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MANAGING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Abstract. Customer experience and service quality are among the most important factors influencing the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of hospitality businesses. Hotels, restaurants, resorts, and other hospitality organizations operate in an environment where customers increasingly expect personalized, convenient, responsive, and memorable services. Therefore, managing customer experience requires a systematic approach that integrates service quality management, employee performance, digital technologies, personalization, customer feedback, and continuous improvement. The article argues that effective customer experience management should move beyond individual service transactions toward an integrated approach covering the entire customer journey. The findings indicate that hospitality organizations can strengthen customer satisfaction and competitive performance by combining employee-centered management, data-driven personalization, continuous service-quality monitoring, and effective response to customer feedback.
Keywords: customer experience, service quality, hospitality industry, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, personalization, digital transformation, service recovery.

Introduction. The hospitality industry is one of the most customer-oriented sectors of the service economy, where customer satisfaction and service quality play a central role in organizational success. Hotels, resorts, restaurants, and other hospitality businesses operate in an increasingly competitive environment in which customers have access to a wide range of alternatives. Therefore, providing high-quality services alone is no longer sufficient. Hospitality organizations need to create positive, consistent, and memorable customer experiences throughout the entire customer journey. Customer experience includes all interactions between customers and a hospitality organization, beginning with information search and booking and continuing through arrival, accommodation, service consumption, checkout, and post-stay communication. These interactions influence customers' perceptions of value, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), customer experience is formed through multiple touchpoints and interactions across the customer journey. In the hospitality sector, factors such as employee behavior, service responsiveness, physical facilities, personalization, convenience, and digital communication can significantly influence the overall experience. Service

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quality is another fundamental component of successful hospitality management. Online booking platforms, mobile applications, social media, online reviews, artificial intelligence, and data analytics allow customers to compare services and make informed decisions before purchasing. At the same time, these technologies provide hospitality organizations with opportunities to personalize services, analyze customer preferences, monitor feedback, and improve operational efficiency. Artificial intelligence and data analytics can support recommendation systems, automated communication, demand forecasting, and the identification of recurring service problems. Employee performance also remains essential because hospitality services involve direct human interaction. Therefore, this article examines the main approaches to managing customer experience and improving service quality in the hospitality industry. Particular attention is given to service standards, employee performance, personalization, digitalization, customer feedback, artificial intelligence, and service recovery as important factors influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Literature review. Customer experience and service quality have become important research areas in hospitality management because they directly influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, and organizational competitiveness. Early studies of service quality mainly focused on the difference between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service received. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, identifying five major dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. This model has been widely applied in hospitality research to evaluate customers' perceptions of service performance and identify areas requiring improvement. The concept of customer experience has subsequently expanded the traditional understanding of service quality. Meyer and Schwager (2007) argued that customer experience results from customers' responses to direct and indirect interactions with an organization. Similarly, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasized the importance of the entire customer journey, including multiple touchpoints before, during, and after service consumption. From this perspective, hospitality organizations should manage not only individual service encounters but also the complete customer journey. Personalization has also received considerable attention in the literature. Kandampully, Zhang, and Jaakkola (2018) highlighted the importance of customer experience management in creating personalized and relationship-oriented services. In hospitality, personalization can involve recognizing guest preferences, providing customized recommendations, and adapting services to individual needs. Such practices can increase perceived value and strengthen customer relationships.

Digital transformation has further changed the relationship between hospitality organizations and their customers. Buhalis and Law (2008) demonstrated that information and communication technologies have significantly influenced tourism and hospitality by improving information access, communication, distribution, and customer interaction. More recently, artificial intelligence, mobile technologies, online booking platforms, and data analytics have created new opportunities for personalization and real-time customer support. Customer feedback and online reviews are also

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important elements of service quality management. Positive and negative reviews provide hospitality businesses with information about customer expectations and service deficiencies. Research by Sparks and Browning (2011) demonstrated that online reviews can influence consumers' perceptions and booking decisions. Consequently, monitoring and responding to customer feedback has become an important component of modern hospitality management. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that customer experience and service quality are closely interconnected but represent broader and complementary concepts. While service quality focuses primarily on customers' evaluation of service performance, customer experience encompasses the emotional, functional, social, and digital aspects of interactions throughout the customer journey. Therefore, contemporary hospitality organizations need an integrated approach that combines high service standards, employee performance, personalization, digital technologies, and systematic customer feedback management.

Research results and discussion. The analysis of the existing literature and contemporary practices in the hospitality industry demonstrates that customer experience and service quality are closely interconnected and represent major factors influencing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the competitiveness of hospitality organizations. The findings indicate that customers evaluate not only the final service result but also the quality of interactions they experience throughout the entire customer journey. One of the main findings is that service reliability and responsiveness remain fundamental determinants of customer satisfaction. Customers expect hotels and other hospitality organizations to provide services accurately, consistently, and within the promised time. Delays in check-in, inaccurate reservations, slow responses to requests, or failure to resolve complaints can negatively influence the overall customer experience. Therefore, hospitality organizations should establish clear service standards and continuously monitor their implementation. Another important result concerns the role of employees in creating positive customer experiences. The analysis shows that employees represent one of the most important points of contact between customers and hospitality organizations. Professional communication, courtesy, empathy, and problem-solving skills can significantly affect customers' perceptions of service quality. Consequently, regular employee training should focus not only on technical service procedures but also on communication, emotional intelligence, conflict management, and customer-oriented behavior. The findings also demonstrate the increasing importance of personalization. Modern customers increasingly expect hospitality services to reflect their individual preferences and needs. Personalized room arrangements, customized recommendations, recognition of returning guests, and individualized communication can increase perceived value and strengthen customer relationships. This indicates that hospitality organizations should use available customer information responsibly to develop more relevant and convenient service experiences.

Digital technologies represent another major factor identified in the research. Online booking systems, mobile applications, digital payment, chatbots, artificial intelligence, and customer relationship management systems can simplify interactions and improve service accessibility. Digital technologies

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also allow organizations to collect and analyze customer data, identify common service problems, and develop personalized offers. However, technology should complement rather than completely replace human interaction, particularly when customers experience complex problems or require emotional support. The analysis further indicates that customer feedback and online reviews have become important instruments for service quality improvement. Customers increasingly share their experiences through online platforms, and these reviews can influence the expectations and decisions of potential customers. For hospitality organizations, online feedback provides valuable information about strengths and weaknesses in service delivery. Systematic analysis of reviews can help identify recurring complaints and determine which aspects of service require immediate improvement.

Table 1. Key Factors Influencing Customer Experience and Service Quality

Factor	Main influence on customer experience	Recommended management approach
Reliability	Builds trust and reduces dissatisfaction	Standardized service procedures
Responsiveness	Improves convenience and perceived value	Faster response systems
Employee performance	Strengthens emotional and interpersonal experience	Continuous staff training
Personalization	Increases perceived relevance of services	Customer data analysis
Digital technology	Improves accessibility and convenience	Mobile and AI-based solutions
Customer feedback	Identifies service weaknesses	Systematic review monitoring
Service recovery	Reduces negative effects of failures	Rapid complaint resolution

The results also highlight the importance of service recovery. Service failures are sometimes unavoidable in hospitality, but the way an organization responds to such failures can determine whether a dissatisfied customer becomes a lost customer or remains loyal. Rapid communication, sincere explanations, appropriate compensation, and effective problem resolution can reduce the negative impact of service failures. Therefore, service recovery should be incorporated into the overall customer experience management system rather than treated as an isolated activity. From a management perspective, the findings suggest that customer experience should be managed as a continuous process rather than as a single interaction. The customer journey begins before arrival through online searches, advertisements, reviews, and booking platforms. During the stay, customers interact with reception staff, housekeeping, restaurants, digital systems, and other service points. After departure, communication, feedback requests, loyalty programs, and online reviews continue to influence the relationship between the customer and the organization. The discussion further shows that service quality and customer experience should be considered complementary concepts. Service quality provides an important foundation for satisfying customer expectations, while customer experience reflects the broader emotional, functional, social, and digital perceptions created through multiple interactions. Thus, an organization may provide technically high-quality services but still fail

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to create a memorable customer experience if communication, personalization, or digital convenience is inadequate.

An integrated customer experience management model can therefore be represented as a continuous cycle:

Customer expectations → Service delivery → Customer interaction → Experience evaluation → Feedback collection → Service improvement → Personalized service → Customer loyalty

This cycle demonstrates that customer feedback should not simply be collected but transformed into managerial decisions. Hospitality organizations can use customer reviews, satisfaction surveys, complaint records, and digital interaction data to identify patterns and continuously improve their services.

Overall, the findings confirm that improving hospitality performance requires a combination of human-centered service management and technological innovation. Employee competence, service reliability, personalization, digital technologies, feedback management, and effective service recovery should operate as interconnected elements. Organizations that systematically manage these elements can create more consistent customer experiences and establish stronger long-term relationships with guests. At the same time, the analysis indicates that digitalization creates certain challenges. Excessive dependence on automated systems may reduce personal interaction, while the collection and use of customer data raises questions concerning privacy, transparency, and responsible data management. Therefore, technological innovation should be accompanied by appropriate organizational policies and a balanced approach between automation and human service. In summary, the research results demonstrate that customer experience management is a multidimensional process. Service quality remains a fundamental component, but contemporary hospitality competitiveness increasingly depends on personalization, employee engagement, digital convenience, effective feedback management, and continuous service improvement. These findings support the view that hospitality organizations should move from a purely service-oriented approach toward a comprehensive customer-experience-oriented management model.

Conclusion. Customer experience and service quality are among the most important factors determining the sustainable development and competitiveness of hospitality organizations. The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that modern customers evaluate not only the quality of the core service but also the entire process of interaction with a hotel or other hospitality organization. Therefore, effective customer experience management should cover all stages of the customer journey, from information search and booking to service consumption, feedback, and post-stay communication. The findings show that reliability, responsiveness, employee performance, personalization, digital convenience, and effective service recovery have a significant role in creating positive customer experiences. Employees remain particularly important because their communication, professional competence, empathy, and ability to solve problems directly influence customers' perceptions of service quality. Consequently, continuous employee training and the development of customer-

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oriented organizational culture should be considered essential elements of hospitality management. In conclusion, successful hospitality management requires an integrated approach that combines high service standards, competent employees, personalized services, digital innovation, feedback management, and effective service recovery. By continuously monitoring the customer journey and transforming customer feedback into practical improvements, hospitality organizations can strengthen customer satisfaction, encourage loyalty, and enhance their long-term competitiveness.

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