

Beyond Satisfaction:

How Fostering “Room Ownership” Can Boost Guest Loyalty

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One goal often espoused by hotel operators is gaining guests’ loyalty by delighting them. Strange as it sounds, however, delighting guests is table stakes in today’s saturated hospitality industry. As brands compete on ever finer margins of service and comfort, loyalty can no longer rest solely on satisfaction. Even as most hotel firms seek and achieve flawless execution, they cannot gain substantial differentiation. So what else moves the needle? A study recently published in the *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* suggests a novel strategic lever: psychological ownership.

The power of ownership. The idea of encouraging "guest ownership" is as follows: when guests feel that a hotel room is "theirs," they are more likely to return, recommend, and engage. We explored this idea using multiple test methods, including an analysis of TripAdvisor hotel reviews, a field study at a Midwestern U.S. hotel, and controlled online experiments using hypothetical scenarios. Across these studies, we found that psychological ownership—not just satisfaction—plays a powerful role in fostering guest loyalty. Moreover, we found that hotels can cultivate this sense of ownership through simple, low-cost guest experience design choices, rather than expensive upgrades or service overhauls often intended to enhance satisfaction.

In this research brief, we present the theoretical grounding of psychological ownership, summarize the empirical findings, and translate the insights into actionable strategies.

The nature of psychological ownership. Psychological ownership refers to a subjective sense of possession, even without legal ownership. It's an intuitive feeling that something—be it an office desk, a vacation home, or, in this case, a hotel room—is "mine." Unlike legal ownership, psychological ownership is perceptual and emotional. Research shows that psychological ownership boosts perceived value, fosters stewardship, and shapes how individuals relate to the object they feel they own, as well as to the broader context or brand associated with it.

The following three psychological paths cultivate a feeling of ownership and increase the attachment to the space:

- **Control:** The ability to make decisions about the room, including room selection or customization;
- **Investment of self:** Time, effort, or personal input invested in the room; and
- **Intimate knowledge:** Knowing unique details about the room.

Other studies have focused on psychological ownership at the level of travel destinations or brand community platforms. In contrast, this study examines the effect of guests' personal connection with their hotel room. The key question is: if guests feel like they own the room, will they become more likely to feel loyal to the hotel brand behind that room?

To answer this question, my co-authors and I conducted a multiple-method investigation—comprising an analysis of more than 14,000 TripAdvisor reviews, a real-world Midwestern hotel field study, and two

controlled lab experiments. We found that increasing guests' sense of room ownership can elevate hotel loyalty.

Possessive Pronouns as a Sign of Loyalty

We analyzed 14,689 TripAdvisor reviews from a major chain hotel in Waikiki, Hawaii, to explore whether natural language indicating psychological ownership (e.g., the use of possessive pronouns like "my room" or "our room") correlated with loyalty-related behaviors.

The findings were revealing. Guests who referred to their room using possessive pronouns wrote longer and more detailed reviews, especially when they were satisfied, suggesting greater personal investment and a stronger inclination to endorse the hotel. For hospitality firms, this highlights the tangible business relevance of fostering guests' psychological ownership.

Choice Increases Ownership

To move beyond correlations, we conducted a field experiment at a hotel in the Midwestern U.S. Guests were randomly sorted into one of two conditions at check-in, namely, room choice and room assignment. Guests in the room-choice condition were offered a selection between two available rooms. In the assigned-room condition, guests were simply given a room as usual. A brief feedback survey was left in each room for the guests to fill out and return as part of the hotel's standard guest experience assessment.

Interestingly, many guests in the choice condition expressed uncertainty when asked to select between two rooms, and a number of guests deferred to staff for recommendations. Perhaps because this type of choice felt unfamiliar or low stakes, it had only a minimal and marginal impact on reported satisfaction.

What stood out was not guest satisfaction, but guests' intentions to engage in loyalty-related behavior. Guests who were offered a choice at check-in reported a stronger sense of ownership over their room, a shift that showed up not just in surveys but in behavior. Upon checkout, their rooms were rated as cleaner by housekeeping staff, who were unaware of the experiment. Most important, these same guests also expressed greater intent to return and to recommend the hotel. In other words, the increase in loyalty didn't come from fancier amenities or elevated service—it came from a personal connection guests felt to their room. Thus, we concluded that offering a choice, even a small one, can meaningfully shape how guests relate to both their room and the hotel brand.

Guests who were offered a choice of room at check-in reported a stronger sense of ownership over their room—and were more likely to return.

Three Paths to Activate Psychological Ownership

In a follow-up online experiment, we explored how the three drivers of psychological ownership—that is, control, self-investment, and intimate knowledge—could be activated during the hotel check-in process. Participants viewed simulated check-in experiences that were designed to selectively activate one of the three psychological ownership drivers that we mentioned above:

- (1) Giving guests control over certain room features (*e.g.*, customizable room features like light, music, and pillow types);
- (2) Inviting self-investment (*e.g.*, guests rearranging modular furniture to suit their needs); and
- (3) Sharing intimate knowledge (*e.g.*, highlighting unique historical details about the room).

Each path significantly increased guests' psychological ownership of the room, which, in turn, increased their loyalty intentions. Notably, this happened even when overall satisfaction levels remained unchanged, thus highlighting the distinct role of psychological ownership.

The Ways of Hyperpersonalization

Hyperpersonalization is becoming the norm for many consumer-related businesses, and hospitality is no exception. Our final study examined how a digitally personalized check-in interface might be designed to activate psychological ownership.

Participants in this simulation navigated a digital hotel check-in experience that varied in how much interactivity and customization was allowed. We compared two approaches now in use, reflecting current industry practices. One approach mirrored Marriott Bonvoy's policy of allowing members to save detailed guest preferences in their profile—preferences which are then automatically applied to future stays. The other approach took its inspiration from Hilton Honors, which provides flexible tools within its app that allow guests to customize and select room features for each stay, such as choosing a room from a digital floor plan. While both approaches deliver a personalized experience, they differ in how much *ad hoc* customization guests perform.

Our theory predicts that when guests actively shape the experience for each stay—rather than rely on saved defaults—they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over their room. Indeed, that is what occurred, as guests who could customize their room

gained a greater sense of ownership that translated into higher intentions to recommend and rebook. That said, however, we note that both Marriott and Hilton are providing guests with room features that reflect their personal preferences.

Practical Implications

For hospitality leaders seeking new ways to foster loyalty without substantially increasing costs, this research points to relatively small decisions regarding guest experience design. The following are five strategies based on this study that should help cultivate psychological ownership among hotel guests.

Track more than satisfaction. Look beyond guest ratings. Indicators like room tidiness, review richness, or referral behavior can reveal how invested guests feel.

Use reinforcing language. Small linguistic cues matter. Training staff to use phrases like “*your* room is ready” or “*your* suite has a great view” can shape perception in subtle but lasting ways.

Offer meaningful choices at check-in. Let guests choose their room from a digital floor plan—or even from two room options. Giving guests a voice activates a sense of control, one of the key pathways to psychological ownership.

Enable room customization. Features like adjustable lighting, preferred pillow types, curated music options, or modular furniture layouts allow guests to shape the room to reflect their needs, thereby reinforcing feelings of ownership.

Tell stories that personalize the space. Provide guests with distinctive “insider information” about

their room—such as unique historical details or design elements. Curated “story cards” or in-app notes about a room can deepen personal connection through intimate knowledge.

These approaches can be layered and adapted to align with different brand identities and operational capacities. The key is not to overhaul service, but to offer guests small moments of control and connection that help transform “a room” into “my room.”

Conclusion: From Room to Relationship

Psychological ownership offers a fresh way for hotels to deepen guest loyalty—not by chasing ever-higher satisfaction scores, but by making guests feel ownership in the room. The best part? These interventions are relatively low-cost and easy to implement. For hotels aiming to stand out in a sea of excellent service, turning “the room” into “my room” may just be the next big competitive edge.

Satisfaction is essential, but it is no longer a differentiator—it’s table stakes, as we said at the outset. This research invites hospitality leaders to look one layer deeper, toward the subtle emotional connections that turn a stay into a story, and a room into *my* room.

By tapping into psychological ownership, hotels can activate loyalty not through opulence or reward points, but by helping guests feel that the experience is theirs. The result? Cleaner rooms, richer reviews, more referrals, and above all, returning guests.

In an industry where customer attention is fleeting and competition is fierce, psychological ownership is a fresh advantage worth claiming. ■

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Yoon received her Ph.D. in Marketing from Cornell University at the Johnson Graduate School of Management, where she also taught marketing management courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students as a sole instructor. Her educational background also includes a B.A. in Communication Studies with a minor in statistics from UCLA, graduating with college and departmental honors. She also received an M.S. from Korea University Business School, graduating with distinction. Prior to becoming a professor, Yoon worked in consulting and hosted a radio show in Korea covering various topics like behavioral science and technology.



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Joann Peck's research has been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, the *Journal of Retailing*, and the *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science*. Her work has been cited in *Forbes*, *U.S.*

News and World Report, *Time.com*, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, and others. Professor Peck teaches consumer behavior to PhD students, MBA students and undergraduates. She has also taught marketing strategy and marketing principles. Coming from a secondary math education background, Peck appreciates the art and science of both marketing and teaching.

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Suzanne Shu is dean of faculty and research at Cornell University's SC Johnson College of Business and John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing at the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management.

The types of decisions analyzed in her research include consumer self-control problems and consumption timing issues, with important implications for both negative behaviors (such as procrastination) and positive behaviors (such as saving). Shu has also worked on grant-funded projects using behavioral economics to encourage hypertension medication adherence, reduce procrastination in mammogram screenings, increase adherence to weight loss programs, and promote colon cancer screenings.

Shu has taught marketing and decision making courses to MBA students at the University of Chicago, Southern Methodist University, INSEAD, and UCLA. She is also an NBER faculty research fellow, holds a joint faculty appointment at the UCLA Medical School, and has been a visiting scholar for several years at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

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