


# What is luxury hospitality? A need to move towards a scientific understanding

Andy Heyes 

Hotel Management School, NHL Stenden University of Applied Science, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands  
Correspondence: andy.heyas@nhlstenden.com

**ABSTRACT:** The world of luxury and that of luxury hospitality has been growing for numerous years. From hotels such as the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, The Torch in Doha and The Savoy in London, luxury hospitality and the variety which is now on offer are growing exponentially. Despite the growth of the industry, little research and literature is available to practitioners, scholars and researchers alike to help them better understand the current situation. While there is a little literature on offer, there is a need for more detailed research and analysis to be conducted. This article is a call for research which it is hoped will help to add to the current body of knowledge as well as help to attract future researchers to collaborate on developing new insights. A brief analysis of the current situation and literature is provided along with future tracks and themes which could potentially be a means for research development.

**KEYWORDS:** comparison, hotels, London, United Arab Emirates

## Introduction

The combination of luxury and hospitality is one which has for many years been scrutinised (Heyes & Lashley, 2017). While luxury arguably can be about retail, the mixture between luxury and hospitality has been one which has been visible in society for centuries. While no official definition of a luxury hotel exists (Slattery & Games, 2010), the two concepts have joined together particularly in terms of the tangible and intangible natures of what they offer. A theory of hospitality has been put forward by Lashley and Morrison (2001); however, a theory based on luxury and luxury hospitality does not exist. This article will start to address that.

### *The non-existent luxury theory*

To theorise luxury is not possible, arguably due to the complex nature and the unique aspects which the concept of luxury has to offer. Certain theories around the subject do exist, such as conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). But to define and theorise luxury is arguably impossible due to the many components of luxury — including that of exclusivity (Chandon et al., 2016), price/expensiveness (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012) and quality (Frank, 1999; Thomas, 2007; Hoffmann & Coste-Marnière, 2012).

To expand upon this, arguably the main element is that luxury is highly personalised, although it is also dependent on an individual's historical and cultural background (Berry, 1994; Choi, 2003; Wiedmann et al., 2007). "The idea of luxury products and services are exceptions to the everyday normalities of life", bringing into context a person's real-life cultural experiences, needs and social backgrounds (Hoffmann & Coste-Marnière, 2012, p. 69). With everyone's lives and personal backgrounds different

to others, it is hard for us as academics and practitioners to move towards a unified definition of "luxury hospitality".

### *Luxury hospitality*

While the world of luxury has usually been associated with that of retail and is often the focus of the academic literature available on the subject, hospitality and the service industry do find their way into the discussion, which means elements of luxury are no doubt apparent. The need for exciting new products (tangibles) delivered with high class service (intangibles) is arguably needed to create memorable experiences for which the hospitality industry is famous (Lashley & Morrison, 2001). Questions could be asked, however, as to how and to what extent these experiences become "luxurious". An increase in quality and even quantity could be argued to be at the forefront of most people's ideas when it comes to luxury — but an excess may not be luxury, particularly in a world increasingly debating sustainability.

From previous literature, it could be interpreted that the worlds of luxury and hospitality have similar meanings associated with them. The quality of the tangible with a mixture of the intangible could arguably help create the overall experience (Mattila, 1999; Sherman, 2007; Slattery, 2012; Heo & Hyun, 2015).

While the turn of the millennium has been suggested to be the start of the "experiential economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), it can also be suggested that it was the start of the new luxury period (Mei-Pochter & Nanisch, 2010), where consumers changed their notions of wanting physical goods (tangibles) to what is now considered wanting luxury experiences to express their emotions (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006; Hoffmann & Coste-Marnière, 2012).

Figure 1 provides a model that looks to identify and explain the current circumstances which revolve around the concepts

of luxury and hospitality. A combination of both tangibles and intangibles can help to create the necessary experience which consumers are looking for.

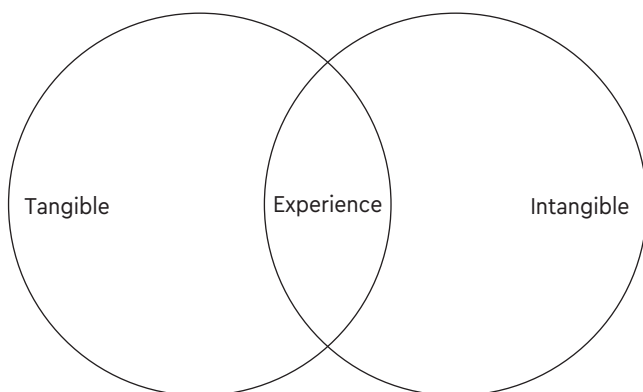
Research and literature on luxury hospitality has been discussed throughout the past two decades (Sherman, 2007; Heyes & Nadkarni, 2016; Heyes & Lashley, 2017; Hoa & May, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Further research is, however, needed if we are going to move towards a deeper understanding of luxury hospitality — from both a practical and an academic perspective.

With many graduates of hospitality studies expressing their desire to work in the luxury hospitality industry, arguments have arisen based on whether the current curriculum is sufficient for students to move into a career in luxury hospitality. So, this article is to ask for collaborations into the future development of our understanding of the luxury hospitality industry, and how hospitality education should prepare future managers for this. While it could be suggested that the luxury sector is a relatively small part of the hospitality industry, it is an area of great potential to which a wide range of academic disciplines could be applied, including that of economics, sociology and psychology. Based on my personal experience, gaining access to such establishments and consumers to conduct research or gather teaching resources is challenging (Heyes & Lashley, 2017). However, collectively, it should be possible for hospitality educators to gain a deeper understanding of the term luxury hospitality.

#### Areas for future research

There are multiple areas for future research in the luxury hospitality industry. Firstly, in regard to human resources. A recently created website (insightandy.co.uk) explores a range of notions which we as researchers can look to investigate and discuss. Such topics could include that of graduate learning and management schemes, and the experience and expertise of faculty members, etc. Similarly, the need to explore the notions of luxury hospitality whether that be from a tangible or intangible perspective is needed. In a realm where “experience” is most important, how best to research this going forward is a big question.

A call for research is provided and needed in these areas. Therefore, a proposal of possible research themes and tracks can be set out as follows:



**FIGURE 1:** The relationship between the tangible and the intangible, a work in progress

1. Service quality in luxury hospitality establishments
2. Human resources in luxury hospitality
3. Luxury hotel schools — what are they?
4. International expansion of luxury hospitality groups — is expansion a way of losing exclusivity?

The above research agendas can assist greatly in identifying tracks to which many researchers can find suitable initiatives and avenues of research.

#### ORCID

Andy Heyes: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5843-849X>

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