

Mapping the consumer journey in the hotel industry: guest segmentation and experience evolution

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Abstract

Purpose – Understanding the consumer journey is crucial in hospitality, where satisfaction, delight and loyalty depend on service quality. While customer journey mapping is popular, research often overlooks variations in customers' thoughts and feelings across the stages of the customer journey. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the customer journey in luxury hotels, examining how rational and emotional factors that influence consumer delight, behavior and satisfaction evolve across each stage – from initial engagement to post-stay evaluations.

Design/methodology/approach – K-means clustering was used to segment consumers based on delight. Chi-square and ANOVA analysis facilitated assessment of variances between delight segments along the customer journey.

Findings – K-means clustering identified three guest delight segments: "Dissatisfied seekers," "Content but cautious" and "Delighted advocates." Results highlight differing decision-making factors, experiences and emotions encountered at various stages of the customer journey by each segment, indicating the need to develop tailored service delivery strategies.

Research limitations/implications – This study was conducted in the luxury hotel segment in Istanbul, which may limit generalizability. Future research should replicate this study across different geographical regions and hotel categories to explore cultural variations and broader applicability. Longitudinal studies could assess how emotional engagement evolves across multiple stays. The focus of this research is luxury hotels; future studies could explore whether delight-driven segmentation applies to other hospitality segments, such as mid-range or budget hotels and alternative accommodations.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study provides the first holistic analysis of the entire consumer journey in the luxury hotel sector – from pre-stay decision-making through onsite experiences to post-stay evaluations. While previous studies have typically examined individual touchpoints or a single outcome variable, this research integrates both emotional and rational factors; segments guests based on their behavior and satisfaction profiles; and identifies critical touchpoints that influence both customer satisfaction and loyalty. It contributes to luxury hotel experience management theory and provides practitioners with concrete recommendations to improve each stage of the guest journey.

Keywords Hotel industry, Service quality, Customer delight, Consumer journey, Guest segmentation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction and loyalty are no longer shaped by individual moments but by the quality and consistency of the entire experience, from initial brand interaction to post-stay evaluations (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). These experiences encompass digital interactions, such as websites and reservations and physical processes, such as check-in and personalized services (Burstn Webster et al., 2021). Although consumer journey mapping is becoming more widespread, research generally focuses only on purchase decision or

post-consumption stages, overlooking the holistic and complex nature of the journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). This segmented approach does not adequately reflect the nature of continuous interactions, particularly in the hospitality industry, where multi-stage service encounters are prominent (Anderl *et al.*, 2016; Kannan and Li, 2017).

A significant gap in the existing literature is the lack of comprehensive consumer journey studies that include pre-decision and post-experience stages. Accommodation studies generally examine these stages separately, providing only limited explanations of the effects of touchpoints on customer perceptions and behavior. Therefore, academics emphasize the need for a comprehensive framework that reflects the dynamism of experiences developing across different service interactions (Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, there is a need for studies that acknowledge the multifaceted nature of accommodation experiences and investigate the combined effects of emotional and rational factors throughout the entire journey.

The hotel industry offers an ideal environment for examining the complexity of the consumer journey. Providing seamless, memorable experiences across multiple stages is critical to enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Luxury, four- and five-star hotels place greater emphasis on physical and human elements (Walls *et al.*, 2011). Guests at these hotels have higher expectations and expect superior quality at every stage of their journey (Padma and Ahn, 2020). However, this holistic approach has largely been overlooked in the literature, with studies typically focusing on post-stay evaluations or brand loyalty.

This article aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a holistic analysis of the consumer journey in the luxury hotel industry. The study has three objectives:

1. to identify critical touchpoints that influence satisfaction and loyalty by analyzing the entire consumer journey;
2. to segment guests according to their satisfaction levels to understand different profiles and behavior patterns; and
3. to provide a comprehensive perspective on customer experience management by integrating emotional and rational factors.

These contributions propose a comprehensive model for consumer journey mapping, emphasize the role of satisfaction in emotional attachment and loyalty and provide practical insights to hotel managers on how to tailor their services to different segments.

2. Literature review

2.1 *The consumer journey in the hospitality industry*

In line with recent developments in the hospitality industry (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), this study addresses the customer journey in three stages: pre-decision, decision-making and post-experience. Expectation confirmation theory (ECT) (Oliver, 1980) emphasizes that satisfaction arises when actual experiences meet or exceed expectations. The application of ECT enables a comprehensive understanding of consumers' processes of expectation formation, experience evaluation and shaping future behavior in the hospitality context.

Emotional attachment and rational factors play a central role in consumer decisions in the hospitality industry (Prayag *et al.*, 2013). Emotions such as happiness and enjoyment emerge as the primary drivers of loyalty, particularly during the experience and post-experience stages (Ali *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, rational elements such as price, service quality and convenience are more prominent during the pre-decision and decision-making stages (Kannan and Li, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that hospitality brands that combine emotional and rational elements encourage greater long-term loyalty (Rather, 2017). For example, experiential

features such as a unique atmosphere or personalized service increase emotional attachment and satisfaction (Ju and Jang, 2022; Kandampully *et al.*, 2018).

2.1.1 Pre-decision phase. The pre-decision phase represents the initial interaction between consumers and the brand, where potential guests gather information through word-of-mouth, prior experiences, online reviews and brand reputation (Xiang *et al.*, 2015; Filieri *et al.*, 2015). In today's digital era, social media and peer reviews strongly shape expectations and influence decisions (Sparks and Browning, 2011; Belanche *et al.*, 2024). According to ECT, expectations formed in this phase become reference points for evaluating future experiences (Oliver, 1980). Additionally, this phase builds initial consumer commitment, driven by positive information and emotional connection to brand messaging (Park *et al.*, 2010).

2.1.2 Decision-making phase. The decision-making phase marks the shift from consideration to action, where consumers decide whether to book a hotel (Kahneman, 2011). This decision is shaped by price, perceived value, convenience and emotional appeal (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Consumers assess the hotel's value proposition against their expectations (Li *et al.*, 2018), and as per ECT, perceived value guides final choices (Oliver, 1980). Real-time digital tools, including dynamic pricing and integrated reviews, further influence decisions. Emotional factors such as brand attachment and trust also play a key role (Gomez-Suarez and Veloso, 2024; Kim *et al.*, 2023). Commitment at this stage is crucial, reinforcing the intention to book (Amin *et al.*, 2021). Consumers who perceive a hotel as trustworthy and aligned with their values are more likely to finalize their choice.

2.1.3 Post-experience phase. The post-experience phase involves consumers evaluating the service after consumption. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction arises from comparing actual experiences with prior expectations (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Positive experiences foster loyalty and repeat bookings, while negative ones lead to dissatisfaction and harmful reviews (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). According to ECT, when experiences meet or exceed expectations, satisfaction leads to loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Oliver, 1980; Kandampully *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, unmet expectations cause dissatisfaction. This phase is crucial in hospitality, as feedback strongly influences future guests' decisions (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). Positive evaluations reinforce loyalty and help brands exceed future expectations, fostering delight.

2.2 Segmenting the consumer journey: the role of delight

In hospitality, where experiences shape loyalty, understanding emotional and rational influences is essential. Segmenting customers by emotional responses, especially delight, is effective. Delight, a stronger response than satisfaction, signals exceeded expectations and helps differentiate loyal customers (Oliver, 2014; Barnes *et al.*, 2016). It fosters deeper brand attachment, repeat patronage and advocacy (Torres and Kline, 2013; Kandampully *et al.*, 2018). Beyond satisfaction, delight enhances engagement and organic growth, increasing lifetime value and retention (Dolnicar and Grün, 2008).

In the luxury hotel sector, consumer behavior gaps persist (Mele *et al.*, 2024). Segmenting by delight allows tailored strategies for specific needs, strengthening loyalty and satisfaction (Dolnicar and Grün, 2008). Understanding delight drivers helps exceed expectations and build emotional bonds (Füller and Matzler, 2008). Ultimately, this approach improves experience management by addressing emotional and practical aspects across all touchpoints.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

A personal survey was conducted in Istanbul, Türkiye (NUTS 2 region), in 2024, with ethical approval from Bursa Uludağ University Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee (2023–11). Istanbul, as a major hospitality hub, offers many luxury (four- and five-star) hotels. The final sample included 600 respondents: 300 international and 300 domestic tourists. The sample was 44% female and 56% male; 80% had university or postgraduate education, 19% had higher education and 1% had secondary education. Regarding socio-economic status, 15% reported medium, 60% medium-high and 25% high. About 28% stayed with family, 28% with friends, 18% as a couple, 12% with colleagues, 9% alone and 5% in an organized group. Respondents were required to have stayed at the hotel during data collection.

The questionnaire captured the customer journey across three stages:

1. Inspiration and search (pre-decision);
2. Decision moment; and
3. At the hotel (post-experience).

An evaluative component on consumer delight enabled cluster creation. Nominal measures were informed by prior studies (Bhinde *et al.*, 2023; VanBergen *et al.*, 2022; Castro *et al.*, 2017; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017; Burns and Neisner, 2006; Ho *et al.*, 2012). Commitment and satisfaction were measured using five-point semantic differential scales (Ni *et al.*, 2022; Busser *et al.*, 2022). A 14-item, five-point Likert scale measuring delight was adapted from Liu and Keh (2015).

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS v29. K-means clustering segmented customers into delight groups to examine behavior across the three journey stages. This method suits the data type and sample size (Arimond and Elfessi, 2001) and has been widely used to analyze user group differences (Eibl *et al.*, 2024) and segment customers in tourism and hospitality (Konu *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2016; Sánchez-Rivero *et al.*, 2023). ANOVA tests showed all items significantly predicted cluster membership (F -values > critical value, $p < 0.05$; see Table 4). Chi-square and ANOVA tests further identified significant differences between delight segments at each stage (Pallant, 2020).

Appendix shows the frequencies for the inspiration and search, decision factors and post-experience stages. At the inspiration and search stage, the average commitment score was 3.64 (SD = 1.13), indicating some respondent commitment. Commitment levels remained similar in the decision stage ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.18$). At the post-experience stage, the mean satisfaction score was 3.85 (SD = 1.29). Table 1 presents the mean and SD values for each customer delight item and the total score. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.934 indicates high reliability of the delight scale.

3.2 Analytical approach

K-means clustering explored two-, three- and four-cluster solutions to identify consumer segments (Steinley, 2006). This method minimizes Euclidean distances to optimize data partitioning and has been widely used in hospitality to analyze preferences and behaviors (Dolnicar and Grün, 2008). All variables were standardized to ensure comparability. Based on interpretability, variance explained and coherence, a three-cluster model was selected. This model identified low delight (Dissatisfied seekers), medium delight (Content but cautious) and high delight (Delighted advocates) (Table 1).

Cluster 1: Low delight (20% of the sample): "Dissatisfied seekers"

Table 1 Delight evaluation among clusters

<i>Item</i>	<i>Overall mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Cluster 1: Dissatisfied seekers, n = 117, low</i>	<i>Cluster 2: Content but cautious, n = 151, medium</i>	<i>Cluster 3: Delighted advocates, n = 332, high</i>	<i>F (ANOVA)</i>	<i>Sig. (ANOVA)</i>
The staff seemed interested in helping me	4.20	1.08	2.47	4.58	4.65	495.64	<0.001
They were really helpful and polite	4.11	1.12	2.35	4.42	4.59	456.25	<0.001
I felt stimulated during the stay	3.82	1.24	1.77	4.44	4.25	596.48	<0.001
The stay was very exciting	3.80	1.22	1.74	4.32	4.29	671.67	<0.001
I felt that I was exceptionally lucky that day	3.80	1.3	1.61	4.19	4.40	676.52	<0.001
My days in the hotel is truly a special one	3.75	1.26	1.72	3.99	4.35	533.93	<0.001
The service I received was much more than generally necessary	3.73	1.29	1.74	3.83	4.39	459.44	<0.001
The experience at the hotel was full of wonderful surprises	3.70	1.29	1.69	4.03	4.27	428.59	<0.001
Most services were very satisfying	3.69	1.24	1.74	4.23	4.14	451.41	<0.001
The experience in the hotel was very pleasant	3.68	1.24	1.59	4.07	4.23	659.54	<0.001
The hotel was a pleasant surprise	3.61	1.33	1.62	3.56	4.34	469.47	<0.001
I never thought that I could enjoy a stay at a hotel so much	3.52	1.32	1.57	3.72	4.11	350.06	<0.001
They made me think that I was very important	3.43	1.24	1.56	3.26	4.16	524.81	<0.001
I was treated like royalty	2.75	1.26	1.47	1.86	3.60	414.01	<0.001
Summated mean score	36.71						
Source(s): Authors' own work							

This group showed the lowest level with an average satisfaction score of 1.20. They reported dissatisfaction with personalized service and emotional connection, indicating a need for targeted improvements.

Cluster 2: Medium delight (25% of the sample): “Content but cautious”

With an average score of 2.79, they are generally satisfied but expect improvements in service consistency and speed. Addressing these needs could increase loyalty.

Cluster 3: High delight (55% of the sample): “Delighted advocates”

With an average score of 3.79, they have the highest level of satisfaction. Their expectations for personalized service and attention to detail were found to be aligned. This group is loyal and inclined to advocate for the brand.

4. Results

This section analyzes findings across customer journey stages, highlighting factors affecting behavior and satisfaction. [Tables 1–4](#) show frequencies, means and standard deviations; [Tables 2–4](#) present expected and observed counts. Only significant results are discussed. Adjusted residuals (ARs) from Chi-square tests were used to calculate p -values and identify categories driving cluster differences ([MacDonald and Gardner, 2000](#)). Residuals above 1.96 or below -1.96 indicate significant relationships: positive values show over-representation, and negative values indicate under-representation ([Mele et al., 2021](#)).

4.1 Inspiration and search

Chi-square analysis ([Table 2](#)) showed that hotel reputation influenced Dissatisfied seekers more (AR 3.7), but less so for Delighted advocates. Previous experience also differed: Dissatisfied seekers did not rely on it (AR -6.3), while Delighted advocates valued it (AR 5.4). Recommendations from family and friends mattered more to Delighted advocates (AR 3.0) and less to Dissatisfied seekers (AR -4.2). Prior knowledge of the hotel was more important to Dissatisfied seekers (AR 2.9), highlighting the role of expectation-setting. Differences also emerged in online search behavior: Delighted advocates used search engines (AR -2.5) and hotel websites (AR -2.8) less, while Content but cautious consumers relied more on hotel websites (AR 2).

Emotional experiences differed notably across clusters. Delighted advocates felt “happy” and “sure,” Dissatisfied seekers felt “unsure,” “worried” and “less happy,” while Content but cautious customers felt more “respected.”

A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in commitment during the inspiration and search stage among the three groups [$F(2, 597) = 169.379, p < 0.001$]. Tukey’s HSD tests indicated higher commitment in Delighted advocates ($M = 4.02, SD = 0.83$) and Content but cautious ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.84$) than in Dissatisfied seekers ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.16$). The effect size (eta squared) was 0.36.

4.2 Decision-making stage

In the decision-making stage, consumers evaluated options based on specific attributes ([Table 3](#)). Price was more critical for Dissatisfied seekers (AR 2.4) and less important for Delighted advocates (AR -3.6). Local character mattered more to Delighted advocates (AR 2.7) and less to Dissatisfied seekers (AR -3.0).

Emotional responses also varied: Delighted advocates felt “happy,” “sure,” “pleased” and “proud”; Content but cautious felt more “sure”; and Dissatisfied seekers felt “unsure” and “worried.”

Table 2 Pre-decision stage									
Inspiration	Cluster 1: Dissatisfied seekers, 20%		Cluster 2: Content but cautious 25%		Cluster 3: Delighted advocates		χ^2	p	Cramer's V
	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals (AR)			
Hotel reputation (132)	7	3.7	26	0.1	67	-3.1	18.008	<0.001	0.173
Previous experience of the hotel (130)	0	-6.3	24	-0.4	76	5.4	45.478	<0.001	0.275
Previous knowledge of the hotel (n=59)	34	2.9	19	-1.2	47	-1.3	8.796	<0.001	0.121
Recommendation from friends and family (n= 117)	32	-4.2	25	0.4	43	3	15.138	<0.001	0.159
<i>Search for information stage</i>									
Google (or another search engine) (n= 379)	21	1.5	27	1.5	52	-2.5	8.404	0.018	0.103
Hotel website (n= 229)	22	1.3	30	2	48	-2.8	48.862	<0.001	0.116
<i>Feelings</i>									
Happy (n= 196)	1	-8	29	1.5	70	5	63.909	<0.001	0.326
Sure (n= 151)	2	-6.3	29	1.3	69	3.9	39.69	<0.001	0.257
Pleased (n= 111)	8	-3.4	32	1.7	60	1.2	11.878	0.003	0.141
Respected (n=68)	3	-3.7	37	2.3	60	0.9	15.224	<0.001	0.159
Joyful (n=65)	8	-2.5	26	0.2	66	1.9	6.783	0.034	0.106
Unsure (n= 65)	68	10.4	15	-1.9	17	-6.6	109.031	<0.001	0.426
Worried (n=60)	73	11.1	15	-1.9	12	-7.2	124.789	<0.001	0.456
Loved (n=46)	2	-3.1	33	1.2	65	1.4	9.645	0.008	0.127
None of these feelings (n= 39)	56	6	13	-1.8	31	-3.2	36.216	<0.001	0.246
Source(s): Authors' own work									

Table 3		Decision stage						
Selection factors		Cluster 1: Dissatisfied seekers, 20%		Cluster 2: Content but cautious, 25%		Cluster 3: Delighted advocates, 55%		Cramer's V
		Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	
Price (n= 167)		26	2.4	30	1.9	44	-3.6	0.002
Local character of the hotel (n= 44)		2	-3	23	-0.4	75	2.7	0.005
<i>Feelings</i>								
Sure (n= 252)		0	-10.1	33	3.5	67	4.9	<0.001
Happy (n= 128)		4	-5	30	1.3	66	2.8	<0.001
Pleased (n= 118)		1	-5.7	31	1.7	68	3	<0.001
Proud (n= 73)		3	-3.9	27	0.5	70	2.7	<0.001
Worried (n= 65)		80	13	8	-3.4	12	-7.4	<0.001
Unsure (n= 45)		84	11.4	11	-2.3	0	-7.1	<0.001
None of these (n= 32)		65	-4.3	16	-1.3	19	-4.3	<0.001
Loved (n= 23)		0	-2.4	39	1.6	61	0.5	0.036
Source(s): Authors' own work								
							6.649	0.105
							101.5	0.411
							25.217	0.205
							32.567	0.233
							15.308	0.16
							170.07	0.532
							131.81	0.469
							46.279	0.278

Table 4 Post-experience stage

Selection factors	Cluster 1: Dissatisfied seekers, 20%		Cluster 2: Content but cautious, 25%		Cluster 3: Delighted advocates, 55%		χ^2	p	Cramer's V
	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals	Observed (%)	Adjusted residuals			
Positive aspects									
Location (n = 223)	25	2.7	28	1.3	47	-3.3	11.925	0.003	0.141
Originality (n = 194)	12	-3	24	-0.6	64	2.9	11.531	0.003	0.139
Price (n = 187)	25	2.6	27	0.6	48	-2.6	8.509	0.014	0.119
Prestige of the hotel (n = 135)	10	-3	24	-0.4	66	2.8	11.126	0.004	0.136
Exclusive atmosphere (n = 82)	6	-3.3	27	0.4	67	2.3	11.219	0.004	0.137
Size of room (n = 44)	39	3.3	20	-0.7	41	-2	11.121	0.004	0.136
Negative aspects									
Breakfast (n = 91)	33	3.5	24	-0.2	43	-2.6	13.036	0.001	0.147
Parking (n = 90)	5	-3.9	33	1.9	62	1.4	16.022	<0.001	0.163
Restaurant (n = 88)	47	6.9	19	-1.4	34	-4.3	48.624	<0.001	0.285
International atmosphere (n = 56)	9	-2.1	20	-1	71	2.5	7.18	0.028	0.109
Price (n = 53)	38	3.5	28	0.6	34	-3.3	14.94	<0.001	0.158
Atmosphere in terms of other clients (n = 40)	58	6.3	14	-1.5	28	-3.7	39.497	<0.001	0.257
Feelings									
Sure (n = 250)	1	-9.8	34	4.4	65	3.9	98.314	<0.001	0.405
Happy (n = 109)	1	-5.4	22	-0.8	77	5	35.479	<0.001	0.243
Unsure (n = 47)	100	14.5	0	-4.1	0	-7.9	210.516	<0.001	0.592
Pleased (n = 43)	0	-3.3	30	0.8	70	2	11.249	0.004	0.137
Worried (n = 36)	100	12.6	0	-3.6	0	-6.9	158.101	<0.001	0.513
Understood (n = 33)	0	-2.9	45	2.8	55	-0.1	12.525	0.002	0.144
Source(s): Authors' own work									

ANOVA revealed significant differences in commitment [$F(2, 597) = 306.846, p < 0.001$], with a large effect size (0.507). Delighted advocates ($M = 4.27, SD = 0.76$) and Content but cautious ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.81$) showed higher commitment than Dissatisfied seekers ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.03$).

4.3 Post-experience

In the post-consumption stage, satisfaction was shaped by tangible and intangible factors (Table 4). Delighted advocates valued originality (AR 2.9), prestige (AR 2.8) and exclusive atmosphere (AR 2.3). Dissatisfied seekers prioritized room size (AR 3.3), location (AR 2.7) and price (AR 2.6).

Regarding negatives, Delighted advocates noted the international atmosphere (AR 2.5), while Dissatisfied seekers rated the restaurant (AR 6.9), other guests' atmosphere (AR 6.3), price (AR 3.5) and breakfast (AR 3.5) more negatively. Emotionally, Delighted advocates and Content but cautious felt more "sure," while Dissatisfied seekers felt more "worried" and "unsure."

Post-purchase satisfaction was strongly linked to customer delight. ANOVA showed significant differences among groups [$F(2, 597) = 781.528, p < 0.001$], with a large effect size (0.780). Delighted advocates reported the highest satisfaction ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.55$), followed by Content but cautious ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.62$), while Dissatisfied seekers had the lowest satisfaction ($M = 1.53, SD = 0.75$).

5. Discussion

This study segmented the luxury hotel market by delight and examined how factors and emotions differ across the customer journey. Table 5 presents the characteristics of each segment, including respondent profiles and journey details.

The findings show that external validation, prior experience and emotions shape decision-making and post-consumption experiences, supporting research on social proof and experiential memory (Wahba, 2024). Delighted advocates relied on past experiences and social proof from friends and family, while Dissatisfied seekers focused more on hotel reputation. This underscores the importance of strong brand reputation and consistent guest experiences for building trust and loyalty (Yaghi, 2024).

Information search behavior is dynamic (Mieli, 2023) and varied across segments. Delighted advocates were confident, conducting fewer online searches, while Content but cautious consumers sought more reassurance via hotel websites. This reflects different cognitive strategies (Kahneman, 2011). Emotionally, Delighted advocates felt "happy," "sure" and "pleased," whereas Dissatisfied seekers felt uncertain and worried, highlighting the impact of positive emotions on satisfaction and commitment (Gao and Zhang, 2025). ANOVA confirmed greater decisiveness among Delighted advocates and Content but cautious consumers. For managers, providing engaging, reassuring content early can boost satisfaction and reduce uncertainty, suggesting hotels should tailor digital content to build emotional confidence and trust (Kim et al., 2012).

In the decision-making stage, price was crucial for Dissatisfied seekers, while Delighted advocates valued the hotel's local character. This supports segmenting consumers by value orientation: cost-conscious customers prioritize financial factors, while satisfied guests seek authentic, hedonic experiences (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2015). Emotionally, Delighted advocates felt pride and pleasure, whereas Dissatisfied seekers remained uncertain. Trust-building strategies such as personalized recommendations, flexible policies and transparent pricing can boost confidence among Dissatisfied seekers.

In the post-consumption phase, satisfaction depended on both tangible and intangible factors. Delighted advocates valued prestige, originality and exclusivity, highlighting the

Table 5 Characteristics and customer journey for each delight segment

<i>Dissatisfied seekers</i>									
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Content but cautious</i>		<i>Delighted advocates</i>		<i>SE status</i>	<i>Stayed with</i>		<i>SE status</i>	<i>Stayed with</i>
	<i>Education</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Education</i>	<i>Gender</i>		
Female 31%	Higher education 17%	Family 30% Couple 24%	Female 39% Secondary school 1%	Female 51%, Male 49%	Medium 23%	Family 30% Couple 24%	Female 39% Secondary school 1%	Medium-low 0%	Family 33%
Male 69%	Post-graduate 23%	Friends 22% Alone 12%	Male 61% Higher education 13% College or university 59% Post-graduate 27%	Friends 23% Work colleagues 18% Couple 15%	Medium-high 61%	Friends 22% Alone 12%	Higher education 13% College or university 59% Post-graduate 27%	Medium 14%	Friends 21%
		Work colleagues 10% Organized trip 2%		Work colleagues 18% Couple 15%	High 28%	Work colleagues 18% Couple 15%	College or university 57% Post-graduate 20%	Medium-High 59%	Couple 20%
				Alone 13% Organized trip 5%		Alone 13% Organized trip 5%		High 27%	Work Colleagues 12% Alone 7%
									Organized trip 7%
<i>Stages</i>	<i>Inspiration and search</i>	<i>Decision-making</i>	<i>Post-experience</i>	<i>Stages</i>	<i>Inspiration and search</i>	<i>Decision-making</i>	<i>Post-experience</i>	<i>Stages</i>	<i>Post-experience</i>
<i>Main factors</i>	Hotel reputation	Price	Location	Main factors	Hotel website			Local character of hotel	Originality
	Previous knowledge of the hotel	Price							Prestige of the hotel
			Size of room						Exclusive atmosphere
<i>Emotions</i>	Unsure Worried	Unsure Worried	Unsure Worried	Emotions	Respected	Sure	Emotions	Happy Sure Pleased Proud	Happy Sure Pleased
<i>Commitment Satisfaction</i>	Low	Low	Low	Commitment Satisfaction	Medium	High	Commitment Satisfaction	High	High
Source(s): Authors' own work									

importance of premium experiences. In contrast, Dissatisfied seekers prioritized location, price and room size. Their negative views on breakfast, restaurant quality and atmosphere emphasize the need for consistent service. Empowering employees to apply trust-building and recovery strategies can strengthen emotional bonds at this stage (Hyun and Kim, 2012).

6. Conclusions

This study offers valuable insights into consumer behavior across the customer journey. By segmenting consumers into Dissatisfied seekers, Content but cautious and Delighted advocates, it highlights differences in decision factors and emotional states affecting all stages. Emotional segmentation allows hotels to optimize resources and tailor services, enhancing satisfaction, fostering loyalty and creating sustainable competitive advantage.

Dissatisfied seekers are consumers whose high expectations were unmet, leading to emotional disengagement. Consistent service and proactive recovery are essential to improve their experiences. Content but cautious consumers balance practical and emotional factors, showing moderate satisfaction and conditional loyalty – presenting an opportunity to convert them into loyal advocates through consistent service, personalized touches and loyalty offers. Delighted advocates represent the ideal segment, with high satisfaction and strong brand advocacy. They value personalized, emotionally resonant experiences that foster repeat visits and word-of-mouth. Maintaining their loyalty requires continuous innovation, personalized enhancements and efforts to make them feel valued (Mele *et al.*, 2024).

6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study challenges the notion that satisfaction is a static concept, demonstrating that guest experiences are multidimensional and dynamic and that satisfaction plays a critical role in loyalty and recommendation behavior. Satisfaction has been defined as an important factor influencing future consumption behavior, and this study contributes to the literature (Kim *et al.*, 2013; Oliver, 2014). Segmenting guests into segments based on their satisfaction levels using K-means clustering empirically reveals the dynamic structure of emotional attachment and its strong relationship with loyalty. The emphasis on transition from satisfaction to satisfaction and exceeding expectations questions traditional models that focus on functional quality and highlights the importance of psychological and emotional dimensions in consumer behavior.

This study builds on the consumer journey understanding in the luxury hotel industry (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018) by segmenting customers according to their satisfaction levels in the pre-decision, decision-making and post-consumption stages. While existing models focus on rational factors such as price and convenience, this research emphasizes the importance of emotional and social factors and provides rational, emotional and demographic profiles for each segment. The use of K-means clustering enhances the method's rigor by identifying segments that exhibit different behavioral patterns and emotional responses. This approach contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer behavior beyond aggregate analysis in the luxury hotel industry and provides a replicable framework for future studies in the service sector.

6.2 Practical contributions

These findings provide actionable insights for hospitality managers to enhance guest satisfaction and loyalty. By segmenting guests into three categories and analyzing rational and emotional factors at each stage, hotels can deliver more strategic and personalized service.

For Dissatisfied seekers, proactive service recovery and real-time feedback are vital, as they are highly sensitive to unmet expectations. Staff should detect early dissatisfaction and

respond empathetically; tools such as in-room surveys help resolve issues quickly. Post-stay follow-ups that acknowledge feedback and outline improvements rebuild trust and encourage positive word-of-mouth.

Content but cautious consumers value consistency and reliability; any service deviation impacts them. Clear pre-arrival communication and personalized offers (e.g. upgrades, curated experiences) enhance perceived value. Targeted loyalty programs and exclusive incentives drive repeat bookings and deepen loyalty.

Delighted advocates should receive exclusive benefits, personalized amenities and structured advocacy programs (e.g. referrals, social media). Personalized welcomes and unique experiences reinforce their status, while public recognition further strengthens loyalty, turning them into brand ambassadors.

6.3 Limitations and future research directions

This study focused on luxury hotels in Istanbul, which may limit generalizability. Future research should replicate it in other regions and hotel categories to examine cultural differences and broader applicability. Longitudinal studies could explore how emotional engagement changes over multiple stays. Further research might also test delight-driven segmentation in other segments, such as mid-range and budget hotels or alternative accommodations.

As digitalization transforms hospitality, technologies such as AI, virtual reality previews and chatbots may strongly shape consumer expectations and experiences. The impact of these technologies on consumer delight deserves further study. Additionally, post-consumption engagement – such as user-generated content, reviews and advocacy – warrants exploration. Future research could examine how delighted consumers influence others through digital word-of-mouth and social media. By integrating technology and expanding delight-based segmentation, future studies can deepen understanding of emotional engagement in hospitality.

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Appendix

Table A1 Frequencies for inspiration and search, decision factors, and post-experience stages

Stage	Question	Items	Frequencies
Pre- decision stage			
Inspiration & attention	Describe what you did to find inspiration or how you got in touch with information that caught your attention about the hotel:	I knew because the reputation of the hotel.	132
		My previous experience in the hotel	130
		My friends/family recommended it	117
		I was searching for a hotel in internet	116
		I was in the area, and I show the hotel	59
		It was the closest option given the aim of the trip	37
		A message in Instagram got my attention	9
Information search	Where did you search for information (you can select 3 options) about where to stay?:	Google (or another search engine)	379
		Website	229
		I asked my friends/family	197
		TripAdvisor	183
		I didn't search for information	164
		Comments on social media about the restaurant	160
		Instagram or other social media	93
		Recommendation at a restaurant, travel agency or other face-to-face external source	67
		Emotional state	In this search you would say that we were:
More rational	255		
Feelings	How did you feel while searching for information? (multiple options can be chosen):	None of them	17
		Happy	196
		Sure	151
		Pleased	111
		Respected	68
		Unsure	65
		Joyful	65
		Worried	60
		Proud	47
		Loved	46
		None of the previous ones	39
		Understood	15
		Overwhelmed	11
		Fearful	2
		Guilty	0
		Frustrated	0
		Ashamed	0
		Angry	0
Decision stage			
Decision factors	Which three factors where crucial to take the decision? (you can select 5 options):	The location	276
		The restaurant	187
		The price	167
(continued)			

(continued)

Table A1

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>
		The comments (TripAdvisor or other social media)	130
		The atmosphere (in terms of other clients)	124
		The prestige of the hotel	121
		The comments from family/ friends	120
		The photos of the reception and entrance hall	106
		The design of the room	104
		The exclusive atmosphere	67
		The breakfast	65
		The staff	63
		The luminosity (in terms of windows) of the room	61
		The design	48
		The local character of the hotel	44
		The photos of the bathroom	32
		The originality	29
		The size of the room	21
		The option of a spa	16
		The option of a gym	8
		The international atmosphere	7
		The Parking	2
		Available offers	2
Emotional state	In this search you would say that you were:	More emotional	356
		More rational	231
		None of them	13
Feelings	How did you feel? (multiple options can be chosen):	Sure	252
		Happy	128
		Pleased	118
		Proud	73
		Worried	65
		Unsure	45
		None of these	32
		Understood	26
		Loved	23
		Joyful	22
		Respected	9
		Overwhelmed	9
		Angry	1
		Ashamed	1
		Fearful	1
		Frustrated	0
		Guilty	0
<i>Post experience stage</i>			
Decision factors	Please pick the 3 main positive issues of the experience:	The location	223
		The originality	194
		The price	187
		The design of the room	167
		The restaurant	158
		The prestige of the hotel	135
		The atmosphere (in terms of other clients)	113
		The reception and entrance hall	84
		The staff	82
		The exclusive atmosphere	82
		The luminosity (in terms of windows) of the room	76

(continued)

Table A1

Stage	Question	Items	Frequencies
Feelings	How did you feel? (multiple options can be chosen):	The design	67
		The breakfast	49
		The size of the room	44
		The local character of the hotel	30
		Bathroom	26
		The international atmosphere	24
		Parking	15
		The crowdy atmosphere	14
		Available offers	13
		The spa	9
		The gym	8
		The crowdy atmosphere	266
		Bathroom	166
		Available Offers	115
		The design	110
		The originality	108
		The local character of the hotel	92
		The design of the room	91
		The breakfast	91
		Parking	90
		The restaurant	88
		The size of the room	88
		The luminosity (in terms of windows) of the room	74
		The prestige of the hotel	69
		The exclusive atmosphere	66
		The gym	58
		The international atmosphere	56
		The price	53
		The atmosphere (in terms of other clients)	40
		The reception and entrance hall	29
		The spa	28
		Location	18
		The staff	4
		Emotional	360
		Sure	250
		Rational	236
		Happy	109
		Unsure	47
		Pleased	43
		Worried	36
		Understood	33
		Proud	20
		Joyful	16
		Frustrated	12
		Loved	9
		Overwhelmed	9
Respected	5		
None	4		
Angry	3		
Fearful	3		
Ashamed	2		
None of these	2		
Guilty	1		
Source(s): Authors own work			

About the authors

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