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Guest Delight: The Influence of Sustainable Performance and Guests' Perceived Health and Safety (Part 1)

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Executive Summary: Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the importance of guests' health, safety, and well-being in the hotel industry. Further, in today's highly competitive environment, hotels must orchestrate memorable experiences for guests to realize their value and become ambassadors for the brand. The purpose of this research is to explore the antecedents (i.e., sustainable performance, safety, and health) and the outcomes (i.e., brand love, trust, and willingness to pay more) of customer delight. Surveys will be distributed to hotel guests and the results can provide insights and implications for scholars and practitioners to better understand the concept of customer delight.

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KEYWORDS: *Customer delight, hotel branding, brand love, brand trust, guest well-being*

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive environment, it is not sufficient for hotels to be merely a place to sleep, eat, meet, entertain, or relax. Instead, hotels must orchestrate memorable experiences for guests to appreciate the value and become brand ambassadors. In particular, the sustainable performance of hotels has become increasingly important in the hospitality industry, with growing literature highlighting its positive impacts beyond cost savings, environmental sustainability, or financial performance.

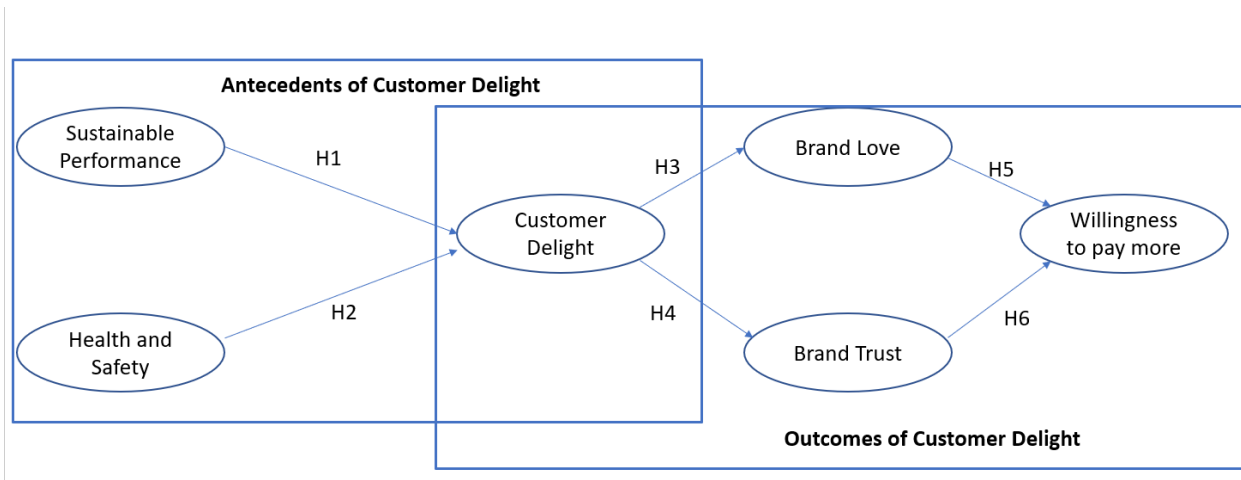
Sustainable performance has also been shown to provide a competitive advantage by meeting the growing demand for hotel guests. Further, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of guests' health and safety in the hotel industry.

Since 1997 when Oliver, Rust, and Varki published the foundational literature on the concept, researchers have devoted considerable attention to customer delight and its critical impact on customers' attitudes and behaviors. Many customer

delight studies attempted to examine the antecedents of customer delight, that is, customer joy, fun, and fulfillment of personal goals (Collier and Barnes, 2015; Howe and Douglas, 2016); employee’s effort, engagement, knowledge, and skills (e.g., Ali, Kim, Li, and Jeon, 2018); and physical environment, the culture of an organization, and self-service technologies (e.g., Collier and Barnes, 2015; Magnini, Torres and Kline, 2013).

No previous study has considered examining how a hotel’s sustainable performance and a guest’s perceived health and safety influence customer delight. Although most of the previous delight research is based upon disconfirmation theory (e.g., Oliver, 1980), this study attempts to apply the self-esteem needs theory (Torres and Kline, 2013), which can better understand the relationships among these concepts, which in turn influence brand love, trust, and willingness to pay more (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable Performance and Perceived Health and Safety

The existing literature suggests that a hotel's sustainable performance can have a significant positive impact on guests' perceptions of service quality and emotional responses, which ultimately leads to increased brand loyalty. Various studies have shown that customers who

perceive hotels to be environmentally friendly are more likely to have a positive perception of the brand (Balaji, Jiang, & Jha, 2019; Tajbakhsh, 2014; Yusof, Awang, Jusoff, & Ibrahim, 2017). Hotels that prioritize sustainable practices and effectively deliver are more likely to enhance guests' delight (Preiziosi, 2022). Customers who value environmental sustainability are willing to pay more to stay at a green hotel (Han, Hsu, & Lee, 2009; Kang, Stein, Heo, & Lee, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the hospitality industry, with a growing concern for guests' perceptions of health and safety in hotels. Studies have shown that perceived health and safety have become more important than ever in hotel guests' satisfaction and their decision to stay during the pandemic (Shin & Kang, 2020). Additionally, customers who perceived a higher level of health and safety measures at hotels were more likely to have higher levels of perceived service quality and overall satisfaction (Nunkoo, Teeroovengadam, Ringle, & Sunnassee 2020).

According to Torres and Kline (2013), self-esteem, or the need to feel cared for, respected, and noticed, is a critical human need that must be met. Thus, when customers' self-esteem needs are met, they feel special and significant, making them feel delighted (Torres & Kline, 2013). Fulfilling consumers' self-esteem needs can be an intriguing aspect of customer delight. For example, a hotel's sustainable, healthy, and safe guest service can be essential to properly fulfill customers' needs (Cook et al., 2002; Grandey et al., 2005). Therefore, the following hypotheses are suggested:

H1: Sustainable performance will have a significant and positive impact on customer delight.

H2: Perceive health and safety will have a significant and positive impact on customer delight.

Customer Delight

When customers perceive their service experience to be surprisingly better than

expected, they tend to feel delighted. Previous studies of customer delight have consistently demonstrated a positive impact of delight on customers' attitudes and behaviors such as increased repurchase intentions (e.g., Bartl, Gouthier, & Lenker, 2013), a greater likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth, and stronger loyalty to the provider (e.g., Chitturi et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2015). Further, this positive emotional experience is likely to enhance the level of confidence among consumers and develop positive attitudes toward the focal brand, which can lead to brand love and trust. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: Customer delight will have a significant and positive impact on brand love.

H4: Customer delight will have a significant and positive impact on brand trust.

Brand Love, Brand Trust, and Willingness to Pay More

Brand love has been defined as "the passion and emotional attachment that a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Brand love is distinct from satisfaction and trust and is defined as an affective construct with various types of emotions involved (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Albert et al. (2008) identified eleven dimensions to explain brand love: passion, duration of the relationship, self-congruity, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, beauty, trust, and declaration of affect. Studies suggest that customers who have high brand love are found to have increased revisit intention as well as a high willingness

to pay a price premium for the brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2020).

Brand trust is defined as the willingness to rely on a brand in which the customer has confidence in the reliability and integrity of the brand (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Researchers agree that brand trust is a key component in long-term customer-brand relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003) addressed that brand trust is based on the perception that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer. Brand trust has been identified as an affecting factor of behavioral intentions (Alan & Kabadayi, 2014). Consumers who trust a company and feel secure with the brand would have positive behavioral intentions toward the brand. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H5: Brand love will have a significant and positive impact on willingness to pay more.

H6: Brand trust will have a significant and positive impact on willingness to pay more.

RESEARCH METHODS

Measures

The survey questionnaire comprises seven sections: sustainable performance, perceived safety, and health, customer delight, brand love, brand trust, willingness to pay more, and demographic. All items are developed based on previous literature and measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicated “strongly agree.”

Sampling and Data Collection

Data will be collected through a web-based survey. Subjects will be overnight hotel guests at a hotel located in Midwest. Randomly selected guests will be invited to complete the online survey by email. Each respondent who completes the survey will receive a \$10 e-gift coupon to Starbucks.

Data Analyses

To test the proposed model, data will be analyzed using the standard partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The measurement model will be tested through a confirmatory factor analysis and the structural model will be then examined for causal relationships among constructs.

CONCLUSION

Discussions

This study is to examine the relationships among six constructs. Our research contributes to the customer delight literature by examining the determinants of customer delight from the self-esteem theory perspective. Findings from this study can provide a better understanding of customer delight and its antecedents and outcomes within the hospitality literature. The results can also provide insights for practitioners to implement the concept of customer delight into their customer service strategies.

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