

Trust, Emotion, and Adaptive Standards: A Qualitative Exploration of High-End Tourist Loyalty to Butler Service

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Abstract: This study examines how Thai luxury hotel guests who regularly use Butler Service build and sustain loyalty over time. Rather than measuring what guests rate, it explores what they feel, remember, and narrate—psychological territory that survey instruments cannot adequately reach. Twelve purposively selected high-end tourists in Thailand participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews averaging 75 minutes each, followed by a three-hour Focus Group Discussion. All participants used Butler Service at 5-star-and-above properties at least five times per year. Data were analysed using Six-phase Thematic Analysis with constant comparative coding and member checking. Six themes emerged from the data. Trust accumulation forms the relational base without which deeper loyalty cannot develop. Social identity construction ties the Butler experience to how guests see and present themselves. A progressive ratchet effect—here termed Adaptive Standards—continuously elevates guests' minimum acceptable service level. Time value and a zero-friction ideal characterise how senior professionals experience Butler's worth. Emotionally charged, unsolicited Butler gestures crystallise as peak memories that carry disproportionate loyalty weight. Butler turnover, reactive rather than anticipatory service, and digital friction quietly erode commitment that took years to build. No prior study has theorised Butler Service loyalty from the Thai guests' perspective through qualitative inquiry. This paper introduces the Adaptive Standards (Ratchet Effect) construct—a dynamic invisible to cross-sectional surveys—and proposes the Trust-Emotion-Standards (TES) model of VVIP loyalty.

Keywords: Butler Service; Thematic Analysis; Lived Experience; Adaptive Standards; Acceptable Service Level; Emotional Attachment; Luxury Hospitality; Trust-Emotion-Standards (TES).

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1. Introduction

What does it feel like to be served by a truly exceptional Butler—and why does that feeling produce loyalty that survives competitor pricing, tolerates occasional service failures, and sustains repeat patronage across decades? These questions sit at the centre of luxury hospitality strategy, yet they resist quantitative capture. Survey instruments built around SERVQUAL dimensions or Perceived Value sub-scales document what guests rate but cannot reach what guests feel, remember, and narrate—the lived phenomenology that underlies durable brand commitment. Butler Service occupies the apex of personalised

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hospitality [12]. In Thailand, where luxury hotel properties are concentrated in Bangkok, Phuket, and Koh Samui, Butler Service has evolved from a Victorian domestic arrangement into a strategic differentiator deployed by properties ranging from Four Seasons to Capella and from The Peninsula to Rosewood. No prior study has examined Butler loyalty from the guest's perspective.

The quantitative companion to this paper establishes that Perceived Value accounts for loyalty variance and that Overall Satisfaction partially mediates the Perceived Value-to-loyalty path. Those statistics, however robust, cannot explain the psychological architecture through which the patterns are lived. The present study addresses that gap through interpretive qualitative inquiry. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and a Focus Group Discussion were conducted with 12 VVIP tourists—professionals, executives, physicians, legal partners, and internationally active consultants with monthly incomes exceeding THB 1 million and between 5 and 30 or more prior Butler Service experiences [16]. The guiding question is: How do high-end Thai tourists narrate, construct, and sustain loyalty to Butler Service? Two theoretical contributions follow from the analysis. The Adaptive Standards (Ratchet Effect) construct captures a progressive escalation of guest expectations that cross-sectional surveys cannot detect. The Trust-Emotion-Standards (TES) model then integrates all six identified themes into a sequenced psychological framework that specifies how trust, emotion, and rising standards interact. Both constructs carry practical implications for how hotels design Butler programmes, manage Butler retention, and track loyalty in their highest-value segment.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Qualitative Inquiry in Luxury Hospitality: The Case for Phenomenological Depth

Quantitative methods have produced robust statistical models of guest satisfaction and loyalty, but at the cost of phenomenological depth. Riessman [15] and Denzin et al. [5] argue that qualitative inquiry is not a methodological fallback but a theoretically distinct mode of knowledge generation, uniquely suited to capturing the meaning-making processes through which social actors construct their experience. In luxury consumption research, Batat [1] demonstrates that numerical scales cannot discriminate between novice, advanced, and confirmed connoisseur levels in gourmet dining—a finding with direct parallels to the Adaptive Standards mechanism identified here. Several theoretical frameworks bear on this inquiry. Trust-Commitment Theory posits that trust is the foundational relational currency in service relationships. Experience Economy Theory frames luxury service as a staged experience whose value resides in memory creation [8]. Emotional Attachment Theory explains how luxury experiences can generate identity fusion with a service brand. Social Identity Theory frames luxury consumption as a practice of signalling.

2.2. Trust in Service Relationships: From Transaction to Covenant

Morgan and Hunt [11] define trust as the condition where “one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity.” In transactional service contexts, trust grows through consistent delivery against reliability criteria. Butler Service, however, is characterised by intimate, repeated, and deeply personalised interactions. A Butler's cumulative knowledge of a guest's preferences, emotional states, life events, and vulnerabilities represents a form of relational capital that a new Butler, or an AI system, however sophisticated, cannot quickly replicate. Durvasula et al. [7] and Plewa et al. [14] argue that in complex service relationships, personal values—not service attribute assessments—determine the depth of loyalty commitment. Butler Service, operating at the intersection of professional service and intimate personal assistance, creates the conditions for value-level trust, a precondition for genuine commitment rather than calculated switching-cost retention.

2.3. Emotional Memory and the Crystallisation of Loyalty

Research in the neuropsychology of service suggests that emotionally salient encounters are encoded as episodic memories that subsequently bias future evaluations [6]. In the luxury hotel context, Holmqvist et al. [8] show that hedonic escape experiences tend to produce stronger loyalty intention than functional satisfaction, because they link the brand to identity-relevant memories. Pine II and Gilmore [13] experience economy framework—Educational, Esthetic, Escapist, Entertainment—provides the structure through which Butler experiences are staged as memorable events rather than transactional deliveries. Unexpected, unsolicited gestures by a Butler that exceed any reasonable expectation function as peak experiences in the sense described by Csikszentmihalyi [4]: They leave traces out of proportion to their brevity, generating loyalty momentum that extended periods of adequate, rule-compliant service cannot match.

2.4. Adaptive Standards: Theoretical Precedents

Rising expectations with accumulated experience have precedents in adaptation-level theory in which perception baselines recalibrate in response to repeated stimuli. In consumer research, a related dynamic is the escalation of commitment: Guests

who have experienced exceptional Butler Service recalibrate their minimum acceptable standard upward, becoming simultaneously more loyal to properties that can meet the elevated bar and more sensitive when they cannot. Cross-sectional SERVQUAL or Perceived Value instruments measure current perceptions relative to a static expectation anchor and thus cannot detect this shift.

3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophical Positioning

This study adopts a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, premised on the view that guest loyalty is not a stable attitudinal object waiting to be measured but a dynamic process of meaning construction that must be explored [3]; [5]. The research question: How do VVIP tourists construct and sustain loyalty to Butler Service? —requires methods capable of accessing participants' own narrative logic, not their position on a pre-defined scale.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who would maximally illuminate the phenomenon [10]. Eligibility criteria were: Thai nationality; regular Butler Service use (five or more experiences per year); current or recent guest status at a 5-star-and-above property in Thailand; and monthly income of THB 1 million or above (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant profile (n = 12)

ID	Sex	Age	Occupation	Income/ Month	Butler Exp.
KI-01	M	45	Senior Executive	> THB 2 M	> 20 times
KI-02	F	52	Business Owner	> THB 5 M	> 30 times
KI-03	M	38	Entrepreneur / Investor	> THB 1 M	10–20 times
KI-04	F	47	Corporate Executive	> THB 2 M	10–20 times
KI-05	M	61	Retired Senior Executive	> THB 3 M	> 30 times
KI-06	F	42	Medical Specialist	> THB 1 M	10–20 times
KI-07	M	55	Attorney / Partner	> THB 2 M	> 20 times
KI-08	F	36	CFO / Finance Executive	> THB 1 M	5–10 times
KI-09	M	49	Artist / Public Figure	> THB 1 M	10–20 times
KI-10	F	58	International Consultant	> THB 3 M	> 30 times
KI-11	M	43	Lead Engineer	> THB 1 M	5–10 times
KI-12	F	67	Regional Politician	> THB 2 M	> 20 times

Twelve participants were recruited through hotel concierge contacts and snowball referrals within the luxury guest network. The eleventh participant reached theoretical saturation; the twelfth provided confirmatory triangulation.

3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in hotel lobbies or in private meeting spaces familiar to participants, between March and April 2567 B.E. 2024. Each interview followed a six-question guide covering: the personal meaning of Butler Service; the most memorable Butler encounters; what makes a Butler indispensable; how expectations have evolved; instances where Butler Service fell short; and the relationship between Butler quality and hotel loyalty. Interviews were conducted in Thai, audio-recorded with participant consent, and professionally transcribed. Average duration was 75 minutes; total corpus approximately 15 hours of recorded material. A three-hour Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was subsequently conducted with all 12 participants. Using a building-on-individual protocol, emerging themes from individual interviews were presented as seed statements for participants to converge, diverge, or extend. Four additional thematic clusters (FG-A through FG-D) emerged from this phase.

3.4. Analytic Procedure: Six-phase Thematic Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke [2] six-phase Thematic Analysis. Familiarisation involved reading and re-reading all transcripts with initial notes recorded. Initial coding generated line-by-line codes inductively from semantic content. In the third and fourth phases, codes were clustered into candidate themes, and the resulting thematic map was reviewed against the full dataset for fit and coverage. Themes were then defined and named with clear boundaries and internal coherence before a

narrative account with verbatim extracts was produced. Two independent coders achieved an initial agreement of approximately 85% on code assignments; all discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Four trustworthiness criteria guided the study. Credibility rested on member checking: six participants reviewed summaries of their themes and confirmed their accuracy [9]. For transferability, thick description and verbatim quotes are provided throughout, so readers can judge their applicability to other contexts—no claim is made that the findings generalise directly beyond the Thai VVIP segment. An audit trail of codes and analytic memos addresses dependability. A second coder, blind to the research hypotheses, independently confirmed all six themes; this confirmability check produced no substantive revisions to the thematic structure.

4. Findings

4.1. Six Themes of VVIP Butler Loyalty

Analysis of the 15-hour interview corpus and the FGD produced six principal themes. Trust forms the relational base; emotional memory deepens and sustains the relationship over time; and rising personal standards set the performance bar that every subsequent Butler encounter must clear (Table 2).

Table 2: Thematic map: Trust-emotion-standards (TES) model of VVIP butler loyalty

Foundation Layer (Trust)	Binding Layer (Emotion and Identity)	Motivational Engine (Standards and Gaps)
T1: Trust Accumulation as Loyalty Foundation → Reliability-based trust → Relational capital → Anticipatory knowing	T2: Social Identity Construction T5: Emotional Surprise and Memorable Moments → Peak-experience crystallisation	T3: Adaptive Standards (Ratchet Effect) T4: Time Value / Zero-Friction Ideal T6: Service Gaps as Loyalty Disruptors

4.1.1. Theme T1: Trust Accumulation as the Loyalty Foundation

Across all 12 participants, trust emerged as the non-negotiable prerequisite for loyalty. What participants described was not the transactional confidence that a Butler will execute a request correctly, but something deeper: a relationship in which the Butler knows them—their habits, preferences, emotional patterns, and vulnerabilities—more thoroughly than many close acquaintances:

“A good Butler is the person who knows I like to drink unsweetened lemon water before sleeping—without me ever saying so. Sometimes he knows my life better than I do.” — KI-02, Business Owner, > THB 5 M/month, > 30 Butler experiences.

“The fact that my Butler remembered I had a noise problem last time and automatically upgraded my room this visit—without waiting for me to complain—that is what I call Trust with a capital T.” — KI-07, Attorney / Partner, > THB 2 M/month, > 20 experiences.

This trust had three interrelated dimensions: accumulated relational capital (the Butler’s cumulative knowledge of the guest’s life), anticipatory knowing (the ability to infer future needs from past patterns), and asymmetric vulnerability (the guest’s willingness to allow the Butler access to personal information that would not be shared with a standard hotel employee). KI-10 named this last dimension plainly:

“I’ve told my Butler things I haven’t told my assistant at work. Because the Butler needs to know how to serve me properly, that level of trust takes years to build—and you feel it profoundly when the hotel loses that Butler to another property.” — KI-10, International Consultant, > THB 3 M/month, > 30 experiences. The loss of a trusted Butler was the single most frequently cited loyalty disruption across all interviews—a thread that recurs in Theme T6.

4.1.2. Theme T2: Social Identity Construction Through Butler Experience

Nine of 12 participants described Butler Service in explicitly identity-constructive terms. The decision to stay in a Butler-equipped room was not merely a service preference but a statement about who they are—to themselves, to their professional networks, and to their social reference groups:

“When I tell a subordinate or a partner where I’m staying, it’s not just the hotel name—it tells them who you are. Butler Service makes that statement complete.” — KI-01, Senior Executive, > THB 2 M/month, > 20 years of experience.

“I’m not just paying for the room. I’m paying to tell myself and others: I’ve reached that level.” — KI-04, Corporate Executive, > THB 2 M/month, 10–20 years of experience.

Social identity theory predicts that services functioning as group-membership signals produce stronger attitudinal loyalty than those that deliver only utilitarian benefits, because switching requires surrendering the identity signal. In the Butler context, this mechanism operates on two registers simultaneously: external (what the choice signals to others) and internal (what it confirms about oneself). KI-04’s account above captures it in the same breath. Several participants drew a clear distinction between the identity-signalling value of the hotel brand and the identity-validation value of the Butler relationship itself. As KI-09 observed:

“It’s not about the hotel’s status. It’s that the Butler sees me as a specific person, not a room number. That personal recognition—of who I actually am—is what I can’t get anywhere else and what I keep coming back for.” — KI-09, Artist / Public Figure, > THB 1 M/month, 10–20 experiences.

4.1.3. Theme T3: Adaptive Standards — The Progressive Ratchet Effect

What distinguishes Theme T3 from the others is that it was not prompted by any interview question but surfaced independently and without exception across all 12 participants. Each described a dynamic in which repeated Butler Service experiences progressively elevated their minimum acceptable standard—not to a stable plateau but in a continuous upward ratchet. Each exceptional experience raises the floor of what is acceptable; a return to a lower baseline then generates dissatisfaction disproportionate to the objective severity of the lapse:

“The first year I used it, the service was amazing. By the third year, I thought, “This is normal now.” I need more than this. I need the Butler to anticipate me before I know myself what I want.” — KI-10, International Consultant, > THB 3 M/month, > 30 years of experience.

“I remember the first time a Butler unpacked my suitcase. I thought: Wow, incredible. Now, if they don’t do it completely right, I feel disappointed. Our standards keep rising all the time.” — KI-05, Retired Senior Executive, > THB 3 M/month, > 30 years of experience.

Three structural dimensions of this ratchet effect emerged from cross-participant comparison. The first is expectation recalibration: each excellent Butler encounter becomes the new baseline against which subsequent Butlers are unconsciously measured. KI-02 described this as the memory writes itself into the template. The second is scope expansion—as trust deepens, guests extend the domain of Butler involvement from logistics into emotional territory, inviting Butlers into personal milestones, family events, and health concerns. The third is asymmetric sensitivity: failure at the newly elevated standard produces distress disproportionate to the objective severity of the lapse. As KI-07 put it: A Butler who used to exceed my expectations, but today merely meets them—I now experience that as a step backwards, even though objectively nothing has gotten worse:

“What I now require is what the best Butlers once gave me as a surprise. If a Butler today only does what was extraordinary five years ago, it feels like regression. My floor is their ceiling.” — KI-05, Retired Senior Executive.

A hotel cannot hold VVIP loyalty through a static Butler programme. The programme must evolve in response to each guest’s rising standards, which call for individualised guest intelligence systems that track and respond to the ratchet effect over time.

4.1.4. Theme T4: Time Value and the Zero-Friction Ideal

Eight of 12 participants—uniformly the senior executive and professional sub-group—valued Butler Service in explicitly temporal terms. For this group, time is the scarcest resource; Butler Service is valued not primarily for what it delivers but for what it removes: waiting, explaining, deciding, and managing the minor frictions of hotel life that consume mental bandwidth needed for high-stakes work:

“What Butler does for me is Zero Friction. I don’t have to think about small things, I don’t have to wait, I don’t have to explain. He manages everything before I even feel there’s a problem.” — KI-03, Entrepreneur / Investor, > THB 1 M/month, 10–20 years of experience.

“On the day of an important board meeting, I made one call to my Butler. He arranged the car, the meals, the documents, and the meeting room—everything. That is the value that justifies the price premium.” — KI-07, Attorney / Partner.

Once experienced, frictionless service becomes the expectation; any return to friction-generating service is not merely inconvenient but registers as a qualitative downgrade. KI-08, the youngest participant, added a cognitive dimension to this:

“The best thing about having a dedicated Butler is that I stop carrying the mental load of logistics. I am completely present in my work or my leisure. I am not managing a hundred small things in the back of my head. That cognitive freedom—I would pay almost anything to maintain it.” — KI-08, CFO / Finance Executive, > THB 1 M/month, 5–10 years of experience.

4.1.5. Theme T5: Emotional Surprise and Memorable Moment Crystallisation

Eleven of 12 participants described at least one specific Butler encounter that crossed from service delivery into an emotional event—something that generated a strong affective response and that they had narrated to others multiple times since. These encounters were invariably unsolicited: not something the guest had requested, but something the Butler had done based on accumulated knowledge and emotional attunement:

“It was my husband’s birthday. I hadn’t told anyone. But the hotel Butler had prepared a cake and flowers in the room—he had remembered from a detail I shared during a previous stay. I cried. Something like that you don’t forget. Ever.” — KI-06, Medical Specialist, > THB 1 M/month, 10–20 years of experience.

“I was travelling alone and felt exhausted—overwhelmed, actually. The Butler sensed it and arranged a massage immediately without me asking. That level of emotional intelligence—reading a person’s invisible distress—cannot be replicated by a system or an AI.” — KI-09, Artist / Public Figure.

Three structural properties of Memorable Moments emerged from the data. Every moment described was initiated by the Butler, not requested by the guest, which makes it structurally different from even excellent responsive service that remains within the expected transaction frame. Memorable Moments were also customised to the specific guest’s life, relationships, and emotional state, drawing on accumulated relational capital (Theme T1) rather than a generic luxury script. Their impact, finally, was asymmetric: a single Memorable Moment carried more loyalty momentum than months of consistently excellent routine service. As KI-12 reflected, one moment can make me a customer for life. A hundred ordinary perfect days cannot.

4.1.6. Theme T6: Service Gaps as Invisible Loyalty Disruptors

Despite predominantly positive experience narratives, seven of 12 participants described service failures that had meaningfully damaged their loyalty commitment. Three patterns emerged. Butler turnover was the most emotionally charged disruption across all interviews. When a trusted Butler leaves a property, guests described something close to relational bereavement:

“Every time I come back now, it’s a different Butler. I have to rebuild the whole relationship from zero. It’s exhausting. I want the hotel to keep good Butlers the way they keep good wine—carefully.” — KI-12, Regional Politician, > THB 2 M/month, > 20 experiences.

The second pattern was a reactive rather than proactive orientation. Several participants described technically satisfactory Butler behaviours—requests fulfilled correctly and promptly—that felt impersonal because the Butler was waiting for instructions rather than anticipating needs. In the context of rising adaptive standards (T3), a merely reactive Butler is experienced as a failure by guests who now expect anticipatory service as a baseline:

Some Butlers are excellent at answering requests. But I don’t want to have to make requests. I want the Butler to have already solved the problem before I knew there was one. If I have to ask, something has already gone wrong.” — KI-11, Lead Engineer, > THB 1 M/month, 5–10 years of experience.

The third pattern was digital and communication friction. Several participants cited hotels’ failure to provide seamless digital channels for their butlers. KI-03 described frustration that some properties still required physical telephone contact—a friction that contradicts the Zero-Friction Ideal (T4) and signals a mismatch between service ambition and operational reality.

4.2. Focus Group Discussion: Four Thematic Clusters

The three-hour Focus Group Discussion produced four clusters that extended and deepened the individual interview themes (Table 3).

Table 3: Focus group thematic clusters (FG-A through FG-D)

Code	Theme	Core Proposition
FG-A	Invisible Value	The most important thing a Butler creates is something that never happens: the problem prevented, the wait eliminated, the discomfort absorbed before the guest feels it. Loyalty flows from what guests were spared, not only from what they received.
FG-B	Emotional Attachment to the Person, Not the Brand	Loyalty to a hotel property is partially loyalty to a specific Butler individual. When a trusted Butler moves, some guests will follow—booking the new property because their Butler now works there.
FG-C	Hyper-Personalisation: The AI-Augmented Butler	Guests in the digital era expect Butler Service to be supported by accumulated data intelligence. AI is a tool for the Butler, not a substitute: human presence, emotional attunement, and moral trustworthiness cannot be algorithmic.
FG-D	Butler as Elite Brand Ambassador	Exceptional Butler encounters are narrated within high-end social networks. This elite word-of-mouth is less frequent than online review behaviour, but more trusted and more directly action-motivating for others in the VVIP segment.

The Invisible Value cluster (FG-A) drew the most energetic and convergent discussion of the entire FGD. When the moderator presented the seed statement—The most important thing about Butler Service is what it prevents, not what it delivers—all 12 participants affirmed it without qualification. KI-07 captured the group’s position:

“That is exactly it. When you take a long-haul flight, the most luxurious thing isn’t the bed or the champagne—it’s that you land and every problem has already been solved. You didn’t even know there was a problem to solve. The Butler absorbed it into invisible space. That is the highest form of service.” — KI-07, Attorney / Partner.

The Emotional Attachment cluster (FG-B) exposed a structural vulnerability in standard hotel loyalty metrics. Surveys measure attachment to the property; in the VVIP segment, emotional attachment is often primarily to the Butler as an individual. When a trusted Butler moves to a competitor's property, some guests follow. KI-02 gave a personal account:

“My favourite Butler moved to a competitor's five-star property last year. I followed. I booked that hotel specifically because he was there. I hadn’t stayed there before. I haven’t been back to my original hotel since. That tells you something about where the loyalty actually lives.” — KI-02, Business Owner, > THB 5 M/month.

4.3. The Trust-Emotion-Standards (TES) Model of VVIP Butler Loyalty

The six themes and four FGD clusters form a three-layer psychological model of VVIP Butler loyalty in which each layer depends on and amplifies the one below it.

4.3.1. Foundation Layer: Trust Accumulation (T1)

Trust is the structural prerequisite for all other loyalty-generating mechanisms. Without a Butler’s deep knowledge of the guest’s patterns, preferences, and vulnerabilities, none of the processes in Themes T2, T3, T4, T5, or FG-B can take hold. The trust at issue here is not simply confidence in service reliability [12]. It is closer to the relational covenant described by Morgan and Hunt [11]: An arrangement involving asymmetric vulnerability and accumulated knowing that creates the psychological safety within which emotional surprise (T5) and scope expansion (T3) become possible.

4.3.2. Binding Layer: Emotion and Identity (T2, T5, FG-B)

Once trust is established, emotional and identity mechanisms bind guests to the Butler relationship, making switching psychologically costly. The Butler experience becomes incorporated into the guest’s self-narrative (T2)—leaving requires revising that narrative, not merely changing a hotel. Memorable Moments (T5) create asymmetrically weighted emotional memories that carry the relationship through periods of merely adequate service. And because the attachment described in FG-B partly attaches to the Butler as an individual rather than to the hotel brand, that loyalty is portable: it can follow the Butler to a new property, representing a direct revenue risk for the originating hotel.

4.3.3. Motivational Engine: Standards and Gaps (T3, T4, T6)

As trust accumulates and emotional memories crystallise, the guest's minimum acceptable standard escalates progressively via the Ratchet Effect (T3) (Table 4).

Table 4: The TES model: Layer summary, mechanisms, and management implications

Layer	Themes	Psychological Mechanism	Loyalty Contribution	Management Implication
Foundation (Trust)	T1	Accumulated relational capital; anticipatory knowing; asymmetric vulnerability	Structural prerequisite: enables all other mechanisms	Invest in Butler continuity; build Guest Intelligence profiles; protect the trust covenant
Binding (Emotion / Identity)	T2, T5, FG-B	Identity construction; peak-experience memory; person-specific attachment	Deepens switching costs; creates portable loyalty risk	Design for Memorable Moments; track Butler-specific loyalty; manage Butler departures as loyalty events
Engine (Standards / Gaps)	T3, T4, T6	Ratchet Effect; Zero-Friction Ideal; asymmetric failure sensitivity	Creates a continuous improvement imperative; elevates failure cost	Implement Adaptive Butler Training; monitor guest standard evolution; address turnover and proactive-gap failures

The Zero-Friction Ideal (T4) gives this elevated standard its practical expression: any expenditure of mental effort on logistics has already fallen short. Service gaps (T6) are then experienced not against an absolute standard but against the guest's current ratchet position, so each failure carries greater relational damage as the relationship matures.

4.4. Discussion

4.4.1. The Ratchet Effect as a Novel Construct

Adaptation-level theory and the escalation of commitment provide precedents for rising guest expectations, but neither adequately describes the asymmetric, cumulative, and scope-expanding dynamic observed among VVIP Butler guests. The Ratchet Effect differs from these prior constructs in ways that matter empirically. It is driven specifically by relational trust deepening—the guest's progressive willingness to allow the Butler into more intimate domains—rather than by generic experience accumulation alone. The scope of expectations expands as a result, moving from logistical management toward emotional intelligence. Critically, failure at the elevated standard produces relational damage disproportionate to the objective severity of the lapse—a feature that neither Helson's nor Denzin et al. [5] frameworks fully accommodate. For service quality measurement, this has a practical implication that is easy to overlook. Cross-sectional surveys that ask guests to evaluate current experience against current expectations necessarily compress and mislead when applied to long-tenure VVIP guests whose expectations are already calibrated to extraordinary service. A guest with 30 Butler experiences who rates satisfaction 6 out of 7 may, in fact, be registering relative disappointment against a ratcheted standard, while a first-time Butler guest with the same rating may be expressing genuine delight. Survey-based KPIs, therefore, risk systematically underestimating loyalty vulnerability in the highest-value segment.

4.4.2. Person-Specific Loyalty and the Hotel Brand Measurement Problem

The FG-B finding—that loyalty in the VVIP segment is substantially attached to the Butler as an individual, not exclusively to the hotel brand—poses a structural measurement problem for standard loyalty instruments, which presuppose that the loyalty object is the property. When KI-02 followed her Butler to a competitor property, standard metrics would record a defection from Hotel A and a new loyal guest at Hotel B. Neither metric captures the actual event, which was a person-specific relational transfer. This finding supports the case for Butler-specific loyalty tracking as a distinct management intelligence stream, separate from and complementary to brand-level guest satisfaction data.

4.4.3. Theoretical Integration: TES and Existing Models

Trust-Commitment theory grounds the foundation layer and explains why Butler's knowledge and vulnerability matter more than service attribute ratings in this context. Experience Economy accounts for the mechanism by which Memorable Moments crystallise into loyalty that outlasts the encounter [13]. Social Identity Theory explains why switching hotels can feel like a revision of self-concept rather than a simple change in service preferences. Adaptation-Level Theory and the Escalation of Commitment provide the conceptual foundations for the Ratchet Effect, though neither alone captures its relational specificity.

Where TES extends beyond these frameworks is in specifying direction and sequence: trust opens the door to emotional investment, which in turn raises the standard by which every future Butler encounter will be judged—and against which every future failure will be measured.

4.5. Implications

4.5.1. Managerial Implications

The most urgent managerial insight from this study concerns Butler continuity. Because VVIP loyalty is substantially person-specific (FG-B, T1), Butler turnover is not an HR operational matter—it is a guest experience event with direct revenue consequences. Hotels should treat a Butler's departure with the same seriousness as any other loyalty-disrupting event, implementing structured knowledge-transfer protocols, long-term retention agreements tied to guest satisfaction outcomes, and personal communication with VVIP guests whenever their Butler changes. The data from KI-02, KI-10, and KI-12 suggest that some guests will follow a trusted Butler to a competitor property if no proactive retention effort is made. Beyond retention, the Ratchet Effect has a second managerial implication that is harder to see in aggregate KPI data. Because VVIP guest standards are continually rising, a static Butler programme will gradually underperform for the hotel's most valuable guests while appearing to perform well in average satisfaction scores. Individualised Guest Intelligence Systems that track each guest's evolving ratchet position—not just their current preferences—are therefore a competitive necessity rather than a luxury.

A guest with 30 Butler visits needs a Butler who has absorbed 30 visits of learning about that guest, not one executing a generic luxury service script. The asymmetric impact of Memorable Moments (T5) points to a further operational change. Because a single unsolicited, personally specific gesture can generate more loyalty momentum than months of excellent routine service, Butler training should invest meaningfully in emotional attunement and what might be called proactive gesture design—equipping Butlers with both the relational intelligence and the operational empowerment to plan and execute at least one significant unsolicited gesture per guest per stay. This is not a soft add-on to the service offer; for the VVIP segment, it is among the highest-return activities a Butler can undertake. Finally, the Zero-Friction Ideal (T4) extends to communication infrastructure. For guests who manage professional relationships via instant messaging around the clock, a telephone-only Butler contact is not a minor inconvenience—it contradicts the service promise at the operational level. It signals a mismatch between the hotel's ambition and its systems. Digital communication across all channels the guest habitually uses should be treated as a baseline requirement, not an optional upgrade.

4.5.2. Theoretical Implications for Luxury Hospitality Research

Several theoretical extensions follow from the TES model. The Adaptive Standards construct needs to be operationalised as a longitudinal variable in Butler loyalty studies—capturing how each guest's standard trajectory shifts across consecutive stays, rather than offering a static snapshot of current satisfaction. That kind of instrument does not yet exist in the luxury hospitality literature, and its absence makes it difficult to test whether the Ratchet Effect is as universal across cultural contexts as it appears within this Thai VVIP sample. Separately, person-specific loyalty should be distinguished from brand loyalty in measurement frameworks, so that the relational capital embedded in individual Butler relationships becomes visible and manageable rather than invisible to hotel analytics. The Invisible Value construct (FG-A)—service quality generated by what is prevented rather than what is delivered—warrants systematic incorporation into Butler Service quality measurement, as proposed in the companion paper.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the lived psychology of VVIP Butler loyalty in Thailand through 15 hours of in-depth interview data and a three-hour Focus Group Discussion with 12 high-end tourists who are regular, experienced Butler Service users. Six themes were identified—Trust Accumulation, Social Identity Construction, Adaptive Standards, Time Value and the Zero-Friction Ideal, Emotional Surprise and Memorable Moments, and Service Gaps—and integrated into the Trust-Emotion-Standards (TES) model. The Adaptive Standards (Ratchet Effect) construct is the principal theoretical contribution. No prior framework in luxury hospitality research fully captures the asymmetric, scope-expanding, and relationally driven escalation of guest expectations that accumulated Butler experience produces—nor the disproportionate damage that failures against the elevated standard can inflict. This dynamic required the iterative interpretive work that qualitative inquiry makes possible; it will not surface in cross-sectional survey data. For luxury hotel management, sustaining VVIP loyalty through Butler Service is less about maintaining a fixed service standard and more about understanding who each guest has become through the relationship, and equipping Butler personnel with the intelligence, training, and organisational support to serve them accordingly. The ratchet does not stop; the only question is whether the Butler programme moves with it.

5.1. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Five limitations constrain the generalisability of these findings. All participants are Thai nationals, and the psychological mechanisms identified—particularly Social Identity Construction (T2) and Trust Accumulation (T1)—may manifest differently among Western or Middle Eastern VVIP guests, where relationship norms and luxury consumption cultures differ markedly. The more consequential gap, however, is the absence of the supply side: no Butler professionals participated in this study. Butlers own accounts of how they perceive, manage, and respond to rising guest standards would add essential complementary insights that the present design cannot provide, and this asymmetry should be the priority for follow-up research. Third, the FGD protocol of presenting seed statements derived from individual interviews may have introduced social desirability effects, particularly around sensitive topics such as Butler Turnover and Emotional Attachment. Fourth, participants narrated past experiences; retrospective accounts introduce interpretive distortions that in-the-moment data collection could help address. Fifth, the geographic restriction to Thailand limits the applicability to emerging Butler Service markets elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Future research should conduct cross-national comparative studies contrasting Thai VVIP guests with Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European guests in the same luxury hotel chains; include Butler professionals in a supply-side counterpart study to complete the relational dyad; develop and validate a longitudinal instrument to track Adaptive Standards evolution across consecutive stays; and test the full TES model using a sequential mixed-methods design in which qualitative insights generate survey items for large-sample quantitative validation.

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