An examination of the factors which influence a positive customer experience within the Irish hospitality industry

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ABSTRACT

Although more and more academic researchers place importance on the services marketing concept of the 'customer experience', there is seen to be little practical research and guidance for personnel in the hospitality industry to implement an exceptional customer experience in their places of work. This study will focus on hospitality customers in Ireland who regularly visit Irish hotels, and use a phenomenological approach to explore and gain insights into their past experiences in hotels. The data collection consisted of six qualitative semi-structured interviews with customers who often visit Irish hotels, obtained through purposive sampling. The findings, using thematic analysis, reveal the factors which were deemed most important in the customer's experiences with hotels, grouped into themes which mirror the components of the Services Marketing Mix. In the case of this study, the factors which most strongly influence a positive customer experience are staff competency, staff amiability and service recovery. The results provide advice to hotel management on what areas to focus on in providing an exceptional customer experience.

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INTRODUCTION

According to research carried out by the Irish Hotels Federation in 2017, the Irish hospitality industry is now worth an estimated €3billion, with hotels and accommodation making up over 14% of 16,000 enterprises in the hospitality industry (Irish Hotels Federation, 2017). As outlined by Brophy and Kiely (2002), the aspect of quality has become one of the major pressures Irish hotel organisations face in Ireland. Despite the growing value of the hospitality industry in Ireland, Irish scholars have put little focus on the hospitality industry in Ireland, the experience of the customer with Irish hotels and what factors produce a positive experience for them. The researcher believes that the Irish hospitality industry has the potential to improve the experience of Irish hotels for domestic customers who use Irish hotels, for either leisure or corporate purposes. There is a need to broaden and obtain practical knowledge and understanding of the customer experience of hotel customers in Ireland and how it can be shaped to improve the hospitality industry in Ireland.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine the topics necessary for the researcher and reader to gain an understanding of the concept of the customer experience and how it can be assessed in the hospitality industry in Ireland. A first section will examine and define the customer experience, and provide evidence of lack of practical research in the hospitality industry. The second section will present the theoretical framework used to categorise the various factors associated with shaping and achieving a positive customer experience. The third section will provide brief examples of where similar research has been carried out but may not be of relevance to this research. This review hopes to provide an extensive overview of the literature acquired and provided by the academic marketing community in order to explain the main ideas behind the presented research project.

2.1 The Customer Experience, Its Importance and Lack of Research

2.1.1 The Customer Experience

The term 'customer experience' goes as far back as 1955 where Abbott put forward the notion that "what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences" (Abbott, 1955, p. 40). Throughout services marketing literature, it has been expressed time and time again that there has been an increasing interest in the concept of the customer experience or creating "experiences" for customers in service organisations (Pullman and Gross, 2004).

When attempting to understand the definition of the term 'customer experience', many authors have used the word 'holistic' to define the customer experience, in that it incorporates the customers cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, and spiritual responses to all interactions with the organisation in question (Bolton et al., 2014). Lemke, Clarke and Wilson (2011, p.846) similarly define the customer experience as "the customer's subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm, and customer experience quality as its perceived excellence or superiority". This broad, generic idea of customer experience can be challenging to organisations, when there is no clear definition of what they can do to provide a great customer experience. The customer experience should be

researched further by scholars, ensuring the literature is practical and can be applied by consultants and managers.

As outlined by Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.70), the design, delivery and management of the customer experience can be examined from different perspectives; the point of view of the firm, "with the firm essentially designing and crafting an experience for the customer to receive", from the point of view of the customer, or from a co-creation point of the view, where both the service provider and the customer have a role in the service delivery. Although research has been carried out from these different perspectives in the past, the point of view of the customer might appear to be the most valuable to service personnel in the design, delivery and management of the experience.

2.1.2   Lack of Research

As outlined by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), there is an increasing focus on the concept of the customer experience because of the amount of customer touch points present in service organisations today through multiple channels and media. However, Lemon and Verhoef proceed to express the nascent nature of customer experience literature. The concept of the customer experience is said to be acknowledged as a new focus of managerial attention by scholars and researchers, however its definition and measurement remains unclear (Kasution, Sembada, Miliani, Resti, Prawono, 2014) and that the term 'customer experience' remains in its infancy (Hwang and Seo, 2016). This causes concern for managers in practical roles who are told by scholars that this concept of the customer experience to be a new and vital aspect of marketing, despite its definition being outlined as far back as 1955. However, they have little guidance on how to create exceptional customer experiences due to the lack of practical knowledge.

The concept of the customer experience has been clearly researched in depth in academic scenarios but as mentioned previously, it is still seen as a very broad concept with many authors describing it as 'holistic'. When examining the customer experience, all parts of the customer journey must be considered,

including the "search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phases of the experience" (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros and Schlesinger, 2009). Klaus (2014) mentions in his article that "today's holistic conceptualizations and definitions of CX from both scholars and businesses provide very little additional insight beyond how the phenomenon was described in the past" (Klaus, 2014, p. 307). It is clear that the concept of the customer experience has not been developed further than this holistic, broad definition and is impractical for managers and practitioners in designing exceptional customer experiences for their target market.

This idea is similar to Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007, p.395) where they imply that "while many studies explore such themes from a theoretical viewpoint, tools aimed at supporting marketing managers in devising the right stimuli to support an excellent Customer Experience are still scarce". Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018) stress the lack of research on customer experience management in the hospitality field, "with little integration between the CEM (Customer Experience Management) research and principles of hospitality management" (p. 22). It must be acknowledged that although scholars have stated theoretical viewpoints on the concept, it has not been researched in depth from a practical viewpoint.

The concept of the Customer Experience has often been categorised with Customer Relationship Management or CRM. Although they may have similarities in nature in the marketing literature, Hwang and Seo (2016) contrast the two concepts in that CRM focuses on recorded customer histories, whereas Customer Experience Management (CEM) focuses on "the process of strategically managing a customer's entire experience with a product or company" (Schmitt 2003, p. 17). Instead of examining a repeat customers history and relationship with a hotel, it is important to examine how a customer moves through their experience with a hotel for the first time, from when they first discover the hotel until post-stay.

Although it is widely mentioned that the concept of the customer experience has been under-researched and underdeveloped for practitioners, it must also be

accepted, as mentioned by Klaus (2014, p.306), that "CX is very context-specific and that there is unlikely to be a generally applicable 'play book' appropriate across all industries and company strategies". Customer experience practices will contain huge variations across industries and geographical locations, making it difficult to generalise and also vital to carry out customer experience research per industry and per region.

Following from this 'holistic' description of the Customer Experience that is used regularly throughout Customer Experience literature, Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018) demonstrate the importance of bringing together departments like marketing, operations, human resources and technology in order to manage the Customer Experience. These roles and influences of the customer experience can be categorised further to determine what factors influence a positive customer experience in the Irish hospitality industry.

2.2 The Extended Marketing Mix as a Framework

The customer experience in the hospitality industry is not only determined by food, beverages and accommodation, but also from a number of other features and processes of the service (Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola, 2018). As mentioned previously, Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018) demonstrate the importance of bringing together departments like marketing, operations, human resources and technology in order to manage the Customer Experience.

Furthermore, as outlined by Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007, p.397), a good customer experience "must holistically and consistently involve a person at different levels". Bringing these points together, in order to categorise these different levels and components of the customer experience in the hospitality industry, one can use the extended services marketing mix as a theoretical framework. Rafiq and Ahmed (1995, p.4) outlined the marketing mix as a "set of controllable variables at the disposal of marketing management which can be used to influence customers". This can be evaluated to be an effective tool for assessing and managing the area of the customer experience in service industries.

However, the original marketing mix (product, price, promotion and place) has been criticised in respect of being too simplistic for service businesses, as managing services is seen to be more complicated than managing products (Kushwaha and Agrawal, 2015), and that the mix failed to address the characteristics of service industries (Anitsal, Girard and Anitsal, 2012). By this, Anitsal, Girard and Anital (2012) mean that services have problems maintaining quality due to lack of standardisation. Services also cannot be inventoried, patented or transferred (Kushwaha and Agrawal, 2015). In order to accommodate the marketing challenges proposed by the complicated nature of services, the three additional components 'people', physical evidence' and 'process' have been added to the traditional marketing mix to create the Extended or Services Marketing Mix.

Booms and Bitner, creators of the Services Marketing Mix framework which includes the additional three 'services P's' provide a rationale for the separation of the components of People, Physical Evidence and Process from the original marketing mix:

> *"The potential power of these elements results from the large degree of direct contact between the firm and the customer, the highly visible nature of the service assembly process, and the simultaneity of production and consumption"* (Booms and Bitner, 1981, p.48)

Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2016, p.22) define the 'People' component to be "all human actors who play a part in service delivery and thus influence the buyers perceptions". This may include front line staff in the service environment, the customer itself and other customers present. All other humans provide cues to the customer about the quality of the service and directly affect the experience of the customer. The customer may take into account the appearance of others, their attitudes and behaviours. Booms and Bitner (1981), although dated, also express the importance of human factors or 'people' in service organisations. In outlining the role of personnel, factors such as attitudes, behaviour, appearance and commitment are mentioned, and importance is also placed on the behaviour,

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involvement and contact of the customer with other customers in the service environment and process.

Another component added to the marketing mix was the factor of 'physical evidence'. Rafiq and Ahmed (1995, p.7) outline that physical evidence in services refers to the "environment in which the service is delivered and any tangible goods that facilitate the performance and communication of the service". When designing an effective customer experience, the physical environment must be considered because services cannot be readily displayed and the physical evidence is a component that can help customers to develop a positive first impression (Yelkur, 2000).

As outlined by Bitner (1990), "often the only cues available are the firms physical facility and its employees". People and physical evidence are often seen as the more important 'P's' of the services marketing mix. However, it is also important to consider the actual process of the service delivery, which can be a strong determinant of the customers overall experience. Process is defined by Wilson *et al*. (2016) as the procedures or flow of activities involved in the delivery of a service.

2.2.1 People

When examining the component of the services marketing mix 'people', Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018) stress that well admired service firms recognise the importance of humans in effective service delivery and a positive customer experience. Connolly and McGing (2007, p.201) concur in that "people are central to all aspects of the hospitality industry – in the creation, design, development and delivery of all its services". In order to define the people component of the services marketing mix, Wilson *et al*. (2016) address the term 'People' in the service marketing mix as individuals or groups who are involved in service delivery and therefore have the power influence the perceptions of the consumer. These actors may include the organisations personnel, the customer in question and other customers present during service delivery. Miao and Mattila (2013) point out that past research has found that the human interaction

component is of vital importance in the customer experience and customer satisfaction.

It is crucial to consider the relational value that consumers gain through interactions with the service employees (Cetin, Akova and Kaya, 2014). As expected, Hwang and Seo (2016) posit that literature identifies employees as a major antecedent of customer experiences, and Li, Canziani and Barbieri (2018) claim that a critical determinant of the customers experience of a service is the interaction between the frontline staff and the customer. Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) concur in saying that the host-guest relationship is a key characteristic of a successful service organisation from which other dimensions emerge.

As pointed out by Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018), the service personnel or frontline employees are the people who directly serve and interact with customers and their status strongly influences the holistic experience of the customer, They are also the first to be informed of service faults or failures. The employee actions at this point also have the power to directly influence the customer experience, whether they fix the problem if possible or report the need for improvement (Ford and Heaton, 2001).

Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakkola (2018) express the point that in terms of the marketing mix component 'people', it is not only service personnel and employees that can have an effect on the customer experience. It is vital to consider the presence and effect of other customers in the service delivery, rather than focusing solely on the provider-customer relationship (Lugosi, 2008). Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2016, p.23) explain that "customers not only influence their own service outcomes, but they can influence other customers as well". Other customers can either enhance the customer experience or negatively impact the customer experience in the form of disruptive behaviour, causing delays or manifesting incompatible needs (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 264).

Miao and Mattila (2013) in their article 'The Impact of Other Customers on Customer Experiences' mention the importance of the role of other customers in the customer's experience because "sharing the service environment with other

customers is often an inherent part of a guest stay" and that a complex social environment becomes part of the services due to the presence and involvement of other customers (Miao and Mattila, 2013, p.78).

2.2.2 Physical Evidence

The 'physical evidence' component of the services marketing mix is seen to be an important aspect of the customer experience in the case of the hospitality industry. It can be defined as "the environment in which the service is delivered and where the firm and customer interact, and any tangible components that facilitate performance or communication of the service" (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2016, p. 23). Similarly, well-known author, Bitner, is still quoted regularly throughout services marketing literature and uses the world 'servicescape' to describe the physical surroundings or 'built environment' (Bitner, 1992). This term was further explained by Lee and Jeong (2012, p.50) as "overall layout, design, decoration, and aesthetics".

Bitner (1992) focused on three main dimensions of the physical environment: 1) ambient conditions, 2) spatial layout and functionality, and 3) signs, symbols and artefacts. Cetin, Akova and Kaya (2014, p.1047) also mention factors of the physical environment such as "aesthetic clues, ambiance, design, colours, odour, aroma, decoration, signage, art works, the music played" and posit that they play an important part in the experience of the customer.

Cetin, Akova and Kaya (2014) have stressed that in the hospitality industry, it is extremely difficult to create a positive customer experience without a suitable atmosphere and environment. In order for hotels to remain competitive in the hospitality industry, numerous researchers outline the importance of the 'physical evidence' component of the services marketing mix in the form of an attractive physical environment and portraying a positive image (Ali, Omar and Amin, 2013). Bitner (2012) outlines the importance of the physical environment particularly in service businesses like hotels and restaurants, as it is rich in tangible cues about service quality and has the ability to influence behaviours and

create a desired image. Pullman and Gross (2004) concur on this point, that effective aesthetic physical design of a service organisation can cause emotional reactions among consumers, contributing to their overall experience with the organisation.

When examining the 'physical evidence' component of service industries, one must also consider the "technology driven, digitally advanced customers" (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018) who have expectations of the 'virtual servicescape' as identified by Wilson *et al.* (2014). Similar to Bitners three components of the servicescape, Harris and Goode (2010) discuss three main dimensions of the online servicescape: aesthetic appeal, layout and functionality and financial security. These factors may be taken into consideration before they experience the service in person. The 'e-servicescape' outlined by Lee and Jeong (2012) is becoming increasingly important in the holistic customer experience as it allows consumers to preview the hotel and build expectations before they visit, and also stressed that a well-designed web site for a hotel has the power to provide good first impressions in the same way as how they are treated by the first member of staff that they meet.

It is clear that the physical evidence component of the marketing mix that the component that is most within the control of the service organisation and gives the business the opportunity to send strong and consistent messages to the consumer about the firms purpose and the nature of the service (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2016). This consistency is more difficult to achieve through the 'People' and 'Process' components of the services marketing mix when attempting to deliver an exceptional customer experience to every customer. However, it can be questioned if the physical environment is deemed as important by managers as investing in high quality staff and other procedures when satisfying customers. The physical evidence component may be seen as irrelevant in some service organisations such as a phone service provider. However in the hospitality industry, the physical environment can be seen as a large part of the experience as the customer is physically present during the experience.

The lack of research available surrounding physical evidence in comparison to 'People' lead the researcher to believe that it is an under-researched area and it is seen as an aspect of the resulting customer experience that is deemed less important. In contrast, Hwang and Seo (2016) point out that numerous hospitality and tourism studies have focused on the effect of the physical environment on the customer experience and that it is gaining growing attention among academic researchers (Ali, Omar and Aman, 2013). However, it unclear if this is a key factor in influencing positive customer experiences in the case of hotels in Ireland.

2.2.3 Process

Because services are often actions or performances carried out for/with customers, a number of steps, actions and activities may be involved in the service delivery (Wilson *et al*., 2016). As mentioned previously, the 'process' component of the services or extended marketing mix is associated with "the actual procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is delivered" such as the service delivery and operating systems (Wilson *et al*., 2016, p.23). Similar to the 'people' and 'physical evidence' components, the 'process' factor also gives customers evidence on which to judge the service quality (Wilson *et al*., 2016) and it also has the power to influence the holistic experience for the customer.

One can again examine the renowned Booms and Bitner framework quoted by Rafiq and Ahmed (1995, p.6), where they mention aspects of process such as "policies, procedures, mechanization, employee discretion, customer involvement, customer direction, flow of activities". Wilson *et al*. (2016) mention similar characteristics of the 'process' component such as flow of activities, standardisation/customisation, number of steps, simplicity/complexity of service journey and customer involvement. It is clear that the process component of the services marketing mix may overlap with 'people' and 'physical evidence', however it is still an important component to assess when researching the hospitality industry and the processes involved for the customer.

Mentioned by Hallin and Marnburg (2008), the hospitality industry is an industry which is becoming more knowledge-based because of the growing importance of information and communication technology involved in the service process. These knowledge-based systems require a trained workforce capable of implementing technology into the hospitality organisational process to add value to the firm and have a positive influence on the customers experience (Olsen and Connolly, 2000). Because the service delivery occurs as a result of direct interaction between customers and employees, it is now seen as a requirement that customers needs are acknowledged by employees in order to provide a positive customer experience and customer satisfaction (Kahle, 2002).

Further from this, when examining the process component, one must consider service recovery. Service recovery is required if an error or failure occurs in the delivery of a service, or if the service falls below the customer expectations, leading to a dissatisfied customer (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). It is clear that service failures will influence the customers experience, however, it must also be acknowledged that dissatisfied customers due to service failures will tell other customers about their negative experiences or post their experiences online. Lewis and McCann (2004, p.7) have expressed that many large hotels fail to identify "what problems are experienced, how they are dealt with, and how satisfied the customers are with the handling of their problems". Service recovery can be seen as a process in the hospitality industry, which can have a strong effect on the customer in a highly experiential industry.

2.3 Practical Customer Experience research in other regions

As mentioned previously, customer experience practices will contain huge variations across industries and geographical locations. Because of this variation, it is unwise for hotel managers in Ireland to examine and apply research to their organisations that has been carried out in various regions across the world and expect these practices and findings to apply to Irish hospitality businesses.

Cetin, Akova and Kaya (2014) have examined how a positive customer experience is created from the point of view of the hotel manager, rather than the point of view of the customer. Upscale hotel managers were interviewed, who acknowledged 'creating positive guest experiences' as an important objective of the organisation in which they work. The main resources they identified as creating experiential value were human resources, technology, procurement and strategic alliances, and physical design. The management of these resources would then create 'customised, different and unique, involving and unexpected' experiences for customers.

Although the nature of this study may be useful to managers regarding shaping organisational activities to create positive customer experiences in the hotel industry, it is vital to take customers opinions into account. As outlined by Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2016), there may be a gap between management perceptions and actual customer expectations, due to lack of or poor upward communication and research, or lack of correct information on behalf of the service provider. Similarly, this study was carried out by researchers in Turkey so it cannot be assumed that this research can be generalised and applied to Irish hotels and Irish customers.

Another study that was examined was a study carried out by Choo and Tan (2017) in Malaysia, looking a different perspective at factors which influenced a poor customer experience in 2-5 star hotels. This study was carried out using a methodology of netnography in the form of Trip Advisor reviews. Customer experience quality measurement scales were used by the researchers including product experience, outcome focus, moments of truth and peace of mind. Similar to the first research, the data was derived from reviews for Malaysian hotels and it is difficult to assess if the findings are applicable to the Irish hotel industry.

Although the study by Khan, Garg and Rahman (2015) involved studying the impact of customer experience quality dimensions on aspects such as customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth and brand loyalty, the study was carried out in Indian districts and data was collected through quantitative data. As before, this data

cannot be generalised and applied to the Irish hotel industry, as consumer behaviour across geographical areas may contain a great degree of variation.

From assessing various studies, it could be evaluated by the researcher that this academic research may be of use to hotel managers in the regions where the research was carried out. However, it was difficult to find any research which has been carried out on the Irish hotel industry to determine what factors are deemed important to Irish customers in the hospitality industry in Ireland.

To conclude, this literature review shed light on the customer experience concept, its definition and lack of practical guidance from academic research, and the services marketing mix which can be used to assess the experience of customers when utilising the hospitality industry. Academics are divided when it comes to the marketing concept of the customer experience and if there is enough information on the tools and practices that can be used to create a positive customer experience. It is clear that there is a lack of practical research for service personnel when it comes to the Irish hospitality industry, and it remains to be seen what components of the services marketing mix are deemed more important by Irish hospitality customers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As outlined by Klaus (2014) previously, there is a significant lack of research relating to the practical guidelines to assist managers and marketers in developing an effective customer experience strategy. Having carried out the literature review in the broad area of the customer experience and also specifically to the hospitality industry, a gap in the research was identified. This gap inspired this piece of research, where many authors talked about the area of the customer experience being a vague concept, with no practical guidance for marketing practitioners and managers. Hwang et al. (2016) have stressed that "considering the experience-based nature of hospitality services and products, it is particularly important to design superior customer experiences in this industry" (Hwang et al., 2016, pp. 2219).

Furthermore, Klaus (2014) says that CX strategies are very "context specific", and that "there is unlikely to be a generally applicable 'playbook' appropriate across all industries and company strategies" (Klaus 2014, p.306). Research of this nature should be carried out according to industry, as it would be impossible to identify general factors which influence positive customer experience across all industries. The main objective of this research, as stated in the title, is to identify the factors which influence positive customer experience, focusing specifically on the hospitality industry and hotel stays for domestic customers, and if the Irish industry is similar or differs from previous customer experience research.

This dissertation will address the following questions in the research:

a) Which of the three services P's of the marketing mix (People, Process, Physical Evidence) is deemed most important in past experiences of participants?

b) What aspects of the customer experience should managers of Irish hotels focus on?

c) Are customer experiences in foreign countries different to experiences in Ireland for Irish people?

It is important to the researcher to examine these questions in depth to allow for advances to be made in the Irish hospitality industry and identify practical areas for managers for improving customer experiences in hotels in Ireland to promote domestic hotel stays. A suitable methodological approach was developed in order to answer the outlined research questions.

METHODOLOGY

Having outlined the research questions, this section will explore the methodological approach behind this research study, including research philosophy, data collection, sampling, data analysis, data collection and ethical considerations.

4.1 Research Philosophy

The first step the researcher took was to discover the philosophy of the research. Research philosophy can be defined as "the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p.127). This research will take an interpretivist philosophic approach through qualitative methods in order to provide a descriptive account of hospitality consumers in Ireland. The interpretivist philosophy stems from phenomenology, which refers to "the way in which we as humans make sense of the world around us" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Creswell (1998) posits that the most effective way to identify if the research should take a philosophical approach is when the research problem or question requires an in-depth understanding of human experiences common to a group of people. As explained previously, this research aims to examine the factors which influence a positive customer experience in the Irish hospitality industry, according to consumers who avail of services of hotels in Ireland. As outlined by Goulding (2005), the legitimate source of data for a phenomenological study is the common views and experiences of the participants themselves.

Padilla-Díaz (2015) explains that in phenomenological research, the suggested studied group should comprise of 3-15 members and the members of the group need to be able to articulate their past experiences. The goal of phenomenology, as outlined by Spiegelberg (1982), is to "enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences". It is a critical reflection on conscious experience and is designed to uncover the never changing features of a person or groups experience (Goulding, 2005). A series of seven steps is suggested when taking a

phenomenological approach: 1) Read participants narratives in order to fully understand them, 2) Extract significant statements, words and sentences, 3) Formulate meanings for these statements, 4) Cluster statements and words into themes, 5) Integrate recurring themes into a rich description of the phenomenon being studied, 6) Reduce themes into a structure that offers an explanation for behaviour, 7) Return to participants to conduct further interviews or allow for their feedback and interpretation (Goulding, 2005). This process allows for an in-depth analysis of data which will be explained further in section 4.4.

4.2 Data Collection

Hwang et al. (2016) posit that qualitative methods are most suitable for researching the customer experience as it is context-specific and non-linear in nature. As outlined by Goulding (2005), the main instrument for data collection in phenomenological studies is the interview. The researcher decided to use the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews, as the research objectives centre on "understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values and processes" (Rowley, 2012, p. 262). This was deemed to be the most suitable method for data collection as the interviewees would be more receptive to an interview than other data gathering approaches (Rowley, 2012). The interviewer could probe the participants "to elicit more detailed information on the topic" (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau and Bush, 2010, p.81) and to create a natural opportunity to discuss the topics in more detail.

The researcher prepared a list of themes and key questions to be covered in a set order, with some flexibility in the questions, the extent of probing by the interviewer and the question order (Rowley, 2012). The open questionnaire is included in Appendix A. The researcher avoided leading questions in order to reduce bias, and the interviewees were considered co-researchers because they were experienced in the area being examined. The interviewees were encouraged to elaborate their thoughts and reveal underlying perspectives (Cetin et al. 2014). The interviews were carried out in person in the form of face-to-face interviews, with the exception of two interviews being carried out over the phone for convenience reasons.

The researcher also considered other collection methods for the research project. The use of netnography, which was utilised in a previous customer experience study in the hospitality industry by Choo and Tan in 2017, is a "qualitative, interpretive research methodology that uses Internet-optimized ethnographic research techniques to study virtual communities and networks" (Sharma, Ahuja and Alavi, 2018, p.27). This method of data collection could have been deemed a suitable method, as consumers become more and more vocal online about their experiences, particularly in the hospitality industry. Consumers experiences could have been examined through online sites such as Trip Advisor. The use of focus groups were also considered, however the researcher was concerned that participants may not want to voice their personal experiences and reactions in the company of a group. Therefore, the semi-structured interview method was deemed more effective by the researcher than netnography and focus groups for the phenomenological nature of the study, to gather experiences directly from the sample and allowing for probing of additional insights.

4.3 Sampling

This study will utilise the non-probability sampling method of Purposive sampling, with the process of talking to informants who are most likely to provide early but rich information (Goulding, 2005). The researcher chose this method of sampling as she could use her judgement to select informative cases that best enabled her to answer her research questions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012) and that best met the requirements of the study (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau and Bush, 2010). For this phenomenological study, the researcher selected informants based on the criterion that they regularly stay in hotels in Ireland. However, the researcher attempted to select participants who experienced hotels for different reasons, such as work or leisure stays, to shed light on and gather information on different experiences and perspectives. However, it was important to the researcher that the participants were not purely price focused in order to gather experiences that weren;t just based on price and value for money.

The recommended number of participants in a qualitative study varies among authors and researchers. However, due to the phenomenological nature of the

study, many research textbooks recommend to continue collecting data until data or theoretical saturation is reached (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012), with Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006, p.60) agreeing that "theoretical saturation be a criterion by which to justify adequate sample sizes in qualitative inquiry". The researcher agreed to continue collecting data until few, if any, new themes or information were being brought forward through the data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012).

When planning data collection, the advised number of participants in a phenomenological study varied among researchers and scholars. As previously stated, Padilla-Díaz (2015) recommended a sample of 3-15 participants, while Creswell (1998) also recommended carrying out 5-25 interviews for a phenomenological study. Rowley (2012) also posits from past research that new researchers should aim for 12 interviews of approximately 30 minutes in length, or 6-8 interviews of one hour in length. Based on these recommendations, the researcher settled for a study of six participants, where saturation was occurring and there didn't appear to be any new themes or insights emerging.

4.4 Data Analysis

This study will take a mainly inductive data analysis approach, by collecting data through semi-structured interviews and then exploring them to see which themes to follow up and concentrate on (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). According to Thomas (2006), the outcome of an inductive study is a description of the most important themes related to the study and research objectives. However, most research studies may contain elements of both inductive and deductive approaches, and in the case of this study, the researcher brought with her knowledge and theory which suggests themes that may lie in the collected data (Hair et al. , 2010).

The researcher first carried out data reduction through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be described as "a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.82) and is carried out through careful reading and re-reading of data (Rice and Ezzy,

1999). Furthermore, themes are defined as a pattern in the collected data that describes and organises the findings and interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998).

The researcher listened to the recorded interviews and transcribed to allow for careful consideration of detail. The textual data was then used to develop themes and categories, which provided the researcher with a structure relevant to the research project to organise and analyse data further (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). In order to categorise data, the researcher used a combination of the three sources suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998): 1) terms that emerge as data is being analysed, 2) actual terms used by participants, and 3) terms used in existing theory and literature discovered through carrying out the literature review. Similar ideas and quotes were clustered on a coding sheet to assist the researcher to form core themes, and several sub-themes.

In conclusion, this section has provided an overview of the necessary methodological steps necessary to carry out the dissertation. From a phenomenological approach, six semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to provide rich qualitative data to provide and present findings for this research study regarding factors which influence positive customer experience in the hospitality industry.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In order to carry out the data collection in an ethical manner, the researcher adhered to a number of ethical principles as outlined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012). The researcher gave participants the right to withdraw at any time during the research. The researcher ensured privacy, confidentiality and anonymity to the participants, and were also fully informed of the purpose, nature and outcomes of the research (Hewitt, 2007). As outlined by Connelly (2014), consent should be given voluntarily, subjects should clearly understand what is being asked of them for the research study, and participants must be competent to consent.

In order to adhere to consent guidelines of academic research, the participants were also asked to sign a consent form before the interview commenced, which is outlined in Appendix B. The research should also be kept confidential and protected as advised by Connelly (2014). The collected data will remain only in the possession of the researcher. Furthermore, the reporting of the collected data will be clear and honest.

This section has provided the methodological basis for the dissertation in question. A phenomenological approach will be taken to gather experiences of customers of Irish hotels in order to gain insight into what provides value for them during these experiences. A purposive sampling method was used by the researcher to interview candidates with a knowledge and vast experience of Irish hotels, and semi-structured interviews were carried out with this sample. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis and will be presented in section 5.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Following the methodological approach, the purpose of this section is to present and analyse the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Despite the interviewees having different backgrounds, ages and travel purposes, the researcher was able to group the findings into common themes which revealed factors of importance for the participants in their experiences with hotels in Ireland. Although the findings are grouped into themes, it is clear that some of the subthemes and components of the Services Marketing Mix overlap and are intertwined. Direct quotations from the interview participants are provided to support and clarify the researchers interpretation of the themes that are being presented (Connelly, 2014).

5.1 People

The most common theme that occurred throughout data collection was the theme of 'people' within the hospitality industry that the participants engaged with during their collection of experiences of hotel stays. It could be seen from the data that the theme of 'people' could be divided into three main subthemes: staff competency, staff amiability and the presence of other customers. These subthemes all presented evidence of how the human aspect of services can strongly influence a positive customer experience.

5.1.1 Staff Competency

The first theme that surfaced from the collected data was staff competency, and how efficiently and successfully the staff of the service worked. When discussing the 'whole package' in terms of what she looked for a in a hotel, Participant B placed "good staff" at the top of the list. While outlining a time when she thoroughly enjoyed a hotel stay, she discussed how the staff had been willing to help and went beyond their job requirements.

> While we were in the area, we wanted to check out the local attractions and
> the reception staff could not have been more helpful. They recommended

tourist activities and local restaurants, and gave us any directions and help
we needed, and answered any questions we had. (Participant B)

For participant A, there was more emphasis and enthusiasm about the staff of the hotel than on the actual product/service when discussing her best hotel experience. The participant spoke about staff in different departments of the hotel, and described the staff using adjectives like "attentive", "calm" and "friendly".

It was the service that we were more impressed with. Although it was a busy
hotel, the staff appeared so calm at all times. The staff that served us were so
friendly, they couldn't do enough for us. We had several conversations with
the manager throughout our stay, in the restaurant, in the bar, in the
hallways. He was so attentive and appeared to really enjoy his job.
(Participant A).

Another participant places emphasis on the importance of the professionalism of the staff, explaining:

The front desk staff were true professionals. The checking in process was so
quick and easy going, very professional with a little bit of chat. That is very
important for me. I like a bit of interaction with staff, but I also like when it
is kept professional. (Participant C).

It was made clear by another participant that the staff of the hotel should make them feel looked after and that the customer should have confidence in the staff of the service.

Although we didn't run into any problems while we were there, it was clear
the staff were always alert and ready for any requests anyone had. It's
comforting to know that you're being looked after and that the staff are of a
high standard that always know what they are doing. (Participant D).

The participants also discussed how the competency of the staff has negatively affected their experiences in hotels in the past. The negative experiences, where there is a lack of competency and the standard of the staff is poor, appear to be as memorable for the participants as the positive experiences. Participant C explains that "if I have a bad experience with a person who's carrying out a service, it

gives me a bad taste in my mouth and 9/10 times, I won't return". Similarly, Participant B goes as far as saying: "Sometimes, the staff can let down a beautiful hotel, which is a pity. Bad staff are the biggest liability in my opinion and can really bring down the reputation of a hotel".

It is clear to see that the competency of hotel staff is placed as an area of high importance in the mind of the customer. This theme, along with staff amiability, was the most prominent theme among the collected data and the majority of the participants appeared to agree that the professionalism, competency, willingness to help and confidence of hotel staff have the biggest influence on the experience of the customer with a hotel.

5.1.2 Staff Amiability

Another recurring theme surrounding the concept of people in a hospitality service business was amiability, with most respondents mentioning the importance to them of staff friendliness. When asked to describe their most memorable and positive hotel experience, many respondents spoke about not only the standard and competency of the staff but also their positive personality, willingness to help and the feeling of being cared for.

Participant B spoke of the significance of the staff amiability when remembering their favourite hotel experience, in saying that "the staff were truly so friendly and it really made our stay there feel extra special". The participant referred to how the staff made them feel, similarly to Participant D, who explained that they would place staff at a high importance in their hotel stays: "I think you will always remember how you are treated, whether it be very good or very bad. Staff can leave you feeling very cared for".

Another participant had a similar opinion on the matter of friendly and amicable staff, where they explained to the researcher that "a member of staff in a service business, particularly in a hotel, can brighten up your day by their friendliness and conversation and willingness to help" (Participant F). Participant A showed

particular enthusiasm about staff and their willingness to return to a hotel because of the friendliness of the staff:

> Lovely staff have made me return to hotels and it makes me smile to return somewhere like that ... It gives me the impression that the staff are happy there and there's little staff turnover. That's the kind of place that I'm happy to give my money to. (Participant A)

Participant E brought up the subject of bringing her children away to hotels in Ireland and put the staff friendliness as her main priority when returning to hotels.

> When I bring my kids away, it's a bonus if the hotel to have staff that are good with children. Friendly staff is something that is very important for me and it's usually something that I remember the most about a hotel. I worked in hotels when I was younger and it always stayed with me how much customers appreciated when the staff are friendly and staff who engage with them. (Participant E)

However, similarly to staff competency, the participants also spoke about the effect of unfriendly staff on their hotel experiences.

> Sometimes when I've been visiting hotels, the staff are careless, lazy, and clearly don't enjoy their job. It's something that makes me uneasy and brings down my experience and I don't remember it in a positive light. (Participant C)

> Rude staff have made me remember hotels for the wrong reasons and I always tell my family and friends about these experiences. (Participant B)

It is clear that unfriendly staff result in negative customer experiences for the participants, making them remember the experience in a negative manner, remembering it "for the wrong reasons" and also telling their family and friends about the negative experience, resulting in poor word of mouth for the hotel in question. It can be seen from the collected data and interview quotes that friendly staff result in satisfied customers and unfriendly staff lead to negative experiences and word of mouth.

5.1.3 Other customers

When collecting experiences from participants, the researcher probed them regarding the presence of other customers during service delivery. When carrying out a literature review on the matter, it was clear from past research that the presence of other customers can have an effect on the customer's experience, both positively and negatively. Participant E gave an account of her past experiences where other customers have impacted on her hotel stays in positive ways for both herself and her family:

> It is nice to meet other people while you're away with children. We've also had stays in hotels where our children have made friends with other children at the hotel through the facilities, and that has absolutely made their experience at the hotel. It keeps them amused and they don't get bored. Myself and my husband have also had weekend breaks away where we've met other couples in the bar and stayed in touch afterwards. We once stayed at a great hotel in Sligo where we met some lovely people in the hotel and ended up spending the whole weekend with them. (Participant E).

Similarly, Participant C concurred that it is nice to meet likeminded people while he is visiting hotels, "who you can get along with and chat to at the bar". Participant D provided a similar anecdote when speaking about a favourable experience in a hotel, and included the factor of age when telling the researcher about other customers having a positive impact on their experience:

> My girlfriend and I met loads of people our own age when we were having a few drinks in the hotel bar one night. It was fantastic to spend a great night with a few new people who were similar ages and had similar interests to ourselves. (Participant D).

Participants A and C also mentioned the factor of age when speaking about other customers having an impact on the customer experience in hotel stays.

> Sometimes, if the hotel is lively at night time, and has live music, we sometimes get talking with other guests our age. It's nice to have a bit of extra company in the hotel if you are there for a week or so. (Participant A).

It is nice to be surrounded by guests who may be around the same age as you or people who have similar interests as you. (Participant C)

In contrast, several of the interviewees spoke of how other customers have negatively impacted on their experience during service delivery when staying at a hotel. Different types of customers, depending on different variables (e.g. age, purpose of stay). have caused issues for other customers. Participant A spoke about other customers disrupting her stay at a hotel.

I was away for a relaxing weekend and there was a hen party on in the hotel, and they were so loud very late at night which isn't ideal. Sometimes the guests of a hotel can be very different in terms of what the purpose of their trip is. (Participant A).

Participant D spoke of a similar experience which happened to a family member, where the guests staying at a hotel had completely different purposes and resulted in dissatisfied customers.

My sister went away to a hotel with her husband and two young children. The hotel was described as a family hotel on its website, and many of the reviews she had read online about it said it was the perfect place to bring children for a few nights away. However, when she was there, a group of very loud women were staying next door, who were very noisy into the early hours of the morning after being out partying. Her children were awoken because of the noise and she couldn't get them back to sleep. They were tired and cranky the next day. (Participant D).

A common theme that arose under the broader theme of 'other customers', was if other customers having a negative impact was of the fault of the hotel. Participant D commented that the above issue that happened to his sister was "something that could have been avoided on behalf of the hotel", considering the hotel was known as a family friendly hotel. However, he went on to say that these issues with other customers are often out of the control of the hotel and cannot be avoided. Participant C concurred on this point in saying that:

It is nice to be surrounded by people who may be around the same age as you or people who have similar interests as you, but I think it's impossible for a business like a hotel to control that. (Participant C).

In conclusion, the presence of other customers was discussed throughout all of the interviews, in both positive and negative lights. The positive occurrences were clearly valued by the participants, in that the other customers they encountered added value and enjoyment to their stay.

5.2 Physical Evidence

The next theme that arose as per the Services Marketing Mix is the theme of 'Physical evidence'. It was clear to the researcher that the physical components of the service also serve as an area of great importance to Irish customers. Similarly to the People section, the theme of Physical Evidence could be broken into subthemes to discuss the components of Physical Evidence individually. These subthemes showed the importance of physical evidence in the customer experience within the hospitality industry. The three subthemes associated with Physical Evidence are: Aesthetics/Functionality, Atmosphere and Website.

5.2.1 Aesthetics/Functionality

Aesthetics and functionality of the physical aspect of the hotel proved to be a recurring theme during the one-to-one interviews with participants. Participants outlined that in order to enjoy the hotel experience that they paid for, it must be aesthetically pleasing, cleaned to a high standard and maintained adequately. Participant B was particularly enthusiastic in their anecdote about their favourite hotel experience when speaking about the physical environment of the hotel:

When I arrived, the hotel was beyond what I had imagined. The room was spacious, simply decorated but tasteful and wonderfully designed. I loved the colour scheme, lighting and layout. The room smelled so clean and fresh. The room was one I will never forget. (Participant B).

Aesthetics of the hotel appeared to be of great importance to this participant, who mentioned aesthetics first when asked about her most memorable hotel experience. Participant A also spoke with great excitement about the appearance and interiors of the hotel room in her favourite hotel experience in saying that, "When we arrived at our room, we were blown away. It was beautifully decorated, the place was immaculately clean. I had never seen attention to detail like this", also using the adjective "exquisite" to describe the aesthetics of the hotel.

Participant D again outlined the importance of the appearance of the hotel and hotel room that they are spending money on. The concept of decoration was mentioned by the participant, who also placed importance on cleanliness:

> The hotel had been recommended to us by a friend. It was a gorgeous place, really well decorated and really clean. The room was cleaned thoroughly every day which was good. This meant a lot to me. It was expensive but worth the price. (Participant D)

Participant E combined functionality and aesthetics in her answer when questioned about her favourite hotel experience. The purpose of her hotel stays were leisure breaks with her family, ie. young children.

> The room we got was really spacious for the five of us, we really don't like having to separate into two rooms when we go away with the children so it was nice that the hotel had rooms big enough for all of us. The whole hotel was very modern and nicely decorated which is important for me, I don't like when hotels interior is dated, it gives me the impression that the hotel isn't maintained regularly and that it isn't well looked after. (Participant E)

Participant C spoke highly of the aesthetic and physical environment when describing their favourite hotel experience, in saying that when they arrived to their hotel room, "it was huge and it felt so spacious. There was a great desk, a beautiful bed and even a lounging area. The décor was very modern but also made you feel very at home at the same time, which I liked". Further, when questioned if they placed higher importance on the staff of the hotel or the physical environment, they answered:

Obviously, the actual hotel and its appearance are hugely important, particularly if you take into account the price you are paying. If you are paying a high price, you want a nice reception, you want a leisure centre, you want a nice restaurant and bar, and obviously a bedroom of a high standard. (Participant C).

Although most participants placed higher importance on staff competency and staff friendliness, Participant B, who is a mainly stays in hotels for business purposes, commented "I think, for me, the most important part is the physical hotel itself. Maintenance and aesthetics are a big pull factor for me in booking hotels". It is clear that different consumers who travel to hotels for different purposes place importance on different components of the customer experience.

5.2.2 Atmosphere

The physical evidence component of 'atmosphere' was a theme that was put at a lesser importance by most of the participants of the research project, however, it did arise often and briefly throughout the interviews, so it can be deemed as a factor that influences a positive customer experience. Many participants mentioned the concept of 'atmosphere' in different contexts, such as relating to other guests, staff, music playing in the hotel, etc. When discussing Participant D's favourite hotel experience, he outlined his experience with other customers and how it had had a positive influence on his stay in that specific hotel. He went on to discuss the atmosphere of the hotel; "the atmosphere was great, it was very laid back, perfect for a couple like us and it became a really memorable weekend away for us".

Similarly, Participant E discussed the atmosphere in relation to the live music being played in the hotel and the ambiance. Again, other guests were mentioned in conjunction with the positive atmosphere of the hotel; "There was a great atmosphere in the hotel with the live music they had while we were there, which made us really enjoy the hotel. Sometimes other guests can really influence your experience in a positive way!". It can be evaluated that the presence of other customers can create an atmosphere in the hotel that is favourable for customers and can add to their customer experience in a positive way.

Similarly, the staff may contribute to the ambiance of the hotel, as Participant B commented that despite the busy nature of the hotel, there appeared to be a calm ambiance: "The atmosphere was calm at all times, even though it was busy. I always felt at ease there". This leads the researcher to believe that although there were many customers present, the staff remained calm and ensured the customers remained at ease and were tended to effectively.

5.2.3 E-servicescape

In today's online world, the researcher wanted to investigate the importance of the website and online experience in the customer's holistic hotel experience. Carrying out activities online is a large part of the lives of today's consumers, who rely on the internet for a large range of activities, and was clearly a relevant theme that appeared throughout the interviews with the research participants. The researcher asked the participants if they have ever been put off a hotel by the appearance and functionality of the hotel website, and a range of contrasting answers were given to the researcher. Participant B discussed their point of view regarding the hotel website and if it has ever put them off booking a hotel.

> I have been put off a hotel by its website. It's not very important to me but if I am staying at a hotel for leisure and not work purposes, it might give me a bad first impression of the hotel. The venue may be stunning but it makes me think that they might be lacking in certain areas if their website is poor … A good website is important nowadays because it is often the first impression I get of something … I know from my occupation that a decent website is not a huge expense but it will pay to present the hotel in a positive way to potential visitors, through good aesthetics, functioning and showcasing what the hotel has to offer. (Participant B)

Participant B makes a relevant point that the website is "often the first impression I get of something". Consumers regularly carry out research online prior to purchasing a product or service, and a poor first impression can result in the immediate loss of a sale. The visual first impression online is vital for a service like a hotel for both leisure and corporate purposes. Participant A had similar thoughts regarding a hotel website and its effects on the consumers first

impressions of the hotel in saying that "A good website could give you a good first impression of the hotel", with Participant D also commenting:

> Yeah, as I browse online for hotels, I like to see pictures of the hotel and see its features etc. So a good website is important, one that functions well, is well designed, etc. It wouldn't deter me from booking a hotel, but I do think it's a bad sign when a good hotel doesn't invest in its website. It's a good visual for future customers and gives a good first impression. (Participant D)

Participant F had strong opinions on the importance of a good website for a hotel, who even admitted that they often judge a hotel by the appearance and functionality of the website.

> "Yes, I often judge a business by their website. I think hotels have gone so much in the direction of IT with various third-party websites and booking online, and therefore should have no excuse for having a website that is unpleasing to the eye, difficult to navigate or functions poorly." (Participant C)

In contrast, some participants did not feel strongly about the appearance and functionality of the hotel website, and it did not appear to affect their experience with a hotel. Participant E explained that she doesn't often book online, although she does like to browse online sometimes. When asked if the appearance and functionality of a hotel website would put her off booking a specific hotel, she replied:

> "It's not very important to me. Although I like to browse through websites to find general prices and packages, I usually just hear about a hotel through friends and will ring them directly. I feel more comfortable doing that." (Participant E)

The researcher also got the impression that in the hospitality industry, third party websites such as 'Trip Advisor' and 'Booking.com', are deemed more important and more useful to consumers from Participant A's comment:

> The appearance and functionality of the website isn't too important to me as I usually book through third parties. I look at Trip Advisor sometimes as I

feel that's where the true representations of the hotels can be found. A good website could give you a good first impression of the hotel back some time ago but I think with all of the resources nowadays online where you can get information, it's not completely necessary. But as I said, it can give me a good first impression. (Participant A)

Again, opinions were contrasting among participants on the importance of an aesthetically pleasing and fully functioning website in the hospitality industry. Some placed huge importance on this component of physical evidence, where a good hotel website may now be deemed expected in this digital age. It gives consumers a good first impression of the hotel and may encourage their decision to book the hotel. In contrast others preferred to book offline with a receptionist, book with a reliable third party website such as 'Booking.com' or 'Trip Advisor', or found that there are many resources available online for researching hotels, and therefore placed less importance on the appearance and functionality of a hotel website.

5.3 Process

Following the theme of Physical Evidence, a theme that was discussed during the interviews with participants was the third element of the Services Marketing Mix, Process. Although it was not the most common theme and was not discussed in as much detail and enthusiasm as People and Physical Evidence, it could still be classed as an area of importance in the customer experience in the hospitality industry. The overall theme of Process could be divided into two main subthemes: Service Recovery and Process Encounters. This section will discuss these themes and the findings that arose from the data.

5.3.1   Service Recovery

The main theme that arose under the Process category was service recovery. The respondents were asked if they ever had an issue with a hotel they were staying in and discussed how it was dealt with. Service recovery, as identified in the literature review, is a highly researched area of the customer experience and can

be identified as an important factor in contributing towards a positive customer experience. Although Wilson et al. (2016) stress the importance of 'getting it right the first time', this is an unrealistic expectation of service businesses and each participant discussed an occasion in a hotel where an issue or service fault arose.

Participant B discussed an issue regarding a corporate stay at a hotel, who stated that they provide Wi-Fi. When the participant was staying at the hotel, the Wi-Fi was not working and the Participant complained to a member of the staff. The issue was not rectified and the member of staff had no explanation. The Participant went on to say:

> I later complained via email, which was ignored. I think without customers identifying these issues to staff, they cannot be rectified and improved. The staff didn't seem to care about this issue or my experience at the hotel. I don't complain to be a pain to staff, but to help improve the experience for myself and others. (Participant B)

He had booked it specifically for its reputation as a corporate hotel and due to this fault in the service and the lack of service recovery afterwards, it had meant that he "could not get work done that I had planned to do for the conference". The participant appeared disgruntled at this service fault and explained that he would not return to this hotel. Similarly, Participant A recalled a service fault that required service recovery during a past hotel stay, when she wasn't allocated the room size she had booked:

> It didn't spoil our whole experience with the hotel, but it would have been nice to be given what we asked for originally. We had booked well in advance and it clearly said there was a triple room available. (Participant A)

She went on to say that although they still enjoyed their time in the hotel, she elaborated on her feelings regarding the service fault, that it gave her a poor first impression of the hotel and that it made her think that the hotel was a bit "careless":

> Something like that happening really gives you a negative first impression on your trip and it makes you think that they are a bit careless with their

reservations. The fact that it wasn't really fixed either put me off the hotel a bit too. I would never bother complaining afterwards but I would be reluctant to go back to hotels like that. (Participant A)

Participant D told of an occasion when a service fault had occurred and had been rectified to his satisfaction: "The manager apologised profusely and I was moved room immediately. There was a percentage taken off my stay after it happened, which I thought was nice and I appreciated". He went on to give his thoughts on such issues occurring in saying that "I think accidents are bound to happen in any hotel or service but it's how it is rectified and dealt with that matters in the end" and "when they haven't been dealt with well, no matter how minor the issue is, it makes me not want to return".

Participant E had also experienced service faults but appeared more laid back about them than other participants. All of his issues with hotels had been minor and had been rectified, leading the researcher to believe that he may also have had similar opinions to other participants had their experiences happened to him: "I have complained but it's always been rectified and once its rectified, I don't think about it anymore. Accidents and mistakes happen everywhere and are hard to avoid, so once it's dealt with and fixed, I won't dwell on it". (Participant E)

5.3.2   *Process Encounters*

The concept of process encounters was another subtheme that embodied all encounters and processes experienced by the customer in their interaction with the hotel, including ease of carrying out various activities such as booking the hotel and checking into the hotel. Many participants complained about the complexity, time consuming, unnecessary steps involved in checking into a hotel. Participant A discussed her experience with hotels and the process of checking in:

> Some hotels have big forms for you to fill out that just seem to request unnecessary information so they can keep your details on file to send you emails regularly. It doesn't really annoy me but it's a bit time consuming. (Participant A)

However, she went on to explain that she has had experiences in hotels where the checking in process was affected by the staff: "I've stayed in hotels in the past where the staff are clearly not trained. They are flustered when I'm checking in and it's clear that they don't really know what they are doing". Participant D had similar thoughts and explained how the checking in process for her is often affected negatively by the front desk staff:

> I also think it makes things a lot simpler if the staff are well trained and know what they are doing, and I think you find that out pretty quickly when dealing with someone in a front desk role. I've had situations where the process is slowed down because the receptionist is unorganised, can't find things, is unsure about the process etc. (Participant D)

Similarly to service recovery, the staff competency theme was prominent in process encounters, having overlaps in the answers of the participants. Participant C again backed up this concept in commenting that the check-in process is often lengthy and unnecessary, and that higher rated hotels "try to make the process as simple as possible and are always well trained and polished in the checking in process". Again, staff training is mentioned during this checking-in process discussion and can be seen to be an area of importance for the customers being interviewed.

5.4 Comparison of hotels in Ireland to hotels in other countries

In relation to the research question mentioned in section 3, the researcher wanted to find out if customer experiences in foreign countries different to experiences in Ireland for Irish people. As expected by the researcher, it was difficult for the participants to pinpoint differences between hotels abroad and hotels in Ireland. The common idea surfaced among the participants that when Irish people stay in hotels abroad, they don't place as much importance on the hotel itself as they are visiting the country for a purpose, to explore and see new locations. For this reason, they do not spend much time in the hotel and experiencing different aspects of the organisation. Participant A commented that the hotels she visits

abroad are "just a place to sleep and keep our belongings", in comparison to Ireland where she visits places in Ireland "… just to experience the hotel and stay there for most of my stay. I sleep there, eat there, relax there, make friends there. It's much more of an experience".

Participant C commented that "it's hard to group hotels and their traits according to countries as they vary so much" but proceeded to explain that, for her, the famous trait of friendliness in Irish people can be something that sets hotels in Ireland apart from hotels in other countries that she has visited.

> … but Irish people are said to be the friendliest in the world so I think that that can be a trait that sets Irish hotels apart from hotels abroad, particularly for Irish customers. (Participant C)

> I don't usually spend that much time in the hotel when I'm abroad as I like to explore the area. However, I've never found the staff to be as friendly when I've stayed in hotels abroad. Yes, they are well trained and do their jobs very well, but I don't think they have the same charm that Irish hotel staff have, for Irish customers anyway. (Participant D)

As outlined by Participant D, again, the friendliness of Irish staff is mentioned which may be a factor which sets Irish hotels apart from hotels abroad. Participant D mentioned although the staff have been competent in the hotels they have visited abroad, the 'charm' that Irish hotel staff have remained in their memories. Again, the human element of services, particularly staff amiability, was prominent in the answers of the participants when comparing Irish hotels to hotels they have visited abroad.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis carried out by the researcher revealed the importance of the three components of the services marketing mix, people, physical evidence and process, which add value to the customer experience in the hospitality industry. Each theme will be discussed in the next section, referring to the subthemes and their importance in the customer experience for the participants

DISCUSSION

6.1 People

Having discussed the findings of the research data, it was evident that the most important factor in the customer experience of hotel stays is the component of 'People'. It is widely addressed throughout the literature the importance of the service provider in the customer experience, with Connolly and McGing (2007, p.201) mentioning that "people are central to all aspects of the hospitality industry – in the creation, design, development and delivery of all its services". The themes of staff competency and staff amiability were core themes throughout the interview data and proved to be the vital factors in the experiences of the hotel customers in the research project.

The interviews also proved that poor competency and amiability of hotel staff result in negative customer experiences. Many participants spoke with sincerity about experiences with hotel staff that lacked competency and friendliness, and how these experiences have prevented them from returning to a hotel. It is clear from this data that customers expect well trained staff who are comfortable in their roles. The advice that can be given from this insight is to hire staff who fit the atmosphere of the hotel and to train them adequately in order to provide the high standard in staff that customers have come to expect.

Another theme that arose around the concept of 'People' was the presence of other customers in the service delivery. Although this subtheme was not as prominent as staff competency and amiability, it was still deemed important in both a negative and positive customer experience. The research participants spoke of their hotel experiences which were affected by the presence of other customers. However, the participants felt more strongly about the positive presence of other customers, and how other customers enhanced their experience in hotels in the past through common stay purposes, demographics and interests. The participants who had negative experiences through the presence of other customers understood that the presence of other customers is often out of the control of the service provider.

These opinions back up what Miao and Mattila (2013) explain, that the hotel stay is a complex social environment that is difficult to control with the presence of many different types of customers. It can be advised by the researcher for hotel managers to carefully select a target audience for their hotel and to target them effectively. This may increase the chance of the hotel attracting similar customers and creating an opportunity and environment for customers to meet customers who have common interests and stay purposes.

6.2 Physical Evidence

In the discussions regarding the importance of the Physical Evidence factors in the customer experience in Irish hotels, the participants had mixed opinions of its importance. Unlike other service industries, the customer is physically present during the service delivery in the hotel experience, leading the researcher to believe through past literature that it may be a prominent area of discussion in the semi-structured interviews. As expected, the participants talked in detail about the importance of the physical environment of the hotel, regarding aesthetics and functionality. Both leisure and corporate customers classed it as an area of importance in their hotel experiences, however, it was not deemed as importance as the areas of staff competency and amiability. On the other hand, it was noticed that the customer mentioned that if they are paying a higher price, they expect more in the physical environment of the hotel. This is in contrast to the competency and amiability of staff, which appears to be expected by customers with all hotels.

With regards to the 'e-servicescape' as outlined in the literature review, the participants were probed about the importance of a hotel website and the impression it gives them prior to booking. Lee and Jeong (2012) expressed concern in the importance of online physical evidence of the hotel as it allows the consumers to preview the hotel and service, and it also allows them to build expectations. Although some tech-savvy participants discussed its importance and how they may be deterred from booking a hotel if the website is not aesthetically pleasing and functioning adequately, the majority of participants dismissed its importance with the availability of information online from other hotel related

sources, such as Trip Advisor, Booking.com, offline and online word of mouth and recommendations, etc. This insight proved to be an area of the customer experience that may not be as relevant as literature currently insists.

6.3 Process

When the discussions veered toward hotel processes, the component of 'people' was brought back up by the participants. This thought process of the participants lead the researcher to realise that the concepts of both Service Recovery and Process Encounters, as managed by people, strongly overlap with the 'staff competency' theme that arose in the people component. The themes proved to be difficult to separate and as mentioned in the literature review, Kandampully, Zhang and Jaakola (2018) outline that service personnel are the first to be informed of service faults and failures, hence their importance in service recovery.

The process of service recovery would not be possible without personnel, and in conjunction, the personnel of the hotel also strongly affect process encounters. Although many participants stressed that the checking in process should be simplified, participants also linked the checking in process to the competency of the staff. As mentioned previously, Anitsal, Girard and Anital (2012) stress that services struggle to maintain quality due to the difficulty in standardising the service. This lead the researcher to believe that the the service provider should attempt to amend the checking in process into a simpler set of steps for the customer and the front desk staff should be trained in these steps to ensure higher standardisation. Co-creation can be seen in the process of checking in, as outlined by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) where customers have a role in communicating with front desk staff. However, customers of hotels desire minimal effort and complexity in this activity.

The 'process' component of this research project lead the researcher to question the Services Marketing Mix, as created by Booms and Bitner, when researching it in practice. The researcher questioned the validity of the 'Process' component and if it was necessary with the presence of the 'People' component, as such strong overlapping occurred throughout the interviews with the participants.

6.4 Comparisons of hotels in Ireland to hotels in other countries

Although participants found it difficult to pinpoint differences in their experiences in Irish hotels and hotels in other countries, it was noted that participants appreciated the friendliness of staff in Irish hotels and this was the main insight that was taken from this section of the semi-structured interviews. It was clear that Irish customers spend more time at the hotel when staying in hotels in Ireland, in comparison when travelling to and using hotels in other countries. This insight

CONCLUSION

The phenomenological research carried out in this study collected opinions, thoughts and experiences from customers of Irish hotels. Outlined in the dissertation was a review of the literature from the area of the customer experience, the methodological approach of the research project, an analysis and discussion of the findings and to conclude, the researcher will provide a summary of the research questions answered, the theoretical and managerial implications and the limitations of the research project.

7.1 Empirical findings

In section 3, a number of research questions were outlined. This section will provide a brief summary of the findings of the research to answer the research questions.

a) *Most important component of the services marketing mix for the hospitality industry:* From the collected data and findings presented, it was clear that the component of 'people' in service delivery was deemed most important in the customer experience in Irish hotels. This could be broken into three subthemes of varying importance: staff competency, staff amiability and presence of other customers. The human aspect of services was strongly linked to the factor of 'process' which required similar staff competency and amiability in order for these important service processes to be carried out successfully.

b) *Areas of focus of the customer experience for managers of Irish hotels*: Closely linked to the previous research question, the component of People was deemed most important in the customer experience having analysed all of the semi-structured interviews. Therefore, managers should focus on effective human resource management, putting vital focus on hiring amiable staff and providing extensive staff training to ensure competency within their roles.

c) *Differences across customer experiences in Ireland and other countries*: Although similar factors may be important for Irish customers visiting

hotels in Ireland and other countries, the main theme that arose under this section was the charm and friendliness that Irish customers appreciate from staff in Irish hotels.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

As discussed previously in the discussion section, the results of this study caused the researcher to question the 'process' component of the Services Marketing Mix for the hospitality industry, as it strongly overlapped with the 'people' component. Due to the prominent presence of people in the service delivery in a hotel experience, it was difficult to separate the themes. It may be suggested that amendments should be made to the Services marketing Mix for different types of service organisations to accommodate the vast differences across industries.

7.3 Managerial Implications

Several managerial implications were outlined throughout sections 'Analysis and findings' and 'discussion'. The main practical insights gained throughout the collected data were:

1) The first recommendation that the researcher can give from the data was to engage in thorough human resource practices to ensure providing the most competent staff to deliver services throughout the customers entire encounter with the hotel (ie. front desk staff, managerial staff, catering staff etc) and providing rigorous training to staff to ensure the highest quality delivery of services to customers.

2) The second recommendation for managers was to attempt to develop a target market for the hotel. The theme of the presence of other customer and their impact in the experience of the customer was a common occurrence in the past experiences outlined in the interviews, and as mentioned previously, selecting and targeting a specific market for the hotel may increase the chance of the hotel attracting similar customers and creating an environment for customers to meet customers who have common interests and stay purposes.

3) With the presence of other online sites that provide information about hotels, the researcher recommends that the hotel encourage visitors to leave a review for them on Trip Advisor and similar sites, as these sites appeared to be more common and valued when customers were carrying out research before booking a hotel. Although, a website which provides images of the hotel and its facilities is also important to provide for those tech-savvy customers.

4) The vital importance of service recovery was evident throughout the data collection and analysis. The process of service recovery and how a service failure was managed by hotel staff is an area for managers to put emphasis on, for all staff of the hotel. The researcher advises that a service recovery plan be drafted for the specific hotel and that all staff (not solely management) be trained in service recovery practices to ensure quick and efficient recovery.

5) A recommendation can be made to managers of hotels to attempt to standardise the checking in process and make amendments to the process if it is deemed too time consuming or complex. It was commented numerous times throughout the interviews that a complex check-in process is quite common in hotels and a simpler process would be beneficial to improving the customer experience.

7.4 Limitations

The main limitation of this research study can be seen to be the fact that the study is of a qualitative nature and qualitative studies are difficult to generalise. The participants of the research comprise a small, non-random sample, and although the researcher was confident that there was enough diversity in the sample, the sample could not be seen as statistically representative (Hair et al., 2010). Another limitation of this research study was the time constraints. The researcher was limited to approximately one year to plan, collect, analyse and present the research in an academic manner.

Furthermore, this study was carried out to explore how respondents feel about their hospitality experiences in Ireland, rather than determine how many may feel

or think in this particular way. A suggestion for further research to expand upon this study is to carry out a further quantitative study to gain further insights in the form of statistical data. Qualitative research is often used as an initial research method for quantitative research, and the researcher feels that quantitative results would strengthen this research project and as mentioned previously, allow for the information to be generalised for a larger population.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

- Do you often visit hotels in Ireland?

- Is it usually for work or leisure purposes?

- Can you tell me about a time when you stayed in a hotel in Ireland which you thoroughly enjoyed?

- Which element would you place ashaving more importance in a hotel visit: the staff of the hotel or the physical environment of the hotel?

- Have you ever stayed in a hotel when the staff weren't satisfactory and the hotel was beautiful, or vice versa?

- Do you often book your hotel stays online? Would you prefer to book online or directly with the hotel? (ie. speaking to a receptionist)

- Have you ever been put off booking a hotel by the appearance and functionality of their website?

- Have you ever had a negative experience when checking into a hotel? Have you ever found a checking in process to be complicated and time consuming?

- Do you ever interact with other guests when visiting a hotel? Have you found that the other guests staying at the hotel have had an impact on your stay?

- Have you ever had a poor experience in a hotel? If so, how was it dealt with or rectified? Were you happy with the end result and how it was dealt with?

- Have you ever stayed in hotels abroad? If so, do you think they are different to Irish hotels?

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