



## Examining key drivers of customer delight in a hotel experience: A cross-cultural perspective

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Customer delight  
Customer satisfaction  
Culture  
Hotels

### ABSTRACT

Welcoming all guests is the calling shared by those who work in the hotel industry. Everyday hoteliers strive to provide a service of excellence to all of those who visit. This can be somewhat of a complex endeavor, as hotels receive guests from different nationalities and cultures. Previous research in the area of customer delight has revealed some of the factors that define and drive the customer delight experience. Despite the emerging literature on the subject, the question remains: are guest from different cultures likely to be delighted by different things? In the present study, the researchers conducted extensive semi-structured interviews ( $n = 228$ ) with guests from different nationalities visiting the Central Florida area. The guests interviewed came predominantly from the United States, Brazil, Germany, and Canada. Using a process of content analysis, the researchers analyzed the drivers of customer delight and concluded that while some universal service elements exists, guests from different cultures can also be delighted by different services and amenities.

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### 1. Introduction

Marketers in the hotel industry strive to perform up to customers' expectation and deliver an exceptional service. Therefore, they constantly seek to gain insights on service quality through investigation on customers' experience, such as on what customers like and what they dislike (Crotts et al., 2008). Nevertheless, a customers' experience is an experiential product that involves the intricacy and resiliency of subjectivity. Furthermore, the task of creating a great experience is even more daunting at a global stage as many hotels enter foreign markets and find themselves in whole new cultures. Consequently, understanding what constitutes a valuable customer experience becomes a question to be tackled for firms seeking to be successful in the global market.

Customer satisfaction has been believed to be the ultimate goal for service industry. However, some research challenges the previously held assumptions that customer satisfaction leads to loyalty (Skogland and Siguaw, 2004). Moreover, existing research also suggests that merely satisfied customer is not necessarily a loyal nor committed (e.g. Voss et al., 2008). Facing the challenge, researchers have attempted to prescribe solutions. Some scholars turned to the notion of customer experience which is holistic in nature and may

include "every point of contact at which the customer interacts with the business, product, or service" (Grewal et al., 2009, p. 1). Hosany and Witham (2010) proposed that experiences should be memorable, that is, the customer must be able to retrieve them from their memory; and be distinctive. Similarly, Gilmore and Pine (1999) argued that emotionally engaged customers are more likely to repurchase and recommend to others; in order to have such effects, businesses must orchestrate a memorable experience for their customers. It has also been found that, across the entire spectrum of service experience, the peak moments largely shape customers' retrospective evaluation (Varey and Kahneman, 1992).

The existing body of service literature demonstrates a rather lopsided phenomenon. Consequently, a vast amount of research exists on the topic of service recovery, while a much smaller stream of research exists on positive service experiences. Emphasizing both aspects of emotional attachment and peak experience, the concept of customer delight has accordingly become a topic of interest (Keininningham et al., 1999; Kumar et al., 2001; Finn, 2005; Torres and Kline, 2006; Magnini et al., 2010; Wang, 2011). However, even within the realm of customer delight, little attention has been paid to the cross-cultural context, which is increasingly important to today's service environment. In effect, it is strategic for firms to look at the other end of the continuum of customer responses and examine the critical aspects of services that they do right in addition to what they do wrong.

Service failure will inevitably occur due to resource constraints and reasons to service failure could be consistently inconsistent for each encounter. Yet a delightful service that impresses customers

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is unlikely to be easily replicated by competitors (Crofts et al., 2008). In other words, customer delight can be a strategic resource in competitiveness. Therefore, to maintain and enforce on areas that are already warmly embraced by customers is more strategically sound. In light of the present knowledge on this subject, the present study explored customer delight in a lodging experience. The topic of customer service and customer experience is highly relevant in the hotel industry and therefore warrants further empirical study. The objective of this study was to examine the phenomenon of customer delight from a cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, it aims to explore the factors that drive a delightful experience and to uncover the difference existing across various travelers.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. What is customer delight?

Customer delight has been defined from three different perspectives in the current literature. One definition stresses the confirmation–disconfirmation paradigm. The next group of research stresses the emotional components. Finally, the last school of thought emphasizes human needs. Stressing the disconfirmation perspective, Patterson (1997) proposed that customer delight is where the experience goes beyond satisfaction and involves a pleasurable experience for the guest. Keininningham et al. (1999) proposed that customers have a certain zone of tolerance and that performing beyond the upper thresholds of such zone would generate customer delight.

Another approach to defining customer delight is to take an affect-based approach. As an example of such research, Kumar et al. (2001) proposed that customer delight is composed of the emotions of joy, thrill, and exhilaration. Finn (2005) defined customer delight as an emotional response which results from surprising and positive levels of performance. Finally, Schneider and Bowen (1999) proposed that customer delight is a function of the satisfaction of three human needs: security, justice, and self-esteem.

Admittedly, delight and satisfaction share common characteristics. According to the expectancy-disconfirmation model (Oliver, 1980), customers are expected to compare pre-purchase expectation with the actual experience of product or service. If perceived performance fails expectation, dissatisfaction or outrage will occur. If perceived service quality exceeds expectation, then positive responses such as satisfaction or delight will arouse. Therefore, delight and satisfaction are unified by their nature as positive emotions.

The two constructs, however, are separated by antecedent condition and magnitude. Delight entails a pleasant surprise which satisfaction lacks. It is noted that the emotional state of being delightful is a blend of happiness and surprise (Kumar et al., 2001; Berman, 2005). This is in keeping with Oliver et al. (1997) proposition that surprise acts as an antecedent for delight to occur. A recent study analyzed *Tripadvisor* blog postings and found that surprise is an essential component of the delight construct. In addition, the surprise component was found to be strongly associated with customer loyalty (Crofts and Magnini, 2010). There are other reasons why surprise might be an important element in customer delight. First, surprise may trigger emotional arousal, which has been proven to have a major effect on customer delight (Bowden and Dagger, 2011). Second, according to Wang (2011) “customers are often surprised under disconfirmation situations.” (p. 150).

Compared to satisfaction, delight also stresses the state of emotional attachment and is more strongly associated with customer loyalty, positive word of mouth, and repeat purchase intent (Torres and Kline, 2006). Ekini et al. (2008) proposed that customer delight

is highly individualized based on needs and personality. On a continuum, Berman (2005) proposed four stages to measure post-purchase customer responses. Specifically, they are outrage/pain, dissatisfaction, satisfaction, and delight. As customer emotions moves through the continuum from negative to positive, customer loyalty is expected to ascend.

In order to gain deeper knowledge into the concept of customer delight, Ma et al. (2013) adopted a model based on the Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT). This process-based approach posits that emotions (and delight in particular) are elicited by various factors including the customer’s knowledge, goal congruency, agency, certainty/novelty, and goal relevance. These factors will exert influence over an individual’s appraisal of a situation, and thus lead to the arousal of positive affect, resulting in the more specific emotion of delight. According to Ma et al. (2013), the state of delight can be elicited “when tourists appraise their theme park experience either as unexpected, or as important to their personal well-being or special needs, or as in their interest, or as highly goal congruent” (p. 373).

In sum, existing literature commonly addressed that the construct of delight bears two characteristics: (a) delight occurs as a result of memorable, positive reproducible events. As opposed to satisfaction, delight lingers for a longer period of time, and (b) delight is more strongly associated with customer loyalty and intent to repeat purchase. Compared to merely satisfied customers, delighted customers tend to be more loyal and more likely to be retained.

### 2.2. Key drivers of customer delight

Key drivers of customer delight have been defined as service attributes that contribute to a delightful experience (Crofts et al., 2008). Such factors have major impact on customer evaluation and behavior which include satisfaction and repeat purchase intention. Some customer delight drivers might be context-specific rather than universal. From the perspective of customer experience management, it is strategically meaningful to explore what these key drivers are as evaluation with different components of an experience may have remarkably different impacts on the overall evaluation. In a guest’s mind, one under-performed area may not be the deal-breaker to the lodging experience. Rather, the entire experience can be spoiled if the perceived key areas do not perform well. Despite the association of delight drivers with customer experience, very few studies have actually dedicated to empirically examine this phenomenon and no study to the author’s knowledge has explored it in a hotel setting.

Among existing empirical evidence, the study by Crofts et al. (2008) investigated key delight drivers in the context of a food and wine festival. Using data collected from 310 participants, the authors identified “diversity of wines and food tasting” and “quality of the food samples” as two major factors that contribute to participants’ delight. Also noteworthy is that, although respondents mentioned negative impressions of the festival such as “lack of seating” and “too crowded”, they still rated the overall experience as positive and demonstrated revisit intention. Thus, delight generated from key driver areas is proven to be persuasive enough to counteract negative feelings and dictate the overall evaluation. Torres and Kline (2013) conducted content analysis of letters of guest feedback. As part of their results, they present a typology for customer delight. Accordingly, the following themes were presented: charismatic delight (associated with employee friendliness personality), fulfillment delight (associated with the fulfillment of higher-level needs such as that of self-esteem), problem resolution delight (resulting from the effective solution of a guest problem, especially when it was not the hotel’s responsibility), professional delight (resulting from employee

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