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FROM SERVICE DELIVERY TO CRAFTING MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE: GUESTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF HOSPITALITY EMPLOYEES

Abstract

This study explores the role of staff service in creating memorable hotel experiences (MHEs) through the lens of customer perceptions. Drawing on 30,783 online reviews from 100 hotels across the world's ten most visited cities, a large-scale text analysis identified five staff-related components that significantly contribute to MHEs: emotional competence, responsiveness and problem-solving, professional competency, personalization, and adaptability and flexibility. Beyond identifying these dimensions, the study offers deeper insights into how guests interpret and value employee interactions that shape their overall experiences. The findings advance theoretical understanding of employee competencies within the experience economy and emphasize the importance of care, pride, and authenticity in service encounters. Practically, the study provides actionable implications for hospitality managers seeking to strengthen human resource strategies and enhance guest experiences that are distinctive, emotionally engaging, and memorable.

Keywords: Experience economy, memorable hotel experience, online review, employee competencies, data mining.

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Introduction

The rise of the experience economy has become increasingly influential in shaping tourism and hospitality practices. Pine and Gilmore (1999) define experiences from a business perspective as "events that engage individuals in a personal way" (p. 12). It highlighted a shift from the traditional "delivery-focused" service economy, which prioritizes quality offerings, to a "staged" economy where businesses design experiences that leave lasting impressions (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Building on this, Hemmington (2007) advanced the conceptualization of hospitality beyond service management, framing it as a commercial experience. His framework emphasized five dimensions central to the hospitality encounter, consisting of the host-guest relationship, acts of generosity, theatricality and performance, delightful surprises, and assurances of safety and security (Hemmington, 2007).

Within this evolution, hospitality organizations are increasingly expected to transition from traditional "service providers" to "experience providers" (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017). Even though a well-designed physical environment and effective servicescape design showed positive impacts on customer satisfaction (Bitner 1992; Nowacki and Niezgoda 2023), poor interpersonal interactions may undermine their overall experience (Sukhu and Bilgihan 2023). This shift raises a critical question for both scholars and practitioners of what competencies hospitality employees should possess in order to consistently create distinctive and memorable customer experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017).

In today's experience economy, experiential outcomes such as customer word-of-mouth (Hurombo, Basupi and Chatibura 2025) as well as online reviews (Gabbard and Dominic 2023) reflect not only that guests enjoyed their stay, but also that the experience left a strong and lasting

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impression that compelled them to share it with others. Such expressions offer valuable insights into what guests truly value and appreciate during their encounters (Joseph, Vasundhara and Thomas 2024). From a practical standpoint, this understanding can help bridge the gap between customer expectations and what hospitality providers deliver (Li et al. 2020). Guest perspective, which can be extracted from guest online reviews, could be the spur for hotel business improvement and innovation (Yin et al. 2023), including human resource management (Hu, Trivedi, and Teichert 2021).

Guided by the guest perspective, the present study examined the role of employees in the creation of memorable hotel experiences. Specifically, it investigated which staff attributes are most valued by guests and how these attributes provide new insights for the management of memorable experiences. While digital innovations have transformed service delivery, user-generated content, such as online reviews, plays an equally critical role by shaping guest expectations and perceptions. These reviews provide a rich source for examining how customers construct and communicate their memorable experiences (Herjanto and Gaur 2017). Accordingly, this study combines text mining with hermeneutic qualitative analysis of guest reviews to identify emergent staff attributes and introduce a concept as a lens for rethinking how hoteliers approach their work.

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Literature Review

Memorable Hotel Experience

The notion of the memorable experience was widely regarded as a new source of competitive advantage in hospitality and tourism, attracting growing scholarly and managerial attention (Tung et al. 2017). Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) defined memorable tourism experiences as those "positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred" (p. 13). Experiences are associated with strong affective responses, whether positive or negative, that generate a lasting "gut feeling" (Herjanto and Gaur 2017). However, positive experiences are of particular importance, as they have been shown to drive favorable outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions (Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick 2012). Memory is a crucial mechanism in shaping post-consumption evaluations and future decision-making; it functions as the single most important personal source of information guiding tourists' repeat visitation decisions (Sthapit and Coudounaris 2017). Accordingly, delivering memorable tourism experiences has become a key determinant of competitiveness in the tourism and hospitality industries (Kim and Ritchie 2014; Glaap and Ermolaeva 2024).

In this study, a memorable hotel experience (MHE) is defined as a positive experience that lasts in the guest's memory after their stay (Sthapit 2018). Beyond the immediate service interaction, such experiences foster a stronger and more enduring relationship that generates beneficial outcomes for hotels. Memorable experiences lead to higher guest satisfaction, strengthen intentions to return, and stimulate positive word-of-mouth communication (Agapito and Sigala 2024; Kim and So 2022).

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Scholars agree that memorable experiences are complex phenomena shaped by a combination of contextual, relational, and psychological factors (Herjanto and Gaur 2017). Destination drivers such as destination charisma and environmental conditions (Curtin 2010), along with local culture, activities, hospitality, infrastructure, environmental management, and physiography (Kim 2014), have been shown to play a central role. Relational aspects, including personalization and the authenticity of host - guest relationships, also emerge as critical in shaping positive impressions (Ariffin 2013). Psychological dimensions further enrich this understanding, with self-determined motivations, particularly the desire to learn, demonstrated to enhance engagement (Sie, Phelan and Pegg 2018), while perceptions of authenticity and sincerity significantly shape heritage experiences (Taheri, Gannon and Kesgin 2020). More recently, in line with the growing digitalization of tourism, smart tourism technologies have also been found to play a pivotal role in shaping memorable experiences, mediated through marketing and organizational practices (Elshaer and Marzouk 2022).

In the hotel context, research consistently reveals a set of recurring themes that determine memorable guest experiences. These include the quality of guest rooms, human interaction, physical design, culinary offerings, value for money, location, and overall atmosphere (Castellani et al. 2020; Hurombo, Basupi and Chatibura 2025; Sthapit and Coudounaris 2018). Building on this and drawing on insights from the world's top hotels, Herjanto and Gaur (2017) emphasize the central role of staff hospitality and professionalism, alongside guests' perceptions of their travel experiences and the effective management of hotel spaces.

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The role of staff in creating memorable hotel experiences

In tourism and hospitality, hospitality employees, especially front-line employees, have been highlighted due to their vital role in contributing to service quality and guest satisfaction (Marneros, Papageorgiou, and Efstathiades 2020). With the expansion of the experience economy, the role and competencies of hospitality employees have increasingly been of concern (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013), along with wider developments in the hospitality sector (Agapito and Sigala 2024). Excellent service delivery, with the central role of employees, enhances customer satisfaction, generates an emotional sense of memorable experience, and ultimately fosters guest loyalty (Ariffin and Maghzi 2012). Despite variations in hotel standards, the most critical factors influencing customer satisfaction are the quality and perceived value of services provided (Soifer, Choi and Lee 2021). Expanding this perspective, Vo et al. (2021), in their study of Vietnam's luxury hotel market, demonstrated that guest internet reviews reflect how staff service quality improves customer satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty. At the other end of the spectrum, studies of budget hotels show that, even when pricing is comparable, staff service quality often explains differences in customer evaluations and the popularity of these properties (Permatasari, Maghrifani, and Wibowo 2025).

Human interaction is a prerequisite for memorable hotel experiences (MHEs), which may be categorized into staff-guest interactions and guest-guest interactions (Hurombo, Basupi, and Chatibura 2025). The competence of hotel service teams is widely recognized as a critical element in enhancing service quality and meeting guest expectations (Wang et al. 2020). Staff encounters, consistently identified as at the core of memorable experiences beyond tangible aspects of the

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service environment, highlight that employee competencies in service delivery are central to shaping guest emotions and satisfaction (Herjanto and Gaur 2017; Meng and Lai 2024).

Hospitality employee competencies are evolving following changes in customer needs (Alshaibani et al. 2024) and the diversification of business context (He, Ahmad, and Razak 2024; Luo, So, and Hsieh 2018; Promnil, Srepirote, and Pooprueksachat 2024). Previous studies in hospitality have examined hotel employee service attributes through conceptual competency frameworks (Marneros, Papageorgiou, and Efstathiades 2020; Lou, So, and Hsieh 2018) as summarized in Table 1. However, the improvement of current competence levels related to service quality and guest satisfaction does not necessarily guarantee the creation of memorable experiences (Promnil, Srepirote, and Pooprueksachat 2024). To enhance hotel experiences, new competencies are needed, such as "hospitality intelligence", which extends beyond technical skills to include emotional, cultural, and experiential intelligence, as key competencies for co-creating guest experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013).

While the importance of "soft competencies" among hotel employees has been widely acknowledged (Table 1) and competencies aligned with the growing experience economy have begun to receive theoretical attention, there remains a pressing need to examine them from empirical perspectives (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013). Given that customers are highly engaged in hotel services (Yin et al. 2023), their evaluation ultimately determines whether the service has successfully delivered the intended experience (Gabbard 2023). From this perspective, employee competencies are not only demonstrated in action but are recognized and validated through how they are perceived, interpreted, and valued by guests (Gunawardana, Gamlath, and Herath 2024). Accordingly, guest perceptions become a crucial element in assessing the quality of guest-

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employee encounters (Pijls et al. 2017) and provide valuable guidance for developing and refining hospitality competencies (Yin et al. 2023). Building on this premise, the present study took a guest-centric approach, focusing on the attributes that guests value in employee-customer interactions and how these attributes contribute to the formation of memorable experiences. This shift emphasizes the importance of understanding not only what employees are trained to perform, but also how their behaviors are perceived and appreciated by guests in ways that leave lasting impressions (Meng and Lai 2024)

[Insert Table 1.]

User Generated Content

The growth of user-generated content (UGC) has transformed the way travelers make decisions (Chiappa and Alarcón-del-Amo 2015). In the digital era, online reviews are among the most influential forms of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). They provide peer-based insights and recommendations that influence choices of destinations, attractions, and accommodations, often outweighing conventional marketing messaging (Liu et al. 2020). As such, eWOM significantly shapes consumer perceptions and impacts hotel reputation (Gabbard 2023; Watson and Wu 2022). Beyond influencing decisions, online reviews have become a vital resource for understanding consumer behavior in tourism and hospitality (Joseph, Vasundhara, and Thomas 2024), offering hoteliers practical insights into how service quality affects customer satisfaction (Vo et al. 2021).

Building on this, UGC has evolved into a powerful research tool for examining customer expectations and assessments of product and service delivery (Brito, Ban, and Kim 2024; Hu et al. 2021; Kaveski Peres and Pacheco Paladini 2021). Studies using online reviews have identified a

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range of factors influencing hotel evaluations, including positive attributes such as room quality, location, value for money, and breakfast (Permatasari, Maghrifani, and Wibowo 2025), as well as negative aspects like noise and booking or check-in issues (Nowacki and Niezgoda 2023). While many studies emphasize the role of the physical environment in shaping positive guest feedback, staff service consistently emerges as one of the most frequently mentioned and influential attributes (Kaveski Peres and Pacheco Paladini 2021; Permatasari, Maghrifani, and Wibowo 2025). Moreover, guests who are either highly satisfied or strongly impacted by staff interactions tend to leave longer and more detailed reviews (Brito, Ban, and Kim 2024; Vo et al. 2021). This underscores the value of UGC as a rich source of insight into customer evaluations of employee performance, providing an authentic lens for understanding staff contributions to memorable hotel experiences.

Methodology

Research Design:

Content analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, which objectively examines textual data without relying on preconceived theories or frameworks, thereby allowing the emergence of insights unique to the study (Bengtsson 2016). To address the research aims, this study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines large-scale text mining with qualitative thematic analysis to investigate how memorable experiences are expressed in online customer reviews within the hospitality context. This approach aligns with recent calls by Agapito and Sigala (2024) to employ a mixology of research methods in order to capture a more comprehensive understanding of subjective experience.

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Thematic analysis is widely recognized as a powerful tool for identifying and interpreting themes within qualitative data, providing a structured way of organizing and making sense of complex textual material (Braun and Clarke 2006). Nevertheless, coding can at times become overly static and reductionist, fragmenting data and minimizing its contextual depth (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). To counterbalance this limitation, automated text mining in the present study was complemented with a hermeneutic approach of a subsample of reviews, thereby strengthening the robustness of the findings while preserving their contextual richness (Alvesson and Sandberg 2021).

Data selection

TripAdvisor was chosen as the data source for this study due to its widespread use and continued status as one of the world's largest travel review platforms. In 2024, its community posted nearly 80 million new contributions, including 31.1 million reviews and 38.1 million photos/videos, across its website and app (Tripadvisor 2024). Its wide-ranging coverage of accommodations, restaurants, and travel services, and reliability make it a robust platform and appropriate for the recent study.

Reviews were extracted from the TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice Best Hotels, which are determined annually based on the quality and quantity of traveler reviews. From each of the Top 10 most visited cities in 2024, (Euromonitor International 2024), the top 10 ranked hotels were selected. Review data were collected across a five-year period (January 2021 – August 2025) to ensure both recency and robustness in capturing evolving guest perceptions.

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Data analysis procedure

After extracting data using the TripAdvisor Review Scraper, the text underwent a pre-processing stage to ensure both quality and relevance. First, only English-language reviews exceeding 25 words were retained, as brief comments often lack sufficient narrative detail (Boyd 2017). Second, the dataset was limited to four- and five-star reviews, reflecting the study's emphasis on positive and memorable experiences. Third, reviews were filtered to include only those explicitly referencing memorable experiences, using keywords such as "memorable," "unforgettable," "extraordinary," "lasting impression," "experience," "once in a lifetime," and "special occasion" (Sthapit 2018). Finally, the data were cleaned, organized, and standardized to remove unnecessary content, thereby facilitating computational processing and enhancing analytical performance. Following this process, the final dataset comprised 30,783 reviews that were ready for subsequent analysis. The cities and their corresponding reviews are presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

The analysis proceeded in three stages.

Stage 1 focused on text mining analysis. The corpus was imported into Voyant Tools, an open-source text analysis environment (Gregory, Geiger, and Salisbury 2022), where topic modeling and frequency analysis were performed to detect recurrent themes across the dataset. The resulting clusters were then synthesized and grouped by the researchers into broader factors influencing customer experience.

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Stage 2 centered on staff-related collocation analysis. To explore employee-related aspects in more detail, collocate analysis was performed using staff-related keywords extracted from Voyant's text-mining process (e.g. staff, team, receptionist, concierge, server, housekeeper, manager, waiter). Using the words most frequently associated with these terms, specific staff attributes were identified as initial codes and collated into potential themes. Then the specifics of each theme were reviewed and validated in order to refine them, as well as the overall narrative given by the analysis, generating definitions and titles for each theme.

Stage 3 involved a hermeneutic analysis approach. To complement the computational findings, a random sub-sample of 500 reviews was subjected to interpretation, which exceeded the sample size for saturation (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). This stage allowed for the recognition of contextual nuances and latent meanings not easily captured by automated techniques, including affective tones, metaphors, and subtle forms of guest–host interaction (Paterson and Higgs 2005). Insights derived from this stage enriched the understanding of memorable experiences and validated the thematic categories generated through computational analysis.

To enhance credibility, coding decisions from both the collocation and hermeneutic phases were discussed iteratively among the research team until agreement was reached.

Findings

Topic modeling and frequency analysis (word count) identified the main terms appearing in the dataset. The researchers manually classified the resulting themes based on their assessment of each topic's important phrases. Five themes were established, each representing a separate factor

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highlighted by guests. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of reviews that included each element, and Figure 1 illustrates the connection between frequently mentioned terms in the dataset. Staff service, hotel facilities, food and beverage, location and atmosphere, and recreation and entertainment were identified as factors influencing guests' memorable experiences. Among these, staff service stood out as the most frequently mentioned. Taking into account that individual reviews could reference multiple aspects, an impressive 99.7% of the 30,783 guest reviews highlighted hotel staff, emphasizing the positive interaction with staff as the defining element that made their stays truly memorable.

For instance, one guest wrote: *"The hotel is very clean and my room was very comfortable but what made the stay really special was the staff. Sam and Maria made my stay memorable."* Another wrote *"To all the staff, it is you guys that make the magic happen here, thank you for everything you did to make my stay the best one I ever had!"*

Some guests explicitly noted that the quality of staff service motivated them to write reviews: *"Honestly, this place is so good that part of me doesn't want it to become too popular, but I felt compelled to write this review as a way to thank the amazing staff who welcomed us so warmly".* This evidence reinforces the central role of staff interactions in creating memorable hotel experiences.

[Insert Table 3.]

[Insert Figure 1.]

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The following round of investigation revealed five critical features of hotel staff that impact clients' memorable hotel experiences (MHE). Through a collocate analysis, independent researchers rigorously classified and categorized the extracted keywords (Table 4). Keywords associated with *hotel staff* were also visualized in the word cloud presented in Figure 2. Further validation and fostering of these themes were achieved through an open coding method on a sub-sample of the data, with the results shown in Table 5. Emotional competence, responsiveness and problem-solving, professional competency, personalization, and adaptability and flexibility are five key attributes.

Emotional competence refers to the emotional expressions and interpersonal behaviors demonstrated by staff during guest interactions. These include warmth, empathy, understanding, emotional resilience, and the ability to motivate and positively influence guests (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013; Goleman 1995). **Responsiveness and problem-solving** reflect staff's ability to promptly and effectively address guest inquiries, concerns, or issues, showing a genuine willingness to assist, clear communication about actions taken, and timely service delivery (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Sharma and Srivastava 2018). **Professional competency** refers to the ability to perform duties effectively while maintaining professional ethics, adopting a team-oriented mindset, and applying technical and communication skills (Cheng and Wong 2015). **Personalization** involves proactively understanding, anticipating, and tailoring services and experiences to meet individual customer needs and preferences (Lei et al. 2024; Sørensen and Jensen 2015). **Adaptability and flexibility** describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to remain open to change, respond promptly to unforeseen events, and adjust actions to accommodate varying customer needs (Warier 2014; Secchi, Roth, and Verma 2020).

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[insert Figure 2.]

[Insert Table 4.]

[Insert Table 5.]

The hermeneutic qualitative reading further revealed interesting insights from the customer perspective.

Emphasize authenticity and genuineness

It was evident that the emotional dimension was repeatedly highlighted and carried the greatest weight among all staff-related reviews. Beyond general remarks such as *"friendly"*, *"kind"*, or *"welcoming"*, guests particularly stressed the actions that made them feel truly cared for and warmly received, describing staff as *"warm and sincere"* and *"patient and affectionate."* Enthusiasm that was driven by genuine intent was valued even more than professional support or technical service. As one guest put it: *"This level of service went far beyond professional courtesy - it felt like genuine hospitality."*

An interesting finding emerged in contrast to the commonly discussed experiential domain of escape (Pine and Gilmore 1999). While prior research suggests that memorable hospitality experiences (MHEs) often arise from novelty and immersion in unfamiliar physical environments (Herjanto and Gaur 2017), when it came to human interaction, guests expressed a preference for qualities that felt close to the heart, those that created a sense of familiarity and belonging, much like being at home. As one review noted: *"We felt so welcome and at home, we enjoyed ourselves immensely!"* Another guest echoed this sentiment*: "Amazing hospitality that made it a home away from home. [GM] and his team are ever so attentive and welcoming. The hotel experience is so*

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wonderful that my children call it my home in Bangkok and ask to revisit every time we are planning a holiday - isn't that a testament to how homely it feels for us."

These reflections indicate that memorable experiences are profoundly shaped by guests' perceptions of emotional interactions, particularly when those interactions are portrayed with authenticity. *"It was a demonstration of genuine care, a subtle yet powerful expression of the hotel's commitment to fostering a positive and memorable guest experience."*

Exceeding Expectations through Dedication

To go beyond being a "service provider" to being an "experience provider", hospitality employees must demonstrate their abilities in a way that creates the greatest value for guests, often by exceeding expectations. Guests cognize and deeply appreciate the display of effort, passion, and drive for excellence. As one guest summarized, *"The staff went above and beyond in every way."* Another guest also highlighted that *"The thoughtfulness and effort put into celebrating with us made the day feel extra special. It was a heartwarming gesture that I'll always remember and appreciate, showcasing their dedication to going the extra mile for their guests."* Guests frequently noted that when staff go beyond scripted duties, acting deliberately, willingly, and with dedication to create the best possible guest experience. *"Thank you for all the amazing details and for reading our minds in every activity and time that we spend in the hotel."*

Personalized Connections

Special gestures and personalized treatments often leave guests with lasting memories and profound emotional impressions. For instance, one guest recalled: *"She noted my recent birthday on my passport, and the next thing I knew she had sent a small birthday mousse underneath a*

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cloche with a card, candle, and lighter to ring in a belated birthday." Beyond the material gesture, what resonated most was the sense of personal recognition and care that transformed the experience into something memorable.

Guest feedback frequently highlights gratitude not just for service delivery, but for the emotional gift of experience. Expressions such as *"I want to express my gratitude, especially to Paul Peker, for his support during my stay here"* and *"I am deeply indebted to Mr. Eddie for his thoughtful consideration and the profound impact he had on my overall experience"* illustrate that staff are not merely fulfilling professional duties, they are perceived as active creators of customer experience.

Notably, guests often make a point to mention staff by name in their reviews. *"Especially Milan and Marcus from reception, Fanny and Danny from Caprice, TMs from IRD and HSKP, their services are terrific"*, thus underscoring the significance of individual employees in shaping hospitality experience. This practice goes beyond standard complementing of the hotel itself, it reflects the recognition of personal, human connections. In these cases, service is no longer scripted but personalized, indicating that the staff members took ownership of the guest's experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

With the emergence of the experience economy, the hospitality industry has become one of the most closely related sectors, rethinking its business strategies and organizational practices to meet

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changing customer expectations (Agapito and Sigala 2024; Kim and So 2022). This transformation demands not only innovative approaches but also new competencies from employees, who are increasingly positioned as co-creators of guest experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017). While past research has predominantly examined broad antecedents of hotel experiences (Hurombo, Basupi, and Chatibura 2025; Nowacki and Niezgoda 2023), the present study underscores the critical need to transform hotel employees from merely as service providers to nurturing true hosts with a deep-seated devotion to unforgettable experiences (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017; Kim and So 2022).

This study applied content analysis of user-generated content (UGC), integrating text mining with qualitative interpretation, to capture customer perspectives on hotel employee attributes. Findings reveal a range of factors influencing guest experiences, such as staff service, facilities, food and beverage, location and ambiance, and recreation and entertainment, with employee-guest interaction consistently emerging as the most decisive element. Specifically, five employee attributes were identified as shaping memorable experiences, i.e. *emotional competence*, *responsiveness* and *problem-solving*, *professional competence*, *personalization*, and *adaptability and flexibility*.

Guest perceptions of emotional engagement align with competencies associated with emotional intelligence, service orientation, and interpersonal effectiveness (Cheng and Wong 2015; Gelacio-Alcedo et al. 2025; Tuble 2016), which are increasingly emphasized in hospitality competency models and are central to hospitableness (Tasc, Aktas, and Acikgoz 2021). Since emotions are a key factor in shaping intriguing experiences (Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung 2007), the emotional connection displayed by employees has a strong impact on long-term memory (Sthapit

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and Coudounaris 2017). This study further revealed that emotional interactions are most powerful when perceived as genuine and relatable.

Responsiveness and problem-solving emerged as core competencies, aligning with both managerial and frontline requirements (He, Ahmad and Razak 2024; Vaitiekunaite 2022). Guests perceive seamless assistance and timely resolution of issues as essential to feeling at ease during their stay, reinforcing satisfaction (Sharma and Srivastava 2018). This dimension also resonates with evolving service contexts, from traditional servicescapes to new intelligent service environments (Yin et al. 2023).

Professional competence continues to be a cornerstone of service delivery, traditionally defined as employees' capacity to perform their tasks effectively (Cheng and Wong 2015). Researchers have highlighted that this encompasses technical abilities, product knowledge, operational capacity, and teamwork (Li et al. 2025; Liasidou et al. 2024). From the guest perspective, competence also reflects employees' attitudes toward their work, dedication to serving others, and passion for their roles. This suggests that professional competence, as perceived by guests, combines technical proficiency with softer, emotive qualities that convey credible professionalism.

Personalization has long been recognized as an experience management strategy in luxury hotels (Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola 2018) and has gained renewed significance within the experience economy (Castellani 2020). This involves tailoring service interactions to individual guest preferences, expectations, and emotional needs (Sørensen and Jensen 2015), often requiring prior customer knowledge, proactive effort and additional resources (Lei et al. 2024). Beyond customization, this study suggested that personalization also emerges when employees bring their

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individuality into service encounters, with guests recognizing them as personal experience creators. While many competency frameworks subsume personalization under broader categories like service orientation or behavioral intelligence (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017; Vaitiekunaite 2022), the evidence here supports treating personalization as a distinct and vital competency in creating memorable experiences.

Adaptability and flexibility have become increasingly important, particularly in the wake of the post-COVID-19 context (Promnil, Srepirote, and Pooprueksachat 2024), and in response to the diversification of tourism and hospitality, including religious tourism (Alshaibani et al. 2024), integrated resorts (Lou, So, and Hsieh 2018), historic centers (Magalhães, Araújo and Andrés-Marques 2022), and technologically advanced environments (He, Ahmad, and Razak 2024). The findings of this study reinforce the importance of flexibility, as employees who can adjust their actions beyond standardized service are better able to exceed guest expectations. Barnes et al. (2020) noted that a lack of flexibility can severely undermine satisfaction, service quality, and value, while the present study reconfirmed that positive employee adaptability plays a central role in creating memorable experiences.

The diversity of studies on hospitality employee competencies (Table 1) shows the dynamics of the competencies in response to customer demand. In today's experience economy, hospitality consumers seek experiences beyond the service they receive during encounters. When their requirements changed, consequently, hospitality guests request new competencies of hospitality employees. From the guest perspective, this study's findings demonstrated that the employee attributes most valued by guests reflect core dimensions of high-quality service delivery, extending beyond a checklist of functional competencies. What stands out is how guests frame

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their experiences, highlighting not only efficiency but also dedication, sincerity, and personalization. Their narratives suggest that memorable encounters are those that feel carefully and thoughtfully crafted, positioning service employees as crafting guest experiences.

Implications

This study contributes to the literature on experience management in hospitality, customer–employee interactions, and the application of textual analysis using large datasets of online hotel reviews. It advances theoretical understanding of the experience economy by focusing on its central dimension, human interaction (Hemmington 2007; Hurombo, Basupi, and Chatibura 2025), and by exploring how employees can elevate hotel encounters into memorable experiences.

In the experience economy, customers seek products based on their direct and subjective experiences (Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung 2007). Within this paradigm, service providers take on the role of performers, and the service environment becomes the stage where experiences are enacted (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Consequently, the role of employees has evolved from merely transferring pre-produced or pre-designed goods and services to actively participating in the design, production, and delivery of experiential products (Bharwani and Jauhari 2017; Sotiriadis and Varvaressos 2016). Building upon this shift, this study provides an empirical contribution to the growing body of research on the transformation of human resource management in the experience economy (Sotiriadis and Varvaressos 2016).

While previous research has proposed extensive lists of employee competencies (He, Ahmad, and Razak 2024; Tule 2016), this study reinforced and illustrated those most valued by guests in the context of the changing experience economy. Its significance lies in offering an in-depth customer perspective, revealing which employee attributes stand out, truly shape lasting

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memories, and drive guest recommendations. A key contribution is the identification of personalization as an emergent and distinct competency, rather than a hidden subset of other soft skills, that have been discussed largely within academic scholars for the last decades (Baum 2007; He, Ahmad, and Razak 2024). While previous research was criticized lack of innovation, experimentation, or sophistication in methodology (Baum et al. 2016), this paper, by using an innovative method of content analysis, provides an up-to-date and insightful skills and competencies. The findings also highlight a more nuanced picture of employee contribution, resonating with the idea that memorable experiences are created when service is delivered with enthusiasm, compassion, and personal investment.

Echoing Baum's (2002) argument, this study affirms that the nature of hospitality work does not fit within fixed typologies, emphasizing the limitations of oversimplifying employee skills into a one-size-fits-all framework as seen in earlier studies (Kim et al. 2011; Mutarza 2015). The current paper's empirical findings provide support for the view that hospitality roles evolve dynamically across different contexts, shifting fluidly like a "post-modern amoeba" (Baum 2002), and are shaped by the diversity of operational environments (Alshaibani et al 2024; Magalhães and Andrés-Marques 2022). Situated within the expanding experience economy, where workforce adaptation to experiential value creation continues to unfold (Sotiriadis and Varvaressos 2016), offers one of the first empirical examinations of employee competence in the co-creation of memorable experiences, responding to Bharwani and Jauhari's (2017) call. The paper sheds light on hospitality employees' competencies evolution, which has been predicted by Baum (2007) without empirical support.

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For practitioners, these insights are timely and relevant. In a highly competitive and complex hospitality landscape, employees at the customer interface are central to effective engagement and the co-creation of unforgettable experiences. Hoteliers should therefore prioritize competencies that enhance customer-employee interactions and foster authentic moments of connection. Managers, in particular, should focus on encouraging employees' visible displays of emotional connection and personal engagement, as perceived by guests, rather than relying solely on technical abilities or supervisor-assessed skills. As Marneros, Papageorgiou, and Efstathiades (2020) noted, expertise and technical capacity are not always visible to guests or easily translated into service behaviors. Businesses must therefore design development strategies that help employees activate their individual strengths, take ownership of their roles, and embrace personal initiative. When nurtured effectively, these qualities can transform routine service into genuine, memorable encounters.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has several limitations that open suggestions for future research. First, the analysis focused exclusively on positive reviews. While positive assessments are valuable for identifying employee attributes that create memorable experiences, negative experiences may also provide important insights into service gaps and critical incidents that shape lasting impressions. Analysis of negative reviews may well highlight a significant body of reviews where staff were the cause of the negative perceptions about the experience. Future research should therefore consider both positive and negative reviews to capture a more understanding of guest-employee interactions. Such analysis would offer a more holistic view of the competencies required of hospitality employees. Furthermore, a comparative investigation across different hotel types (e.g. budget hotel,

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island resort, etc.) would enrich our understanding of how employee attributes are perceived and valued in varied service contexts.

This research employed a mixed-method approach combining text mining with qualitative content analysis for in-depth interpretation. Future studies utilizing big data could expand the analytical scope by incorporating techniques such as opinion mining or attribute-level comparisons to provide more insights.

Finally, while this research revealed how employee attributes can be understood through the lens of "craftsmanship," further research is needed to develop and empirically validate measurement scales for this construct in hospitality. Such work could examine whether craftsmanship forms a distinct and independent framework for human resource management in the hospitality industry, particularly in the design of training and employee development initiatives.

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Table 1. Studies on Hotel Employee Competencies and Service Attributes

Author	**Context**	**Main method**	**Population/ Sample**	**Findings**
Kim et al. (2011)	Hotel Employees' Competencies and Qualifications	Quantitative survey	Hotel professionals and employees	Practical competency, Adaptability to working environment, Ability to make progress in work, Interpersonal skills, Active participation in social gatherings, Flexibility of time management, Foreign languages and work related learning
Murtaza (2015)	Model of competencies case of Jammu Kashmir, India	Quantitative survey	Hotel employees	Social competencies, decision making skills, leadership skills, professional skills, human relation skills, basic knowledges
Cheng and Wong (2015)	Professionalism in hotel context	Qualitative interview	Managers and employees	Eight elements of professionalism: passion, sensitivity, open-mindedness to new trends, team-oriented attitude, competence and skills, emotional self-control, professional ethics, leadership by example, and perfectionism

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Tuble (2016)	Competencies and Skills Definitions for New Entrants to the Philippine Hotel Industry	Mixed method: qualitative interview & quantitative survey	Hotel professionals	Personal Qualities, Communication Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Problem-Solving Skills, Technical Skills, planning & organizing, leadership & influence skills
Bharwani and Jauhari (2017)	Competencies Required to Cocreate Memorable Customer Experiences	literature review		Proposes a new construct of "Hospitality Intelligence" (HI): Emotional intelligence (EQ) (containing interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence), cultural intelligence (CQ), and hospitality experiential intelligence dimensions.
Pijls et al. (2017)	Development of Experience of Hospitality Scale	Mixed-method qualitative Delphi technique & quantitative survey	Hospitality experts & service customers	Dimensions of hospitality: inviting, care, comfort.

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Lou, So and Hsieh (2018)	Competencies required for entry-level in Integrated resort in Macau	Mixed method: qualitative interview & quantitative survey	Hotel professionals and college students	Work ethic, customer service orientation, Initiative, Ability and willingness to learn, obeying supervisors, Achievement orientation, Interpersonal understanding, Self-control, Flexibility
Alexakis and Jiang (2019)	Skills and knowledge of hospitality students	Quantitative survey	Managers of hotels in Florida, US	Key elements: Critical/Reflective, Professional/Technical, Communication/Relational, Plasticity/Erudition
Marneros, Papageorgiou, and Efstathiades (2020)	Identifying key success competencies	Quantitative survey	Professionals, managers, assistant managers	Human relations/communication; Operational knowledge; Leadership; Human resource management; and financial analysis skills
Marneros, Papageorgiou & Efstathiades (2021)	Competencies hospitality students should acquire prior to entering the hotel industry in Cyprus	Quantitative survey	Educators and hospitality professionals	Six core factors: Leadership and Critical Thinking, Information Technology and Financial Analysis, Human Relations -Communication, Interpersonal Communication-Cultural Diversity, Human Resource

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				Management and Professional, Image-Operational Knowledge
Tasc, Aktas, and Acikgoz (2021)	Hospitableness concept	Mixed method: qualitative & quantitative survey	Frequent Turkish travelers	19 hospitableness items loading onto six factors; lenience, grace, compassion, civility, proficiency, and veracity
Magalhães, Araújo and Andrés-Marques (2022)	Work Skills before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic	Quantitative survey	Hotel employees	Employees are most confident in soft skills (teamwork, interpersonal relationships, and adaptation or flexibility) and feel need to improve the most are hard skill (linguistic and digital)
Marneros, Papageorgiou, and Efstathiades (2022)	Hospitality Management Competency Framework	literature review		Human Resource Management (HRM); Professional Image; Operational Knowledge; Leadership; Communication; Information Management; and People Relationship Management.

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Sowanna and Lertputtarak (2022)	Competency models for service process innovation in 4-5-star hotels managed by Thai owners	Qualitative interview	Hotel experts: academics & hr directors	Be creative, seek novelty; Look for opportunities and operate proactively; leadership; Network of partners; Assessing the business SWOT; Represent change; Promote continuous learning; Improve and develop tasks continuously; technological skills; Team control and coordination
Vaitiekunaite (2022)	Competencies of non-managerial employees compared to managers	Quantitative survey	Managers and employees	Problem solving and crisis management skills, Communication skills, Information technology skills, Customer service skills, Personal characteristics.
Commey, Sarkodie Amoako, and Kokt (2023)	Framework to Match Expectations of Academia and Industry in Ghana	Qualitative interview	Educators and professionals	Decision-making skills, Problem-solving skills, Knowledge on industry trends, Innovative skills, Knowledge on how to utilize industry-based tools and technology, Professionalism, Change management skills and adaptability

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Alshaibani et al (2024)	Competencies of service providers in religious tourism	Qualitative in-depth interview	Religious tourists	10 Dimensions: Practical efficiency, ability to adapt to the work environment, adaptability to breakthroughs, Interpersonal skills, ability to manage time, problem-solving skills, reception and etiquette skills, honesty and privacy in the work environment, providing help and support
He, Ahmad and Razak (2024)	Hotel employee Gen Z in an intelligent environment in China	Mixed method: qualitative interview & quantitative survey	Hotel managers and operational managers	3 dimensions with 33 elements: skills and ability (eg: communications, learning, interpersonal, problem-solving, etc); comprehensive quality (eg: responsibility, teamwork, professional ethics, etc), professional knowledge (eg: working standards, job product knowledge, culture knowledge etc)
Liasidou et al. (2024)	Hotel industry in Cyprus	Quantitative survey	Hotel managers	Dimensions of professionalism: passion, open-mindedness to change, interpersonal skill, emotional self-control, competence and skills,

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				professional ethics, team oriented attitude, professionalism
Manfreda et al. (2024)	Conceptual framework of "Hospitable Service Mindset"	Qualitative interview	Educators	Framework including: Hostship, Meaningful connections, Inclusivity, Memorable experiences, Altruism, Comfort.
Promnil, Srepirote, and Pooprueksachat (2024)	Competencies of Hotel employees in Thailand after COVID-19	Quantitative survey	Hotel Managers and operational employees	Adaptability and sustainability Self and social focus competency Service and communication Ethical and moral competency
Li et al. (2025)	Hotel Management competencies: The Case of Shanghai, China	Quantitative survey	Hotel managers	Hotel management competencies: interpersonal communication, leadership, operational knowledge, human resource management, financial analysis, technology, and administrative management
Gelacio-Alcedo et al. (2025)	Labor skills and cultural competence in	Qualitative interview	Human resource managers	Competencies: English proficiency, teamwork, autonomy, leadership and adaptability. Knowledge: use of hotel

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	hotel sector in Peru			technologies, management systems, customer service and conflict resolution. Cultural values: empathy, charisma and service-mindedness.
Zhang (2025)	Competency model for hospitality management education	Delphi method	Students, teachers, and hotel managers	Career foundation skills, digital technology application, operations management and leadership, professional ethics and compliance, cultural service capabilities, lifelong learning and career development

Source: Created by authors.

Table 2. Cities and corresponding reviews

No	**City**	**Country**	**Number of 4 and 5 stars reviews**	**Number of memorable experience reviews**
1	Bangkok	Thailand	7,147	2,540
2	Istanbul	Turkey	7,217	2,749
3	London	England	8,185	3,935
4	Hongkong	China	8,544	5,136
5	Mecca	Saudi	5,786	2,328
6	Antalya	Turkey	6,831	2,226

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7	Dubai	United Arab Emirates	8,571	3,742
8	Macau	China	3,957	2,065
9	Paris	Fance	6,826	2,945
10	Kuala Lumpur	Malaysia	7,807	3,117
Total			**63,724**	**30,783**

Source: Created by authors

Table 3. Factors that influence guests' memorable hotel experience

Factor	**Terms**	**N**	**%**
Staff service	staff (6078), friendly (2462), service (2004), helpful (946), team (876), attentive (677), reception (441), guest relations (439), employees (348), polite (300), special mention (99)	30,700	99.7%
Hotel facilities	room (2106), pool (2019), rooms (1564), bed(s) (609), comfortable (511), facilities (359), lobby (348), spacious (307)	19,454	63.2%
Food and Beverage	food (3695), bar (1501), restaurant (1282), drink (1164), delicious (901), restaurants (530), variety (473), choice (468), buffet (453), cocktails (333), breakfast (329), dinner (290)	20,001	65%

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Location and Ambiance	clean (1731), beach (1529), beautiful (962), area (676), sea (576), location (430), view (366), nice hotel (411), atmosphere, nice place (42), nice touch (41), nice location (38)	19,789	64.3%
Recreation and Entertainment	entertainment (1080), activities (625), fun (532), water–sport/park/slide (459), club (443), spa (409), music (291), kids club (208), kids activities (65)	10,621	34.5%

N: number of reviews that contain the factor

%: percentage of the reviews that contain the factor

Source: Created by authors

Table 4. Five themes categorized from text mining

Attribute	**Terms**
Emotional competence	friendly (2477), kind/kindness (456), care/caring (369), polite (311), warm/warmly (276), welcoming (246), smile (244), smiling (122), courteous (71), sincere (37), respectful (35), enthusiasm/enthusiastic (30), sympathetic (26), energetic (23)
Responsiveness and problem-solving	Help/ helpful (1708), attentive (705), accommodating (77), responsive (62)

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Professional competency	professional/professionalism (334), work hard/hard-working (137), communicate (69), efficient (68), dedicated (36)
Personalization	surprises (111), thoughtful (63), celebrate (48)
Adaptability and Flexibility	willing (453), above and beyond (148), exceed expectations (28)

Source: Created by authors

Table 5. Five attributes of hotel employees with terms combined from text mining and open coding

Attribute	**Terms**
Emotional competence	friendly, kind/kindness, care/caring, polite, warm/warmly, welcoming, smile, smiling, courteous, sincere, respectful, enthusiasm/enthusiastic, sympathetic, energetic
Responsiveness and Problem-Solving	help/helpful, attentive, accommodating, responsive, solution, actively solve problem, exceptional assistance, eager to help, provide solution
Professional Competency	professional/professionalism, work hard/hard-working, communicate, efficient, dedicated, accurately explain, skillful, diligent, cooperative, inform the best way
Personalization	surprises, thoughtful, celebrate, personal touch, delighted and surprised

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Adaptability and Flexibility	willing, above and beyond, exceed expectations, supportive, went out of their way

Source: Created by authors

Figure 1. Link words – extracted from Voyant (created by authors)

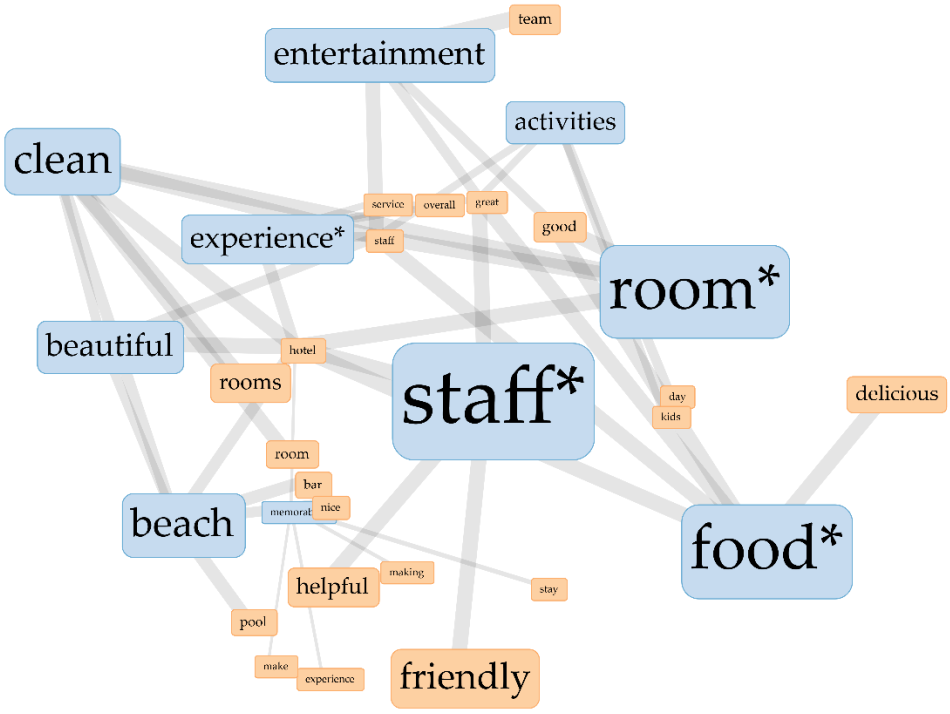

Figure 2. Word cloud related to staff – extracted from Voyant (created by authors)

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