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Esther Gracia, Arnold B. Bakker and Rosa M. Grau

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What is This?

Positive Emotions: The Connection between Customer Quality Evaluations and Loyalty

By Esther Gracia, Arnold B. Bakker, and Rosa M. Grau

Abstract

Although customer quality evaluations is a recognized precursor to loyalty, several studies have indicated that loyalty also depends on favorable customer emotions toward a hotel or restaurant. This model of developing loyalty can be summarized as a process that begins with the customer's favorable assessment of service quality; continues with positive feelings toward the establishment; and ends with loyalty behavior, including repeat purchases and favorable recommendations. To assess this process, a cognitive-affective-conative model is tested, using separate constructs to clarify the specific role of customers' positive affective responses in enhancing customer loyalty. Based on a sample of 586 hotel customers and 571 restaurant customers from 120 Spanish establishments, the results of the multigroup structural equation modeling analyses confirmed the proposed hypothesis that service quality increases positive affective responses, and these, in turn, increase customer loyalty. Thus, positive affective responses partially mediate the relationship between service quality perceptions and customer loyalty in hotels and restaurants simultaneously. These results suggest that customer loyalty in hotels and restaurants may follow a process were cognitive evaluations and emotions play an important role.

The importance of loyal customers to the success of a hospitality business is well accepted. One gauge of customer loyalty is the extent to which a customer recommends and plans future use of a particular company (Caruana 2002, 813). Research has suggested two main predictors of customer loyalty. First, customer cognition or perceptions of service quality seem to be the strongest predictor of future customer behavior (Sirohi, McLaughlin, and Wittink 1998). Second, customers' affective response, particularly if customers are favorably disposed to a company, also influence future customer actions, such as repeat purchases (Laros and Steenkamp 2003).

Both predictors are often synthesized and expressed as customer satisfaction, an overall evaluation based on previous expectations of a cognitive, affective, and conative nature, which likewise is a strong predictor of future loyalty intentions (Petty, Wegener, and Fabrigar 1997). Despite the importance of customers' perceptions and emotional responses in fostering customer loyalty, the specific role of customers' affective responses to service encounters in regard to loyalty has still to be clarified (Bennet, Hartel, and McColl-Kennedy 2005). This study examines the specific role played by customers' affective responses in the process that results in customers' becoming loyal hotel and restaurant customers.

Predictors of Customer Loyalty: Perception and Emotion

Several studies that focused on hotels and restaurants have found that customer loyalty can be predicted by customers' evaluations of service quality (e.g., Salanova, Agut, and Peiró 2005), which we can consider a cognitive definition. It is widely agreed that the concept of service quality refers to the discrepancy of customer expectations with the received service (Grönroos 1984) and is therefore a subjective evaluation. Based on this approach, the often applied service quality model known as SERVQUAL was proposed to provide better knowledge for improving customers' service quality ratings (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). This model attempts to measure gaps between the expectations of service stakeholders (managers, workers, and customers) and the actual service levels. Initially composed of ten dimensions, the SERVQUAL scale was condensed to the following five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (often expressed through the mnemonic, RATER). SERVQUAL has been criticized for both theoretical and operational issues (e.g., Buttle 1996), particularly since its dimensions may have various structures or weightings in different settings. For instance, a hotel study conducted in Turkey adapted the five SERVQUAL dimensions

to explain more of the variance of customers' overall service quality in an international environment (Akbaba 2006). In that study, the most highly ranked items were the tangible features of the hotel, followed by understanding and caring, adequacy in service supply assurance, and convenience.

Several studies have compared the predictive strength of service quality with other predictors of customer loyalty (including price and value) and have found that service quality had the strongest effect among all the predictors on store loyalty intentions (Bloemer, Ruyter, and Wetzels 1999). A study of 160 grocery stores found that service quality had both a direct and an indirect influence on loyalty (Sirohi, McLaughlin, and Wittink 1998).

Although service quality is an important predictor of customer loyalty, other studies have found that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship (e.g., Lam et al. 2004). Because satisfaction also has an emotional component, we believe that customers' affective responses could also exert an influence on customer loyalty. That is, both perceptions of service quality and the emotional reaction to the service have an effect on loyalty.

This argument was corroborated in a study of bank customers by Baumann et al. (2007) that tested how service quality influenced overall satisfaction and affective responses in different ways. As measured on the Servqual scale, service quality accounted for less of the variance in satisfaction (62 percent) than it did in affective responses (72 percent). The Baumann group concluded that service quality was able to predict short-term loyalty behavior, while affect was able to predict both short- and long-term loyalty behavior. Moreover, affective response was the strongest predictor of loyalty intentions among these bank customers, more so than satisfaction and service quality. This study indicates that satisfaction and affect are indeed different in nature, and emotional response almost undoubtedly influences customer loyalty.

We have seen few empirical studies that have tested the direct effect of customers' affective response on their loyalty or other intentions in real service settings. One hotel and restaurant field study found that customers' negative affective responses to service failures significantly influenced their overall satisfaction with hotels, but that affective responses had no effect on restaurants (Smith and Bolton 2002). We note, however, that this study focuses on the negative, rather than on the positive consequences of affective responses. One other study found that customers who experienced strong emotions with regard to their hotel stay were willing to pay more than customers who felt nothing special (Barsky and Nash 2002). Emotions were also found to be significantly related to the customers' intention to return to the hotels.

Summing up, the literature suggests that there are two separate main predictors of customer loyalty: cognitive evaluations regarding the service received and positive affective responses to this service. What we have not seen is an empirical indication of the specific role of positive affective responses. In the study described in this article, we attempt to integrate these two loyalty influences by examining the role of cognitive and affective responses in developing customer loyalty.

Developing Loyalty

One way to analyze the process by which customers develop loyalty is to assess the progression from understanding (or opinion) to emotional connection to behavioral intention. This progression is summarized as the cognitive-affective-conative framework (McCain, Jang, and Hu 2005, 466). This framework argues that customers follow an attitudinal process to become loyal. In the first step, cognitive development, customers evaluate available information, including assessments of service quality. The second step, affective development, involves customers' emotional or affective responses related to the service encounter. Finally, the so-called conative step occurs when a customer formulates a behavioral intention that is influenced by the positive cognitive and positive affective evaluation of the service encounter (Oliver 1999).

This framework for customer loyalty has so far been applied using customer satisfaction as a proxy for emotional reactions (Caruana 2002; Olsen 2002). Therefore, the influence of customer affect on customer loyalty, as a consequence of the service received, has still to be clarified empirically. For this reason, our study will focus on the importance of the affective response that customers feel as a consequence of service encounters in restaurants and hotels. We also examine whether programs to develop customer loyalty should take into account both customers' perceptions of service quality and their affective response to a service.

On the basis of the literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Customer perceptions of service quality will be positively related to customer loyalty toward hotels and restaurants.

Hypothesis 2: Customer perceptions of service quality will be positively related to the positive affective response that customers feel as a consequence of the service they receive at hotels and restaurants.

Hypothesis 3: Customers' positive affective response will be positively related to customer loyalty toward hotels and restaurants.

Hypothesis 4: Customers' positive affective response will mediate the relationship between customer perception of service quality and customer loyalty.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 1,157 customers of 120 Spanish hotels and hotel restaurants (586 hotel customers and 571 restaurant customers). Seventy percent of the hotels held a three-star rating, while the rest were four-star properties. Sixty percent of the hotels target holiday customers, while 40 percent specialize in business customers. Only hotel customers who stayed longer than three nights were asked to participate in the study, while the inclusion criterion for restaurants was eating either lunch or dinner. We randomly invited ten customers from each hotel and restaurant to participate in the study, which involved a questionnaire that took about ten minutes to complete. Only 4 percent of those invited declined to participate. Hotel customers filled in the questionnaire when checking out, while restaurant customers filled in the questionnaire when paying their bill. We were present to help customers in case of difficulties with filling in the questionnaires. The sample had slightly more men than women, the mean age was 43 years (SD = 14.70), and the preponderance of respondents reported being married.

Measures

Service quality was assessed with an adapted version of the Servqual questionnaire (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). We asked customers about the extent to which they agreed with three items representing each of the five RATER dimensions (using a 7-point rating scale). *Reliability* refers to the hotel or restaurant's ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. A typical question was, "When I arrived at the hotel [or the restaurant], the services were available as I had expected" (Cronbach's alpha [α] = .76). *Assurance* referred to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. A representative question was, "The employees of the hotel [the restaurant] earned our trust" (α = .69). *Tangibles* encompassed physical facilities, equipment, and staff appearance. The questionnaire asked, "The restaurant's [the hotel's] cleanliness and hygiene were excellent" (α = .86). *Empathy* was indicated by caring and individualized attention toward customers. A sample item was, "The employees of the hotel [the restaurant] understood each customer's special needs" (α = .87). Finally, *responsiveness* is the willingness to help customers and provide a prompt service. One question was, "The employees of the hotel [the restaurant] provided a prompt service" (α = .83).

Customers' positive affective response was measured with a scale for positive affect (Edell and Burke 1987) using the extent of agreement (7-point scale) with the following three items: "I felt pleased while this hotel [restaurant] provided the service"; "I felt happy with the services provided by this hotel [restaurant]"; and "I felt enthusiastic about the service provided by this hotel [restaurant]." The internal consistency of this scale was good: α = .91.

Customer loyalty was assessed with four items that measured the likelihood of customers' returning to the hotel or restaurant for further service, engaging in positive (or negative) word-of-mouth behavior, and perceptions of excellence (again on a 7-point scale). For this we used an adaptation (Martínez-Tur et al. 2001) of the scale developed by Swan and Oliver (1989). An example of an item is "I will recommend this hotel [restaurant] to other people" (α = .87). Needless to say, higher scores indicated greater customer loyalty.

Analysis and Results

Confirmatory Factor Analyses of the Servqual Scale

Exhibits 1 and 2 show the mean values, standard deviations, internal consistencies, and correlations between all the study variables. Prior to testing the hypotheses of this study, we tested the basic structure of the Servqual scale for tourism. We ran a confirmatory factor analysis on the proposed five-factor RATER model (*Model P_1*). The results indicated that the five-factor model fit the data adequately, $\chi^2(125)$ = 956.24, p < .001; and we were able to conclude that the Servqual instrument, adapted to hotels and restaurants, includes the same five factors as the original instrument. The nonnormed fit index (NNFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) were above the criterion of .90; and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) was nearly so. Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was below .08 (GFI = .91, AGFI = .88, RMSEA = .076, NNFI = .92, IFI = .94, CFI = .94).

We further tested *Model P_1* by testing it against two competing models, and in the end we retained it as the best fitting model. One of the competing models, *Model P_2*, included three dimensions found in previous research work (Caruana 2002): a service quality dimension composed of reliability and tangibles; an intermediate service quality dimension: assurance and responsiveness; and empathy. The other competitor, *Model P_3*, was a one-factor model that did not discriminate between the different dimensions of service quality. We found a statistically significant difference between *Model P_1* and the two alternative models, thus indicating that the proposed *Model P_1* represents the structure of the data best: *Model P_2 – Model P_1*: $\Delta\chi^2(7)$ = 907.33, p < .001; and *Model P_3 – Model P_1*: $\Delta\chi^2(9)$ = 2,673.19, p < .001.

Hotels vs. restaurants? We conducted separate confirmatory factor analyses for the hotel responses and for the restaurant data. The fit indices of the two separate analyses showed that the Servqual model was robust for both samples, for hotels, $\chi^2(5)$ = 32.76, p < .001; for restaurants, $\chi^2(5)$ = 21.350, p < .001. Furthermore, we found no significant effects due to gender.

Exhibit 1:

Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistencies (Cronbach's α), and Correlations between Variables in Hotels (*N* = 586)

	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Reliability	6.15	0.93	.84	—					
2. Responsiveness	6.16	0.92	.89	.60**	—				
3. Assurance	5.87	0.96	.82	.58**	.69**	—			
4. Empathy	5.38	1.15	.89	.53**	.58**	.63**	—		
5. Tangibles	5.58	1.14	.78	.50**	.43**	.49**	.52**	—	
6. Positive affect	5.68	1.14	.91	.54**	.53**	.54**	.57**	.55**	—
7. Loyalty	5.74	1.27	.86	.57**	.53**	.56**	.56**	.63**	.73*

*p < .05. ***p* < .01.

Exhibit 2:

Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistencies (Cronbach's α), and Correlations between Variables in Restaurants (*N* = 571)

	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Reliability	6.10	0.95	.78	—					
2. Responsiveness	6.17	0.89	.91	.64**	—				
3. Assurance	5.91	0.94	.80	.66**	.68**	—			
4. Empathy	5.46	1.14	.89	.55**	.55**	.66**	—		
5. Tangibles	5.75	1.05	.79	.48**	.45**	.48**	.49**	—	
6. Positive affect	5.54	1.18	.92	.54**	.47**	.49**	.51**	.51**	—
7. Loyalty	5.87	1.27	.88	.50**	.41**	.44**	.46**	.57**	.71*

*p < .05. ***p* < .01.

Testing Hypotheses

We checked the criteria for mediation to test the hypotheses (Baron and Kenny 1986) using two models, a direct model (M_1) and an indirect model (M_2). To establish the mediation effect of emotion in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, the following conditions must hold. First, in the direct relationship model *(Model M_1)*, service quality must have a positive effect on the loyalty dimension. Second, in the indirect relationship model *(Model M_2)*, by contrast, service quality must have a meaningful effect on customers' positive affective response, and the customers' positive affective response must have a meaningful effect on customer loyalty. Finally, the effect of service quality on the loyalty dimension must be less strong in *Model M_2* than in *Model M_1*.

These conditions were tested by assessing the two different models separately on the hotels and restaurants by means of multigroup analyses to simultaneously test the mediating role of customers' positive affective response in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty. We also were able to compare the invariance of the effects between hotels and restaurants, which constitutes our test of whether the loyalty model applies to both groups. To

review, *Model M_1* comprises the direct relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, while *Model M_2* comprises the mediation of customers' positive affective response between service quality and customer loyalty. We compared both of these to a null model.

Both the models showed a good fit to the data: *Model M_1*: $\chi^2(52) = 349.428$, $p < .001$, GFI = .93, AGFI = .89, RMSEA = .07, NNFI = .96, IFI = .96, CFI = .94; *Model M_2*: $\chi^2(102) = 475.007$, $p < .001$, GFI = .93, AGFI = .90, RMSEA = .06, NNFI = .95, IFI = .96, CFI = .95. We could reject the null model, because its goodness of fit was far below that of the two models and its root mean square error was high, $\chi^2(132) = 10,790.734$, $p < .001$, GFI = .23, AGFI = .92, RMSEA = .26.

Regarding possible differences of the hotel and restaurant models, we could test the invariance of the proposed indirect model (*Model M_2*) for both samples. We compared the fit of a constrained version of the model (*Model M_2* [c]), in which targeted estimates were constrained to be equal to that of the unconstrained model (*Model M_2*) for both types of establishments (see Exhibit 3). The results showed that there were no significant differences between the two samples (see Exhibit 4). Hence, although factor loadings are slightly different between hotels and

Multiple Group Analyses (MGA) of the Mediator Model Including Hotel Customers (*n* = 586) and Restaurant Customers (*n* = 571) Simultaneously

	χ2	df	p	GFI	RMSEA	NFI	AGFI	NNFI	CFI	Δχ²	Δdf
Model 2	475.00	102	.00	.93	.06	.96	.96	.95	.96		
Model 2	475.00	102	.00	.93	.06	.96	.96	.95	.96	Model 2 – Model 2 = 0	0
Null model	10,790.73	132	.00	.23	.26						

Note: χ² = chi-square; *df* = degrees of freedom; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; NFI = normed fit index; NNFI = nonnormed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; Model 2 = mediator model (freely estimated); Model 2 = fully constrained model.

Exhibit 4:
Results of the Indirect Relationship Model (Model 2) of Customers: Hotels (*n* = 586)/Restaurants (*n* = 571) Simultaneously
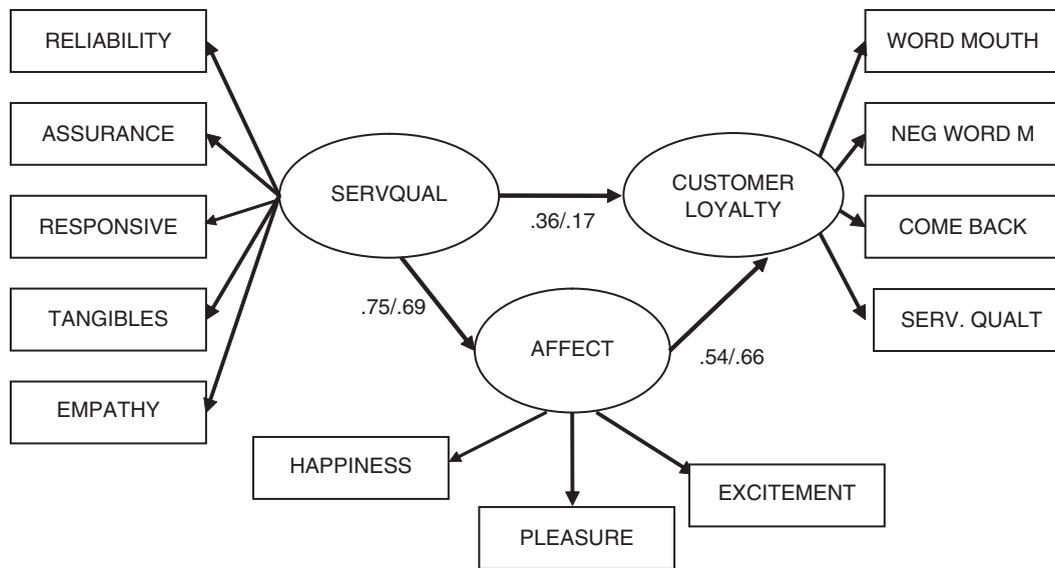
restaurants, the model was robust, stable, and invariant between the restaurants and the hotels.

Based on the relationships between the constructs shown in these models, we can conclude that the hypotheses are confirmed. First of all, there was a strong significant relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in *Model M*$_1$ in both hotels (γ = .76, *p* < .001) and restaurants (γ = .62, *p* < .001). This finding confirmed hypothesis 1, which proposed that customer perceptions of service quality would be positively related to customer loyalty toward hotels and restaurants, and fulfills the first criterion of the mediation construct.

In *Model M*$_2$, the relationship between service quality and customers' positive affective response was significant in hotels (γ = .75, *p* < .001) and restaurants (γ = .69, *p* < .001). These results confirmed hypothesis 2, which proposed that customer perceptions of service quality would be positively

related to the positive affective response that customers feel as a consequence of the service they receive. Thus, the second criterion for mediation is met.

Turning to the third criterion for mediation, the relationship between customers' positive affective response and customer loyalty was positive and significant in hotels (β = .54, *p* < .001) and in restaurants (β = .66, *p* < .001). This confirms hypothesis 3, which proposed that customers' positive affective response would be positively related to customer loyalty toward hotels and restaurants, and establishes the third criterion for mediation.

Finally, the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in *Model M*$_2$ was simultaneously significant (γ = .36, *p* < .001) in hotels and (γ = .17, *p* < .001) in restaurants, even though the factor loading scores were weaker than in *Model M*$_1$ (in hotels [γ = .76, *p* < .001] and in

restaurants [$\gamma = .62$, $p < .001$]) because of the presence of customers' positive affective responses. This feature is in agreement with the fourth mediation premise, but we need another test to confirm hypothesis 4. We used the Sobel test (1982) to determine whether the mediating role of customers' positive affective response has a significant influence between service quality and customer loyalty in hotels and restaurants. This depends on the unstandardized regression coefficient between the constructs' paths and their standard errors in both relationships. The results showed that the Sobel test value (t) was significant in both hotels ($t = 7.36$, $p < .001$) and restaurants ($t = 8.48$, $p < .001$). Hence, the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty became substantially weaker with the presence of customers' positive affective response in both samples—demonstrating the critical role of affect in the relationship between quality and loyalty. Hypothesis 4 is confirmed because all criteria of the mediation relationship premises were met.

Discussion

Previous studies showed that, separately, customers' cognitions and affections play an important role in maintaining customer loyalty (Wong and Sohal 2003). However, the two do not appear to have previously been tested together before our study. We found that 70 percent of the variance of loyalty intentions can be explained by customers' evaluations of service quality and positive affective responses. Moreover, the main findings of this study confirm that a positive opinion of a hotel or restaurant's service seems to induce positive affective responses which increase loyalty intentions.

This study identifies the main predictors of customer loyalty. In relation to the cognitive perceptions of hotel and restaurant service, our results showed that there is a positive relationship between customers' high evaluations of the quality of the service provided and their loyalty intentions. When employees provided good service quality, the customers' intention to come back to this establishment grew (confirming Lam et al. 2004). Thus, customer cognitions are a key factor for creating loyal customers in hotel and restaurant settings. Additionally, the results of this study showed that the SERVQUAL scale is robust after having been adapted to hotels and restaurants and that it keeps its dimensional structure in both settings (as is also true for theme parks, tour operators, and dental services, for instance; Atilgan, Akinci, and Aksoy 2003).

Furthermore, this study found that customers who have a high perception of service quality also display positive affective responses. During service encounters, customers experience positive feelings to a greater or lesser extent depending on the quality of the service provided (as also found in Price, Arnould, and Deibler 1994). Customers feel happier, for example, when employees show customers understanding and comprehension. This highlights the importance of the role played by customer-oriented restaurant and hotel workers.

At the same time, this study has found that positive affect is also an important antecedent of customer loyalty. Although some researchers have previously highlighted the fact that customers' affective response could influence loyalty, this is the first field test we know of that assesses the role of customers' positive emotions on loyalty. We asked the customers about their purely positive affective responses fulfilled during service encounters, such as pleasure, happiness, and enthusiasm, with the goal of clarifying the specific role of affective responses in customer loyalty. These findings support the premise that strong positive affective responses are complementary to measuring the cognitive evaluations of customers' attitudes (Dubé and Schmitt 1991). We must note that positive affective responses were only partial mediators between service quality and loyalty intentions, but the fact remains that emotions influence guests' evaluations of hotel and restaurant service quality. This reinforces laboratory studies about intentions to repeat product purchase (e.g., Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes 2002).

This study also confirms the idea that customer loyalty follows a cognitive-affective-conative process (Oliver 1999). This process starts with the customers' evaluation of the quality of the service received, which involves taking into account certain tangible features like the reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy of the service. In an intervening step, the customer must have a positive affective response, such as pleasure, happiness, and enthusiasm, which will influence the customers' attitude to recommend this establishment and to come back to it. So even though the customers' evaluations of service quality are an important element for generating loyalty, customers' positive affective responses cement that likelihood of loyalty and the resulting actions.

Because it takes into account both customer cognitions and also positive affective responses, this study combines two different approaches to loyalty found in existing literature: that is, cognitive-loyalty relationships and affective-loyalty relationships. We field tested this theoretical model separately for restaurants and in hotels to confirm that the same process occurs in both types of establishment.

Limitations and Practical Implications

A key limitation of this study is that we used self-report questionnaires for all three key variables, that is, service quality, positive affective response, and loyalty intentions. As a consequence, this study may be subject to common method variance. Our methodology is similar to that of other studies on human behavior that rely on self-reports simply because

getting information about internal states such as evaluations, affective responses, and intentions is difficult using other measurement methods (Spector 2006). However, future studies should try to collect information from different sources to avoid the mono-method measurement limitation.

We must also point out that this study does not report causality, due to its cross-sectional design. To validate these findings, a longitudinal study would be needed to verify whether customer satisfaction and affect at one time results in loyalty at another time. For instance, we did not measure whether these same customers came back to the hotels and restaurants. An interesting idea for future studies would be to check that customers are already loyal customers or whether they have the intention of becoming loyal customers, but still do not display this behavior. Moreover, it would be important to study which service quality features are the most important for inducing customers' positive responses and whether there is any difference among several population segments.

Although we do not claim causality, companies can still focus their efforts on making their customers think and feel positively about their services. There are two elements to such a strategy.

First, hotels and restaurants should ensure high-quality service. Customer feedback methods can be used as tools to enhance service quality, and hotels and restaurants should improve both tangible and intangible features constantly, since both of these exert an influence on customer loyalty intentions.

Second, efforts to induce positive affective responses in customers could open up a substantial distance with competitors, because we know that customers' positive emotions are associated with loyalty. The challenge here is that each customer will react and be influenced in a different way. This means that customer-oriented workers and their performance play a key role. One study has suggested that workers should be oriented to extrarole performance to induce positive affective responses (Price, Arnould, and Deibler 1994).

In summary, this study shows the importance of customers' emotions in developing customer loyalty in restaurants and hotels. While we cannot assert a specific causal mechanism, we know that service quality presents a stronger relationship with customer loyalty in hotels and restaurants when it is mediated by positive customer emotions. Consequently, we suggest that the customers' affective response could make all the difference in competitive markets.

Disclosures

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Bios

Esther Gracia, Ph.D., is on the faculty of psychology at the Universidad de Valencia (Esther.Gracia@uv.es). **Arnold B. Bakker**, Ph.D., is on the faculty of the Institute of Psychology, Dept. of Work and Organizational Psychology, at Erasmus University Rotterdam (bakker@fsw.eur.nl). **Rosa M. Grau**, Ph.D., is on the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Dept. of Work Psychology, at Universitat Jaume I (rgrau@psi.uji.es).