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Guests' Perceptions, Preferences, and Experiences of Smart Automation in Hospitality Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study aims to understand hotel guests' perceptions and experiences to synthesize their encounters with smart automation at different stages of service delivery. The study addresses the knowledge gap regarding the subjective experiences of end users of smart automation in the hospitality industry and seeks to uncover the essential structure, or essence, of technology interactions within guests' lifeworld (Lebenswelt). Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven hotel guests in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. The researchers analyzed the data using Colaizzi's seven-step method, including horizontalization and clustering of meanings to generate themes. The findings revealed a fundamental Duality of Technological Perception. Guests viewed smart automation as a symbol of modern efficiency and luxury that empowered them with a sense of frictionless control over their stay. This was accompanied, however, by panoptic anxiety, in which guests felt that invisible automation had been placed there to watch them—surveillance, in the guests' own words. Ultimately, the experience captured the essence of the Dichotomy of Empowered Autonomy and Emotional Isolation, in which machine perfection displaced the human touch at the core of traditional hospitality. The study concludes that guests seek not full automation but a synchronized hybrid ecosystem in which automated systems handle mechanical functions while human staff provide emotional and cultural hospitality.

Keywords— *Colaizzi's method; panoptic anxiety; hybrid service model; artificial intelligence (AI); Internet of Things (IoT); Filipino hospitality; service innovation*

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation has fundamentally reshaped the hospitality industry, making it a key sector for digital advancement through the integration of robotics, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things. These innovations enable more efficient service transactions, improved room and facility management, and stronger safety and security measures, ultimately elevating the overall guest experience. As hospitality establishments increasingly adopt smart systems, they are better equipped to meet the evolving expectations of modern travelers who value convenience and personalized service. As Kim and Han (2020) note, the rise of smart hotels represents a critical shift toward creating efficient, comfortable, and technologically advanced environments. This transition also supports global sustainability by promoting energy efficiency and upskilling the workforce to minimize dissatisfaction from technical inefficiencies, in line with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including Quality Education, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Responsible Consumption and Production.

Globally, smart automation is characterized by adopting these technologies to enhance operational efficiency and guest responsiveness. Internationally, smart hotels are evolving by adopting cloud computing and predictive analytics to automate functions ranging from personalized room environments to guest preference tracking. In the Philippines, this transformation reflects similar trends, with hotels integrating digital concierge services and room controls to redefine interactions while appealing to environmentally conscious travelers. Although adoption scales vary because of resource constraints, both international and domestic studies highlight automation as a central element of contemporary innovation.

Technological adoption is commonly framed through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as primary determinants of user acceptance. Recent scholarship has integrated these constructs with affective variables such as trust, perceived value, and emotional response to capture the nuances of hospitality as contactless systems become widespread. Studies show that when guests perceive tangible gains, such as faster service, their positive attitudes rise; conversely, concerns regarding privacy or limited digital literacy tend to reduce acceptance. In the Philippine context, factors such as connectivity and staff competence shape these perceptions in ways that standard models must be expanded to explain, particularly in provincial settings.

This study is significant to several sectors. For hotel executives, the findings support informed financial decisions that prioritize customer comfort over mere operational speed. Frontline employees gain a clearer understanding of their evolving roles, shifting from routine tasks to high-value relational service. Within the academic sector, the study serves as a resource for curriculum enhancement, helping students recognize that emotional intelligence remains a vital competitive advantage. Finally, for future researchers, the study establishes a qualitative baseline for exploring human–computer interaction in the hospitality lifeworld.

A. Objectives of the Study

The primary goal of this research was to describe the lived experiences of hotel guests through the following specific objectives:

1) To describe the essential structure of the lived experience of hotel guests regarding their perceptions of smart automation;
2) To analyze the essential structure of the lived experience regarding guest preferences on the use of smart automation in hospitality service delivery; and
3) To explore the actual experiences and reflections of guests when using smart automation in hospitality settings, in order to provide a holistic understanding of the technological encounter.

B. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in phenomenology, a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand the lived experiences and meanings individuals attach to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology serves as the primary foundation because the research aims to explore how hotel guests personally make sense of smart automation in hospitality service delivery, prioritizing guest narratives as the main source of knowledge rather than testing predefined variables. Within this orientation, themes emerge inductively from participants' descriptions of automated amenities and security systems, focusing on the universal essence of encounters centered on convenience, efficiency, trust, and human interaction.

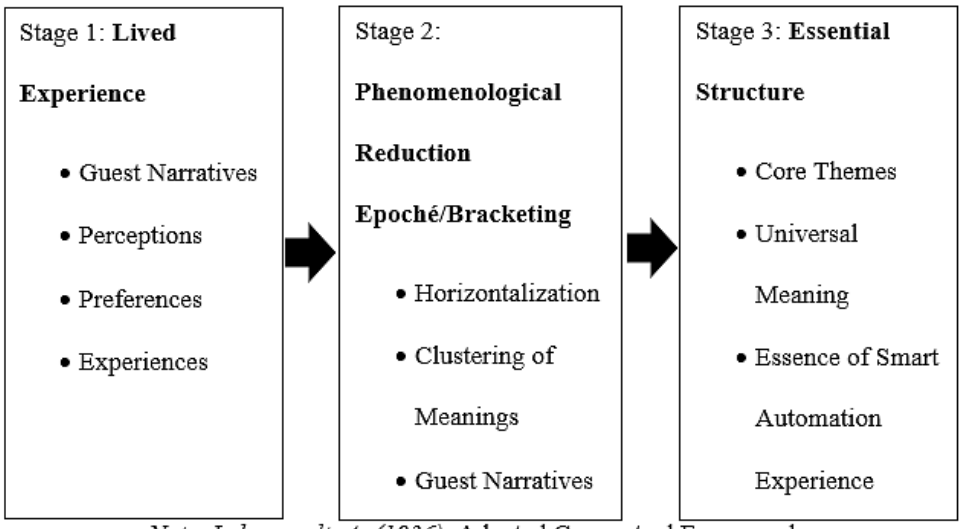
C. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework adopts a process-oriented approach emphasizing the Lebenswelt, or lifeworld, of hotel guests. As established by Husserl (1970) and operationalized through Creswell and Poth (2018), the study is organized into three interrelated stages, as shown in Figure 1. The first stage, Lived Experience, focuses on direct interactions with automated features to capture raw experiential data through personal narratives. The second stage, Phenomenological Reduction, involves epoché (bracketing), in which prior assumptions

are set aside so that horizontalization and clustering can identify significant statements. The third stage, the Essential Structure, synthesizes these meanings into core themes that express the universal essence of the experience, with the secondary theories applied only to compare emergent themes with existing literature.

Figure 1

Research Paradigm



Note. Lebenswelt, A. (1936). Adapted Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1. Research paradigm of the study.

The research paradigm visualizes the flow from input to output within the phenomenological tradition. It begins with qualitative input from guest narratives on smart automation. This leads into the analytical process of horizontalization and thematic clustering, in which significant statements are given equal value to prevent researcher bias. The final output is the determination of the essential structure, or essence, of the phenomenon. This paradigm ensures that the study remains a human-centered investigation of how technology is truly experienced in the hospitality lifeworld.

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This research employed a qualitative approach using an interpretive phenomenological design, which facilitated the capture of in-depth descriptions of guests' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences with automated amenities and security systems. Because these variables are subjective and experience-based, this design enabled a contextualized understanding that numerical methods cannot adequately capture.

B. Research Setting

The study was conducted in 2026 in the province of Nueva Vizcaya, a locale characterized by an emerging hospitality sector in the Cagayan Valley Region. This province provides a distinct research backdrop, as local hotels and restaurants have begun a gradual transition toward digital integration, incorporating features such as automated booking, digital check-in, and smart room controls. Selecting this setting allowed the research to move beyond urban-centered narratives and explore the nuances of technology adoption in a provincial hospitality context. While the research team used Aldersgate College in Solano as a central administrative base, participants were drawn from various hospitality establishments across the province to ensure a broader perspective of the local industry.

C. Participants

The participants consisted of eleven individuals who had direct experience with smart automation, such as IoT-enabled rooms, mobile check-in systems, and digital payment kiosks. Their encounters ranged from voice-controlled devices to tablet-based ordering systems and mobile checkout platforms. A multi-stage purposive–snowball technique was used to recruit participants, beginning with purposive sampling to ensure that initial respondents met the inclusion criteria, followed by snowball sampling to expand the pool through referrals. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, reached when additional interviews yielded no new themes, ensuring a diverse range of shared lived experiences.

D. Research Instrument

The primary data-collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit in-depth qualitative narratives from hotel guests. This format aligned with the interpretive phenomenological design, allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions and explore the subjective meanings participants attach to their experiences with smart automation. To ensure the instrument's effectiveness, the guide was finalized through an expert review process in which reviewers assessed the clarity, sequencing, and relevance of the questions to confirm that they could capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. The development of the guide was further informed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9), and Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), in order to balance technological inquiry with societal and developmental concerns.

E. Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews focusing on participants' narratives within the provincial hospitality setting of Nueva Vizcaya. Ethical considerations, including participant confidentiality and informed consent, were strictly maintained throughout the research process to ensure analytic rigor. All transcripts were anonymized before analysis, and participants are identified in this report only by number.

F. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method to systematically extract the essence of the guests' lived experiences with smart automation. The process began with multiple readings of the anonymized transcripts to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the narratives. To maintain objectivity, the researchers employed epoché (bracketing) to suspend personal biases and prior theories regarding technology before engaging in horizontalization to identify significant statements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Lived Experience of Guest Perceptions of Smart Automation

This section explores how guests cognitively and emotionally interpret the presence of smart automation in hotels. The data revealed a complex duality in how technology is perceived, captured in the major theme below.

Major Theme 1: The Duality of Technological Perception

This major theme reveals how guests appreciate smart automation as a marker of luxury and physical safety while simultaneously perceiving it as a risk to their psychological privacy.

Sub-theme 1.1: Automation as modern efficiency and elevated luxury

Participants predominantly perceived smart automation as a signifier of contemporary, high-end hospitality. Participant 4 commented that smart automation means efficiency and modern service. Participant 9 viewed the technology as a representation of luxury:

> *"It represents world-class service. It shows the restaurant cares about using the best tools available." (Participant 9)*

These statements indicate that guests interpret the financial investment in smart automation as an investment in their personal care, elevating their perception of the hotel's brand prestige.

This finding supports perceived usefulness as the most substantial factor affecting technology acceptance within the Technology Acceptance Model. Because guests view the technology as a highly valuable tool with added benefits of luxury and efficiency, their response toward it is strongly positive. The results also align with Buhalis et al. (2022) on smart tourism, who argue that advanced technology in hospitality extends beyond its operational function and occupies a central position within the luxury value offering, thereby increasing positive brand perceptions and perceived service quality.

Sub-theme 1.2: Visible automation as a safety mechanism

For guests, smart automation goes beyond luxury; it is also valued as a way to promote health and secure the environment. Participant 5 provided a vivid example:

> *"I saw a UVC robot sanitizing a hallway… This is very advanced and safe." (Participant 5)*

The same sentiment was encapsulated in a further observation that the technology represents safety, efficiency, and innovation—cleanliness combined with advanced technology. This suggests that automated cleaning technologies provide guests with visible, tangible reassurance, transforming technology into a physical safety protocol.

Within the TAM framework, both perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are heightened because these technologies mitigate health risks without requiring effort from the guest. This reflects the shift in guest psychology documented in post-pandemic hospitality literature. As noted by Shin and Kang (2021), hygiene-related smart technologies such as UVC robots and contactless systems have moved from being novelties to essential risk-mitigation strategies that directly influence a guest's psychological comfort and willingness to stay at a property.

Sub-theme 1.3: Panoptic anxiety and the illusion of security

Conversely, the phenomenological data revealed that automation disrupted perceived comfort. While hospitality is focused on the care and well-being of the guest, invisible automation is often perceived as discomforting surveillance. Participant 1 articulated a profound unease:

> *"It feels like I'm being watched and that bothers me a lot." (Participant 1)*

This highlights an important interpretation: for certain guests, ambient smart technology in hotels is experienced as an intrusion into what was once expected to be the safe space of a hotel room, rather than as a useful addition to it.

Theoretically, this indicates a constraint of traditional TAM models. A system may score highly on perceived usefulness, yet acceptance can still fail if the technology intrudes into the user's emotional space. In recent work on digital privacy in smart hotels, Lin et al. (2022) identified technology anxiety as a significant problem: extensive use of IoT devices and AI can lead guests to feel that the technology is invading their space, with a marked effect on the quality of their stay.

B. Guests' Preferences Regarding the Use of Smart Automation

This section captures guests' lived preferences and why, highlighting complex desires for a balance between traditional hospitality and automation.

Major Theme 2: The Desire for a Synchronized Service Ecosystem

This major theme reveals that guests do not want full automation, but rather a productive combination in which technology removes tasks that require only data processing while emotional tasks are left to human staff.

Sub-theme 2.1: The hybrid service preference (routine versus emotional)

A dominant theme across the interviews was the strict compartmentalization of hotel services. Guests do not wish for a fully automated hotel. Participant 10 preferred automation for routine services and staff for guest support, while Participant 3 echoed the distinction, preferring staff for welcoming guests and digital tools for service. Participant 9 summarized the preference most clearly:

> *"I want machines to handle the data, like my name, and allergies… Then, I want the human staff to use that information to talk to me, explain the food, and make me feel welcome." (Participant 9)*

This recurring preference reveals that guests view technology strictly as an enabler rather than a replacement, establishing a clear boundary between mechanical data tasks and emotional care.

In relation to the theoretical framework, guests tend to prefer technology where they believe it enhances the efficiency of the task at hand, such as processing data, but prefer humans for tasks involving emotional complexity. This strongly supports the high-tech, high-touch position gaining acceptance in hospitality management. Bowen and Morosan (2023) argue that the most effective hospitality systems use technology to streamline the less complex parts of the service encounter, relieving hospitality workers so they can focus on what is fundamentally human and critical to hospitality practice: emotional connection and complex problem resolution.

Sub-theme 2.2: Craving genuine human warmth

Despite recognizing the efficiency of automation, guests located the core of hospitality in human connection. Participant 1 said they felt more comfortable and satisfied with the care and hospitality of human staff, and Participant 2 stated the same preference for human staff on grounds of hospitality.

This demonstrates that the preference for human interaction is driven by a psychological need for emotional validation—a fundamental warmth that algorithmic precision cannot replicate. This phenomenological reality is echoed by Gursoy et al. (2021) in their study of human–robot interaction in service delivery. They found that while AI can execute a service script flawlessly, it lacks the genuine empathy required for true hospitality; guests still instinctively seek human validation in order to feel welcomed and valued as individuals.

C. Guests' Actual Experiences in Using Smart Automation

This section illustrates firsthand examples of the intersection of smart automation, its hidden trade-offs, and its emotional costs.

Major Theme 3: The Reality of the Frictionless Trade-off

This major theme captures the lived reality that while using smart technology is highly empowering and physically seamless, it comes at the direct and often disappointing cost of emotional engagement.

Sub-theme 3.1: Empowered autonomy and the frictionless experience

When systems are optimally automated, the end-user journey shifts. Participant 11 recalled:

> *"I checked in quickly, got my room access, and went straight to my room… I felt in control because the process was simple." (Participant 11)*

Participant 8 reported feeling empowered at being able to manage the process independently, and Participant 7 described being impressed by the effortless comfort of the technology.

The lived experience of smart automation thus emphasizes the value of co-creation, resulting in a greater sense of self-reliance. This aligns with Expectation-Confirmation Theory. Guests set a high bar for operational efficiency; when integrated technology performs seamlessly, it generates strong positive confirmation, producing post-adoption satisfaction and a sense of empowerment in co-creating the service journey.

Sub-theme 3.2: The efficiency–warmth trade-off and fading novelty

The interviews also surfaced the trade-offs guests are willing to accept. Participant 8 commented that the service was efficient but felt less personal, and Participant 6 expressed the same sentiment, noting that automation reduced personal interaction while increasing convenience. Such trade-offs are often accepted with initial enthusiasm, as Participant 2 observed:

> *"First it was satisfying, but when you stay longer, you don't feel the presence anymore." (Participant 2)*

This suggests that while automation is functionally effective, it demands an emotional sacrifice and fails to provide the lasting engagement that creates truly memorable experiences.

Through the lens of ECT, the initial functional expectations are confirmed while the emotional expectations of hospitality remain unfulfilled. This illustrates hedonic adaptation in hospitality technology. Ivanova et al. (2022) note the brief "wow factor" guests experience when staying in a hotel that employs service robots and smart rooms; once the novelty fades, guests revert to judging their stay based on emotional and social engagement.

D. Synthesis: The Essential Structure of the Experience

The exhaustive description reveals a coexistence of technological convenience and the human need for connection. Initially viewed as a symbol of luxury and empowered autonomy, the pervasive nature of the technology eventually triggers panoptic anxiety. As the stay progresses, novelty fades, and guests feel the absence of humane service as efficiency is traded for warmth. The essential structure of the lived experience is therefore defined by the Dichotomy of Empowered Autonomy and Emotional Isolation. Guests do not want a fully automated hotel, but a synchronized hybrid ecosystem in which invisible systems manage mechanical functions while human staff provide the irreplaceable emotional and cultural dimensions of hospitality.

CONCLUSION

Based on the phenomenological analysis, the study concludes that smart automation functions as a double-edged instrument: it elevates a hotel's brand image through modernity and safety while simultaneously triggering privacy anxieties. This suggests that technology acceptance in hospitality is dictated more by emotional factors than by functional utility alone.

To preserve the cultural authenticity of Filipino hospitality—specifically the values of malasakit (care) and bayanihan (community)—establishments must adopt a synchronized hybrid ecosystem that ensures technology enables genuine human connection rather than displacing it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. The Hospitality and Tourism Sector

Hotel owners, administrators, and management. Guided by Expectation-Confirmation Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model, management must ensure that the smart technologies they implement are highly useful without crossing the threshold into perceived surveillance. Management should adopt a hybrid service blueprint: given that guests do not want total automation, self-service kiosks and mobile applications should handle transactional duties while staff are repositioned as guest experience ambassadors focused on conversation and emotional care.

Hospitality frontline employees. Since technology now handles routine data processing efficiently, frontline staff should recognize that their primary value lies in human warmth. Employees are encouraged to shift from a transactional mindset to a relational one, focusing on active listening, empathy, and personalized guest engagement in order to bridge the emotional isolation caused by automation.

Provincial tourism officers of Nueva Vizcaya. Local tourism officers may use these findings to formulate smart tourism guidelines for local hotel operators. By educating local businesses on the synchronized service ecosystem, the province can elevate its tourism competitiveness, ensuring that accommodations adopt modern automation while preserving the region's traditional Filipino hospitality.

B. The Academic Sector

College of Business, Management, and Accountancy administrators and faculty. Educators may undertake a curriculum realignment. Syllabi for operations management and service innovation should be updated to teach students how to manage the synchronized service ecosystem, emphasizing the balance between property management systems and high-level customer service strategies.

Aldersgate College Computer Institute administrators and IT students. Developers and IT students are encouraged to adopt a human-centered approach to user interface and user experience design. Within the TAM framework, to support perceived ease of use and reduce panoptic anxiety, automation should be designed as a tool users activate, rather than as passive, constant monitoring.

Hospitality management students. As the future workforce, students should focus on developing advanced interpersonal skills. While digital competency is necessary, students must internalize that their ability to handle complex emotional interactions and crisis resolution is their ultimate competitive advantage relative to AI.

Other educational institutions. Higher education institutions are encouraged to use the findings as criteria to benchmark curricula, ensuring that students can manage the safe integration of technology and human skills in service delivery.

C. Future Researchers

Future researchers may adopt a quantitative approach with a larger sample to empirically test the relationship between panoptic anxiety and guests' intention to return to a smart hotel. Researchers may also apply Expectation-Confirmation Theory in longitudinal studies to determine the pace at which technology novelty fades during prolonged hotel stays. Such work would clarify the time frame involved and establish the critical points at which technological involvement gives way to a need for human input in order to sustain guest satisfaction.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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