2020), it is important to examine interactions from the customer's point of view. Based on a customer experience analysis and the company values, opportunities can be prioritised (Temkin, 2010). Exploring the customer experience based on the customer journey will help to shape a firm's identity and to identify opportunities and challenges in the future. The research gives an insight into understanding and managing customer experience in the hospitality industry, and the focus of this study is on hotel identity through the use of a customer experience analysis.

The main question that guided the study was: How can using customer experience analysis highlight the identity of two hotels?

The sub-questions were:

- SQ1: What do the guests of the hotel report regarding the service provided during their customer journey?
- SQ2: Which aspects do the guests feel influence their decision-making process?
- SQ3: How do the guests of the hotel feel about the hotel performance?
- SQ4: How do guests experience the hotel during their stay?

## Academic literature

### Customer experience

To create a customer experience analysis, the topic of customer experience is first highlighted. Customer experience is both the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). A

successful brand shapes customers' experiences by embedding the fundamental value proposition in every feature (ibid.). Most researchers state that the overall customer experience is a multidimensional construction that involves emotional, psychological, and social components (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This is confirmed by the Marketing Science Institute, where customer experience is described as consisting of emotional, physical, social, and economic elements that mark the customer's direct or indirect interaction with a (set of) market actor(s) (de Keyser et al., 2015).

Another important factor under the subject of customer experience is that the experience is subject to the consumers' perception and view, meaning that customer experience is inherently personal and unique to each customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Helkkula et al., 2012). Customer experience consists of individual contact between the firm and the customer at distinct points in the experience called touchpoints (Homburg et al., 2015). Not only is customer experience subject to what products and services a company offers, the overall customer experience is above all built through the sum of various touchpoints during different phases of the customer journey (Verhoef et al., 2009). This involves a multidimensional construction that consists of emotional, social, personal, physical, and economic factors (de Keyser et al., 2015).

#### ***The customer journey***

When consuming a good or service, the customer experiences interactions with an organisation or business. This customer experience life cycle consists of every interaction with an organisation. This journey can be separated into different phases: pre-, during, and post-consumption. The customer journey, therefore, consists of different stages with several, multichannel touchpoints involved. The orchestration of each of the business processes involved should be in place to provide a seamless customer journey (Hunt, 2012). Businesses need to achieve accurate visibility and understanding of the path the customer is taking to fully encounter the complexity of managing customer experience. Also, a practice to examine interaction with the customer is the customer journey map, which includes the wider pathway customers might have taken pre-, during, and post-consumption (Davey, 2019). The customer journey mapping process engages stakeholders and encourages consideration from the customers' point of view. Collectively, the customer journey map will help visualise and structure the process a customer goes through while interacting with a firm (Bitner et al., 2008).

#### ***Customer experience in the hospitality industry***

In the hospitality industry, superior customer experience is essential in gaining customer loyalty and in achieving a competitive advantage (Kandampully et al., 2018). Although limited research has been done on the combination of the topic of hospitality and the topic of customer experience management, the available research shows that it is important to balance the facet of service quality with other factors, such as price, aesthetics, ambiance, product quality, location, assortment and other elements that influence the hospitality experience pre-, during, and post-consumption (Ryu & Jang, 2008; Johnson et al., 2009). Others examine the role that employees, business procedures, and the outlook of the firm

play in customer experience in the hospitality industry (Morgan et al., 2008).

Researchers and managers have pointed out that customer experience management is particularly important for the hospitality industry (Kandampully et al., 2015) because of the extensive customer-employee relationship and the service aspects which are integral to the hospitality experience (Kandampully et al., 2018). The experience that customers have with hospitality firms consists of relatively longer interactions, which provides unique opportunities for businesses to create a truly positive and lasting experience through the whole customer journey (Kandampully et al., 2018). It can be stated that the employee contributes to the creation of memorable experiences and that the employee-customer relationship adds to the customer experience (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; McColl-Kennedy, et al., 2015). As shown by research, for hospitality practices, service is an essential component to ensure that customers perceive value, and some state that it is the most critical asset to build long-term relationships and business sustainability (Kandampully et al., 2018).

Besides factors such as price, ambiance, and product quality that influence customer experience, customer experience is, in the hospitality industry, mostly created by the frequent and intimate interactions between customer and employee. Employees may guarantee customer commitment and customer loyalty (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013) and may thereby be viewed as the primary drivers in creating a positive customer experience (He et al., 2011). Today's consumers do not buy products or services – their purchase decisions revolve around buying an experience (McKinsey, 2017).

#### ***The importance of analysing customer experience***

Leading companies have to understand that they are in the customer experience business, and they have to understand that *how* an organisation delivers its product is beginning to be as important as *what* it delivers (McKinsey, 2017). Many researchers stress the essential position of customer experience and the connection it has with creating customer value and engagement. Moreover, customer experience may be viewed as the root of both customer value and customer engagement (de Keyser et al., 2015). In the IBM 2010 Global CEO study, 88 per cent of the CEOs stated that getting closer to customers was a top priority for their business. Many leaders see opportunities through the right analysis of customer needs, wants, and desires to improve customer engagement and retention (Hunt, 2012).

Firms recognise this critical role across all industry sectors: today's technology-driven, digitally advanced customers expect personalised experiences at every point of interaction. Nowadays, 89 per cent of companies expect to compete primarily based on customer experience, and it is now one of the key strategies adopted by leading hospitality firms such as Marriott, Hilton, and Starbucks (Sorofman & McLellan, 2014). 80% of the firms believe that the experience they provide is superior, while only 8% of the customers described the experience as such (Bain & Company, 2015). With such disparity, the need is urgent: customers have more choices than ever and will choose another product or service unless improvements and considerations are made (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Correctly analysing the customer experience will not only give firms insight into how to improve customer engagement, but it will also approach the subject from the customer's point of view and will identify

gaps and opportunities in the current situation. Furthermore, a customer experience analysis will provide relevant and accurate information, which will help to anticipate and make better business decisions for the future (Davey, 2019).

In conclusion, this review underlines the importance of customer experience, the visualisation of customer experience, the link to the hospitality industry, and its relevance. Customer experience has proven to be a multidimensional construction that involves many components, such as emotional, social, and physical facets. Other researchers stress the important point that customer experience is inherent to one's personal preferences. Researchers agree that customer experience consists of different stages, with several, multichannel touchpoints, business components, and personal factors involved. Mapping the customer experience gives a firm insight into the structure and process a customer goes through while interacting with a firm. The customer journey will serve as a basis that will give insight from the outside in, providing businesses with the opportunity to research customer experience and build long-lasting customer relationships through the touchpoints.

Although many businesses now recognise the importance of managing customer experience, research has proven that there is a great disparity between the view customers have of a firm's customer service and the way firms see their own customer service. This highlights the importance of exploring and analysing customer experience. Customer experience is seen as the root of both customer value and customer engagement. In the hospitality industry, providing a superior customer experience may be considered essential in the process of gaining customer loyalty, given the fact that hospitality firms have relatively

longer interactions with customers. Customer service, and thus the relationship between employee and customer, has proven to be one of the primary drivers for customer satisfaction and customer engagement.

### Conceptual model

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of different components (phases) that will help to establish the customer experience analysis. The key concepts for this research are shown in phases 2 and 3, in bold. Phase 2, the customer journey map, is a tool to help visualise and build on the customer experience analysis. To map the customer journey, the left section (phase 1) shows what steps need to be taken first. As described in the literature review, the customer journey consists of three phases, namely pre-, during, and post-consumption. These sections show different factors (per consumption phase) that could influence the customer journey and experience in the hospitality business. These variables related to the hospitality industry are based on emotional, social, psychological, physical, personal, and economic components derived from the literature review. These components and variables are used as a basis for the interview. Lastly, phase 3 consists of extracting the customer experience analysis. The conceptual model is constructed as a guideline for this research article, based on the literature review.

### Methodology

To scrutinise the topic, we took an interpretive stance which is based on a naturalistic approach of data collection such as

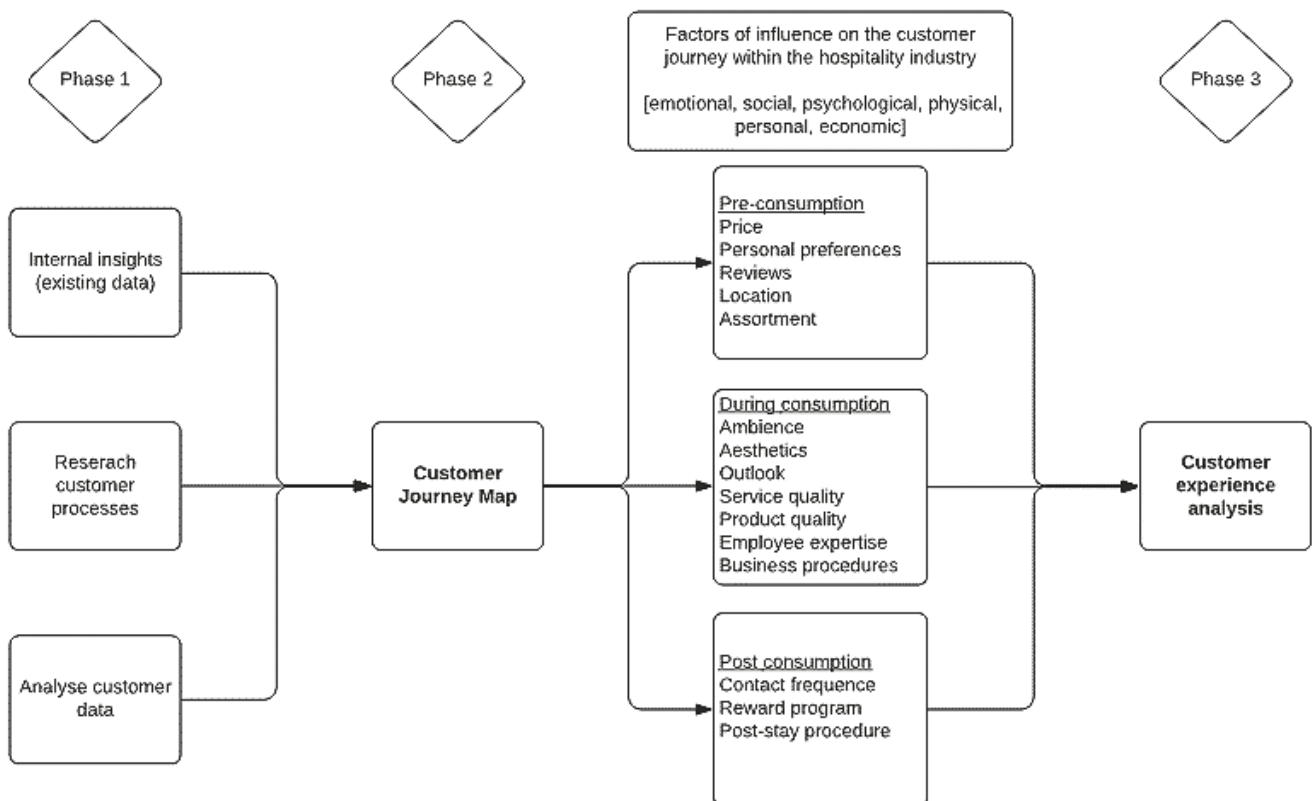


FIGURE 1. The customer experience analysis process

interviews and observations. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were the best method to collect details and sensitive data about the tendencies being explored in this study. Nine guests from two hotels were interviewed. Due to reaching a certain level of saturation in the theory and coding process, we decided that a total of nine interviews was enough. No new information or codes were found while conducting and coding the last interviews. In each hotel, the interviewees were selected based on the set criteria and willingness to participate. The criteria were that the guests should have different nationalities, a different purpose of stay and that the stay was for at least three nights. These criteria gave different perspectives on the questions and added more value to the outcome of the interview. To process interviews, a coding process was used to analyse the outcomes. Three different stages of coding: open, axial, and selective coding were adapted. For the coding process, one interview was coded on paper first. After this, ATLAS.ti was used to process and code all the interviews.

### Findings: Customer journey

The first theme that was found concerning the first research question is the customer journey. The guests from both hotels reported several touchpoints pre-, during and post-consumption, which can be divided into the following subthemes: hotel procedures (with a focus on guest contact), guest service, and employee expertise, all about service quality.

#### Hotel procedures – guest contact

Well-arranged guest contact during the different procedures the guest goes through during the stay is important. For example, the pre-arrival procedure could set the tone for the rest of their stay. The following was reported about the guest contact and service: *They [staff] know who we are..., so it's very easy. They know us already. So, we just arrive, check-in, it takes two minutes* (BC5). This comment suggests that the staff is informed and provides a quick and personal service, which the guests prefer. This can also be concluded from the following: *It seems every email was meant to make sure I'll be OK and happy there. Which I think again is something that a lot of the time is not done* (TE7).

On the other hand, one guest stated that *It was fine, but I think it could have been less. I received five or six emails I think, and for me, one or two would be enough* (BC2). This shows that different people prefer a different approach. While one guest enjoys extended service and contact, another could be fine with only the necessary information. It can be concluded that although a different approach is desired per person, the overall contact and service during the hotel procedures are perceived as positive: *When having contact via email; it always went well, and the communication was clear* (TE4).

#### Guest service

During the customer journey (the stay) of the guest, the service offered seems to be positively received. One of the guests stated that the service provided was *above and beyond* (TE7), and *more than what I expected* (BC1). Several guests mentioned that the service offered was done with a personal touch: *I travel a lot and I experience that personal service is highly valued here* (TE4), and *you made everyone feel absolutely at home* (TE4). That the personal service has a positive effect on the stay can

be concluded from the following statement: *Even if the service was less, I would still be happy here, you know, but, they do more* (BC1). The guests perceive the personal service as a *brilliant touch* (TE7) and experience it as *if I was a friend who was staying* (BC2).

*Gold standard service from the staff. Top class. Seriously. I've stayed in many hotels, and I don't think I've been made to feel as welcome as I did here. And it was just no matter what, you'd do everything you could, and again, that's the standard* (TE7).

#### Employee expertise

The guests reported about the expertise of the staff during their stay. *You all seem to get the balance right; it's finding out from the guest almost immediately how we prefer to be called and how to be treated* (TE8). This statement suggests that the employees are aware of what the guests' needs and wants are. This finding is also supported by the following: *they have a great personal integrity* (TE9), and *you [employees] would come over and have a chat...but then you would also know when I was doing some work* (TE8). The expertise of the staff seems to have a positive influence on the overall experience of the guests, even if requests could not be granted, *they made you accept the things you don't like...That makes them of great value* (TE9).

### Findings: Hotel performance

Themes that emerged on hotel performance were processes, amenities, and business features of both hotels. Guests noticed the hotel performance through the following subthemes: hotel procedures (with a focus on process quality) and product quality.

#### Hotel procedures – process quality

The subtheme here focuses on the quality of hotel processes rather than the guest contact's service quality as described above. Guests would describe the process before arrival as *super quick and easy* and stated that *I like the fact of pre-registering... that made the arrival super quick* (BC1). Another guest also stated that the arrival process was quick and smooth:

*Everything was clear. I think there was like this pre-check procedure, which is great because I have travelled a lot in my job...it's small, but when you do it so often it's time-consuming...It's early, it's late. If you've already done a lot of that work and you can just basically hand over your credit card or get your key within, I think it was like less than, five minutes* (TE8).

Other hotel procedures such as the checkout and the mail contact were described as *great. Easy. Takes two minutes* (BC5), and *very, very simple, you know, painless, very good, no problem* (TE9). Overall, it can be stated that the guests notice a quick and easy process during all contact points and procedures along with their stay at both the hotels. The opinion on this is positive, which can be concluded from a guest who reported that *it [the procedures] has all been great, I think it is really good* (BC1).

#### Product quality

Hotel performance was measured by statements of the guests about the products offered in the room, and the design. Guests of both hotels described the products in the hotel room as *outstanding* (TE3), even *better than what I have in my own*

house (BC5), and *high quality* (BC1). The experience with the products in the room was positive: *great bed, great linen, even the shampoo: there has been a lot of thought put into it* (TE4), and one guest stated that it was the *best bed I've ever slept in* (BC5). Overall, the quality of the room is very high and clearly guests are impressed by the hotel's room design: *It's a small kitchen, but it's high quality and everything is there. So, I am impressed by what's provided in the room* (BC1).

### Findings: Physical and non-physical components

An important theme that was found covers the variable of the physical and non-physical components of the hotel. The interviewees reported on the facilities on site, the location, the ambiance, and their overall hotel experience on their stay.

#### Facilities

Both hotels offer different facilities such as wellness studios, gyms, and bars and restaurants. Guests of both hotels reported that the gym was *exactly what I needed* (TE8), and *of a really good standard* (BC1). Hotel 1 has a restaurant where guests can enjoy a drink or have dinner. One guest reported that *it was nice food, but it didn't meet the same expectations as the hotel* (BC1). On the other hand, it was stated that *the food's great. Service is great* (BC5). It seems that the restaurant faces some trouble keeping the food quality at a consistent level or it might be the case that the guests had different expectations. Hotel 2 does not have a restaurant but offers breakfast and has a bar on-site for guests to enjoy a drink. *I had everything I needed. A bar downstairs so I could watch the football game and have a couple of beers* (TE7). Another guest stated that *the facilities were one of the reasons I chose the hotel* (TE8). It could be concluded that the guest satisfaction regarding the facilities fluctuates, depending on personal preferences and expectations.

#### Location

A physical component that stood out was the location of both hotels. Reported by several guests was the accessibility of Hotel 1: *I think that in Amsterdam, in terms of accessibility, there is no better place* (TE4), and *great transportation links, very good location* (TE8). For Hotel 2, it was mentioned that *it is a unique spot, with the terrace located right on the water, you just don't have that in the centre of Amsterdam* (BC6). Both hotels are located just outside the city centre of Amsterdam and the guests have a positive feeling about this. *It is nice and quiet and tucked away from the business of the centre and it is also close enough to do whatever I want to do* (BC1). Also, someone stated that *I think it is good that it is outside the city centre because it can be quite busy. But you can get there with such ease* (TE7). In conclusion, guests prefer both hotels due to their location, described as *being out of it, without being out of it, if that makes any sense* (TE7).

#### Physical and emotional components

How guests experience the physical and non-physical elements of both hotels was found through statements about the ambiance (emotional components) and the outlook (physical appearance). The guests immediately noticed the eye for detail:

*The smell when you enter! It smells so good everywhere. And it's not just the smell. It is the overall theme that comes back in everything you see. It is supposed to be*

*like that: the scent matches the interior; it matches the hotel room; it matches the wooden doors, and it also matches the lighting* (TE4).

In addition to this, it was stated that *everything is beautiful and great. You can feel it is decorated with style* (BC5), and *I was under the impression everything was hand-picked. That they're not supposed to be the standard, same-as-every-hotel sort of furniture* (TE8). The boutique-style of the hotels made the guests feel at home. *It feels welcome and open, but at the same time the feeling of having enough privacy of your own home* (BC1). Another description was that *it feels warm, but not unprofessional. It just fits with what you would wish as a guest* (TE3). Others described the atmosphere as *cozy* (BC5), *chilled* (TE7), *comfortable* (TE8), *luxurious but warm* (BC2), and as *being at a friend's house, without having to see the friend* (TE7). Overall, both hotels were made to feel like a home away from home, and *that is exactly what it feels like* (TE7).

### Findings: Buying behaviour and customer engagement

The last theme that emerged from the interviews was the guests' buying behaviour and (customer) engagement. Choosing the right hotel is not an easy task. There is a thin line between finding and creating the right match between the customer's wishes and the hotel's offerings since expectations do not always match the experience. The following subthemes discuss the interviewees' overall guest experience, their preferences regarding their hotel choice, and areas that leave room for improvement.

#### Guest experience

An overall positive experience adds to customer engagement and has a positive influence on the guests' buying behaviour. At both hotels, the guests reported a positive experience. *It more than matched my expectations, it really did* (TE8), and *it is better than my expectations, the room as well. And the staff: they go beyond what I expected* (BC1). For the guests, the little things made the stay special. *When there's a package, they always offer to take it up to my room. You know, things that they don't need to do* (BC1). Two separate guests mentioned that Hotel 1 is and forever will be *the best place to stay in Amsterdam* (TE8/TE7). *There's nowhere else I'd stay now in Amsterdam. Hotel 1 just adds to the experience* (TE7). The overall positive guest experience ensured that all interviewees would stay again at both hotels.

#### Guests' preferences

Apart from an exceptional service level and product quality, different preferences regarding the guests' hotel choice were reported. Both hotels are one of a kind and operate a unique concept. *It is quite a niche hotel in terms of its own place, it's very cool and boutique-y* (TE8), and *it doesn't feel like a big crazy hotel like the Marriott. I really like that it's not like that. It's more boutique* (BC1). The preference of the guests lies with a boutique-style, spaciouly set up hotel just outside the city centre, with a personal service touch. For some, it is a personal preference, but it can be concluded that in comparison to other hotels, Hotel 1 and Hotel 2 exceed the expectations. *Arriving at this hotel was a change in my life because it was like: "finally what I need". Honestly, I would not change anything* (BC5). And

*it's a nicer experience than, I would say, just about any hotel I've stayed in, to be honest (TE7).*

When asked what the decisive factor was, the guests reported: *that all the details add up (TE4), the personal touch (TE3), value for money (BC2), and the space and amenities in the room (BC5).* What made a difference to all guests was the service and the staff. As one of the guests reported: *As lovely as the hotel is, without you guys there, it just wouldn't be what it is (TE7).*

Something to improve for Hotel 1 is the breakfast. *It would be nice to have a slight change in breakfast every other week. But this is probably only from a long-stay point of view (TE8).* Another guest reported that *I miss the breakfast. I would love an à la carte breakfast menu to choose from (TE3).* However, most guests were satisfied with the hotel performance and stated that *there's nothing that I see could be improved. I would go for the easy one and say: a swimming pool. Only because it would be nice (TE7).*

## Discussion

This part explains the research questions – “How can using customer experience analysis highlight the identity of two hotels?” To find the answer, four possible areas were investigated – service during the customer journey, the decision-making process, hotel performance, and guest experience. The results will be critically compared with the literature, followed by some recommendations for the practice and further research.

### ***What do the guests of hotels report about the service provided during their customer journey?***

According to the guests concerning the touchpoints of their stay, employees can play an important role in establishing a great customer experience in a hospitality business (Morgan et al., 2008) and staff can make a distinct difference. It was found that the service at both hotels is perceived as if the employees are there to make the guests feel welcome, comfortable and, most importantly, at home. Not only did the guests give a positive report on the top-class service that exceeded their expectations during the stay, but also on arrival and check-out. The staff is well informed and takes care of the guest as soon as he or she walks in and even after the moment of checking out. How an organisation delivers its product is beginning to be as important as what it delivers (McKinsey, 2017). In line with this are the clear statements about the service standard. At both hotels, service is a number one priority and that is what stood out for the guests as well. However, not only service makes the guest's stay exceptional, within the hospitality businesses there is a unique opportunity to create a true and lasting experience throughout the whole customer journey because of the relatively long and extensive customer-employee relationship (Kandampully et al., 2018). The two hotels pay close attention to this and therefore it is the combination of providing excellent guest service with great employee expertise at all contact points that makes the guests feel at ease and more than welcome. The staff has the right balance and integrity to provide the best service to each guest.

### ***Which aspects do the guests of hotels feel influence their decision-making process?***

The guests reported on the overall experience at both hotels and the preferences regarding the hotel of choice. That employees can guarantee customer commitment and customer loyalty (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013) is confirmed by guests of both hotels; the primary driver to return to the hotel is the excellent service that was provided by the staff. All guests reported that the overall experience exceeded the expectations they had beforehand. Regarding what made the guests choose the hotel in the first place, it was reported that the unique interior and boutique-style attracted the guests. With this, the location and spacious (apartment) hotel rooms added to the experience and fitted the wishes of both the long-stay business guest and the short-stay leisure guest. With the increased demand from consumers for personalised and superior service (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) it is not a surprise that guests reported the employees and the personal touch to be one of the most important facets of both hotels. The personal service given to each guest and during each stay makes both hotels unique. Nonetheless, every experience is subject to the guest's perception and view (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Helkkula et al., 2012), and it could be concluded that the guest satisfaction regarding the overall stay depends on personal preferences and expectations. Nevertheless, the combination of all hotel elements made the stay of all guests one to come back for. The guests prefer the boutique-style, spacious apartments as much as the location just outside the city centre and the personal service provided by the staff. For some it was a personal preference, but overall, one can conclude that both hotels exceeded the expectations and the hotel experiences guests had in the past. As stated by He et al. (2011), the employees may be viewed as the primary drivers in creating the overall positive guest experience. Without the staff, the hotels would not be what they are.

### ***How do the guests of hotels feel about the hotel performance?***

Hotel performance was investigated in terms of the hotel processes, amenities, and business features. Guests of both hotels reported that the arrival procedure was quick and well managed. The staff is well prepared and educated, which makes the process flow smoothly. Every business process should be in place to provide a seamless customer journey (Hunt, 2012). As one of the guests stated, it can often be time-consuming if these processes take too long. However, at both hotels, the standard processes before, during, and after the stay are flawlessly arranged to make sure the guests experience the – sometimes time-consuming and boring – procedures as quick and easy. Besides this, the high-quality products in the hotel room and the attention to detail is the secret to a good customer experience (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Not only is customer experience subject to what products and services a company offer, it is built through the sum of various touchpoints during different phases of the customer journey (Verhoef et al., 2009). The extra attention that is paid to the check-in procedure (e.g. the option to pre-register) and the room amenities (high quality and attention to detail) makes that guest expectations are exceeded in this area. Overall, the process of the guests' experience in both hotels appears clear, quick, and easy. In combination with high-quality products, the amenities provided in the room and the attention to detail, one can conclude that the guests experienced excellent hotel performance.

### How do guests experience hotels during their stay?

The guests reported on the facilities, location, and ambiance. The facilities, such as the gym, wellness studio, and restaurants/bars at both hotels are of good quality and for most guests exactly what was expected and needed. Nevertheless, the guest satisfaction for the restaurant at one hotel fluctuates as the guests already had high expectations from what was experienced in the hotel. Thus, not all experiences at the restaurant matched the expectations. It is important to analyse the customer experience since many companies believe they provide excellent service, while most customers do not describe or experience it as such (Bain & Company, 2015). Therewith, researchers stressed the essential position of customer experience and the connection it has with creating customer value and engagement. To create customer value, the total construction of emotional and physical factors should be in place (de Keyser et al., 2015). For both hotels, this construction consists of having excellent procedures and great guest service. Moreover, it works because these standards and values are embedded in all hotel elements (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). The unique interior design and ambiance suit the location of each hotel, and vice versa. The physical and emotional components match, giving guests a warm and home-like feeling, which is exactly what the hotel was meant to feel like. The fact that both hotels are located just outside the city centre adds to this as well. Hotels are perfect for a weekend getaway close enough to the city centre for guests to explore or when guests are looking for a place to stay a little bit longer with everything within reach but just outside the bustle of Amsterdam.

### Limitations

Due to COVID-19, both hotels experienced lower occupancy. As a result, six interviews were held with long-stay (21-day stay or longer) business guests, one returning business guest, and only two short-stay leisure guests. The long-stay guests could have been biased since they had stayed at the hotel for a longer time. In addition, only one female was among the interviewees. Males could interpret some situations or questions differently, therefore the outcome could have been different if more females were interviewed. Another limitation was in conducting the interview; it was not possible to meet guests in person. All interviews were held via Teams, which did not allow the interviewer to read non-verbal body communication which direct face-to-face interviews could have provided.

### Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study advocate the following: providing excellent guest service is embedded in all aspects of the hotels, and integrity runs like a golden thread through the employees' work values. Finding the right balance and providing tailor-made service for each guest is not a simple task. However, at both hotels, this is executed with great expertise. The properties are niche, boutique-style hotels and offer a unique interior with high-quality products and facilities, which makes for a magnificent stay. Nowadays, guests seek new experiences, unique places, extraordinary services, and for hotel businesses, outstanding design and a lot of spaciousness in the hotel and the hotel rooms. This does not only speak to the imagination of the millennial looking for a perfect weekend getaway with

friends, but also to businesses who seek a place to stay for their employees. The hotel style and design add to the experience of the guests and the fact that the hotel is considered medium in size adds to the homely feeling the guests so much appreciate. With this, it seems important to create the same level of service, product quality, and design throughout all facets concerning the hotel. Creating a great customer experience is only possible when the hotel DNA seamlessly runs through all hotel elements. It should therefore be considered to apply this to all hotel facilities where improvement on the overall quality is necessary. For guests, the staff prove to be the essential component to ensure engagement and satisfaction. Having the right balance for both leisure and business guests makes the hotel the perfect place to stay. It is the combination of having apartment hotel rooms with quality products and facilities while providing excellent service at all times that makes the experience exceed the expectations of all guests, every time.

Since the guests perceive both hotels highly positively, this study recommends that both hotels continue the business practice based upon the present work ethic. Secondly, it is advised for future extensions to continue to build hotels in the same size and range. Guests reported greatly enjoying the personalised service and the boutique style, which most likely is directly connected to the size and number of rooms. To guarantee the same experience in the future, it is advised not to exceed the number of 100 rooms. Lastly, the guests reported that they did not have the same expectations as the hotel. Therefore, it is advised to create clear standard operation procedures (SOPs) to create accurate visibility and understanding of the service and quality standards that need to be achieved across all hotel elements and facilities. This research is only based on nine interviews and the sample group was not as diverse as it could potentially be. Therefore, for further research, it is recommended to create a more diverse sample group to find additional information on the research topic at the same hotels. It might be good to conduct further research in larger hotels with a different scale and size.

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