

BALANCING GUEST PREFERENCES AND OPERATIONAL NEEDS IN 4-STAR HOTELS: EVIDENCE FROM HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract: This paper explores the operational tension between standardized front office procedures and the growing demand for guest personalization within the 4-star urban hotel segment in Ho Chi Minh City. By analyzing this "standardization-personalization" paradox, the research identifies specific friction points that hinder the delivery of tailored guest experiences. A mixed-methods exploratory design was implemented, integrating quantitative survey data from 143 hotel guests with qualitative thematic analysis from front office staff interviews. The dual-perspective approach captures the gap between guest expectations and the practical realities of hotel department constraints. The evidence reveals a significant "personalization gap," particularly during the mid-stay phase. While guests prioritize proactive communication and tailored local insights, service delivery is frequently restricted by rigid Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), high staff turnover, and the underutilization of existing guest data. The study concludes that personalization in this context is a "negotiated outcome" rather than a consistent service standard. This study moves beyond general satisfaction metrics to conceptualize the front office as a site of operational negotiation. It introduces the Guest Preference Integration Framework (GPIF), a novel strategic tool designed to help mid-scale urban hotels bridge the gap between resource-limited operations and high-touch guest expectations. The findings suggest that the implementation of a "Local Ambassador" role within the front office can empower staff to deliver authentic, personalized recommendations without disrupting core operational efficiency.

Keyword: front office operations, guest preferences, guest experiences, service personalization, 4-star hotels, urban city, Ho Chi Minh city

Introduction

In the contemporary hospitality industry, guest satisfaction is increasingly driven by personalized experiences rather than standardized service quality (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Kim & Kim, 2017). This shift is particularly evident in urban 4-star hotels, where guests expect front office interactions that extend beyond functional efficiency. Emotional sensitivity, contextual awareness, and adaptability have become central to perceived service value (Walls et al., 2011). As the first and last point of contact during a guest's stay, the front office (FO) occupies a critical position in shaping overall guest experience (Abbott & Lewry, 2000). Personalization at this level is therefore no longer a peripheral tactic. Instead, it represents a strategic capability that directly influences satisfaction and loyalty outcomes. Despite its benefits, delivering personalized service in FO operations remains operationally challenging (Li et al., 2020). Hotels must manage staffing constraints, rigid standard operating procedures, and rising cost pressures. These challenges have intensified in the post-pandemic period (Sigala, 2020).

In Vietnam, these constraints are especially visible. Many 4-star hotels operate with uneven digital infrastructure and weak integration of guest data across departments (Nguyen & Tran, 2023). As a result, front office operations often rely on manual coordination, constraining the consistency of

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personalized service delivery. This creates a persistent gap between rising guest expectations and operational feasibility, particularly in mid-scale urban hotels. At the same time, global hospitality trends show growing reliance on technology to support personalization, particularly through digital platforms and front office systems. However, in many mid-scale hotels, technological adoption at the operational level remains fragmented. This misalignment often creates a gap between what guests expect and what front office teams can realistically deliver. Examining how front office operations manage this tension is therefore both a practical and academic concern. Empirical evidence on this balance remains limited, especially in emerging hospitality markets.

This study investigates front office personalization practices in 4-star urban hotels in Ho Chi Minh City, with data collection facilitated through a single hotel context. Focusing on 4-star urban hotels is particularly relevant, as such properties operate under tighter resource constraints compared to luxury hotels, while still facing increasing expectations for personalized service. This creates a more pronounced tension between operational efficiency and service personalization, making them a suitable context for examining how such trade-offs are managed in practice. Its objectives are: (i) To identify key guest preferences in FO services; (ii) To examine internal barriers to consistent personalization; and (iii) To propose strategies for aligning expectations with operational realities. Adopting a mixed-method approach: guest surveys and staff interviews, this research collects data during March-May 2025. While data were collected through a single hotel, the study scope is framed at the level of front office operations in 4-star urban hotels, addressing broader themes relevant to hospitality settings in emerging markets.

Based on these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

Question 1: What front office service attributes do guests value most in a 4-star urban hotel context?

Question 2: What internal operational constraints limit the delivery of consistent personalized service at the front office level?

Question 3: How can front office operations balance guest expectations and operational feasibility in resource-constrained hotel settings?

By addressing how a 4-star hotel in Ho Chi Minh City can bridge this gap using data-driven strategies, this research aligns with global trends and offers practical insights for similar hotels striving to enhance competitiveness in a post-pandemic, tech-driven hospitality landscape. This study extends existing hospitality research by reconceptualizing front office personalization as a negotiated operational process, rather than a purely technology-driven outcome.

2. Literature review

2.1. Guest Preferences in Front Office Operations

2.1.1. Concept of Guest Preferences

Guest preferences have been widely conceptualized in the hospitality literature as expectations and evaluations that shape how guests perceive and engage with service encounters. While earlier studies

emphasize functional and service quality dimensions, more recent work expands this view to include emotional, experiential, and contextual elements. Kandampully et al. (2018) describe guest preferences as a combination of explicit expectations and implicit service cues formed before and during the stay, while Walls et al. (2011) emphasize the influence of emotions, prior experiences, and situational factors.

However, the literature remains divided in how guest preferences are understood and operationalized. One stream of research treats them as relatively stable and measurable inputs to service design, emphasizing efficiency-oriented attributes such as speed, accuracy, and reliability (Kim & Kim, 2017). In contrast, another perspective highlights their dynamic and situational nature, arguing that preferences evolve throughout the service journey and are shaped by interaction quality, cultural background, and travel context (Walls et al., 2011).

Despite this conceptual distinction, existing research has paid limited attention to how guest preferences are enacted in real-time service delivery. In practice, preferences are not merely predefined expectations but often emerge as situational demands during service encounters. This gap is particularly evident in front office settings, where standardized procedures and human interaction intersect, requiring staff to continuously interpret and negotiate guest needs within operational constraints.

2.1.2. Overview of Front Office Operations

The front office (FO) is widely recognized as the primary interface between hotel operations and guest experience, managing interactions that span from arrival to departure (Abbott & Lewry, 2000). While traditionally framed as an administrative coordination function, it also plays a critical role in shaping guest perceptions through continuous service encounters. However, this broader role is often underemphasized, as the front office is frequently reduced to operational execution rather than understood as a site where service expectations are actively interpreted and negotiated.

Prior studies acknowledge the dual role of front office operations. On one side, the FO is expected to maintain efficiency through standardized procedures, system coordination, and time-sensitive execution (Kim & Kim, 2017; Li et al., 2020). On the other, front office staff are required to deliver interpersonal service that relies on communication skills, emotional awareness, and situational judgment, which strongly influence guest experience (Walls et al., 2011; Kandampully et al., 2018).

This dual responsibility creates ongoing tension in front office work. Staff must follow organizational rules and performance targets while responding to diverse and changing guest expectations (Sigala, 2020). As a result, service outcomes at the FO level depend less on formal service design and more on how efficiency demands and personalization are managed in daily practice.

Despite this complexity, much of the hospitality literature continues to treat the front office as a functional unit focused primarily on operational tasks (Abbott & Lewry, 2000). Limited empirical research examines how front office processes actively mediate the trade-off between efficiency and

personalization during routine service delivery, particularly in mid-scale hotels where resource constraints intensify operational pressure (Nguyen & Tran, 2023).

2.1.3. Guest Preferences in the Front office operation

Guest preferences within front office operations are frequently discussed in relation to the different types of expectations guests bring to service encounters. Prior studies suggest that these expectations do not form a single, homogeneous set of demands, but instead reflect multiple dimensions of service value that may coexist or compete during the stay.

One stream of research associates guest preferences primarily with efficiency-oriented expectations. From this perspective, front office performance is evaluated based on procedural consistency, service accuracy, and the smooth coordination of operational tasks, which are closely linked to perceptions of reliability and professionalism. Such expectations are particularly salient in short-stay or business-oriented travel contexts, where efficiency and predictability are prioritized.

Another body of literature emphasizes experiential and relational expectations. Here, guest preferences are understood as socially and culturally embedded, shaped by interaction quality, recognition, and the ability of front office staff to respond empathetically to individual situations. These expectations tend to be more pronounced in leisure or longer stays, where guests seek personalized engagement and a sense of local relevance beyond functional service delivery (Wong & Lai, 2022).

While these perspectives are often examined independently, limited empirical research explores how front office staff manage efficiency-oriented and experiential expectations simultaneously in routine service delivery. In particular, little is known about how front office operations in mid-scale hotels translate these competing demands into everyday practices under standardized procedures and performance constraints. This gap is especially evident in emerging hospitality markets, where resource limitations and uneven service standardization shape front office work, yet remain underexamined in personalization research (Nguyen & Tran, 2023; Sigala, 2020).

2.2. Framework for Integrating Technology into Front Office to Address Guest Needs

As the hospitality industry evolves toward digital transformation, technology plays an increasingly vital role in managing guest preferences within front office (FO) operations. According to Buhalis and Leung (2018), smart technologies enable hotels to collect, analyze, and respond to guest data in real time, facilitating personalized experiences at scale. Front office systems, such as Property Management Systems (PMS), customer profiling tools, and guest messaging apps, now support not only transactional efficiency but also deeper engagement with guest needs (Ivanov & Webster, 2017).

Despite these advancements, many mid-sized hotels face challenges in aligning technology with staff capabilities and service design. This study proposes an integrative framework to bridge that gap, focusing on harmonizing technological tools, human interaction, and organizational alignment to address both internal and external guest preferences effectively.

The proposed framework is grounded in three key theories: Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), which explains guest satisfaction based on expectation–performance gaps; Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), used to understand staff and guest adoption of FO technologies; and Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which frames value co-creation between hotels and

guests. These theories jointly inform the design of the Guest Preference Integration Framework (see Figure 2.9), which conceptualizes how front office operations may balance internal efficiency and external personalization through data-driven, guest-centered.

The proposed framework (Guest Preference Integration Framework – **GPIF**) consists of four core components:

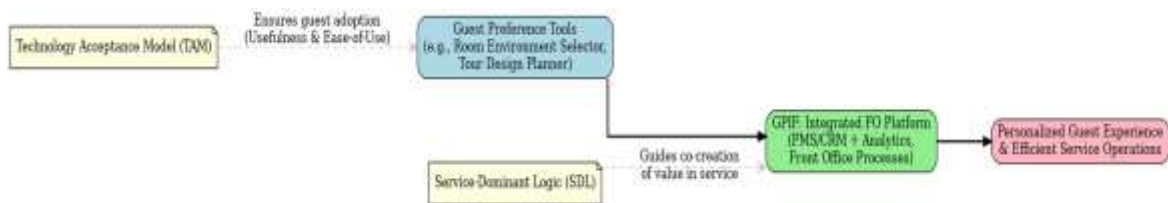


Figure 1. Guest Preference Integration Framework (GPIF)

Source: Adapted from Oliver (1980); Davis (1989); Vargo and Lusch (2004)

- *Guest Data Capture:* Using digital forms, check-in apps, and CRM tools to collect structured and unstructured preference data (e.g., room type, communication style, food allergies). Data privacy and clarity are emphasized during this process.
- *Preference Analysis and Mapping:* FO teams and systems collaborate to analyze guest profiles, segment data into actionable clusters, and align these with existing service protocols. This includes mapping preferences onto FO tasks (e.g., room assignment, greeting style, special requests).
- *Technology-Supported Service Personalization:* Based on preference mapping, FO staff are supported by technology to personalize service moments, such as sending pre-arrival messages, assigning preferred rooms, or offering customized local recommendations.
- *Staff Enablement and Feedback Loop:* Employees receive training on system usage and emotional intelligence. A two-way feedback loop (guest-to-staff and staff-to-system) ensures that preferences are updated and refined over time.

By combining human touchpoints with lightweight digital tools, the GPIF model proposes a hybrid approach to FO service design. It emphasizes practicality over complexity, proving a practical reference for resource-constrained hotels to scale up personalization initiatives while maintaining operational coherence. This framework is informed by service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) by empowering both guests and staff to co-create value through data-enabled interaction.

2.3. Research gap

Prior research on personalization in hospitality has approached the topic from multiple perspectives. Some studies examine how personalization practices are formed and perceived in hotel settings, demonstrating that perceived personalization may differ from intended service design and highlighting the challenges of translating guest data into meaningful experiences (Lei et al., 2023). Other streams of research emphasize the role of technology and customer relationship management

systems in enabling personalization at scale, suggesting that digital platforms, data integration, and smart systems can support tailored service delivery, particularly in technologically advanced markets (Buhalis & Leung, 2018; Ivanov et al., 2019).

Recent studies further point to the growing potential of artificial intelligence and data analytics in enhancing personalization, noting their capacity to support preference prediction, service automation, and real-time responsiveness (Gretzel et al., 2021; Ivanov & Webster, 2017). However, much of this work remains focused on macro-level technology adoption or customer satisfaction outcomes, offering limited insight into how personalization is operationalized within day-to-day front office practices.

In the Vietnamese context, hospitality research has primarily examined service quality, guest satisfaction, and post-stay evaluations, rather than the operational processes through which personalization is delivered at the front office level (Nguyen & Tran, 2023). As a result, relatively few empirical studies explore how front office teams navigate competing efficiency-oriented and experiential expectations under real operational constraints. This limitation is particularly salient in mid-scale hotels in emerging markets, where resource constraints and uneven digital readiness shape front office practices. Addressing this gap requires closer examination of the front office as a dynamic service interface, rather than a purely functional unit, to understand how guest preferences are interpreted and negotiated under real operational constraints.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Overview of the 4-Star Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City

Consistent with the exploratory mixed-method design, this section presents descriptive findings and interpretive insights to examine patterns in front office service delivery. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the moderate sample size, the quantitative analysis focuses on identifying dominant perception patterns rather than testing causal relationships. Inferential techniques such as ANOVA or regression are therefore beyond the scope of this study and are suggested as directions for future research. This approach is appropriate for studying front office operations, where service outcomes are shaped by situational interactions, human judgment, and operational constraints rather than isolated causal mechanisms.

The quantitative analysis draws on 143 valid guest responses, which is sufficient for identifying dominant perception patterns within a bounded service context. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the survey data are used to highlight areas of convergence and divergence in guest evaluations across key stages of the stay. Such use of moderate sample sizes is common in exploratory hospitality research focused on service processes (Hair et al., 2019).

Overall, the findings reveal uneven guest satisfaction across the service journey. Satisfaction is highest at arrival and departure, where interactions are standardized, and declines during the mid-stay period, particularly in relation to personalization and proactive engagement. Qualitative insights from front office staff contextualize this pattern by pointing to workload concentration, limited staffing flexibility, and reliance on standardized procedures. Together, the mixed-method findings underscore a recurring tension between efficiency-oriented service delivery and the need for adaptive personalization during the guest stay.

FO Structure and Operation

The FO department is organized into four core functions: reception, bell service, guest relations, and reservations, coordinated by a Front Office Manager and Assistant Manager. Staff are cross-trained to manage both administrative processes and guest engagement across the full guest cycle: pre-arrival coordination, arrival (check-in), mid-stay support, and departure.

Daily FO operations include handling bookings, allocating rooms, processing payments, and responding to guest inquiries. Technology plays a supporting role, with real-time updates from PMS and mobile apps enabling faster service delivery. A flexible shift system ensures continuous service and responsiveness, especially during peak hours or special events. This structure provides a strong foundation for analyzing how FO operations can better address dynamic guest preferences, which will be explored in the following section.

3.2. Assessment of guest preference at 4 star hotel in Ho Chi Minh

3.2.1. Quantitative insights (Survey)

A structured bilingual survey was conducted between March and May 2025, yielding 143 valid responses from recent guests at a 4-star urban hotel through email distribution and QR codes. The 46-item questionnaire captured guest perceptions across seven dimensions, including front office service, personalization, and loyalty-related outcomes. The respondent profile was dominated by younger guests aged 18–34, with a balanced gender distribution and a high proportion of repeat visitors (82%).

Leisure and bleisure travelers accounted for the majority of responses (83%), indicating strong interest in experiential and culturally oriented service elements. In addition, over half of the respondents (51%) booked through online travel agencies, suggesting familiarity with digital platforms and relatively high baseline service expectations. This demographic composition implies a guest segment that values both operational reliability and personalized engagement, reinforcing the relevance of examining how front office operations balance efficiency-oriented processes with culturally enriching service interactions.

Cronbach alpha test result

The survey instrument consisted of 46 items measured using five-point Likert scales, capturing guest perceptions across key dimensions of front office service, including operational efficiency, personalization, cultural engagement, technology use, and loyalty intention. Survey items were adapted from prior hospitality and service management studies and refined to fit the front office context of 4-star urban hotels.

Table 1 : Cronbach Alpha's Result

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Front Office Operational Efficiency	7	0.78
Service Personalization	8	0.84
Cultural Engagement	6	0.81
Technology Use in Front Office	7	0.75
Guest Satisfaction	6	0.86
Loyalty Intention	5	0.79

Source: Author's survey data analysis

To assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's alpha. The results indicate satisfactory internal consistency across the main constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.72 to 0.86, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 for exploratory research. These values suggest that the survey items within each construct were sufficiently correlated and suitable for descriptive and interpretive analysis.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on identifying patterns rather than testing causal relationships, factor analysis was not employed. Instead, construct validity was supported through careful item selection based on established literature and expert review during the survey design process. This approach aligns with common methodological practices in exploratory hospitality research and supports the robustness of the quantitative findings.

Internal needs

The internal guest journey at a 4-star hotel was generally evaluated as competent and guest-focused, with strong performance at key touchpoints. Survey results show high ratings for arrival (~4.10/5) and check-out (~4.01), highlighting the hotel's efficiency in welcome and departure processes. Check-in speed, lobby ambiance, and flexible handling of special requests stood out, reinforcing positive first and final impressions.

However, guest satisfaction dipped during the stay (~3.63–3.76), particularly in personalization and timely issue resolution. Pre-arrival communication was moderately rated (~3.63), with lower scores for proactive preference collection (~3.40–3.60), revealing missed opportunities to deliver tailored service. While all stages scored above neutral (3.0), the mid-stay decline indicates a gap in consistency and attentiveness. Although all stages remain above neutral, the observed mid-stay dip suggests inconsistency in how internal service processes support ongoing guest needs.

As illustrated in Figure 2, this pattern reflects an operational model that prioritizes efficiency at structurally defined moments of the guest journey, while offering less adaptive support during less predictable service encounters. This imbalance implies that front office processes are effective in managing standardized interactions, but less equipped to sustain attentiveness and personalization throughout the stay.

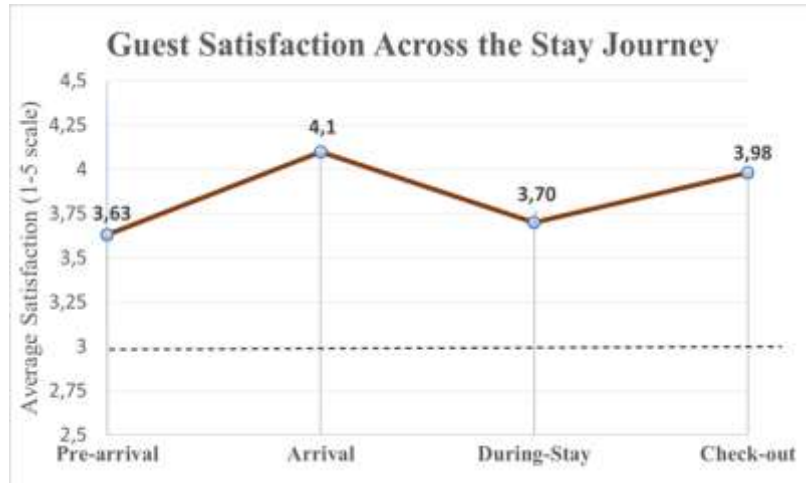


Figure 2. Average satisfaction ratings of guests across key stages of the stay (pre-arrival, arrival, during stay, and check-out).

Source: Author's survey data.

Overall, the findings suggest that internal front office operations function reliably at the beginning and end of the guest journey. Enhancing mid-stay engagement, particularly through improved preference recognition and follow-up, represents a key opportunity to strengthen consistency and elevate overall guest experience.

External needs

Beyond internal services, the survey examined how well the front office supported guests in exploring local experiences. Results revealed a clear gap: many guests did not feel adequately guided or inspired to engage in cultural activities. As shown in Figure 3, several items on cultural personalization scored below neutral (~2.8–2.9/5), including recommendations for local attractions and access to digital resources like QR codes or maps. While a proportion of guests participated in suggested activities, overall satisfaction with these experiences was limited, suggesting that the offerings lacked personal relevance or depth



Figure 3. Guest ratings for front office support of local experiences

Source: Author's survey data

Although 59% of guests participated in suggested local activities, satisfaction remained neutral (~2.9), suggesting the experiences lacked personal relevance or depth. The remaining 41% chose not to engage, likely due to disinterest, time constraints, or uninspiring offers. Open-ended feedback pointed to demand more immersive options such as food tours, cooking classes, cultural workshops, and wellness experiences, rather than generic sightseeing suggestions. This pattern suggests that experiential engagement is treated as an auxiliary service function, rather than as an integrated component of front office interaction. As a result, opportunities for meaningful personalization beyond core operational tasks are often underutilized.

These findings highlight a missed opportunity for the front office team to enrich the overall stay through curated cultural engagement. While operational tasks are delivered efficiently, the current approach to external support appears passive and unmemorable. To bridge this gap, the hotel could equip staff with better local knowledge or partner with experienced providers, aligning with modern travelers' expectations for authenticity and connection.

Improving this area would not only enhance the guest journey but also fulfill the broader aim of balancing internal excellence with external cultural values.

Balance

A core aim of this study is to assess whether a 4-star hotel can effectively balance internal service quality with the facilitation of local cultural experiences. Survey results affirm that most guests desire both: 54% prioritized "a balance of both" over internal comfort (18%) or local exploration alone (28%).

Figure 4 illustrates this distribution, showing that over four in five guests value a stay that combines comfort with cultural immersion. This confirms that travelers expect high-quality service and authentic cultural engagement without sacrificing either.

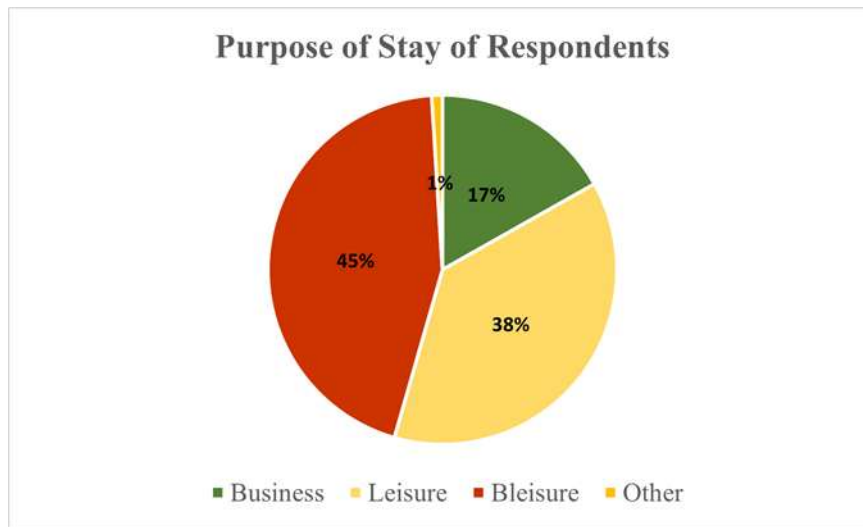


Figure 4. Guest priorities when staying at a 4-star hotel (Q23)

Source: Author's survey data

However, guest ratings on actual hotel performance show that this balance remains underdeveloped. Across several Likert-scale items, average agreement hovered around neutral (~ 2.7 – $3.0/5$), suggesting that while expectations are clear, delivery is still lacking. Guests felt the front office struggled to juggle operational tasks with experiential support (~ 2.85), and cultural needs were sometimes overlooked (~ 2.76). Staff were seen as proficient in hotel operations but less so in acting as knowledgeable local guides (~ 2.78).

Importantly, guests expressed a strong desire for more cultural integration in future stays (~ 3.63). Open-ended feedback further emphasized this, calling for more proactive recommendations, deeper staff knowledge of local culture, and accessible experience packages.

Guest feedback further reinforces this interpretation. Many respondents expressed interest in greater cultural integration during future stays, emphasizing the need for more proactive recommendations, deeper staff knowledge of local context, and accessible experience options. Together, these findings suggest that the challenge lies not in guest demand, but in the front office's capacity to translate cultural engagement into routine service practice.

Overall, the results highlight a persistent imbalance between internal service efficiency and experiential personalization. While operational performance meets baseline expectations, limitations in integrating cultural elements into front office interactions constrain the delivery of a more complete and differentiated guest experience.

Technology, Benchmarking and Customer Loyalty

Survey results show that while current front office technologies at a 4-star hotel, such as mobile check-in and QR codes, are moderately used (~3.44/5), guest interest in future tech-driven personalization is significantly higher. Respondents rated features like pre-arrival room customization (~4.03) and tailored local recommendations (~4.01) very favorably, indicating clear demand for more interactive, personalized tools.

Compared to other 4-star hotels, the hotel was seen as slightly above average in personalization (~3.28–3.42), with front office staff recognized for professionalism (~3.47). However, cultural integration within tech offerings remains modest. Loyalty intention was also moderate (~3.55), with 58% willing to return, though 20% expressed hesitation due to inconsistent personalization.

Comparative assessments further indicate that the hotel performs adequately in core service delivery relative to comparable 4-star properties. Front office professionalism is generally recognized, yet the integration of cultural content into technology-supported services remains limited. As a result, technology functions largely as a transactional aid rather than as a facilitator of experiential engagement.

Loyalty-related responses reflect this pattern. While many guests express willingness to return, a notable proportion remain hesitant, citing inconsistent personalization as a key concern. This suggests that repeat visitation is influenced not only by operational competence, but also by the perceived distinctiveness of the service experience.

Viewed collectively, these patterns imply that technology represents an underutilized resource for strengthening the connection between operational efficiency and personalized engagement. The challenge for front office operations lies in aligning digital tools with service practices that support cultural relevance and sustained guest relationships, rather than treating technology as a standalone efficiency mechanism.

3.2.2. Qualitative insight: Operational and Strategic Tension in Front Office Personalization

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with front office staff (n = 12) and managerial personnel (n = 4), supplemented by internship-based observations and guest feedback from online travel platforms. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions covering key operational areas, including complaint handling, technology use, service personalization, and perceived constraints in front office operations. For example, participants were asked how they manage guest preferences during daily operations and what challenges they encounter in balancing efficiency with personalized service. This format allowed for consistency across interviews while retaining flexibility to explore context-specific issues and emergent insights, which is particularly suitable for exploratory research.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to operational pressure, technology use, and personalization practices. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and guest feedback were reviewed iteratively to identify meaningful patterns, which were then manually coded and grouped into broader categories. Through this process, themes

were developed inductively, capturing how these dimensions interact within daily front office operations. Rather than applying predefined categories, the analysis remained grounded in the data, allowing themes to reflect actual service conditions and constraints. This process resulted in three dominant themes, highlighting the ongoing tension between efficiency requirements and the delivery of personalized guest experiences.

Operational pressure prioritizing efficiency over personalization

Front office staff consistently described high workload intensity and workflow disruptions, particularly during peak check-in and high-occupancy periods. System limitations, manual workarounds, and coordination delays with housekeeping often required staff to prioritize speed and procedural accuracy over personalized interaction. As a result, discretionary personalization was frequently deprioritized in favor of maintaining service flow.

“During peak check-in hours, the queue builds up because our system often lags or even crashes. Guests get frustrated waiting, and we feel helpless when tech issues slow us down.” (Front Desk Agent)

These accounts indicate that personalization at the front office level is highly contingent on operational conditions. When time pressure intensifies, service delivery becomes efficiency-driven, reinforcing the gap between guest expectations for personalized engagement and actual service practice.

Technology as operational support rather than experiential enabler

Both staff and managers perceived technology as a necessary support for administrative efficiency rather than a tool that actively enables guest engagement. While digital systems were valued for handling routine tasks, interviewees expressed concerns that fragmented systems and limited training increased cognitive load and distracted staff during guest interactions.

“Automated systems are great for routine tasks, but guests still expect a warm greeting and personal help. Technology supports us, but it cannot replace the human touch.” (Front Office Staff)

This theme highlights a clear tension between technological efficiency and human-centered service. Although technology is present, it is primarily used to sustain operational performance rather than to facilitate meaningful personalization during the stay.

Strategic constraints shaping personalization decisions

From a managerial perspective, personalization initiatives were strongly shaped by strategic considerations, particularly budget limitations, return on investment (ROI), and data privacy concerns.

Managers emphasized the need for cost-effective solutions and expressed caution toward over-automation that could undermine the hotel's boutique identity.

“Any new system we consider has to prove its value. We can't invest in expensive technology without clear improvements in efficiency or guest satisfaction.”
(Front Office Manager)

These strategic constraints limit the extent to which personalization can be embedded into routine front office practice, reinforcing the treatment of personalization as discretionary rather than systemic.

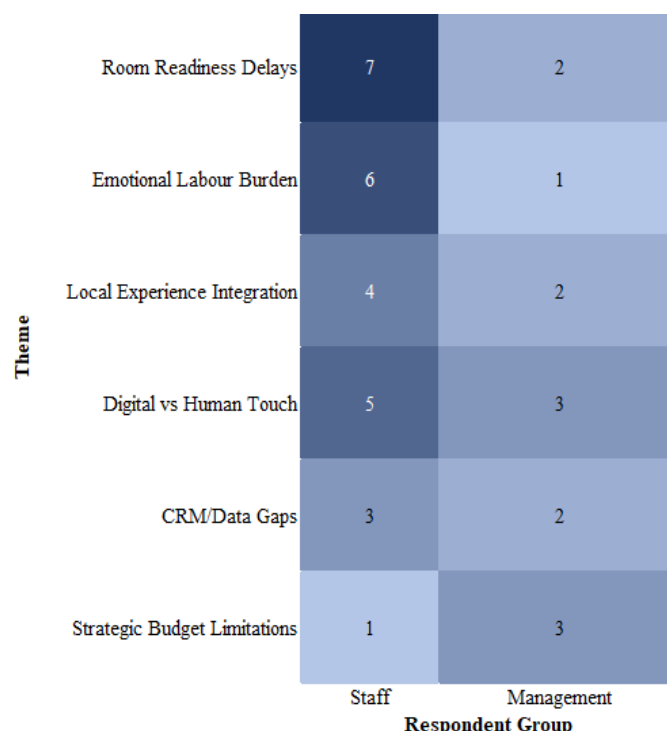


Figure 5. Heatmap of theme mention frequency from front office staff vs. management interviews

Source: Author's qualitative analysis

Figure 5 provides an overview of the relative emphasis of qualitative themes across respondent groups. Frontline staff more frequently highlighted immediate operational pressures and emotional labor, while management respondents emphasized budget constraints and technology investment considerations. Despite these differences, both groups expressed shared concern regarding the balance between digital tools and the human touch, as well as the need for improved guest data integration.

Taken together, the qualitative findings illustrate that front office personalization is shaped by the interaction between frontline operational realities and managerial priorities. Efficiency demands, technological limitations, and strategic risk considerations jointly influence how personalization is enacted in daily operations. These insights reinforce the quantitative findings by demonstrating that the efficiency–personalization trade-off is not resolved through service design alone, but continuously negotiated in practice.

4. Solutions and application

4.1. Solution

The findings of this study point to several managerial implications for front office operations in 4-star urban hotels seeking to balance operational efficiency with personalized guest experience.

First, the results highlight the importance of strengthening mid-stay service engagement. While front office processes perform reliably at arrival and departure, personalization tends to weaken during the stay, when guest needs become more situational and less predictable. Managers should therefore prioritize mechanisms that support preference recognition, follow-up, and service recovery during this phase, rather than concentrating personalization efforts solely at initial touchpoints.

Second, the study underscores the need to reposition front office staff as facilitators of experiential value, not merely executors of standardized procedures. The findings suggest that limited confidence and discretion constrain staff ability to provide culturally meaningful recommendations, even when guest demand is evident. Targeted training that enhances local knowledge, storytelling skills, and situational judgment may help integrate cultural engagement more consistently into everyday front office interactions.

Third, technology should be approached as an enabling support rather than a standalone solution for personalization. Digital tools can assist with preference capture, information access, and coordination, but their value depends on alignment with front office workflows and staff adoption. Incremental and user-friendly technological enhancements are more likely to improve personalization outcomes without undermining the human element of hospitality.

Finally, the findings suggest that performance management systems play a critical role in shaping front office behavior. When evaluation criteria emphasize speed and error reduction exclusively, discretionary personalization is often deprioritized. Managers may therefore consider balancing efficiency-oriented metrics with indicators that reflect guest engagement and experiential quality, supporting a more holistic approach to front office performance management.

Taken together, these managerial implications emphasize that personalization in front office operations is not achieved through isolated initiatives, but through coordinated adjustments to staff roles, technology use, and performance expectations. Such an approach is particularly relevant for 4-star urban hotels operating under resource constraints and competitive pressure.

4.2 Implementation Strategy

4.2.1. Objectives, Oriented Development and Step-by-Step Roadmap for the “Local Ambassadors Empowered by X/Y & Technology” Program at a 4-Star Hotel

a. Objectives

The Local Ambassadors program at a 4-star hotel follows a two-phase objective: short-term piloting and long-term integration. In the first 3–6 months, the focus is on piloting and refining the initiative. This includes certifying 4–5 front office staff as cultural ambassadors, launching the QR-code

discovery guide, and hosting initial in-lobby workshops. These early activities aim to validate guest engagement and assess whether staff can incorporate the new responsibilities effectively.

From month 6 onward, the objective shifts to full integration and scaling. The program is expected to become a core part of the hotel's service model, contributing to improved guest satisfaction, higher NPS and review scores, stronger participation in local experiences, and increased ancillary revenue from workshops, tours, and F&B services. Internally, the initiative aims to boost front office staff motivation and sense of ownership.

In the long run, the hotel aspires to be recognized as a 4-star property that offers a distinctly personalized cultural experience, setting itself apart from competitors. While currently limited to one property for manageability, the program has the potential to serve as a prototype for future expansion.

b. Orientation Development Approach

The proposed solution follows a phased and adaptive development approach, emphasizing learning and gradual integration rather than large-scale implementation. Drawing on a pilot-rollout-refinement logic, the initiative is designed to remain responsive to guest feedback and operational constraints while aligning with the principles of the Guest Preference Integration Framework (GPIF).

Initial efforts focus on building foundational capabilities, including staff preparation and content development, before scaling service practices more broadly across front office operations. Subsequent stages emphasize integration into routine workflows and ongoing refinement based on performance feedback. Throughout this process, priority is given to maintaining a guest-centric orientation while balancing efficiency and personalization within existing resource limits.

Rather than prescribing a fixed implementation roadmap, the approach highlights the importance of flexibility, incremental adoption, and alignment between staff roles, technological support, and experiential objectives. This orientation allows front office teams to adapt personalization initiatives to local conditions while minimizing operational disruption.

4.2.2. Evaluation of Current Front Office Operations

The evaluation of current front office operations indicates a mixed performance profile characterized by strong operational execution alongside notable experiential gaps. Evidence across multiple service dimensions suggests that standardized front office procedures support efficient service delivery at arrival and departure. These stages are consistently associated with positive guest perceptions, reflecting the effectiveness of routine processes and staff responsiveness in managing time-bound interactions. Interpersonal warmth and basic service attentiveness further contribute to favorable first and final impressions.

In contrast, performance becomes less consistent during less structured phases of the guest journey. Mid-stay interactions are more frequently perceived as generic, with limited recognition of individual preferences and uneven engagement with cultural or experiential elements. This pattern emerges across survey results and qualitative feedback, indicating that personalization efforts tend to weaken once core operational tasks have been completed. The absence of integrated guest data and fragmented coordination across front office functions appear to constrain the ability to sustain adaptive service responses beyond standardized touchpoints.

Comparative assessments further suggest that while the hotel performs competitively in efficiency-related outcomes relative to similar 4-star properties, experiential differentiation remains underdeveloped. Operational competence alone does not translate into a distinctive guest experience when personalization and cultural engagement are inconsistently embedded into routine service practices. As a result, front office operations contribute more reliably to functional satisfaction than to memorable or differentiated experiences.

Overall, the evaluation highlights an imbalance between operational efficiency and experiential value creation. Front office operations demonstrate reliability in managing standardized service encounters but face limitations in translating this strength into sustained personalization throughout the stay. This imbalance underscores the importance of aligning operational processes, staff discretion, and supporting technologies to better integrate personalized engagement into everyday front office practice.

4.3. Limitation and future research

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings:

(i) Contextual and geographical scope.

Data collection was facilitated within a single urban hospitality context in Ho Chi Minh City. While the research design was framed to reflect front office practices across 4-star hotels in the city, local market characteristics, labor conditions, and guest profiles may differ across regions. As a result, the findings should be generalized with caution beyond comparable urban hotel settings in emerging markets (Nguyen & Tran, 2023).

(ii) Sampling approach and sample size.

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling approach, resulting in 143 valid guest responses. Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on operational service processes within a single hotel context, this sampling strategy was considered appropriate for capturing guest perspectives during the service experience. While the sample size is adequate for identifying dominant patterns and service-related tensions, it does not support population-level generalization or causal inference. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically generalizable (Hair et al., 2019).

(iii) Exploratory research design.

The study adopts an exploratory mixed-method approach and relies primarily on descriptive statistical analysis and qualitative interpretation. Inferential techniques such as regression or factor analysis were not employed, consistent with the study's aim to generate insight into operational dynamics rather than to test predefined hypotheses. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than confirmatory (Sigala, 2020).

(iv) Service encounter focus.

The analysis centers on front office operations and does not incorporate perspectives from other hotel departments such as housekeeping or food and beverage services. While this focus allows for depth in

examining front office personalization, it may overlook cross-departmental interactions that also shape overall guest experience.

Directions for Future Research

Building on the exploratory insights of this study, several avenues for future research merit consideration. Future studies could extend the conceptual framework developed here through comparative research across different hotel categories, such as budget, mid-scale, and luxury properties, as well as across multiple urban contexts.

In particular, comparative analyses across Southeast Asian markets, including Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, or Indonesia, would help clarify whether the tension between operational efficiency and service personalization observed in 4-star urban hotels persists under varying levels of digital maturity, labor structures, and service cultures. In addition, longitudinal research designs could examine how guest expectations and front office personalization practices evolve over time, especially in response to digital transformation initiatives and post-pandemic recovery dynamics. Such approaches would allow researchers to assess whether observed personalization gaps represent persistent structural challenges or transitional issues during periods of operational change. With larger and more diverse samples, future studies may also employ inferential analytical techniques, such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling, to test and refine the relationships suggested by this exploratory study (Hair et al., 2019).

Finally, extending the analytical scope beyond front office operations to include interactions with other hotel departments could provide a more holistic understanding of value co-creation processes in hospitality settings, consistent with service-dominant logic perspectives (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

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