Standardisation or customisation? An investigation of the attributes of customer experience among international hotel brands in China and New Zealand

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Abstract

The features of international hotel brands are reflected in the standardised hotel products and services they offer (Ivanova et al., 2016). However, the needs and expectations of hotel guests are changing, as they now seek experiential hotel products and services (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). Therefore, it is worthwhile determining the preferences of contemporary hotel guests, especially in terms of experience. Many scholars have explored aspects of the customer experience in the hospitality sector (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Ren et al., 2016; Wu & Yang, 2018;). Extant studies on customer experience have mainly concentrated on luxury and budget hotels. However, research on the customer experience of international hotel brands is limited, especially in New Zealand. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the attributes affecting customer experience in internationally branded hotels in China and New Zealand.

This study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm and adopted a qualitative research approach. A content analysis was employed to analyse a total number of 300 online reviews collected from Booking.com on three international hotel brands.

The main attributes affecting customer experience of international hotel brands were rooms, service, staff performance, hotel facilities, food and beverages, and location. Price and social responsibilities were less important but none-the-less influential attributes affecting the overall customer experience. The findings of this study also revealed that guests prefer standardisation of a hotel's physical environment but customisation of the social environment. Results of this study will be helpful for hospitality industry practitioners, as they provide suggestions on how to improve customer experiences. The findings also contribute to the literature by identifying the attributes affecting customer experience.

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Signed:

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1   Chapter overview

This study investigates the attributes of customer experience among international hotel brands in China and New Zealand. The overview of this study is outlined in this chapter. First, the background information and relevant concepts are introduced. Also, gaps in the extant literature are identified. Then, the research questions and objectives of this study are provided. Finally, the methodology and structure of this study are explained and discussed.

1.2   Background to the study

Globalisation can be defined as a process of continuous exchange and integration of the world economy, society, and culture (Hjalager, 2007). Many industries have been affected by globalisation, and tourism is no exception. Tourism can be traced back to the early 18th century (Csapo, 2012), flourishing in the 19th century to become the most robust and growing industry in the global economy (Gyr, 2010). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (WTO) (2019), the number of international tourist arrivals was 1.46 billion in 2019, with an average annual growth rate of 5% over the previous decade. A report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) stated that global tourism made a contribution of US$8.9 trillion to the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019, accounting for 10.3% of the global GDP (WTTC, 2019). According to Bunghez (2016), tourism is an indispensable economic activity in contemporary society, having a positive effect on economic and social development. Similarly, Meyer et al. (2017) stated that tourism has a positive impact on local and regional economic development and growth. It is evident that the tourism industry plays a vital role in global and domestic economies.

More recently, the tourism industry in China and New Zealand has experienced rapid development. As New Zealand's largest export industry, tourism has attracted many international tourists (Tourism New Zealand, 2020). According to Statistics New Zealand (NZ), the number of tourists' arrivals before 2013 was approximately 2.5 million each year, but in 2018, this number had risen to 3.82 million. It was estimated that the number of international tourist visits will reach 5.1 million by 2024, and their spending would reach NZ$14.8 billion (Statistics NZ, 2018). Tourism has made a contribution of NZ$16.2 billion

to New Zealand's gross domestic product in 2019 (Tourism New Zealand, 2020). Hahn (2021) claimed that New Zealand's tourism industry will achieve breakthrough economic growth in the next few years, especially in urban centres like Auckland and Queenstown. Currently, New Zealand is developing 48 hotels, providing 7,441 rooms, of which Auckland plans to add 14 hotels and 2,726 rooms (Hahn, 2021).

The Chinese tourism market is also developing steadily and has become one of the most-watched inbound and outbound tourism markets in the world (Ma, 2020). According to statistics released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2020) of China, the number of domestic tourists in China reached 6 billion in 2019, almost double that of 2014, and the number of international tourists was 14.53 million in the same year. The total annual tourism receipts were CNY6.63 trillion (NZ$1.33 trillion). Also, based on the 13th Five-Year Plan launched by the National Development and Reform Commission in 2016, China has been cultivating tourism as an important industry for the national economy (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2017). The above information shows that New Zealand and China attach great importance to the future development of tourism. It is also indicating that the two countries may become popular tourist destinations in the international tourism market. Therefore, this study chooses New Zealand and China as research objects. In the context of globalisation, the hotel industry is expanding rapidly to cope with the increased numbers of tourists. Shaw (1999) pointed out that accommodation is an essential element of tourism products and the largest part of the tourism economy. According to Ye (2018), accommodation, transportation, and tourist attractions are the most important tourism products, and accommodation is one of the key factors that tourists must consider during travel. Although the contemporary hotel industry is still dominated by the provision of accommodation and leisure facilities, the types of accommodation have undergone various changes to meet the changing needs of tourists. The emergence of resorts, motels, serviced apartments, and Airbnb home hosting reflects the diverse needs of consumers. However, in the past few centuries, these traditional accommodation types were private, and independently operated (Kruesi, 2015). It was not until the late 19th century that Cesar Ritz first proposed to separate the ownership and management of a hotel. Subsequently, Conrad Hilton, the founder of the Hilton Hotel, proposed the concept of a hotel brand in the early 20th century (Kruesi, 2015). A *hotel brand* can be defined as a horizontal hotel alliance under the same organisation (Ivanov & Zhechev, 2011). In the 1950s and 1960s, InterContinental Hotels and Hilton Hotels internationalised

the concept of hotel brands. According to Gee and Singh (2012), the trend to internationalise the hotel industry began in the second half of the 20th century, as more and more hotel organisations began to occupy the international market. InterContinental Hotels Group, Hilton Hotels & Resorts, and Marriott International are the top three largest hotel organisations in the world (Kruesi, 2015).

With the development of international brand hotels, the standardisation of hotel products and services has become a feature of global brand hotels (Ivanova et al., 2016). Yu et al. (2014) mentioned that the advantages of standardised management of hotels included economies of scale, internal operating efficiencies, and international consistency. Also, standardised room sizes, hotel designs and appearance, could make hotel maintenance and renovation more efficient and economical. Many global hotel brands have tried to adopt a standardised operating model to establish a standard image among all their hotels, so customers can experience the same quality of service worldwide when staying in hotels of the same brand; some customers feel comfortable and safe in a hotel of a familiar design and environment (Raajpoot, 2004).

However, standardised products and services of brand hotels may not be sufficient to meet the needs of customers from different cultural backgrounds. Ivanovic and Galicic (2007) noted that hotel guests in the 21st century were more culturally diverse, and their ecological and health awareness was improved. Also, they were seeking different ways to relax, and had high expectations of quality experiences. Therefore, hoteliers need to be aware of the changing needs and expectations of customers, and meet these requirements, to maintain a high level of customer experience.

1.3 Gaps in the literature

Three major gaps can be identified in the extant literature on this topic. The first gap related to the globalisation of international hotel brands across different cultures. Given the international nature of hotel brands, intercultural communication is reflected in global hotel brands (Grobelna, 2015). Cultural differences and cultural diversity are the main challenges facing the international hotel industry (Gong, 2008). According to Grobelna (2015), cultural conflicts are not only found between hotel guests and hotel employees, but also in the internal workforces of hotels, and the successful operation of international hotel brands requires an

understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds. Torres et al. (2014) claimed that standardised products and services would not satisfy customers from different backgrounds. Thus, international brand hotels need to investigate the preferences of different guest groups and provide customised services and products accordingly to maintain profitability and good customer experiences (Torres et al., 2014).

The extant literature offers few studies of customer experience. Most studies are focused on customer satisfaction and its relationship with a firm's performance (e.g., Barsky, 1992; Dietz, 1997; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Customer satisfaction is key to business success (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and may help firms build a good reputation and promote repeat purchase behaviour (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Hoteliers need to understand the needs and satisfaction factors of hotel guests, especially in international brand hotels, as they employ standardised procedures, but operate in different countries with different cultural backgrounds. More recently, researchers have emphasised the changing needs and expectations of modern hotel guests. According to Bharwani and Butt (2012), contemporary guests seek experiential hotel products and services. Harkison (2016) discussed ways to package experience as a product. Some studies have addressed the customer experience in luxury hotels (Wu and Yang, 2018; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019) and budget hotels (Ren et al., 2016). However, research on customer experience in international hotel brands is limited, especially in a New Zealand context. This work aims to investigate the attributes affecting customer experience among international hotel brands in China and New Zealand.

Most studies on hotel customer experience have employed quantitative research methods, using interviews and questionnaires. However, the use of online reviews as a data source to explore customer experience is less common. Online reviews are channels to obtain customers' perceptions of products and services, and their function is similar to traditional word-of-mouth recommendations (Mellinas et al., 2016). Traditional word-of-mouth spread through the internet has evolved into electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Gruen et al., 2006). The hotel industry is particularly affected by e-WOM (Mellinas et al., 2016). Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) believed that online reviews affected consumers' buying behaviours and decisions, and Ricci and Wietsma (2006) claimed that online reviews were more truthful and objective than commercial information. Therefore, online reviews are essential for hoteliers, as they reflect guests' consumption trends, providing valuable

information to hotel management (Sun et al., 2014). Furthermore, the development and maturity of online travel agencies has promoted and increased the number of customer reviews on hotel services (Mariani & Borghi, 2018). TripAdvisor and Booking.com are the leading online travel agencies, and have been used by many researchers as information resources. Booking.com is a database with more than 140 million customer reviews (Martin-Fuentes & Mellinas, 2018). In terms of the number of reviews, booking.com occupies a leading position among all online travel agencies, accounting for almost 40% of reviews worldwide (Wohl, 2017). Therefore, this study chose Booking.com as a data resource to investigate the attributes of customer experience between China and New Zealand among international hotel brands.

1.4   Research question and objectives

The acceleration of globalisation and the flourishing tourism industry has led to a sharp increase in the numbers of tourists. The hotel industry is also rapidly expanding globally to respond to this trend, especially international hotel brands. The vast potential of China and New Zealand's tourism market has also been favoured by international hotel brands. Many global hotel brands such as InterContinental, Marriott, and Accor, have hotels in these two countries. Standardised products and services are characteristic of international hotel brands and leave a common image in the memories of consumers. However, standardised products and services may not be suitable for customers of some cultural backgrounds. In addition, the needs and expectations of guests are constantly changing with improved living standards. It is therefore vital for hoteliers to understand the attributes affecting customer experience. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate the attributes of customer experience between China and New Zealand among international hotel brands. The study aimed to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the main attributes of customer experience of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand?
2. Do the attributes of customer experience vary between hotels of the same brand in China and New Zealand?

Based on these research questions, two objectives were proposed to guide the study. The first objective was to identify the attributes of customer experience of international hotel brands

based on online guest reviews collected from Booking.com. The second objective was to compare the attributes of customer experiences of hotels in the same hotel brand in China and New Zealand and identify the differences and similarities.

1.5   Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. This first chapter introduced the research background and briefly outlined the history of the tourism and hotel industry. The importance of customer experience and online reviews to the hotel industry was also introduced. The second chapter reviews theories and concepts related to international hotel brands, customer experience, and online reviews. Chapter three introduces the paradigm and methodology employed in this study; an interpretive paradigm and qualitative research methods were adopted. This chapter also describes and discusses the sample selection and data collection methods. A convenience sampling technique was used in this study, and content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapter four. Also, this chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the literature. Finally, Chapter five summarises the study. The research's implications are presented in this chapter, along with the contribution to the literature and related industries and the limitations of the research.

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Chapter overview

As this study aims to investigate the attributes of customer experiences of the same international hotel brands in China and New Zealand, the chapter starts by reviewing the literature on the historical development of hotel brands, and the internationalisation process. The characteristics and challenges of international hotel brands are then identified, and the importance of customer experiences in the hotel industry discussed. Relevant concepts and theories are introduced to understand how customers review their experiences after staying at hotels. Finally, as the study analyses online guest reviews from Booking.com to explore customer experiences, the importance of online guest reviews to the hotel industry is highlighted.

2.2   The development and internationalisation of hotel brands

The appearance of hotels can be traced back to ancient Rome, with the example of the accommodation facilities built by Greeks for the Roman government officials to enjoy some rest and entertainment (Levy-Bonvin, 2003). The concept of hotel brands firstly appeared in the 1920s, and was proposed by Conrad Hilton, who realised that the advantages of brand hotels lie in centralised procurement, cost control, and marketing (Kruesi, 2015). Similarly, Salvioni (2016) believed that the reason privately owned hotels are replaced by corporately owned hotels, is related to the continuous increases in construction, maintenance, and operating costs of private hotels. Many hotel models have been developed, such as the first franchise model created by Holiday Inn (Rushmore et al., 2001). According to Gee and Singh (2012), there are three different modes of brand hotel expansion: 1) expansion in the domestic market; 2) expansion in niche markets; and 3) development of new international markets. Since the research object of this study is international hotel brands, the analysis focuses on the third expansion method, the internationalisation process of hotel brands. *Internationalisation* refers to the growth and development process of a company outside the country where it is registered, usually in a specific region or globally (Salvioni, 2016). Indeed, all international hotel brands are formed from local brand models through international expansion.

The development of international hotel brands firstly appeared in the United States of America (US) after World War II (Johnson & Vanetti, 2005). Subsequently, the internationalisation trend of the hotel industry began to grow in the 1960s and continued for around 20 years (Johnson & Vanetti, 2005). InterContinental Hotels and Hilton Hotels were in a leading position in this regard because they were the first to internationalise the concept of hotel brands (Kruesi, 2015). Initially, the main targets of the international expansion of hotel organisations were in developed countries, but they then shifted to developing countries in the 1970s (Gee & Singh, 2012). Wu et al. (1998) mentioned that major hotel brands have been shifting their expansion targets from the mature US and European markets to developing countries in Asia since the 1980s, particularly in China. However, the internationalisation process of hotel brands was not smooth because the global economy experienced a period of turbulence in the late 1980s, and a large number of hotel organisations began to merge and form giant chain enterprises (Rushmore et al., 2001).

A *hotel chain enterprise* is a hotel company that owns a brand; that brand can be managed by the hotel company itself or by a group (Kruesi, 2015). With the development of globalisation, communication barriers between countries were gradually reduced, and the circulation of information, funds and personnel further promoted the development of international hotel brands (Salvioni, 2016). According to Das and De Groote (2008), the majority of international hotel brands in the world are controlled by a few hotel chains. Salvioni (2016) also stated that the top 10 hotel chains in the world controlled 75% of the world's hotels.

Data in Table 1 show that the world's top 10 hotel chains (by number of rooms in 2017) are mostly from the United States, China, and Europe. Marriott International is the largest company, with 5,952 hotels and 1,164,668 rooms worldwide, as they completed the acquisition of Starwood Hotel Group in 2015 (Marriott, 2015). Marriott Hotels & Resorts and Courtyard is Marriott's most well-known hotel brand (Das & De Groote, 2008). Hilton Hotels & Resorts is the second largest hotel organisation in the world, with 4,875 hotels and 796,440 rooms; Hampton Inn & Suites is Hilton's largest hotel brand (Kruesi, 2015). InterContinental Hotels Group rank third with 5,174 hotels and 767,135 rooms; Holiday Inn is their best-known brand (Kruesi, 2015).

Table 1   *Top 10 Hotel Chains Internationally by Number of Rooms in 2017*

Rank	Company	Country	Number of Hotels	Number of Rooms
1	Marriott International	USA	5,952	1,164,668
2	Hilton Hotel & Resorts	USA	4,875	796,440
3	InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG)	England	5,174	767,135
4	Wyndham Hotel Group	USA	8,035	697,607
5	Shanghai Jin Jiang International Hotel Group Co	China	5,977	602,350
6	AccorHotels	France	4,144	583,161
7	Choice Hotels International Inc	USA	6,514	516,122
8	BTG Home inns Hotels Group	China	3,402	373,560
9	China Lodging Group	China	3,269	331,347
10	Best Western Hotels & Resorts	USA	3,677	293,059

Note: Data sourced from HospitalityNet (2017)

Motivations for internationalising hotel brands have been extensively studied. According to Tse and West (1992), the main driving force for the internationalisation of hotel organisations is the pursuit of profit and growth. Kruesi and Zámborský (2016) confirmed the view of Tse and West (1992). By studying four international hotels in New Zealand, they found that hotels entered overseas markets to obtain greater profits. Moreover, Kitchen and Eagle (2002) pointed out that brand internationalisation helps to integrate the relationship between enterprises, customers, and brands and establish closer communication links. The profits of the company have increased significantly by building good international communication with consumers. Bell (1993) suggested that the reason for hotel brands' overseas expansion was to obtain brand awareness and global distribution because the familiarity and loyalty of existing and emerging markets would increase with wider geographic coverage of a brand. Brotherton and Adler (1999) wrote that hotel brands seek extensive geographic coverage because the development of a domestic market is necessarily restricted. Similarly, Yu and Huimin (2005) stated that the saturation of the domestic market and the emergence of new overseas markets have promoted the internationalisation of the hotel industry. However, internationalisation is not necessarily a successful strategy for hotel brands, because hotel organisations need to address political, economic, and legal issues in the process of internationalisation (Gee & Singh, 2012). Morschett et al. (2010) emphasised that the differences in cultural background and economic levels between countries make the internationalisation process of hotel organisations more difficult.

2.2.1 Characteristics of international hotel brands

The internationalisation strategies of hotel brands have enabled them to move out of the local market and into the international market. As a result, hotel brands usually operate in different countries and thus can also be regarded as multinational companies. International companies usually standardise some of their products, services, systems, and procedures (Hofstede, 2003), as do international hotel brands. Quality standards, reservation and marketing systems, and management styles are the foundation of contemporary hotel brands (Jayawardena et al., 2013) and the most prominent features of international hotel brands. Espino-Rodriguez and Taylor (2006) believed that centralised marketing, reservations, operations, and training systems established by hotel brands ensure consistent service quality. These centralised activities also improve the operational efficiency of hotel brands (Brown & Dev, 1998). Ivanova (2013) emphasised that global reservation system, distribution network, and training systems of hotel brands are their competitive advantages on entering new markets. Harkison, Hemmington, and Hyde (2018) agreed with Ivanova's point of view. Their study on the customer experience of luxury hotels in New Zealand found that a hotel with a complete global reservation and ordering system can provide customers with more convenience and increased hotel competitiveness. Additionally, the development of international hotel brands has also led to the standardisation of hotel products and services (Ivanova et al., 2016).

Many global hotel brands are building their own corporate culture and trying to embed their hotel products and services. This means that when customers choose hotels of a particular brand, they can experience a consistent quality of products and services. Aliouche and Schlentrich (2011) found that the standardisation of international hotel brands is reflected in the physical environment, such as in standardised room sizes, hotel designs, and appearance. They believed that a standardised physical environment could make hotel maintenance and decorating more efficient and economical. Furthermore, the advantages of standardisation are reflected in guests' experiences. Fairweather & Swaffield (2002) proposed integrating the natural environment into the hotel experience, such as natural landscapes, iconic buildings, and the New Zealand family experience, would enhance the customer experience. Some studies have concluded that guests feel safer and more comfortable with familiar hotel designs and atmosphere (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002; Raajpoot, 2004). Chan, Ye and Xu

(2016) found that Chinese international hotel brands recognized the importance of integrating local culture and international culture. Hiring local managers and employees can provide customers with a quality experience. An advantage of international brand hotels that cannot be ignored, is the power of their brands. According to O'Neill and Carlbaeck (2011), the brand is the basis for the existence of chain hotels. A strong brand provides a hotel with visibility and recognition, and a well-known brand symbolises a unique image and reputation to customers (Ivanova, 2013) O'Neill and Mattila (2009) pointed out the positive relationship between brand awareness of chain hotels and their share of loyal customers.

Given the international nature of hotel brands, economies of scale have become another significant advantage of hotel brands. Contractor and Kundu (1998) found that with increases in the number of member hotels in a hotel brand, the overall marketing costs can be better distributed, effectively reducing the financial burdens of brand hotels. However, Butler and Braun (2014) argued that increased numbers of member hotels may generate extra contract fees and other transaction costs, which are disadvantages for a hotel brand because these increase overall operating costs. Nevertheless, from a long-term perspective, the performance of a hotel may improve with the improvement of a hotel brand's image, which can compensate for the extra expenses (Holverson & Revaz, 2006). Besides, many studies have proved that the most crucial advantage of hotel brands is financial (Hanson et al., 2009; Xiao et al., 2008).

2.2.2 The challenges of international hotel brands

The extant literature indicates that the challenges faced by international hotel brands can be categorised into two major challenges. The first challenge is the threat posed by the sharing economy. In the early stages of hotel brands' development, academic and industry research focused on hotel brand expansion (Bender et al., 2008; Cunill, 2009), entry mode (Alon et al., 2012; Brookes & Roper, 2010), and affiliation types (Cunill & Forteza, 2010; Ivanova & Ivanov, 2015). Subsequently, the direction of hotel brand studies gradually turned to hotel performance (O'Neill & Carlbäck, 2011) and hotel human resource management (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). The past research directions illustrate the challenges faced by hotel brands in different stages. However, the operating mode of international hotel brands has been relatively stable after years of development.

The sharing economy is a likely manifestation of globalisation, enabled by the liberation of barriers between countries and the popularisation of the concept of sharing all over the world (Salvioni, 2016). The benefit of the sharing economy is to avoid fixed costs in the business model of existing companies, making business operations more flexible (Salvioni, 2016). In the hotel sector, the emergence of accommodation sharing is a manifestation of the sharing economy and a major challenge faced by international hotel brands (Salvioni, 2016). Accommodation sharing companies led by Airbnb, have received the attention of many scholars and hotel industry professionals. Since its establishment in 2008, Airbnb has been regarded as an alternative for brand hotels and has gradually become a mainstream accommodation choice (Salvioni, 2016). By 2015, Airbnb had more than 1 million rooms worldwide and was the world's largest peer-to-peer hotel service company, with more beds than InterContinental, Marriott, Hilton, or any other international hotel organisations (Salvioni, 2016). The emergence of Airbnb has changed the traditional accommodation model, and is characterised by connecting individuals with other individuals instead of the traditional model of connecting individuals and hotels (Salvioni, 2016).

The second major challenge facing international hotel brands is in the changes to customer needs and expectations. In terms of customer experience and expectations, many studies have emphasised consumers' pursuit of high-quality and personalised experience. Richard (2017) considered that consumers' knowledge is more adequately affected by Web 2.0 (i.e., social media), leading to higher expectations of services and products. Ivanovic and Galicic (2007) emphasised that hotel guests now value cultural diversity, ecological, and health awareness. They also have a unique interest in high-quality consumption experiences. Similarly, Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) stated that the consumption tastes of contemporary travellers are more diverse than ever before. High-quality and customised service experiences are highly valued. Bharwani and Butt (2012) also pointed out that contemporary guests pay more attention to the hotel experience, and the demand for experiential hotel products and services is growing. According to McIlroy and Barnett (2000), contemporary guest's demand for customised experiences is growing. Relying on membership plans and discount cards alone cannot meet customer needs or expectations, and it is difficult to obtain customer loyalty. McIlroy and Barnett (2000) evaluated the general discount strategy of a New Zealand hotel and found that although customers are satisfied with the price, their loyalty and experience

with the hotel is lacking. It can be seen that contemporary customers' demand for customised experiences is increasing.

However, as mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of international hotel brands is the standardisation of products and services, which is inconsistent with the consumption experience pursued by hotel guests. Lee (2011) argued that unified hotel design, décor, and facilities cannot provide a unique and unforgettable accommodation experience. Also, Yu et al. (2014) proposed that the similar designs of brand hotels may result in a loss of uniqueness and authenticity and would not attract consumers with unique interests. Although many scholars and hotel practitioners are aware of this problem, current solutions are concentrated on analysing consumer purchasing preferences, big data collection, and more detailed market segmentation. The specific area of how to balance standardisation and customisation from a hotel's perspective has been neglected.

2.3 Customer experience in the hotel industry

The concept of customer experience can be traced back to the 1980s and was widely disseminated at that time in the marketing literature (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Subsequently, this concept began to attract attention in academia and various fields of the industry. Marketing methods that create overall customer experience have replaced traditional product marketing due to the considerable changes in marketing models over the past thirty years (Maklan & Klaus, 2011). This phenomenon is particularly significant in relation to the service industry. For example, the hotel industry has gradually shifted its marketing focus from service quality to customer experience quality (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) first proposed the concept of *experience*, which they defined as an activity that can trigger fantasy, emotion, and fun. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), an experience is an activity of personal participation, and includes the intention of sharing with others. Berry et al. (2002) believed that experience is the interactive result of physical and social factors in the consumer environment. Mossberg (2007) pointed out that an experience is sensory integration, which has an impact on the customer's body, emotion, and spirit. Although the definitions of customer experience are various, they have some common characteristics. Gentile et al. (2007) summarised definitions of *customer experience*

and suggested that a customer experience occurs when a consumer interacts with a product or product supplier. These interactions cause a series of physical and emotional reactions to the customer.

2.3.1 The quality of customer experience

The extant literature on customer experience is in three main directions: 1) verifying the dimensions of the customer experience; 2) establishing a conceptual model of customer experience; and 3) identifying the antecedents of customer experience, and their consequences.

Hemmington (2007) pointed out that hospitality is an experience in a commercial context rather than service management. The commercial experience is composed of five major aspects: host-guest relationship, generosity, theatre and performance, little surprises, and security. According to Hemmington (2007), personalised service and an unforgettable experience are ways hotel organisations can gain a competitive advantage. Therefore, hotel companies should enhance delivery of these five dimensions of commercial experience to create unforgettable customer experiences. Tung and Ritchie (2011) explored the essence of memorable experiences using in-depth interviews based on research in the field of psychology. Their research results revealed that memorable experiences are composed of four key dimensions: affect, expectations, consequentiality, and recollection. Although their study did not explain the impact of memorable experiences on customer loyalty and satisfaction, it provides advice to practitioners on the possibility of creating memorable experiences for customers. Ren et al. (2016) conducted a questionnaire survey to investigate the potential dimensions of customer experience in budget hotels. Their results show that tangible-sensory experience, employee relational/interactive experience, aesthetics perception, and location, are the four main dimensions of customer experience. The authors found that these four dimensions positively correlated with customer satisfaction, and the tangible-sensory dimension had the most significant impact on customer satisfaction. The *tangible-sensory dimension* refers to the essential elements of hotel accommodation, that is, cleanliness, smell, quietness, shower, temperature, and other attributes. Therefore, budget hotels should first ensure that the essential attributes of the guest rooms are perfect, to improve customer satisfaction.

The second stream of the literature on customer experience developed a conceptual model of experience quality. Cole and Scott (2004) examined the mediating role of experience quality in the tourist experience model and found four main stages of the tourist experience: performance quality, experience quality, overall satisfaction, and revisit intention. Performance quality is expressed in the three dimensions of the ambiance, amenities, and comfort of tourist attractions. Experience quality is reflected in the three dimensions of entertainment, education, and community in tourist attractions. Fernandes and Cruz (2016) examined a model of customer experience quality and validated it in the wine industry. Their experience quality model contains six dimensions: environment, service providers, learning, entertainment, functional benefits, and trust. Their research shows that environment and functional benefits have the most significant impact on customer experience quality, while the dimensions of entertainment and learning are the least important.

The last stream of the experience literature focused on identifying antecedents affecting customer experience and its consequences. Ismail (2011) investigated the antecedents of British customers' experience with resort hotel brands and discovered price perception, core services, and word of mouth have a direct impact on customers' interpretation of resort hotel brand experience. Walls (2013) explored the impact of hotel consumer experience on customer values. The results show that the physical environment and human interaction are the two main characteristics affecting the customer experience. These two characteristics have a positive relationship with consumers' perceived value. Ali and Omar (2014) evaluated the determinants that influenced the guest experience in Malaysian resort hotels and the link between customer satisfaction and revisit intention. The results revealed that the decisive factor affecting the customer experience was the physical and social environment of the hotel, consistent with the finding of Walls (2013). Also, the physical and social environments were effective predictors of customer satisfaction and revisit intention. This result is similar to the findings of Cole and Scott (2004), who found that the quality of experience is a determinant of tourist satisfaction and willingness to revisit.

Ali et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between customer experience, emotion, satisfaction, and price acceptance in Chinese resort hotels. Their result showed a positive relationship between customer experience and emotions. Both factors had an impact on customer satisfaction, which also affects customers' acceptance of high prices. Stein and

Ramaseshan (2016) investigated the factors affecting customer experiences of New Zealand hotels and found that communication, process-related, employee-customer interaction, and product-customer interaction have a direct impact on the guest experiences. They emphasized that guests may be more satisfied with hotel services when these factors were optimized. Manthiou et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between hotel guests' brand experience and customer loyalty. Their study found that brand experience is a holistic concept with four aspects: sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual. The author emphasised that brand experience is directly related to the formation of customer loyalty, but affected by the customer's understanding of brand knowledge.

2.3.2 The dimensions of customer experience

Although the customer experience has received attention from scholars and industry practitioners in recent years, creating a unique customer experience and its subsequent management is still one of the many challenges facing the hotel industry (Walls et al., 2011), as the literature on customer experience lacks practical support, and there is no standardised framework to measure. Many studies on customer experience focus on identifying the factors that affect experience (e.g., Barsky & Nash, 2002; Knutson et al., 2008). In the hotel sector, scholars are trying to understand and establish the dimensions of customer experience. According to Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), literature on the dimensions of guest experience can be divided into two categories. The first category regards the feelings and emotions generated by customers in the experience as customer experience, and the second category focuses on evaluating interaction quality between the customer and the physical and social environment. The study by Pine and Gilmore (1999) addressed the first category, which proposed the most widely cited and recognised dimensions of customer experience.

According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), the first dimension of experience is *entertainment*, which refers to the experience of passive absorption by customers, such as in watching a theatre performance (Oh et al., 2007). The second dimension is *education*, in which customers actively participate in and experience an activity, such as skiing and diving (Ali et al., 2014). Pine and Gilmore (1999) believed that an educational experience would attract customers and stimulate their desire to learn. *Aesthetics* is the third dimension, and refers to the passive participation and immersion of customers in the experience, that is, customers' understanding of the surrounding environment (Sharma & Rather, 2015). In the hotel sector,

the physical environment is a key attribute, and includes factors such as colour, smell, setting, and layout (Han & Ryu, 2009). According to Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2013), the physical environment affects consumers' memory and behaviour. Similarly, Bitner (1992) pointed out that emotions such as satisfaction and loyalty are produced when customers are in a positive physical environment. Escapism is the fourth and final dimension. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines the *escapism* experience as the extent to which a customer is completely immersed in an activity. Such an experience requires a high degree of customer participation, for instance, playing in a casino (Hosany & Witham, 2009). Pine and Gilmore (2011) emphasised in a subsequent study that customers generate positive memories and behaviours when participating in the consumption of these four experience dimensions. Such behaviours lead to revisits and sharing with family and friends (Quadra-Felitti & Fiore, 2013).

Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) synthesised the two notions of evaluating the dimensions of customer experience and proposed seven dimensions: atmospheric, emotional-related experiences, staff-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction, guest security, learning, and lifestyle. According to them, *atmospheric* refers to the customer's cognition and emotional perception of the hotel's physical environment when interacting with the hotel. The physical environment of the hotel includes noise, indoor temperature, lighting, hotel layout and design, hotel décor, etc. (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). The authors' interpretation of "atmospheric" is similar to the third dimension of experience proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999), namely aesthetics, and both point out that the physical environment of a hotel has a significant effect on customer experience.

The second dimension is that of emotional-related experiences, and includes escapism/immersion, fun/entertainment, and surprises. *Escapism/immersion* refers to the feeling of being disconnected from reality when deeply involved in activities (Chang & Horng, 2010). *Fun/entertainment* refers to the happiness, pleasure, and enjoyment felt during the consumption process (Jin et al., 2013). For instance, customers enjoy an advanced and convenient hotel room technology (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). *Surprise* refers to exceeding customer expectations (Rust & Oliver, 2000). This experience can be a surprise delivered by the hotel's physical environment, such as careful and imaginative hotel design, but can also be reflected in services, such as free upgrades during check-in, and room rate discounts during check-out (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

Learning refers to the knowledge acquired by customers participating in and experiencing hotel services (Fernandes & Cruz, 2016). For example, hotels show and explain available services and projects to guests, introduce the country's culture, and lead customers to experience local culture and attractions, etc. (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). Both studies (i.e., those by Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019 and Pine & Gilmore, 1999) pointed out that learning experiences promotes customers' desire to learn new things and make them actively participate in hotel activities.

Staff-customer interaction refers to the advantages of interaction between hotel staff and customers (Ali et al., 2016). Such interactions exist in different consumption stages through various channels (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, email, and online comments) (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The quality of customer experience can be improved when employees present good interaction skills (e.g., polite, enthusiastic, and friendly, etc.) (Kim & Choi, 2013).

Customer-customer interaction refers to the perception and judgment of the interaction between customers (Lemke et al., 2010). For example, the experience of other guests may be affected when a customer yells or interrupts a conversation with a hotel employee (Chang & Horng, 2010). On the other hand, the experience of other guests may be improved when a customer respects the privacy of other customers and exhibits friendly behaviour (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

Guest security refers to the protection of guests' lives and property (Enz, 2009). Hilliard and Baloglu (2008) emphasised that customer security is an integral part of the overall customer experience. According to Feickert et al. (2006), hotel guests are willing to accept strict security measures and willing to pay for them.

Lifestyle refers to the degree to which the values and lifestyle performed by a hotel are consistent with those of its guests (Nam et al., 2011). According to Solomon (2019), a customer may have a sense of belonging to a brand when that brand demonstrates a lifestyle and values similar to that of the guests. Fawaz (2015) believed that hotels can respond to customers' changing lifestyles by developing personalised products and services, creating unique lifestyle experiences to attract guests and increase their sense of belonging.

2.3.3 The importance of customer experience in the hotel industry

The importance of customer experience management in the service industry has been recognised by many researchers (e.g. Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). First, products and services provided by hotels require a high degree of customer participation (Walls et al., 2011). Second, hotel products and services are hedonistic in nature, and the results of consuming these services are reflected in a customer's psychology (Hemmington, 2007). Therefore, customer experience management is highly appropriate for the hotel industry. Moreover, Acheampong and Asamoah (2013) pointed out that customers' perceived value and positive evaluations of a hotel experience are necessary for improving hotel performance. Therefore, the application of customer experience management can transform an experience into something that has a substantial impact on purchase decisions (Yoon & Lee, 2017). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), a positive experience can bring unique value to customers, and is difficult to imitate by competitors. Similarly, Iglesias et al. (2011) emphasised that the physical environment of hotels can be replicated by competitors, but unique experiences are more challenging. Furthermore, a positive customer experience greatly improves consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Berry et al., 2002).

The significance of customer experience is also reflected in its relationship with customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is one of the long-term concerns in the hotel industry (Golder et al., 2012). Sande (1998) defined *customer satisfaction* as an essential indicator for measuring the quality of products and services delivered by hotels to customers. Studies have discussed the impact of customer satisfaction on the survival and development of hotels (e.g. Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Getty & Thompson, 1995; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1988) believed that customer satisfaction and product/service quality are determinants of business success. Getty and Thompson (1995) studied the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction and found that customers' purchase intentions increased with improved satisfaction. Anderson and Sullivan (1993) similarly found a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, which means that a reasonable degree of customer satisfaction will prompt customers to remain loyal to a product, service, or brand. Han and Back (2007) explored the formation process of revisiting intention and pointed out that there is a positive function relationship between guests' revisit intention and satisfaction. Similarly, Ali and Amin (2014) researched resort hotel

environments and proposed that improving customer satisfaction increased customers' willingness to revisit.

However, Ren et al. (2016) pointed out that customer satisfaction in a hotel environment depends on the overall experience of guests during their stay. Because the hotel environment is composed of multiple elements, such as physical products, service quality, employee performance, environment, and atmosphere, these elements have an impact on the overall customer experience (Pizam & Ellis, 1999). Many scholars have studied the relationship between customer experience and satisfaction (e.g., Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Schmitt, 2003). According to Schmitt (2003), customer satisfaction is a result-oriented attitude based on customer experience, while customer experience is a process-oriented concept. Similarly, Meyer and Schwager (2007) pointed out that customer satisfaction depends on the accumulation of customer experience. That is, it depends on the difference between a positive experience and a negative experience.

To conclude, the literature shows the importance of customer satisfaction, which is an effective indicator for guests' purchase intention, revisit intention and customer loyalty. However, research has identified that the level of customer satisfaction depends on the quality of customer experience; the better the customer experience, the higher the satisfaction (Kim et al., 2008).

2.4   Online guest reviews

Online hotel reviews refers to all kinds of comments on hotel products published by hotel consumers on websites, and include reviews of experience, as well as general evaluations (text and rating evaluations), and opinions (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). With the rapid development of the internet, online hotel reviews have had a significant impact on the development of the hospitality industry (Phillips et al., 2016). Online hotel reviews have become an essential basis for travellers to make reservation decisions and for guests to anonymously evaluate hotel service quality (Teng et al., 2020). In the face of such a vast database of hotel review information, reviews are an important topic requiring in-depth research to actively analyse, utilise and explore their value in terms of inspiring and enhancing hotel enterprises and ultimately, the entire industry.

Online booking platforms not only provide customers with reservation and purchase services, but also with anonymous and free evaluations of products (Kim & Kim, 2004). This kind of evaluation mode is favoured by consumers and attracts many consumers to leave comments and information on products and services after making a purchase (Teng et al., 2020). Thus, many studies have focused on analysing data on online booking platform (Sparks & Fredline, 2007; Teng et al., 2020). Sparks and Fredline (2007) proposed that it is difficult for consumers to try before they buy in the hotel industry; consumers can only evaluate the service quality of hotels after they check in. For example, staff friendliness, cleanliness of the surrounding environment, room temperature, room configuration, and the quality of bedding, are usually not known to consumers before their stay experience. Consumers' online reviews on internet platforms are open, whether positive or negative, affecting the impressions of potential consumers of products and services, word-of-mouth recommendations, and consequently, the profit of the affected enterprises (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

According to data from the China Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2019), in 2017, the number of travel booking users in China was 37.58 million., and by 2018, had reached 41.01 million, an of 9.1%. Mobile travel bookings also increased 17.9%. According to Statista (2016), in 2007, about 65% of New Zealand internet users used the internet to make a travel booking or online booking, and by 2015, this figure had reached 80%. From these data, it is evident that whether in China or New Zealand, the number of online travel bookings is growing every year, and its popularity is also increasing. The use of mobile phone travel bookings has gradually become a habit of travellers. For online travel bookings, online hotel bookings are an integral part of the overall travel booking.

2.4.1 The importance of guest online reviews to the hotel industry

Online reviews by consumers have become an essential channel by which hotels can obtain the real feelings of consumers (Martin-Fuentes & Mellinas, 2018). Hotels can improve their business models or overcome deficiencies in their products and services based on suggestions made by customers in online reviews (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2018). Many scholars began to use consumers' online reviews as data sources to analyse their impact on hotel performance (Phillips et al., 2016). Online reviews are based on consumers' real consumption experiences, feelings, and experiences, in the form of short comments after consumption, and have the characteristics of equality and vitality in the network space (Duan et al., 2008). Phillips et al.

(2016) pointed out that online reviews may improve the accuracy and credibility of research, as they have the sought after qualities of authenticity and objectivity.

Reading hotel reviews on relevant platforms has become a habit of customers before booking hotels, with the primary purpose of improving convenience, quality, social security, and risk reduction (Kim et al., 2011). These evaluations not only affect other consumers' perceptions of a hotel, but also affect their consumption behaviours and future hotel room sales. Most customers do not read more than the first two pages of reviews (Pavlou & Dimoka, 2006), and the impact of recent reviews on customers is more significant than those of earlier reviews (Dellarocas, 2003). Positive online reviews can bring benefits to hotels, while negative online comments generally do not cause them losses (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). However, negative comments may have a negative impact on customers' perceptions of a hotel (Browning & Sparks, 2013).

As a product of the internet era, online comments, compared with data obtained from traditional questionnaires and in-depth interviews, are not limited in their evaluation scope, quantity and content, and can better reflect consumers' perceptions and concerns (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Online reviews can provide useful materials and data for studies of hotels, and their value has not been fully exploited and utilised. Online reviews can not only become the objects of research, but can also provide useful data for hotels or scholars, and provide consumers' comments on various aspects of hotels. The reviews are from consumers' post-consumption experiences, and potential consumers can make choices based on these reviews. Reviewed enterprises could fully exploit and utilise this information to make better decisions. Many organisations have realised the potential value of comments in textual data for gaining insights into customers' preferences, and guiding management decisions (Phillips-Wren & Hoskisson, 2015). Litvin et al. (2008) pointed out that the use of online hotel reviews is not a threat to the hotel industry, but a development opportunity.

2.5 Summary of the literature

This chapter reviewed the development of international hotel brands and highlighted its major characteristic, which is the standardisation of products and services. The challenges of international hotel brands were identified; the emergence of accommodation sharing led by Airbnb and the changes in customer needs and expectations are the main challenges faced by

international hotel brands. The concept of customer experience and its dimensions were explained and discussed. It was found that the extant literature has focused on verifying the dimensions of customer experience and identifying the antecedents and consequences of customer experience. A hotel's physical and social environment are considered as the main dimension affecting customer experience. The importance of customer experience in the hotel industry was also presented. Creating a unique customer experience can be a competitive advantage for hotels, and hard for others to replicate. It was found that customer experience is closely related to guest satisfaction and loyalty, which is essential to the survival and development of hotels. Finally, the development of online review platforms and their importance to the hotel industry were introduced and discussed. Online reviews can provide meaningful data for hotels to gain insights into customers. The methodology of this study is explained in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter first introduces the philosophical basis of the study, such as the research paradigms, ontology, and epistemology. The qualitative method adopted is explained, as are the data population and sampling method. The data collection process and data analysis method are also discussed in detail.

3.2 Research philosophy and paradigm

According to Hughes and Sharrock (2016), a *research philosophy* is a way to observe how the world works and how people acquire knowledge. O' Gorman (2014) pointed out that the role of a research philosophy is to clarify the nature of scientific beliefs. Similarly, Wilson (2014) observed that a research philosophy is a belief and a way of collecting and analysing data in the research process. As a philosophy influences researchers' learning methods and strategy choices (Wilson, 2014), it is necessary for researchers to understand the importance of a research philosophy. A research philosophy guides researchers as they observe the nature of and investigate reality, understand the sources and limitations of knowledge, as well as the significance of research principles and ethics (Hughes & Sharrock, 2016; O' Gorman, 2014). The research paradigm is discussed and explained in the following sections.

According to Ponterotto (2005), a *paradigm* is a collection of hypotheses about interrelated topics, and a conceptual framework. Senik (2009) recognised that a paradigm is a framework and derived from the worldview of the essence of existence and knowledge. Many scholars consider that the selected paradigm is the beginning of the research process, because it has an impact on the way knowledge is studied (Bell et al., 2018; Krauss, 2005). According to Krauss (2005), the research paradigm guides the research direction, how to research, and the findings of the research. Bell et al. (2018) stated that the paradigm affects the objectivity of the researcher, the research process, and interpretation of results.

Research paradigms can be divided into four categories: positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, and critical inquiry (Gray, 2019). The positions of positivism and post-positivism are based on an objective epistemology and a "being" ontology. The view of both paradigms is that the world and truth do not change (Veal, 2017). In contrast, the position of

interpretivism and critical inquiry is based on a subjective epistemology and a "becoming" ontology, that is, beliefs about the world and truth are changing and developing (Veal, 2017). According to Krauss (2005), the positivist paradigm is mainly used by researchers to find relationships and changes between variables. The positivist paradigm generally uses quantitative methods in research, such as surveys, questionnaires, and official data (Gray, 2014). Bell et al. (2018) pointed out that the interpretivist paradigm is a method for sociologists to use to understand the subjective meaning of social behaviour. Ryan (2018) emphasised that the world and the truth are subjective views based on personal experience in the interpretivist paradigm. According to Chowdhury (2014), the interpretivist paradigm aims to explore the meanings and motivations behind the behaviours of individuals and groups in society and culture. O' Donoghue (2006) stated that the interpretivist paradigm is usually used in case studies and text analysis.

The purpose of this study was to explore the attributes of customer experience of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand using online customer reviews. Customer online reviews reflect various subjective factors such as customers' personal opinions, experiences, and expectations (Ali, 2016). The objective of this study is in line with the viewpoint stated by Chowdhury (2014) that the interpretivist paradigm aims to explore the meanings and motivations behind personal behaviours. Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm was employed in this research.

3.3 Methodology

Brown (2006) explained that a *methodology* is a philosophical framework that can guide researchers to choose an appropriate research method through critical evaluation. It is also a procedure for ensuring that research is conducted in a scientific and systematic way (Brown, 2006). Veal (2017) defined *methodology* as the method of establishing research through reality, knowledge, and understanding. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are the two main types of research methodology (Gray, 2014). Quantitative research methods usually employed statistical procedures to analyse numerical data; that is, problems and phenomena that can be revealed from quantities (Finkbeiner, 2017). According to Daher et al. (2017), qualitative research aims to explore and deepen the understandings of personal experiences

and backgrounds. Qualitative data are more convincing than quantitative data as they are usually collected from individuals (Daher et al., 2017).

Qualitative methods are considered more appropriate for this study for the following reasons. First, the quantitative method is to carry out systematic empirical research on observable variables through calculations and statistical techniques to reveal the patterns and facts in the research field (Given, 2008). According to Quinlan et al. (2019), quantitative methods mostly use measurable data to make inferences about observed phenomena, presenting objective statistics and data analysis. On the other hand, qualitative methods are usually used to reveal changes in opinions and thoughts, and to deepen the understanding of potential motivations, reasons, and opinions in the research field by analysing the research data. Mohajan (2018) pointed out that qualitative methods aim to generate new concepts and theories through the perspectives and experiences of individuals or groups to explain social phenomena systematically. Qualitative methods emphasise the understanding of subjective reality in terms of individual or group experiences, emotions, behaviours, and attitudes (Queiros et al., 2017), conforming to the purpose of this study, which investigates customer experiences of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand.

Second, according to Gray (2019), quantitative research is a digital analysis of collected data based on the perspective and objective position that the facts do not change. To the contrary, qualitative research is based on subjective interpretations and discussions of non-digital data and focuses on the meaning of the content in order to reveal the social background of the research results. This study sought to understand customer experience by analysing online customer reviews collected from Booking.com. Felbermayr and Nanopoulos (2016) pointed out that customer reviews are personal views expressed through text based on experience and expectations. Therefore, customer reviews are non-digital data, and data collected from Booking.com are qualitative, because customer reviews are descriptions and explanations of their experiences.

Finally, Ryan (2018) believed that in the process of interpretivist research and data collection, the values and beliefs of researchers cannot be separated from truth and knowledge. Bore et al. (2017) stated that the study of customer reviews requires researchers to have an unbiased understanding of specific social fields and analyse and evaluate customers' opinions based on their own experience. Therefore, the qualitative approach is in line with interpretivism. In

summary, qualitative research is suitable for exploring and understanding the diversity of society and life, such as beliefs and values (Kumar, 2019). The purpose of this study was to evaluate and understand customer experiences through online customer reviews. Thus, a qualitative method was an appropriate approach for this research.

3.4 Research population and sampling method

According to Crisan and Borza (2015), a *research population* refers to individuals or groups selected to participate in specific research activities. The purpose of this research was to explore and compare customer experiences of the same international hotel brands in China and New Zealand. However, it is not easy to compare these, because the number of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand is large and distributed across various cities. According to Boddy (2016), the depth of a sample is more important than its size in qualitative research because its purpose is to examine social reality. Hennink et al. (2020) pointed out that qualitative research usually selects a small representative sample for specific research purposes. Therefore, the research objects selected for this study were three international hotel brands operating in China and New Zealand: Hilton Hotel, Crowne Plaza Hotel, and the Grand Mercure Hotel. The selected six international brand hotels were located in Auckland, New Zealand, and Shenzhen, China.

These three international hotel brands are chosen because of their popularity, and their chain stores are operating in many cities in China and New Zealand. On the one hand, the breadth of hotels helps obtain more data, making this research more reliable and accurate. Also, these hotel brands are all internationally renowned. Most customers have a specific understanding or experience with the brand hotel service. Thus, the result of this research can be more practical. On the other hand, choosing three representative hotels in China and New Zealand are more researchable than choosing a large number of unknown hotels. It is more in line with the research method selected in this study. Moreover, too many research objects may increase the difficulty of data statistics, which is not conducive to obtaining accurate data.

According to Statistics New Zealand (2020), Auckland is the industrial and commercial centre of New Zealand. It is also the gateway city to New Zealand's foreign trade and tourism, as it is the hub of road, rail, and air transport. As New Zealand's largest and busiest commercial and financial centre, Auckland is known as the "economic capital" of New

Zealand. According to the Shenzhen Government (2020), Shenzhen is China's economic centre and regional financial centre. It is also an important hub of railway, air, and sea transport in China. Shenzhen occupies a vital position in financial services, foreign trade exports, and ocean transport, and is one of the representative cities of China's economic development. Accordingly, it can be concluded that Auckland and Shenzhen are the economic centres of New Zealand and China respectively, occupying important positions. Both Auckland and Shenzhen can be regarded as representative samples, so can represent New Zealand and China to a certain extent. Meanwhile, the rapid development of the tourism and hotel industry in these two countries has contributed to their economic growth. China is currently one of the most-watched inbound and outbound tourism markets globally (Ma, 2020). New Zealand is also a famous tourist destination country with unique natural scenery and authentic Maori culture. Therefore, choosing China and New Zealand as the research objects is more representative.

This study aimed to explore customer experiences by analysing customer online reviews on Booking.com. However, it is impossible to analyse all the comments due to the large number of customer reviews. In qualitative research, the richness of sample content is more valuable than sample volume (Hennink et al., 2020). Thus, it was important to choose an appropriate sampling technique. According to Babbie (2013), there are two main sampling methods, probability sampling and non-probability sampling. *Probability sampling* means that each individual in the research group has a certain probability of being selected as the research sample, which is commonly used to infer important parameters or characteristic values of the wider research group (Babbie, 2013). *Non-probability sampling* refers to the method of sampling in which probability does not exist (Babbie. 2013). Although the deviation of the results of probability sampling is smaller than that of non-probability sampling, non-probability sampling can help researchers obtain the most useful and rich sample data for their research topics (Babbie, 2013). Since the purpose of this study was to explore customer experience through online guest reviews, the richness of the sample content was more important than was the sample size. Therefore, non-probability sampling was employed in this study.

According to Hennink et al. (2020), there are three common non-probability sampling methods: convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and quota sampling. In c*onvenience*

sampling, the researcher uses the most easily obtained set of samples as the research data (Howitt, 2019). Using *purposive sampling,* researchers deliberately search for individuals with specific characteristics to form a research sample according to the research purpose (Flick, 2018). *Quota sampling* refers to the method by which investigators classify or stratify the overall sample into a specific number according to certain characteristics and randomly selected samples within the quota (Hennink et al., 2020).

This study explored customer experiences by analysing online guest reviews on Booking.com. A customer review generally reflects the consumer's experience. Therefore, it was not necessary in this study to deliberately search for specific comments to form a purposive research sample. Furthermore, cognisant of the cost and time constraints of the study, the collection efficiency and timeliness had to be considered during the sample collection process (see Suthakar et al., 2016). Thus, this study adopted convenience sampling to collect online reviews of three international hotel brands selected from the top 10 international hotel organisations presented in **Table 1** (see Chapter 2).

3.5   Data collection process

Since this research investigated the attributes of customer experience in different international hotel brands in China and New Zealand, six internationally branded hotels in Auckland and Shenzhen were selected: Hilton Auckland, Hilton Shenzhen Futian, Crowne Plaza Auckland, Crowne Plaza Hotel & Suites Landmark Shenzhen, Grand Mercure Auckland, and Grand Mercure Oriental Ginza Shenzhen. According to Booking.com, these three hotel brands received 4648 reviews in total (See **Table 2**). Jennings (2010) suggested that when the total population of a research group exceeds 2000, a sample proportion of three to five percent of the total population is appropriate to ensure the reliability of the research. This study collected five prevent of the total reviews, which were in approximately 230 comments, to make it easier to split the data between the selected six hotels. The total number of reviews was set at 300, and the number of reviews selected from each hotel was 50. The data collection method and the process are explained in detail in the next section.

Table 2   *International Hotel Brands Operating in Auckland and Shenzhen*

Hotels ╲ Regions	Auckland	Shenzhen
No. of reviews — Hilton	895	387
No. of reviews — Crowne Plaza	1515	306
No. of reviews — Grand Mercure	1059	486
Total reviews	3469	1179

The data set for this study, a total number of 300 online guest comments, was collected from Booking.com between July and August in 2020. The most recent 50 comments from each hotel were selected to represent the latest feedback from the customers. The source of the data set was Booking.com, a database with more than 140 million customer reviews (Martin-Fuentes & Mellinas, 2018). In terms of the number of reviews, Booking.com occupies a leading position among all online travel agencies, accounting for almost 40% of online reviews worldwide (Wohl, 2017).

3.6 Data analysis method

According to Judd et al., (2017), *data analysis* is a process of analysing, summarising, understanding, and digesting a large amount of collected data using appropriate analysis methods. Data analysis can help researchers maximise the role of data (Judd et al., 2017). Similarly, Abulela and Harwell (2020) pointed out that data analysis is a detailed study and summary of the collected data. The formation of research conclusions requires extracting useful information from the data analysis process (Abulela & Harwell, 2020).

The most commonly used methods for data analysis in qualitative research are thematic analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, and grounded theory (Mayan, 2016; Riley & Weiss, 2016). *Thematic analysis* refers to coding research content to determine the main themes and provide conceptual instructions (Glase & Laudel, 2013). *Discourse analysis* is a method of studying the meaning of language, sound, or gesture communications, and its purpose is to understand the application of different types of expressions in social life

(Johnstone, 2018). *Grounded theory* refers to a research method that develops a theory from a systematic collection and analysis of data (Silverman, 2016).

The content analysis method was employed in this study for the following reasons. According to Hofmann (2013), *content analysis* is a research method based on an objective perspective for conducting a systematic and quantitative analysis of the target content. Using this method means non-quantitative information can be transformed into quantitative data, and the meaning of content information can be derived by establishing categories with special meanings to explain the target content (see Hofmann, 2013). Marvasti (2019) pointed out that content analysis is a commonly used method in qualitative research. It is a method that interprets data based on the subjective perspective of researchers, encodes and recognises themes, and then conducts systematic classification. Marvasti also emphasised that in qualitative content analysis, data are usually presented in the form of text and themes. Scotland (2012) explained that the content analysis method overcomes the difficulty of finding information through a coding process so that it can more accurately and comprehensively understand the quality of the research content. This study explored the customer experience by analysing reviews posted by the guests on the Booking.com. Customer online reviews are presented in text form, so they needed to be coded and classified before analysis. The detailed content analysis process is discussed next.

From reviewing the literature, it was evident that researchers have different opinions on the process of content analysis (e.g., Bengtsson, 2016; Marvasti, 2019), but what they have in common is that the data analysis should be carried out in steps. According to Bengtsson (2016), the process of content analysis can be divided into four main stages: decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation, and compilation. He emphasised that these four stages need to be repeated to maintain the quality and credibility of the analysis. Data in this study were analysed according to these four steps.

Stage 1: Decontextualisation

According to Bengtsson (2016), researchers should be familiar with the collected data and understand the overall content of the text. The purpose of this study was to explore and investigate the attributes of customer experiences of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand. The data set was 300 online customer reviews collected from Booking.com.

The sample content described customers' consumption experiences in hotels. The decontextualisation process consists of two steps: 1) break down the transcribed text into smaller meaning units in order to understand the sample content; and 2) use open coding for each meaning unit (Bengtsson, 2016). The meaning units were recorded manually in this study (see Table 3). Some of the reviews collected from hotels in China were Chinese, and they will be translated into English at this stage.

Table 3   *Example of the Condensed Meaning Units*

Hotel: Hilton Auckland	
Guest Name: Marimagor	
Guest comments	**Condensed meaning units**
Was so worth it!!!!!!!!!!! every last dollar x.	Was so worth it. Every last dollar x
Breakfast - Delicious and was worth it!!!	Delicious breakfast
Bed - OMG!! I spent TBH majority of my time in that bed! So good!	Comfortable bed
Swimming was Nice and so was the Gym - wish they had a spa though, but the pool was nice and warm with a beautiful view of the skytower.	Nice gym/Swimming pool was nice and warm with beautiful views/ No Spa
Staff and Service this was the highlight of the trip, how nice and polite everyone was.	Polite staff and nice service
It's nice even after the whole COVID lockdown how positive people can be and how the vibe can really set the mood for a city getaway like this...	Positive people and vibe
Water should be FREE as well.... (really think about it) and should stop using bottles, to save the waters surrounding the Hilton at the VIADUCT.	Bottle water should be free and should stop using bottles.

According to Bengtsson (2016), open coding is a process by which researchers label each meaning unit based on their understanding of the context. Sometimes the meaning expressed by the guests were not clear, but could be inferred through an understanding of the overall context.

See for example, the following guest comments:

Was so worth it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! every last dollar x.

That was the only thing missing, otherwise it was GREAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! and so WORTH IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

It was not possible to understand the meaning of these sentences clearly, but it was inferred from the context that the guest believed the accommodation experience was worth the money he/she spent. Bengtsson (2016) pointed out that coding can help researchers identify concepts, reduce cognitive changes in the analysis process, and improve reliability. The encoding process can be done manually or using a computer program (Bengtsson, 2016). Although computer programs can speed up the encoding process, they cannot analyse complex text data (Bengtsson, 2016). Therefore, the collected data were manually coded in this study. Coding examples are presented in Table 4.

Table 4   *Open Coding Examples*

Condensed meaning units	Codes
Was so worth it, every last dollar.	Value for money
Room with amazing views of the sun	Room / views
Delicious breakfast and was worth it	Breakfast
Gym was nice	Gym
Swimming pool was nice and warm with a beautiful view of the Sky tower.	Swimming pool
Nice and polite staff and service was the highlight of the trip.	Friendly staff / excellent service
Positive people and nice vibe.	Atmosphere
Spa was the only thing missing and wish Hilton had it.	Spa
Water should be free and should stop using bottles.	Amenities / environmentalism

Stage 2: Recontextualisation

According to Bengtsson (2016), the importance of this stage is to check whether there is any discrepancy between the original text data and the meaning units. This requires re-reading of the original text and each meaning unit to find any differences. The purpose of this step is to

help recheck the original text, and determine if important information has been omitted. The researcher needs to re-decontextualise the original texts if there is an omission.

In this step, data in Table 3 were used to check the original texts of the guest comments and compare them with the condensed meaning units again. No discrepancies were found, and no important information had been omitted.

According to Bengtsson (2016), the recontextualisation step ends when there are no differences in the inspection results, and useless information in the original text can be discarded.

For example, in this extract, the shaded part of the sentence was considered redundant information in the original text, and was discarded.

Bed - OMG!! I spent TBH majority of my time in that bed! So good!

Stage 3: Categorisation

In this step, the codes are categorised, and the themes determined. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggested that a theme is an overall concept with potential meaning. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) pointed out that themes represent a class of codes with similar characteristics. Codes can usually only reflect a particular aspect or perspective of an event, but a theme is more extensive than a code (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A theme is a collection of different perspectives based on the main central idea (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The determination of a theme requires re-examining the codes and discovering associations between the codes, that is, the similarities and repetitiveness of the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Krippendorff (2004) emphasised that the identified theme needs to meet the homogeneity within the group and the heterogeneity between the groups, that is, no code should exist in two themes simultaneously. Similar codes should be organised into themes related to the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The related themes of customer experiences are presented in Table 5.

Table 5　　　　　　　　　*Themes of the Attributes*

Themes	Code range

Room	Room condition/In-room amenities/Room size/Bed and beddings/Bathroom facilities /
Service	Professional service/ Fast response service/Inattentive service/Upgrade service/Check-in and check-out process
Staff performance	Professional Staff/Skilled staff/Multilingual staff
Facilities/Amenities	Sauna/Restaurant and bar/Parking/Gym and pool
Food and beverages	Breakfast choice/Food quality and variety/Beverage quality and selection
Location	Convenient to transport/Walking distance
Price	Value for money
Atmosphere/Ambiance	Feelings of luxury/Feelings of comfort
Social responsibility	Social responsibility

Stage 4: Compilation

In this step, the analysis and compilation process of the research question begins. Bengtsson (2016) emphasised that in the analysis process, researchers should focus on exploring how the informants understand the experience and transform it into consciousness. That is, the researcher should understand the essence of the phenomenon under study. When conducting qualitative content analysis, the collected data should be analysed from a neutral perspective, considering the objectivity of the data (Bengtsson, 2016). It has been suggested to compile the themes, categories, and subheadings into a table so that readers can quickly understand the analysis results (see Bengtsson, 2016).

In this stage, it was evident that the themes categorised for each hotel in step 3 reflected the attributes that guests considered affected their stay experiences. Thus, the themes and codes were summarised and mapping for each hotel, which made it easy to identify how the attributes varied across the same hotel brand in Auckland and Shenzhen. For example, the attributes and sub-factors affecting customer experience are summarised for Crowne Plaza hotel in Auckland, in Figure 1.

Figure 1 *The Attributes of Customer Experience at Crowne Plaza Auckland*
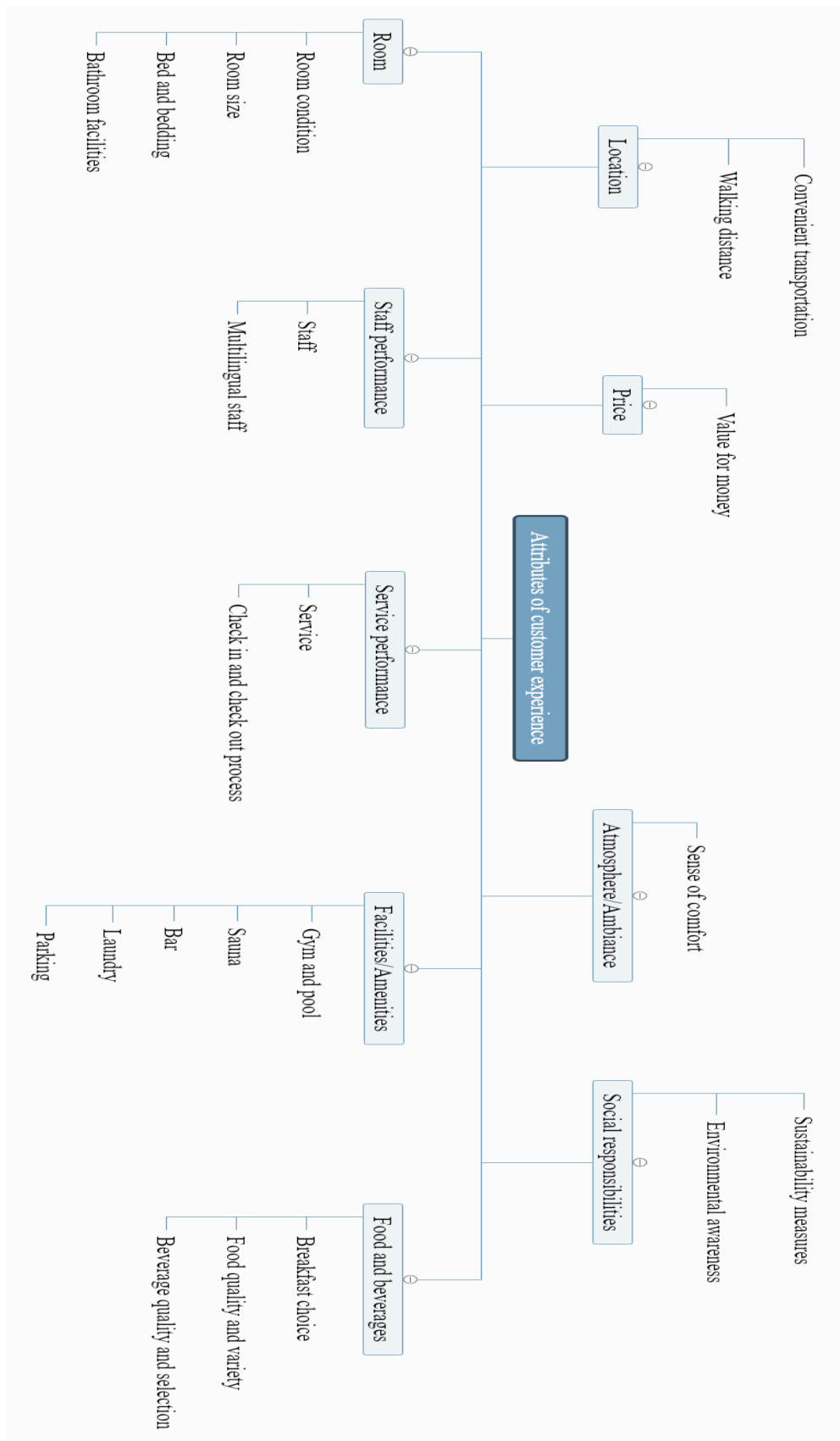
3.7   Summary of methodology

This chapter discussed and explained the methodology employed in this study, including the research paradigms, research methods, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. This study was based on an interpretive paradigm and guided by scholarly works on qualitative methods. A data set of 300 online customer reviews was collected from Booking.com using a convenience sampling technique in order to explore the customer experiences of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand. The content analysis approach was employed to analyse the collected data. The findings and discussion of the data are presented in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Chapter overview

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings from the analysis of online guest reviews collected from Booking.com. The results of the content analysis revealed that rooms, staff performance, service performance, location, food and beverages, facilities/amenities, cleanliness, price, property and atmosphere/ambiance, were the most significant attributes affecting customer experiences in international hotel brands. Some surprising attributes were discovered. Each attribute is discussed and compared with findings in the extant literature.

4.2 Identification of attributes affecting customer experiences

The attributes affecting the customer experiences in each hotel are summarised in Table 6. Room, service performance, staff performance, facilities/amenities, location, food and beverages, cleanliness, price, property, and atmosphere/ambiance, were the main attributes affecting customer experiences.

Table 6 *Summary of Attributes of Customer Experience among Three International Hotel Brands in Auckland and Shenzhen*

Region: Auckland			Region: Shenzhen		
Hilton	**Crowne Plaza**	**Grand Mercure**	**Hilton**	**Crowne Plaza**	**Grand Mercure**
Attributes	**Attributes**	**Attributes**	**Attributes**	**Attributes**	**Attributes**
Room	Room	Room	Room	Room	Room
Service	Service	Service	Service	Service	Service
Staff performance	Staff performance	Staff performance	Staff performance	Staff performance	Staff performance
Facilities/Amenities	Facilities/Amenities	Facilities/Amenities	Facilities/Amenities	Facilities/Amenities	Facilities/Amenities
Food and beverages	Food and beverages	Food and beverages	Food and beverages	Food and beverages	Food and beverages
Location	Location	Location	Location	Location	Location
Price	Price	Price	Price	Price	Price
Atmosphere/Ambiance	Atmosphere/Ambiance	Atmosphere/Ambiance	Atmosphere/Ambiance		Atmosphere/Ambiance
	Social responsibility				

4.3 Rooms

As one of the core products of hotels, the quality of hotel rooms is considered an important factor affecting customer experience. Many factors influence how guests perceive the quality

of a room. According to the results, there are five factors that contribute to guests' experiences of room quality: Room condition, room size, bed and bedding, in-room facilities/amenities, and bathroom facilities.

4.3.1 Room condition

Room condition refers to how guests feel about staying in a room. The findings suggest that the overall condition of a room is a key element used by guests to gauge their experience with their overall stay. The majority of the guest reviews suggested room conditions such as a clean room or room views, were an important attribute of their stays. These are some examples of the guest comments on booking.com:

> *The room is beautiful and comfortable and Modern… (Rachel, Hilton, Auckland)*

> *Very bad, unbearable smell in their pallos [sic] and rooms… All rooms have a boiled chicken foot smell, (that smell followed us everywhere), we even asked for room change and it was the same… (Biagio, Hilton, Shenzhen)*

> *Room and bed were very comfortable, and the room was super quiet considering we were in central Auckland, we had a great night sleep here. (Abigail, Crown Plaza, Auckland)*

4.3.2 Room size

Room size is another factor that affects the guest's impression of the room, as reflected in a considerable number of online reviews in the data. Guests have an intuitive impression of the size of the room and compare this with their expectations. The difference between actual and expected room size can affect a guest's experience positively or negatively. Findings showed that guests were often happy when assigned a larger room than they had expected. These are some typical comments collected from booking.com:

> *Standard room feels like a suite, enough space to relax… (Anonymous, Hilton, Shenzhen)*

> *The room is too small to turn around, there is no place for the luggage rack or sofa… (Xi, Crowne Plaza, Shenzhen)*

The rooms are very small, which, at over 200 euros per night, should be quite larger and better equipped compared to the country standard… (Janina, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

4.3.3   Bed and bedding

Beds and bedding were considered by guests to be the most important in-room amenities. The findings indicated that a large and comfortable bed was preferred, and people prefer hard mattresses to soft ones.

…comfortable bed was like sleeping on a cloud. (Kingi, Hilton, Auckland)

…The biggest bed I have been in my life, almost 3 meters wide!!! Very comfortable, slept like an angel… (Nuno, Hilton, Shenzhen)

…I found the beds to be a bit soft. They were comfortable but I prefer a slightly harder mattress. (Richard, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

…Beds were very soft and were quite uncomfortable. On top of the mattress, there was both a mattress protector and a quilt underneath the bottom sheet. (Mike, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

4.3.4   In-room amenities

The findings showed that in-room facilities/amenities also affected customer experience. Out of the amenities mentioned in the dataset, wi-fi was that most commonly mentioned in guest comments, and were mostly negative.

…The internet was also a bit bleak, however that seemed to be an overall China issue. (Alicia, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

Just a Wi-Fi problem, not enough signal in the room, so very low speed and cuts. (Charles-henri, Crowne Plaza, Shenzhen)

…The wifi was difficult to login and I gave up trying and used my phone. Usually I have no problem at all with this task, but the hotel needs better information for guests reprocess to access wifi. (Richard, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

4.3.5 Bathroom

Bathroom quality was a common factor affecting customer experiences. The findings demonstrated that many guests were unhappy with their bathrooms.

…There is a gap in the glass shower door, causing the water to splash out. So, it ended with a very wet & slippery floor each time someone uses the shower. (Ho, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

…The bathroom was antiquated. One fitting and a shower over the bath. We are in our 80's and it is difficult if not dangerous to be getting into the bath and standing in it without a non-slip mat. (John, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

…The decor was a bit dated in our bathroom and it had a frosted glass sliding door that didn't close properly in the bathroom. Not ideal. (Mary, Hilton, Auckland)

4.3.6 Summary

Overall, rooms are one of the core products of hotels, and their quality has a significant impact on the experiences of hotel guests, as discussed in many studies (Alrawadieh & Law, 2019; Kotler et al., 2017). Ren et al. (2016) claimed that room condition, in-room technology, and various other attributes, contribute to the guest experience. The findings from this study confirmed that rooms are one of the most important attributes of customer experience at hotels. Among the different room attributes, room condition, such as clean rooms, quiet rooms, and rooms with views, are valued by most guests, which is consistent with the work of Chan and Baum (2007), who emphasised the intangible factors of hotel rooms. Similarly, Kim et al. (2019) pointed out that beds were the most important attribute for luxury hotel guests. Although this study is not focused on the experience of luxury hotel guests, the findings also indicate that bed and bedding are considered by guests as the most significant in-room amenities. The extant research suggests that customer satisfaction may be enhanced by well-equipped room facilities (Khozaei et al., 2016; Xu & Li, 2016;), a finding supported

by the findings in this study, as room facilities were found to be important to guests, especially wi-fi facilities.

4.4 Service performance

The findings revealed that the frequency of mentioning service in online reviews was relatively high compared to comments on other attributes. This suggests that guests considered the quality of service as an important aspect of their experiences. As one of the attributes affecting customer experience, service performance is important, as it may have an impact on guest revisit intentions. Guests expressed their willingness to revisit when the service pleased them, but wrote that they would not visit again when service failure occurred.

4.4.1 Check-in and check-out process

The process of check-in and check-out was frequently mentioned in the online reviews. It was evident that poor check-in services could ruin a customer's experience at the very beginning. As commented by guests in online reviews:

> …There are not many check-in counters and the queuing time is quite long (20 mins) … (Simone, Hilton, Auckland)

> …It took 15 minutes to checkout… (Terence, Hilton, Shenzhen)

> …Check out was very slow as always, not the first time we have stayed at this accommodation. (Anonymous, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

4.4.2 Upgrading service

The findings suggest that extra service made customers have a memorable experience, which is helpful in terms of enhancing their willingness to revisit. "Upgraded services" were considered as extra services, and frequently mentioned in the reviews. As demonstrated by many guests in online reviews, upgrades were valued by them:

> Perfect place to stay at. Loved everything about it got upgraded to a high floor room for our anniversary…just made our stay there really good… Highly recommend it and will definitely be going back… (Wai, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

I booked on behalf of my parents as an anniversary present. The staff was very accommodating and even upgraded their room to harbor side! Will definitely be staying again. 10/10 would recommend. (Celine, Hilton, Auckland)

"Little gifts" offered by the hotel, as another service surprise, made guests feel that they were cared about. This was highlighted by guests in the online reviews:

We were well taken care of, with complimentary champagne etc, as we were just married on the day we arrived… (Janie, Hilton, Auckland)

…The service is impeccable, I made a passing comment to my partner at check in about being excited for my birthday weekend and we arrived back in the room later that day to a sweet card and treats on behalf of the hotel… (Natasha, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

4.4.3 Service failures

The findings indicated that guests often encountered service failures, and commented on them in their online reviews, mentioning attributers such as slow and unprofessional service. Service failure affected the customer experience and could be regarded as one of the decisive factors influencing their revisit intentions. A number of hotel's operational areas were mentioned in the guest reviews, such as reception, in-room service, and concierge.

…Our booking made through Booking.com 21 July failed. We had to wait about 45 minutes to get this sorted. Given that this was my wife's 70th birthday the excitement was totally lost. (Geoff, Hilton, Auckland)

Please upgrade your services…From the start, I wasn't greeted at the door. The valet was in dreamland - had to leave my hubby in the car and walk to reception to find your valet. When found, he took his time. So, I had to walk again to him and ask if he needed help, what was delaying him. I expected reception to walk over and see what the delay was, but he didn't. (Sylvia, Hilton, Auckland)

Disappointing…No welcome at the door or offer of assistance with our luggage by staff who were standing at the entrance. What is that? Something as simple as no visible spoons to stir and make our coffee which seemed ridiculous. We only travel

intermittently from the country and chose to go with the Hilton because of the Brand. I particularly wanted to spoil my wife. Our last stay in Auckland was at the Sofitel which set the bar for us by exceeding our expectations. Unfortunately, this experience left us feeling empty. We won't be back. (Piripi, Hilton, Auckland)

4.4.4 Summary of service performance

Service performance is an important attribute affecting customer experience and mentioned frequently by guests in the online reviews. It was found that customers expected quality service in brand hotels. Also, frequent guests attached great importance to the consistency of service and compared it with that of their past experiences, or with the service at other branded hotels. As discussed in Chapter 2, the features of global hotel brands are reflected in standardised products and services (Ivanova et al., 2016). The findings of this study demonstrate that quality service is considered by guests to be an expected standard of international hotel brands. According to Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), a pleasant surprise offered by a hotel affects the customer's experience. The results of this study revealed that extra service can enhance customer experience, which is consistent with the finding of Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019). Furthermore, it was found that guests who received extra service from hotels were likely to visit again. On the contrary, service failures may be the decisive factor leading to non-repeat stays. These results showed that customer experience affects guests' revisit intention. This finding is similar to the findings of Cole and Scott (2004), who believed that experience quality was a determinant factor of tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. Finally, most of the service failures arose because of staff factors, which are discussed in the next section.

4.5 Staff performance

Staff performance, as another essential attribute affecting customer experience, also mattered to guests. Staff characteristics, multilingual staff, and staff training were frequently mentioned in the online guest reviews. These revealed that guests prefer and enjoy service offered by skilled and attentive staff. Staff who can speak several languages are helpful for increasing the quality of guest experiences. The results showed that the primary factor that led to negative customer experience, was a lack of staff training.

4.5.1 Staff characteristics

According to the online guest reviews in Booking.com, "friendly," "welcoming," "professional," "helpful," and "attentive," were the most desirable staff characteristics considered by guests. The findings suggested that being "friendly and welcoming" was considered the most important staff attitude. Guests often associated helpful staff with great service. Indeed, customer experience may be enhanced when guest difficulties are solved by helpful staff. This was mentioned by many guests in online reviews:

…Staff there were so helpful with everything and just made our stay there really good… (Wai, Hilton, Auckland)

I really enjoyed the friendly staff engaging in conversation making you feel extremely comfortable. (Anonymous, Hilton, Auckland)

A very good hotel where staff went out of their way to provide a thoroughly lovely experience… I also had very good attention and service from Sam the assistant manager who was friendly and helpful with planning and guiding my day and providing clear instructions for getting around. (Jennifer, Hilton, Shenzhen)

4.5.2 Language skills of staff

The findings revealed that the language barriers caused by a lack of multilingual staff was inconvenient for guests, and had an impact on customer experience, as shown in these examples of guest comments on Booking.com:

…The staff are extremely helpful and can speak both English and Chinese… (Anonymous, Crowne Plaza, Shenzhen)

…Staff does not speak good fluent English, so communication is a bit challenging. (Rohit, Hilton, Shenzhen)

…There was no staff who could speak Japanese. (Hiroshi, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

…Too bad no staff speaks French when it is common in many tourist places in Auckland… (Patrice, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

4.5.3 Poor staff performance

As mentioned before, most of the service failures related to a lack of staff training. The findings indicated that staff need to be trained in appropriate telephone answering and check-in procedures. Clear information and instructions about hotel accommodation and facilities were expected by guests, as the following examples demonstrate.

…Room service calls were not answered consistently… (Brittany, Hilton, Auckland)

…Whoever answering the phone at the reception certainly needs some extra training, I've been asking reception by phone for 3 times about the sauna services, each time comes with different answer. (Jianyu, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

…Starting with the staff at check in, they did not give us the necessary information, such as where the breakfast room is… (Martina, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

…We had a fire alarm and evacuation at midnight and the staff was not helpful or communicative during the process or after. At check in the staff did not give proper information or instruction as to lodging details and accommodations - breakfast, etc. (Amanda, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

4.5.4 Summary of staff performance

The results illustrated that customers appreciated staff's friendly and welcoming attitudes and were satisfied when service was provided by helpful and skilled staff. This finding is consistent with the work of Cetin and Walls (2016), who found that skilled staff with a positive attitude was essential for creating a good customer experience. Online comments indicated that guests had language expectations of employees in international hotel brands, as language barriers affected the customer experience. This finding is similar to that of a study conducted by Cheng and Zhang (2019), who found that language barriers were the main issue affecting the experience of Airbnb hosts and their guests. Thus, issues caused by language differences are worth noting in studies of customer experience. Furthermore, this finding confirms those in many studies that found a lack of staff training causes negative customer experiences (e.g. Chidley & Pritchard, 2014; Harris, 2007). The findings from this study revealed that staff training was especially needed in relation to the operation of

telephone answering and check-ins. As discussed in the literature review, Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) suggested that staff-customer interactions are one of seven major dimensions affecting customer experience. The findings of this study confirmed that the quality of interactions between hotel staff and guests affects the customer experience. This is consistent with the work of Kim and Choi (2013), who found that guest experiences could be enhanced with quality interactions.

4.6   Hotel facilities

When analysing the online guest reviews, it was found that guests were very concerned about the variety and condition of the hotel facilities. Gyms, swimming pools, and saunas, were entertainment facilities frequently mentioned in online comments. Guests preferred different types of fitness equipment and had specific quantity requirements. The lack of these entertainment facilities made guests unhappy, which influenced their experience. Besides, this, satisfaction with the condition of the facilities is also worth noting. The findings indicated that modern and advanced facilities were favoured by guests over outdated ones. The online comments from Booking.com provide useful examples:

…Every decent hotel should have a sauna. (Anonymous, Hilton, Auckland)

Old 5-star hotel with outdated facility… (Wang, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

...You only have one stationary bike in the gym, which is often busy, so for a hotel of your stature I would expect 2 at least? (Bruce, Hilton, Shenzhen)

...My partner particularly liked the virtual gym facility, a training room where you can self-select from dozens of different work out videos… (Natasha, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

The findings showed that gyms, swimming pools, and saunas, were entertainment facilities that guests frequently enjoyed during their stays. It was evident that such facilities enhanced the experience of guests, which is consistent with the findings of Harkison (2018), who stated that luxury guest experiences are improved with the availability of convenient leisure facilities. However, this finding contrasts with that of Darini and Khozaei (2016), who claimed that public facilities were less important to customer satisfaction. Furthermore,

according to Jin et al. (2013), pleasant experiences can be associated with various facilities and activities. The findings of this study have confirmed that the guest experience may be enhanced by the provision of well-equipped hotel facilities.

4.7   Food and beverage service

The findings revealed that the quality of food and beverages also affects customer experience. Breakfast was considered the most important meal by guests, followed by drinks. The quality and variety of food and drinks was a concern to guests, especially the choice of breakfast food. Furthermore, the atmosphere and service of restaurants also had an impact on the customer experience. As described by guests in their online reviews:

...I didn't expect the breakfast to be so limited. Try send a staff to Cordis and see their breakfast...your breakfast is way less selection but your hotel cost way more. (Sylvia, Hilton, Auckland)

...The breakfast was amazing!! We thoroughly enjoyed the fresh juice bar, the made to order omelette's and coffee...cannot say enough about the selection of foods... (Kathleen, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

...The evening drinks were very average quality and not much selection, other guests agreed it's the worst lounge we have every stayed in... (Graham, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

...The restaurant menu is very limited. I fell back on chicken, dry and tasteless. Also, the food at the restaurant for breakfast is not very tasty. The choice of dishes (eggs, cold cuts) is not very appealing... (Chantal, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

...Too many people in the breakfast, it is like a market in the breakfast area. Feels like you are fighting for food. (Haoze, Grand Mercure, Shenzhen)

The findings suggest that food and beverages are considered by guests as a vital attribute influencing the experience during their stay. This confirms the results of Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014), who proposed that a positive guest experience results from exquisite food preparation. The limited food variety was frequently mentioned in the guest reviews,

especially choices of food at breakfast. This finding indicates that a wide range of foods was expected and favoured by guests, which supports the work of Harkison (2016), who pointed out that luxury hotel guests expect a variety of food options. Furthermore, findings from this study revealed that frequent guests expect standardisation at brand hotels, and often compare the quality of products among brand hotels. This finding agreed with the work of Lai and Hitchcock (2017), who wrote that the formation of guest preferences derived from comparisons of their experiences in several hotels.

4.8 Location

According to the findings, location is a significant attribute affecting customer experience. "Convenient location to get transportation," walking distance to major landmarks," and "close to shops and restaurants," were often highlighted by guests in the online reviews. The significance of location was in its convenience for guests' travel; less traffic and time savings may enhance their experience of a stay. This was indicated by many guests in online reviews:

...It's close to a local shopping mall, which offers a range of restaurants, including an Italian restaurant. Easy to get a taxi... (Terence, Hilton, Shenzhen)

...Great location for walking around central Auckland or upper Queen street area... (Richard, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

Location was very convenient for access to major city landmarks... (Mike, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

Excellent location- nearer to Guomao station and walking distance to Laojie station. Near shopping Malls and there are convenient stores and eatery behind the hotel... (Ruth, Crowne Plaza, Shenzhen)

We chose the hotel because of its location. 10-minute walk with wheeled cases from the cruise terminal and slightly less to the ferry terminal. Also close to main shopping and business area, hop on hop off buses and eating establishments... (Anonymous, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

Similar to the results in the extant literature (e.g. Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014; Li et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2016), it was found that an excellent location contributes to a positive guest experience. Ren et al. (2016) observed that location was one of the main dimensions of customer experience based on the results from a survey conducted in budget hotels. The findings of this study support their view. The attributes of excellent location, such as convenience for transport, were consistent with Li et al.'s (2015) findings. "Walking distance" was also mentioned frequently in guest comments, confirming an observation made by Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014), that luxury guests favour walking as their preferred mode of travel.

4.9   Other attributes affecting customer experience

The findings of this study revealed that price, atmosphere, and social responsibility are secondary attributes of the overall customer experience. These attributes were less frequently mentioned in the guest reviews, especially the attribute of social responsibility.

4.9.1   Price

The results illustrated that price influences guest experience of a stay, and value for money is one of the most important aspects of price. The main reason for the lack of value for money was because the products and services provided by hotels were below the expectations of customers. Price and value for money were highlighted by many guests in online reviews:

We booked a deluxe king size room for over $400 per night and found it to be no different than a normal room to justify… Terrible value for money. (Hayden, Hilton, Auckland)

…The hotel is competitively priced for the area, but I did not think the facilities on offer matched the cost. If the hotel were not under the umbrella of Hilton, I imagine it would be cheaper. (Terence, Hilton, Auckland)

…Also, the facilities at the hotel are very luxurious and give full value for money… (Kobi, Crowne Plaza, Shenzhen)

…Not value for money, there was not even a coffee maker in the room. I found it very expensive for what was offered. (Alejandro, Grand Mercure, Auckland)

The findings of this study showed that price and customer experience affected each other, which is inconsistent with the work of Ali et al. (2016), who claimed that experience affects customers' acceptance of high prices. According to Ismail (2011), price perception directly impacts the guest's interpretation of a brand hotel experience. In other words, guests often believed that high prices and quality experiences are associated with each other. Guests accept the high pricing of international hotel brands because they believe that the hotel brand will guarantee quality products and services. This finding is aligned with the observations of Harkison (2018), who noted that the standards of luxury hotels should be distinguishable from those of others. A negative customer experience occurs when the actual experience is not in line with what the guests expected. Although the leading cause of negative experience is problems with the quality of products and services, high prices exacerbate the negative experiences of customers.

4.9.2 Atmosphere/ambiance

"Atmosphere/ambiance" refers to the subjective feelings of guests about a hotel as a whole. The findings revealed that guests have expectations about the atmosphere of brand hotels, especially in terms of a sense of luxury and comfort, which they consider to exist in international brand hotels. These kinds of feelings can be created through hotel design and décor. Poor ambiance, caused by problems such as noise, may negatively affect the guests' experience at the beginning of their stay. These are some examples of guest comments from Booking.com:

...Noise above in the atrium from an upstairs function when we arrived at the reception area to check-in, a really poor ambiance... (Piripi, Hilton, Auckland)

...Modern cultures also emerged in a unique NZ atmosphere, hard to find relaxed accommodation like this one. No airs and graces provide an authentic experience and a relaxed atmosphere... (Rachel, Hilton, Auckland)

...I was expecting a bit more luxury from a Hilton hotel. (Toni, Hilton, Auckland)

The sense of comfort at Crowne was the best thing about our stay... (Shevaun, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

...Everything that you expect to find in a 5-star hotel, you find it here: comfort, luxury...
(Nuno, Hilton, Shenzhen)

It was evident that the atmosphere had an impact on the senses and emotions of guests. According to the guest reviews, a luxurious and comfortable atmosphere satisfies the emotions of guests and promotes their overall experience. This finding confirms that of Pizam and Ellis (1999), who stated that a hotel's atmosphere has a particular impact on their overall customer experience. Many guests expressed their views on the design and décor of hotels. "Outdated design" and "tired décor" were frequently mentioned in the online reviews, indicating that atmosphere can be created from the hotels' design and decoration. According to Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), atmosphere was one of the dimensions affecting guest experience, and relates to customers' cognition and emotional perceptions of a hotel's physical environment when they interact with it. The physical environment is composed of lighting, hotel layout, design, and decoration. Thus, the findings from this study are aligned with the views of Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019).

4.9.3 Social responsibility

"Social responsibility" as an influence on the overall experience of guests was an interesting finding. This suggests that guests consider some hotel practices were not environmentally friendly. As mentioned by guests in their online reviews:

Too many small product packaging not optimal as sustainability measures. (Marcello, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

More could be done for environmental awareness. At breakfast 2 of the little disposable one-way butter containers were not used. The waiter heaped these onto the dirty plates, presumably to throw them in the trash, what a waste of butter and plastic. Sad. (Antje, Crowne Plaza, Auckland)

This revealed that guests are concerned about the environmental practices of hotels, supporting the work of Ivanovic and Galicic (2007), who emphasised that modern hotel guests valued cultural diversity, and ecological, and health awareness. According to Solomon (2019), customers may have a sense of belonging to a brand when that brand demonstrates a

lifestyle and values similar to their own. *Lifestyle* refers to the degree to which the values and lifestyle performed by a hotel are consistent with those of its guests (Nam et al., 2011). The findings from this study showed that guests criticised their hotels' environmental practices, which means values and lifestyles were inconsistent between the hotels and customers. This finding confirmed the assertion of Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), that lifestyle is one of the dimensions affecting customer experience.

4.10 Summary of findings

In conclusion, nine attributes were found to contribute to customers' experiences. Room, service, staff performance, hotel facilities, food and beverages, and location, were the main attributes affecting guest experiences of international hotel brands in Auckland and Shenzhen. Room quality was considered the primary concern to guests. It was found that a positive experience occurred when guests were assigned a bigger room than they had expected. Guests perceived bed and bedding as the most important in-room amenities, and often preferred a large and comfortable bed with a hard mattress. The findings further revealed that service quality and staff performance are closely related to each other. Extra service, such as upgrades, can enhance customer revisit intentions, but service failures may be a decisive factor of non-repeat stays. Furthermore, most service failures were caused by staff factors. The findings indicated that a lack of staff training was a major issue, resulting in negative guest experiences. Fully equipped hotel facilities such as a gym, swimming pool, and sauna were favoured by guests. It is worth noting that the variety of food and beverages was of interest to guests, especially in relation to choices at breakfast. Moreover, some interesting attributes, such as price, atmosphere, and social responsibility, were found to impact on the overall guest experience. Online guest reviews showed that guests were concerned about the environmental practices of hotels. The inconsistency between the values and lifestyles of guests (especially in terms of environmental practices) and the values of the hotels may affect the overall experience evaluation made by guests.

Chapter 5 Discussions and conclusions

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter aims to further discuss the findings from Chapter 4 and summarise this study. First, the research questions and objectives of the study are revisited, based on a review of the findings. Second, the attributes affecting customer experience are categorised into themes to facilitate further discussion, and the theoretical implication and practical recommendations of the study outlined. Finally, the limitations of the study are presented, and suggestions for future study provided.

5.2 The research questions and objectives revisited

A content analysis was adopted to analyse the online guest reviews collected from Booking.com. This study collected 300 guest comments on three international hotel brands operating in Auckland and Shenzhen as the data set. It was expected that the attributes affecting customer experience would be revealed by analysing the guests' reviews.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main attributes of customer experience of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand?
2. Do the attributes of customer experience vary between hotels of the same hotel brand in China and New Zealand?

In relation to the first research question, the findings revealed that rooms, service, staff performance, hotel facilities, food and beverages, and location, are the main attributes affecting customer experience in China and New Zealand. Also, price, atmosphere, and lifestyle have an impact on the guests' overall experience. However, these latter attributes were less frequently mentioned in online guest reviews. Thus, this study considers price, atmosphere, and social responsibility as secondary factors contributing to customer experience.

To answer the second question, there was a slight difference on the attributes of customer experience in the same hotel brands in China and New Zealand. The results of this research

show that the six main customer experience attributes were found in all the selected hotels. However, guests placed a different emphasis on attributes in the same hotel brands in China and New Zealand. It was found that the attributes of room and hotel facilities received more attention from guests at these three brand hotels in China compared those staying to New Zealand. Based on the research question answers, the two matching objectives set for this study have been achieved.

5.2.1 Primary attributes affecting customer experience

Hotel physical environment

This study considered rooms and hotel facilities as the hotel's physical environment. As one of the core products of hotels, a room is considered a significant attribute affecting customer experience. Among different room factors, the overall room condition and beds are the most critical factors of concern to guests. A clean and quiet room is preferred, as this was mentioned frequently in guest reviews. Also, a large and comfortable bed is regarded as an essential in-room facility. The significance of the bed was noted in many studies (e.g. Albayrak & Caber, 2015; Kim et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2019) pointed out that the bed is considered the most important attribute to luxury hotel guests. The findings from this study provide evidence that guests of international hotel brands also value quality beds. It was found that the room size also matters to guests, and a positive guest experience occurs when the room assigned to guests is bigger than they expect. According to the online guest reviews, frequent guests have expectations of consistency of products and services provided by hotels. Several reviews indicated that the room size was smaller than they had previously experienced. Thus, it was revealed that standardised hotel facilities influenced the guest experience to a certain extent. Ivanova et al. (2016) observed that the standardisation of hotel products and services had become a feature of global hotel brands, especially in relation to consistency internationally (Yu et al., 2014). The findings of this study confirm this. Although prior studies have recognised the importance of hotel room size, this study suggests that standardisation of room size matters to customers of international hotel brands.

Online guest reviews revealed that entertainment facilities, such as gyms, pools, and saunas, are frequently enjoyed by guests during their stays. It was found that positive guest experiences result from having these facilities, consistent with past studies that found a

positive relationship between customer experience and hotel facilities (Harkison, 2018; Jin et al., 2015). However, more importantly, the findings from this study reveal that guests have expectations of and requirements for a variety of hotel facilities, especially in international branded hotels. As demonstrated in the online reviews, hotels with well-equipped facilities are sought by guests, as good leisure facilities were a primary contributor to the guest experience in this study. It is therefore suggested that international hotel brands should look for ways to improve their facilities.

Hotel social environment

Service and staff performance are regarded as the hotel's social environment in this study, as service is commonly delivered by staff members. Of the service attributes affecting guest experience, service quality is what guests particularly look for, as commented by the majority of guests in their reviews. Also, extra service is very important, contributing to positive customer experiences and the intention to return. More importantly, these extra services such as "upgrade service" and "little gifts" can be thought of as personalised services, making guests feel they are cared about by the hotel staff. This finding confirms those in the extant literature (e.g. Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Ivanovic & Galicic, 2007; Richard, 2017) that found high-quality and a customised service experience is valued by guests. According to Bharwani and Butt (2012), guests now seek experiential hotel products and services. However, as mentioned earlier, standardised products and services are the distinguishing features of international hotel brands. Thus, it is suggested that hotels may need to shift their focus to providing personalised services to enhance the guest experience.

Another significant finding of this study was that service failures likely influence decisions not to return to a hotel. It was revealed in the guest comments that service failures are often caused by unprofessional staff. Most service failures described in the dataset of this study were related to answering the telephone and checking-in and suggested that staff training was lacking. This finding is in line with those in other studies (e.g. Ali et al., 2016; Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016), that found that staff-customer interactions affect customer experience.

5.2.2 Secondary attributes affecting customer experience

Price

Previous studies have focused on the relationship between price and customer satisfaction (e.g. Hanif et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2020), but a few have concentrated on price and guest experience (e.g. Ali et al., 2016; Ismail, 2011). This study found that the quality of customer experience affects the acceptance of high prices (see also, Ail et al., 2016). However, the findings of this study also indicate that guests accept high prices before they have the actual experience, because they have acquiesced in relation to the quality of products and services, which they believe are guaranteed by the hotel brand. This finding is consistent with the work of Ismail (2011), who observed that price perception directly impacts the guests' interpretation of the brand hotel experience, which means guests often believe that high prices and quality experiences are associated with each other in brand hotels. Thus, high prices raise the expectations of guests in terms of the actual experience. The data showed that perceptions of poor value for money often occur when guests are disappointed with products and services. However, value for money is rarely mentioned when the guests' expectations are met. Therefore, it appears that price has less influence on guest experience when the experience is positive, but high prices exacerbate the potential for a negative experience.

Lifestyle

An interesting finding from this study is that guests are concerned about the hotel's environmental practices. This finding supported the work of Ivanovic and Galicic (2007), who pointed out that hotel guests value ecological and health awareness. Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) proposed that lifestyle is a dimension affecting customer experience. *Lifestyle* refers to the degree to which the values and lifestyle demonstrated by the hotel are consistent with those of its guests (Nam et al., 2011). In this study, guests criticised the environmental practices of hotels, observing that the hotels' operations were inconsistent with their values. Thus, the guests' experience was affected. Solomon (2019) pointed out that customer may have a sense of belonging to a brand when that brand demonstrates a lifestyle and values similar to their own. Therefore, it is suggested that hotel management may need to consider their social responsibilities in daily operations to reduce the effects on the guest experience and strengthen guests' sense of belonging.

5.2.3 Comparing the attributes of customer experience between hotels of the same brand in China and New Zealand

Although the six main attributes affecting customer experience were all found in hotels of the same brands in China and New Zealand, guests place different emphases on these attributes. The findings of this study reveal that service and staff performance were considered more important by the guests of Hilton Auckland, while the attributes of the room received greater attention from the guests of Hilton Shenzhen. The findings revealed quite a number of positive and negative guest comments on service quality and staff performance at the Hilton Auckland, suggesting that the service standard at the Hilton Auckland was not stable. Many guests criticised the physical environment, such as the room condition and hotel facilities, at the Hilton Shenzhen. The data showed that noise and dated interiors were the main causes of negative comments.

The room and food and beverages were the most important attributes considered by the guests of Crowne Plaza in both countries. The majority of guests were satisfied with the breakfast choice and quality and praised the quality of bed and bedding in both hotels, presenting evidence of good standardisation across countries. However, the room size and room condition of the Crowne Plaza Shenzhen were not up to the standard of the Crowne Plaza in Auckland according to the guests' reviews.

At Grand Mercure hotels, location was the attribute most frequently mentioned in reviews in both countries, especially in relation to convenient transport. The room attributes also received attention from guests, and it was evident that room size and condition was inconsistent between the two countries. Many guests of Grand Mercure Auckland found the room size was too small, while the guests of Grand Mercure Shenzhen found that the hotel interior was outdated.

Overall, the social environment of these three brand hotels was of a good standard and consistent between China and New Zealand. However, the physical environment of these hotels in China were below standard in comparison to hotels of the same brand in New Zealand, particularly for the attributes of rooms and hotel facilities. Outdated interiors and facilities were the primary reasons for these inconsistencies.

5.3   Theoretical implications

This study investigated the attributes of customer experience in hotels of international hotel brands in China and New Zealand. The main contribution of this study was that it identified the attributes affecting customer experiences in international hotel brands. The extant literature on customer experience is mainly concentrated on luxury and budget hotels (e.g. Harkison, 2016; Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Walls, 2013). This research on customer experience in brand hotels extends and enriches the literature. As the findings show, the physical environment of hotel brands, such as guest rooms and hotel facilities, is valued by customers. Guests expect standardisation and consistency in the physical environment of a branded hotel. This finding supports findings in extant studies, that standardisation is a characteristic of global hotel brands (Ivanova et al., 2016; Raajpoot, 2004; Yu et al., 2014).

However, it is also evident that some guests have a demand for a quality social environment, such as customised services. This is consistent with the extant literature, that indicates standardised products and services cannot satisfy all customers (Ivanovic & Galicic, 2007; Torres et al., 2014). For brand hotel guests, a standardised physical environment and customised social environment are highly sought after, based on the findings of this study. Therefore, this study not only helps to understand the attributes affecting the customer experience in brand hotels, but also acts as a guide for the future development of brand hotels in terms of balancing standardisation and customisation.

The results reveal that price influences the overall guest experience. When a negative customer experience is caused by product and service problems, the price factor may aggravate the negative experience, which is an aspect not mentioned in the extant literature. Finally, an interesting finding was that guests are concerned about the environmental practices in the daily operation of a hotel. Corporate image and values of social responsibility have a certain impact on customer experience. Future research can further explore factors that affect customer experience based on the results of this study.

5.4   Practical implications

The findings from this study have practical implications for international hotel brands operating in China and New Zealand. Gaining an understanding of the needs and wants of customers is essential for brand hotels. Findings of this research reveal that six attributes, namely, room, service, staff performance, hotel facilities, food and beverages, and location, are important to guests. Thus, hotels should give considerable attention to these areas in order to maintain high quality of performance. Firstly, in terms of a hotel's physical environment, room size can easily represent the standardisation of international brand hotels. Given that guests often compared their experience with those of past stays, maintaining a standard room size may enhance the experience, as customers feel safer and more comfortable with familiar hotel designs and atmospheres (Raajpoot, 2004). Guests consider bed and beddings as the most important in-room facilities and have different preferences for them. It is suggested that hotels provide bedding options for guests to select from, showing customisation in standardised products. The need for a quiet room was mentioned frequently in guest reviews. Guests often complained of noise coming from a construction site nearby or from the corridor. Findings of this study suggests hotels should install sound-proof windows and doors for each hotel room. Wi-fi also received a lot of attention from guests: so free and fast connection wi-fi is needed in brand hotels. It is also worth noting that the variety of hotel facilities mattered to guests. The essential leisure facilities of gym, pool, and spa/sauna need to be fully equipped. Also, up to date and advanced equipment is favoured by guests and may enhance their overall experience. Hotels can also provide auxiliary equipment, such as VR (virtual reality) goggles and heart rate monitors.

Advice for hoteliers on the physical environment:

- Standardise the room size across countries when establishing or decorating a new hotel;
- Provide bedding options for guests to select from;
- Install sound-proof windows and doors;
- Provide fast and stable wi-fi free of charge;
- Essential leisure facilities, such as gym, pool, and spa/sauna should be fully equipped; and

● Provide auxiliary equipment for gym, such as VR goggles and heart rate monitors.

Secondly, at the level of the hotel's social environment, service and staff performance are considered significant attributes of the guest experience. Findings indicate that customised service is sought by hotel guests. Extra services that surprise customers may significantly enhance their experience. This study suggests that brand hotels shift their focus from standardised services to customised service. This requires empowerment of staff, who need the authority to provide personalised services. For example, receptionists can offer free upgrade services when they are available, without asking permission from a supervisor. More importantly, it is suggested that hotels establish a unique customer management system to capture the preferences and anniversaries of regular guests, and share these with their other hotels around the world to ensure guests enjoy customised services at any hotel in their brand. Another area that needs improvement is staff training, as most service failures in this study were caused by staff, in particular, telephone answering and checking-in. Standard operating procedures should be a part of regular staff training.

Advice for the hoteliers on the social environment:

● Empower staff, so they have greater authority to provide personalised services when available;
● Establish a unique customer management system to record the preferences of guests;
● Set a standard operating procedure for essential services such as telephone answering and checking-ins; and
● Ensure the standard operating procedures are part of regular staff training sessions.

Finally, the findings suggest that branded hotels may need to pay attention to their corporate image and values, especially in the field of being environmentally friendly and sustainable. Building a lively corporate social responsibility ethic consistent with contemporary green values is suggested for international hotel brands.

5.5 Limitations of the study

Although this study enriches the extant literature on customer experience, it has some limitations. First, the secondary data used in this study were collected from Booking.com.

The data from this platform cannot represent all the guests staying in international hotel brands. Thus, the sample size of this study was limited. Secondly, the data collection time of this study was from July 20, 2020, to August 20, 2020, and based on the convenience sampling method, only the most recent 50 guest reviews of each hotel are selected. As this timeframe was during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of international tourists decreased significantly. The 300 samples from the three hotel brands in this study may not represent the population well as a result. Therefore, the generalisability of the results may be limited. In addition, the customer reviews collected in this study include those of guests in Chinese hotels. Thus, the authenticity of this study may be affected due to semantic deviations caused by the process of translation into English. Finally, this study selected only Auckland and Shenzhen as the research contexts, so other parts of New Zealand and China were not included in the study. Therefore, the results may not fully represent views on the guest experience elsewhere in New Zealand and China.

5.6   Recommendations for future study

Although this study helps to understand the customer experience of brand hotel guests, the limitations indicate that future studies in this field are needed. First, the data collection for this study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the reduction of international tourists may have led to a poor representation of the population. It is therefore suggested that future research extend the period of data collection to obtain more information after the recovery of the tourism and hotel industries. Second, the findings of this study reveal that guests have requirements of both standardisation and customisation at international brand hotels. Thus, future studies can focus on ways to balance standardisation and customisation. Finally, this study does not classify the ratings of international hotel brands. Future research can further explore the attributes affecting customer experience in luxury hotels and budget hotels of the same brand, to determine how these attributes vary.

5.7   Conclusion

This study has investigated the main attributes affecting customer experience in hotels of international brands in China and New Zealand. By analysing online guest reviews from Booking.com, six main attributes were identified: rooms, service, staff performance, hotel facilities, food & beverages, and location. The findings have revealed that guests prefer

standardisation of the hotel's physical environment, but customisation of the hotel's social environment. With these indications, hoteliers are recommended to standardise their physical environment such as room sizes, hotel décor, and leisure facilities and adjust their social environment to meet the expectations of customers from different cultural background. Due to the limitation of secondary data, future studies can apply either quantitative or qualitative method with primary data for more detailed descriptions of customers' preferences with hotel experiences.

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