



Drivers of Customer Delight and Loyalty in a Boutique Hotel: An Application of Online Review Analysis

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Abstract

Many studies revealed that customer delight has a significant impact on customer loyalty (i.e., repurchase intention or positive word-of-mouth). Loyalty is recognized as one of the factors which drive the success of organizations because loyal customers help reduce costs since they are less expensive to retain considering the sales from repeat customers over the whole period of their relationship with the company. Loyalty also can be in the form of advocacy or positive word of mouth (WOM) or this day and age of Web 2.0; it is called eWOM. With the new word-of-mouth marketing, prospective customers tend to listen to what other customers have to say about a hotel, more than any other source and are more likely to patronize establishments that have received excellent reviews. This study aimed to discover what delightful experiences expressed in online reviews lead to customer loyalty in a boutique hotel setting. Employing content analysis, the boutique hotel's online review results revealed that its guests were delighted by how the hotel staff treated them and made them feel. Loyal guests were entertained by friendly, helpful, excellent, well-trained hotel staff who also displayed the right attitude. Loyal guests were also delighted by the overall cleanliness of the hotel, the cleanliness of the rooms, having comfortable beds; the quality of food in general, and buffet breakfast, in particular. The location of the hotel plays a significant factor among loyal customers if the area suits the purpose of their travel. This research will help boutique hotel management to consistently provide delightful experiences to customers, which could lead to loyalty.

Keywords

Customer delight, customer loyalty, boutique hotel, online review analysis

1 Introduction

In this day and age where the online review sites such as TripAdvisor, is influential, the online review of a product or service may influence the decision of a potential customer of a business. Positive reviews could attract new customers. Companies also realize that merely satisfying guests might not lead to loyalty. Thus they should try harder by delighting customers (Alexander, 2010). As of this writing, only a few papers have been written on customer delight, particularly in the context of the hotel industry. This research aims to discover what delightful experiences expressed

in online reviews, lead to customer loyalty in a boutique hotel setting. Hotel managers can benefit from this study by providing information on how to create customer relationship management programs that enable them to keep their customers. The typologies of customer delight designed by Torres and Kline (2006) was used to classify and analyze the positive feedback of the customers.

This study will examine the customer delight drivers, which lead to guest loyalty in a boutique hotel in Manila. The managers of the boutique hotel being studied can benefit from the results of this paper by being informed on how to continuously create delightful experiences for their guests as part of their customer relationship management strategy. This paper will also add to the body of researches on service quality management, particularly in attracting and retaining boutique hotel guests. This study covered the positive online reviews of guests of an independently managed boutique hotel located in Manila, covering the period January 2014 to August 2015. Since the researcher used only one boutique hotel, the results cannot be generalized for the hotel industry.

2 Literature Review

Customer Delight

When the customer receives what is expected, the customer is satisfied (Berman, 2005; Crotts, Pan, & Raschid, 2008; Finn, 2005; McNeilly & Barr, 2006; Torres & Kline, 2006). Satisfaction is a combination of emotion and reason, while delight is an emotion. Delight, as an emotion, comprised of cheerfulness, happiness, joy, pleasure, and surprise (Kumar & Iyer, 2001). When a customer's experience moves past satisfaction, the customer experiences pleasurable emotion. The expectancy-disconfirmation theory stated that delight happens when a customer is pleasantly surprised as a reaction to an experienced disconfirmation to the service, or product, or towards the business organization (Oliver & Linda, 1981). Delight follows when the outcome of the customer experience is positive, and that outcome is unexpected (Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1997). Expectations are one of the most widely used standards of comparison in the evaluation of service quality, so receiving something unexpected, may it be tangible or intangible, can lead to delight (Kumar, Olshavsky, & King, 2001). Kumar and Iyer (2001), concluded in their studies that factors that concern service providers' interpersonal behavior (i.e., attitude and helpfulness) distinguish customer satisfaction and delight about the business' characteristics of service, such as cleanliness, and speed of service delivery. The standards used by a customer to judge the quality of service or product are that customer's expectations. Expectations are created by either the company's brand promise (advertisement, word of mouth, reviews) or the customer's past experiences with the same company or competitor. Satisfaction is the result of the evaluation of service by the customer in comparison with their expectations (Verma, 2003). For example, customers expect to receive the value for their money when they book a hotel room. Someone who paid for a five-star accommodation would expect no less than five-star service. A five-star accommodation category comes with features and benefits that cannot be found in lower star-rated accommodation. Delight will occur when customers' expectations are exceeded (McNeilly & Barr, 2006). Finn (2005) states that "Customer delight is conceptualized as an emotional response, which results from surprising

and positive levels of performance (p.104)." But when a customer has low expectations but is satisfied and happy with the service or product, his emotional state could be "delight." Delight emotionally bonds the customer with the company, with the product, or with the service. By "wowing" the customers, the experience may deliver additional emotional benefits to the customers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Crotts et al. (2008) regarded delight as a combination of happiness and surprise. In Verma's (2003) qualitative study, delight is described as "pleasurable," "unforgettable," "surprisingly memorable." Schneider and Bowen's (1985) model of human needs, self-esteem, and security tend to elicit customer delight. Cook, Bowen, Dasu, Stewart, & Tansik (2002) recognized friendliness and professionalism as human factors relevant to service design to delight customers. Sufficient problem resolution may lead to delight, according to Patterson (1997). Torres and Kline (2013) highlighted the importance of obtaining customer delight in the hotel industry through the five delight typologies of (1) problem resolution delight (hotel staff's problem resolution skills), (2) charismatic delight (staff's friendliness and amiability), (3) professional delight (staff's excellence in performing job-related tasks), (4) comparative delight (occurs when guests feel they receive better service and product in the hotel they are currently staying in versus their experience with other hotels they have visited before), and (5) fulfillment delight (when hotel staff fulfills the guest's needs for self-esteem, respect, and being made to feel important). Patterson (1997) stated that customer delight is the most effective way to increase customer loyalty.

Delight as Driver of Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment to repurchase or patronize a preferred product consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts which could cause switching behavior (Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1997). Achieving customer satisfaction, retention, and delight will result in more significant market share and profitability (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). Hicks, Page, Behe, Dennis, and Fernandez (2005) revealed that unlike satisfaction, delight has a significant impact on repurchase intention. Loyalty is desirable since retaining current customers is less expensive and more comfortable than finding and developing new ones. Loyal customers may also help to reduce costs because they are probably less costly to deal with and the costs of sales, marketing and set-up can be amortized over the whole period of their relationship with the company. Companies also realize that losing one customer means losing not just a single sale, but losing the customer's lifetime value (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). There are two dimensions of loyalty behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Yi & La, 2004). Behavioral loyalty the commitment to repurchase, or willingness to return to the destination, it could also be the actual repeat purchasing of a brand by a consumer over time that is measured and directly affects brand sales (Rundle-Thiele & Mackay, 2001). While the goal is for customers to buy and repurchase the products or services, there is still much value if customers engage with the brand and talk positively about their experiences (Kasolowsky, 2014), and that is in the form of attitudinal loyalty which refers to the level of consumer's psychological attachments and attitudinal advocacy towards the company, which can be in the form of willingness to recommend a product to others (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In hospitality and tourism setting,

attitudinal loyalty is measured by the degree of customers' intentions to revisit the destination and in their willingness to recommend the destination to others (Li & Petrick, 2008; Yi & La, 2004). Attitudinal loyalty is reflected in the desire to support a service provider to other consumers either through word of mouth (WOM) or online reviews (Oppermann, 2000).

Online Review as a form of eWOM

For many years word of mouth (WOM) has been considered more important than advertising in promoting awareness and influencing buyers to try a product. In this digital age, WOM becomes eWOM because of Web 2.0, which has become a significant factor of User-Generated Content (UGC). Customers have become empowered to write online reviews, which can influence the buying decision of a potential buyer. According to Hoffman (2011), recent studies have shown that 70% to 79% of consumers use the Internet to find local businesses; 67% to 71% of local consumers have consulted online reviews of local businesses, and 67% to 69% trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. It is also worth mentioning that Google favors online reviews because numerous mobile clients utilize the search engine more. Towsley (2014) also emphasized that online reviews help improve search ranking since many reviews will contain tags or keywords that acquire new clients. A review is usually indicated by a numerical star rating scale representing its value, often together with feedback or comments. With the modern word-of-mouth marketing, new customers listen to what other customers have to say more than any other source. They are more likely to patronize those establishments that have received excellent reviews. People form or change their views, attitudes, or behaviors in response to what others say about products and services. In this case, an organization enables existing clients to do the promoting to create new clients (Towsley, 2014). For some products, the buying action may only be a one-time purchase; a traveler checking in a hotel may not revisit the hotel because he may not go back to the destination. In this case, hotels strive to meet or even exceed their guest's expectations making sure to provide a positive experience for the guest. The positive experience provided by hotels gives the staff the confidence to encourage their guest to write that one-time online review because a positive review will influence the decisions of potential hotel guests.

Summary

Based on the reviewed literature, these researchers have previously highlighted the importance of customer delight because delight influences loyalty, which drives profit and creates positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Hicks et al., 2005; Torres & Kline, 2006). This paper supports studies about the factors that influence customer delight which leads to either attitudinal loyalty (Kasolowsky, 2014; Oppermann, 2000; Yi & La, 2004) or behavioral loyalty (Rundle-Thiele & Mackay, 2001) and explores its applicability to a boutique hotel. This study extends support for the conceptualization of customer delight, which leads to loyalty (Finn, 2005; Phillips & Baumgartner, 2002). The factors of customer delight experience from the studies, were meeting human needs for security and self-esteem (Crotts, et.al., 2008) professionalism and friendliness (Cook, et.al., 2002;

Finn, 2005), attitude and helpfulness (Kumar, Olshavsky, & King, 2001; Kumar & Iyer, 2001), customer service, quality of rooms, quality of food, cleanliness, value, and family friendliness (Ramanathan & Ramarathan, 2011; Verma, 2003), accommodations (Torres & Kline, 2006). For this study, the researcher used the Delight Typology Framework of Torres and Kline (2013).

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework (Figure 1), the researcher utilized the Delight Typology framework of Torres and Kline (2013). A Customer Delight Typology explains how hotel customers could be delighted in terms of (1) problem resolution delight, (2) professional delight, (3) comparative delight, (4) charismatic delight, and (5) fulfillment Delight. These delight drivers lead to either attitudinal or behavioral customer loyalty. Problem resolution delight occurs when the hotel service providers are equipped with problem solving skills most especially if the problem. An example would be when a guest failed to make a reservation in a famous restaurant which is always fully booked, and the hotel staff found ways to make the reservations possible) does not concern the hotel. Another example would be a hotel guest having difficulty rebooking his flights and the hotel staff went above and beyond to help the guest in rebooking the trip, offered transportation, etc. Interpersonal skills, like being amiable, friendly, approachable, and effectively connect to guests are some of the drivers of charismatic delight. The abilities, skills, knowledge of hotel employees in performing their jobs excellently are a professional delight.

An example would be a housekeeper who was expected to make-up a room and was able to do it right on schedule, based on housekeeping standards in terms of cleanliness and replenishment of amenities. When guests compare their over-all hotel, stay with other hotels they've been into, that is a comparative delight. So, the hotel should make sure that their guests are receiving better products and services during their stay. Hotel employees also should consider fulfilling the needs of guests, psychologically, that is, their self-esteem. Fulfillment delight takes place when the hotel guest feels welcomed, critical, and much respected. These delight drivers lead to either attitudinal or behavioral customer loyalty.

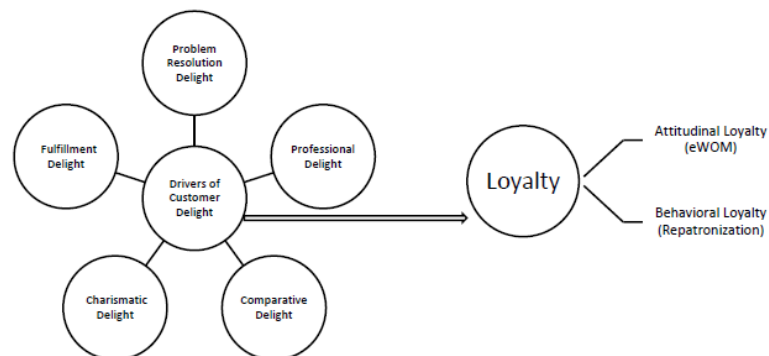


Figure 1 Drivers of Customer Delight Leading to Loyalty

3 Methods and Data

This paper is a qualitative study employing a case study approach. Since this study focused on delight, only the positive online reviews were used, so the 305 recorded positive online reviews, covering the period January 2014 to August 2015, from the Customer Feedback Management System (CFMS) of a boutique hotel in Manila represented the convenience sample. The CFMS is a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system where the online reputation manager (the person in charge of monitoring the guest's online reviews) inputs or encodes the monitored guests' online reviews from TripAdvisor, Agoda, Hotels.com, Booking.com, Expedia, ctrip.com, Travelocity.com.

The researcher selected this independently managed boutique hotel in Manila because its location is convenient to visit for ocular and observation, and the researcher had access to the sources of data (i.e., management and staff). Instead of using a survey instrument to find out what factors will make the boutique hotel guests loyal, the researcher decided that it was better to acquire the actual feedback of the guests which was available online. The basis of the data was from the guests' real experiences and not just perceptions. The researcher sent a letter to the general manager requesting for the recorded online positive guests' feedback. The general manager allowed access and endorsed the researcher to the front office manager, who emailed the required data to the researcher. The data directly came from the hotel's CFMS. The researcher did not collect any data from online review sites since there was no need to do so because the hotel already had a system in place (i.e., monitor and record the online reviews of the guests regularly). The general manager also gave the author permission to coordinate with or interview her, the frontline supervisor, or the staff during data collection to verify or clarify information.

The researcher employed content analysis, descriptive statistics, and frequency distribution in analyzing the data. Figure 2 shows the process of data analysis through text mining. From the collected 305 positive online reviews, the researcher first identified the loyal customers. The loyal customers' reviews were content analyzed if reviews contained customer delight drivers. The delight drivers identified were classified according to Torres & Kline's (2013) Delight Typology. Since the data collected were in MS Word format, the researcher utilized the "word search" feature of MS Word to look for words which represent or describe or signify customer loyalty to the hotel and delightful experience.

Measurement of Customer Loyalty

The analysis of customer loyalty in this study is the guest's willingness to return (WTR) or recommend the hotel (attitudinal loyalty), and the guest coming back to the hotel (behavioural loyalty). In order to identify which among the 305 positive online reviews were loyal customers (Table 1), the researcher utilized the word search feature of MS Word to look for the words "will go back to this hotel again", "will come back to this hotel", "I recommend this hotel", "you should try this hotel", "will visit again", "will use this hotel again" for the WTR/Recommends the hotel category. After carefully reading the outputs from 305 reviews, the researcher identified 111 reviews expressing WTR/Recommends the hotel. For the Returning Guests category, the researcher sought

the words “my nth time in this hotel...” , “I’ve been using this hotel...” , “I’ve been going back to this hotel...”.

Measurement of Delight

To confirm whether these loyal guests are delighted, the researcher analyzes the 158 online reviews of these loyal guests. The researcher used the definition of customer delight as an emotion composed of joy, exhilaration, pleasure, or excitement or as a combination of happiness and surprise. Using text mining to verify Torres & Kline (2013) Delight Typology application, to find out if these loyal guests were delighted, the researcher found the following words used by the loyal guests in their online reviews:

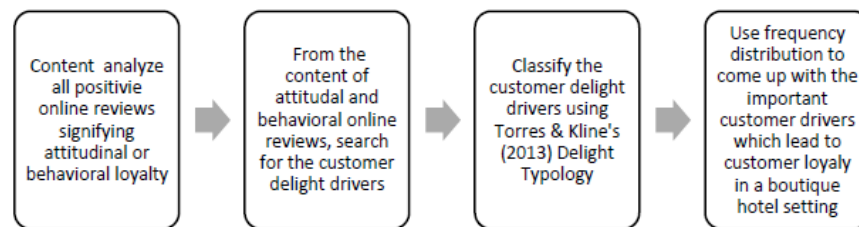


Figure 2 Data Analysis Process

4 Results and Discussion

After careful validation, and subjecting the sample to the measurement of loyalty and delight, Table 1 shows that out of 305 online reviews, 111 (36%) expressed their willingness to return (WTR) or recommend the hotel (attitudinal loyalty) while 47 (15%) were already returning guests (behavioural loyalty). The remaining 147 (48%) reviews were still positive but contained no expression of WTR or recommending the hotel. They also did not write whether it was their first time or returning guests of the hotel.

Table 1: Total Number Positive Online Reviews - WTR and Returning Guests

Category	Online Reviews	Percentage
1. Willing to Return (WTR)/ Recommending the hotel (Attitudinal Loyalty)	111	36%
2. Returning Guests (Behavioral Loyalty)	47	15%
3. Did not express WTR nor recommend the hotel	147	48%
	n=305	100%

This paper just focused on the 52% of the loyal guests' online reviews (Table 2) those who were considered loyal (i.e., guests who expressed their willingness to return (WTR) and those who

recommended the hotel combined with the returning guests). Those who did not show whether they would return or recommend the hotel but wrote positive reviews (48) were not included in data analysis.

Table 2: Total Number of Positive Online Reviews – Loyal Customers (WTR+Returning)

Category	Online Reviews	Percentage
1. Loyal Guests (WTR+Returning)	158	52%
2. Did not express WTR nor recommending the hotel	147	48%
	n=305	100%

Table 3 shows that those who were willing to return (WTR) and recommend the hotel placed greater emphasis on the staff. In terms of frequencies, the following drivers appeared in the online reviews: staff (88 times or 74% of total frequencies), cleanliness of the hotel (39 times or 35%), food (37 times or 33%), buffet breakfast (34 times or 31%), location (34 times or 31%), rooms (34 times or 31%), price (11 times or 10%) and comfortable bed (7 times or 6%). Cleanliness of the hotel included rooms, bathroom, lobby, and dining area; food, and buffet breakfast included quality, taste, and variety, while rooms covered design, size, and comfort level.

Table 3: Positive Online Reviews – Willing To Return / Recommends the Hotel

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Staff	88	74%
Cleanliness	39	35%
Food	37	33%
Buffet breakfast	34	31%
Location	34	31%
Rooms	34	31%
Price	11	10%
Comfortable bed	7	6%
	n=111	

As shown in Table 4, the returning guests placed greater emphasis on the staff. Staff appeared in the online review 47 times or 100%, while cleanliness of the hotel was mentioned only 34 times or 72%. These were followed by location, which was cited 13 times or 28%, food, 10 times or 21%, buffet breakfast 8 times or 17%, and rooms nine times or 19%. The bottom three were buffet breakfast (mentioned 8 times, or 17%), price (cited 7 times or 15%) and comfortable bed (mentioned twice or 4%).

Table 4: Positive Online Reviews – Returning Guests

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Staff	47	100%
Cleanliness	34	72%
Location	13	28%
Food	10	21%
Rooms	9	19%
Buffet Breakfast	8	17%
Price	7	15%
Comfortable bed	2	4%
	n=47	

Combining the results of who are willing to return, and those recommending the hotel, and those who are returning guests revealed the following findings (Table 5); The staff was given the most considerable emphasis (83%), followed by cleanliness (32%), food (30%), location (30%), rooms and buffet breakfast (both at 27%), price (11%), and finally comfortable bed (5%).

Table 5: Positive Online Reviews – Loyal Guests (WTR + Returning Guests)

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Staff	131	83%
Cleanliness	50	32%
Food	47	30%
Location	47	30%
Rooms	43	27%
Buffet Breakfast	42	27%
Price	18	11%
Comfortable bed	8	5%
	n=158	

The loyal customers' description of the staff is shown in Table 5.1. Friendly was mentioned 47 times (30%), helpful 32 times (20%), excellent 21 times (13%), pleasant 16 times (10%), and other characteristics (courteous, outstanding, professional, attentive, nice, caring, smiling, lovely, well trained, and [having] right attitude).

Table 5.1 Positive Online Reviews – Staff Characteristics

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Friendly	47	30%
Helpful	32	20%
Excellent	21	13%
Pleasant	16	10%
Courteous	13	8%
Outstanding	7	4%
Professional	7	4%
Attentive	6	4%
Nice	6	4%
Caring	5	3%
Smiling	5	3%
Lovely	2	3%
Well trained	2	2%
Good Attitude	2	1%
	n=158	

The expression of delight in the related literature were reinforced in the contents of the online reviews by loyal guests (Table 6). It is also worth mentioning that the word “very” (positively used to describe an experience, or product, or staff) appeared 88 times in the 158 online reviews.

Table 6 Positive Online Reviews – Expression of Delight

Expressions of Delight	Frequency	Percentage
“very”	88	56%
enjoy	17	11%
pleasant	9	6%
happy	7	4%
surprised	5	3%
impressed	4	3%
fantastic	4	3%
delight	2	1%
better than expected	2	1%
n=158		

Table 6.1 “Very” to describe product and services

Staff	Rooms / Price	Food	Stay / Experience
very friendly staff	very quiet room	very varied and good breakfast food	very satisfied,
very attentive staff	very nice rooms,	very tasty food	very happy,
very helpful	very clean room		very pleasant stay
very nice staff	very comfortable rooms		very much pleased with the service
very obliging staff	very well maintained		very fast check-in / check-out
very efficient staff	very reasonable price		very impressed with prompt reply
very accommodating staff	very fair price		very satisfactory choice of hotel
very high standard of staff			

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the findings supported the studies of Hicks et al. (2005), Oliver et al. (1997), Torres & Kline (2006) which showed that delight influences loyalty, which in turn drives profit and create positive word-of-mouth. Loyal customers expressed their loyalty through eWOM by writing positive reviews, representing their intentions to return to the hotel, recommend the hotel (attitudinal loyalty), keep on using the hotel or returning to the hotel (behavioral loyalty; loyalty-driven profit).

But what made these guests loyal were the delightful experiences they had during their stay in the hotel and these pleasant experiences were driven by how the staff or service providers treated them while receiving the product or service they needed like over-all cleanliness of the hotel, quality of food, quality buffet breakfast, the cleanliness of the rooms with comfortable beds. A delightful experience is a combination of how the guests feel while using the products and using the service they paid for. One of the examples would be this review:

Each time I stay at this hotel, I find it so very accommodating. I enjoy the staff the most, but the rooms are clean and comfortable also. The kitchen help in the cafe is always ready to help in addition to preparing delicious food. I am glad this hotel finds quality employees. I always look forward to staying in this hotel each [time] I am in the Philippines

The location of the hotel plays a significant factor for loyal customers if the location suits the purpose of their travel, such as if the hotel is near the embassy. One of the examples would be this review:

I have stayed at the hotel at least 20 times in the past two years. This is my first review on the hotel, and I want to say to everyone: The staff is just only one of the best I have come across in Manila. Super friendly and super helpful. The hotel is small, but the rooms are nice and luxurious with the bonus of being super clean! Also perfect location with easy access to US Embassy, local malls, local churches, etc. To sum it up, what influence this boutique hotel guests to be loyal is getting the product or service they needed to be combined with the delightful experience they have while interacting with empowered, professional, friendly, and respectful and courteous staff.

Managerial Implication

The researcher proposed an operational model for customer loyalty drivers for the boutique hotel being studied to capitalize on the results of this paper (Figure 3). This operational model proposes, that the boutique hotel manager(s) delight guests by (1) satisfying the personal needs of the guests; (2) providing quality food, clean rooms, comfortable beds, (3) being in a good location, and (4) charging a reasonable price. Delighting guests by providing their personal and practical needs could be improved by establishing systems and processes (procedural), empowering staff to solve the guest's concerns or problems, giving flexible rates, subjecting the team to continuous training to make them experts in their jobs like doing express check-in and check-out, housekeeping, cooking, and systems innovation.

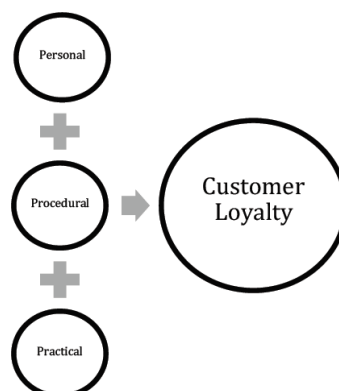


Figure 3: Customer Loyalty Drivers in a Boutique Hotel

Future research could further enlighten specific customer delight drivers with broader applicability (e.g., hotel industry). Also, research in the future may investigate if there's a difference between boutique hotel guests or upscale hotel guests' delightful experience drivers. The value of providing customer delight and its impact on loyalty, whether in terms of repurchase intention or positive eWOM, may also be further studied. The buzz about customer delight, which goes beyond customer satisfaction, is also worth investigating.

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