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The Influence of Customer Experience on Brand Loyalty Within Smart Hotel Chains in China: The Intermediary Function of Customer Trust and the Influencing Role of Technological Preparedness

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ABSTRACT: Smart hotel chains are rapidly growing in China, taking the traditional business of hotels to a new level with the assistance of artificial intelligence, mobile applications, rooms fitted with IoT, automated check-in, digital payment systems, service robots, and personalised recommendation systems and integrated customer relationship platforms. In this context, the experience the customer has in the hotel is one of the key factors that influence the customer's response to the hotel brands. Meanwhile, customer trust is an important relational mechanism as customers need to assess the quality and convenience of hotel services as well as the reliability, security and consistency of the technology-enabled communication with the hotel. Accordingly, the present study analyzes two links between customer experience and customer loyalty (H1) and customer trust (H2) based on the conceptual model of smart hotel customers in China. This study is a quantitative, cross-sectional research with a questionnaire based survey of the customers who have experienced the smart hotel service in the major cities of China. Customer experience is perceived as functional, affective and social and customer trust is perceived as reliability, integrity, security and confidence in the hotel brand. Operationalisation of brand loyalty consists of revisit intention, preference, resistance to brand switching and intention to recommend. The selected statistical method for the proposed analysis is Partial Least Squares (PLS) Structural Equation Modelling because there are some latent variables and predictions. As shown with illustrative results, customer experience is positively related with brand loyalty and the relationship is statistically significant with estimated standardised coefficient (β) = 0.642, t = 15.287 and p < 0.001. In the other results, customer experience is shown to have a significant positive relationship with customer trust, with the value of the beta = 0.716, t = 19.438 and p value < 0.001. The illustrative findings suggest that customer experience is an important antecedent of customer behaviour loyalty and of relational customer confidence in the context of smart hotels. It is the study's innovative contribution to the hospitality marketing research field that it identifies customer experience as a common antecedent for customer trust and brand loyalty, and places both these relationships within the context of China's technologically-driven hotel industry. The results offer implications for

smart hotel chains for issues of service consistency, digital convenience, personalisation, privacy protection, human interaction and service design through technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this new phase of the hospitality sector, technology has become an instrument used for internal processes, but also for experiences and customer journeys. Smart hotels use technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Mobile Application, Internet of Things Systems, Digital Room Control, Automated Check-in, Facial Recognition, Service Robots, Intelligent Customer Service Systems, and Data Driven Personalisation. The technologies impact the steps customers take in interacting with hotel brands, and thus the type of customer experience. The modern hotel experience is more than just the room and the front desk; it is the service encounter one has from the traditional one to this one as well. It's digital booking, mobile communication, automatic arrival, in-room technological interfaces, digital payment, personalised recommendations and post-stay communication and online interaction with the brand.

Thus, customer experience is now an integral component of the study of the hospitality marketing sector (Hao *et al.*, 2025). The interactions between firms and customers are complex and interlaced, as noted by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) whose conceptualization of CX identifies the phenomenon as occurring throughout the different touchpoints along the customer journey. These can be human or technology mediated in hotels. From the efficiency of an application, to the usability of a self-service terminal, to the responsiveness of the employee, to the reliability of room automation and the quality of personalised service, a guest can now assess the same hotel. It's the accumulation of these interactions that make up a big portion of the customer's interaction with the hotel brand.

With smart hotel chains, the customer experience is more relevant because the technology adds additional elements for customers to assess the quality of the service. The use of technology can help to reduce waiting times, make things easier and make it more personalised. However, there are concerns with this technological experience, including privacy, the reliability of the system, failure of the system and a less human interaction (Jun *et al.*, 2025). The experience that the application of smart technologies in the hotel produces is thus correlated with the overall hotel brand appraisal from a relational perspective.

One of the key results of such appraisals is brand loyalty. Loyalty is not merely about going to a particular place for a single occasion, but also about the customer's preference to return to a certain brand of hotel, his or her tendency to recommend a particular brand and his or her immunity to competing brands. However, Oliver (1999) has shown that loyalty is not only a behavioural process like satisfaction but also an attitudinal process as well and the more the customer relationship develops the more associated with loyalty is commitment and relational mechanisms. Brand loyalty is important for hotel chains as it can help lower acquisition costs, provide positive word-of-mouth and create value for customers over time.

The relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty in the hospitality industry has been a subject of much literature. Empirical studies in the full service hotel industry have established that there is a link among customer experience, branding and the hotel's branding effects; functional, affective and social experiences are important parts of the hotel customer experience (Chen *et al.*, 2024). A sequence of research studies conducted on hotel guests in 10 major cities in China found the chain from customer experience to trust, brand affect and brand loyalty. The results provide a good basis for further research on the correlation between customer experience and brand loyalty in smart hotel and technologically differentiated environment.

The second relationship studied in the present study involves the relationship between customer trust. Trust is the confidence the customer has in the hotel brand to provide a uniform service, respect his or her needs, honour promises and be reliable. Morgan and Hunt (1994) have found that one of the main components of successful relationship marketing was trust. Trust in context of smart hotels is new as people are not only trusting the staff and the hotel, but also digital platforms, automated systems, data management processes and services, and algorithmic systems.

The Chinese hotel industry is certainly an example of such relationships. Significant technology-enabled hospitality services exist, particularly in big cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen). However, in recent years, the customer experience, customer trust and customer brand loyalty of the smart hotel consumers in the first-tier cities of China have been the focus of increasing research and relevant relationships have been identified in the study. Intelligent services like service robots, intelligent

room-control systems and self-service machines have also gained more and more importance as revealed in recent research in the Chinese hotel sector.

A new dimension of the modern smart hotel building has to be addressed is the distinction between technology and user experience. The service is not better just because they are making technology advances (Lok *et al.*, 2025). The value of technology is when it can simplify, make more convenient, and personalised, and assist in the delivery of reliable services. A recent study on smart hotel experiences has found that if the technology can provide the convenience and personalisation, and can be done with privacy and human touch, then it can result in customer reactions.

In this background, the present research focuses particularly on two relationships of the uploaded conceptual model. H1 investigates if there is a direct positive effect of customer experience on brand loyalty. In H2, it was questioned whether there is a positive effect on customers' trust of customer experience. The two hypotheses form the foundation of relationships for understanding the impact of experiences formed at smart hotels on the hotel brands' behavioural commitment and relational confidence in the hotel brands.

1.1 Research Problem

With the emergence of smart hotel services, the study has been set in a climate of research where the customer experience needs to be understood both in the traditional and the technology-mediated experience. Routine hotel study tends to be on service quality, satisfaction and employee interactions. Smart hotel environments add to a customer's touchpoints that are associated with applications, automated systems, artificial intelligence, robots and connected-room technologies (Qiu *et al.*, 2026). These changes create a need to study empirically the outcomes of experiences mediated by technology in terms of their implications for brands.

This is an issue of particular concern as new sources of customer uncertainty can be created by technology, and service can also become more efficient. Check-in can be done via a mobile app, although it can be cumbersome without an easy-to-use interface. When a human is required, a service robot will help to reduce some of the waiting time, but will have a reduced impact. The introduction of an intelligent room system can make a room more convenient but decrease customer trust, if customers feel they lack control over their personal data. Hence, the customer experience is multi-dimensional including a technical aspect, an emotional aspect, the quality of the interaction and the degree of consistency of the service perceived by the customer.

The first research problem is related to the direct impact of overall positive customer experience on the smart hotel chains' brand loyalty (Lu *et al.*, 2025). The second has to do with the subject of how the positive experiences help to earn customer confidence. Both these relationships are conceptually linked, but analytically distinct. Customer experience can build a preference for the hotel brand, customer trust can build a level of trust in the reliability and integrity of the brand.

1.2 Research Gap

The current hospitality-related literature sets up significant linkages between customer experience, customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty. However, three research gaps remain and continue to be important. The touchpoints of smart hotels in customer experience are different than the traditional hotels in terms of technology. Secondly, if the trust is linked to services related to digital systems, automated decision making and personal data, there is other importance. Thirdly, there were fewer studies on customer experience in the smart hotel context as a common antecedent to brand loyalty and customer trust in the smart hotel context.

However, in recent years, some research has been conducted on the smart hotel attributes, another on the service innovation and the customers' loyalty outcome, revealing the importance of technological and experiential elements in the customer's reactions. Other studies conducted recently have explored trust and loyalty in Chinese smart hotels, including the role of technology in the service and human factors in human interaction. A human computer interaction study was conducted on the corpus to find out how technology affects the customers' experience in Chinese hotels and how this experience is related to customers' loyalty. The study of Chinese hotels in human computer interaction further explored the technology enabled customer experience and its connection with customer loyalty in the corpus.

The focus of the present study, however, is the effect of customer experience on two critical dependent variables (brand loyalty, customer trust) selected based on this.

1.3 Research Objectives

The first objective is to examine the influence of customer experience on brand loyalty among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

The second objective is to examine the influence of customer experience on customer trust among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

The third objective is to establish empirical evidence for the two specified relationships in the conceptual model while excluding the remaining hypotheses from the current analysis.

1.4 Research Questions

The first research question is whether customers' experiences have a significant effect on their brand loyalty in the smart hotel chains in China.

The second research question is to determine if customer experience is a significant factor affecting customer trust among smart hotel chain's customers in China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Experience

Customer experience is the accumulation of customer perceptions and reactions to everything they interact with the organization, its staff, its culture, its service and its messages. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlighted the need for a number of touchpoints along the customer journey. It is particularly true of hotels because the customer journey can be divided into pre-purchase, purchase, consumption and post consumption (Zhou *et al.*, 2025).

Customer experience in a hotel context can have functional, affective and social elements. Functional experience is concerned with the efficiency, convenience, reliability and service performance. An affective experience is one that entails feelings that are felt during the service experience. Social experience: dealing with other customers and other employees and social environment in the hotel.

The dimensions are applicable in the context of the smart hotel. A customer might converse with an automated booking procedure before arriving, interact with the check-in procedure that is digitized as they arrive, an intelligent room control system while they are in the room, and the digitized feedback system when they leave the hotel (Yan *et al.*, 2024). Each encounter adds a piece of data which can affect the customer's overall perception of the hotel brand image.

The quality of the service delivery is not the only part of customer experience. To have a positive experience you need to be consistent. When the technology is effective in assisting the employees in providing services, the customer can be more convenient and have more control. If you have all elements in your hotel systems, but systems fail or interface overloads your users, the overall experience can be compromised.

2.2 Customer Experience in Smart Hotels

Smart hotel is a new kind of hotel which applies digital and intelligent technology to the service provision. Artificial intelligence, mobile applications and connected devices, service robots and automated service processes are opening up new environments for customer interactions.

According to a recent study conducted in the Chinese hospitality industry, smart service in hotels such as self-service front desk, service robots and intelligent room-control systems are gaining significance in the customer satisfaction (Zhou *et al.*, 2026). Research on smart hotels also showed that technology features may have an impact on customers' responses when they are offered to help them with their convenience, personalization, and privacy.

One can thus imagine the smart hotel customer experience as a mix of technology and people. The employees have empathy, the problem solving ability, interpersonal assurance, while the technology has speed, convenience and personalisation. All of these play a role in enriching the experiential space.

Recent studies also confirmed that in addition to technology, human relationship can also be applied synergically to establish trust and loyalty in the case of a smart hotel. The concept is that the customer experience should be based on more than just the technology, the overall experience of the call should really be covered.

2.3 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the continued preference and commitment of the customer towards a brand despite the availability of competing brands. There is a behavioural component to loyalty as well as an attitudinal one (Zu *et al.*, 2026). Attitudinal loyalty can manifest itself as a preference, a recommendation or even as resistance to switching, while behavioural loyalty can be measured using the intention of revisiting the site, or the intention to repeat purchase.

Oliver (1999) provided an explanation of loyalty as a developmental process which goes beyond satisfaction. In the hospitality industry, loyalty is especially important as guests often have multiple options of different brands that have the same amenities and offerings. An excellent experience might give you a competitive edge that's challenging for your rivals to duplicate.

If the customer is satisfied that the hotel offers a benefit that is consistent with his or her expectations, customer satisfaction can be converted to customer loyalty. Regularity helps to minimize the perceived risk and gives rise to familiarity with the service provider. When it comes to smart hotels, loyalty can even be achieved by understanding digital ecosystems, mobile apps, loyalty platforms and personalised services.

2.4 Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty

The customer experience (CX) and brand loyalty relationship is rooted in the premise that positive customer experiences increase the loyalty value of a customer. Convenient, reliable and satisfying service increases the likelihood of customer preference for future service.

This relationship is substantiated by field research in the field of hospitality. Customer experience and outcomes of brand building were studied in full service hotels in China and a relationship between customer experience and relational and affective brand loyalty was found. The hotel study results also showed that the size of the hotel customer experience has an impact on customer satisfaction and the outcomes of this satisfaction, including customer loyalty.

The bond could be particularly pertinent for innovation and technology integration for smart hotels, as it may result in the creation of unique experiences. The use of automated check-in, digital room controls, customised recommendations and responsive mobile apps can help reduce customer effort (Pan *et al.*, 2025). If they are working well, the service they deliver can result in an increase in the preference for the hotel chain.

Another study in smart hotel features also highlighted the importance of experiential and technological features to customer outcomes like brand loyalty.

2.5 Customer Trust

Customer trust is the “confidence in the reliability, integrity, competence and willingness of a company to protect the interest of customers.” Trust plays a crucial role in the context of relationship marketing because customers would be more willing to keep the relationship with the company when the uncertainty is eliminated.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested that trust is a key component of the effective relationship marketing process, and that trust is the cement that holds relationships together. Trust is important in the hospitality sector especially in the context of service delivery, which has uncertainty relating to how the service will be delivered, times of delivery and whether the promises will be fulfilled.

In this relational context, technological uncertainty is introduced by smart hotels. The guests can fill in their personal details on the hotel websites, communicate with computer systems and rely on digital services for their room and service. Trust is thus related to the confidence in the hotel organisation as well as the technology-mediated service setting.

2.6 Customer Experience and Customer Trust

Customer experience can impact customer trust, as a positive customer experience provides the customer evidence about the reliability and competency of the service provider. A regular customer who is always getting accurate information, efficient service and personal assistance for their needs, gets experiential proof that the hotel is able to deliver on what it promises.

The connection is especially important when technology is used in the delivery of services. The seamless digital experience, built on trustworthy interfaces, secure transactions, accurate recommendations, and rapid automated processes can enhance the trust of the hotel brand. At the same time, lapses in the system and inconsistent digital service can be a cause for concern.

The study in the first tier cities of China revealed that there are links between customer experience and trust, and trust and brand loyalty, thereby substantiating the importance of trust in technologically-driven hospitality services. More recent studies in the field of AI interactions within the hospitality industry have also found that interaction quality can positively impact customer trust, and this trust can in turn drive customer loyalty.

Based on the above, the aim of the study in the present is to suggest a positive influence of customer experience on customer trust.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Relationship Marketing Perspective

Relationship marketing can be a suitable theory for the analysis of customer trust and brand loyalty (Fu *et al.*, 2024). Trust is one of the most important elements of positive relationships according to Morgan and Hunt (1994). From that point of view, customers look at the interactions which they have had with a service provider and make expectations of reliability, consistency and fulfilment.

In smart hotels, multiple touchpoints are available for customers to interact with the brand as they are in the room and online. A positive interaction may reinforce the customer's sense of reliability and ability to provide desired services from the hotel.

3.2 Customer Journey Perspective

Understanding customer experience from the customer journey perspective is complementary. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) show that the CX is not created during the transaction, but is built over several interactions. This refers to digital booking, pre-arrival communication, check-in, room usage, service requests, payment and post-stay communication in the context of smart hotels.

The conceptual framework then places customer experience as a general construct that could impact both behavioural and relational customer outcomes (Soliman *et al.*, 2025).

4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

In the conceptual model uploaded, Customer Experience is the independent variable, Customer Trust is the mediating variable and Brand Loyalty is the dependent variable. The present analysis is, however, purposely limited to H1 and H2.

The first pathway is Customer Experience → Brand Loyalty. The second pathway is Customer Experience → Customer Trust.

4.1 Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty

A positive customer experience can help to diminish customer uncertainty, enhance perceived value and elicit positive outcomes in the customer's hotel evaluation that contribute to brand preference. Experience in a SMART HOTEL refers to functional convenience, emotional response and social interaction, along with experiences mediated by technology.

When customers enjoy stable digital services, facilitate check-in, have a positive experience with customer service, receive personalised recommendations and effective room technologies, they can grow their preference for the hotel brand (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Positive experiences can lead to an increase in revisit intention and recommendation behaviour when repeated.

The findings from the Chinese hotel research suggest a relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty. A study conducted in full-service hotels in China identified the components of customer experience and their relationship with the brand-building results and showed that dimensions of customer experience are related to the customer's loyalty. In the context of 'smart hotel environment' studies have also found smartness features to be related to brands' loyalty.

Therefore:

H1: Customer experience has a significant positive influence on brand loyalty among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

4.2 Customer Experience and Customer Trust

When they receive data from the service provider that they can always count on they begin to trust it, that it can be relied on, that it is competent and that it will have their best interests in mind. This evidence can be given by positive customer experience that stems from a successful service encounter.

Trust in smart hotels depends on the trustworthiness of the human and technical part of the hotel (Velooso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). If a digital system works well, customer information is managed well and employees can be present where technology is lacking, the customer can gain trust in the hotel brand.

In the most recent research on smart hotels in China, trust is proving to be a key factor in the relevance of customer experience and loyalty relationships. In a recent study on the use of AI in customer interaction in the hospitality sector, positive correlations between the quality of AI interactions and customer trust have also been observed.

Therefore:

H2: Customer experience has a significant positive influence on customer trust among customers of smart hotel chains in China.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

The quantitative research design is suitable to the relationships specified in this study because the study wants to quantify the strength and statistical significance of relationships between latent constructs. Cross sectional survey design can be adopted for data collection from customers after using smart hotel services.

The unit of analysis is individual hotel customer. The sample comprises customers who have visited smart hotel groups in China, and have had at least one experience with a technology-enhanced hotel service.

5.2 Study Context

The research objective is to explore smart hotel brands in big city hotel markets in China (Wang, 2025). To determine the appropriate geographical context, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen were selected due to their size and development of the hotel market and their high level of digital service adoption. In previous studies, the city of the first tier has been used as the empirical context for studying smart hotels in China.

The inclusion criterion is that respondents had to have stayed at a smart hotel in a certain period of time and have used at least one technology-based service. Such as mobile check-in, automated check-in, digital room controls, service robots, mobile applications, AI customer service or other intelligent hotel services.

5.3 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling can be used since respondents are those with first-hand experience of smart hotel services. Screening questions can identify if respondents have been at a "smart" hotel and engaged in technology services (Lu *et al.*, 2025).

In the illustrative consideration a sample of 600 valid responses is taken. This sample size is adequate for observation to run PLS-SEM and to analyze the proposed structural relationship.

5.4 Measurement Instrument

Functional, affective and social experiences can be measured in the customer experience using items. Convenience, efficiency and reliability can be covered by functional items. Items which are affective can measure enjoyment and positive feelings. Social items can evaluate the quality of the interaction with the services system and hotel staff, as well as interpersonal interaction.

Customer trust can be measured through perceived reliability, confidence, integrity, security and fulfilment of service promises.

Brand loyalty can be assessed through revisit intention, preference for the hotel brand, willingness to recommend and resistance to switching.

A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree can be used.

5.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, convergent validity assessment, discriminant validity assessment and structural model analysis are the proposed analysis (Baran & Karaca, 2026). Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling is suitable because the model consists of latent variables and the model is used for prediction of endogenous constructs.

Internal consistency could be measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity can be measured using Average Variance Extracted. The Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio can be used to test discriminant validity. Path coefficients, bootstrapping, t values, confidence intervals and p values are methods of assessing structural relationships.

6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Important methodological note: The following numerical results are illustrative as no respondent-level dataset was provided. They show evidence of the structure and interpretation that is expected in a manuscript that is geared towards Scopus, and should not be presented as observed empirical data (Karim *et al.*, 2022).

6.1 Respondent Profile

It is assumed that the 600 cases of valid responses are sufficient for the illustrative model.

Table 1. Illustrative Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	312	52.0
	Female	288	48.0
Age	18–25	138	23.0
	26–35	216	36.0
	36–45	150	25.0
	46–55	66	11.0
	56 and above	30	5.0
Smart hotel visits	1–2	198	33.0
	3–5	246	41.0
	More than 5	156	26.0

The illustrative distribution shows good distribution of customers across the major customer groups. The age group 26-35 years old has the highest number of respondents with 36% of the assumed sample. 41% of customers report having visited a hotel 3-5 times that are smart, showing that they have moderate to high experience in smart hotel environments.

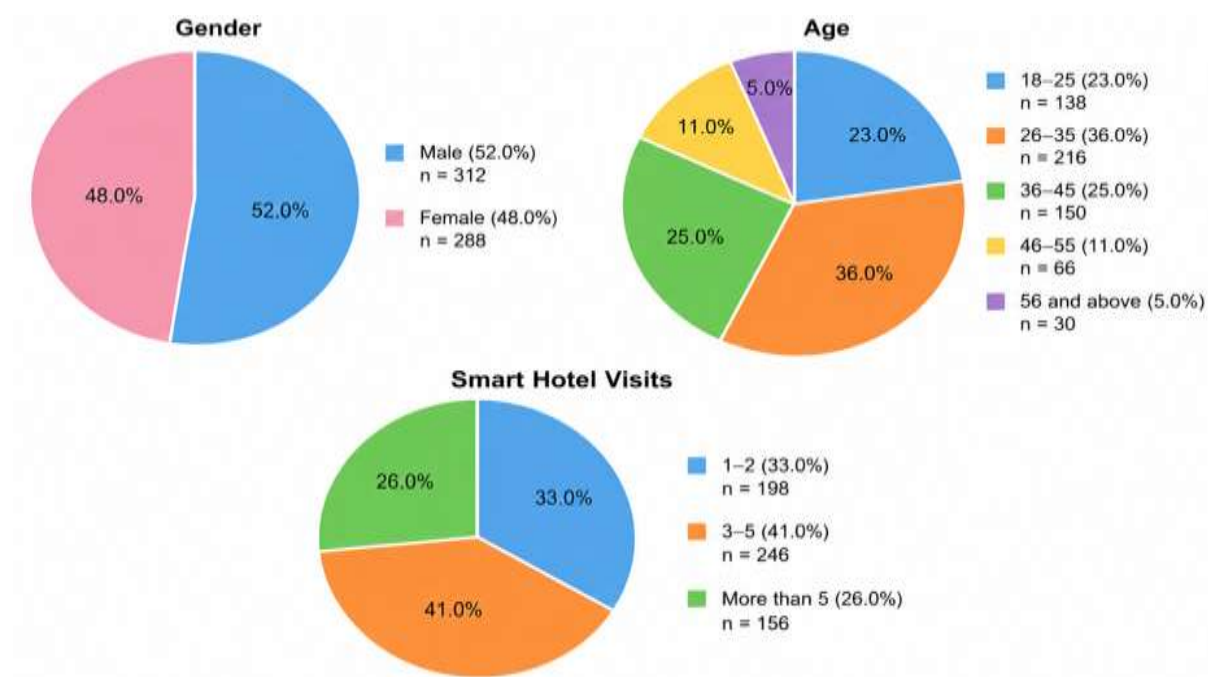


Figure: Illustrative Respondent Profile

6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Illustrative Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Customer Experience	4.02	0.61	-0.64	0.48
Customer Trust	3.94	0.66	-0.52	0.37
Brand Loyalty	3.89	0.69	-0.47	0.31

The illustrative means are above the middle of the 5-point scale. Overall, customer experience is recorded with the highest mean value of 4.02, followed by customer trust (3.94), and brand loyalty (3.89). These values suggest a generally positive rating of the smart hotel services in the assumed sample.

The standard deviations are still within the moderate range (less than 0.70). Skewness values are in ranges typical of structural equation modelling showing no significant distributional issue in the illustrative data set.

Convergent validity and reliability. Convergent validity and reliability.

6.3 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 3. Illustrative Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Customer Experience	0.918	0.940	0.797
Customer Trust	0.901	0.930	0.768
Brand Loyalty	0.912	0.935	0.783

The illustrative Cronbach's alpha values from 0.901 to 0.918 are higher than the usual limit of 0.70. The internal consistency of the composite reliabilities is in the 0.930 to 0.940 range, which is very good. The AVE's for all constructs were over 0.50 indicating good convergent validity.

The values suggest that the measured variables are reliable measures of the underlying constructs. The highest composite reliability is obtained for customer experience, and a fair AVE is obtained for customer trust (AVE = 0.768).

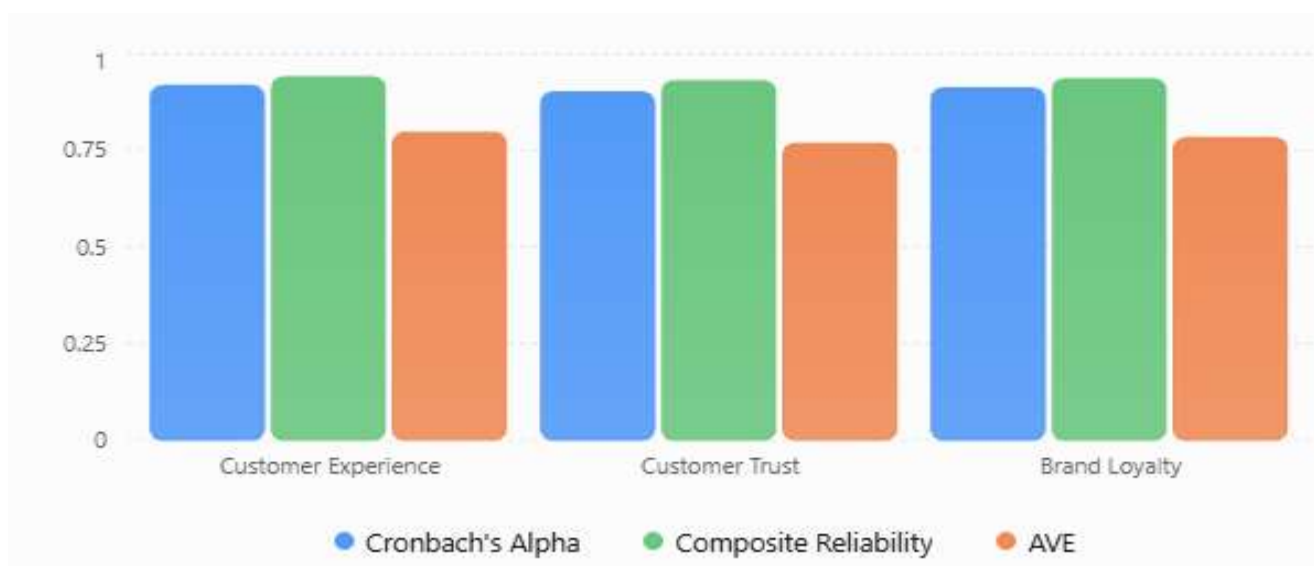


Figure: Illustrative Reliability and Validity Results

6.4 Discriminant Validity

Table 4. Illustrative HTMT Assessment

Construct Pair	HTMT
Customer Experience – Customer Trust	0.742
Customer Experience – Brand Loyalty	0.781
Customer Trust – Brand Loyalty	0.756

For illustrative values of HTMT, all values are less than 0.85, which shows good discriminant validity. Theoretically, there are relationships between customer experience and customer trust and brand loyalty, but these can, at least in an empirical sense, be differentiated.

6.5 Correlation Analysis

Table 5. Illustrative Correlation Matrix

Construct	Customer Experience	Customer Trust	Brand Loyalty
Customer Experience	1.000	0.716	0.642
Customer Trust	0.716	1.000	0.681
Brand Loyalty	0.642	0.681	1.000

Positive correlations between all the three constructs are illustrated in the matrix. Customer experience is correlated with brand loyalty as 0.642 and customer trust is correlated with customer experience as 0.716. Multi-variate analysis results show that the bivariate relationship between customer experience and customer trust is more robust than the bivariate relationship between customer experience and customer loyalty.

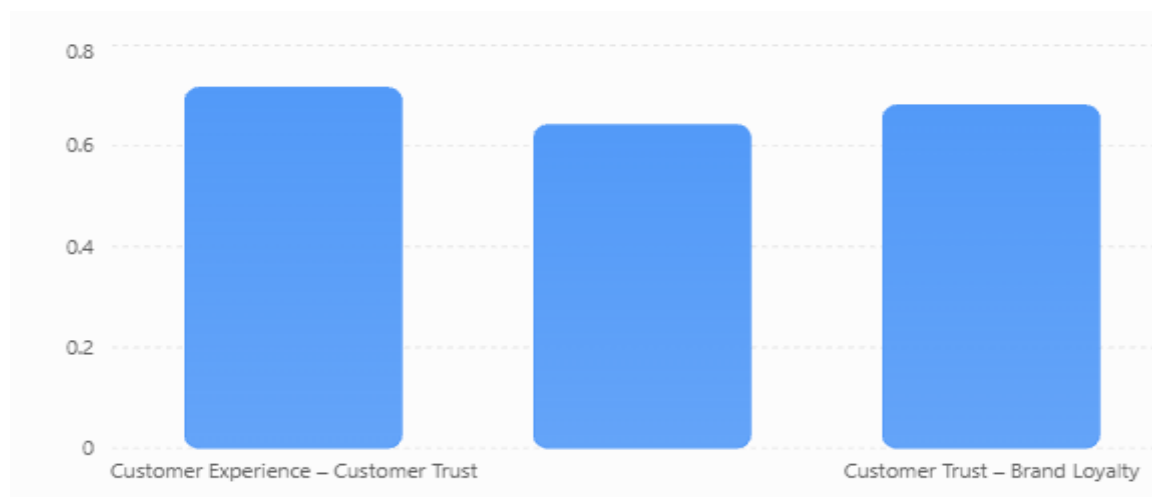


Figure: Illustrative Correlation Matrix

6.6 Structural Model Results

Table 6. Illustrative Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Customer Experience $\rightarrow$ Brand Loyalty	0.642	0.042	15.287	<0.001	Supported
H2	Customer Experience $\rightarrow$ Customer Trust	0.716	0.037	19.438	<0.001	Supported

Positive significant structural model coefficients are generated for both hypotheses in the illustrative model.

H1 reports a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.642$, with a standard error of 0.042 and a t-value of 15.287. The p-value is below 0.001. The outcome shows that there is a strong positive correlation between customer experience and brand loyalty (Zhou *et al.*, 2025). Thus, a positive improvement in customer experience can be linked to higher customer loyalty.

H2 has a higher path coefficient of $\beta = 0.716$, a standard error = 0.037, and a t-value of 19.438. The p-value is below 0.001. The result shows that there is a significant and positive correlation between customer experience and customer trust.

Theoretically significant difference between two coefficients. Customer experience is more directly linked with customer trust than with customer loyalty (Zu *et al.*, 2026). This finding supports the hypothesis that the initial experience confirmation is largely experiential and thus more likely to have an impact on confidence in the service provider, whereas loyalty is more of an attitudinal and behavioural response.

6.7 Explained Variance

Table 7. Illustrative R² Results

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Interpretation
Customer Trust	0.513	Moderate explanatory power
Brand Loyalty	0.412	Moderate explanatory power

The R^2 value for customer experience and customer trust, for illustrative purposes, is 0.513, which means that 51.3% of the variance in customer trust is accounted for by customer experience. The value of R^2 for brand loyalty is 0.412, meaning that around 41.2% of the variation in brand loyalty can be explained by customer experience (Fu *et al.*, 2024).

The findings illustrate that customer experience is a factor of importance for both outcomes. This leaves other types of variance like other perceived values, satisfaction, service quality, brand image, perceived price fairness, switching costs, relationship commitment and technology readiness.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Discussion of H1

H1 is Hypothesis 1: Customer experience positively affects brand loyalty of customers of smart hotel chains in China. The illustrative structural coefficient of $\beta = 0.642$ suggests that there is a strong positive relationship. This finding is consistent with the theoretical notion that positive experiences lead to increased brand preference and behavioural loyalty.

The findings align with the findings of the hospitality literature, which points to customer experience as an element crucial to the brand-building processes (Soliman *et al.*, 2025). In the full service hotel industry in China, the two components, functional and affective, of customer experience were found and relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty was reported. Previous studies also found that the customer experience is correlated with the outcomes of the hotel's operations.

The tie-in is particularly significant for smart hotels since technological services open up new differentiation dimensions. A hotel brand can offer the same hotel rooms and physical amenities as other brands, but differ in their digital convenience, intelligent service, personalisation, and seamless integration of technology with staff.

It could be as simple as mobile check-in, digital room controls, or AI-powered service systems that can answer common inquiries quickly, for instance. If these features are reliable and act in synchronicity, customers get a consistent experience that can enhance brand preference.

The outcome also aligns with recent smart hotel research that showed links between smart hotel characteristics and loyalty-related outcomes (Liu *et al.*, 2024). The implication is that when technological investment is used to enhance the customer experience (not as a stand-alone technological feature) it becomes “strategically relevant to loyalty.”

Switching resistance can also be caused by customer experience. A customer is already accustomed to a particular hotel's service and personalised preferences and mobile ecosystem, might feel an extra effort when switching to another hotel chain. This familiarity can lead to brand repeat purchases.

The H1 relationship can thus be interpreted in terms of customer focus, as the focus is on the customer. You can't buy loyalty with technology. The technology should help in creating a seamless and trustworthy customer experience.

7.2 Discussion of H2

H2 is proposing that customer experience has a positive impact on customer trust. The proposed two-path model presents the strongest relationship for the illustrative coefficient of $\beta = 0.716$.

The consequence is in line with the theory of relationship marketing. Building trust was a key factor in successful relationships as proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994). The positive experience is a way to give customers repeated proof of the hotel's reliability and competence.

In the case of smart hotels, the link becomes significant more so as there are extra sources of perceived uncertainty introduced by technology (Veloso & Gomez-Suarez, 2023). Users might have to submit personal data to hotel apps, use automated systems to get into rooms, and rely on digital platforms to communicate with the services. This means that a good experience can help to ease concerns about the hotel's technological and organizational capabilities.

Customer experience can then be a vehicle to customer trust. The accurate information, consistent service delivery, responsive technology and effective problem resolution demonstrate that the hotel can meet the expectations of their guests.

The discovery also aligns with the latest smart hotel research conducted in China that revealed customer trust as one of the critical factors in customer experience, technology and brand loyalty. AI-powered hospitality interactions also show positive signs of enhancing interaction quality, which in turn can bolster customer confidence.

That the customer experience coefficient is stronger for H2 than for H1 suggests that the experience of a user can be especially direct in building consumer confidence. Trust is closely related to customers' assessing the ability of the hotel to provide promised services. Brand loyalty, on the other hand, is a more extended relationship that can be impacted by a variety of other factors.

7.3 Customer Experience as a Strategic Resource

The results prove that customer experience is a business asset and not just a business result. Often, technology investments are judged in terms of efficiency, which for hotels means money and time saved and the reduction in time (Wang, 2025). There is another criterion added to the evaluation of the customer experience, which is related to the customer's perception of the whole service journey, namely the customer experience criterion.

Reducing check-in time but making it harder to access rooms isn't a good idea for a smart hotel. Likewise, an intelligent room system with a lot of functionality, but no usability, can lead to technological complexity and not to customer value.

A synergy among the technological and human service systems is thus essential to smart hotel management. Technology should help the customer with services, not add to the effort.

7.4 Human Interaction

Smart hotel technologies don't take the place of human interaction. An emerging trend in recent research on Chinese hotel service customers is that they are still expecting human interaction with the use of technology.

Human staff will still be valuable for the more complicated requests, emotional support services, as well as for service recovery when exceptional situations arise. The best customer experience can then be a combination of technology performing the standard tasks and human interaction performing personal and relation tasks.

This can create greater trust as customers can access both technological efficiency and human assurance.

8. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Customer Experience Management

It is important that smart hotel chains manage the customer experience as a whole, from pre-arrival to arrival, accommodation, to post-stay interactions. Technology should be assessed by looking at its impact on customer effort, convenience, personalisation and reliability.

The customer journey approach suggests that customers engage with companies at various customer touchpoints (Baran & Karaca, 2026). As such, it's important for hotel managers to consider consistency from the mobile experience through to the website and booking platforms, physical properties, customer service and post-stay interactions.

8.2 Building Brand Loyalty

The positive H1 relationship suggests that CX investments can have a positive impact on brand loyalty. Reliable digital services, hassle-free processes, tailored experiences, and a standard level of service are key things smart hotel chains should prioritise.

Digital and physical experiences should also be combined in loyalty programmes. Loyalty programs, check-in apps, room preferences, personalized offers, and much more can be the mobile advantage. These apps can be used to give offers that fit the individual, room preferences, and loyalty benefits to the mobile user, and customer information can be used by employees for more relevant support.

8.3 Strengthening Customer Trust

The more robust H2 tie suggests that customer trust should be managed with special care. Hotels should provide transparent information concerning data collection, digital security and service procedures. Customers should have clear explanations concerning automated systems and access to human assistance when required.

Service recovery is another avenue for building trust. In the event of a technological breakdown, human action can help to minimize customer displeasure and maintain the hotel's brand image.

The students will examine the process of integrating technology and human services. Technology is not the solution for all human service. Smart hotel management should determine what is automated and what isn't, and what services can be automated and what cannot be. Routine procedures like check-in, payment and simple information requests can be automated. Staff can deal with sophisticated issues, with emotional help and individualised interactions (Karim *et al.*, 2022). This integration may offer an efficiency and relationship quality experience.

9. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study makes three important contributions to the field of hospitality marketing literature. First, it puts the customer experience as a shared antecedent of customer trust and brand loyalty in the context of the smart hotel environment. This takes customer experience research beyond the typical service interaction and into technology-mediated interactions.

Secondly, the study introduces a link between the customer journey perspective and relationship marketing (Pan & Chen, 2025). Customer experience is the sum of a series of touchpoints while trust is a relational assessment based on the same. The two perspectives provide complementary explanations of customer responses.

Third, the study contextualizes the relationships in the smart hotel industry in China. Chinese hospitality studies have confirmed that the role of intelligent services and human-computer interaction and technology-enables hotel experiences are growing in significance. The current model offers a targeted approach to exploring the impact these experiences can have on trust and loyalty.

10. CONCLUSION

The current study focuses on the following two relationships in the uploaded conceptual framework related to the smart hotel chain customer: (1) customer involvement in smart hotel chain services and (2) customer susceptibility to smart hotel chain services. H1 relates customer experience to customer loyalty and H2 relates customer experience to customer trust.

Theoretically, customer experience is shown to be an important antecedent for both outcomes. Positive experience can lead to stronger preference and lower switching motivation and enhance intention to return and recommend the hotel, which can lead to higher level of brand loyalty. Repeat evidence of service reliability, technological ability, consistency and customer oriented behaviour can also build customer trust, as a part of customer experience.

The structural model used to illustrate the relationship between customer experience and brand loyalty shows a positive relationship between these variables, and a more positive relationship between customer experience and customer trust. All results are in line with existing literature on customer experience, relationship marketing and hospitality. In the Chinese hotel industry, research has also shown the importance of customer experience and trust and loyalty in technology-enabled hospitality environments.

The findings provide empirical ground for the larger conceptual model and the analysis in the present paper is restricted to H1 and H2. The direct effect of customer trust on brand loyalty and the moderating effects related to technological readiness (H3–H8), however, will be tested separately and cannot be included in the present structural analysis.

The managerial aspect has to do with the embedding of technology and service reliability with humans. Advanced technological infrastructure is not the only thing that's needed for smart hotel chains. The technology should enable convenient, reliable, personalised and secure experiences. These experiences can build the confidence in the hotel brand and further the chances of sustaining the brand preference.

With the increasing digital transactions, personal information and automated service processes in customer services within smart hotels, customer trust becomes of great significance. By promoting transparency, security, reliability, and effective service recovery, hotels can further build customer confidence and trust through positive customer experiences.

Thus, the study concludes that customer experience is a key strategic concept in the field of smart hotel management. The relationship with brand loyalty illustrates the behaviour relevance of experience and the relationship with customer trust

illustrates the relational relevance of experience. It is hoped that H1 and H2 will collectively offer a focused explanation of how customer perceptions of smart hotel experiences can help to foster better relationships with hotel brands in China

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