

Redefining Value in Hospitality: Key Drivers of Satisfaction

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Abstract: In the hotel industry, customer behaviour is quite dynamic and impacted by a variety of factors. Primarily, guests choose hotels based mainly on location and price. Nowadays, personalized experiences, customer reviews, price comparison, and the availability of premium services, are all influencing actual preferences. New trends in hospitality are emerging as a reflection of the sector's dynamism and its constant transformations in consumer behaviour and technological advances. This shift underscores the growing importance of emotional engagement and perceived value over purely transactional interactions, especially among loyalty programme members who expect recognition and consistency. Showing an increasingly competitive global market, hotels face the challenge of balancing innovation with adaptation to emerging demands, such as sustainable and regenerative practices and personalised experiences. It is essential to identify the factors that influence their decisions and predict their choices in the Hotel Industry. This article aimed to measure satisfaction across multiple service dimensions, including room quality, staff responsiveness, personalisation, check-in and check-out efficiency, and overall service recovery. A quantitative research approach was employed, with data collected through a structured, on-site survey administered to 62 hotel guests during their stays between March and May 2025. Results indicate that room quality (e.g., cleanliness, comfort, and functionality) and staff performance (including friendliness, professionalism, and anticipatory service) are the strongest drivers of guest satisfaction. Notably, even in the absence of expected perks (e.g. upgrades), guests reported high satisfaction when staff demonstrated empathy and proactive service recovery. The study concludes that continuous investment in staff training, service personalisation and operational consistency is more impactful than reliance on perks alone. In addition to its analytical contribution, this study reflects key learning, including practical insights into guest relationship management, service design, and the operational realities of luxury hospitality. The findings offer actionable recommendations for hotel managers aiming to optimise loyalty programme effectiveness and elevate guest satisfaction in competitive urban markets.

Keywords: Customer behaviour; Guest Satisfaction; Loyalty Programs; Luxury Hospitality; Service Quality

1. Introduction

The contemporary hotel industry faces significant challenges in attracting and retaining customers in an increasingly competitive and dynamic market. In this context, loyalty programs emerge as essential strategic tools to promote guest loyalty and boost the profitability of organizations (Kotler and Keller, 2016). These programs aim to reward customers for their continued preference, offering benefits ranging from discounts and room upgrades to personalized and exclusive experiences (Antavo, 2024). The sector has witnessed a fundamental shift in customer behaviour, moving from a traditional focus on utilitarian factors like location and price to a complex evaluation of experiential value, emotional engagement, and personalized recognition. This evolution is driven by digital transparency, where online reviews and global comparisons set ever-higher benchmarks, and by the rise of the experience economy, where guests seek meaningful, memorable interactions over purely transactional exchanges. The effectiveness of loyalty programs is intrinsically linked to the quality of service provided and guest satisfaction is strongly influenced by factors such as empathy, responsiveness, reliability, and the tangibility of the services. The combination of a well-structured loyalty program with excellent service can result in high levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ali et al., 2021). Therefore, loyalty programs, particularly for high-value guests, face a critical challenge: they must deliver beyond transactional incentives to foster genuine emotional loyalty. While the theoretical importance of service dimensions such as room quality, staff empathy, and custom-made service is well-established in literature, a pressing empirical gap exists regarding their relative impact on satisfaction, especially when standard loyalty benefits, like room upgrades, are unavailable. How do guests prioritize these service elements in real-time evaluations? Can proactive, empathetic service recovery compensate for the absence of expected tangible rewards? This study addresses these questions by empirically investigating the key drivers of guest satisfaction within a luxury hospitality context. Through a quantitative analysis of data collected from hotel guests, it aims to identify which service factors most powerfully influence satisfaction, providing evidence-based strategies for hotel managers to optimize loyalty program effectiveness, enhance service design, and secure a competitive advantage in demanding urban markets.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Customer Satisfaction in Hospitality and Tourism

Customer satisfaction is one of the main performance indicators in the hotel industry, being associated with the intention to return, recommendation, and loyalty. According to Lu et al. (2015), while managers consider luxury as an experience or a feeling, linked to the hotel's culture and guest expectations, guests perceive luxury in a more concrete way, emphasizing design, cleanliness, spaciousness, and the absence of cost concerns. Hotel managers define satisfied customers as those who return, generate revenue, provide feedback, and have all their needs met. For guests, satisfaction is when the value of the service received is equal to or greater than the price paid, and their expectations are met (Lu et al., 2015). To Oliver (2014), satisfaction results from the comparison between expectations and perceived performance. This approach remains central, but has been enriched by perspectives that integrate emotional, relational, and contextual factors. In the hotel industry, the customer experience is highly subjective and multidimensional. Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) proposed a model that integrates sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and relational dimensions, recognizing that satisfaction depends not only on the rational evaluation of the service, but also on affective involvement. This is particularly relevant in the luxury segment, where guests value personalized attention, recognition, and consistency in treatment throughout their stays. Ali et al. (2021) identified the main determinants of satisfaction as: room comfort, cleanliness, professionalism, and personalization of the experience. Customer satisfaction is a critical success factor in the hospitality industry, particularly in mid-to-high-end and high-end segments, where guest expectations are high and the market is highly competitive (Ladhari, Souiden and Ladhari, 2012). In a sector where the service experience is lived in real time and where the memory of the stay influences future decisions, satisfaction represents not only an operational objective, but a strategic asset with a direct impact on loyalty, reputation, and profitability of hotel units. Recent literature shows that hotel satisfaction cannot be dissociated from the consistency of the service provided, coherence with the brand, and the ability to personalize. Luxury hospitality distinguishes itself by seeking not only to meet the explicit needs of the customer, but also to anticipate implicit desires and offer elements that exceed initial expectations. Pine and Gilmore (2011) argue that the value perceived by the customer is deeply linked to their emotional, sensory, and symbolic involvement with the brand. The application of this logic in the hotel industry has led to strategies based on storytelling, service design, and the creation of aesthetically prominent environments, where each point of contact with the customer is an opportunity for enchantment. This engagement is fundamental in a context where the customer has multiple similar options in terms of product, location, or price. It is now understood as a multidimensional outcome shaped by the seamless integration of tangible reliability, such as room comfort and cleanliness, with profound emotional and relational engagement, driven by staff empathy, personalized recognition, and consistent, anticipatory service. This synthesis of sensory, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions creates a superior perceived value that not only meets but aims to exceed guest expectations, fostering strong emotional brand connections. Achieving sustained satisfaction and loyalty in a competitive market requires a holistic, customer-centric strategy that prioritizes experiential cohesion, a culture of excellence, and strategic investments in staff training and service design over mere transactional benefits.

2.2 Customer Expectations and Behaviours

Customer expectations are one of the central pillars in evaluating the quality and satisfaction of services, especially in the hotel industry, where the experience is subjective, sensory, and highly influenced by previous perceptions (Grönroos, 2020). In classical terms, expectations represent what the customer anticipates because of their interaction with the service, being shaped by past experiences, brand communication, online reputation, and social norms (Oliver, 2014). In high-end hotels, expectations tend to be more demanding and detailed, reflecting the level of financial investment, the guest's social status, and the type of relationship with the brand. Loyal customers often expect not only efficient and comfortable service but also a set of personalized interactions, recognition, and tangible benefits, such as upgrades or access to exclusive areas (Antavo, 2024). Customer expectations have also evolved with the advancement of digitalization, easier access to online reviews, and the growth of technological personalization. To Nobar and Rostamzadeh (2018), hotel managers should focus on managing customer experience and satisfaction to build loyalty, that strengthens brand power. Trust in the brand is a crucial antecedent of consumer loyalty and brand power, and to increase loyalty and brand power, companies should invest in strategies such as building trust and a sense of belonging to the brand, continuously improving service quality, effectively managing complaints, and offering services that meet customer needs. Guests not only compare hotels in the same category but also experiences in different geographies and brands.

Thus, an average stay in a luxury hotel can be perceived as negative if the service does not match the emotional and symbolic standard that the customer associates with the brand. In this context, tools such as Customer Journey Mapping are fundamental to understanding and managing expectations throughout the various touchpoints of the stay (De Keyser et al., 2015). By identifying critical moments, such as check-in, contact with staff, or access to loyalty program benefits, hotels can better align the actual experience with brand promises. Based on these contributions, customer behaviour results from a continuous process of validating or not meeting their expectations, being strongly influenced by details that go beyond the function of the accommodation. In luxury hospitality, the careful management of expectations becomes a core competency, capable of transforming competent service into a memorable experience or, generating dissatisfaction even without objective failures. Managing customer expectations in the high-end hotel industry is a critical and complex strategic function, extending far beyond the mere delivery of promised services. Expectations are shaped by a confluence of brand promises, digital reputation, social norms, and personal investment, creating a demanding benchmark for the guest experience. Customer satisfaction and experience, mediated by loyalty, are essential components for brand growth and strength in the hotel industry, and the effective management of these elements is fundamental for competitiveness and success (Nobar and Rostamzadeh, 2018). The literature underscores that while the failure to meet implicit expectations, such as personalized recognition, can severely damage trust and satisfaction, a proactive and empathetic service recovery can paradoxically strengthen loyalty. Consequently, in an era of digital transparency and global experience comparison, success hinges on a hotel's mastery of the entire customer journey. This requires a deliberate alignment of every operational touchpoint with the brand's emotional and symbolic promise, ensuring that meticulous expectation management transforms a competent stay into a consistently memorable and defensibly superior experience.

2.3 Strategies to Increase Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

In an increasingly experience-oriented sector focused on long-lasting customer relationships, implementing effective strategies to increase satisfaction and promote loyalty is a priority for hotel units, especially in the luxury segment. The literature identifies a set of practices that stand out for their positive impact: personalization, employee autonomy, technological innovation, and strengthening loyalty programs (Mariani and Borghi, 2023). Service personalization is one of the most effective strategies for creating memorable experiences. Neuhofer et al. (2015) highlight the role of big data and artificial intelligence in collecting and analysing guest preferences, allowing for the anticipation of needs and adjustment of service in real time. Qi (2024) argues that personalized services improve customer satisfaction, perceived value, emotional experiences, and contribute significantly to brand loyalty and competitiveness in the luxury market. Personalization is crucial for differentiating brands in a competitive high-end market and serves as a crucial tool for integrating local cultural values with global hospitality standards, boosting customer satisfaction and loyalty (Qi, 2024). In luxury hotels these solutions are integrated into customer relationship management (CRM) systems, allowing, for example, the allocation of rooms based on previous preferences, the offering of personalized amenities, or the adaptation of housekeeping schedules to the customer's routines. Continuous training and employee autonomy are fundamental to guaranteeing excellent service and studies show that employees with the autonomy to solve problems and make decisions contribute significantly to the perception of quality and satisfaction (Chathoth et al., 2016). This empowerment is even more relevant when it comes to loyal guests, who expect quick, flexible responses tailored to their status. Another strategic dimension lies in creating immersive environments consistent with the brand's positioning. Service design, storytelling, and sensory elements (lighting, aromas, sound) play an important role in differentiating the hotel experience. These strategies increase emotional engagement and promote retention through positive memories associated with the stay. Customer loyalty results from the triangulation: (1) benefits offered by the loyalty program, (2) the perceived quality of service, and the (3) consistency of the experience with the expectations generated by the brand. In hospitality, this satisfaction goes beyond the functional aspects of the stay and takes on an emotional and symbolic dimension (Gentile, Spiller and Noci, 2007). Customer satisfaction depends not only on the delivery of benefits such as late check-out, or lounge access, but also on how the service is personalized and experienced in direct contact with the brand. To Xie and Chen (2013), the consistent application of promised benefits reinforces the perception of fairness and trust in the program. When these benefits are not granted, for example, in situations of full capacity or operational limitations, the way the service is managed becomes even more critical. Proactive, empathetic, and differentiated service can compensate for the absence of perks, maintaining high levels of satisfaction (Bowen and Shoemaker, 2003). Literature highlights that the effective delivery of benefits is as important as the benefits themselves. When the front office team communicates proactively and offers alternatives to the customer (e.g., late check-out or bar vouchers) and demonstrates empathy, it is possible to mitigate the impact of the absence of a concrete benefit,

maintaining high overall satisfaction. Furthermore, the perception of value in the relationship with the brand is strongly influenced by the emotional coherence of the experience. Pine and Gilmore (2011), defend that the loyal customer seeks not only comfort and functionality, but experiences that make them feel valued and unique. This logic is evident in the elements of positive surprise (e.g., small, personalized gestures, unexpected upgrades, VIP tickets to events), which create memories and reinforce the emotional connection with the brand. The satisfaction of loyal customers also depends on managing expectations. When these are inflated by promotional campaigns or exceptional past experiences, any deviation—even if technically acceptable—can be interpreted as dissatisfaction. Thus, transparency in communication, consistency in delivery, and training the team to recognize the value of each member are critical factors.

2.3.1 Loyalty Programs in the Hotel Industry

Loyalty programs, in turn, should go beyond the logic of accumulating points and discounts. The current trend is the development of programs focused on symbolic recognition and the creation of experiential value (Antavo, 2024). Some luxury hotels offer access to benefits such as room upgrades, early check-in, late check-out, and access to exclusive lounges, but the real differentiator lies in how these benefits are delivered: with consistency, empathy, and personalization. Poor implementation of a promised benefit (e.g., an upgrade granted late or with a communication failure) can have a greater negative impact than its absence. Recent studies suggest that the most effective strategies are those that integrate different dimensions: operational, relational, technological, and emotional. Mariani and Borghi (2023), for example, identify that sustainable loyalty results from a balance between perceived value, effort to stay, and quality of experience. Thus, more than offering rewards, hotels should focus on building relationships, maintaining a narrative of care and exclusivity that extends over time. Loyalty programs are fundamental strategic tools for the hotel sector, functioning as mechanisms for retention, differentiation, and increasing customer lifetime value. In addition to rewarding the frequency of stays, these programs seek to establish an emotional relationship between the guest and the brand, promoting repeat behaviours and strengthening the customer's identity with the hotel chain. Historically, loyalty programs were based on a transactional logic — accumulating points in exchange for free nights or discounts. However, luxury hotels have evolved towards more relational models, where symbolic benefits, such as recognition, exclusivity, and access to unique experiences, play an increasingly central role (Antavo, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these programs depends not only on the benefits offered, but also on how they are communicated and delivered. Real loyalty does not result solely from the quantity of rewards, but from the personalization of the experience. A failure to deliver an expected benefit, even when not guaranteed, can be interpreted as a breach of promise, negatively affecting customer confidence in the brand. Achieving sustainable loyalty in the luxury hotel sector necessitates a holistic and integrated strategy that transcends traditional transactional rewards. The literature converges on a model where personalized service, empowered and empathetic staff, immersive environmental design, and technologically aided anticipation form the foundational pillars of guest satisfaction. Critically, modern loyalty programs must evolve into relational frameworks that prioritize symbolic recognition and the consistent, seamless delivery of exclusive experiences. The ultimate differentiator lies not merely in the catalogue of benefits offered, but in the flawless execution and emotional resonance of every interaction. Therefore, long-term success depends on synthesizing these operational, technological, and human-centric dimensions into a coherent, customer-obsessed culture that consistently validates the brand's promise and transforms satisfied guests into genuinely devoted advocates.

3. Methodology

The question that guided this study was: To what extent does the perception of room quality and staff influence the satisfaction of the members of a loyalty program, even in the absence of additional benefits such as upgrades? Therefore, the overall objective is to analyse the relationship between three independent variables — hotel quality, room quality, and staff quality — and the dependent variable customer satisfaction, with a view to identifying the main factors that affect perceived value and the overall experience of loyal customers in luxury hotel industry.

Considering the research objective, the research adopted a quantitative approach, suitable for studies aimed at testing hypothesis and analysing causal relationships between pre-defined variables (Creswell, 2018). The research is both descriptive and correlational, allowing for the characterization of customer perception and the assessment of the degree of influence of different dimensions of service quality on satisfaction. The explanatory quantitative methodology is appropriate for validating empirical relationships based on structured data, namely through techniques such as linear regression (Hair, 2022). This approach was deemed suitable, given the

objective of identifying the statistical impact of specific variables on the satisfaction of loyal customers, based on a standardized questionnaire and rigorous statistical analysis.

Based on the literature review and on the objectives of this research, the following hypotheses were formulated with the aim of exploring the relationship between different dimensions of service quality and the satisfaction of a luxury hotel loyalty program.

H1: The perceived quality of staff has a positive and significant impact on members' satisfaction.

H2: The perceived quality of the room has a positive and significant impact on members' satisfaction.

H3: The perceived quality of the hotel has a positive impact on members' satisfaction.

These hypotheses were tested through a multiple linear regression analysis, aiming to identify which factors have the greatest weight in explaining customer satisfaction. The quantitative approach adopted allows for assessing the statistical validity of each predictor and its relevance in the Elite members' experience, even in situations where the expected benefits are not delivered.

Data collection was through a structured questionnaire, applied through Google Forms platform, to the members of a luxury hotel loyalty program. Access was provided to members via a secure link, with the support of the reception team, at check-in and check-out times, and sixty-two valid responses were obtained.

The questionnaire was built based on scales validated by Nunko et al. (2019) and Goeltom et al. (2020) and adapted to the reality of the hotel chosen. The items were grouped into four categories, and rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"):

Hotel quality: cleanliness, physical environment, response to complaints, and fulfilment of promises (Goeltom et al., 2020);

- Room quality: comfort, noise, temperature, and physical space (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991);
- Staff quality: empathy, availability, and personalized attention (Kotler, 2016);
- Customer satisfaction: overall evaluation of the experience and perceived value (Oliver, 2014; Anderson, 1994).

A non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, based on the hotel's database and the availability of guests during the collection period. This method is considered appropriate in applied and exploratory contexts when the aim is to collect data from a specific and accessible group (Malhotra et al. 2012).

Data collection took place between March and May, during check-in and check-out times at the hotel. A total of 62 (majority male, n=35) valid responses were obtained, evenly distributed across the different levels of the loyalty program, with the following distribution: Silver - 24.2%, Gold - 21.0%, Platinum - 17.7%, Titanium - 19.4%, and Ambassador - 17.7%, which allowed observing the diversity of perceptions among the different status members. The statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (version 29), which is widely used in quantitative studies in the service sector. All data was collected and analysed in accordance with ethical guidelines and the anonymity of individuals and organisations fully preserved.

4. Findings

The presentation of the findings is structured into variables description, scale reliability and regression analysis.

The variable hotel quality was broken down into two factors, when using an exploratory factor analysis. This approach made it possible to distinguish between:

- Factor 1 - Hotel Quality 1: Structural and functional aspects of the hotel, such as cleanliness, physical environment and response to complaints.
- Factor 2 - Hotel Quality 2: Perception of the benefits associated with the loyalty program, including upgrades and accrual of nights.

To ensure internal consistency of the scales used, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated, a statistical indicator that measures the degree of coherence among the items in each dimension of the questionnaire.

The scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with values above the 0,70-threshold recommended by the literature (Taber, 2018) (Hotel Quality: 0,84; Room Quality: 0,86; Staff Quality: 0,88; Customer Satisfaction: 0,90).

The model presented a coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0,653$, indicating that 65.3% of the variance in guest satisfaction is explained by the variables under analysis. This value demonstrates a strong relationship between the predictors analysed and the level of guest satisfaction, being considered high in the context of service studies (Hair, 2022).

The multiple regression analysis revealed that satisfaction is driven by two key variables:

- Staff Quality ($\beta = 0,56$; $p < 0,001$): The factor with the greatest impact, highlighting the importance of human contact, empathy, and proactivity.
- Room Quality ($\beta = 0,28$; $p = 0,007$): Confirmed the relevance of tangible elements (comfort, cleanliness, and acoustics) for the luxury segment. Interestingly, symbolic benefits (rewards and upgrades) did not show a statistically significant impact on satisfaction.

Despite the reduced number of responses, the results are in line with both classical and contemporary models: SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml, 1991) by reinforcing the dimensions of empathy and tangibility; Perceived Justice (Oliver, 2014) since it explains why customers maintain satisfaction even without extra benefits, as long as the core service is excellent and personalized; and Relationship Marketing (Kotler and Keller, 2016) since the creation of long-term value relies on emotional bonds, not just on promotional incentives.

5. Conclusion and Practical Implications

This research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge about how dimensions of quality perception influence the members' satisfaction of a luxury hotel loyalty program.

Therefore, this study revealed that the core service works as a value driver, since true loyalty and satisfaction depend on the hotel's ability to deliver the basic experience (staff and room). Symbolic benefits lose relevance in the absence of service consistency.

Additionally, it was found that the lack of perks (such as upgrades) does not compromise satisfaction if the service is empathetic and memorable. This is vital given that occupancy operational limitations often prevent the provision of these extras.

Prioritize investment in continuous team training and the maintenance of physical quality is also required. Personalization and attention to detail should be the strategic differentiators, creating lasting emotional bonds.

From these results, it is concluded that the factors experienced during the stay (especially interaction with the staff) have a greater impact on perceived value and satisfaction than the abstract or symbolic benefits of the loyalty program. This finding corroborates recent studies on luxury hospitality and loyalty, where personalization and human service are identified as the main differentiators of the customer experience (Nunkoo et al., 2020). In sum, the satisfaction of members of a luxury hotel loyalty program is anchored in the operational and human excellence of the stay, rather than in the accumulation of promotional benefits.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation abides in the fact that the study was conducted for convenience just at a single hotel unit with a limited sample ($N=62$), which restricts the ability to generalize the results. Another limitation was the sample that was made by convenience, based on guest availability during the collection period and the guests who participated may not be representative of all members of the loyalty program. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate the study across multiple units and countries, as well as to include new variables (e.g., reason for travel, frequency of stay). It would be advised to study the impact of AI technologies on service personalization for hotel loyalty program.

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Ethics Declaration

Personal and organisational identities have been anonymised. No additional ethical issues arose during this research.

AI Declaration

ChatGPT 5.1 was used as a writing aid for wording support, grammar improvement, and occasional rephrasing.

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