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Article

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Understanding customer experiences insights in boutique hotels: a case study from Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Boutique hotels, which belong to the hospitality sector, hold significance for guests seeking new experiences. Guests are interested in staying and spending money on boutique hotels that create memorable experiences. Based on previous studies in the boutique hotel industry, empirical studies have revealed several relationships without drawing upon stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory. This study aims to fill an important gap by comprehensively examining the effects of the 4Es (educational, entertainment, esthetic, and escapist experiences) in the boutique hotel sector—along with the addition of memorable experience—with the assumption that ME powerfully generates an effect in eliciting positive emotions in customers. As a result, these positive emotions are expected to significantly influence customer loyalty intentions. Data were collected from Thai customers who had experiences with boutique hotels across four regions in Thailand: northern, northeastern, central, and southern. The researchers identified 12 boutique hotels, gathered data by selecting three hotels per region, and administered 50 questionnaires for each selected hotel. A total of 395 usable samples were then analyzed through structural equation modeling via SmartPLS. The findings enhance the theoretical understanding by making four contributions to the customer experiential concept in tourism and hospitality, providing valuable insights for both the management team and the operational staff of boutique hotel marketers.

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SUBJECTS

Hospitality; Hospitality Management; Hotel Management; The Hospitality Industry

1. Introduction

In recent years, consumption has drastically changed compared with how customers were in the past (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). Marketing researchers agree that, rather aiming only for functional attributes and quality of products, consumers seek unique, memorable, and extraordinary experiences, which together create a holistic and lasting experience on a personal level (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Similarly, in the hospitality context, customers regard hotels not only as places for rest but also as places for experience consumption (Ghaderi et al., 2020). When guests have positive, unique, and engaging experiences during their stay, they develop a deeper attachment to property (Altinay et al., 2023; Casalo et al., 2021). Positive emotions lead to increased guest loyalty, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Birgit, 2019). Experiences have become the fastest-growing area in the global economy, making the concept of experience a key construct in marketing (Kim, 2010). This shift has also placed experiences at the forefront of staging and delivering memorable moments (Oh et al., 2007).

Boutique hotels can be considered heritage hotels (Ghaderi et al., 2020), representing a unique lodging experience focusing on stylish uniqueness, cool and elevated service standards, and the attention of individual guests (Ghaderi et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2013; Xiang et al., 2022). In recent years, the rise of the boutique and lifestyle hotel sector in the hospitality industry has received special attention (Jones et al., 2013). Boutique hotels are currently a large unit in the hospitality segment (Ghaderi et al., 2020); in 2022,

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for example, the value estimation of the boutique hotel market is \$93.37 billion, and by 2023, it is predicted to reach \$115.80 billion, with a CAGR of 6.7% from 2022 to 2032 (Future Market Insights, 2023).

Several scholars have employed the customer experiences variable to predict customer behavior in the context of tourism and hospitality, such as in wine tourism (Thanh & Kirova, 2018), cruise tourism (Hosany & Witham, 2010), and resort hotels (Ali et al., 2014). Typically, these studies adopted the 4Es model of the experience economy, which was developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Oh et al. (2007). This model includes the 4Es of educational, esthetic, entertainment, and escapist experiences, which measure customer experiences based on the degree of customer involvement and connection between the customer and their surroundings (Ali et al., 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010).

However, studies have primarily focused on broader tourism sectors, and there is a notable concern regarding the lack of empirical testing of the 4Es concept when it is incorporated with memorable experiences (ME) in boutique hotel tourism (Ali et al., 2014). For example, Veloso and Gomez-Suarez (2023) indicated that ME often act as mediators, influencing affective or hedonic outcomes. In addition, Hung et al. (2016) revealed that creative experiences and memorability are related to revisit intentions in active tourism activities. Similarly, Sitepu et al. (2020) argued that revisit intentions are affected by tourist satisfaction, tourist decisions, and the perceived experience. Furthermore, Rismawati et al. (2021) presented ME as independent variables leading to tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions.

Therefore, tourists' perceptions of each dimension may differ in different contexts (Şeker & Kamil, 2022), along with a call for additional empirical support to better understand boutique hotel consumers (Ali et al., 2014; Ghaderi et al., 2020; Lee & Chhabra, 2015; Pourabedin et al., 2022; Quadri-Felitti et al., 2022). In addition, the role that ME play in influencing positive emotions and customer loyalty within this context remains underexplored (Ali et al., 2014; Rahimian et al., 2021). Therefore, recent research has highlighted the importance of studying ME in tourism (Rahimian et al., 2021; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018) because these positive experiences can potentially lead to positive emotions, which, in turn, foster customer loyalty.

The present study aims to fill an important gap by comprehensively examining the effects of the 4Es in the boutique hotel sector, along with the addition of ME, in eliciting positive emotions in customers. These positive emotions are expected to significantly influence customer loyalty intentions. The empirical evidence in the current study bridges the gap between theory and practice in the context of boutique hotels. By integrating the 4Es model with ME, the current study extends the theoretical framework of the experience economy; it addresses the lack of empirical testing in boutique hotels, offering new insights into how these establishments can enhance customer experiences. Additionally, the findings provide practical contributions for boutique hotel marketers and managers, helping them create and deliver engaging experiences that foster positive emotions, increase loyalty, and generate positive word of mouth—key factors in the competitive boutique hotel market.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) developed stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory by studying consumer behavior. The stimuli are external factors, such as products, services, advertising, environments, events resulting from the environment, or experiences that influence individual consumer behavior (Casaló et al., 2021; Horng & Hsu, 2021; Huang, 2012; Melo et al., 2022; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023). The organism is consumers' internal evaluation, which mediates the impact of particular stimuli on responses (Casaló et al., 2021). Evaluation consists of both the cognitive and affective aspects, which refer to the use of reasons and emotions, respectively (Altınay et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2020). A response is a consumer's reaction to stimulus (li), which results in either positive or negative behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Zhu et al., 2020). For example, a positive stimulus may result in a positive emotional response, which, in turn, can lead to favorable consumer behavior, such as purchasing a product or recommending a service (e.g. Kim & Lennon, 2013).

This model is used for explaining consumer behavior based on inputs (stimulus), processes (organism), and outputs (response), and it is normally used to study the relationship between stimulus and response,

with the organism serving as a mediator. It is a valuable framework for understanding and influencing consumer behavior as well as for improving user experiences in various settings, including hotels, hospitals, retail stores, and online environments (Altinay et al., 2023; Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023; Saricam, 2023). In the context of boutique hotels, the current study applies the model to examine how customer experiences (stimuli) can trigger positive emotions in customers (organisms), which may lead to their loyalty being the final response.

2.2. Customer experiences as stimuli

Customer experience is defined as the events in which an individual consumer experiences the senses of enjoyment and engagement that are worth remembering (Oh et al., 2007; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Typically, as proposed by Oh et al. (2007), the four dimensions of the experience model, which is based on the experience economy of Pine and Gilmore (1998), provide a theoretical foundation for comprehending customer experience. The first dimension—educational experience—refers to an engagement with and stimulation of the consumer's mind to prompt new learning (Hosany & Witham, 2010), such as painting classes, photography classes, or baking sessions. The second dimension—entertainment experience—refers to the sense of entertainment arising from passively observing interior/exterior decoration and the atmosphere and passively observing others performing and/or doing certain activities, which includes enjoying music and reading for pleasure at particular destinations (Ali et al., 2014). The third dimension—esthetic experience—refers to a way in which consumers interpret their physical environment by passively engaging with the sensual environment around them (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Melo et al., 2022; Thanh & Kirova, 2018), such as enjoying the atmosphere of the beauty of hotels (Ali et al., 2014). The fourth dimension—escapist experience—refers to an active search for different experiences from what customers have daily (Thanh & Kirova, 2018) or an attempt to escape everyday life during their holidays by staying at resort hotels that are peaceful and silent, for example (Ali et al., 2014).

Several previous studies have revealed that experiences can be categorized as stimuli (S), which trigger changes in people's internal or organismic states (O). For example, Şahin and Kılıçlar (2023) studied gastronomic experiences as stimuli that trigger food consumption emotions, which, in turn, lead to behavioral intention responses.

2.3. Positive emotion as an organism

Positive emotions refer to positive feelings or moods such as joy, happiness, warmth, love, delight, and pleasure (Altinay et al., 2023; Casaló et al., 2021). Many scholars emphasize that positive emotions are critical variables in gaining a deeper understanding of users' experiences (Huang et al., 2013). For example, Yi and Jai (2020) referenced Rook and Gardner's (1993) study, which highlights that customers with more positive emotions have a greater potential for impulsive buying because they feel less restrained. This aligns with the findings of Altinay et al. (2023), who reported that, in hospitals, patients' positive emotions during their stay positively influence their intention to recommend the hospital.

Positive emotions frequently serve as mediators between stimuli and customer behaviors across various contexts, including hotels and restaurants (Gracia et al., 2011; Song & Qu, 2017), marketing (Ali et al., 2023), and marine tourism (Suryawan et al., 2024). Thus, researchers suggest that positive emotions will also be found in boutique hotels, particularly as customers engage in educational activities such as painting classes, handcraft sessions, and photography classes; entertainment activities, such as watching nightly shows or listening to live music bands (Hosany & Witham, 2010); esthetic activities, such as observing attractive servicescapes or ambiances in the hotel and experiencing the breathtaking scenery of surrounding falls (Ali et al., 2014); and escapist activities, such as escaping their daily routines and immersing themselves in a different world for a short period.

In line with previous studies that have employed the 4Es model to investigate consumer behaviors in various contexts, such as wine tourism (Thanh & Kirova, 2018), cruise tourism (Hosany & Witham, 2010), and resort hotels (Ali et al., 2014), there is a noticeable gap in the application of the 4Es model in the boutique hotel context. Despite its significance and substantial revenue generation for the tourism and hospitality sectors (Future Market Insights, 2023), research on the 4Es in boutique hotels remains limited

(Ali et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential to explore whether customers' perceptions of each dimension of the 4Es in boutique hotels differ from those in other contexts (Şeker & Kamil, 2022).

The authors believe that the more positively customers experience the 4Es (S), the more positive emotions (O) they will have toward boutique hotels. Thus, the authors posit the following hypotheses to test in this context:

- H1: Educational experience positively affects positive emotion.
- H2: Entertainment experience positively affects positive emotion.
- H3: Esthetic experience positively affects positive emotion.
- H4: Escapist experience positively affects positive emotion.

In addition to the 4Es, ME are critical (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). A ME is defined as an event, situation, or interaction that leaves a lasting and vivid impression in a person's memory. It stands out as significant or emotionally impactful, making it easy for individuals to recall and reflect upon (Smith, 2020). However, few studies have investigated ME as an independent variable. Veloso and Gomez-Suarez (2023) revealed that ME often act as mediators, influencing affective or hedonic outcomes. Previous studies, such as those by Rismawati et al. (2021), have suggested that ME can also serve as independent variables, leading to tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions. Additionally, Hung et al. (2016) and Sitepu et al. (2020) demonstrated that ME influence cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

The dimensions of ME, such as hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge, align well with the unique characteristics of boutique hotels; these hotels feature themed environments and high-level services, making them well suited to fostering ME. However, tourism service providers are not the only ones responsible for creating these experiences; they also play a role in setting up the environments that enable tourists to create their own ME (Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Recognizing the need for further exploration, several researchers have called for more empirical studies on ME, particularly in the boutique hotel sector (Ghaderi et al., 2020; Lee & Chhabra, 2015). Given the distinctive characteristics of boutique hotels and the significant impact of ME on cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, it is essential to include ME as a variable. Although the 4Es framework provides a strong foundation for understanding customer experiences, it does not fully capture the depth of ME. By integrating ME variable, the current study can offer a more comprehensive analysis of customer behavior in boutique hotels and provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to positive customer emotions and loyalty.

To achieve this goal, the current study adopts the framework proposed by Oh et al. (2007), explores the influence of educational, entertainment, esthetic, and escapist experiences, and introduces ME within the context of boutique hotels. The primary objective is to examine the relationships among these various experiences and understand their impact on the positive emotions and behavior of customers. Therefore, the researchers propose the following hypothesis:

- H5: ME positively affects positive emotion.

2.4. Customer loyalty as a response

Most businesses or organizations want customers to repurchase or spread brand reputation to grow businesses sustainably. These two behaviors are called customer loyalty (Wolter et al., 2017). Satisfied customers tend to recommend a particular product/service/brand/destination to others and repurchase/revisit the product/service/brand/destination (Brakus et al., 2009; Chen & Phou, 2013; Supriyanto et al., 2021).

Previous studies have shown that positive emotional reactions can positively impact behavioral intentions (Altinay et al., 2023; Casaló et al., 2021), such as the intention to recommend and intention to revisit/repurchase. For example, Gracia et al. (2011) reported that customers' positive affective responses particularly serve to enhance customer loyalty in hotel and restaurant contexts. This finding echoes the

study of Bock et al. (2016), which revealed how emotions, specifically gratitude, can contribute to customization's positive effect on trust and, later, loyalty. It is also in line with, Birgit (2019), who studied the role of positive customer emotions and satisfaction by exploring positive emotions evoked by perceiving a friendly environment; the researcher posited that customer satisfaction and loyalty are outcome variables derived from these emotions.

Based on the previous section, understanding the customer experience in boutique hotels can help hotel managers and businesses emphasize the significant components leading to consumer loyalty. Several previous studies in hospitality and tourism investigated the influence of the 4Es model on guest satisfaction and intentions to revisit. While the current study has been extended, the conceptual model includes ME in the 4Es concept. The present study demonstrates the relationship between a customer's experience and positive emotions, which are predictors of customer loyalty intention, such as behavioral intention, intention to revisit, and intention to recommend (Hossain et al., 2023; Rajadurai et al., 2023)

Regarding the 4Es and ME as stimuli (Stimuli-S), which trigger customer emotions, the researchers believe that the more customers feel positive emotions—an individual process (Organism-O) during their stay in a boutique hotel—the more likely they are to exhibit loyalty, which is a response behavior (Response-R) to the hotel, hence leading to the following hypothesis:

H6: Positive emotions positively affect customer loyalty.

A theoretical framework for the current study is proposed, as shown in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The present study was conducted at several boutique hotels in four regions (northern, northeastern, central, and southern) of Thailand. Research on hotel guests was based mainly on convenience of sampling, which refers to a sampling technique employed for obtaining research units (or persons) that are the most conveniently accessible (Zikmund et al., 2013). Convenience sampling was employed by

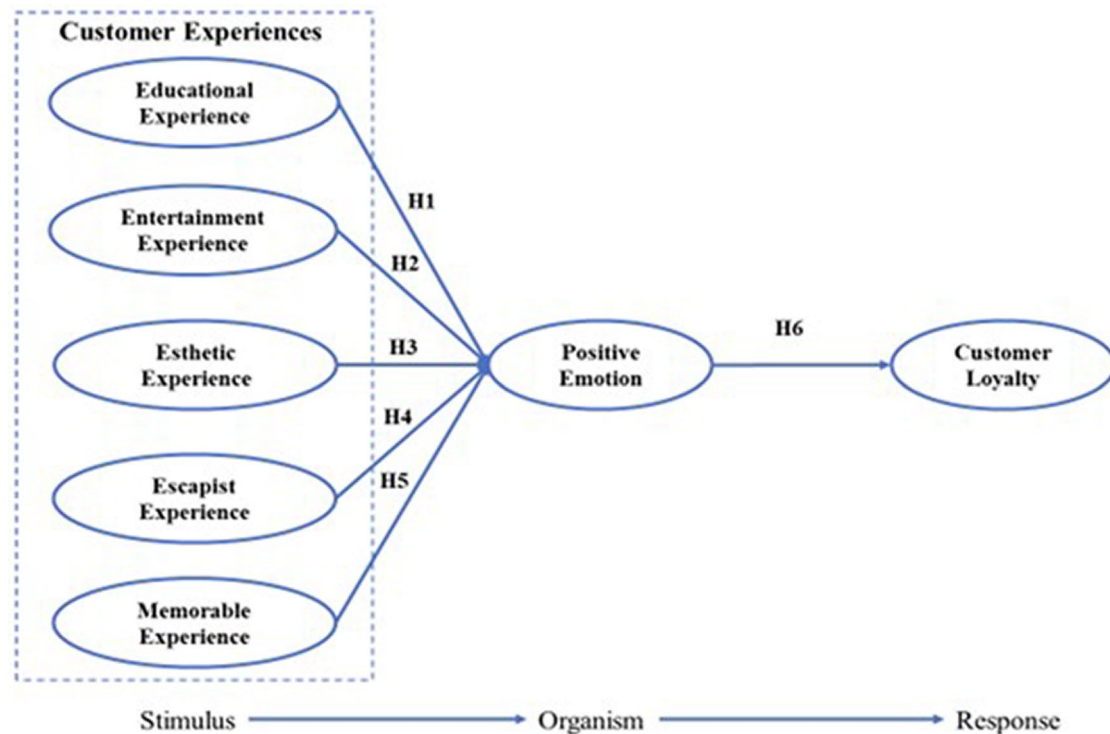


Figure 1. The Proposed Conceptual Model.

selecting hotel guests who are readily available, reducing the time and effort required for more complex sampling methods. In addition, convenience sampling can be suitable for increasing initial insights and allowing scholars to collect data that can inform more rigorous future studies (Abowitz & Toole, 2010; Doebel & Frank, 2022).

The researchers identified 12 boutique hotels, gathered data by selecting three hotels per region, and administered 50 questionnaires for each hotel. The main criterion of selecting the hotels was Thai boutique hotels. For example, Thai boutique hotels were a size of fewer than 50 rooms, a style of hotel providing traditional Thai décor, such as heritage hotels (Ghaderi et al., 2020), a unique lodging experience that focuses on stylish uniqueness, relaxed and elevated service standards, and the attention of individual guests (Ghaderi et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2022), and hotel locations located within the four regions of Thailand, hence ensuring representation from various regions (e.g. Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Bangkok, and Phuket) to capture regional variations.

The research team approached these hotels, explaining the research objectives to managers and guests. Guests willing to participate were invited to complete the questionnaire upon preparing to depart from the hotel. To ensure that the respondents had experienced a boutique hotel stay, the research team confirmed this before guests filled out the questionnaire. A total of 600 questionnaires with consent forms were distributed to guests during their check-out in the lobby of 12 boutique hotels. Finally, 395 usable responses were obtained from April to May 2023, yielding a response rate of 65.8%.

3.2. Measurement development

The survey questionnaires were created by adopting measurement constructs from previous studies, which were measured on a 5-point Likert scale by assigning (1) as 'strongly disagree' and (5) as 'strongly agree'. Education experience, entertainment experience, esthetic experience, and escapist experience were measured via 13 items (Ali et al., 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh et al., 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013; Thanh & Kirova, 2018) representing the essential experiences suitable for measurement in the context of hotels. ME was assessed with five items (Kim et al., 2012; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018). Positive emotion was assessed with three items (Altinay et al., 2023; Casaló et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020; Gezhi & Xiang, 2022; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and customer loyalty was assessed via three items (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013).

First, the questionnaire was designed in the Thai language because the respondents were Thai customers in boutique hotels. In the Thai version, the current study used the suggested forward and backward translation process (Van de Vijver & Leung, 2000). The questionnaire was translated into English by two fluent English experts. Next, to avoid errors, the experts used semantics matching, discrepancy correction, and forward and backward translation matching to ensure that the Thai version was consistent with the English version. Before the questionnaire was used, the Thai and English versions were given to the hospitality and tourism experts. The instrument was revised and refined for the finalized draft, and three sections were included. Thirty guests in boutique hotels were asked to respond to the scale for pilot testing. The present study submitted ethics in Humans under the entitled 'Transformational model of a ME for customer loyalty in boutique resort hotels in Thailand' (HE663078). This research was reviewed by the Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee for Human Research based on the Belmont Report and the Good Clinical Practice (GCP) in Social and Behavioral Research.

The present study employed partial least squares–structural equation modeling (PLS–SEM) to predict and explore the relationships between variables rather than confirm established theories. Because the present study aims to develop and test a new theoretical model and explore complex relationships in the hospitality and tourism fields, PLS–SEM is more appropriate. Conversely, Covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (CB–SEM) would be appropriate for a confirmatory study to test the fit of a well-established theory or model. The analysis via PLS followed a three-step process. The initial part involved outer model evaluation, assessing the reliability of the employed measures. Convergent validity and discriminant validity were tested in this outer model evaluation. The second part was the inner model evaluation, which assessed the resilience of the constructed structural model. The final step

comprised hypothesis testing, wherein the study established a significance level of 5% (alpha) to assess the proposed hypotheses.

3.3. Data analysis and results

3.3.1. Sociodemographic profile

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic profile of the respondents. Approximately half of the sample was female (53.4%), followed by male (46.6%). In terms of generations, almost half of the samples are Gen Z (48.1%), followed by Gen Y (38.0%) and Gen X (13.9%). Most of the sample has a bachelor's degree (62.5%), followed by those who have a master's degree or higher (22.0%), secondary school (11.6%), and primary school (3.8%). Approximately 33% of the sample earns \$300 or less per month, 25% earn \$601 to \$900, approximately 15% earn \$300 to \$600 and \$901 to \$1,200, and approximately 10% earn more than \$200. The purposes of staying at boutique hotels are leisure/vacation (88.9%), visiting relatives or peers (5.3%), and business travel (5.1%), as mentioned in Table 1.

3.3.2. Measurement model/outer model

The present study analyzed the model via partial least squares (PLS) analysis with SmartPLS 4.0. Following the approach of Hair and Alamer (2022), the current study employed PLS-based SEM, which served as a strong basis for confirming theories and explaining the application of these theories. The present study adopted a two-stage analytical approach for SEM. First, the validity and reliability of the data were assessed, and second, the model was tested via partial least squares. The estimated values of R^2 were 0.71 and 0.60 (adjusted R^2 : 0.70, 0.59) for the measurement models of positive emotion and customer loyalty, respectively (Hair et al., 2014).

The present study initially assessed the factors of the estimated significance values of the 4Es (educational, entertaining, esthetic, and escapist experiences), along with ME, positive emotion, and customer loyalty. Table 2 shows that all estimated factor loading values are positive, indicating the significance of each parameter composing the formative constructs. Furthermore, the variance inflation factor (VIF) values could be lower than 5, indicating that multicollinearity is not a significant issue (Hair et al., 2021). Convergent validity for common factors such as positive emotion and customer loyalty have been developed because the average variance extracted (AVE) values and standardized loadings are more than 0.5. The composite reliability values for all common variables in the current study are greater than 0.6, confirming construct reliability (Hair et al., 2021).

For discriminant validity, Henseler, (2020) suggested that, when the HTMT ratio between two variables approaches the threshold of 0.90, it is necessary to further assess discriminant validity via the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loadings. If the indicators exhibit appropriate loadings, this could indicate that, despite the close relationship between constructs, they remain distinct as shown in Table 3.

Following discriminant validity guidance, the current study tested the discriminant validity via the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler, 2020). The results of the Fornell–Larcker analysis, as presented in Table 4, indicate that there were no issues with discriminant validity. The discriminant validity for the current study proved that the square root of the AVE of all the constructs was greater than the correlation with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the study respondents.

Variables	%	Variables	%
Gender		Monthly Income	
Male	46.6	Less than \$300	33.7
Female	53.4	\$300 to \$600	15.7
Generation		\$601 to \$900	24.3
Gen X	13.9	\$901 to \$1,200	15.7
Gen Y	38.0	More than \$1,200	10.6
Gen Z	48.1	Purpose of travelling	
Educational level		Leisure/Vacation	88.9
Primary School	3.8	Visiting Friends or Relatives	5.3
Secondary School	11.6	Business Travel	5.1
Bachelor Degree	62.5	Other	0.8
Master Degree or higher	22.0		

Table 2. The measurement model.

Constructs	Loading	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Education Experience (EDU)		3.64	0.85	0.87	0.92	0.80
I learned a lot during stay in this boutique hotel.	0.87					
This/The boutique hotel excited me to be curious and learn new things.	0.90					
I had an actual learning experience when I stayed at this boutique hotel.	0.92					
Entertainment Experience (ENT)		3.57	0.86	0.89	0.93	0.83
The boutique hotel provides entertaining activities.	0.90					
The boutique hotel has engaging activities as part of entertainment.	0.94					
This boutique hotel has fun activities/performances.	0.90					
Esthetics Experience (EST)		3.99	0.70	0.84	0.89	0.68
The boutique hotel is an attractive place to stay.	0.84					
The boutique hotel uses local products (art & craft) for service.	0.84					
The boutique hotel has unique but harmony decorated rooms.	0.82					
I felt a sense of beauty when I stayed at the boutique hotel.	0.82					
Escapist Experience (ESC)		4.01	0.67	0.80	0.88	0.71
I feel peaceful when I stayed at the boutique hotels.	0.79					
I feel fulfil when I stayed at the boutique hotels.	0.98					
I feel free when I stayed at the boutique hotels.	0.87					
Memories Experience (ME)		3.92	0.68	0.87	0.91	0.67
I had a good impression about this boutique hotel.	0.78					
I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience when I stayed at the boutique hotel.	0.82					
I had a unique experience when I stayed at the boutique hotel.	0.86					
This boutique hotels had outstanding service than other types of hotels.	0.76					
I really enjoyed during my stay at this boutique hotel.	0.89					
Positive Emotion (PE)		3.88	0.66	0.75	0.85	0.66
I am happy when staying in this boutique hotel.	0.82					
I feel a sense warmth when I stay in this boutique hotel.	0.83					
I feel like I am a special guest of the hotel.	0.77					
Customer Loyalty (CL)		4.03	0.70	0.85	0.91	0.78
I am willing to return to stay at the boutique hotel in the future.	0.9					
I will tell my friends and family good things about the boutique hotel.	0.89					
I will recommend the boutique hotel to friends and family to stay in the future.	0.86					

Notes: SD = Standard deviation, CR=Composite reliability, AVE=Average variance extracted.

Table 3. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT).

Constructs	EDU	ENT	EST	ESC	ME	PE	CL
EDU							
ENT	0.60						
EST	0.60	0.43					
ESC	0.60	0.40	0.71				
ME	0.76	0.49	0.76	0.81			
PE	0.75	0.56	0.73	0.90	0.84		
CL	0.55	0.46	0.69	0.84	0.76	0.89	

Notes: EDU=Education experience, ENT=Entertainment experience, EST=Esthetics experience, ESC=Escapist experience, ME=Memorable experience, PE=Positive emotion, and CL=Customer loyalty.

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Constructs	EDU	ENT	EST	ESC	ME	PE	CL
EDU	0.90						
ENT	0.54	0.91					
EST	0.52	0.39	0.83				
ESC	0.52	0.35	0.60	0.85			
ME	0.67	0.44	0.66	0.68	0.82		
PE	0.65	0.49	0.63	0.75	0.74	0.82	
CL	0.48	0.40	0.60	0.69	0.67	0.77	0.88

The next test for discriminant validity involved examining cross-loadings ranging from 0.77 to 0.94 (Hair et al., 2021). The cross-loadings table (see Table A1 in the Appendix) suggests that all indicators loaded most strongly on their respective constructs. This finding indicates that there were no discriminant validity issues and that further analysis could be carried out.

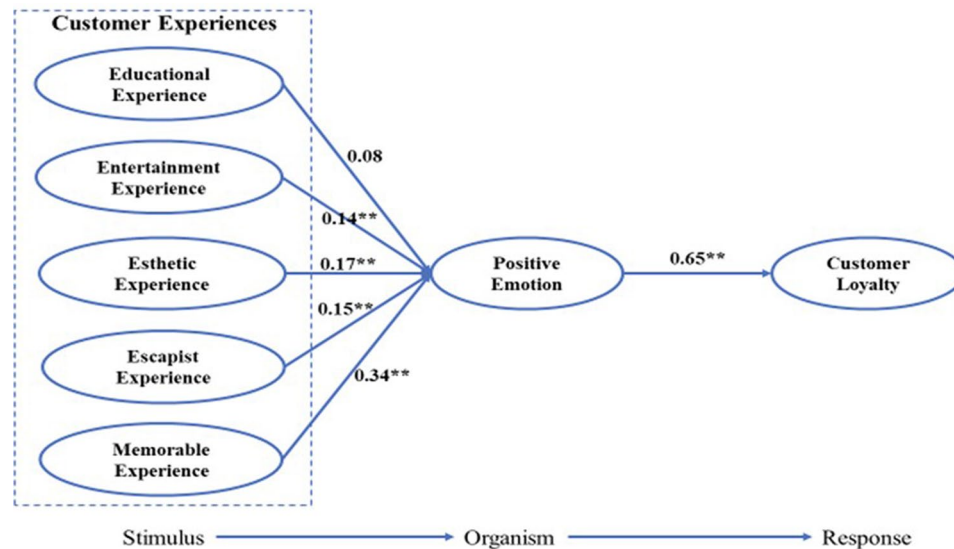
3.3.3. Path analysis/hypothesis testing/inner model

The present study used bootstrapping to evaluate the structural model (inner model) after testing the measurement model (outer model). The present study conducted tests to check data normality for SEM,

Table 5. Hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis testing	Path coefficient	t-Value	Results
H1 Educational experience positively affects positive emotions.	0.08	1.66	Not supported
H2 Entertainment experience positively affects positive emotions.	0.14	3.38**	Supported
H3 Esthetic experience positively affects positive emotions.	0.17	3.49**	Supported
H4 Escapist experience positively affects positive emotions.	0.15	3.46**	Supported
H5 Memorable experience positively affects positive emotions.	0.34	6.83**	Supported
H6 Positive emotions positively affect customer loyalty	0.65	25.35**	Supported

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

**Figure 2.** The result of structural equation modeling.

and the results revealed skewness statistics ranging from -0.47 to 0.30 and kurtosis statistics from -0.67 to 0.19. According to Kline (2023), our data met the criterion of not exceeding 2 for these values, indicating a normal distribution. In terms of multicollinearity, the highest VIF was 2.83, which is less than 3 (Kock & Lynn, 2012), indicating a low correlation among predictors and no multicollinearity problem. The quality of the model was assessed via the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), which yielded a value of 0.071, meeting the recommended criteria and indicating a model with good fit (Hair et al., 2014).

The structural model results are presented in Table 5. All the hypotheses are supported, except for one path: the relationship between educational experience and positive emotion. Figure 2 graphically displays the beta coefficients among the paths, revealing that ME had the greatest impact on positive emotion ($\beta=0.34$, $p<0.01$), followed by Esthetic ($\beta=0.17$, $p<0.01$), escapist ($\beta=0.15$, $p<0.01$), and entertainment ($\beta=0.14$, $p<0.01$) experiences. The last path shows that positive emotion positively influenced customer loyalty ($\beta=0.65$, $p<0.01$). The findings of the current study provide significant evidence that customer experiences influence positive emotions, leading to increased customer loyalty in the field of boutique hotels.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Building on the S-O-R theory, our initial hypothesis posits that the experiences developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Oh et al. (2007) serve as stimuli that trigger internal processes within individual customers, such as positive emotions. These, in turn, lead to desired business responses, including customer loyalty. The present study applied the 4Es model and an additional experience, ME, to examine their effects on positive customer emotions and subsequent customer loyalty. This investigation has addressed a call for further research into the importance of these environmental experiences in shaping customer behaviors in boutique hotels. Our findings revealed significant positive relationships, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies in various contexts, such as wine tourism (Thanh & Kirova, 2018), cruise tourism (Hosany & Witham, 2010), and resort hotel hospitality (Ali et al., 2014). However, there was one exception: the relationship between educational experience and positive emotion.

Positive emotions, such as being happy, warm, special, and satisfied, are evoked after the activities of boutique hotels have been experienced. Customers are likely to experience these emotions during their stay at hotels. For example, in entertainment experiences, customers feel happy when enjoying activities such as listening to music or leisurely reading at hotels (Ali et al., 2014). In esthetic experiences, customers feel special when passively engaging with a sensual environment, the atmosphere, or the beauty of the hotels (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). In escapist experiences, customers feel satisfied when they enjoy different experiences from their daily routines. In ME, customers feel warm because of things that customers receive, such as gaining a unique experience, outstanding and special service, and feelings of enjoyment during their stay at boutique hotels (Loureiro et al., 2020).

ME affect positive emotions the most, followed by esthetic experience, escapist experience, and entertainment experience. Interestingly, education experience does not significantly influence customers' positive emotions. In other words, learning new things or participating in knowledge-gaining activities while staying in a boutique hotel may not lead to positive emotions such as other kinds of experiences or other contexts. For example, in cruise and wine tourism, when consumers are in cruisers' tourism, customers are interested in learning new things during their cruise trip (Hosany & Witham, 2010). This is likely because cruises offer a variety of educational activities (Rungroueng & Monpanthong, 2023), such as learning from the head chef and culinary team about creating world-class flavors for all on board, taking unique sea-based sushi-making classes, gaining expertise in diamond and gemstone purchasing, participating in dance lessons or acquiring skills in casino gaming. This is similar to wine tourism, which involves wine tasting and wine-making classes for consumers (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Another possible reason is that customers have longer durations of stay on a cruise/ship, which in contrast to the shorter stay in boutique hotels, which means cruises must provide customers with opportunities to engage in various activities to fill their time. Additionally, the main purpose of almost 90% of the sample in the present study was for vacation and relaxation, so gaining new knowledge may not be their goal of choosing to stay at boutique hotels. In addition, the current study highlights the value of contributing to the literature by applying S-O-R theory to the context of boutique hotels. In terms of hospitality and tourism settings, boutique hotels need more attention in other contexts, such as cruise and wine tourism. The results revealed that memorable, esthetic, escapist, and entertainment experiences impacted customers' positive emotions and loyalty. On the other hand, education experience had an insignificant effect, as did other components in boutique hotels. Interestingly, this finding supported and highlighted the unique nature of customer expectations and behaviors in boutique hotels, where customers tend to focus on relaxation and distinct ambiance rather than learning or acquiring new knowledge. The findings indicate that the value of the impact of different types of experiences on customer emotions is context dependent. References to cruise and wine tourism illustrate the differences in serving customers who are staying longer, and a wider variety of educational activities enhance customer satisfaction (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013), whereas the boutique hotel concept focuses on relaxation and ME related to the short-term, immersive nature of their stay. Similarly, Radojevic et al. (2018) presented the context of urban business hotels similar to the boutique hotel experience in terms of personal and esthetically pleasing environments, and the educational experience of urban hotels was found to be insignificant in driving customer satisfaction. In contrast, Ali et al. (2014) and Walls et al. (2011) reported that guests focus on education experiences in resort hotels and luxury hotels. Therefore, the current study enhances this understanding by highlighting the importance of context in shaping the effectiveness of different experiential offerings, suggesting that boutique hotels should focus more on enhancing ME and esthetic experiences rather than educational experiences to foster customer loyalty.

5. Theoretical and practical implications

5.1. Theoretical contributions

The present study makes four theoretical contributions to the literature. First, the current study answers the call for additional empirical studies to better understand consumer experiences in the boutique hotel sector (Kim et al., 2006; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). In their study of customer satisfaction in the boutique hotel industry, Kim et al. (2006) revealed that more empirical research is needed to understand the specific factors influencing customer experiences and satisfaction in the market of boutique hotels. In

addition, McIntosh and Siggs (2005) called for future studies to explore how unique experiences and other components affect consumer behavior in boutique hotels.

The findings of the current study show that three of the 4Es of Pine and Gilmore (1999) model had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty. Additionally, a new experience, ME, which was added to the 4Es model, also had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, followed by esthetic, escapist, and entertainment experiences. However, educational experience had an insignificant effect on positive emotions in boutique hotels. The current study revealed another component that is more important than educational experience: MEd, which generate the most significant effect on customer loyalty in the boutique hotel context (Loureiro et al., 2020). The 4Es model may need to capture more experiences to drive consumer behavior in boutique hotels. These findings provide an understanding, expand the 4Es model, and can impact further studies and implementation within the hospitality and other service sectors by encouraging the exploration of additional experience dimensions within specific and different contexts (Ali et al., 2014; Hosany & Witham, 2010; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013; Thanh & Kirova, 2018).

Second, the current study contributes to the existing boutique hotel literature by investigating the relationships among the 4Es along with ME, positive emotion, and consumer loyalty. The findings show that positive emotions played an important mediating role between these customer experiences and customer loyalty, here corresponding with previous studies in the healthcare sector (Altinay et al., 2023) and restaurant sector (Yi & Jai, 2020). The findings highlight the importance of context influencing the experiential dimensions of consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2006; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). The results indicate that boutique hotel research findings may not apply to other hotels, thus encouraging more nuanced and context-specific research. This is a challenge for researchers to explore differently with consumers in diverse contexts, potentially leading to the development of new theoretical insights (Ali et al., 2014; Radojevic et al., 2018; Walls et al., 2011).

Third, the findings present a path that is incongruent with prior research (namely, the path between educational experience and positive emotions, a path that has been studied in different contexts, such as the B&B hotel context (Oh et al., 2007), marketing context (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013), wine tourism context (Thanh & Kirova, 2018), and cruise tourism context (Hosany & Witham, 2010)). Fourth, the current study has confirmed the S-O-R theory in boutique hotels by investigating different variables from those used in previous studies, specifically ME and positive emotions. The current study demonstrated that external inputs, such as experiences with the physical environment in each dimension—such as joining, seeing, watching, playing, and listening—in which guests engage during their stay in a boutique hotel (the 4Es and ME) are considered stimuli. This, in turn, leads guests/consumers to experience positive emotions as an internal process within the individual organism, eventually causing them to react behaviorally (customer loyalty) (Jacoby, 2002). The research findings contribute to the theoretical implications through the flexibility and robustness of the S-O-R theory to elucidate consumer behavior in different contexts. The present study was expanded and adapted to include new stimuli as ME relevant to boutique hotels (Altinay et al., 2023; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023; Sarıcam, 2023). Therefore, the current study increases the applicability and relevance of the findings in terms of theoretical and practical implications.

5.2. Practical contributions

The practical contributions of the current study can be applied in the hospitality sector, especially in boutique hotels, to design and plan a variety of appealing experiences. The findings can be implemented at both the management and operational levels.

From a management perspective, the current study provides boutique hotel owners/management teams with a tool for assessing and understanding their customer experiences. A thorough understanding of consumer experiences across the five dimensions (memorable, esthetic, escapist, entertainment, and educational experiences) supports them in segmenting and positioning their target customers as well as developing appropriate integrated marketing communication and promotional strategies (Hosany & Witham, 2010). In addition, hotel management can apply guest comments and data analytics to recognize which of the five experience components are essential for different and diverse customer segments. Furthermore, the hotel manager can establish marketing messages to highlight the hotel's experience in attracting the target segments and creating the most value. Therefore, boutique hotel owners/managers need to develop a core mindset in each aspect. For example, to deliver an

entertainment experience, customers can arrange space for relaxation and entertainment activities such as listening to music, watching movies, reading books, and so forth. To deliver an Esthetic experience, the hotels can beautify areas, from lobby spaces and stairs to gardens or green areas. ME include designing and decorating hotels and rooms with uniqueness, creating different themes and styles to make customers feel impressed, and having a once-in-a-lifetime experience when staying at the boutique hotel.

From an operational perspective, hotel staff need to have a service mindset and should receive training regularly to ensure that customers are provided services with warmth and special care, making customers feel like special guests when visiting the hotels. For example, in creating ME, the staff should impress customers by using the guest's name to make them feel important, ensure that the service exceeds their expectations, and provide prompt services. In creating an esthetic experience, staff should dress appropriately and beautifully to leave a positive impression on guests. In creating an escapist experience, customers should find a peaceful and private atmosphere, making them feel fulfilled and allowing them to fully disconnect from their daily routines. In creating an entertainment experience, hotel staffs should perform enjoyable activities and actively participate with guests in those activities. For an educational experience, although it remains important, there may not be a need to emphasize this because boutique hotel guests might prioritize relaxation and rest over actively seeking to learn new things; this would follow the original concept of boutique hotels, which includes allowing guests to enjoy different designs and styles with uniqueness and themes or enjoy superior levels of services and amenities (Loureiro et al., 2020).

6. Limitations and future research

Although the current study expands our knowledge of the experiential concept of boutique hotels, it has several limitations. First, convenience sampling was used in the current study; thus, the sample might not be representative of the entire population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should apply a random sampling method and conduct surveys from a sample that represents the entire population visiting boutique hotels. Applying a random sampling technique can increase the reliability and validity of findings based on different samples, particularly in terms of demographics and geographic locations. Second, the sample was entirely Thai; therefore, future research should conduct surveys with foreign tourists to better understand customer behavior and confirm the present study's findings.

In addition, focusing on a diverse sample, including foreign tourists, can reveal how cultural differences impact experiential perspectives and preferences in boutique hotels. Third, the current study did not examine how gender or generation may impact responses differently. Therefore, in future studies, moderating variables (e.g. gender between males, females, and LGBTQ+ or generation between generations X, Y, and Z) should be tested; testing these variables can help sales and marketing in boutique hotels, generating strategies and service offerings to meet the needs of diverse gender identities and generations. In particular, boutique hotels can understand different generations, promptly provide personalized services, and enhance guest satisfaction with diverse generations. Fourth, future research can compare boutique hotels with other types of hotels (e.g. luxury hotels, chain hotels, and budget hotels). This comparison can shed light on the uniqueness of boutique hotels and how they contribute to the hospitality industry. Finally, future research can integrate quantitative and qualitative methods for obtaining data, including in-depth interviews and focus groups. Using these approaches can provide richer, more context-specific insights into the guest experiences in boutique hotels.

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Authors' contributions

Akkhaporn Kokkhangplu: Conceptualized and designed the study, analyzed and interpreted the data, provided resources, drafted the paper, and revised it critically for intellectual content. Piyaporn Auemsuvarn: Provided resources, analyzed and interpreted the data, drafted and wrote the paper, and revised it critically for intellectual content.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study submitted ethics in Human under the entitled 'Transformational model of a memorable experience for customer loyalty in boutique resort hotels in Thailand' (HE663078). This research was approved by the Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee for Human Research based on the Belmont Report and GCP in Social and Behavioral Research.

Informed consent statement

The customers responding to the questionnaire gave their written consent form to use their information. Therefore, the questionnaire is anonymous, and no personal data was collected.

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Data availability statement

The data support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author.

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Appendix

Table A1. Cross loading.

Items codes	EDU	ENT	EST	ESC	ME	PE	CL
EDU2	0.87	0.48	0.44	0.43	0.60	0.55	0.43
EDU3	0.90	0.48	0.53	0.48	0.62	0.61	0.49
EDU4	0.92	0.50	0.44	0.48	0.59	0.60	0.39
ENT1	0.50	0.90	0.39	0.32	0.41	0.45	0.40
ENT2	0.55	0.94	0.37	0.38	0.46	0.47	0.36
ENT3	0.43	0.90	0.29	0.24	0.33	0.41	0.34
EST1	0.47	0.30	0.84	0.54	0.56	0.57	0.51
EST2	0.43	0.40	0.84	0.54	0.56	0.57	0.51
EST3	0.33	0.21	0.82	0.44	0.52	0.42	0.43
EST4	0.48	0.35	0.82	0.45	0.54	0.51	0.50
ESC1	0.31	0.24	0.45	0.79	0.56	0.57	0.57
ESC2	0.42	0.25	0.47	0.88	0.58	0.63	0.60
ESC3	0.56	0.38	0.59	0.87	0.59	0.71	0.59
ME1	0.49	0.35	0.49	0.46	0.78	0.51	0.49
ME2	0.48	0.31	0.50	0.57	0.82	0.59	0.55
ME3	0.58	0.39	0.57	0.62	0.86	0.63	0.59
ME4	0.57	0.36	0.53	0.48	0.76	0.59	0.47
ME5	0.63	0.40	0.61	0.65	0.89	0.69	0.64
PE1	0.51	0.32	0.54	0.65	0.60	0.82	0.62
PE2	0.57	0.53	0.47	0.60	0.57	0.83	0.62
PE3	0.44	0.36	0.44	0.50	0.48	0.77	0.50
CL1	0.47	0.36	0.57	0.62	0.69	0.75	0.90
CL2	0.44	0.34	0.42	0.60	0.52	0.67	0.89
CL3	0.37	0.37	0.58	0.61	0.56	0.62	0.86