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Yilmaz, Özgür Devrim

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Revisiting Employee - Guest Interactions in Hotels: An Analysis of Critical Incidents

Özgür Devrim Yılmaz

Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey

Abstract: *The study was conducted to find out the positive and/or negative effects that hotel employees may have upon hotel guests' experiences during their stay. Using the critical incident technique (CIT), data were obtained from 105 guests (a total of 174 incidents) staying in two different 5-star hotels that have similar characteristics in terms of type, price, ownership and concept in Bodrum, Turkey. The incidents were primarily categorized as positive and negative and afterward the incidents from two categories were compared to each other in terms of three main process of hotel accommodation as check-in, accommodation and check-out. Despite the fact that most hotels currently place emphasis on employee-guest interactions –under the concept of service quality or customer satisfaction-, the findings revealed that there were still a number of negative incidents that caused customer dissatisfaction and managerial implications were needed in hotels to minimize negative incidents and maximize the positive ones.*

Keywords: Critical incidents, Hotel, Employee-guest interaction, Employee behavior, Customer satisfaction.

JEL Classification: L8, O15, J24

Biographical note: Özgür Devrim Yılmaz is an associate professor at Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Business, Department of Tourism Management, İzmir-Turkey. Her research areas are tourism and hotel management, tourism sociology and organizational behavior in tourism enterprises. She has published many articles in the field of tourism management. Corresponding author: devrim.yilmaz@deu.edu.tr

1 INTRODUCTION

Nearly all service offerings require high levels of consumer involvement however deeper levels of engagement on the part of the consumers can be recognized in tourism industry. In other words, service in tourism - which is characterized by being mostly intangible, perishable and variable-, depends heavily on human interactions which is called service encounter (Bitner et al., 1990) or moments of truth (Carlzon, 1987). Moreover, as Wu (2007) stated service is a summation of interaction and performance between employees and customers. Therefore, service organizations have to focus on identifying the factors affecting customers' perceptions of these interactions (Bitner, 1990; Bitner et al., 1990; Fisk et al., 1993). It is also well-known that in order to be successful in competitive business environment, all service businesses must develop and sustain long-term relationship with their customers as the future of the business heavily depends on customer satisfaction (Chen and Popovich, 2003; Freeman and Glazer, 2012; Rangan et al., 2012). Therefore, service encounters related to interactions and relationships between

employees and guests have always been the foci of academic research from different points of views. In their former studies some scholars (Bitner et al., 1990; Nyquist et al., 1985) examined and categorized specific interactions and events causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction whereas others (Mattila, 1999; Furrer et al., 2000; Tsang and Ap, 2007) evaluated consumers' interactions with employees from a cross-cultural perspective. On the other hand, in some studies (Christou, 2002; Juwaheer, 2004; Grandey et al., 2005) the impacts of interpersonal attributes of employees were discussed.

Being the main component of tourism industry, the major part of hotels' product involves service encounters and these moments of truths have usually been the major consideration while studying service quality and customer satisfaction. From hotel service perspective, customers may be affected by interpersonal encounters (either customer-to-customer or employee-to-customer) directly or indirectly by being the part of the service (Baker, 1987). Keeping in mind that employee and guest interactions could either enhance or damage the service experience, specifically, the main aim of

this study was to explore the positive and negative incidents that hotel employees may have upon hotel guests' experiences during their stay. After reviewing the relevant literature related to employee-guest interactions in hotels, the CIT method used in this study and the results were presented. Finally, the limitations of the research and the implications of the findings were discussed.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Service Encounter and Critical Incidents*

The service encounter can be defined shortly as "the service from the customer's point of view". A broader definition is specified by Shostack (1985; 243) as "a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service". Shostack's definition covers all aspects of the service as the personnel, the physical facilities and other visible elements. In other words, the service encounters are not limited to interpersonal interactions between the service providers (employees) and the consumers (guests) rather encounters can occur without any human interaction element (Bitner et al., 1990). However, this study's perspective is narrower to Solomon et al.'s study (1985) that refers the service encounters as role performances of employees and the guests since the employee and guest interactions in hotels often become a focal point in consumers' evaluations of the entire organization (Sigala & Christou, 2009; Zeithaml et al., 1988). The former empirical studies (Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Brown and Swartz, 1989; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Bitner et al., 1990) from different service organizations provide valuable contributions by mentioning the importance and effects of the human interaction during the service delivery on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction. From the tourism industry perspective, it is important to state that hotels are subject to service encounters since most of their service occurs during the interaction between employees and guests. In other words, in hotels, service encounters between employees and guests are a critical component of service quality perception and satisfaction of guests.

Critical incidents involve the disconfirmation of expectations. Bitner et al., (1994) proposed that employees and customers share common views pertaining to the service encounter. If there are deviations in these expectations, a critical incident occurs. It is crucial to note that, in service industries, the attributions of employees and guests may differ as each group is likely to explain incidents from their own perspectives regarding the causes of events. Hence, it can be observed that employees are likely to blame customers, whereas the customers are to blame employees.

What is more, the use of the critical incidents in tourism-related studies is still required since these incidents provide a broader understanding of consumers' current needs and expectations during the service delivery. Moreover, as the consumers recall and tell the incidents as stories (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner, 1990; Edvardsson and Ross, 2001; Barron & Watson, 2007) it is easy for the researchers to reach the data.

2.2 *Employee-Guest Interactions in Hotels*

When one thinks of service encounters in hotels, what usually comes to mind is interpersonal exchange between employees

and customers. In other words, employee and guest interactions occupy a vital place in much of services offered by a hotel. While it is true that dissatisfying critical incidents caused by employees are usually at issue, it is imperative to keep in mind that satisfying all the customers within the same service operation is practically impossible. Additionally, despite dozens of studies about hotel customers' perception of service quality and satisfaction, little is still known about how they assess employee-guest interactions and it is impossible to list standards of customers' assessments about these issues yet since service quality perception and satisfaction is very personal.

The relevant literature clearly demonstrated the effects of human interactions in terms of customers' perception of the encounter. A close inspection of studies related to service quality shows that the majority of the dimensions relate to human interactions elements of service such as employee attentiveness and perceptiveness (De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000; Farrell et al., 2001; Chatzigeorgiou & Simeli, 2017), politeness of the employees (Parasuraman et al., 1988) civility and concern (Winsted, 2000) and employees listening behaviours (Chandon et al., 1997; Eaton & Christou, 2000). In fact, it is actually known that hotel guests give much importance to similar employee behaviours and certainly inadequately informed personnel, low-skilled staff, inadequate employee responses, unacceptable employee behaviour create dissatisfaction among hotel guests and these failures can dramatically affect customers' perceptions in a negative way and increase customer complaints. Moreover, several studies (Bateson, 1985; Bowen and Schneider, 1985; Rafaeli, 1993; Christou, 1999; 2003; Samy, 2016) argue that customers are satisfied when employees are friendly, empowered, attentive, enthusiastic and adaptable. It is therefore required that employee interactions with guests should aim at creating an atmosphere of satisfaction and it is more than having efficient employees.

As Ross (1994) states, hospitality organizations should not be simply looking for employees to provide basic service to customers, they ought to be searching for the ones who can manage the service encounter. Thus, it is crucial for the hotels to understand the importance of employee-guest interactions. In other words, ideally, recognizing the consequences of interactions may produce valuable insights for managing employee to guest relationships and help managers to create guidelines for managing employee behaviours. Different models and studies on service encounters (Price et al., 1995; Winsted, 2000; Sigala & Christou, 20019; Mensah & Mensah, 2018) exist but these studies are heavily dependent upon questionnaires using scales that require responses researcher identified. As Prayag and Ryan (2012) suggested, such approaches have merit in analyzing customers' perceptions, however they fail to capture the emotional interactions of guests. One way to explore this subject in a more elaborate way can be observing and noting critical incidents that occur during the stay of the guests.

3 METHODOLOGY

The data collected for the current study were obtained using the convenience sampling technique. The researcher selected

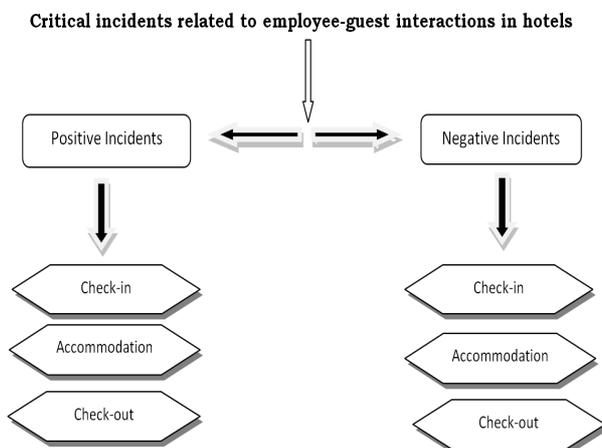
two 5-star hotels in Bodrum, which were believed to have similar characteristics in terms of location (Bodrum), type (resort hotel), price (luxury hotels), ownership (each hotel was a member of an international chain) and service concept (bed and breakfast). The respondents were selected randomly at two different hotels and the data were collected at different days and times during a week.

Critical incident technique was preferred as the answers provided key interpretation of guests' personal complaints, emotions and/or praises. The tool used for data collection was a form composed of open-ended questions about guests' employee-related incidents. The incidents were gathered using personal interviews method –as the interview provided an opportunity for the interviewer to extract the required information- with customers immediately after the check-out process. Guests were asked to describe one or more incidents (regarding positive and/or negative employee-guest interactions) occurring during their stay in the hotel. Besides the open-ended questions, the participants were also answered questions related to their demographic characteristics as gender, age and nationality. As there were foreign tourists as respondents one more question was also included in this part in order to learn whether it was their first trip to Turkey or not. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Specifically, this research uses the CIT to do the following:

- Identify positive and negative employee-guest interactions.
- Classify the positive interactions regarding three hotel processes as check-in, accommodation and check-out.
- Classify the negative interactions regarding three hotel processes as check-in, accommodation and check-out.
- Develop recovery strategies for the negative incidents.

After the incidents were transcribed, they were at first systematically classified into two main groups as positive and negative. To optimize the reliability of the classification all incidents were scrutinized again by another academician apart from the researcher. The agreement rate reported was 87.5%. The differences were resolved through discussion. Posterior action of the research was about dividing all incidents into three main categories for both positive and negative interactions. The model demonstrating the classification of surveyed incidents is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The classification of the incidents



A total of 174 incidents were collected from 105 respondents. Respondents were coded as Guest – 1 to Guest – 105. 60% (63) of the respondents sampled were female whereas 40% (42) were male. 48 respondents (46%) were in the age group of 34-41, 30 were aged 26-33 (29%), while 22 respondents (20%) were aged 42-49 and 5 were (5%) in the age group of 18-25. 90 of the respondents were foreign tourists and 78 foreign tourists specified that they had visited Turkey before. On the other hand, 15 respondents were domestic tourists; descriptive statistics for respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for respondents

Descriptive statistics for respondents			
Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	42	40%
	Female	63	60%
Age	18-25	5	5%
	26-33	30	28%
	34-41	48	46%
	42-49	22	21%
Nationality	Foreign	90*	
	Domestic	15	

*78 out of 90 foreign tourists mentioned that they have visited Turkey before.

Moreover, descriptive statistics for incidents were also presented in Table 2. Within the sample, 116 (67%) incidents were coded as positive and 58 (33%) incidents as negative. Of the 116 positive incidents 65 (56%) were related to guests' satisfaction about employee behaviors during check-in process. On the other hand, out of all incidents 58 were categorized as negative. Of the reported negative incidents 15 (26%) were related to check-in, 32 (55%) were reflecting occasions during guests' stay in hotel and 11 (19%) were about check-out process.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for incidents

Descriptive statistics for incidents*					
Type of incident	Check-in (CI)	Accommodation (ACC)	Check-out (CO)	Total	Percentage
Positive (P)	65	43	8	116	67%
Negative (N)	15	32	11	58	33%
Total	80	75	19	174	100%

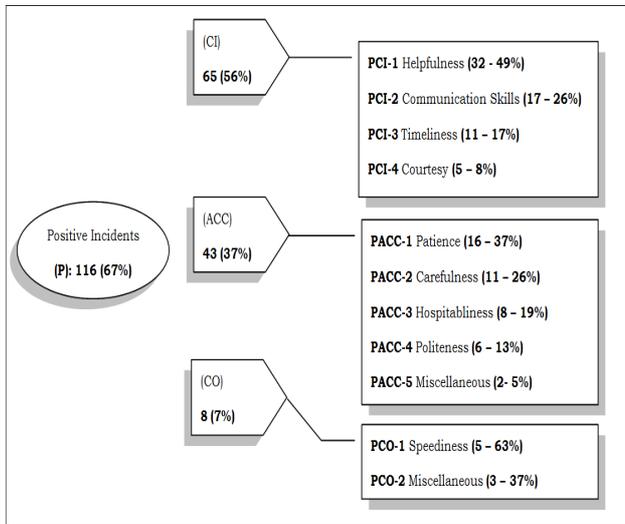
*Abbreviations are used to simply identify and summarize the findings. (P) and (N) indicate either an incident is positive or negative; whereas (CI), (ACC) and (CO) mention the process regarding the incidents.

4 FINDINGS

The positive incidents were categorized into 4 sub-groups and named as (PCI-1) helpfulness (49%), (PCI-2) communication skills (26%), (PCI-3) timeliness (17%) and (PCI-4) courtesy (8%). The frequencies of sub-groups showed that most of the positive incidents during check-in were related to employees' helping behaviours. Employees with good communication skills were mentioned in 17 incidents whereas getting the service on time or without any

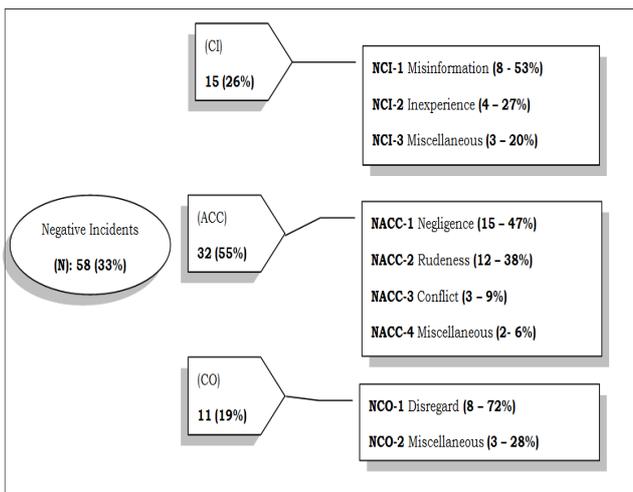
delay were in 11 incidents. Furthermore, guests emphasized courtesy of the employees in 5 incidents.

Figure 2. The frequencies and sub-groups of the positive incidents



In addition, 43 (37%) incidents gathered from the guests were pertaining to accommodation and ranked as (PACC-1) *patience* (37%), (PACC-2) *carefulness* (26%), (PACC-3) *hospitableness* (19%), (PACC-4) *politeness* (13%) and (PACC-5) *miscellaneous* (5%) meaning some exceptional situations that could not be grouped. Guests also mentioned 8 positive incidents regarding the check-out as (PCO-1) *speediness* (63%) and (PCO-2) *miscellaneous* (37%). The frequencies and sub-groups of the positive incidents according to hotel processes were presented in Figure 2.

Figure 3. The frequencies and sub-groups of the negative incidents



In terms of negative incidents, the results showed that the main problems arising between employee and guest during check-in were about (NCI-1) *misinformation* (53%), (NCI-2) *inexperience* and other exceptional situations named under the heading of (NCI-3) *miscellaneous* (20%). Additionally

the primary sources of dissatisfaction among guests during accommodation were mostly about (NACC-1) *negligence* (47%) and (NACC-2) *rudeness* (38%) of employees. There were also a small number of incidents related to (NACC-3) *conflict* (3 incidents) and (NACC-4) *miscellaneous* category (2 incidents). Out of 11 negative check-out incidents, 8 were about (NCO-1) *disregard* and 3 were about exceptional situations such as guests' mistake and service failures. The frequencies and sub-groups of the negative incidents according to hotel processes were presented in Figure 3. As it was impossible to refer to every guest comment here, some of the comments related to positive and negative incidents were given in Table 3.

Table 3. The expressions of incidents from the view of the guests

Positive Incidents	CI	PCI-1	"We arrived to the hotel late at night with my 70 years old mother using a walking stick. We were both tired and I was trying to help my mother and also carrying the luggage. As we entered the lobby, one of the employees saw us and gently asked if he could help my mother through the walk till the reception." Guest-55(female)
		PCI-2	"The receptionist was fluently speaking the foreign language and this made me feel at home." Guest – 8 (female)
		PCI-3	"The reception was quite crowded when we arrived at the hotel. I thought we would wait very long to make the check-in, but it wasn't like as I had expected. After a few minutes I was in my room." Guest – 63 (male)
		PCI-4	"During the check-in, the front-office staff was very polite and attentive. They were all trying to do their best in order to solve a problem that occurred as a result of a failure in the computer." Guest – 12 (female)
	ACC	PACC-1	"Some of the children were running around the waiters especially during lunch and this was affecting the personnel who were trying to do their jobs properly. Despite that all the personnel were very patient and kind towards kids." Guest – 19 (male)
		PACC-2	"When I remembered that I forgot to make my reservation for the restaurant that I used every day during my stay I called them to ask whether it was possible to take late reservation. They told me that they had noticed it and had already made a reservation for me." Guest – 45 (male)
		PACC-3	"I noticed that hotel employees were always trying to make us feel at home. We were not only their customer, we were their guest." Guest – 6 (female)
		PACC-4	"TV in my room was not working. A technician came to the room to solve the problem. Then we understood that there were not any technical problem and the problem was about my child who had switched a wrong button on the remote control. I was very ashamed and disgraced but the technician was so kind and gentle towards us." Guest – 93 (female)

		PACC-5	<i>"They leaved a card in my room celebrating my birthday and presented me a gift. That was really impressive." Guest – 81 (female)</i>
	CO	PCO-1	<i>"We were a very crowded group-approximately 20 rooms- checking-out at the same time, although I thought that the procedures would take long, all check-out transactions were quickly completed." Guest – 104 (male)</i>
		PCO-2	<i>"The receptionist gave us a local souvenir while we were leaving the hotel. I was both surprised and impressed." Guest – 38 (female)</i>
Negative Incidents	CI	NCI-1	<i>"Information that we received about restaurant reservation during the check-in was incorrect." Guest – 16 (male)</i>
		NCI-2	<i>"During registration we asked some questions to a receptionist about renting a bike. He mentioned that he was newly hired and did not know the process. He could ask to his colleague and answered our simple question. More experienced employees were needed in front office." Guest – 73 (male)</i>
		NCI-3	<i>"The registration process took longer than necessary and we had to wait a long time in the lobby." Guest – 91 (female)</i>
	ACC	NACC-1	<i>"I gave my suit to laundry for dry cleaning. The following day, there was a suit in my room but it was not mine. I called the reception and they told me that they will correct the mistake as soon as possible. I had waited about two hours because of inattention." Guest – 93 (male)</i>
		NACC-2	<i>"I could not receive the daily room cleaning service for two-days consecutively. When I saw the housekeepers in hallway I told the situation. They did not even apologize. They said that they will arrange a suitable time for cleaning and entered another room." Guest – 86 (female)</i>
		NACC-3	<i>"Some of the housekeeping personnel seemed to be always in conflict with guests. I had noticed a few times that they were having arguments." Guest – 46 (female)</i>
		NACC-4	<i>"We had ordered a birthday cake for my child but they forgot to bring the cake. When we called the room-service they said that the cake was not ready. It was a special day for us and they really did not care about it." Guest – 29 (female)</i>
	CI	NCO-1	<i>"In fact, our complaints were ignored. They paid no attention to us because we were leaving the hotel." Guest – 57 (female)</i>
		NCO-2	<i>"The check-out process took a very long time although we had notified the front office that we would leave early in the morning." Guest – 73 (male)</i>

businesses and attempted to investigate employee-related interactions that have caused satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction from the point of the consumers. Given the nature of the qualitative study, the researcher did not claim to have investigated all of the different dimensions of incidents in hotels since the study was only determined to understand the employee-related interactions. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations. First of all the results of the study are discussed in the context of the hotel industry and even within this setting employee behaviours can change according to type and management style of the hotel. Secondly, guests' incidents related to employee behaviours may differ according to guest loyalty or nationality of guests. However, this study has revealed a number of useful findings in regard to employee-guest interactions in hotels.

The findings proved that there are –and there will be– some problems related to employee behaviour that affects consumers' perception of service quality in hotel industry as satisfaction is almost personal and very much depending on perceptions hence it is impossible to reassure guests satisfaction in tourism industry. When reviewing results of the study, several issues emerge. First, the current results reveal that there is a surplus of positive incidents over negatives (positive incidents: 67% and negative incidents: 33%). Apparently, it can be said that what guests remember most is about the incidents during the check-in process as 65 incidents are recorded as positive out of 116. Secondly, among the positive incidents during check-in process it can be observed that much attention is predominantly given to employees' helping behaviours. In other words, gentle and polite employees -who deliver the service on time and have good communication skills - create positive impressions and memories on guests. Similarly, positive incidents during accommodation and check-out processes are related to employee behaviours such as patience, carefulness and speediness. On the other hand, according to the results retrieved from negative incidents (N: 58 out of 116), it can be understood that problems which create dissatisfaction among guests are about inexperienced personnel who give inadequate information to guests and employees who gets into arguments with guests.

Managerial and Theoretical Implications:

Using the critical incident method for such a multi-faceted subject as employee-guest interactions appears to be a useful tool for hospitality managers. Studies using this method can easily uncover specific events that underlie customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The findings of the current study can be also used as a base for developing employee behaviour monitoring programs and training processes in hotels. Moreover, the findings can help managers and employees to find out what customers consider important while evaluating their experiences in hotels.

Last but not the least, future studies could explore the subject within the broader tourism industry since it is believed that interaction incidents can change in different tourism enterprises. Further research could also seek to examine employees' incidents about hotel guests. Last but not the least, future studies could discuss the subject similarly in different tourism destinations in order to compare the guests' perceptions about employees in different hotels.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to focus on incidents as an important part of employee-guest relations in service

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APPENDIX 1. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1.	Can you please describe one or more positive incidents that occurred during your stay in hotel?
2.	Can you please describe one or more negative incidents that occurred during your stay in hotel?
3.	Gender (Male / Female)
4.	Age (.....)
5.	Nationality (Turkish / Foreign) The 6 th question is for foreign tourists.
6.	Is it your first trip to Turkey or not?

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