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**Enhancing Guest Experiences in Dubrovnik's 5* Hotels: Content Analysis of Usage of
Sensory Stimuli**

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on investigating the role of sensory stimulation and how it enhances the customers' experience in luxury hotels in Dubrovnik, Croatia. This paper aimed to answer three research questions; is there a link between sensory stimulation and customer satisfaction, which senses provide a memorable experience, and which out of the five senses are alpha to creating high customer satisfaction. Primary research was done through content analysis; examining online comments through TripAdvisor.com of five 5* luxury hotels. The research consisted of 75 hotel guest reviews in total, that were closely chosen based on the mentions of keywords indicating sensory stimulation. Results show that there is a positive correlation between sensory stimulation and guest satisfaction. Implications for the sense of smell and sound were overlooked which could alter the experience of the guest. Further study should be done for future researchers to have more qualitative research to benefit in future studies.

Keywords: Sensory stimulation, customer experiences, luxury hotels, sensory marketing, five senses.

Enhancing Guest Experiences in Dubrovnik's 5* Hotels: Content Analysis of Usage of Sensory Stimuli

Hospitality and tourism is the main driving sector not only in Croatia, but specifically in Dubrovnik, and hotels are the lodging operations that are the most occupied in the season of tourism. While hotels have a similar concept covering basic needs, in today's volatile and uncertain times, it is not enough for our consumers. Guests are becoming more sensitive to the services provided, and their expectations have changed due to the evolving need for service excellence.

Spence (2022) mentioned that people who decide to go away on a holiday, have the desire to need a 'break' from all the stimulation that is given by digital technology, he refers to this as 'digital detox'. That being said, it is not the problem of the individual being overstimulated, but rather the individual having a sensory imbalance (Spence, 2022). This paper will focus on exploring further research on how sensory stimulation can benefit the overall customer experience in luxury hotels within Dubrovnik, Croatia.

The sight and sound senses are the ones that are overstimulated, which leaves the other three: smell, touch, and taste less stimulated, this results in the sensory imbalance as mentioned above (Spence, 2022). Guests are expecting a personalized and memorable experience at every interaction point within the hotel industry (Rahimian et al., 2021).

When it comes to the marketing of the hotel, this is where it is crucial to know what our guests are looking for. As identified in (Guzel et al., 2016) tourists travel to a destination due to satisfaction of their specific needs which include social, emotional, and psychological. It is believed that since a destination itself is enjoyable, engaging, and memorable, Guzel, and Dortyol (2016) suggest that hospitality operations should be giving more attention to realizing the memorable aspect of the travelers' experience. In the context of the hotel industry in Dubrovnik, this paper aims to highlight

the importance of sensory stimulation to make a memorable experience for tourism travelers.

Moreover, this paper will aim to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a link between sensory stimulation and customer satisfaction?
2. Which sensations are used to express a memorable experience?
3. Which one out of the five senses is alpha for customer satisfaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional vs Experiential Marketing

There has been a significant switch in the type of marketing businesses focus on due to the changes in consumer expectations. Nowadays the traditional marketing approach is viewed as an outdated marketing tool since it uses old marketing strategies like, one-way communication (limited interaction), and the fact that there is not any interaction from the potential consumer (Motarwar, 2021).

Now when it comes to experiential marketing, Motarwar (2021) emphasizes that communication is interactive which allows consumers to feel that the product or service is more personalized. Consumer engagement in experiential marketing helps brands know, and understand the needs of their customers that way they can tailor future products or services to increase consumer satisfaction.

The experiential marketing approach is linked to the multisensory method which enables the consumers to generate additional value in their experience and create a wow effect and enhance the customer experience (Lee et al., 2019).

Sensory Marketing

Sensory marketing is identified as one of the experiential marketing approaches that brands use to stimulate the guests' five senses (taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound) to create a memorable experience that can lead to customer loyalty (Ehl Insights). Memorable experiences occur since sensory stimuli support the emotional connection between the guest and the hotel service; which affects the value of the services perceived (GUZEL et al., 2016). Furthermore, creating a multi-sensory experience for the guests can lead to an amplified experience that improves their overall satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019). Guzel et al., (2016) use examples to provide a better understanding of the use of sensory marketing.

Visual

The visual aspect is the alpha sense out of all five and has been the main attention of tourist experiences. Research shows that natural colors increase positive feelings. Based on the research from Zhou & Aitamer (2011) colors have a crucial role when it comes to stimulating individuals' moods and emotions. Cool and warm colors alter the results of the consumers' response to service. It is emphasized that colors draw a consumer's attention and warm and neutral colors are the best option for this type of outcome.

Likewise having powerful lighting creates a homey experience for the guests. Zhou & Aitamer (2011) believes that a strong level of lighting will bring high arousal to the guests and will make them feel more stimulated, alert, and jumpy. Low-level lighting will help the consumer feel more relaxed, calm, and grounded that influences the guests' overall perception of the atmosphere around them. Based on this, lighting is a major aspect of the general environment.

Sound

Music is the easiest way in creating sensations and feelings in guests. Some specific music genres affect the way guests store memories and emotions toward the service. According to Lindstorm (2010) in Zhou & Aitamer (2011) sounds create moods that enhanced feelings and emotions for consumers.

Scent

Scent is one of the vital senses to stimulate. When the sense is stimulated it subconsciously makes the guest spend extra time in the area that they're in, and increases them to feel better about themselves. Overall fragrances have a powerful effect on people and increase customer satisfaction and overall evaluation of the service provided (Zhou & Aitamer, 2011).

Taste

The overall appearance and taste of food are other sensory stimuli that can intensify the guests' experience. Brito (2021) mentions that taste creates memories and mental triggers that are linked to the flavors. Meaning that it can leave an imprint on thoughts and feelings on a subconscious level. The author uses an example of linking the flavor of a lollipop to childhood.

Touch

Lastly, the tangible parts of the property are a central role in a luxury hotel since it makes the experience more realistic and different by stimulating the touch sense.

Management and Marketers should understand the purpose of these different sensory stimuli strategies, to grow the customers' experience, while establishing a brand image that corresponds with the guests' perception judgment, and behavior (Agapito et al., 2013)

Linkage to Consumer Experience (Attitudes, Perception & Behavior)

Due to the growing interest in sensory marketing among marketers and researchers, means that there is a positive effect and an important role of all sense stimulation in a guest's experiences (Agapito et al., 2013). This shows through the rise in experiential marketing in luxury hotels. It has been studied that it contributes to the guest's post-stay having a memorable experience (Spence 2022).

Sensory marketing involves the individual on an emotional, physical, and rational level (Agapito et al., 2013) By providing guests with exclusive, positive, and memorable experiences, can increase the guest's happiness and brand loyalty while creating a sustainable competitive advantage with the other hotel brands (Lee et al., 2019). One of the reasons for successful sensory stimuli is for managers to know the importance of developing a theme. This will allow guests to reflect on their impressions and help increase their memory of the service. Missing this visual component will be challenging for the guests to recall their experience in general (Agapito et al., 2013).

When it comes to making an unforgettable experience for consumers, management and marketers must understand the four realms of an experience. According to (Pine & Gilmore 1998) in (Zhou & Aitamer, 2011), four realms are categorized when it comes to an experience. The two scopes of this framework are customer perception and the environmental relationship. For the first dimension, customer perception is looked at from active or passive participation, and environmental relationships are categorized through absorption and immersion (sight, sound, smell, touch) that are around the consumer. Once these categories have been distinguished, the four realms are looked at which are, entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic. The entertainment realm is connected to the five senses of the consumer, education is linked to learning,

escapism is related to doing and lastly, the aesthetic is the presence of the consumer. Aitamer & Zhou (2011) believes that all dimensions of the realms need to be active to create an unforgettable experience for the hotel guests.

As future managers the knowledge of knowing that guests now value the way of experience rather than the service itself (Agapito et al., 2013). Word-of-mouth advertisement will then be improved since it's known that consumers share the positive or negative emotions that they gathered from their past experiences. This is a perfect way for management to evaluate the company's performance while improving customer experience and customer-employee relationship which will then create service innovation (Lee et al., 2019).

Gap Model

To fulfill the consumers' needs, hotelier management must first know the importance of quality in the service that they're providing. Sofronov (2018) believes that the quality in hospitality and tourism is the need to meet the customer's needs, desires, and expectations of the service. Not only is it important for the customer, but as well as the business due to the high level of competitive advantage.

One way to move up on the competitive ranking, and to satisfy the consumers is to use a model that benefits marketers and management in better understanding customer satisfaction which is the *Gap Model of Service Quality* (11.3 the Gap Model of Service Quality - Principles of Marketing | OpenStax, n.d.) Professionals use this model to analyze the customers' satisfaction levels and identify the areas for improvement within the organization (Indeed, 2023).

The GAP model was first mentioned by A. Parasuraman, Valarie Zeithaml & Leonard L. Berry in 1985 (Lapaas, 2019). According to the research of (OpenStax, n.d.) & (Lapaas, 2019), the GAP

model consists of five different gaps between the service provided and what is expected by the customer:

Gap 1: The knowledge Gap – Customer expectation vs. management perception.

Gap 2: The Policy Gap – Service Quality specifications vs. managements perception.

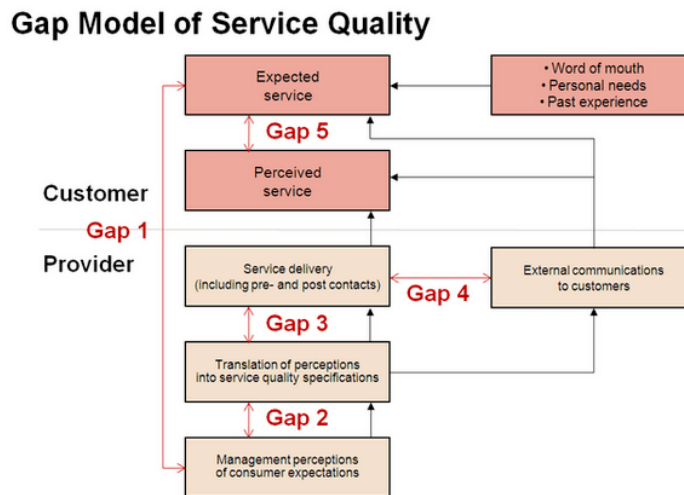
Gap 3: The Delivery Gap – Service quality specifications vs. the service delivery.

Gap 4: The Communication Gap – Service delivery vs. external communication.

Gap 5: The Customer Gap – The expected service of the customer vs. the service they receive.

Figure 1

Gap Model of Service Quality (Sofronov, B.2018)



Note. A visual representation of the service quality gap model

The way Schoemaker (2021) explains it; Gap 1 exists because no research is usually done to understand what the customer wants. Gap 2 can be closed by creating a service design to improve the overall experience. Next, Gap 3 can be delivered by training and working with employees to properly execute the service. Gap 4 is based on the delivery of promises, and here, to close it, employees and management should under-promise in order to over-deliver, which will then increase the customers' zone of tolerance. Lastly, Gap 5 where the expectation should match the perceived service.

METHOD

This current study focuses on investigating the following research questions:

1. Is there a link between sensory stimulation and customer satisfaction?
2. Which sensation is used to express a memorable experience?
3. Which one out of the five sensations is alpha for customer satisfaction?

In order to confirm the findings of these research questions, a qualitative approach was taken place. More specifically, content analysis was applied not as a method of counting words, but analyzing and linking the results with their proper context (Bengtsson, 2016); in this case, the feelings or emotions linked with sensory stimulation. To gather the specific data, the website: *Tripadvisor.com* was used. This is known as one of the largest travel reviews and guidance platforms. Past customers of all hospitality businesses leave their reviews of the service they attended. To write a review, the customer needs to provide a 1-5 (1- terrible; 5-excellent) star rating, duration of stay, with whom they went (couples-solo), the written review, and pictures (optional). TripAdvisor.com mentions that it has “ *more than 1 billion reviews and opinions of nearly 8 million businesses*” and with this, future customers turn to TripAdvisor.com to look for guidance from the ones who experienced the service already.

Using this credible online platform, the examination of past guest reviews was based on their overall experience in one of the five hotels. The analysis looked closely at specific comments including the use of the guests' five senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste). The exploration covered reviewing 5-star hotels in Dubrovnik, Croatia, with 15 comments from each resulting in 75 reviews in total. The selection was from the year 2023-2022 and observed overall positive reviews. The recording process of the data collected was used by Guzel et al. (2016). This format

results in the recording of the 75 total customer reviews, categorization of data between the sense stimuli mentions, and highlights the keywords that influence sense stimuli.

RESULTS

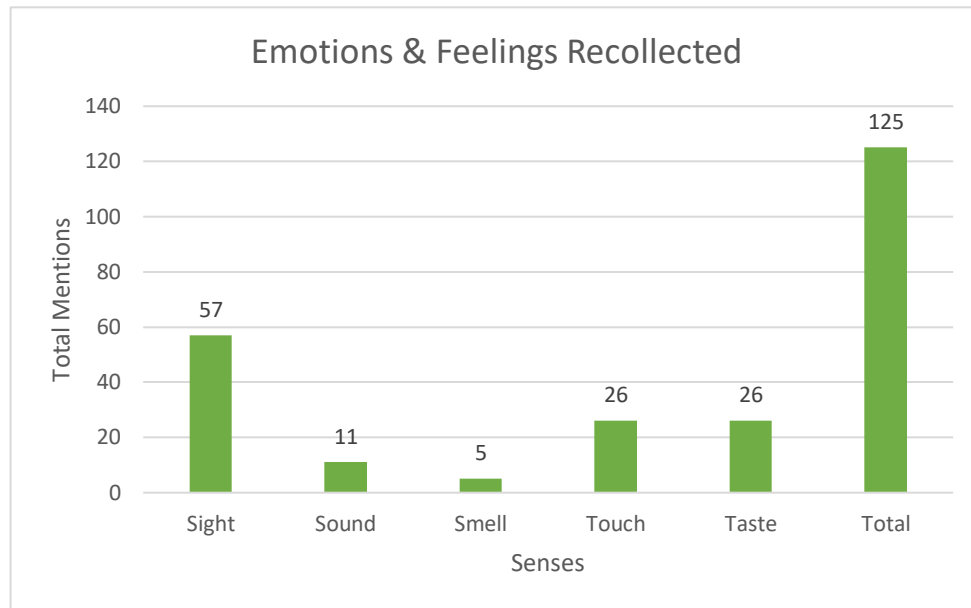
The core of the qualitative primary research above was to explore the linkage between past guests' TripAdvisor reviews of five 5-star hotels and sensory-based experiences that were generated. This investigation was based on the categories of the 5 senses (sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste). With these categories, the focus point was the emotions and feelings that were mentioned in the reviews and then recorded based on the sensory stimuli (Table 1). A representation of the data was formed in graphical form to create a better understanding (Figure 2).

Out of 75 total reviews, the most common sense that was stimulated was sight (45.6%) with the mentions toward décor of the hotel whether being the hotel as a whole, the rooms, or the different operating divisions (lounges, lobby, pool sides, restaurants).

Table 1
Sensory Stimuli vs Total Mentions

Senses	Emotions & Feelings Recollected	Percentage (%)
Sight	57	45.6
Sound	11	8.8
Smell	5	4
Touch	26	20.8
Taste	26	20.8
Total	125	100

Figure 2
Senses vs Emotions & Feelings



Note. Five senses mentioned in e-reviews based on emotions and feelings provided.

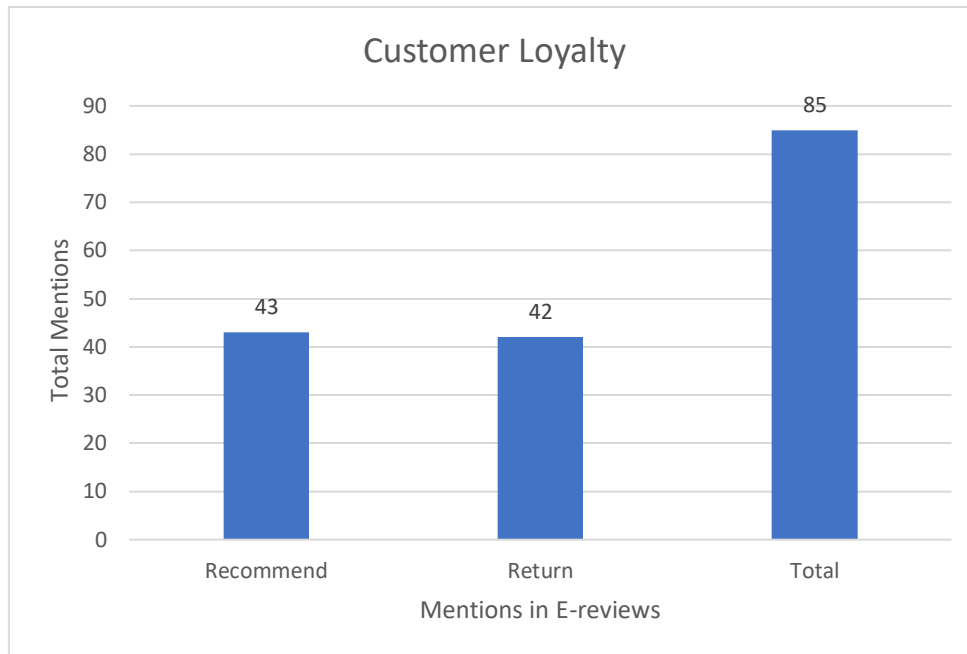
The next point of the research was the mention of recommendations of the hotel or the wanting of return from the past guests (Table 2). A representation of the data was formed in graphical form to create a better understanding (Figure 3).

Out of the 75 reviews that were used to evaluate sensory stimuli, 51% of guests recommended the hotel that they stayed at.

Table 2
Recommendations vs Returns

Mentions	Total Mentioned	Percentage (%)
Recommend	43	51
Return	42	49
Total	85	100

Figure 3
Recommendation vs Return



Note. Number of mentions of recommendation or wanting to return of the 5 hotels analyzed.

The Recollected memories that were stimulated through sight focused mostly on the appearance of the rooms of the hotel and the reception area. The majority of these comments described their feelings toward the decorations, color, cleanliness, lighting and spaciousness.

"wow" moment as you enter the room..."

*"The Lobby is very **spacious**, interior color are **calm**..."*

*"The hotel is very **modern** and **beautifully** decorated with its artworks, sculpture, fresh flowers"*

*"The mood lighting over the pool is **magical** in the evening."*

*"Really **lovely** hotel, the room was **luxurious** and **immaculate**"*

*"As soon as you enter the **tastefully** decorated reception area, the first thing that draws you in is the **amazing** view from the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the Adriatic"*

The reviews based on the sight stimulation showed that there is a linkage to a memorable experience based on the décor, lighting and color of the room or lobby. With the sight sense being

alpha since it was the most targeted out of all 5, it awoke feelings such as *luxuriousness, magical, calmness, tastefulness, gorgeousness*, and most significant, a ‘wow’ factor from the guests.

The second most mentioned sense stimuli that encouraged positive and memorable emotions was touch and taste having a 20.8%. When it came to touch, it was focused mainly on the comfort of the bed, linens and the spa experience.

*“The spa is the absolute highlight of the stay, it was so **relaxing** and **calm** to spend time in there”*

*“The bed was very **comfortable, fresh** clean linen and towels each day...”*

*“The hotel exceeded all our expectations in terms of **comfort, cleanliness** and location...”*

The reviews for touch stimuli presented the generated feelings when it came to the comfort of the bed and linens as well as spa experience. The feelings that generated this memorable experience were *relaxation, calmness, comfort* and *freshness*.

Next for the taste stimuli, the reviews were concentrated on the tastefulness and quality of the food and drinks, but as well as the overall appearance. Most of the reviews were based on the breakfast setting of the hotel. Below are a few of the comments that stood out for the stimuli of taste.

*“Food was **incredible** and made with such attention to detail...”*

*“Breakfast is **outstanding** visually and very **tasteful**”*

“...freshly squeezed orange juice served at breakfast - I looked forward to it every morning...”

*I'm **dreaming** about my next stay.”*

Based on these reviews, there was a hedonistic approach from the guest when eating or drinking at the hotel. They developed feelings of *outstanding, and dreaming*, they also referred to the food as *tasteful* and visually *appealing* with attention to detail.

Unexpectedly, the two senses that were stimulated was smell (4%) and sound (8.8%). When it came to the sense of smell, guests focused on the lobby area and the room itself.

*“The smell of the lobby smelt so **fresh**...”*

*“Gorgeous place, the smell from entry was **spectacular**...”*

When it came to the lobby, it seemed that the guests noticed the smell to be *fresh* or *spectacular*, but when the rooms were mentioned, a few wrote the smell of the room was *clean* and *fresh* as well. Surprisingly enough, the guests did not value the smell of the hotel at all during their experiences.

Lastly, the sense of sound stimuli were mentioned by a few guests. There was an overall theme of live music in the hotel restaurants which the guests had positive reactions to.

*“The bar is **lovely** with either a pianist or guitarist and singer every night.”*

*“**Beautiful** live music kept me longer in the restaurant”*

The guests appeared to be satisfied with this stimuli as it helped them relax and enjoy their stay at the restaurants more. They reviewed it as *lovely, beautiful, peaceful, and relaxing*.

When it came to the hotel rooms, the guests left positive comments on the insulation of the room, how quiet it is and the quietness of the air-conditioning. Below are a few comments that were taken as example:

*“...**quiet** AC you can control in the room.”*

*“great space of rooms... **Nice and quiet.**”*

It appeared that the hotels have a balance of sound stimuli between entertainment areas and the rooms. Unfortunately not many comments were tailored towards sound and smell which makes the overall sound stimuli less relevant than the other senses which were triggered.

One of the comments that impacted the whole research positively was the mention of enjoyment of all five senses (See below).

*“...great decorations inside the lobby, the rooms are spacious with a big comfortable bed...
Enjoyment for all the senses.”*

Not only does this comment influence the research positively but it shows that guests really do look at a hotel based on if their senses were stimulated.

The next set of data that was analyzed was whether these previous 75 total comments had a mention of the guest returning, recommending or both. With a total of 85 mentions, 51% mentioned that they recommend the hotel they reviewed, and 49% mentioned that they would return to the hotel if they had another chance. Overall, the results of this primary research showed that tourist focus on which senses were stimulated, and how this impacted their memorable stay whether by recommending or returning to the hotel.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the importance of sensory stimulation for enhancing guests' experiences in 5* luxury hotels in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The main focus of these findings was to answer whether sensory stimulation is linked to customer satisfaction, which of the sensations creates a memorable experience, and to evaluate which of the five senses is the alpha in creating customer satisfaction.

The results of this research correspond with the previous authors mentioned, multisensory stimulation does create added value in their experience and created a ‘wow’ for the consumer which enhances the customer experience (Lee et al., 2019). It is also confirmed that the sight sense is the alpha out of all five, and the aspects of the hotel that are looked at the most are lighting, color, and decorations. Our findings also show that taste and touch are the second most stimulated

senses that create a memorable experience. The main aspects of taste were based on the flavors and the overall appearance of the food and lastly, touch corresponded to the comfort of the beds, linen, and spa experiences.

As mentioned in the literature review by Zhou & Aitamer (2011), colors within a hotel are crucial in stimulating the guest's feelings which creates a calm environment. One of the research results showed the lighting was magical and when linking to the secondary research it suggests that low-level lighting creates a feeling of relaxation, and grounded. When it came to the sense of smell, research suggested that scent is the more crucial to stimulate since it has a powerful effect on increasing customer satisfaction. As well as sound, it creates and enhances feelings and emotions within the customer which corresponds to the way they store the experienced memories. When it came to touch and taste senses, these both can intensify the guest's experience and are a crucial role in luxury hotels. In correspondence with the research from Lee et al., (2011) it is mentioned that providing guests with memorable experiences increases their happiness and brand loyalty. The above results show the patterns of guests wanting to return and recommending the hotel since their senses were positively stimulated and have a recollection of their memorable experience.

Contrary to the expectations of the literature review, this study surprisingly found that smell and sound were not valued as much as the other senses. Although there were a few that mentioned the smell and sound being spectacular and lovely, it is shown that either the guests do not appreciate these stimulates as much as the others (sight, taste, touch) or management needs to focus on the smell and sound just as much as the other senses, which will provide further meaningful experiences for their guests.

LIMITATIONS

Although the present results support the three main research questions, there are at least three potential limitations to this overall study. The first limitation is due to the time spent on this research. In the future allowing more time for research would benefit the better outcome of more extensive results. Since time researching was momentary, the second limitation restricted more thorough comments being analyzed through the method of content analysis. The final possible limitation was the lack of secondary research done previously. We feel that more research should be studied on the importance of sensory stimulation and how it enhances the guest's experience in hospitality in general. This will benefit future researchers and management to improve their overall service to be more tailored towards creating a memorable experience for their future guests.

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