# What are the factors that influence luxury accommodation experience? Case study: New Zealand

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# Abstract

The luxury travel market is following the global travel trend as experiencing the fastest growth in the travel industry, exerting a crucial influence on New Zealand's tourism market. This study focuses on the luxury accommodation market in New Zealand, to answer the research question, "what factors influence the guest experience in luxury accommodation?" Hence, the study aimed to identify factors influencing luxury accommodation experiences and determine how these factors influence and enhance guest perception of luxury accommodation experience. The study adopts a qualitative approach to a case study of New Zealand cases. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, which were collected from the TripAdvisor platform.

The results indicate that the following factors are the main influences on the guest experience in luxury accommodation: service, ambience, facilities, décor, view, food and beverages, and location. Pine and Gilmore's (1999) widely recognised experience dimensions model is discussed in terms of guest satisfaction in luxury accommodation, in different contexts. In the luxury accommodation sector, the "entertainment" dimension was found to be the dominant influence in this study, on enhancing guest experiences, followed by "aesthetics and escape," and "education," which had the least influence on enhancing guest experiences. The discussion addressing experience influences and Pine and Gilmore's dimensions explores customers' perceptions of value in relation to their accommodation experience, and provides practical recommendations for providing customers with memorable luxury accommodation experiences.

The findings address the objectives of the study and contribute to knowledge and discussions in the literature about luxury accommodation experiences. In addition, the study also provides suggestions for luxury accommodation managers on guest expectations, satisfaction, and marketing orientation.

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# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgement), nor material which to a substantial extent had been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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# Acknowledgements

# Chapter One: Introduction

This study explores the factors that influence the luxury accommodation experience in New Zealand. The purpose of the study was to identify the influential factors on guest experiences in luxury accommodation and provide suggestions about how these factors enhance guest satisfaction and memorable experiences. This chapter addresses the background and significance of the study, the study objectives and purposes, the research methodology, and finally, the structure of this dissertation.

## 1.1 Research background

As a crucial part of the global tourism and hospitality industries, the luxury accommodation market is experiencing continuous growth, with increasing numbers of affluent consumers and continuous demand for personalised and unique luxury experiences (Harkison, 2016). As a consequence of the increasing segment growth, the luxury experience in the hospitality industry is constantly redefining and innovating, resulting in increased scholarly attention to different perspectives, such as customer experiences, definitions of luxury experiences, and luxury accommodation experiences (e.g. Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019; Harkison, 2016, 2018; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt,1999, 2006; Walls et al., 2011).

As the foundation writers on the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (1999) proposed that the influences on experience are entertainment, education, aesthetics, and escapism. Among these four value dimensions, "entertainment" is the dimension that directly generates guest satisfaction, "education" shows that guests receive happiness from inner growth. The aesthetic and escapism values explain that humans generally want to escape their daily routine in the pursuit of beautiful new things.

Oh et al. (2007) measured the experience dimensions in the tourism industry, adopting these four influences on bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation experiences, and suggested that the aesthetic dimension was the main influence on the accommodation experience, and the entertainment and escape dimensions did not directly influence

guest satisfaction. Hosany and Witham (2010) conducted measurements in the cruise industry using the experience dimension framework, and supported Oh et al.'s (2007) argument that the aesthetic value is a dominant dimension for cruise guest experiences, followed by the entertainment, education, and escapism dimensions, and that all four dimensions influenced and generated pleasant and memorable experiences.

Through exploration of the luxury accommodation experience, Yang and Mattila (2016) revealed that the purchase intention of luxury hospitality customers is influenced by hedonic value, functional value, and financial value. In addition, the providers of luxury accommodation invest in the physical environment and human interaction, expecting customers to receive delightful experiences and define their accommodation experience as luxurious in terms of industry's recognition and standards (Harkison, 2016; Walls et al., 2011). Buehring and O'Mahony (2019) proposed that the value generators for a memorable pleasant luxury hotel experience are service, atmosphere, technology, and culture.

According to the Sabanoglu (2021) value of global personal luxury goods report, from 1996 till 2019, the global luxury goods value has experienced a dramatic increase from 76 billion euros to 281 billion euros. In the face of the continuing global economic recession, the strong growth of luxury goods consumption shows that society is increasingly showing the importance of luxury goods to mass consumption (Iglesias et al., 2011). In addition, in the luxury hospitality sector, Grand View Research (2018) reports that the luxury hotel market will reach USD 115.80 billion by 2025. The consumption of luxury hotels plays an essential role in the consumption of luxury goods and has a strong consumer market in order to compete in the luxury hotel market and meet the market's demand. Hotel companies focus on providing a unique customer experience by investing in infrastructure and technologically advanced facilities(Chen & Peng, 2014).

As a Tourism New Zealand (2017) report stated, the luxury travel market is following the global travel trend as experiencing the fastest growth in the travel industry, exerting a

crucial influence on New Zealand's tourism market. In the year ending December 2017, the luxury lodge spend had had a rapid growth of 42% in one year and increased 141% on the previous five years (Luxury Tourism New Zealand, 2017). 230,793 people were directly employed in the tourism industry, accounting for 8.4 percent of the total number of people employed in New Zealand, an increase of 9.3 percent from the previous year (Tourism New Zealand, 2017). New Zealand has a wide range of luxury accommodation from luxury lodges bespoke city hotels and boutique B&B; premium hosts deliver relaxing and genuine service with a memorable experience. Tourism New Zealand aims to constantly improve the reputation of New Zealand as a luxury destination, and keep enhancing the tourist experience by increasing the quality and quantity of luxury accommodation (Luxury Tourism New Zealand, 2017).

This research background to knowledge gained from exploring the luxury accommodation experience, leads to various suggestions and discussions about guest perceptions of a luxury experience. Data on the New Zealand luxury accommodation market signals the importance of exploring guest experiences in luxury accommodation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors influencing customers' experiences in New Zealand luxury accommodation and determine how those factors enhance guest satisfaction.

## 1.2   Purpose of the research

As stated in section 1.1, scholars adopting Pine and Gilmore's (1999) framework of the four-dimensions of influence on customer experiences in the various tourism market have found different guest perceptions of value. Furthermore, scholars are exploring the definition and creation of luxury experience in different areas, trying to establish the meaning of *luxury experience*. Most research has focused on the values or dimensions influencing customers' experiences, but few have stated the major influences on the guest experience, especially in luxury accommodation. Thus, this research focuses on the major guest experience influences in luxury accommodation.

Due to the crucial market position of luxury accommodation in New Zealand, this study

uses New Zealand as a case to explore the factors influencing guest perceptions of luxury accommodation experience and how various factors influence a guest stay experience and generates satisfaction. The research questions guiding the research are:

1. What are the factors that influence the luxury accommodation experience in New Zealand?
2. How these factors influence and enhance the guest perception of luxury accommodation experience in New Zealand?

The results of this research suggest influences on guest experience in luxury accommodation, and discuss how these influences enhanced guest satisfaction. From the results, managers of luxury accommodation can gain a clear idea about the different effects factors have influencing guest experience, and determine the direction of investments into enhancing guest stay experiences. Furthermore, this research adds to the hospitality literature on New Zealand and provide directions and suggestions for the future study of luxury accommodation experiences.

## 1.3   Research methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and case study approach to collecting data to answer the research questions. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influence luxury accommodation experiences. Experience is an immediate phenomenon that keeps changing according to circumstances, so an exploration of experience is more suitable for a qualitative method with an interpretivist approach (see Mason, 2014). Hence, a qualitative methodology was chosen as appropriate for this subjective topic of exploring the guest stay experience. Furthermore, due to the limited scale and timeframe of the study, a case study approach was considered most suitable for an inductive and qualitative study focusing on the New Zealand luxury accommodation market.

The sample for the research was selected from hotels and lodges defined as "luxury accommodation" by Qualmark New Zealand. Online customer feedback from TripAdvisor provided secondary research data for the study. TripAdvisor is the main online travel platform for guest feedback. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to reduce the

sample to fit the size of the study in terms of its reliability. Thematic analysis was adopted to identify the key themes and influential factors using a manual coding process.

## 1.4 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is structured into five chapters. This first chapter presented basic information as a background to the research. It introduced the background to the research topic, then explained the purpose of the research and presented the research questions. This was followed by an overview of the research methodology and the structure of the dissertation.

The second chapter, the literature review, introduces the theoretical background to the research. First, reviews the literature related to luxury accommodation experiences, definitions of *luxury* and *luxury accommodation*, and previous studies about experience marketing in the hotel industry. The second part of the literature discusses influential factors, and the literature on influence and culture, technological innovation, physical environment, and interpersonal interaction influences on the luxury accommodation experience.

The third chapter presents the research methodology and methods of this research. First, it introduces the paradigm and the significance of the qualitative research approach, followed by an explanation of the case study approach and the analysis strategy with the philosophical support of interpretivism. It continues with an outline of the population, sample selection, and data collection, focusing on secondary data and online platform information screening. Finally, the thematic analysis process is described, as this was used to identify the key influential factors, using a manual coding process.

In the fourth chapter, the findings and discussion, the influential factors are identified and explained in detail, followed by an interpretation of how each value or dimension influenced guest perceptions of value.

The last chapter summarises the research, presenting the main findings, and offering the implications for luxury hospitality management in New Zealand. The chapter concludes

with the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the literature background to this study, and academic knowledge on guest experiences and luxury accommodation. The chapter starts with definitions of luxury, luxury accommodation and luxury accommodation experience, then introduces Pine and Gilmore's (1999) influence experience dimensions, before overviewing online platform influences.

## 2.2 Definitions of *luxury*

It is hard to define the term "luxury" due to the perception be varied and it is keeps changing as history and culture progress (Harkison, 2016). The derivation of the word "luxury" dates back to the Latin words "*luxus"* and *"luxuria,"* which connote extravagance and over-indulgence. The consumption of luxury has experienced a gradual increase in Western society (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Luxury is a controversial subject because there is no objective qualification or measurement that can define the standard of luxury. However, *luxury* has several characteristics, such as being more than essential, of a high-quality standard, and exclusively supplied (Harkison, 2016).

The definition of *luxury* is constantly changing, from beyond the necessary and ordinary, to the exclusivity and availability of resources, and finally, to meeting the desire for psychological needs (Heine, 2012). Human society has enjoyed luxury over many generations, and concepts of luxury are very fluid in terms of cultural norms, personal orientation, and innovation. Therefore, *contemporary luxury* has a different meaning to traditional *material luxury*, as it focuses on personalisation, authenticity, and experience (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006).

Social status is associated with luxury, as contemporary consumers use luxury consumption as a social statement to present their identities and gain a sense of belonging (Atwal & Williams, 2017). Tsai (2005) argued that personal orientation also

impacts customer luxury purchase value, as the consumption of luxury products is not only a manifestation of social status, but also a personal orientation of self-directed pleasure, recognition and rewards. Even though the literature shows some characters of luxury, it is hard to find a solid definition of luxury. Not only the term of luxury is hard to define defining luxury in hospitality is a controversial topic. For instance, when adding the term "luxury" to hotels, there are new meanings created when these two words are combined together (Harkison, 2016). More discussion will present in next section on this.

## 2.3 Luxury accommodation

The definition of *luxury accommodation is* diverse thought out the ages amongst industry organisations and scholars. Even though there is no universal definition for luxury accommodation, it can be distinguished according to the physical environment and human interaction of the service level, resulting in different types of accommodation, such as luxury lodges and hotels (Harkison, 2016; Walls et al., 2011). For instance, New Zealand Qualmark (2020, para. 3) stated that the qualification for five-star accommodation is that it should have "facilities and services amongst the best on offer in New Zealand." Thus, *luxury accommodation* in New Zealand is one that has the highest standard of excellence (Qualmark, 2020).

Xu and Chan (2010) proposed that luxury hotels use word of mouth *advertainment* (a portmanteau term to describe a mix of entertainment and advertising) to influence guest perceptions of brand knowledge, so guests have consistent expectations of experience quality. Star ratings of hotels also have a strong influence on the expectations of guests, and the expectations of personalised services in boutique hotels and family accommodation are relatively higher than for standard luxury chain hotels (Ariffin et al., 2012; Briggs et al., 2007). Hu et al. (2009) proposed that excellent service produces superior customer perceived value and has a positive effect on the image of a luxury hotel, resulting in customer satisfaction. As discussed the standard and expectation for luxury accommodation indicates some characters and conceptions of luxury accommodation. However, what guests can experience luxury accommodation is also

the crucial component when defining luxury accommodation, thus the perception of the guest experience in luxury accommodation will be discussed in next section.

## 2.4 Luxury accommodation experience

Walls et al. (2011) proposed that consumer experiences in luxury hotel fall into the two dimensions of the physical environment and human interaction. The physical environment focuses on ambience, and is multisensorial, having a direct influence on impressions of luxury. Human interaction focuses on the hotel staffs' service level, attitude, appearance and co-creation interactions. In addition, different levels of sensitivity, personality, and the travel experiences of a guest, also influence the stay experience (Walls et al., 2011). Harkison et al. (2018a) produced a conceptual model of how the luxury accommodation experience is created. Its key elements were "set the stage" (the tangible facilities and physical environment), "ethos of property" (the intangible atmosphere in a property), "actors' performance" (service staffs' influence on guest experience by value-creating), and "co-creation of experience" (human interactions between guest and staff).

Cetin and Walls (2016) suggested that the key components of luxury hotel experiences were the physical environment and social interaction, and that most guests pay more attention to service staff in social interactions, than they do to their physical surroundings. In luxury hotel restaurants, the physical environment of the restaurant, such as furniture design, lighting, decoration style, restaurant atmosphere, and interactions between the staff and guests (including the affinity of staff attitudes), can positively increase the value of the guest experience (Wu & Liang, 2009). Kwortnik (2008) demonstrated through research on cruise ships that a luxurious physical environment can enhance a guest's accommodation experience and improve it at a broader level. For example, a private balcony with a sea view on a cruise ship, the design and planning of guest rooms, variety of facilities, classical artistic paintings and sculptures all help customers have a unique cruise experience. As the luxury accommodation experience has been discussed by many scholars, there is certainly an understanding of what the guest can experience in

luxury accommodation. However, the experience can be influenced for many reasons, the next section will discuss the influence dimension of experience.

## 2.5 The influence dimensions on experience

It is hard to define influence due to its complicity of causing and human perception (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). However, there are various discussions on the influence of customer experience, since designation of customer experience is the essential advantage in business, it also presents all the aspects a company can offer (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). The most accepted, are the four influence dimensions of Pine and Gilmore (1999), on the customer experience, and the most basic is that of the *entertainment dimension*, which directly relates to pleasure and customers' feelings. The second is the *education dimension*, which refers to the learning, understanding knowledge and experience gained by customers that can effectively improve their experience. Finally, the aesthetic and escapist dimensions explain that humans generally have a desire for beautiful things and want to try something new.

Mody et al. (2017) researched the Airbnb and hotel industry and expanded the four dimensions of Pine and Gilmore (1999) into accommodation experience, which is influenced by serendipity, localness, communities, and personalisation. Mody et al. (2017) explained that due to the continuous expansion of the accommodation industry, the modes and influencing factors on accommodation experiences had undergone various developments, which provided crucial insights for the future hotel industry and the accommodation experience. Atwal and Williams (2017) adapted Pine and Gilmore's (1999) customer connection and participation framework and compared it with traditional marketing focuses just on product functions and services. They argued that experience marketing pays more attention to consumers' feelings, emotions, creative cognition, behaviour, and social characteristics. As scholars adopt Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience dimension into hospitality, it be seen that the close connection between experience and hospitality. In order to have better understanding of each dimension in the hospitality industry, the next section will discuss the four dimensions of experience in

detail.

### 2.5.1 Influence of the "entertainment" dimension

The *entertainment dimension* is a general and basic value dimension of experience, and refers to the human authentic hedonic feeling from the entertainment effect, and is a direct inner influence (Oh et al., 2007). Through an analysis of service in shopping mall experience, Tsai (2010) suggested that the entertainment dimension influence guest with directly emotion pleasure, also stimulated guest with cognition, self-expressiveness, physiological growth and collective awareness. Thus, in order to attract and meet customer demands, experiences co-created with customers should be designed with a managerial approach, as the meaningful value can be created through the interactions of employees and customers (Scott et al., 2009). Miao et al. (2014) suggested that in the experience process of hotel consumption, the hedonistic value perceived by customers is dynamic, and there are different hedonistic experiences in the pre-consumption, during, and after-consumption periods of hotel consumption. Apart from pleasant feelings and memories, education and personal recognition can also be identified as an experience dimension due to the gain of knowledge and personal growth when comprehending new experiences.

### 2.5.2 Influence of the "education" dimension

When people engage themselves and actively participate in an experience, they learn new knowledge and skills, which reflects the *education dimension* of experience (Oh et al., 2007). Oh et al. (2007) applied the four dimensions of experience to the tourism sector, arguing that the education dimension includes the escapism dimension, showing that increasing new skills or knowledge during an experience reflected in the education dimension is not a major influence in B&B accommodation.

Reiter et al. (2014) discussed the factors that influence the quality of experience from the three aspects of human, system, and context. Among them, human influencing factors focus on the different backgrounds of people's characters, such as their physical

responses of visual and auditory sensations, and personal norms of beliefs, values, and objectives, which involve social-cultural and educational backgrounds in high-level cognitive processes. Moreover, the quality and characteristics of product technology systematically affect customer experiences. Finally, the physical and social background context behind the process of customer experience also influences the quality of experience (Reiter et al., 2014). The knowledge gained when experiencing a new thing influences the customer experience. Hence, new experiences can consist with the characteristic of aesthetic; thus the next section is introducing the experience dimension of "aesthetic".

### 2.5.3 Influence of the "aesthetic" dimension

The *aesthetic dimension* shows that tourists are passively influenced by their surrounding environment, resulting in memorable experiences (Oh et al., 2007). After exploring the accommodation experience of cruise passengers, Hosany and Witham (2010) suggested that the aesthetic dimension is the main value in customer experience, increasing customer satisfaction and recommendations to potential customers. However, in contrast to Oh et al.'s (2007) findings, Hosany and Witham (2010) argued that the entertainment dimension is the second strongest influence on experience and the key value resulting in satisfaction. Sipe and Testa (2018) also supported the argument that the aesthetic dimension has crucial value in the hospitality industry, due to the influence of the physical environment on guests' aesthetic pleasure, generating memorable experiences. In addition, this dimension is driven by active participation that imbues an experience with a deep understanding and a sense of indulgence (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011). The process of experience not only influence from the dimension of aesthetic, but also there is an interest in the motivation to escape from daily life for new experiences. The next section will discuss the dimension of "escapism".

### 2.5.4 Influence of the "escapism" dimension

Escapist motivations are a strong influence on purchase intention in the hospitality industry, as consumers seek hedonic leisure in hospitality by escaping their everyday

existence (Taheri et al., 2017). Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) stated that the *escapism dimension* indicated that the participant was actively experiencing what is happening in the present. From an investigation into museum visitors, they proposed that the escapism and entertainment dimensions did not influence visitors' satisfaction. However, when they changed the sample to visitors in music festivals, results showed that the escapism and aesthetic dimension did not significantly influence visitor's satisfaction. Therefore, Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) suggest that different occasion contexts created the experience in different forms; however, the research shows that the experience dimension should influence visitor's satisfaction in different ways.

Oh et al. (2007) argued that in the tourism industry, the *escapism dimension* referred to the tourist's motivation to escape ordinary life to experience different cultures and countries, resulting in a depth of thought about life from a different perspective. Their research showed that the aesthetic dimension was a crucial determinant of destination and overall travel experience, however this dimension was highly influenced by the surrounding environmental characteristics of the business and services. In addition, the fundamental motivation for tourism is finding a meaningful lifestyle and an escape from ordinary daily lives that ultimately influences tourist experience. Therefore, the escapism dimension is an important influence value for tourist experiences with satisfaction (Oh et al., 2007). Since scholars have explored the influence of experience dimension in various hospitality sectors, the next section will focus on the influence of the luxury accommodation sector.

## 2.6 Potential influences on luxury accommodation experience

Cetin and Dincer (2014) confirmed that the importance of physical environment and social interaction as influences on customer experiences in hospitality, highlights that safety and security are concerns for hotel guests due to the different norms, cultures and environments in foreign destinations. Through the analysis of reviews and scorings on hotel online platforms, and combined with Hofstede's (2011) cultural difference theory research, Mariani and Predvoditeleva (2019) proposed that customers with different

national cultural backgrounds have different accommodation experiences, which affects their online reviews. In addition, Lo and Yeung (2020) proposed that not only the physical environment and guest staff encounters are important influences on guest experiences, but also the interactions between guests, as these influence the guest stay experience; guest - guest interactions involve demeanour, behaviour, appearance, and socialisation.

Buehring and O'Mahony (2019) revealed that a memorable customer experience consists of four constructs: service, atmosphere, technology, and culture. The service construct has the most substantial influence on a memorable stay experience, and mainly involves intangible human interactions that co-create hedonic value between staff and guests. Secondly, atmosphere elements focus on the physical environment such as the hotel décor and design, influencing guests with multisensory stimulation. In addition, the embodiment of technological elements such as hotel in-room systems or virtual reality (VR) experiences offer more options and convenience to enhance the overall luxury experience. Finally, culture constructs influence the experience, as guest's active participation and co-creation with staff enable them to experience authentic local cultures and learn new things (Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019). Gunasekaran and Anandkumar (2012) suggested that the most important influence on tourists' alternative accommodation choices are the atmosphere of the home, followed by the value and price of accommodation, the authenticity of the local experience. and finally, the host-guest relationship. This provides evidence of tourists' pursuit of local culture in their choice of accommodation, and the influence of the home atmosphere suggests that in addition to integrating with the local environment, its guests need their own space and has certain changes with their own life. This is consistent with findings on the influence of hedonic escapism on the luxury experience (e.g. Holmqvist et al., 2020).

Based on the research on customer satisfaction with luxury hotels, and after studying hotel service dimensions, Ariffin et al. (2018) proposed three dimensions that affect guests' accommodation experience and significantly improve their satisfaction with luxury hotels. The first is that of personalised service, which means that advanced service enhances the emotional value to guests and resonates with them at an emotional

level. Secondly, a comfortable physical environment can positively affect guests' sense of having a luxury accommodation experience. Finally, in terms of authenticity, in the relatively systematic and institutionalised organisation of luxury hotel services, guests hope to obtain additional real service interactions to produce a real experience. Scholars have explored many influences on the luxury accommodation experience, which has established an abundant knowledge for this research. Moreover, online guest reviews and social media are an appropriate data source that helps scholars exploring the guest's perception of experience, and these platforms also influence guest expectation and stay experience, more detail of this will be discuss in next section.

## 2.7 Online guest reviews

Compared to traditional guest feedback forms, online feedback platforms that contribute electronic word-of-mouth reviews, have extended guest options for collecting product information and have become a crucial data source for researchers and practitioners, especially in relation to the hospitality industry, as many travellers now provide feedback on their hotel stays, which influence potential customers (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Ali et al. (2016) indicated that in the tourism industry, especially in resort hotels, creative tourism experiences influence tourists' feedback and result in intentions to revisit. Hence, this supports the view that escape and recognition factors influence tourists' ability to have a particularly memorable and satisfying travel experience.

Lee and Watkins (2016) revealed that bloggers on social media have a positive influence on the brand perceptions and marketing strategies of luxury brands through their friendships with their audiences. They not only facilitate establish long-term and stable relationships with customers, but also constantly absorb new customer resources. Hotels that receive high ratings and complimentary comments on online social media platforms can be considered trustworthy and presenting high quality accommodation. Therefore, the online ratings and comments are crucial influences on the reputation of luxury accommodation (Filieri et al., 2018). From the various online travel platforms, TripAdvisor has been identified as the leading feedback platform for presenting guest

accommodation experiences and ratings (Torres et al., 2015). In addition, in terms of interest from hotel practitioners, 90% of general managers review TripAdvisor feedback daily, as it has become the most valued data source for guest feedback in the hospitality industry (Torres et al., 2015). Bandi, Tanner and Hämmerli (2018) supported this argument, commenting that travellers are more trusting of TripAdvisor's credibility than other platforms, affecting their decision-making. These suggestions support the notion that TripAdvisor is a credible source of data for this research in data collection.

## 2.8 The gap in the knowledge

The study aims to discover the influences on luxury accommodation experiences in New Zealand. This chapter has reviewed definitions of luxury, luxury accommodation, and luxury accommodation experience, introduced the influence dimension of experience, and the influence of online review platforms. The key studies relating to this study are those on the influences on experience (see Pine & Gilmore, 1999), customer experience in luxury hotel (see Walls et al., 2011), the creation of luxury accommodation experience (see Harkison, 2016), and constructs and generators of memorable experience in luxury hotels (Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019); these either discussed the experience influences or luxury accommodation experiences. However, there is a gap in the literature on exploring the influence of guest experiences of luxury accommodations. Hence, this study uses New Zealand luxury hotels and lodges as a case study to fill this gap in knowledge.

There are several studies on New Zealand luxury accommodation: the greening environmental programmes (Cheyne & Barnett, 2001), the employee voice and organisational culture (Brien et al., 2012; Haynes & Fryer, 2001; Williams et al., 2008), the creation of luxury accommodation experience (Harkison, 2016, 2018), Auckland luxury hotel attributes (Mascarinas, 2020), and guest satisfaction (An, 2018). Only two studies by Harkison (2016, 2018) investigated the luxury accommodation experience in New Zealand, and one study investigated luxury hotel attributes in Auckland (i.e. Mascarinas, 2020). Thus, this research contributes to the understanding of the luxury

accommodation market and guest experience in New Zealand.

# Chapter Three: Research Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore the factors influencing customers' experiences in luxury accommodation, and discover how those factors enhance guest perceptions of the experience. This chapter introduces the research methods and methodology used to answer the research questions, commencing with the researcher's philosophical position and followed by an introduction to the case study. Due to the limited time allowed for writing a dissertation, this study used a case study approach to focus on the luxury accommodation industry in New Zealand. The data was extracted from Trip advisor guest reviews of luxury accommodation providers in New Zealand and analysed using a thematic analysis approach, to summarise the factors that influence the luxury accommodation experience.

## 3.2 Research paradigm and perspective

A *research philosophy* shows how a researcher perceives the world, and expresses the philosophical assumptions and beliefs behind the research paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A clear understanding of the research paradigm and methodology shows the philosophical position taken on society and reality, and guides in the selection of the most appropriate research approach for a study (Ticehurst & Veal, 2000). Krauss (2005) argued that the research philosophy captures how the researcher perceives the world, and expresses the philosophical assumptions and beliefs behind the research paradigm. It has a profound impact on the researcher's understanding of the research question, the process of design research, the content of discussions, the method of data collection, and interpretations of the findings (Mason, 2014)., Based on the research philosophy of the interpretivist paradigm, this research set out to discover the laws behind a particular set of social phenomena based on human behaviour, by adopting qualitative research methods to conduct an inductive analysis on secondary data from an online review platform.

### 3.2.1 Interpretivism

The current two mainstream research philosophies are positivism and interpretivism. *Positivism* usually uses a deductive approach and quantitative research methods to continuously verify the nature and laws of science to obtain objective knowledge (Bryman, 2008). Scholars use positivist paradigms to find connections and changes between different variables and usually test hypotheses using scientific methods (Mason, 2014). On the contrary, research informed by an interpretivist paradigm, gains knowledge through the study of human experience and subjective opinions, and usually apply inductive approaches and qualitative research methods to answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interpretivist stance acknowledges that world phenomena are constructed by individuals' thoughts, behaviours, and interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This is a common way to study social phenomena because it can help researchers discover the motivations, reasons, experience backgrounds, and connections between different individuals (Mason, 2014). Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm was considered the appropriate research philosophy for this study exploring guest perceptions of luxury accommodation experiences and influence factors. As experience is the human resonance of emotion, sensation and perception, influences on experience are complex dimensions that need in-depth interpretation (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

### 3.2.2 Research method

As the interpretivist paradigm was adopted for this study, consistent with the research philosophy and the topic on the nature of human experience, a qualitative method was also chosen, because the study was interested in discovering human experience from the analysis of data. The choice of this social research method indicated the researcher's viewpoint on how to study a social reality phenomenon and perceptions on the nature of social reality (Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) stated that unlike a quantitative method that employs measurement in numbers, qualitative methods focus on individual words and use an inductive approach to discover the relationship between theory and research

(Bryman, 2016). A qualitative researcher believes that social reality is based on human interactions instead of objective phenomena. Qualitative research can be used to analyse subjective and multi-faceted customer feedback to provide in-depth understandings of human experience and understanding (Mason, 2014). Interpretivism with a qualitative method allows scholars to explore and collect customers' opinions and expressions through multi-dimensional explanations of real phenomena, and develop a deeper and stronger discussion of the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As this study collected online guest feedback to explore the luxury accommodation experience, reflecting on personal emotions, backgrounds, and motivations, qualitative research was more appropriate for such qualitative and descriptive data (see Bryman, 2016). However, in qualitative research, a case study approach can help when the sample population of the research topic is too large and too wide, making it difficult to collect and analyse (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, the following section introduces the case study approach used in this study.

## 3.3 Case study approach

A case study approach is appropriate for a focus on a specific context or case in immediate reality, and for investigating, interpreting, and exploring a contemporary phenomenon (Mason, 2014). The case study approach can help understand a current social phenomenon in the real-life context and further facilitate the analysis of a series of data in the context of a certain case (Mason, 2014). A case study is also suitable for exploratory, inductive, and qualitative research in certain fields, to gain detailed and in-depth results (Yin, 1998). Furthermore, Harkison et al. (2018b) argued that luxury accommodation establishes the commitment to meeting guest expectations of having unforgettable experiences, which indicates the key characteristics of high standards of service and a premium price. Accordingly, this research focuses on luxury accommodation to investigate what factors influence the guest experience, as it is a specific market charging a premium price and offering a high standard of service. Moreover, as explained in the research background (see section 1.1), the luxury accommodation market in New Zealand has experienced tremendous growth during the

past five years, and considering the crucial position of the luxury accommodation market in New Zealand, New Zealand luxury accommodation was identified as the case that represented this growing market and could offer supportive evidence to add to the literature. Yin (2003) suggested collecting data with multiple sources of evidence will make a case study approach more reliable and credible. However, the key source of this study was the secondary data of guest reviews on major online travel platforms due to time constraints. The sample included luxury hotels and luxury lodges qualified as such by New Zealand Tourism's official Qualmark.

## 3.4 Generalisation, reliability, and validity

Qualitative research often faces critiques such as the limited scope of findings, limitations of sample sizes, and the collection of outmoded data, creating the challenge of generalisation (Bryman, 2016). As Bryman (2016) proposed, researchers may consider the alternative perspectives of trustworthiness and authenticity when addressing reliability and validity in qualitative research. This research used reviews collected from TripAdvisor, which were considered to be genuine guest's feedback and opinion, and therefore considered trustworthy and authentic (Bandi Tanner & Hämmerli, 2018). Since TripAdvisor is considered a reliable source of data, in terms of validity in this research, the data collection was restricted to a timeframe of 1st December 2019 to 1st March 2020. The reason for this time frame selection is presented in the data collection section (3.6).

Due to the limitations of secondary data, further research may have broader generalisation, particularly if interviews are conducted with respondents in a real context, gaining the perspectives on luxury accommodation from service staff and managers using a triangulation approach (see Bryman, 2016). The exploration of online guest feedback on social media helps tourism and hospitality scholars to have a better understanding of the shared nature of the guests perception of their experience (Cheng & Jin, 2019).

## 3.5 Population and sample

The choice of population is a crucial factor in research, because it can reflect on the reliability of the research results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although it is difficult to determine what kind of population is the most objective and reliable, in sample selection, a researcher should choose the most representative sample of the entire population (Mason, 2014). Qualmark (2020) is the official assessment of Tourism New Zealand's services in the accommodation industry in New Zealand, and applies a star-rating system to classify different accommodation types. According to Qualmark's definition, five-star accommodation has "facilities and services amongst the best on offer in New Zealand" (Qualmark, 2020, para. 3). A luxury lodge should "provide the inspired and unique New Zealand luxury experience that is a stay at a New Zealand luxury lodge to all international, and an increasing number of discerning domestic travellers" (Qualmark, 2020, para. 1).

According to Qualmark (2020) and Harkison (2016), New Zealand's luxury accommodation includes luxury hotels and luxury lodges; there are 32 luxury lodges identified as being the best among the best. In order to meet luxury standards, the criterion of having more than 95% of the five-star rating criteria was applied in the selection of lodges, which identified those with highly exclusive and personalised services (see Qualmark, 2020). In the luxury hotel sector, 21 hotels were rated as five-star hotels, and representative of providing the highest quality services. In summary, a total of 53 luxury properties was selected as the population of this study.

The investigation of 53 properties would present a crucial challenge of time consumption and scale of research. Thus, a purposive sampling approach was adopted for this large sized population. The most common sampling method in qualitative research is purposive sampling, by which researchers can narrow down the sample size to suit the research question, and select a representative sample of a homogeneous population (Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2014). Researchers have different arguments about the sizes of samples that are appropriate (e.g. Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2014). However, considering the scale of a dissertation and time frame limitations, 10 out of the 53 properties were

finally selected for this research as a percentage sample of 18.87% of the available 16386 reviews, which was considered appropriate for research reliability (see Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2014). The selected 10 properties included five luxury hotels and five lodges in New Zealand, as presented in Table 1. The selection was based on the total amount of reviews on TripAdvisor.

**Table 1:** The Sample and Population of the Study

| Luxury hotels | Total reviews on TripAdvisor | Selected reviews (1st Dec 2019 - 1st Mar 2020) |
|---|---|---|
| Stamford Plaza Auckland | 3279 | 112 |
| Pullman Auckland | 3115 | 65 |
| QT Wellington | 2850 | 130 |
| The Rees Hotel | 2589 | 34 |
| Skycity Grand Hotel | 2498 | 23 |
| **Luxury lodges** | | |
| Bay of Many Coves Resort | 457 | 15 |
| Huka Lodge | 450 | 15 |
| Fiordland Lodge | 395 | 10 |
| Hapuku Lodge | 385 | 13 |
| Lake Taupo Lodge | 377 | 16 |
| **Total** | 16386 | 433 |

## 3.6 Data collection

This study used TripAdvisor as an online data source to examine a sample from 10 luxury properties in New Zealand.

Due to the special situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, New Zealand closed its borders to international travellers on March 19th, 2020 (Bonnett, 2020). Therefore, in order to gain rich data of guest reviews of luxury accommodation, the peak season of tourism in New Zealand was selected - from 1st December 2019 to 1st March 2020 (see Statistics NZ, 2019). Peak season contributes a higher occupancy rate than does low season in the luxury hospitality sector (Statistics NZ, 2019), resulting in rich data from

online guest reviews for data collection. All 433 New Zealand luxury accommodation online reviews during this period were collected as data (see Table 1) (the sample and data quantities for luxury hotels and luxury lodges are in chronological order by review quantities.

## 3.7 Data analysis

Once the data were collected, the next phase was summarising the responses relevant to answering the research question (Mason, 2014). Bryman (2016) proposed one of the most popular data analysis approaches for qualitative data is thematic analysis, which can identify and summarise different themes in the data, that relate to the research focus. Therefore, thematic analysis was adopted in this research to identify and categorise the influences on guest perceptions of New Zealand luxury accommodation experiences. The thematic analysis process needed to consider the basis of a theoretical understanding from relevant literature, in order to summarise the major influences on luxury accommodation experiences, of entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism. These four experience influence dimensions proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) were considered as theoretical support for the summarised themes. More detail about this connection is presented in the following findings and discussions chapter.

The data set for this study was from 433 TripAdvisor reviews of 10 luxury hotels and lodges in New Zealand from 1st December 2019 to 1st March 2020. The Microsoft Word program was adopted for manually coding and combining of the key words, and the themes were developed from the different codes by frequency. The reason for using a manually coding process was because a manual coding process with Word and Excel programs provided the researcher with a better understanding and interpretive analysis of each review (see Ose, 2016).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis process has six phases (see Table 2). After becoming familiar with the data, the researcher should have a clear direction for highlighting the codes and categorising the themes. In addition, categorising and reviewing themes helps the researcher consider theoretical support that would relate

to the research question.

**Table 2:** Thematic Analysis Process

| The phases of analysis | Description of the process |
|---|---|
| Familiarising yourself with your data | Fully transcribing the interview data from audio recording. Reading and rereading the data, then making notes of initial ideas. |
| Generating initial codes | Systematically coding any data of interest across the entire data set, then collating the data relevant to each code. |
| Searching for themes | Putting the codes into potential themes, and collecting all the data that relate to each potential theme. |
| Reviewing themes | Reviewing and checking the themes and generating a thematic map of the analysis. |
| Defining and naming themes | Refining the specifics of each theme and generating clear definitions and names for theme. |
| Producing the report | Final chance for analysis, relating it to the research question and literature. Finally, producing a scholarly report of the findings. |

In this process, 433 reviews from the TripAdvisor online platform were coded, then the codes connected with all interesting ideas that influenced guest stay experience, and highlighted in different colours. After all the initial codes were identified, a search for potential themes was undertaken, by analysing different codes and combining the codes into themes under the same category (Bryman, 2016). For instance, the activities "spa" and "wi-fi" were combined under the theme of facilities, as the spa, wi-fi and activities services could be considered as crucial features of luxury hotel physical facilities (see Walls et al., 2011). Similarly, "privacy" was combined with the theme of "ambience," because privacy is a general feeling that relates to the impression of ambience (see Walls et al., 2011). In the process of reviewing and refining the themes, all the potential themes were reviewed repeatedly in consideration of the research question and theoretical support, then each theme was labelled with a clear name and definition. Finally, the main themes of influences on luxury accommodation experiences were

summarised (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Major Influences on Luxury Accommodation Experience

| Themes | Count (Total 433) | Percentage (of 433) |
|---|---|---|
| Service | 290 | 67% |
| Ambience | 286 | 66% |
| Facilities | 268 | 62% |
| Décor | 195 | 45% |
| View | 160 | 37% |
| Food and Beverages | 139 | 32% |
| Location | 108 | 25% |

## 3.8 Summary

This chapter presented the methods and methodology of this research, starting with introducing and explaining the adoption of the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research method as the appropriate research philosophy and methodology. The study utilised a case study approach to identify the New Zealand luxury accommodation as a special case. The sample size and data collection process were explained in detail and consideration given to generalisability, validity, and reliability. The thematic analysis explanation showed how the comprehensive process of eight major themes were summarised from the collected data. The findings and discussion are presented in detail in Chapter Four.

# Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and explains the findings of the research, and discusses these in comparison with the literature. The findings indicated that service, ambience, facilities, décor, view, food and beverages, and location, were the major influences on luxury accommodation experiences.

The research findings indicated the major influences on guest perceptions of luxury accommodation experiences supported the motivation of the experience influence dimensions. Secondly, the discussion of how influences enhanced guest experience compares the findings with literature that offered supporting evidence. Finally, the sequence of the experience influence dimensions is discussed and compared with findings from other studies.

## 4.2 Service

The findings revealed that the most important influential factor was the service. Of the total reviews, 67% related to service, which was the highest proportion of all the influence factors. The influence of service on perceptions of luxury accommodation experiences emphasised the guest perceptions of service and how it influenced their experience. The influence of excellent service provided hedonic value and brought feelings of pleasure to the guests (see Oh et al., 2007). Co-creation and interactions between staff and guest offered personalised service to the guests, creating unforgettable memories, which can become a crucial advantage for the properties (Harkison, 2018).

Service quality with human interactions enhanced guest perceptions of experience by co-creating unforgettable memories, indicating that the "entertainment" dimension of service influence is of crucial value to the luxury accommodation experience.

### 4.2.1 Influence of service quality

The findings showed that experiences were influenced by excellent service, as guests expressed their feelings and appreciation in the reviews. Frequent descriptions such as "excellent," "professional," and "helpful" demonstrated guest expectations of the best possible service in luxury accommodation and emphasised the need for professional staff with knowledge of their work, and an attitude of paying attention to detail, as this influenced guest stay experiences.

> *… Dining staff is very good and provided great customer service … was outstanding not only for providing excellent customer service but also for his knowledge and pleasantness … (Vinod, February 2020)*

> *… The front desk staff was helpful. The concierge provided us with excellent maps and information for our exploring … (Richard, February 2020)*

The interactive engagement of staff and guests reflected the "education" dimension of the pleasant feelings that occurred when guests learned new things from professional and knowledgeable staff. For instance, guests expressed satisfaction with a delightful experience when they tried a new type of food or gained knowledge from exploring. This finding indicated that service is the dominant influence on memorable experiences, and is also related to the service staff's knowledge, skill, and engagement, offering a professional service to guests from their abundant product knowledge (see Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019). The finding aligns with the work of Pine and Gilmore (1999), who found that the "entertainment" and "education" dimensions enhanced guest experiences through staff offering excellent and knowledgeable service to the guests.

### 4.2.2 Co-creation and interaction

Personalised service is a crucial factor for customer experience. The findings illustrated that interactions with staff enhanced the guest experience through personal feelings, as some described the staff as "old friends." Hence, guests use personalised service as an essential measurement for comparing different properties. This indicated that the interactions between guest and staff co-create hedonic value in the "entertainment"

dimension, and offered guests more personalised service, directly influencing their stay experiences. Professional employees interact with customers, allowing customers to participate in the interaction, resulting in positive experiences that not only allow customers to feel an unforgettable experience of personalised service, but also increasing the core competitiveness of luxury accommodation (Harkison, 2018; Wall et al., 2011).

The reviews demonstrated this:

> *… XXX and his wife and team catered for all of our needs effortlessly. It was our first visit and we were treated like old friends… (Lauren, January 2020)*

> *… Because it is a lodge, there is a far more personal feel than you get in a hotel and the proprietor was very friendly and helpful… (Travelizzy, January 2020)*

> *(Wedding Anniversary) We are completely astonished at the high level of service that was provided by all staff that we encountered whether Front Office or Room maintenance. The staff attended to our needs willingly and showing great friendliness. We felt we were part of a very exceptional family… (Sightseer, February 2020)*

The findings showed that the joyful memorable experience that guests reflected on after a special occasion, indicated that special and personalised services generated memorable impressions that crucially influenced guest experiences even after consumption, as one guest described the staff as an "exceptional family." The findings also showed that the "entertainment" dimension of experience was a dominant influence that sublimated guest participation with co-creation hedonic value to inner pleasures. In addition, the interactions, communication, recognition, and authenticity of personalised service enhanced guest experiences, with one describing memories of feeling "home away from home."

The findings agree with those in the literature showing that during interactions with customers, staff providing special services customised to the different preferences of customers, can make customers feel this pleasant experience deeply during their stay, and shape delightful memories even in the after-consumption period of the accommodation experience (see Ariffin et al., 2012; Briggs et al., 2007; Miao et al., 2014).

## 4.3 Ambience

The creation of ambience is related to the intuitive experience of guests entering luxurious accommodation. The findings of this study consistently revealed that guests were influenced by accommodation ambience:

> *… It was so exclusive, luxurious and peaceful that 2 nights really wasn't enough… (Lauren, January 2020)*

> *… One of the most sophisticated and subtle hospitality experiences on earth… (Sfdann, December 2019)*

> *… but despite this it has retained a very warm and welcoming atmosphere… (Ian, February 2020)*

> *From the moment we arrived we felt welcomed and pampered… (Robert, February 2020)*

In the findings, guests frequently described the general feeling of the property in the reviews, suggesting that *ambience* was an intangible genuine feeling that influenced guest stay experience. Of all reviews, 66% reflected on ambience, indicating that the importance of the "ambience" factor was directly connected to what the guests were feeling inside. The expectations of guests of luxury accommodation were described as "welcoming," "luxurious," and "sophisticated." However, this feeling described by guests did not identify whether tangible or intangible products generated the ambience, which suggests a comprehensive approach to the development of ambience.

This finding is consistent with the work of Walls et al. (2011), who proposed that luxury hotels create a physical environment to bring customers a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere to achieve a luxury hotel experience. This argument is associated with the influence of a property's décor on customer experience. The ambience created by the accommodation provider through the design of the physical environment can be directly experienced by guests and expressed in their feedback, which is based on a comprehensive visual and auditory perception of their physical environment (Walls et al., 2011).

Buehring and O'Mahony (2019) argued that the atmosphere in luxurious accommodation is reflected in personalised and authentic service. Guests described the ambience or atmosphere as "warm," "welcoming," and "pampered," indicating that the ambience enhanced their experiences of positive and authentic human interactions. *Authentic service* is the process of serving in a way that really expresses the authentic emotion of helping, and these two performances ultimately make the guests feel the ambience of their luxurious accommodation is a "home away from home" (see Scott et al., 2009).

Finally, ambience was identified as an influence on guest experience that could be considered from two perspectives. The physical environment enhanced guests' experience in the "aesthetic" dimension, and authentic interactions generated a memorable experience in the "entertainment" dimension.

## 4.4 Facilities

The various special facilities that luxury accommodation offer show the luxury standard of the property, which contributes to the key component of delightful experience. The facilities influenced guests in several ways. Firstly, guests enjoyed the facilities in the luxury accommodation with extended convenient service options. Secondly, the unique and creative facilities enhanced their experiences with special surprises that were key advantages for the properties. Finally, the new experiences guest gained through activities at their accommodation highlighted the memorable nature of their stay experience.

Overall, the various characteristics of the facilities enhanced guests' perceptions of experience in the dimensions of "entertainment," "aesthetics," "escapism," and "education."

### 4.4.1 Convenient facilities

These guests explained how the convenient facilities enhanced their stay:

> *… We selected the hotel based on high star rating, that it had a pool and fitness centre, had been recently renovated, had a fully equipped kitchen and finally*

*because if it's interesting décor … (Suzy, January 2020)*

*… The room we had was fantastic. Large comfy bed, great power or deluge shower. A bath which could fit two comfortably. Then there was a large fridge, cooker, microwave and a washer drier. Being on tour for 6 weeks, the latter facility was very useful… (Michael, January 2020)*

These findings are consistent with literature on the convenience value of facilities that positive influence guest experiences. Guests' reviews reflected that the comfortable furniture and useful kitchen tools offered more convenience options for their stay that enhanced their experience and reinforced their sense of having made the right purchase decision (see Shergill & Sun, 2004). Through an exploratory study of New Zealand tourists, Shergill and Sun (2004) found that the basic attributes of accommodation facilities are their safety and convenience, and facilities such as a refrigerator, coffee machine, and kettle in the room reflect the standard of luxury hotel rooms and provide convenience to enhance customers' accommodation experience. Furthermore, facilities such as a spa, swimming pool, gym, business centre, and other services, reflected the expectations of business guests for the comfort and relaxation needs of a luxury accommodation experience (Ariffin et al., 2018; Mascarinas, 2020). The convenient facilities enhanced guest experiences by providing more options and variety to guests, which influenced their experience in the dimension of "entertainment."

### 4.4.2 Unique and creative facilities

Different customers pay attention to hotel facilities in different way. Holidaying guests enjoy the entertainment and hedonism values of different creative luxury facilities and services. These experience dimensions were evident in the research findings, as the following quotes from reviews show:

*… A hot tub was available just outside the lodge…A helicopter service is located within walking distance just below the lodge… the shower was hot and strong and the bed was firm. Wi-FI worked fine anywhere in the lodge… (Michael, January 2020)*

*The water taxi ride from Picton to the hotel should have been a 40 minute mini-cruise through beautiful scenery (as it was for our return) (Graham, December 2019)*

As evident from the reviews, the beautiful scenery of the water taxi and the outdoor bathtub experience and helicopter service offered guests pleasant and delightful surprises as luxury experiences. Special and creative facilities identify luxury properties, as they offer services that are distinctive and not found in other accommodation. Unique and creative facilities not only influence the sense of a luxurious experience, but also offer more choices for the guests' lifestyle during their travel, giving them a pleasant accommodation experience (Harkison, 2016; Maier, 2009). Having different standards of decoration in luxury brand hotels, luxury lodges can provide customers with a different "stage" experience through the creative efforts of the lodge owners in different cultural contexts (Harkison et al., 2018a; Torres et al., 2014). From this perspective, the unique and creative facilities enhanced guest experiences with beautiful scenery or choice of lifestyle, demonstrating the influence on guest experiences in the dimensions of "aesthetics" and "entertainment."

### 4.4.3 Memorable activities

The findings showed that experiencing different activities is a highlight moment in the whole stay experience, and creates memorable experiences for guests. This requires a deep knowledge of local culture, and the provision of activities with personalised services, providing guests with positive experiences created by activities that are integrated into the local environment and culture. This is aligned with the values of "escapism" and "education" as purposes of tourism (see Holmqvist et al., 2020), as guests stated in their feedback:

> … We really enjoyed the hike to the lookout plus the night time walk to look at the local glow worms… (Britabroad, January 2020)

> … Taupo is just ok, but it is the outdoor activities that are the highlight. Hiking, fishing, boating… (MMVV, December 2019)

> … ADVENTURE awaits from advice on treks to biking, fly fishing of course, kayaking - you name it, they can make it happen with the top local providers… (Deb, February 2020)

The findings indicated that guests enjoy new experiences in different activities around

their accommodation, enhancing their overall travel experience with delightful surprises. A new experience can connect to the "education" and "escapism" dimensions of experience, illustrating the inner growth of learning new things, which is a key motivation for tourism experiences (Oh et al., 2007).

## 4.5 Décor

Guest experiences were influenced by the two dimensions of "aesthetics" and "escapism." Guest enjoy décor with a sensory pleasure that leaves an aesthetic impression as a memorable experience. The décor of luxury accommodation offers the first impression to guests, demonstrating the aesthetic value of customer experience, and enhancing guest experiences, as evident in the online feedback:

> *… Our apartment was spacious and stylish with a kitchenette (not used) …The hotel lounge is quite fascinating with all sorts of artwork… (Travelizzy, January 2020)*

> *… the room was impeccable and tastefully decorated, with a view over their magnificent gardens. Wandering through the footpaths of their property was magical… (Robert, February 2020)*

> *The theme is that it is an old nunnery, founded in 1936 and moved to Te Anau about 20 years ago. The monastic theme is maintained in the décor and naming. As well as the rooms in the nunnery, there are others around… (Travelizzy, January 2020)*

The findings showed different décor of accommodation can influence guest experiences in various ways. The data in this study contained words such as "stylish," "impeccable," and "spacious": 45% of the guests expressed their satisfaction with the accommodation décor, demonstrating the influence of the "aesthetic" dimension. The guest reviews suggested that the décor style was an intangible experience in the physical environment, and this experience was manifested in physical objects such as furniture, facilities, and decoration materials. Satisfaction with the décor in the reviews also reflected the customers' higher expectations for luxury accommodation, which effectively distinguished it from other standards of accommodation. This finding agrees with the work of Fionda and Moore (2009), who suggested that the premium quality of luxury physical products can improve the guest experience through aesthetic impressions.

Guests' expectations of a luxurious hotel are of an elegant environment, and this is mainly manifested in the design, decoration, and space, which requires constant updating and following of aesthetic trends (Cetin & Walls, 2016). In these findings, the positive guest feedback showed the influence of the accommodations' décor, in words such as "fascinating" and "magical," expressing the guests' experience perceptions of aesthetics. The findings agreed with the work of Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) who argued that the "aesthetic" dimension has a positive relationship with guest satisfaction, creating a direct sensory experience, thus the design and décor of luxury accommodation produce intuitive feelings for customers with positive impressions and memories. As Harkison et al. (2018b) observed, a luxury accommodation room is a major part of the luxury accommodation experience, since the guest room is where the guests spend the most time. Therefore, the décor in the room has the most important impact on their experience and should be consistent with the guest expectations of luxury standards. In addition, Reiter et al.'s (2014) study on the visual and auditory responses to high-level culture and history norms underpinning the accommodation style showed that the décor could deeply stimulate guest aesthetic responses in different socio-cultural contexts.

## 4.6 View

The view from luxury accommodation influences guest accommodation experiences because guests are in a new environment, so a beautiful view directly stimulates the visual senses and shows the importance of the "aesthetic" and "escapist" dimensions. As 37% of guests showed in their online reviews, beautiful scenery enhances a delightful stay experience:

> *We loved our rustic-chic two-bedroom condominium nestled in the lush hill overlooking the gorgeous bay. (Robert, February 2020)*

> *… the most gorgeous lake-facing balcony with expansive views of the magical scenery outside. That is what makes this place special. (Mitch, January 2020)*

> *… our peaceful balcony where we enjoyed our breathtaking view… (Scott, January 2020)*

In the findings, it was evident that the view was closely related to the property's location and was a direct expression of the site's multisensory experience, ultimately influencing guest perceptions of experience with aesthetic value. Guests described the influence and importance of the beautiful views, suggesting that the natural scenery and urban views from luxury hotels and lodges immediately stimulated their sensations of enjoyment. In addition, the findings also showed that the views enhanced guests' perceptions in the "escapism" dimension of experience of the new locations where they could see beautiful bays, mountains, gardens or city skylines. Apart from the room or property décor that offers guests an aesthetic experience, the surrounding environment of property also brings guests a sensory experience, thus the beautiful view of accommodation positively influences the guest experience through multisensory impressions (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh et al., 2007). Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014) also explored online reviews by luxury hotel guests, and found that praise for a hotel room was generally the most significant part of a positive review, but also the beautiful scenery that the hotel offered, directly enhanced guest perceptions of experience.

## 4.7 Food and beverage

Of all the reviews, 32% showed that food and beverage influenced guest stay experiences in luxury properties. Food and beverage enhanced guests' luxury accommodation experience in two experience dimensions. Authentic food and beverage offered the guests a local experience in a cultural context, illustrating the "education" and "escapism" dimensions of experience influence. Furthermore, the variety of the food options in luxury accommodation gave consideration to diverse guest preferences, which enhanced guest experiences in the "entertainment" dimension.

### 4.7.1 Authentic food and beverage

The findings showed that the experience of local wine and authentic fresh food in luxury accommodation was a pleasant surprise for the guests. Food and beverage experiences allow customers to feel the local culture, deeply influenced by the different norms of the location, such as region, history, and customs. These unique and creative local services

can leave a deep impression with guests; many mentioned that New Zealand wines were the highlight of their whole stay experience. From the perspective of a luxury consumer market, this finding agrees with the work of Nummedal and Hall (2006), who suggested that New Zealand accommodation providers should promote the local food that meets guest expectations and satisfaction needs. The finding is also consistent with the work of Chen and Peng (2018), who proposed that customers' perceptions of the premium quality and local destination food have a positive impact on luxury food consumption, and high-quality local ingredients are a way to promote the image of local culture. Luxury hospitality operators can increase the symbolic value of high-quality local ingredients to enhance the perceived value to customers, and receive positive feedback. This finding also agreed with Nummedal and Hall's (2006) suggestion that New Zealand bed and breakfast accommodation providers should promote local food that meets guest expectations and satisfaction needs, and guests can be educated in the local culture through authentic local food provision.

As guests positively stated:

> *… The resort's chef and staff prepare delectable fare that includes New Zealand's freshest seafood. New Zealand's wonderful wines are available on the excellent wine list, too! (Scott, January 2020)*

> *… the moment you arrive and are greeted with a premium NZ sparkling wine… (Deb, December 2019)*

As the findings show, the freshest local seafood and excellent local wines can leave a wonderful impression and reflect a very strong symbolic value, which is part of the delightful influence on a guest stay experience. For example, the luxury lodges provided local drinks when guests arrived, which allowed customers to indulge in an authentic local experience immediately, exceeding their expectations, which is a positive manifestation of the "education" dimension and "escapism" dimension in the influences on experience. As Chen and Peng (2014) suggested, experiential and symbolic values in the luxury accommodation industry such as superior quality products, uniqueness, exclusivity, locality, and other characteristics, can positively influence guests' overall

value perceptions of luxury accommodation, and their behaviours and attitudes. Furthermore, Nummedal and Hall's (2006) exploratory study of local foods in the New Zealand bed and breakfast industry, suggested that B&B accommodation showed very strong host-guest relationships by offering more personal experiences with local food and knowledge. This relationship results in active human interactions that exceed guest expectations and become revisit opportunities with repurchase intention (Tucker & Keen, 2002).

### 4.7.2 Variety of choice

The diversity of different food choices positively affected guests' accommodation experiences.

> *… The range of food options is impressive in itself - from the hot choices of cooked to perfection… (Jailyka, February 2020)*

> *… Superb food in a lovely dining room, great wine choices plus complimentary wine, fruit and cheese in our room made us feel very welcome plus excellent tea and coffee… (Britabroad, January 2020)*

As the findings indicate, compared with the guests' pursuit of local culture and fresh in food in luxury lodges, guests of luxury hotels were more focused on the variety in the hotel's menu. The high standards of the guests' expectations of luxury hotel services required more comprehensive and detailed services to meet the different preferences of guests. For example, vegetarian and gluten-free options can meet the expectations of customers and provide satisfaction. The variety of food choice can also consist of a variety of facilities which offer more options to guests to enhance their experience in the "entertainment" dimension. As Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014) suggested, positive accommodation experiences can be enhanced by providing high-quality food with a large selection of choices. It was also recognised by Harkison (2016) that luxury hotel guests have different expectations of food services, such as continuous updates of the menus, and different options to cater for dairy and other allergies. Furthermore, luxury lodges provide the all-inclusive "meal experience", which means the lodge decides the food choice for guests, offering more of a personized service and enhancing the guest stay

experience (Harkison, 2016). The findings of this study are consistent with suggestions in the literature to provide detailed and abundant food and beverage options to enhance the luxury experience in the "entertainment" dimension.

## 4.8 Location

The theme of "location" was reflected in 25% of the data, indicating that the location of luxury hotels gave customers more convenient access to different places to carry out various activities, influencing their experience in the dimension of "entertainment." In addition, the locations of luxury lodges were focused on exclusivity and inaccessibility, showing customers' desire to escape from the noisy and busy life to beautiful scenery, demonstrating the influence on guest experiences of the "escapism" and "aesthetics" dimensions.

As stated in the reviews:

> *… A helicopter service is located within walking distance just below the lodge but out of view from the lodge… (Redroverma, December 2019)*

> *The water taxi ride from Picton to the hotel should have been a 40 minute mini-cruise through beautiful scenery (as it was for our return)… (Graham, December 2019)*

> *… The location is central to all the Auckland action, just a short walk from almost everything… (Sightseer, February 2020)*

> *… The location by the waterfront helped open my eyes up to a different side of Wellington… (BJC, February 2020)*

> *… The location was great and the hotel has a shuttle into town which takes less than 10 minutes… (Michael, January 2020)*

Yang et al. (2018) proposed that the accessibility of the destination and the convenience of transport were both important influences on the selection of a hotel by customers. The findings of this study confirm this point, as guests showed a strong preference for convenient locations of luxury hotels in city centres and expressed the positive influence of the convenient hotel location as part of the luxury accommodation experience. A location in the centre of a city enabled business guests to quickly reach business offices,

saving time, while leisure guests had positive feedback on accessibility in terms of location, such as shopping, dining, and convenient transport that can enhance their accommodation experience (Li et al., 2015)

In luxury lodges, whether by water taxis or helicopters as expressed in the online reviews, the inaccessibility and exclusivity of the location and beautiful view, positively affected the luxury experience. Customers were pursuing a quiet, private, and natural environment to escape from their busy and noisy daily lives, making these modes of exclusively accessed environments a wonderful experience and memory, which also fits the luxury experience value dimensions of "escapism" and "aesthetics" (see Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Escapism directly reflects the genuine human desire to pursue and appreciate beautiful things in nature. Therefore, people like to escape their daily lives in pursuit of unforgettable experiences in a new environment, which has become the main driver of luxury tourism consumption (Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019).

## 4.9 Other influences

Due to the limitations of the scale and sample size of this study, some influencing factors discussed in the literature were not clearly reflected in the findings, such as the influence of technology on the accommodation experience (see Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019). The findings of this study showed just three percent of reviews commenting on the speed of wi-fi networks in rooms. However, trends in the luxury accommodation industry, such as the application of virtual reality technology, artificial intelligence in the room equipment and household product development, were also not evident in the findings (Reiter et al., 2014).

In addition, in terms of the impact of social media on the accommodation experience, the findings indicated that the star ratings on travel websites and customer reviews established high expectations of luxury accommodation prior to the consumption process (Lee & Watkins, 2016). As one review showed:

> *We booked into XXX for 2 nights. We selected the hotel based on high star rating…*
> *Finally we must comment on the standard of the gym and pool. We have never*

*experienced such a poor facility in any hotel (Suzy, January 2020)*

As shown in this review, the social media directly led to a purchase intention and the negative reviews expressed by customers are due to their high expectations of luxury accommodation and concentrated on the physical environment, because social media and travel websites can use pictures and videos to show the tangible physical environments, whereas human interactions without physical objects can only be described as an intangible virtual concept in reviews (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Therefore, the impact of social media on the luxury accommodation experience is mainly reflected in the physical environment such as decoration, scenery, facilities, etc., which leads to a very high expectation with guests prior to consumption (Filieri et al., 2018).

Although social media can easily influence customers' purchase intentions, there was also a deviation in authenticity evident (see Lee & Watkins, 2016). For example, the experience expressed by customers in following review was not as negative as other comments read on social media:

> *It's been interesting to see all that various reviews in hindsight and to try to get a balance myself…. My room was clean and modern, no issues like other people wrote about cleanliness… (BJC, February 2020)*

This finding indicates that the influence of the physical environment on social media may be more significant than the impact of customer reviews because photos and videos are objective manifestations of the physical environment. In the contrast, customer reviews are reflections of subjective human consciousness. Therefore, customers will have a higher demand for the tangible physical environment displayed on social media than intangible aspects, which cannot be displayed.

## 4.10 Summary of findings

Customer experience is a vital part of the accommodation industry. This chapter summarised the major factors that influenced guest perceptions of their luxury accommodation experience, in the themes of "service," "ambience," "facilities," "décor," "view," "food and beverages," and "location." The findings indicated that intangible

influential factors such as service and ambience had the strongest influence on customer experience, while tangible factors such as facilities, décor, view, food and beverages, had a relatively weak influence. Although the atmosphere is an intangible factor, It is worth mentioning that it is created by the physical environment of objects and human interaction without objects.

The discussion presented in detail how influences enhanced guest perceptions of experience with the support of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience dimensions. As a result, the "entertainment" dimension was the dominant value that generated service, ambience, facilities, food and beverage and location influences. The second strongest influence dimension was that of "aesthetic," which was identified in the ambience, facilities, décor, view and location influences, followed by the "escapism" dimension in facilities, view, food and beverage and location influences. Finally, the "education" dimension was evident in service, facilities and food and beverages. The research framework with the influence of the experience dimension (Pine & Gilmore's, 1999) is presented in Figure 1.
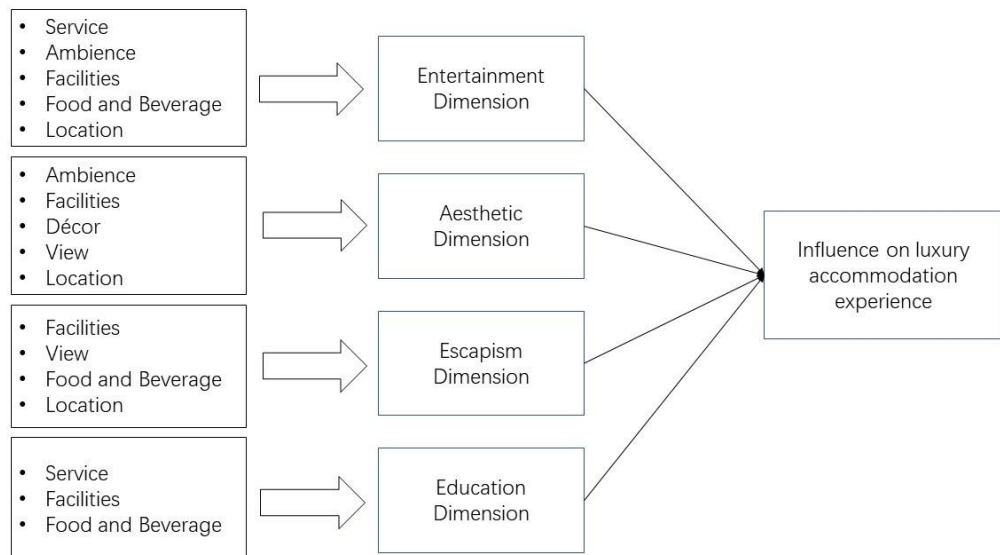


Figure 1: Framework of Influence on Luxury Accommodation Experience

In terms of Buehring and O'Mahony's (2019) luxury accommodation influencing factor

framework, the findings of this study are aligned with the dominant theme of service factors, but other tangible physical factors are more detailed, and expressions of technological and cultural influence factors were few. In addition, when comparing the findings to those in the literature, the results of this study illustrated various divergent and similar factors, which summarise the representativeness of this study's result. Finally, some small influencing factors such as technology and social media, although not very frequently mentioned in the review samples, are worth discussing in future research. The next chapter summarise the research, explains the limitations and implications, and recommends directions for future research.

# Chapter Five: Conclusion

## 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to discover the different influential factors of a luxury accommodation experience and how these influences enhance guests' perceived experiences. In this chapter, the main findings of the study are presented. The chapter highlights the implications and recommendations for the luxury hospitality industry based on how the influences enhanced guest experiences in luxury accommodations. Finally, the limitations of the research and future directions for research are provided.

## 5.2 Answering the research question

This research aimed to explore the influences on the guests luxury accommodation experience in New Zealand using data from the TripAdvisor website. Through the analysis and summarising of the online customer reviews, seven major influences on the luxury accommodation experience were identified: service, ambience, facilities, décor, view, food and beverages, and location.

Among these influences, intangible influences such as service and ambience had the strongest influence on the luxury accommodation experience. The first dimension of the "service" influence was related to providing excellent service quality that reflected the luxury service standards, and the second dimension was related to more personalised services through interactions with customers on value co-creation. Thus, service value reflected in human interaction greatly influences the luxury accommodation experience and ultimately enhances guest experiences. In comparison with Buehring and O'Mahony's (2019) study of the four constructs generating memorable experience (i.e., service, atmosphere, technology and culture) in luxury hotel, this research supports the view that service, atmosphere, and culture are important influence factors, but there was no evidence that technology was a strong influence on the luxury accommodation experience. More detail is provided in the following section, on each of the influence factors.

This study also discussed Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four dimensions of customer experience that influence and enhance guest experiences. Pine and Gilmore's (1999) four influences on customer experience are "aesthetic," "entertainment," "education," and "escapism." The findings also demonstrated that the "entertainment" dimension is the dominant dimension and is found in service, ambience, facilities, food and beverage, and location, all of which influence and develop hedonic value directly enhancing guest experiences. The "aesthetic" dimension was the second most evident in the data and related to the general pleasure of appreciating beautiful things, influenced by ambience, facilities, décor, view, and location. The dimension of "escapism" manifests in new experiences that are different from daily life and were influenced by facilities, view, food and beverage, and location.

The "education" dimension also influenced the guests' experiences, indicating that gaining new knowledge can result in pleasurable feelings during and post experience. This dimension was influenced by the service, facilities, and food and beverages.

## 5.3 Implications of the study

The sample for this study was New Zealand's luxury accommodation market. This research explored the influence of guest perception experience in luxury accommodation market of New Zealand, the research revealed the influence for luxury accommodation experience are service, ambience, facilities, décor, view, food and beverages, and location.

In terms of industry implications, the findings of this research revealed that the strongest influence on a luxury accommodation experience is service, both in service quality and co-created personalised service with human interactions. The study discussed the connections between influences on luxury accommodation experiences and Pine and Gilmores' (1999) experience dimensions of "entertainment," "aesthetics," "escapism," and "education." The findings suggest that the "entertainment" dimension is the dominant influence on guest experiences in the luxury accommodation and mainly influences guest experiences in intangible services with human interactions. Thus, the findings suggest

that luxury accommodation managers need to pay attention to recruitment and training of hospitality professionals to offer authentic and personalised luxury experiences to their guests, and develop the skill and engagement to co-create staged experiences. In addition, the "aesthetic" and "escapism" dimensions also influence guests through tangible factors such as facilities, décor, and locations with a view. Thus, luxury accommodation managers should have a clear direction for enhancing guest experiences with physical products, which stimulates guests' multisensory aesthetic responses by creating comfortable and beautiful ambience. Finally, the "escapism" and "education" dimensions revealed the cultural and authenticity values of luxury accommodation experiences. The findings illustrated several influences motivated by authentic cultural values. For instance, guests have enhanced accommodation experiences through the presentation of local cultural elements in the décor, activities, and view. Furthermore, authentic local food and beverages offered guests a touch of experience with the local culture, exceeding their expectations and satisfaction needs. Thus, luxury accommodation managers can use this value to enhance guest experiences by offering more personalised and authentic services with local cultural influences.

## 5.4 Limitations of the study

The first limitation of this research was related to the data, as secondary data collected for the study came only from online reviews on TripAdvisor, which limited the content of the research, as these online reviews may not have represented the whole stay experience. The second limitation was in the time frame, as the data were collected from online reviews of experiences during the peak season of 1st December 2019 to 1st March 2020, and may not have represented the guest views from other periods. Furthermore, the sample selection was also a limitation in the study, as just ten luxury accommodation properties in New Zealand comprised the sample. However, there were 53 luxury accommodation properties in New Zealand at the time of the study, so analysis of a larger sample may have discovered more influential factors. Finally, as mentioned in the findings on other influences (section 4.9), technology and social media were not identified as major influences in this research. However, as this research analysed data

from only ten luxury properties and just from New Zealand, this may have limited the findings of the study.

## 5.5 Opportunities for future research

The suggestions for future research offer several new directions. First of all, a future study could conduct primary data collection using interviews with guests to gain a deeper understand of luxury accommodation experiences. Secondly, as managers may face critical issues of cost control in the off-peak season, it would be interesting to compare the differences and similarities of the luxury accommodation experience in peak and off-peak seasons. Finally, future studies could focus on new trending influences in hospitality, as the global pandemic of COVID-19 had had a significant impact on the tourism and hospitality industry. Research on how social distancing, travel restrictions and contactless service influence the luxury accommodation experience is critical for both scholars and practitioners.

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