

Contactless Guest Experience: Modernizing the Hotel Industry

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Abstract

Contactless guest experience in the hotel industry is on rise due to technological advancements and, in part, due to the pandemic. Due to growing awareness of the potential hazards associated with physical contact and touch, COVID-19 has significantly increased the popularity of contactless services. Because of this, hotels are putting more money into creative methods to provide visitors a hands-free experience. Numerous firms in the hotel sector have embraced new technologies over the past few years, including smartphone door locks, instant messaging, automated check-in and check-out, voice technology, digital concierge bots, keyless entry, etc. This technological intervention allows customers to have more control over their stay, while also making things easier for everyone. It is not only more convenient, saving the guests time but also makes them feel safer with a means to increase hoteliers revenue. In view of its growing importance, this paper discusses the attributes of contactless services, its application in hotel industry and overcoming challenges in its implementation.

Keywords: Contactless guest experience, Digital concierge, Keyless entry, Contactless payment, Voice command, Intelligent personal assistants, Voice-based assistant

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused fundamental and seismic changes in the hotel industry (Hao, 2021). The most significant of these are customers' concerns regarding social distancing, hygiene, and safety. The new normal for the future hotel industry has, therefore, shifted from "high-tech" and "high-touch" to "high-tech" and "low-touch", thus making the contactless services necessary. Contactless services refer to "adoptions of Artificial Intelligence intended to provide face-to-face services in a seamless, intelligent and adaptive manner, and these services are sustained in the background by the related service organization and its employees, with no direct contact between customers and employees" (Lee & Lee, 2021). The core of contactless service in the hotel industry is the use of cutting-edge technology to avoid unnecessary human-to-human touch and create the safest service experience for both clients and staff (Rahimzhan & Irani, 2020).

Being customer-centered, the hotel industry is characterized by perishable, inseparable, intangible and simultaneous consumption. Therefore, designing an engaging customer experience is key to business success. Contactless hotel services create augmented sense-feel-think-act-relate experiences for customers, which in turn leads to customer satisfaction (Chen, Tzeng, Tham & Chu, 2021). To safeguard customers and employees, many hotels around the world have adopted contactless services, including mobile control (e.g., mobile check-in and check-out, digital payments, and digital menus), voice control (e.g., smart speaker TVs, AC, lighting, curtains), facial recognition (e.g., check-in, keyless entrance, payment), motion sensing (e.g., automatic doors, touchless elevators), robotic services (e.g., room service, concierge), to name a few (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Hao et al., 2020; Hao, 2021).

Today visitors not only demand but also expect contactless transactions. McKinsey (2022) found that "the United States has seen a 20% increase in preference for contactless operations," resulting in a significant change in what customers anticipate from businesses. Criton's research highlights that 80% of travellers would download a hotel app that would enable them to check in, acquire all the information they require, and check out. Further, research reveals that 47% of travellers would be more likely to order room service via an application, and 48% would be more likely to use the hotel restaurant if they could order food via an application. Moreover, 73% of travellers would use an application that allows them to open the door to their hotel room, 30% would check-in and out via a web page, and 47% would be more likely to order room service via an application. ("Contactless Guest Experience as the Future of Hospitality", 2022). Thus, contactless hotels are expected to become a standard in the travel and hospitality industry.

The concept of contactless service is not new, and numerous contactless technologies, including self-service, robotic services, and the internet of things, existed long before the pandemic. However, these technologies have been redesigned to focus on the contactless feature across the customer journey in response to the present pandemic threat (Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015; Wu & Cheng, 2018; Kim & Han, 2020). But there is a limited research on the newly emerged contactless services in hotel industry (Gursoy et al., 2020; Min, 2020; Hao & Chon, 2021; Kim, Kim & Hwang, 2021). Therefore, this paper is a modest attempt to the understanding of contactless services in hotel industry.

II. Discussion

Contactless services in hotels

There are various ways in which contactless services are different from conventional hotel services. First, these services are offered directly to clients via a variety of AI-based or AI-integrated technologies, such as intelligent monitoring, voice assistants, service robots, facial recognition in lock systems, intelligent monitoring, etc (Ahn & Seo, 2018; Tung & Au, 2018; Chi, Denton & Gursoy, 2020). As such in case of contactless hotel services, interactions between technologies and employees take place in the background to facilitate service delivery rather than between employees and clients directly (De Keyser, Köcher, Alkire, Verbeeck & Kandampully, 2019; Sigala, 2020). Furthermore, customers are encouraged to co-create value in contactless services since they are given the freedom to handle certain tasks independently, such as making reservations, customised catering, and innovative experiences (Kervenoael, Hasan, Schwob & Goh, 2020; Kim & Han, 2020). Additionally, as contactless services rely on recognition technologies and large data, client responsiveness is increased guaranteeing prompt service. As a result, this phenomenon affects consumer involvement, trust, and satisfaction (Lin & Hsieh, 2011; Prentice & Nguyen, 2020). Additionally, contactless service encourages interaction through immediate and active communication, which influences how customers use technology, how satisfied they are with it, and in turn their service experience (Ghantous, 2015).

Hotels that use technology-enabled contactless solutions have the ability to provide guests with more engaging experiences and an unexpectedly delighted state of mind, which can improve the way that guests evaluate the brand, relationship, and service value (Hao, 2021). Some of the benefits that customers can enjoy from contactless hotel services are as follows:

Personalization

Personalization of services is a key selling factor in a post-industrial world since it elevates the client experience to a whole new level. Therefore, contactless hospitality solutions work by utilising the clients' personal data, enabling hotels to respond to each visitor's specific preferences ("Contactless hospitality is changing the hotel game in Singapore - All in one hotel concierge application", 2022).

Safety

In contactless hospitality services, all the interactions take place through an application, or a voice solution offering a hands-free experience, thus enabling travellers to enjoy their experiences with less pandemic-related concern. Apart from this, hotel personnel are less likely to contract virus via contact with visitors without compromising the quality of services (Chalimov, 2022).

Reduced stress

In hospitality industry many customers face the problems of miscommunications due to language and cultural differences. With contactless hospitality, it is possible to attract those customers who find interacting with hotel employees stressful and tedious. Thus, contactless solutions take the stress out of human contact and enable customers to enjoy the untainted contactless guest experience (Wang & Mattila, 2010).

Sustainability

As the environmental sustainability is the prominent issue these days, hotels are doing their part by digitizing their service offerings which helps in limiting the use of plastic and paper from day-to-day operations. On the customers front, there is no need for physical menus and instructions, thus making their lives much more comfortable while saving the environment ("Sustainability in Hospitality: How Industry Leaders Can Help | UCF Online", 2022).

Quick service

As guests nowadays want hotels to respond to their requests with haste, contactless technology ensures that guests are not kept "on hold" even if hotels are operating with a smaller staff. Contactless technology makes it possible for visitors to initiate communication on any device or channel and interact according to their needs,

which streamlines their interaction process and places them at the centre of the hotel experience (Anthony, 2022).

Hedonic value

Hedonic value refers to the benefits that clients receive from services that provide them with pleasure and delight (Miao, Lehto & Wei, 2014). With the use of contactless service technologies, clients can customise the shape and content of services in real time, tailoring them to their own preferences for enjoyment expectations (Duman & Mattila, 2005; S, Paul, Strong & Pius, 2020). Contactless services in the form of integrated music, attractive intelligent voices, lighting, and animation, etc., can generate novelty and interest, thus enhancing customers' hedonic benefits (Ahn & Seo, 2018).

Perceived control

Perceived control refers to customers' conceptions of their independence and autonomy in terms of managing their time, service procedures, and content (Turner, Merle & Gotteland, 2020). Utilizing contactless service technology allows customers to co-create value, which in turn controls how services are provided to them. Customers anticipate comprehensive information and prompt responses during this process so they can make decisions about the production and deployment of services at their discretion (Lin & Hsieh, 2011). Therefore, the responsiveness of contactless service technologies may help clients feel more in control by enabling them to alter service offers or the environment (Tung & Au, 2018).

Application of Contactless Services in Hotel Industry

Contactless services can be provided to guests from hotel pre-stay stage to post-stay stage. Following are some of the ways hotels can provide contactless services to customers:

Prebooking assistance

The pre-stay stage of customer journey includes all aspects of customer's encounter with a brand, category, and environment before making a purchase (Kandampully, Zhang & Jaakkola, 2018). Various technologies including Virtual reality/Augmented Reality (AR/VR), mobile technology and chat bots are widely used in the pre-stay stage. Guests are contacted for the first time through the hotel's website. The main goal of this initial interaction is to engage and share information between the hotel and the guest in order to confirm the reservation and to give pertinent details like check-in time, internet, travel itinerary, and weather conditions. Secondly, it assists in identifying queries, unique wants, and personal preferences for gathering of visitor data (Davenport and Ronanki, 2018). Customers can contact hotels anytime, anywhere, and with personalised information via chatbots that are tailored to their needs by using smartphones. AR/VR improve the guest experience by giving visitors the chance to thoroughly examine a property before making booking through a virtual tour (McNeal and Newyear, 2013). Additionally, this technology offers a virtual 360-degree view of hotel rooms and facilities (Hollis, 2020). In conclusion, the pre-stay phase is crucial for connecting with guests and collaborating on the hotel experience, as well as for enhancing the pre-stay experience as a whole. It offers clients the best "try-before-you-buy" experience and enables hotels to promote their accommodations through an interactive experience prior to a visit.

Hotel-stay stage

The hotel-stay stage represents the most interaction-intense stage due to the high volume of in-person interactions between hotel customers and staff occurring within the actual hotel setting. The following are some of the several contactless services that can be offered to consumers during their stay stage:

Digital menus

In conventional guest experiences, the menu card which lists the food offered by the hotel is kept in each room for guests' convenience. But there is a downside to actual menu cards as they do not offer up-to-date information, thereby not depicting clearly whether a food on the menu is actually available. By virtue of digital menus, hotels can overcome this hurdle by putting up QR code menu on hotel room wall and on restaurant tables. Customers may scan the code to receive real-time access to the menu, along with information about which items are in and out of stock, thus improving their overall dining experience.

Contactless payment

As the digital transactions are substituting the actual cash payments in majority of industries, the hotel industry is also following the suite by using cloud-based property management system (PMS) for receiving payments. PMS adds more simplicity, distance, and flexibility to payment activities. It allows customers to make contactless payments by using multiple payment methods simultaneously through their smartphones or chipped cards. The cloud-based solution enables hotels to synchronise payments in real-time across a number of properties into a single system.

Contactless check-in/check-out

Traditional hotel check-in necessitates the involvement of receptionist for conducting guest ID checks, which can cause a number of inconveniences including the delay in processing guest luggage, sluggish check-in, incorrect information, etc., which can have a negative impact on hotel guests' experiences. As an alternative, contactless technologies that are effective in providing high-quality services and conforming to health and safety requirements enable check-in at hotels to be completed without any human involvement or touching any surfaces of the hotel's facilities. As human welcome is important in the hospitality industry, humans are not fully excluded from the reception. But by virtue of contactless check-in, only a small number of hotel staff is required to assist guests with self-service. Following are some of the ways by which contactless check-in/check-out can be applied in hotels: -

- a) Hotels can upload and cross-check visitor ID with the help of a mobile application.
- b) Hotels can implement kiosks that include thermal imaging cameras, document scanning, and facial recognition to augment or take the place of the conventional front desk in order to speed up registration and minimise contact.
- c) Location-based service tools such as Stellar can detect the arrival of a guest in the lobby with a reservation. It can also send a personalised welcome message to arriving guests, trigger an automatic check-in, download the digital key and direct the guest to the room.
- d) Through programmes such as Hilton Honors, Jurny, Xperium, and Aero Guest, visitors can also enjoy a smooth and contactless check-in and checkout by handling the entire process from their mobile devices. Hotel personnel can authorise room choices and even keep an eye on the check-in/check-out procedure with the help of these programmes. When it comes to understanding customer behaviour and purchase intent, travel companies and tour operators can greatly benefit from the datahub reports of these apps.

Keyless entry/ Digital keys

Digital/keyless entry is one of the most well-liked features that hotels offer in their contactless guest experiences. Visitors can enter their rooms by tapping the screen of their smartphone using the keyless entry system, which is powered by Bluetooth and NFC (near-field communication) technology. This eliminates the need for carrying a physical key. With digital keys, visitors can request a room update or change from any location, adding to the convenience, security, and mobility of the room. On the other side, keyless entry systems may provide hotels a number of advantages, including significant cost savings on key replacements, liability protection from COVID19, and improved guest experiences. A modern keyless entry alternative that establishments can employ to perform self-check-in is Lynx. Lynx allows pre-check-in and self-service check-in when connected to a hotel's cloud-based property management system. It also supports guest access to individual room locks via a white-label application. Flexipass also offers keyless entry by allowing visitors to use their smartphones as their room keys. Hotels may minimise touchpoints and provide guests with a simple contactless service through this facility. Another keyless entry alternative is the use of a tiny chip inserted in a bracelet that, when pressed against a door, contactlessly opens a hotel room.

Digital Concierge

Digital concierge is an extremely useful feature which offers online and mobile assistance to visitors right away. Hotel digital concierge is a comprehensive platform that incorporates the majority of desired hotel services, from check-ins to contactless payments, and gives guests control over their stay. The use of a digital concierge improves the personalised experience by giving clients quick access to information and helps in delegating tasks to staff members, resulting in faster service.

Specifically, this system enables guests to ask for an early breakfast, find their room and other places at the hotel, heat their rooms, ask for an extra duvet or pillow, or information on where to go out at night through applications such as Guest friend, Vouch. With the help of digital concierge applications hotel bookings and restaurant reservations can be easily done, while also promoting onsite amenities and guest resources. Thus, it eliminates the barrier to booking. Customers may swiftly update a room's condition, allocate and schedule housekeeping workers, alert to potential problems, and reduce the time between check-ins and check-outs. It can also allow visitors to pay their bills, unlock their rooms, customise the room's settings to suit their tastes, order services, and more.

Voice-Command Devices / Intelligent Personal Assistants

Hoteliers are putting voice-command technology in their amenities and guest rooms to provide a hands-free experience. Modern voice-activated devices consist of conversational AI that allows people to communicate with machines in the same way as they would with other people. A voice-based assistant can take the shape of a standalone device, such as Amazon Echo, Alibaba Tmall Genie, or Apple HomePod, or it can be software integrated into a smartphone or computer, like Apple Siri (Paraskevas, Katsogridakis, Law & Buhalis, 2011). Voice commands allow visitors to do a variety of things, like make reservations for tables, order room service, control the thermostat, switch on the television, arrange excursions, and open the blinds.

A simple voice assistant technology like Volara is one such illustration that enables hotels to implement contactless room control systems and visitor engagement. Using voice commands, hotel customers can get recommendations, additional information, entertainment options, and service requests. Since Volara is powered by the Google Nest Hub, visitors may use the voice assistant to control televisions, stream music, make calls, set alarms, control the temperature of the room, and more. Additionally, the Google and Volara system offers conversational, automatic, and private guest-staff interactions.

Post-Stay Communication

The post-stay stage determines check-out and the completion of guest accounting aspects during the stay. An effective post-stay approach encourages social sharing of the experience, thus multiplying the effect of a great visit. Mobile communication and chatbots could provide a valuable opportunity to engage with the guests by thanking them for their business and informing them about their valuable input, which will encourage new bookings from others who are viewing it. When a visitor checks out of the hotel, the procedure can be personalised with a special farewell message that contains helpful information regarding further visits.

Challenges in Implementation of Contactless Services

While the hotel sector is progressively deploying contactless facilities to assist in reducing the health concerns associated with COVID-19, there are still a number of difficulties with regard to client acceptance of contactless technology that need to be resolved. Some guests still prefer human warmth and attentiveness while staying at a hotel and are hesitant to pay the surcharges associated with contactless services (Menze, 2022). They raise questions regarding the capability of contactless services to offer customers safety and high-quality services. Some customers believe that contactless technology makes the hotel experience complicated and therefore prefer human services to contactless experience ("Contactless Tech in Hospitality 2020", 2022). Some people even assert that the goal of implementing contactless services in the hotel industry is to lower labour costs rather than to improve the guest experience ("Ugh: Awful New Marriott "Contactless" Features", 2022). Therefore, there are a lot of unresolved problems from the service providers standpoint and from service receiver's perspective of acceptance of and willingness to pay for the contactless technology.

To overcome these issues, hotels should pay more attention to the "service" rather than the "contactless" attribute, or even make the "contactless" feature invisible. For instance, with AI and big data, the hotel industry may offer more individualised and personalised services, resulting in pleasurable experiences. Customers' preferred temperature, lighting, and even music may already be set in their smart room when they enter. Additionally, hospitality companies that target markets with lower levels of readiness should initially roll out contactless services and amenities that are simple to use. Motion sensors, thermal sensing, and automatic temperature monitoring, for instance, call for less technical know-how and active participation, making them more acceptable to the lower readiness group. To lessen customers' apprehension over new technology and their humiliation over service failure, it is equally crucial to offer prompt support from human workers. Interactivity and responsiveness of AI contactless services can reduce the time it takes for a few humans to respond to a customer's requests, resulting in high-quality service (Ghantous, 2015; Morita, Kashiwagi, Yorozu, Suzuki & Yamaguchi, 2019). High degrees of interaction and responsiveness of AI could preserve customers' views of hospitality and meet their social and safety demands by offering a constantly linked channel and involving users in value co-creation (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

In order to boost the acceptability of these services by customers hotels should work to lower effort expectations and raise performance expectations for contactless services. The more user-friendly the technology is; the more customers are ready to accept it. In the field of hospitality and tourism, both effort expectation and performance expectancy have proven beneficial in raising the acceptance of technology, such as the intended and real usage of hotel front office systems (Kim, Lee & Law, 2008), hotel biometric systems (Morosan, 2012), hotel mobile applications (Mo Kwon, Bae & Blum, 2013; Huang, Chang, Yu & Chen, 2019), hotel tablet applications (Kim, 2016), radio frequency identification (RFID), cashless payment (Ozturk, 2016), app-based mobile tour guides (Lai, 2013), airline web-based self-service (Lee, 2013), hotel social media networks (tom Dieck, Jung, Kim & Moon, 2017), tourism user-generated content (Assaker, 2019), and online booking technology (San Martín & Herrero, 2012).

The service design of contactless technology necessitates a thorough and empathetic understanding of clients (Stickdorn et al., 2018). Contactless service encompasses not just the use of technology but also the remodelling of products, service procedures, management operation, and customer journey with customer-oriented thinking. By doing this, the service provider is able to provide an experience that is fully functioning, hassle-free, and smooth throughout the service cycle.

Hospitality practitioners should build trust with their customers. In order to effectively handle customer problems (such as service quality, privacy, ethics, and experience), managers are encouraged to engage in open dialogue with them. Interestingly, "contactless" does not equate to "service-less," They need to clearly assert that the goal of contactless service is to secure customers and deliver superior services. Therefore, practitioners should ensure that clients receive enough human warmth and individualised attention.

III. Conclusion

The demand for contactless services has increased as hotels worldwide attempt to equip its personnel and provide a smooth, enhanced guest experience with modern contactless technologies. The contactless service trend is essential for guests to have a pleasant service experience by shortening the purchase path from the customer perspective while simultaneously giving the hotel competitive edge over others. Against this backdrop its imperative that hotels are able to deliver services by blending digital amenities with traditional human services. In this regard, hoteliers should look into various points of contact between staff and guests to map out areas where contactless technology could be applied to reduce exposure while simultaneously preserving the brand's uniqueness. In conclusion, as technology is replacing conventional service delivery techniques, contactless services in hotels in becoming a new standard for customers expecting best experience with less friction and hassle.

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