

## Perceived Influence of Security and Guest Service Roles of Hotel Staff on Returning Customer Behaviour in Three-Star Hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Customer retention constitutes a critical performance indicator in the mid-range hospitality sector. This study examined how security services and guest service roles of hotel staff influence returning customer behaviour in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. A quantitative survey design was adopted. Data were obtained from 96 hotel staff and 99 returning customers using a structured 5-point Likert questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and independent samples *t*-tests were employed. Findings revealed statistically significant perceptual differences between staff and customers across both service domains. For security services, staff reported higher performance ratings ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) than customers ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ),  $t(193) = 5.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Guest service roles showed an even larger gap: staff ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) versus customers ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ),  $t(193) = 6.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

The study concludes that perceptual misalignment between service providers and recipients may undermine loyalty intentions. It recommends perception-based service audits, enhanced security visibility, and emotionally intelligent guest service training.

**Keywords:** customer retention, hotel security, guest services, service perception gap, hospitality management

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### I. Introduction

The hospitality industry functions within a service-dominant logic, where value emerges primarily through interactions, experiences, and relational exchanges rather than through tangible assets alone (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Within this framework, customer retention depends less on physical infrastructure and more on the quality of experiential encounters that shape perceptions, emotions, and post-consumption evaluations. Hotels, particularly in the three-star category, operate in a competitive middle-market segment where physical facilities often reach parity across establishments; consequently, human interaction becomes the principal differentiating resource. Frontline employees, through their communication style, responsiveness, and professionalism, effectively embody the service brand and directly influence customers' affective and cognitive appraisals of their stay (Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola, 2018). Among the various dimensions of hospitality service, security assurance and guest service engagement exert a disproportionate influence on customer evaluations because they address fundamental psychological and relational needs. Security assurance aligns with the foundational level of Maslow's hierarchy safety which must be satisfied before higher order satisfaction and loyalty can develop (Maslow, 1943). Guests who perceive an environment as unsafe or poorly managed experience heightened anxiety, which negatively colors overall service evaluations regardless of other service strengths (Ritchie, 2009). Simultaneously, guest service engagement manifested through courteous reception, efficient check-in processes, problem resolution, and personalized attention contributes to emotional satisfaction and perceived relational value (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996). Together, these domains shape trust, a central determinant of repeat patronage and long-term loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Urban hospitality contexts such as Port Harcourt intensify these dynamics. As a commercial and industrial hub characterized by high mobility, business travel, and security consciousness, the city's environment raises guest expectations regarding professional conduct, surveillance presence, access control, and incident responsiveness. Research in urban tourism settings indicates that perceived safety significantly predicts destination satisfaction and revisit intention (George, 2010). In such contexts, front-desk staff serve not only administrative roles but also symbolic roles as agents of reassurance, shaping guests' perceptions of organizational competence and care.

Despite these expectations, perceptual incongruence often emerges between service providers and service recipients. Staff may evaluate their performance based on procedural compliance or internal standards, while guests judge the same interactions through subjective experiential lenses (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, &

Berry, 1985). This gap, commonly described within SERVQUAL theory as the “perception gap,” can undermine loyalty formation if unrecognized. Employees might perceive security measures as adequate because protocols are followed, whereas guests may interpret the same environment as insufficiently visible or reassuring. Similarly, routine service interactions perceived by staff as efficient may appear impersonal to guests, weakening emotional connection and revisit intention. Against this theoretical backdrop, the present study examines how security functions and guest service operations influence returning customer behaviour in three-star hotels and investigates whether significant perceptual differences exist between staff and guests. By situating these service dimensions within service-dominant logic, trust theory, and service quality gap models, the study addresses the mechanisms through which operational practices translate into psychological assurance, emotional satisfaction, and ultimately, loyalty-related outcomes.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

Customer retention in three-star hotels depends largely on experiential service quality rather than physical infrastructure. However, hotels often evaluate performance using internal operational standards, while guests assess services based on psychological assurance and emotional experience (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). This mismatch can create perception gaps that weaken loyalty even when procedures are followed. Security assurance and guest service engagement are critical in urban hospitality settings such as Port Harcourt, where guests place high value on personal safety and professional interactions. Yet, limited research has examined how these specific staff roles influence returning customer behaviour or whether staff perceptions align with guest experiences in the three-star hotel segment. The problem, therefore, lies in the potential misalignment between staff and customer perceptions of security and guest service performance, which may undermine customer retention despite apparent operational adequacy.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the influence of security roles of hotel staff on returning customers.
2. To investigate the influence of guest service roles of hotel staff on returning customers

### **Research Questions**

1. How do hotel security services influence returning customers?
2. How do guest service roles influence returning customers?

### **Hypothesis**

**H<sub>0</sub>:** No significant difference exists between the mean responses of hotel staff and returning customers regarding security and guest service roles.

## **III. Literature Review**

### **Security Services and Customer Retention**

Security services in hospitality extend beyond the narrow function of crime prevention to encompass a comprehensive system of surveillance, access control, emergency preparedness, and incident response. These components collectively shape not only the physical safety of guests but also their psychological comfort during their stay. In service contexts, perceived safety operates as a foundational condition for satisfaction, since guests cannot fully engage in leisure or business activities if they experience anxiety regarding their personal security (Maslow, 1943). Consequently, security becomes a core service dimension, not merely a background operational function. From a service-dominant perspective, security assurance contributes to the co-creation of value by establishing an environment in which guests feel protected, respected, and supported. Research indicates that perceived safety significantly predicts overall service evaluation and revisit intention, particularly in urban hospitality settings where environmental uncertainty may heighten risk awareness (George, 2010). Visible security measures such as trained personnel presence, surveillance systems, and structured check-in protocols act as symbolic cues of organizational competence, reinforcing trust in the hotel’s ability to manage risks effectively. Moreover, the psychological dimension of security directly influences emotional states that underpin loyalty formation. When guests perceive security systems as reliable and responsive, they experience reduced stress and increased confidence in the establishment. This emotional reassurance fosters affective trust, a key determinant of long-term relational commitment between customers and service providers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In contrast, poorly communicated or invisible security practices may lead to uncertainty, even if technical safeguards are present, thereby diminishing perceived service quality.

Security services also communicate organizational care and professionalism. Hotels that demonstrate preparedness for emergencies, clear access management, and efficient response procedures signal that guest welfare constitutes a priority rather than an afterthought. Such signals shape cognitive judgments about service competence and moral responsibility, both of which influence loyalty behaviour. Therefore, security functions

operate simultaneously at functional, emotional, and symbolic levels, making them central drivers of customer retention. Security assurance influences returning customer behaviour not only through the prevention of adverse events but through the creation of a psychologically secure environment that nurtures trust, emotional comfort, and confidence in the hotel's operational integrity.

#### **IV. Guest Services and Loyalty Formation**

Guest services constitute the interpersonal engine of hotel operations, integrating front desk procedures, concierge assistance, complaint management, and personalized communication into a cohesive service experience. Unlike physical facilities, which deliver functional value, guest services generate experiential value through human interaction, where empathy, tone, and responsiveness shape guests' emotional interpretations of their stay. Within a service-dominant framework, these encounters serve as primary moments of value co-creation because they influence how guests cognitively and affectively evaluate overall service quality (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Front desk interactions hold particular strategic importance as they frame the entry and exit points of the service journey. Professional greetings, efficient check-in, and clear information reduce uncertainty and establish confidence in organizational competence. Concierge services further extend this relational dimension by offering guidance, local knowledge, and situational assistance, thereby reinforcing perceptions of attentiveness and individualized care. Such interactions cultivate emotional engagement, which strengthens the transition from satisfaction to loyalty (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996).

Complaint resolution represents another pivotal loyalty driver. Effective service recovery characterized by prompt action, empathy, and fair outcomes signals accountability and concern for guest welfare. This responsiveness fosters relational trust, a critical element of long-term commitment between customers and service providers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). When guests perceive genuine efforts to address their concerns, negative experiences may transform into enhanced loyalty rather than defection. Personalized communication further deepens loyalty by acknowledging guests as individuals rather than transactions. Remembering preferences, using names appropriately, and adapting service delivery to guest needs reinforce emotional connection and perceived relational value. Research consistently shows that service encounters often outweigh tangible amenities in shaping revisit intentions, since guests retain vivid memories of interpersonal treatment more than of physical attributes. In essence, guest services influence loyalty formation through emotional resonance, relational trust, and experiential satisfaction. By delivering courteous, responsive, and personalized interactions, hotel staff create the affective bonds and positive evaluations that drive returning customer behaviour.

#### **V. Theoretical Review: Guest Services and Loyalty Formation**

Understanding how guest services influence loyalty requires grounding in established service and relationship theories that explain how interpersonal interactions translate into repeat patronage.

##### **Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)**

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) provides a foundational theoretical lens for understanding value creation in contemporary service industries. Rather than viewing value as something embedded in physical goods or infrastructure, SDL argues that value emerges through interactive processes between service providers and customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In this perspective, organizations do not deliver value unilaterally; instead, they offer value propositions that customers interpret and actualize through their experiences. Consequently, the quality of relational exchanges becomes central to performance outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

Within hospitality environments, SDL shifts analytical focus from tangible facilities—such as décor, room size, or equipment to service encounters as the primary loci of value co-creation. Guest services, including front desk communication, concierge assistance, complaint resolution, and personalized engagement, function as critical “touchpoints” where customers and employees jointly shape the service experience. These interactions determine how guests interpret organizational competence, warmth, and reliability, thereby influencing the experiential meaning attached to the hotel stay.

SDL also emphasizes the role of operant resources knowledge, skills, communication ability, and empathy over operand resources such as physical assets. Hotel staff, therefore, serve as strategic assets whose interpersonal competencies directly influence perceived value. A courteous greeting, efficient check-in process, or empathetic response to a complaint contributes more to experiential evaluation than standardized physical features that competitors can easily replicate. This dynamic explains why hotels operating within the same star category may achieve different loyalty outcomes despite similar infrastructure. Furthermore, SDL frames customers as active participants rather than passive recipients. Guests interpret interactions through personal expectations, cultural norms, and emotional states, meaning that service value emerges through subjective appraisal. Loyalty formation thus depends not on the objective presence of amenities, but on how relational

engagement satisfies psychological needs for recognition, respect, and assurance. SDL explains why guest service interactions hold disproportionate influence over loyalty outcomes in hospitality contexts. By positioning interpersonal engagement as the central mechanism of value co-creation, the framework clarifies how relational quality rather than physical infrastructure alone—drives returning customer behaviour.

## **VI. Relationship Marketing Theory**

Relationship Marketing Theory offers a strategic framework for understanding how service interactions evolve into long-term customer loyalty. Unlike transactional approaches that prioritize single exchanges, relationship marketing emphasizes **ongoing engagement**, proposing that sustained interactions build trust and commitment, which in turn drive repeat patronage (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 1994). In hospitality contexts, this perspective positions service delivery not as an isolated event but as part of a broader relational continuum between guests and service providers.

Within hotel operations, guest services function as the primary mechanism through which relational bonds are formed and reinforced. Personalized communication, attentive listening, and timely responsiveness signal recognition and respect, allowing guests to perceive themselves as valued individuals rather than anonymous customers. Such interactions cultivate relational trust, defined as confidence in the service provider's reliability and concern for the customer's welfare, which reduces perceived risk in future transactions and strengthens repeat patronage intentions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Berry, 1995). The theory also highlights commitment as a central outcome of effective relationship-building. When guests consistently experience empathy, courtesy, and professional engagement, they develop an emotional connection to the hotel that extends beyond satisfaction with a single stay. This emotional attachment fosters preference for the establishment over alternatives, even in competitive markets where physical amenities may be comparable (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Thus, loyalty becomes grounded not merely in functional benefits but in relational value.

Moreover, relationship marketing underscores the cumulative effect of interactions. Each service encounter whether a smooth check-in, a helpful concierge recommendation, or effective complaint resolution adds to the relational history between guest and hotel. Positive cumulative experiences strengthen emotional bonds, whereas inconsistent or impersonal interactions weaken them (Grönroos, 1994). Frontline staff therefore play a strategic role in loyalty formation by consistently delivering interactions that affirm care, reliability, and professionalism. In essence, Relationship Marketing Theory explains how guest services translate into repeat patronage through the development of trust, commitment, and emotional attachment. By emphasizing long-term relational engagement, the theory clarifies why consistent, empathetic, and personalized service interactions remain central to loyalty formation in hospitality settings.

## **VII. SERVQUAL Model**

The SERVQUAL model provides a widely adopted framework for conceptualizing and measuring service quality across service industries. Developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), the model proposes that customers evaluate service quality by comparing expectations with perceived performance across five core dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. This multidimensional structure recognizes that service quality extends beyond physical facilities to include interpersonal conduct and procedural effectiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). In hospitality contexts, guest services serve as direct operational expressions of several SERVQUAL dimensions. Responsiveness manifests through prompt assistance, efficient handling of requests, and timely service delivery. Empathy appears in personalized attention, active listening, and sensitivity to guest needs. Assurance reflects staff professionalism, courtesy, and competence, which collectively instill confidence and trust. While tangibles relate to physical elements, research shows that interpersonal dimensions frequently exert stronger influence on experiential evaluation, particularly in mid-range hotel categories where infrastructure differences may be minimal (Kandampully et al., 2018; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The SERVQUAL model also emphasizes the perception gap between expected and experienced service. When guest service encounters meet or exceed expectations in responsiveness, empathy, and assurance, perceived service quality rises, leading to higher satisfaction levels. Conversely, shortcomings in these dimensions result in negative disconfirmation and diminished overall evaluations, regardless of adequate physical amenities (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Thus, interpersonal service factors play a decisive role in shaping how guests interpret their stay. Perceived service quality, as conceptualized in SERVQUAL, strongly predicts behavioural outcomes such as revisit intention and loyalty. Positive evaluations across interpersonal dimensions reinforce trust and emotional comfort, encouraging repeat patronage (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Therefore, guest services represent the practical interface through which hotels influence SERVQUAL dimensions and, by extension, customer retention outcomes. The SERVQUAL model explains loyalty formation by linking specific service quality dimensions to customer perceptions and behavioural intentions. By delivering

responsive, empathetic, and reassuring guest services, hotels enhance perceived quality and strengthen the likelihood of returning customer behaviour.

### **VIII. Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT)**

Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) provides a cognitive explanation for how service experiences translate into satisfaction and loyalty outcomes. The theory posits that customers form expectations before consumption and subsequently compare perceived performance with these prior standards (Oliver, 1980). The outcome of this comparison confirmation or disconfirmation determines satisfaction levels and influences future behavioural intentions such as repeat patronage and loyalty (Bhattacharjee, 2001). In hospitality contexts, guest service encounters represent critical points where expectation confirmation processes occur. Guests typically hold expectations regarding courtesy, efficiency, professionalism, and attentiveness, which serve as benchmarks during interactions with frontline staff. When service delivery meets or exceeds these expectations, positive confirmation occurs, leading to heightened satisfaction and favorable evaluations of the hotel (Oliver, 1980). This satisfaction strengthens trust and increases the likelihood of return visits. Conversely, negative disconfirmation emerges when service performance falls below expectations. Shortcomings in responsiveness, empathy, or professionalism may generate dissatisfaction that outweighs positive tangible features of the hotel experience. Research demonstrates that unmet expectations in service settings significantly reduce loyalty intentions, even when core services remain functional (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996). Thus, ECT highlights the centrality of expectation management alongside consistent service performance.

ECT further positions satisfaction as a mediator between service experience and loyalty behaviour. Repeated confirmation across multiple interactions consolidates positive attitudes, fosters relational trust, and enhances commitment to the service provider (Bhattacharjee, 2001). In contrast, persistent disconfirmation undermines confidence and encourages switching behavior. In essence, Expectation Confirmation Theory explains how guest service interactions influence loyalty through cognitive evaluation processes. By delivering service experiences that consistently confirm or exceed anticipated standards, hotels strengthen satisfaction and promote returning customer behaviour.

### **IX. Affective Events Theory (AET)**

Affective Events Theory (AET) provides a psychological framework for understanding how emotional experiences during service encounters shape attitudes and behavioural outcomes. The theory posits that specific events within an environment trigger emotional reactions, which subsequently influence individuals' judgments, satisfaction, and future behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Rather than relying solely on rational evaluation, customers' decisions often reflect the emotional tone of their experiences. In hospitality contexts, guest service interactions constitute emotionally salient events. Encounters with frontline staff such as welcoming gestures, empathetic listening, or efficient assistance can generate positive affect, fostering feelings of comfort, appreciation, and trust. Conversely, impersonal treatment, delayed responses, or dismissive attitudes may evoke negative affect, including frustration or anxiety. These emotional responses extend beyond the immediate interaction, shaping guests' holistic evaluation of the hotel stay (Mattila & Enz, 2002).

AET emphasizes that emotional reactions influence both short-term satisfaction and long-term attitudes. Positive emotional episodes strengthen favorable perceptions and increase the likelihood of repeat patronage, whereas negative experiences can disproportionately affect overall judgments, even when other aspects of service are adequate. Emotional memory thus becomes a key determinant of revisit intention, as guests often recall how they felt more vividly than objective service features (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). Furthermore, the theory explains why emotionally intelligent service delivery is critical in hospitality. Staff members who demonstrate empathy, warmth, and attentiveness help generate positive affective events, reinforcing relational bonds and loyalty. In contrast, emotionally insensitive interactions disrupt trust and weaken attachment. Affective Events Theory clarifies how guest service encounters influence loyalty through emotional pathways. By fostering positive emotional experiences and minimizing negative ones, hotels can enhance satisfaction, strengthen attitudes, and promote returning customer behaviour.

### **X. Methodology**

The study employed a quantitative survey design to enable systematic and objective measurement of participants' perceptions within the hotel service environment. The population consisted of hotel staff and returning customers in three-star hotels, capturing perspectives from both service providers and repeat service users whose experiences reflect service quality and consistency. A total of 195 participants were sampled, comprising 96 staff members and 99 returning customers.

Data were collected using the RHSRCQ, a structured questionnaire developed on a 5-point Likert scale, which allowed respondents to indicate varying degrees of agreement across the measured constructs. The

reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.88, which indicates high internal consistency and confirms that the items reliably measured the intended variables.

Data analysis incorporated both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Mean and standard deviation were used to summarize response patterns and describe central tendencies and dispersion, while the independent samples t-test was applied to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between the responses of hotel staff and returning customers. This analytical approach ensured robust comparison between the two groups and supported evidence-based interpretation of the findings.

## XI. Results

### Security Roles

Group	N	Mean	SD
Hotel Staff	96	4.32	0.48
Returning Customers	99	3.91	0.63

$t(193) = 5.05, p < 0.05 \rightarrow$  Significant difference

### 7.2 Guest Services Roles

Group	N	Mean	SD
Hotel Staff	96	4.32	0.48
Returning Customers	99	3.84	0.59

$t(193) = 6.18, p < 0.05 \rightarrow$  Significant difference

## XII. Discussion

The findings demonstrate statistically significant perception gaps. Staff appraisals emphasize procedural sufficiency, while customers assess experiential assurance. In security services, the disparity suggests a need for greater visibility and communication of safety measures. In guest services, the larger gap indicates variability in emotional engagement, personalization, and responsiveness. The rejection of  $H_0$  confirms that internal performance assessments do not fully align with guest experiences, potentially weakening loyalty outcomes.

## XIII. Conclusion

Security assurance and guest service engagement significantly shape returning customer behaviour in three-star hotels. However, perceptual discrepancies between providers and recipients signal the necessity for experience-based service evaluation systems.

## XIV. Recommendations

- Implement perception-focused service audits.
- Increase visibility of security operations.
- Train guest service staff in emotional intelligence and service recovery.
- Align internal KPIs with customer-perceived performance indicators.

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