

## A model of luxury lodge experience quality

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Experience quality  
Luxury accommodation  
Luxury lodge  
Interactive experience  
Emotions  
Experience outcomes

### ABSTRACT

Experience quality has been studied for many decades in various contexts. While understanding of experience quality has advanced, its context-specific and multi-dimensional nature has challenged its conceptualisation. With the rise of experiential accommodation in tourism and hospitality, luxury lodges have been increasingly recognised in the industry and by customers as the emblem of luxury experiences, albeit receiving limited scholarly attention. Through a qualitative multiple-case study methodology, utilising high-engagement research techniques, this study explores the dimensions and determinants of luxury lodge experience quality. The study presents an experience quality model grounded in empirical data, bridging various experience quality theoretical perspectives to explain the luxury lodge experience, and demonstrating generalisation capabilities for other service contexts. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on experience quality, particularly in the context of small luxury accommodation. The study also offers important practical implications for luxury accommodation operators on designing, staging and managing quality experiences.

### 1. Introduction

In the current accommodation scene, where increased competition has challenged the standardised nature of traditional hotels (Birinci, Berezina, & Cobanoglu, 2018; Mody et al., 2019), luxury lodges have emerged as an exemplification of what practitioners define as “experiential luxury” (Duarte, 2022; Tomelty, 2018). Their importance and proliferation have raised them to their current status of a critical tourism product attracting high-value travellers and a key attribute in national and international tourism marketing campaigns.

Such growth has been driven by changed consumers’ sensibility toward their accommodation experiences. More discerning and better-informed customers have pressured accommodation operators to review their concepts, designs, and practices to provide guests with more unique, memorable, and meaningful experiences (Kandampully et al., 2022; Mody et al., 2019). The shift will be even more accentuated in a post-pandemic future, with luxury guests considered key drivers for the tourism and hospitality (T&H) recovery (Lee, 2022) and a significant shift in their expectations, attitudes, and behaviours (Czyzewska, 2022; Duarte, 2022).

Like other customer experiences, the luxury lodge experience is a

highly personal, multi-dimensional, and interactive construct (Schmitt, 1999), involving the participation of guests, staff, and managers (Harkison et al., 2018a). To purposefully design, stage, and manage experiences that ensure specific perceptions and evaluations, understanding the dimensions and determinants of these experiences has become crucial (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Smit et al., 2020). However, despite its emerging importance and the increased consumer demand for “experiential luxury” accommodation, luxury accommodation, and specifically luxury lodge experiences, have attracted minimal scholarly attention. Aside from some exceptions (e.g., Aggett, 2007; Harkison et al., 2018a, 2019; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005), most of the literature on luxury accommodation has heavily focused on traditional and mainstream hotels and used quantitative methodologies (Iloranta, 2022; Manfreda et al., 2022), leaving qualitative investigations of luxury lodges largely unrepresented.

The lack of attention and overuse of quantitative approaches is systemic in the literature on luxury services (Wirtz et al., 2020) and tourism and hospitality experience (Smit et al., 2020). This has led to the need for a more foundational understanding of luxury accommodation experiences (Manfreda et al., 2022). Multiple authors have advocated for more in-depth and qualitative investigations to build foundational

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.02.007>

Received 27 September 2022; Received in revised form 17 January 2023; Accepted 12 February 2023

Available online 19 February 2023

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knowledge in these fields, which so far have been dominated by confusion and fragmentation regarding terminologies, definitions, and dimensions (e.g., [Chu et al., 2016](#); [D'Acunzio & Volo, 2021](#); [Gurzki & Woisetschlager, 2017](#); [Iloranta, 2022](#); [Wirtz et al., 2020](#)).

In the luxury accommodation and lodge context, while studies have exponentially increased in the past few years ([Luna-Cortes et al., 2022](#)), the still scarce qualitative investigations have shown noteworthy theoretical and methodological gaps. [Manfreda et al. \(2022\)](#), for instance, argue that luxury accommodation experience research has often relied on single-method research designs, on recollections post consumption resulting from the highly inaccessible nature of the context, and investigating isolated research groups (either guests or managers). Similarly, [Iloranta \(2019, 2022\)](#) calls for increased qualitative investigations that consider the perspectives of both consumers and providers. Thus, we explore luxury lodge experience quality through a qualitative multi-case study methodology and high-engagement research techniques ([Ye et al., 2020](#)). We chose to explore the lived experience of guests and hosts in luxury lodges to bring together the various voices of participants involved in their creation and better reflect the co-created nature of these experiences ([Harkison, 2018](#)), thus providing a triangulated examination of the phenomenon.

This study draws from *experience quality* theory to explore luxury lodge experience evaluations. Adding to the gaps identified in the luxury accommodation experience literature, theoretical advancement in experience quality has relied chiefly on conceptual and quantitative work, leaving qualitative empirical investigations lacking ([Chang & Horng, 2010](#)). Whilst a number of previous experience quality studies in the service literature have provided theoretical advancement and proposed a variety of tested models (refer to supplementary material for a review), very limited work has attempted to provide a holistic understanding of the experience quality construct grounded in empirical data, and taking into consideration dimensions, determinants, and their temporal relationship. This study proposes an integrated conceptualisation of luxury lodge experience quality, bridging and refining existing experience quality perspectives and conceptualisations and contributing to the advancement of experience quality theory for both T&H and the broader service marketing and management field. We present an emerged model of luxury lodge experience quality, which identifies the determinants, dimensions of experience quality, and their intricate relationships. We posit that this model, inductively extracted from empirical data, has the potential to be adopted to explain experience quality in a variety of service contexts, extending its practical value for both practitioners and future experience quality scholarly investigations.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Experience quality

Customer experience is a multi-dimensional construct, and its creation involves various interactive elements eliciting customer emotions ([Bastiaansen et al., 2019](#); [Schmitt, 1999](#)). However, not everyone agrees on which characteristics of the experience produce emotional reactions. As customers consume experiences through their personal lenses, flawless service provision (service quality) does not necessarily ensure the overall customer experience is perceived and evaluated as positive and memorable. Thus, to understand what experiential determinants trigger specific emotional reactions, it is essential to understand how guests perceive and evaluate their experiences. Various constructs have been proposed to explain such differences, including SERVQUAL ([Parasuraman et al., 1988](#)) and SERVPERF ([Brady & Cronin, 2001](#)). However, since [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) advanced experiences as new economic offerings, increasing criticism has been directed at service quality models to explain the complexity, multi-dimensionality, and affective nature of consumer experiences. This criticism has several reasons, including that service quality provides a rational and cognitive process

to explain experience evaluations, which are affective and emotional ([Fernandes & Cruz, 2016](#); [Jin et al., 2015](#)). This is further supported when considering that the benefits sought when consuming experiences are experiential, symbolic, and hedonic, not functional or utilitarian ([Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019](#); [Chen & Chen, 2010](#); [Manfreda et al., 2022](#)). In addition, because experiences are co-created and co-produced, suppliers do not have complete control over how the experience is perceived and evaluated, as it would happen for service quality which is fully controlled and manipulated by the supplier ([Cole & Scott, 2004](#); [Lemke et al., 2011](#); [Verhoef et al., 2009](#); [Wu & Ai, 2016](#)). The personal nature of experiences, thus, explains why evaluations of experiences are subjective, in contrast with evaluations of service quality which are considered objective ([Chang & Horng, 2010](#); [Otto & Ritchie, 1996](#); [Vargo & Lusch, 2004](#)). Authors also argue that service quality does not address holistic factors, which are intrinsic in the definition of customer experience ([Chen & Chen, 2010](#); [Verhoef et al., 2009](#); [Wu & Ai, 2016](#)). For these reasons, more recent research proposed the concept of *experience quality* as more appropriate to explain customer experience perceptions and evaluations ([Cole & Scott, 2004](#); [Hussein, Dwi, et al., 2018](#); [Lemke et al., 2011](#)).

Various experience quality conceptualisations have emerged (Supplementary material for a full review), with numerous models attempting to explain experience quality in various contexts and across disciplines. Such efforts can be categorised into two broad schools of thought ([Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019](#)). The first acknowledges experience quality as the product of the interaction between the consumer, the physical surroundings, and the social environment ([Cetin & Walls, 2016](#); [Chang & Horng, 2010](#); [Dierking & Falk, 1992](#); [Hussein, Hapsari, et al., 2018](#); [Lemke et al., 2011](#); [Verhoef et al., 2009](#)). Despite acknowledging experience quality's emotional nature, this school of thought does not consider experiential outcomes relevant to the overall experience evaluation. The second, deriving from [Schmitt \(1999\)](#) and [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#), looks predominantly at experiential outcomes ([Chen & Chen, 2010](#); [Cole & Scott, 2004](#); [Jin et al., 2015](#); [Maklan & Klaus, 2011](#); [Moon & Han, 2018](#); [Otto & Ritchie, 1996](#)). Based on this view, emotions are experiences themselves, evaluated through customer's cognitive, sensorial, and affective lenses.

Building a bridge between the two perspectives, [Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown \(2019, p. 7\)](#) conceptualised experience quality as the 'customer cognitive and emotional assessment of direct and indirect contacts with the service organisation, physical environment and social environment, coupled with the psychological, symbolic and cognitive outcomes accorded to the customer from specific encounters.' We adopt this conceptualisation as it reflects the subjective, multi-dimensional, and holistic nature of experiences - where perceptions consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements - ([Lemke et al., 2011](#); [Schmitt, 1999](#)), the interactive nature of the encounter ([Chang & Horng, 2010](#); [Dierking & Falk, 1992](#)), and acknowledges the relevance of psychological, symbolic, and cognitive benefits deriving from experiential consumption ([Chen & Chen, 2010](#); [Cole & Scott, 2004](#)).

### 2.2. Experience quality in commercial accommodation

Experience quality in commercial accommodation settings has been previously investigated. [Otto and Ritchie \(1996\)](#) were among the first to investigate hedonics, peace of mind, involvement, and recognition as the four dimensions of experience quality in hotels, airlines, and tourism attractions. Subsequent studies have also related accommodation experience quality to similar dimensions (e.g. [Kim et al., 2012](#)). Additionally, [Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung \(2007\)](#) utilised [Pine and Gilmore's \(1999\)](#) experience quality conceptualisation (Entertainment, Education, Escapism, Esthetics) in their study on bed and breakfast lodging. In the same context, [Chen \(2015\)](#), utilising [Schmitt's \(1999\)](#) SEM model, proposed experience quality as being determined by Sensory experiences, Affective experiences, Creative experiences, Physical experiences, Social identity experiences. Such studies have focused on the

psychological, symbolic, and cognitive outcomes of accommodation experiences as a measure of experience quality.

Contrarily, in their studies on luxury hotels, Cetin and Walls (2016) and Walls et al. (2011) suggest that experience quality encompasses the hotel's physical environment and social interaction occurring between guests and staff, and among guests. This model supports earlier research conducted by Carbone and Haeckel (1994), which identified experience quality as generated by mechanics (physical environment) and humanics (social interaction). Similar to Verhoef et al. (2009), Walls et al. (2011) also suggested that experience quality is determined by the guests' personal characteristics and trip-related factors, including past experiences, and consumer and situational factors. Similar or revised models were adopted in studies on budget hotels (Huang et al., 2014; Ren et al., 2016), resorts (Ismail, 2011), boutique hotels (Hussein, 2018), and luxury accommodation (Manfreda et al., 2022).

While no agreement has been reached on what dimensions and determinants constitute commercial accommodation experience quality, existing studies advance that such experiences are co-created through the input and participation of guests, who use their own set of personal characteristics as a lens to perceive and evaluate the experience (Walls et al., 2011), and the input of hosts, who stage and manage the conditions for experience consumption. These conditions refer to carefully curated physical environments - able to stimulate particular emotional reactions and behavioural responses in the guest - and personalised interaction with the hotel staff and fellow guests (Hussein, Dwi, et al., 2018), which facilitates the sense of security and safety (Hemmington, 2007), encourages guests to express their lifestyle and provides a sense of freedom (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). This interactive process, influenced by external factors (e.g., the purpose of the trip, travel party), allows guests to participate in the experience creation as co-producers (Harkison et al., 2018a; Manfreda et al., 2022) and facilitates guests' learning, fun, entertainment, surprise, immersion, or escapism (Khan et al., 2015), dependent on the individually-sought benefits that each guest brings to the experience consumption.

### 2.3. A unique context: luxury lodges

Luxury lodges are categorised under the term "specialist accommodation", and their sectorial and property characteristics have been previously investigated (Morrison et al., 1996). Luxury lodges are often small and unique, located in rural or remote locations, providing a specialised experience of place (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). They display features of traditional hotels – such as high quality, comfort, security, and safety (Harkison et al., 2018b), elements sometimes missing in non-luxury small-scale and peer-to-peer accommodation (Birinci et al., 2018). These establishments also have a strong connection with local communities, facilitating the interaction between guests and local people and cultures, and reflecting the character of the region in the architecture and activities offered. Personalised interactions and luxury features complement the homely feel that hosts create through their hospitableness, which is facilitated by the small capacity of the lodges and their characteristic high staff-to-guest ratio (Aggett, 2007; Harkison et al., 2018b, 2019; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005).

Luxury lodge guests tend to be a homogeneous group of individuals, oftentimes well-educated and in managerial or executive positions. They are demanding and discerning, habitually couples and independent travellers, seeking highly immersive and participative accommodation experiences (McLeay et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 1996). These properties are not likely to be used for business purposes, with guests taking advantage of the wider region for leisure and tourism activities (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Morrison et al., 1996).

Combining the perspectives of Morrison et al. (1996), Harkison et al. (2018b, 2019), and McIntosh and Siggs (2005), for this study, we define a *luxury lodge* as an establishment that (1) offers personal interaction between guests and hosts, generating meaningful bonds; (2) provides a unique opportunity or advantage for guests afforded by the location,

physical structure, or services offered, reflecting a well-defined experience of place; (3) offers special activities to guests, reflecting the rural and remote location, as well as the unique characteristics of the establishment; (4) has a small capacity (generally less than 25 rooms); (5) offers luxury experiences, reflecting the high quality of both tangible and intangible experience determinants, driving a premium price.

While past studies can define luxury lodges, minimal research has attempted to investigate specialist accommodation and, specifically, luxury lodge experience quality. Most literature on luxury accommodation experiences has focused on the interactive aspects of experience quality (Luna-Cortés et al., 2022), highlighting the role of human interaction and the physical environment in the determination of experience evaluations (e.g., Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019; Cetin & Walls, 2016; Clauzel et al., 2020; Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014; Walls et al., 2011). Additionally, similar to the broader service literature, existing studies have acknowledged the role of personal and situational factors influencing the experience evaluation (Chathoth, Harrington, Chan, Okumus, & Song, 2020; Lu et al., 2015; Manfreda et al., 2022; Walls et al., 2011). There is, however, a lack of studies in this context that identifies how these determinants are related and acknowledges the importance of experiential outcomes in the overall experience evaluation.

Specifically, in the context of specialist accommodation, very limited research has looked into the determinants and dimensions of experience quality, with McIntosh and Siggs (2005) among the first and very few to propose five dimensions of experience quality in specialist accommodation: unique character, personalisation, homely feel, quality, and value-added, dimensions which align with most of the findings in subsequent literature (Aggett, 2007; Harkison et al., 2018b, 2019). Luxury lodge experience quality, thus, is believed to be driven by the uniqueness and quality of physical surroundings, ambience, service provided, and highly personalised offerings, products of the small capacity of the lodges and their characteristic high staff-to-guest ratio (Aggett, 2007; Harkison et al., 2018b, 2019; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). The intimate setting of luxury lodges creates a "homely feeling," which provides guests with comfort, rest, relaxation, charm, and security (Harkison et al., 2019). Luxury lodge experiences are also known to provide additional value ("value added"), intended as the learning (provision of local knowledge and information) and enjoyment (of the broader region) obtained from the consumption experience (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). Despite existing studies in this context providing an initial understanding of experience quality determinants and dimensions, a scarcity of studies is evident, driving the need for more investigation into luxury lodge experience quality.

This theoretical background has highlighted key theoretical concepts applicable to the study of experience quality in luxury lodges. Experience quality is a highly contextualised (Chang & Horng, 2010), multi-dimensional, and interactive construct (Dierking & Falk, 1992; Schmitt, 1999), which has caused challenges in its conceptualisation. Although past studies have identified experience quality dimensions and developed and tested various experience quality models, most of these models were conceptual and did not clarify the intricate relationships among determinants and dimensions of experience quality. This underscores the need for further empirical and context-specific research capable of providing a deeper emic understanding of the construct and acting as a foundation for theory and practice. Past research has highlighted that different experiences can be created in different forms of accommodation (Harkison et al., 2018a). Hence, studying an increasingly prominent type of accommodation, such as luxury lodges, which has grown in importance in the past decade, can provide significant insights into the conceptualisation of experience quality for the broader T&H research field. Our study, therefore, aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore key dimensions and determinants of luxury lodge experience quality and their intricate relationships.
2. To develop a model of luxury lodge experience quality.

### 3. Methodology

Informed by a constructivist paradigm, a qualitative multiple-case study methodology was deemed appropriate for this study, given the specialised and highly-contextualised nature of luxury lodge experiences. Such methodology allows for exploring in-depth specific settings, specific organisations, or specific groups of people and their relationships through multi-methods strategies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Woodside, 2016; Yin, 2013). The lived experience of luxury lodges guests and hosts, the object of inquiry, is a socially constructed phenomenon, where participants' (including the researchers themselves) interpretations of reality are not absolute but a product of their historical and sociocultural background and are context and temporally-bounded (Schwandt, 1994). In this type of research, researchers need to be aware of and acknowledge their active influence on the inquiry based on their positionality (Killion & Fisher, 2018). Thus, stating a researcher's positionality and reflexivity practices can provide several benefits to the research including increased accountability, trustworthiness, richness, clarity, and ethics, and is seen as an essential element in co-creating knowledge (Probst, 2015). The first author, who led the data collection and analysis process, is a Caucasian female in her 30s who was born and raised in Italy and lived in Switzerland and Australia. She has eleven years of experience as a luxury accommodation operator and manager and has pursued an academic career for the past five years. As the main researcher, the first author brings with her a cultural and gendered multi-layered set of experiences and life events which could have influenced the research design, the relationship with the research participants, and the interpretation of research findings. We acknowledge this influence, which we have deeply reflected on during the research process and have made explicit in many parts of its reporting.

Given the objectives of this study, we employed a multi-case study methodology as it is overall regarded to provide more robust and compelling findings compared to single-case studies (Yin, 2013), allowing comparison across multiple cases (Gibbs, 2018) and enabling the generation of more robust theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Due to the lack of an Australian classification for luxury lodges, we selected the three cases from a population of Australian properties reflecting the characteristics of luxury lodges presented in the theoretical background (section 2.3). We used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques in their selection. The fifth author of this paper is an experienced luxury lodge manager who assisted in the selection and recruitment of two of the lodges through his connections, while the first author approached one lodge through her industry contacts. Starman (2013) argues that while selection bias resulting from the positionality of the researcher(s) can occur in this type of research, in qualitative case-studies the researcher's prior knowledge can lead to the selection of case units that are more theoretically significant, thus allowing to generate more robust theory. This bias can also be managed by providing a detailed account of the procedures undertaken in conducting the research, such as the one in this paper (Starman, 2013). In selecting the three case studies, we aimed to showcase the diversity of

lodges, each located in a different Australian state, in very different locations (coast, hills, and outback), and offering very distinctive guest experiences. Increasing the diversity of the sample to showcase the differences among the selected cases is favoured in case-study research to build more transferable findings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Starman, 2013; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The selection of three case studies was also reflective of past research utilising qualitative case study methodologies (e.g., de Andrade-Matos, Richards, & de Lourdes de Azevedo Barbosa, 2022; Harkison et al., 2019; McLeay et al., 2019).

Participants were directly recruited both prior to the fieldwork (staff and managers) and onsite. Similar to the case selection, we used a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques to select the participants at each property, numbers which ultimately depended on the willingness of invited respondents to participate, as well as theoretical saturation (Jennings, 2010). Table 1 presents each case characteristics (all cases' and participants' names are pseudonyms).

Following Yin (2013), data were sourced from documentation, archival records, and physical artefacts. These provided context and enabled a deeper familiarisation with the characteristics of each lodge. However, the majority of data were collected through semi-structured interviews with guests (individual and dyadic), staff, and managers, as well as direct and overt participant observations through employing participative shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007).

The lead author conducted the fieldwork between July 2021 and January 2022 and spent extended time at each lodge, experiencing overnight stays, and joined various guests' activities. This facilitated familiarisation with each lodge context and established authentic and deep bonds with participants. This insider positionality also assisted in the recruitment of guests and staff who perceived the researcher as "one of them", and facilitated the acceptance and integration of the researcher in the field.

The lead author shadowed staff members (from front and back of house) and managers for the duration of their working shifts (Czarniawska, 2007; McDonald, 2005) and participated in daily meetings, operations, and organisational life. Patton (2002) argues that the decision to be a full participant is not a choice the researcher can make a priori. However, it highly depends on the level of access the researcher can gain within the organisation and the relationship the researcher establishes with the shadowee. The lead author's background as a luxury accommodation operator was instrumental in building rapport, sympathising, and gaining acceptance within the field and with participants.

Overt observations can also lead to what Patton (2002) describes as "the observer effect," where participants behave differently than they usually would as a result of being observed. However, McDonald (2005) posits that the utilisation of shadowing enables the shadowee, after an expected initial period of adjustment, to grow accustomed to the presence of the researcher, thus mitigating the observer effect. This is also facilitated if the researcher and the shadowee can establish a sympathetic relationship (McDonald, 2005), which was, in this case, greatly facilitated by the industry background of the lead author. Data were

**Table 1**  
Profile of cases.

Property name	Location	Form of ownership	Number of rooms	Number of guests	Number of staff	Staff ratio to room	Staff ratio to guest	Average rate (per room)	Package Format	Inclusions
The Bay Lodge	Tasmania	Privately owned	20	46	78	3.9:1	1.7:1	\$2800	All inclusive	Overnight stay, all meals and beverages, in-suite minibar, on-site and off-site experiences (approx. 14), use of private airport lounge
The Outback Lodge	Western Australia	Privately owned	10	20	20	2:1	1:1	\$2800	All inclusive (Adult-only)	Overnight stay, all meals and beverages, in-room minibar, off-site experiences (approx. 6)
The Hills Lodge	South Australia	Privately owned	14	28	30	2:1	1.1:1	\$1500	B&B (Adult-only)	Overnight stay, breakfast, in-suite minibar, on-site experiences (approx. 8)



**Table 2**  
Participants' characteristics.

	Name (pseudonym)	Participants group	Gender	Age	Cultural affiliation - Heritage	Occupation	Industry experience (years - Hosts only)	Travel experience (Guests only)
<b>THE BAY LODGE</b>								
Shadowing participants								
	Russell	Manager	M	30–39	Australian	Assistant Lodge Manager	10-14 (International)	
	Mike	Manager	M	30–39	Indian	Housekeeping Supervisor	15-19 (International)	
	Sofia	Manager	F	30–39	Polish	Guest Service Manager	5-9 (International)	
Interview participants								
Dyadic	Mark	Guest	M	40–49	British	Retail		Extensive (luxury)
Interview	Jarrold	Guest	M	40–49	Chinese	Oncologist		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	Tony	Guest	M	60–69	Australian	Business/self-employed		Extensive (luxury)
Interview	Keri	Guest	F	50–59	Australian	Business/self-employed		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	Jason	Guest	M	60–69	Australian	Retiree		Extensive (luxury)
Interview	Giselle	Guest	F	60–69	Australian	Retiree		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	Anton	Guest	M	30–39	Australian	Phycologist		Limited (luxury and non)
Interview	Eleanor	Guest	F	30–39	Australian	Phycologist		Extensive (non-luxury)
	Kate	Manager	F	30–39	Australian	Executive assistant	15-19 (Australia only)	
	Lauren	Employee	F	20–29	Australian	Tour Guide	5-9 (Australia only)	
	Mike	Manager	M	30–39	Indian	Executive	15-19 (International)	
	Mary	Manager	F	20–29	New Zealand	Housekeeping SPA Manager	5-9 (Australia only)	
	Turner	Employee	M	20–29	Australian	F&B team leader	0-4 (Australia only)	
	Jonathan	Manager	M	40–49	British	General Manager	15-19 (International)	
	Gina	Manager	F	30–39	Australian	Guest Services Manager	10-14 (International)	
	Ally	Manager	F	20–29	Australian	F&B Supervisor	5-9 (International)	
<b>THE BAY LODGE</b>								
Shadowing participants								
	Jordan	Manager	M	40–49	Australian	Lodge Manager	20+ (International)	
	Rose	Manager	F	30–39	Australian	Housekeeping Supervisor	0-4 (Australia only)	
	Sophie	Employee	F	20–29	Australian	F&B team leader	5-9 (Australia only)	
	Morgana	Employee	F	20–29	Australian	F&B attendant	0-4 (Australia only)	
Interview participants								
	Imogen	Guest	F	30–39	Australian	Student		Average (luxury and non)
	Bob	Guest	M	40–49	British	Doctor		Extensive (luxury and non)
	Sally	Guest	F	40–49	Australian	Sales Manager		Average (luxury and non)
	Kristoff	Guest	M	50–59	Australian	Police area manager		Extensive (luxury)
	Cameron	Employee	F	20–29	Australian	F&B Attendant	0-4 (Australia only)	
	Patrick	Employee	M	20–29	Australian	F&B Attendant	0-4 (Australia only)	
	Jonty	Employee	M	30–39	Australian	Chef	15-19 (International)	
	Jane	Employee	F	30–39	Australian	F&B Attendant	20+ (Australia only)	
	Jordan	Manager	M	40–49	Australian	Lodge Manager	20+ (International)	
	Jake	Employee	M	40–49	Australian	Gardener	0-4 (Australia only)	
	Amelia	Manager	F	60–69	Australian	Executive	40+ (Australia only)	
	David	Manager	M	30–39	Australian	Housekeeper		
						Guest Services Manager	15-19 (International)	
<b>THE HILLS LODGE</b>								
Shadowing participants								
	Elizabeth	Manager	F	30–39	Australian	Lodge Manager	10-14 (International)	
	Henrique	Manager	M	30–39	Brazilian	Housekeeping Supervisor	5-9 (International)	
	Esmeralda	Manager	F	20–29	Australian	Lounge Supervisor	0-4 (Australia only)	
Interview participants								
Dyadic	Bill	Guest	M	40–49	Taiwanese	Doctor		Extensive (luxury and non)
Interview	Nancy	Guest	F	40–49	Taiwanese	Administrator		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	James	Guest	M	50–59	Australian	Tourism (COO)		Extensive (luxury)
Interview	Louise	Guest	F	40–49	Australian	IT Project Manager		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	Matt	Guest	M	60–69	Australian	Retiree		Extensive (luxury)
Interview	Monica	Guest	F	60–69	Australian	Retiree		Extensive (luxury)
Dyadic	George	Guest	M	50–59	Australian	Dentist		Extensive (luxury and non)
Interview	Gabrielle	Guest	F	40–49	Lithuanian	Office Manager		Extensive (luxury)

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Name (pseudonym)	Participants group	Gender	Age	Cultural affiliation - Heritage	Occupation	Industry experience (years - Hosts only)	Travel experience (Guests only)
Romano	Guest	M	70–79	Greek	Retiree		Extensive (luxury and non)
Henrique	Manager	M	30–39	Brazilian	Housekeeping Supervisor	5-9 (International)	
Esmeralda	Manager	F	20–29	Australian	Lounge Supervisor	0-4 (Australia only)	
Giovanna	Manager	M	30–39	Canadian	Operations Manager	10-14 (International)	
Harvey	Manager	M	40–49	Australian	Estate General Manager	20+ (International)	
Marlin	Employee	F	20–29	German	Guest Experience Host	0-4 (International)	
Elizabeth	Manager	M	30–39	Australian	Lodge Manager	10-14 (International)	
Laura	Manager	F	30–39	Italian	Lodge Assistant Manager	15-19 (International)	
Marble	Employee	F	20–29	Australian	Lounge Team Leader	5-9 (Australia only)	

collected from dictated commentaries, photos, videos, and field notes. To enhance the credibility of the findings and mitigate researcher bias, we adopted a semi-structured observational protocol - to provide a loose structure for conducting observations - and post-shadowing reflexive write-ups (Czarniawska, 2007). We also conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and managers to collect rich insights to triangulate observations, thus enabling member-checking (Creswell, 2013).

Given that hospitality experiences are often consumed in a shared context (e.g., with travel party) and that luxury lodge guests often travel in couples (Morrison et al., 1996), we utilised dyadic interviews to mimic a more naturally occurring conversation with guests and take advantage of the added layer of meaning provided by the observational data of the interaction and relationship between informants (Polak & Green, 2016). The hospitality background of the lead researcher, which provided her with the affective abilities required to work in a “people industry,” to listen empathetically, sympathise, and make people feel comfortable when initiating social interactions, were instrumental in building trust, collaboration, and encouraging openness from participants. Participants were asked questions related to their background, past experiences in luxury lodges, expectations, and reflections on their overall lived experience (Supplementary material for questionnaires). Interviews ranged between 45 and 90 min in length and were often conducted in the public areas of the lodges and during leisure activities, which facilitated a more informal and relaxed atmosphere between researcher and participants. The fieldwork yielded 37 interviews with 45 participants and 229h of observational data, translating into 744 pages and 322,000 words of textual material once collated and transcribed. Table 2 reports the characteristics of participants and their distribution across the cases.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, the lead researcher kept a reflexive journal and constant interactions with the co-authors, who were able to provide an “outsider” view on the process and insights emerging from the data (Ye et al., 2020), assisting in managing researcher bias. The continuous sharing of reflections with external members of the research team also assisted in identifying when theoretical saturation was reached and enhanced the objectivity of the findings, thus increasing the dependability of the research (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

In the formal analysis, each case was analysed separately (within-case), then cross-case comparative analysis was applied to identify similarities and differences and allow for theoretical insights to emerge inductively (Woodside, 2016; Yin, 2013). In each case, we started by generating individual case descriptions, which are helpful to synthesise a large volume of data, preserve the context, and allow the research team to become intimately familiar with each case (Eisenhardt, 1989). Within each case, we applied inductive open coding to reduce the volume of data into units of meaning, followed by axial and selective

coding, to allow key categories and relationships to emerge (Strauss, 1987). Each participants group (guests, managers, and staff) was analysed separately and compared within-case and across cases to identify similarities and differences. The themes emerged from the three participants groups in the three cases were synthesised into a model of luxury lodge experience quality, visually represented in Fig. 1, which was validated by peer-debriefing with the co-authors of this paper and external academic colleagues.

#### 4. Findings and discussions

Key findings are presented in Table 3, aligning them with existing literature. These key findings were translated into a luxury lodge experience quality model, which represents key dimensions and determinants identified and their intricate relationships (Fig. 1). Previous research identified perception gaps between luxury accommodation guests and hosts (e.g., Buehring & O’Mahony, 2019; Cetin & Walls, 2016), however, the analysis from this study highlighted strong alignment of perceptions between participants (guests, managers, staff), moderated by personal characteristics. The following section presents details of the model.

##### 4.1. Influencing factors

Influencing factors are *situational* (dynamic) and *personal* (static/accumulated) *factors* able to influence the luxury lodge experience. Aligning with McIntosh and Siggs (2005) and Morrison et al. (1996), participants overwhelmingly agreed that guests choose luxury lodges for specific leisure purposes, including special occasions (e.g., life milestones, significant birthday or anniversaries), or ticking off bucket lists (once in a lifetime experience). *Purpose of the stay* broadly displayed two main goals: an inward focus (e.g., indulging, escaping, disconnecting, relaxation, self-reward) motivating guests to concentrate on the experience within the lodge, or an outward focus (e.g., exploring, learning, adventure), hence driving their attention beyond the lodge and toward the broader destination.

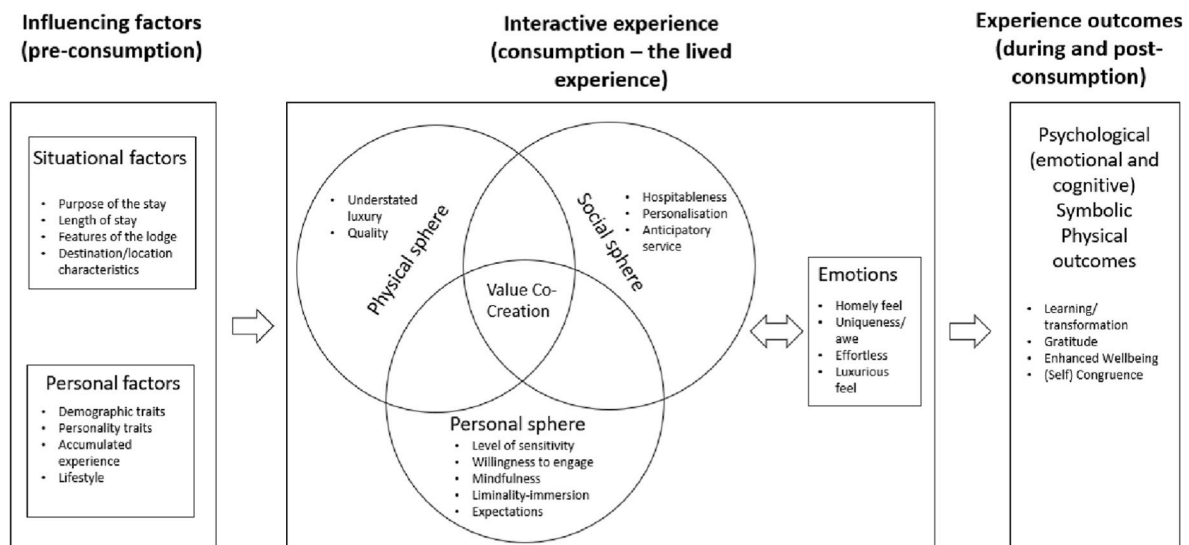
*People aren’t just going to come to the lodge for the lodge [...] they come for everything else. They come for that connection, but they come because they want to learn about the region. [Elizabeth – Manager, The Hills Lodge]*

In line with Manfreda et al. (2022), the *characteristics of the destination* were an important influencer of the lodge experience, affecting guests’ motivations to visit and the hosts’ actions, process of design, management, and value creation.

All participants recognised specific *features of the lodges* as essential to the lodge experience quality. Similar to previous studies (Harkison

**Table 3**  
Model elements, codes, and alignment with existing literature.

Model elements and descriptors	Codes (and sub-codes)	Alignment with literature
<b>Influencing factors</b>		
Situational factors: dynamic factors with the ability to influence the luxury lodge experience prior and during consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose of the stay (Special occasion; Bucket list; Inward; Outward)</li> <li>• Length of stay</li> <li>• Features of the lodge (Staff-to-guest ratio; Capacity; All-inclusive; Premium price; Longevity of operations)</li> <li>• Destination/location characteristics (Culture)</li> </ul>	Walls et al. (2011); Manfreda et al. (2022); McLeay et al. (2019); Chathoth et al. (2020)
Personal factors: static or accumulated factors with the ability to influence the luxury lodge experience prior and during consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographic traits (Age; Gender; Education; Culture/heritage)</li> <li>• Personality traits</li> <li>• Accumulated experience (Travel experiences; Luxury lodges experiences; International experiences; Personal experiences; Professional experiences)</li> <li>• Lifestyle (Life stage; Hobbies; Preferences; Occupation)</li> </ul>	Verhoef et al. (2009); Walls et al. (2011); Manfreda et al. (2022); Chathoth et al. (2020)
<b>Interactive experience</b>		
Personal Sphere: the cognitive experience of participants during the interaction with physical and social sphere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of sensitivity</li> <li>• Willingness to engage</li> <li>• Mindfulness</li> <li>• Liminality-immersion</li> <li>• Expectations</li> </ul>	Scott and Le (2017), Walls et al. (2011); Verhoef et al. (2009), Dierking and Falk (1992), Schmitt (1999); Manfreda et al. (2022)
Physical sphere: the sensorial experience of the luxury lodge physical environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understated luxury (Nature; Approachable; Connection to place; (Lack of) Technology/Soft technology)</li> <li>• Quality (Baseline luxury setting; Amenities/furnishings; Recognising quality; Craftmanship; Opulent materials; View; Aesthetics)</li> </ul>	McIntosh and Siggs (2005), Harkison et al. (2018b) Dierking and Falk (1992); Schmitt (1999)
Social sphere: the relational experience deriving from the interaction among all experience participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospitableness (Cared for; Generosity; Welcoming; Natural inclination of staff)</li> <li>• Personalisation (Tailored attention)</li> <li>• Anticipatory service</li> </ul>	Manfreda et al. (2022); McIntosh and Siggs (2005); Harkison (2018); Harkison et al. (2019); Aggett (2007); Dierking and Falk (1992); Schmitt (1999); Manfreda et al. (2022)
Emotions: The affective experience deriving from the interaction between personal, physical, and social sphere at the time of consumption.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homely feel (Relaxation; Privacy; Comfort; Sense of peacefulness; Sense of belonging/fictive kinship; Refuge/sanctuary/oasis)</li> <li>• Uniqueness/awe (Rich experiences; Out of ordinary; Excitement; Awe; Novelty)</li> <li>• Effortless (Feeling free/worry free; Ease)</li> <li>• Luxurious feel (Recognition-feeling special; Exclusivity; Excess)</li> </ul>	McIntosh and Siggs (2005); Bastiaansen et al. (2019); Harkison et al. (2018b)
<b>Experience outcomes</b>		
Outcomes: the psychological (emotional and cognitive), physical, and symbolic outcomes accorded to experience participants by the interactive consumption experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Gratitude</li> <li>• Wellbeing</li> <li>• (Self) Congruence</li> </ul>	McIntosh and Siggs (2005); Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019); Manfreda et al. (2022)



**Fig. 1.** Luxury lodge experience quality model.

et al., 2019; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; McLeay et al., 2019), the small (less than 20 rooms) capacity, the high staff-guest ratio, and the offering formats (all-inclusive) significantly impacted experience quality. Premium price was regarded as crucial as it carries implicit service promises, shapes expectations, and assists hosts in delivering a luxurious experience. However, the absence of any price component on-site, following from the offerings' all-inclusive/pre-paid nature, was observed to increase perceptions of experience quality by removing worries, increasing trust, and decreasing cynicism toward hosts during the consumption experience.

*Length of stay* also featured as an important factor influencing guests' and hosts' ability to create value and allowing guests to more deeply engage in their experience.

*Tonight, the experience for us [would be] mainly drinking and eating and relaxing and just indulging. If we're staying two or three nights then we go "right, we're going on a wine tour" or "we are going on the different experiences around the place". [James – Guest, The Hills Lodge]*

In line with Ye et al. (2021), managers and staff commented that one day stay was not considered enough to stage and manage the experience, and for guests to experience all its benefits. However, such benefits did not increase with extended stays. Hosts identified two to four-day visits as optimal to achieve the expected benefits while obtaining value for the time and money spent to reach the (often) remote destination and access such experiences.

Most personal factors influencing the luxury lodge experience are already reported in existing literature (Manfreda et al., 2022; Walls et al., 2011), and include *demographic characteristics* (e.g., age, gender, culture), *personality traits*, and *accumulated experiences*. Luxury lodge guests and hosts tend to possess relevant international travel experiences and familiarity with luxury travel and luxury lodges.

An additional significant factor affecting experience quality was *lifestyle*. Contrarily to Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), who define lifestyle as the process of personalisation based on customers' values, lifestyle is intended in this study as the combination of guests' life stage, hobbies, preferences, and occupation. Such factors highly influence the level of sensitivity guests have toward experience determinants. Guests often have stressful, demanding, and managerial jobs, which allow them to understand the backstage mechanics and better appreciate the hosts' efforts.

*Because I own 105 medical centres I know [the service process]. [...] Everything looks simple on the surface, but to deliver a really simple thing lots of complicated process go in the background. So, you see that table [referring to a restaurant table just vacated by guests] is now, two minutes later, all nice and clean. They [lodge hosts] have a process. [Bill – Guest, The Hills Lodge]*

The occupation of guests also makes them more receptive, heightening their sensitivity toward particular aspects of the experience. For instance, Kristoff, a police investigator and area manager used to paying attention to the smallest details in his work life, would describe his experience in very minute details and highlight minor aspects that other guests would overlook.

*I've been doing [investigative work] for 41 years and picking up the details and looking at stuff and more often [...] Where's the camera? Where's the approach route? Where's the safe direction. There's no security cameras fitted in here, no padlocks. [...] The chain on the fence, the gates, the hinges, which way the gates open the type of padlocks, the way to bypass the padlock, to open it without leaving a trace. It's not a security issue for me. It's just an observation. I don't register the things I do. [Kristoff – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

More than age, life stage influences how guests experience luxury lodges and what experiential benefits they seek to obtain. For instance, guests who recently got married or were escaping from their busy work and family life (often filled with children) appeared more inclined to

have an inward focus toward the experience, seeking relaxation within the confines of the lodge and chances to (re)connect with the partner. Differently, long-standing couples without children in their late careers or enjoying retirement appeared more willing to engage in the on-site experience and display an outward focus.

*That [choosing to stay at a luxury lodge] could also come with where I was in life, where the money that was spent on that trip didn't mean that we were going to miss out on other things that were intended for our children or our family life or whatever [...] It's only in later life that we've actually been able to do those things [visiting luxury lodges]. [Sally – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

From the perspective of hosts, understanding the lodge guests' lifestyle was, therefore, an essential step to managing the on-site experience and was often conducted through the active elicitation of lifestyle information before and during the experience consumption.

#### 4.2. The interactive experience

Consistent with Dierking and Falk (1992), luxury lodge lived experiences are shaped by the interaction between the guests' personal sphere, the physical environment of the lodge, and the social experience elicited by the interaction with other experience participants. In the intersection of these three spheres, value is co-created. Aligning with Schmitt (1999), the interactive luxury lodge experience can also be divided into cognitive experiences (personal sphere), sensory experiences (physical sphere), relational experiences (social sphere), creative/behavioural experiences (value co-creation, in the intersection of the three spheres), and affective experiences (emotions resulting from the other experiences). The interaction of the three spheres elicits emotions during the consumption experience, which are sometimes sustained over time.

While these emotions triggered by the interaction of the three spheres can influence the personal, social, and physical sphere during the consumption experience (e.g., positive emotions enhance the guest's willingness to engage in the experience, which reflects in their heightened social behaviour), the model isolates emotions from the interactive spheres. This supports emerging notions (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Moyle et al., 2017) that emotions form the core element of experience evaluations.

##### 4.2.1. Personal sphere

The personal sphere refers to the guests' cognitive state during consumption. In line with Scott and Le (2017), cognitive determinants have been categorised under the *level of sensitivity* (the attention given by participants to determinants that are perceived important), *willingness to engage* (the participants' interest and personal relevance toward the staged offerings of the lodge), *mindfulness* (the state of 'being in the moment'), *liminality/immersion* (the state of being immersed in a 'different' reality), and *expectations*. Guests' engagement in such cognitive experiences facilitate or hinder value co-creation. Guests were observed to be generally highly willing to engage in the lodge experience, often experiencing mindfulness and immersion in the liminal space of the lodge.

*Jason: You just choose your way out and you really think you're somewhere else.*

*Giselle: Yeah, you think you're in another world, really. [Jason and Giselle – Guests, The Bay Lodge]*

Hosts also utilise various techniques (e.g., informal conversations, pre-stay questionnaires and phone calls) to gauge the extent of guests' engagement in such cognitive experiences and their influence on experience quality.

Of special interest was the role of expectations. Participants mentioned guests in luxury lodges often arrive with mixed feelings and



unformed expectations: *I don't think guests know [what to expect before arriving]. I really don't [Jonathan – Manager, The Bay Lodge].* This creates a sense of apprehension and confusion for the guests. As the stay progresses, expectations are often reshaped, allowing hosts a higher control of expectation formation/manipulation during the consumption experience, which facilitates exceeding them.

This process often starts before the on-site experience, with hosts personally engaging with guests through phone calls in preparing their itineraries and using this time to gauge essential information revealing the guests' possible reactions to the on-site experience. During this time, they initiate a connection person-to-person with guests and start shaping perceptions of warmth and approachability. The arrival experience is also a crucial step in shaping and managing expectations. Aware of this state of confusion of the arriving guests, hosts attempt to break down pre-conceived perceptions and disarm guests with the use of empathy, friendliness, and often helped by humour. A carefully staged arrival experience, eliciting guests' awe and surprise, assists in resetting guests' expectations and facilitates their immersion and engagement in the experience.

*It can be quite a confronting experience when a guest walks through those doors [...] So, I think we try to just break down any barriers, start creating a trusting, friendly, fun environment. And as soon as you build that trust and you start dropping away any sort of inhibitions or any preconceived ideas, and you're actually tend to relax into it and start enjoying it. [Johnathan – Manager, The Hills Lodge]*

#### 4.2.2. Physical sphere

Participants agreed that the experience of the physical lodge environment is sensorial. Participants often highlighted the room environment and the overall lodge design, associating them with the idea of quality and understated luxury. Congruent with luxury accommodation literature (Harkison et al., 2018b; Manfreda et al., 2022), all participants highlighted quality as a critical characteristic of the experience. However, quality did not concern the lodge's tangibles but was described in relation to senses and craftsmanship (e.g., feeling and recognising quality).

*When you walk into some of these lodges, and the furniture that's in there, that's handmade furniture. The maker is actually an artist. It's like, you know, you touch it. It's a work of art and you look at it and I would always be like "this is amazing." This chair, just touch it! [Amelia – Manager, The Outback Lodge]*

To understand quality, hosts must experience it first hand and must assume a guiding role and assist guests in recognising the quality of the physical environment, heightening the lodge experience's exclusivity (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Wirtz et al., 2020).

*Our first meeting day [at the Lodge Welcome], I think that's quite unique. If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't know about the Hills Lodge paintings. We wouldn't have known about a bit of history about the paintings, about the pottery. That 30 minutes down there with Esmeralda [...] was very valuable. And it taught us to appreciate why they [the paintings] are here. [George – Guest, The Hills Lodge]*

Participants also highlighted the importance of an understated luxury environment, providing a clear distinction between the luxury environment of the lodge and that of traditional or corporate hotels. The lodge environment was perceived as more approachable, natural, displaying a sense of place, and reflecting the destination characteristics and local culture. As part of this, technology was mentioned for its absence or its soft integration and user-friendliness, enabling guests to fully disconnect, relax, and achieve immersion and mindfulness.

*We do not have reception [at the lodge] [...] I think being disconnected for some people might be important and also something that [...] they're not used to. [Patrick – Staff, The Outback Lodge]*

Understated luxury aligns with the idea of congruence between the lodge experience determinants and the destination characteristics of Manfreda et al. (2022). It manifests in highly curated exterior and interior design choices that are conducive to a more relaxed and approachable luxury space, in harmony with the style and location of the lodge.

#### 4.2.3. Social sphere

Consistent with past research (Ariffin, Maghzi, Soon, & Alam, 2018; Walls et al., 2011), participants agreed that the social experience constitutes the most crucial element of the overall experience. This starts pre-consumption, with staff observed to establish an intimate relationship with arriving guests via phone calls, and continues post-consumption, with hosts reporting of guests maintaining relationships with staff and other guests after their departure.

*It started before we got here. Every phone calls have been so personable. Even the emails. They've gone out of their way to say, "We are so looking forward to meeting you. We can't wait to help you enjoy your stay here." We don't know these people, and it's just their job, but if you suspend that knowledge for a second, these people really want us to come. That's the magic, or illusion, or loveliness, or whatever it is, that they're inviting you into. [Eleonor – Guest, The Bay Lodge]*

Contrasting with existing literature, which identified functional service aspects (e.g., professionalism, efficiency) as essential for luxury accommodation experiences (Presbury et al., 2005; Walls et al., 2011), such determinants were rarely mentioned by participants. All participants identified three manifestations of the social sphere - hospitableness, personalisation, and anticipatory service - as the quintessence of the luxury lodge experience. This is consistent with research on emotional determinants of luxury accommodation experiences (Aggett, 2007; Manfreda et al., 2022; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005).

Participants intended hospitableness as the welcome, warmth, and care experienced during one's stay. The lodges utilise particular practices and mechanisms to ensure hospitableness is transposed to the guest. For example, they hire staff (or partner with external operators) with natural hospitable dispositions, favoring their personality and value alignment with the service philosophy of each lodge over experience or technical skills. In line with other scholars (Pizam, 2020), guest-centric workplace culture, characterised by generosity, empowerment, freedom, equality, and genuine care, also assist in transposing such hospitable attitudes to guests and facilitating reciprocal behaviour. Interestingly, while hospitableness is often examined unilaterally in the interaction between hosts and guests (Hemmington, 2007; Tefler, 2000), we observed hospitableness manifestations in guest-to-host and guest-to-guest spontaneous reciprocation. Guests were observed to act as friends, fictive parents, collaborators, helping staff in their operational duties, making staff feel comfortable and seen, sharing their experiences with staff, and overall adding value to the employee experience. Consistent with McLeay et al. (2019), once guests felt familiar with the lodge and the staff, they "hosted" new guests' arrivals, provide recommendations, pass on the knowledge acquired, and introduce the 'newbies' to the existing guests' community, genuinely caring for other guests' experiences. Reciprocal hospitableness facilitated the creation of *communitas* and elicited a strong sense of belongingness among guests.

Supporting Ariffin et al. (2018) and Manfreda et al. (2022), participants identified anticipatory service and personalisation to positively influence experience quality. Anticipatory service relates to the staff's ability to read and anticipate guests' needs before being asked or even before guests themselves recognise such needs.

*They [guests] are expecting us to know who they are, and to anticipate their needs before they really have to ask for it. [...] we actually want to anticipate what they need before they even realize they need it. [Giovanna – Manager, The Hills Lodge]*

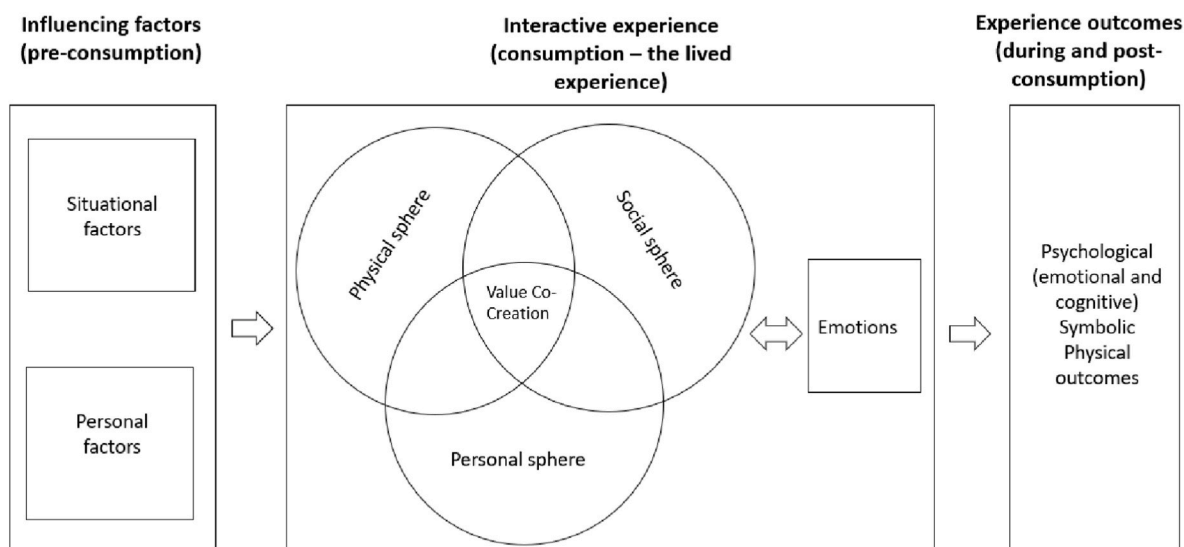


Fig. 2. Interactive Experience Quality model (IXQ).

This anticipatory service mindset materialises in a significant effort to *personalisation*. This involves recognising guests as individuals and acting upon this individuality, sometimes “breaking the rules” to ensure it. This was facilitated by the natural inclinations and skills of staff employed at the lodge – to be observant, intuitive, and creative – and a culture that allowed staff empowerment. Such acts also required organised systems to capture guests’ characteristics (e.g., guest profiles), and sustained cross-departmental communication. While small acts of personalisation occur across the guest stay (e.g., in-room, during dining), personalisation was mainly associated with the tailored, genuine, and authentic interaction between guests and staff.

*When we arrive here, the staff know our names, we know their names and you genuinely [...] feel like they are doing their best to care and look after you. [Jarrod – Guest, The Bay Lodge]*

#### 4.2.4. Emotions

Emotions are elicited by the interaction of personal, physical, and social spheres. They are felt during consumption and, at times, sustained over time, leading to memorability. In line with past studies (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Buehring & O’Mahony, 2019; Manfreda et al., 2022), luxury lodge experiences are evaluated through emotional lenses. Guests often described their experience using emotion-laden language, and emotional displays were often observed. Hosts were also well aware and trained to recognise these emotions and act on them.

*We talk a lot about trust and the emotional bank account and building trust within the team, but the same goes with the guest. We see people turn up and they’re very stoic. Like they bring whatever’s happening in their life. And we know that they go through a whirlwind of emotions when they first arrive. [Johnathan – Manager, The Bay Lodge]*

Participants identified four emotional states determining experience quality: homely feel, uniqueness/awe, effortless, and luxurious feel. A *homely feel* was described as feeling relaxed, peaceful, and comfortable, facilitating privacy and belongingness, perceiving the lodge as a refuge and sanctuary where participants can be themselves.

*[There] isn’t a sense of pretentiousness. You can come in dirty and you can help yourself. They have made it very homely. [Imogen – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

Homely feel, deriving from the small capacity, understated luxury of the physical environment, and the friendly and hospitable reception of hosts and other guests, was highlighted by previous studies as a critical

experience quality determinant in luxury lodges (Harkison et al., 2019; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005).

Consistent with luxury accommodation literature (Harkison et al., 2018b; Walls et al., 2011), participants felt a crucial emotion was the feeling of effortlessness. Effortlessness was associated with a sense of freedom and ease, a consequence of removing tensions and worries. This resulted from the highly structured, all-inclusive, and pre-paid nature of the experience, which minimised the guests’ need to organise and choose, and the hosts’ “can do” attitude. Ease was elicited by little attentions throughout the guests’ stay (e.g., opening doors, tidying up clothes in the rooms, organising personalised itineraries in advance). While often unnoticeable by guests, such tasks require a high degree of organisation, coordination, and communication among hosts, not least a high level of interest from hosts toward understanding and deeply connecting with guests.

Participants described uniqueness/awe as an engaging, rich, exciting experience largely deviating from the guests’ routine and ordinary lifestyle, allowing them to disconnect and escape, and uniquely inherent to the broader destination. Such experiences elicited a sense of novelty, awe, and wonder and were often picked by participants as highlights of their stay. Such perception of uniqueness is derived from the character of the lodge and the services (e.g., the dining experience and activities) provided, which guests cannot experience at home and are non-replicable in other lodges. This finding is consistent with past research identifying uniqueness as a key differentiator of the luxury lodge experience (Harkison et al., 2018b; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Morrison et al., 1996).

Lastly, luxurious feel was associated with traditional luxury values, such as exclusivity (Harkison et al., 2018b; Holmqvist et al., 2020; Wirtz et al., 2020), excess, recognition, and feeling special (Presbury et al., 2005; Walls et al., 2011). Guests, however, explained that to feel special and recognised, they do not require obsequiousness and copious amenities but tailored attention and personal interest from hosts. Similar to Hemmington (2007), such feelings were also reinforced by the utilisation of small personalised gifts, constant surprises, and little personal attention given to guests by the hosts during their stay.

*When you find that right combination between being looked after, as opposed to being pandered to, or an obsequious type behavior then there’s a comfort zone. Everybody likes it. [Kristoff – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

### 4.3. Experiential outcomes

Experiential outcomes comprise the psychological (cognitive and emotional), physical, and symbolic outcomes accorded to experience participants from the interactive consumption experience. Such outcomes are experienced on-site and can be sustained after experience consumption.

Participants identified four key outcomes of the luxury lodge experience that significantly impacted experience perceptions and evaluations: learning, gratitude, heightened wellbeing, and congruence. Learning was intended as a cognitive outcome arising from the guests' willingness to engage and the educational activities organised by hosts.

*In this group of people [guests] you are probably going to find people who like learning, they have done higher education, who have gone on, and have a thirst for knowledge and a respect for knowledge and the accumulation of knowledge. So we're booked onto trips where we're being taught things and learning things. [Bob – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

Guests were observed to gain learning from demonstrations (e.g., cooking classes), hands-on practice (e.g., mixologist classes), storytelling, and their natural informed curiosity. Reciprocal learning was also experienced by guests and hosts, willing to learn from each other's and external operators' experiences, stories, and knowledge.

*Gratitude* refers to the feeling of being lucky and profoundly appreciating the experience consumed. Notably, guests recognised their privileged access to luxury lodges and articulated their gratitude for the exclusive experiences. Gratitude is an emotional construct (Palmatier et al., 2009), which recognition engages experience participants cognitively and enables them to display gratitude through reciprocal behaviour. This was observed in many instances while at the lodges, for instance, in the way guests actively helped and added value to the staff experience or in the way they engaged with the broader local community, supporting it through their experience.

Experience participants also reported *heightened wellbeing* as an outcome of their luxury lodge experience. In line with Filep et al. (2022), wellbeing refers to the combination of hedonic (subjective wellbeing, happiness) and eudemonic wellbeing (meaning of life and self-actualisation). Heightened wellbeing results from the willingness of participants to disconnect themselves from their daily life and the carefully staged, unique experience provided by the lodge. Wellbeing was also enhanced by the comfort (both physical and psychological) felt due to the quality of the physical environment and the homely feel nurtured in such an environment, eliciting relaxation and immersion. Comfort was also achieved through meaningful and authentic interactions and the opportunity to bond and re-connect with people (including the travel companion) at the lodge, allowing guests and hosts to feel comfortable in their own skin and feel better about themselves.

Finally, wellbeing was also associated with the sense of achievement experienced by participants when branching out of their comfort zone, pushing their limits, and the sense of reward arising from experimenting, overcoming personal challenges, and experiencing novelty. Guests often reported the pride and sense of achievement felt by having done something they did not think they were capable of (e.g., a challenging hike) or having had courage to try new things (e.g., particular foods or wine pairings). The trust in the host and lodge offerings prompted guests to feel a bit rebellious and experimental, marking these experiences memorable and, in some cases, transformative.

*I've read about different foods and I watch food shows. And I think to myself, I'll never know if I don't try. So, you get here and you know that it's world class [...] that gives you the confidence to say I'm going to eat it, otherwise I wouldn't have it. [Jason – Guest, The Bay Lodge]*

Congruence is a psychological and symbolic outcome elicited by the efforts of hosts to create a seamless experience and to integrate destination and location characteristics in the experience.

*I think there's another level which is the sense of place and the link with the location. And that sort of thing really makes a difference to make it something really special. [James – Guest, the Hills Lodge]*

In line with Manfreda et al. (2022), participants described congruence as the harmonious relationship felt among experience determinants. To create such a seamless experience an incredible effort must be devoted to the smallest of details, so that nothing feels “out of place.” Extending the interpretation of congruence of Manfreda et al. (2022), the seamless lodge experience can also provide participants with an opportunity to experience self-congruence, transposing their own characteristics onto the lodge experience and in the relationship with other guests. Notably, the equalising experience of the lodge and the perceived likeliness with other guests allowed participants to feel and display their “authentic selves,” creating a *communitas* of equals who shared similar experiences.

*The first thing that disarms you is you go on there and they say “there's your crate, that's where your shoes go when you're on the boat.” So, you come straight off and put your shoes there and you are now bare feet, it's almost like an equaliser when it comes to everyone on the boat. [Sally – Guest, The Outback Lodge]*

## 5. Conclusion and implications

This study sought to explore the determinants and dimensions of experience quality in luxury lodges and, with these, to develop a model of luxury lodge experience quality capable of explaining how these experiences are perceived and evaluated. We have employed a multiple-case study methodology and high-engagement research techniques, which allowed us to capture the complexity of lived experiences and extend our understanding of the intricate relationships among these elements.

The study presents several intertwined contributions to theory and practice related to experience quality, luxury accommodation, and luxury lodges. Firstly, existing experience quality studies have often investigated experience elements separately (e.g., interactive experience vs. experiential outcomes). Those combining experience quality perspectives (e.g., Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019) have ignored the complex relationships among experience quality dimensions and determinants, specifically in a temporal focus (Maklan & Klaus, 2011). This study has proposed a model of luxury lodge experience quality that comprehensively captures determinants and dimensions of the luxury lodge experience and identifies key intricate relationships in the process of perception and evaluation. Our model integrates *influencing factors* - shaping the experience prior to consumption, the *interactive experience* - characterised by the interaction of personal, physical, and social spheres, eliciting emotions during consumption, and *experiential outcomes* - psychological, symbolic, and physical outcomes resulting from the interactive experience and with the ability to be sustained over time - into one holistic conceptualisation of experience quality.

Secondly, this study answered calls for an increased emic and empirical investigation of luxury accommodation experiences (Chu et al., 2016; Manfreda et al., 2022). Through identifying the characterising elements of the luxury lodge experience, it adds to the existing literature on luxury lodges, with significant practical implications for the design and management of luxury accommodation experiences. The narrative explaining the model elements provides numerous examples of best practices that can be replicated across other luxury lodges and even in different typologies of accommodation. This study has shown that emotions and experiential outcomes are essential elements of experience quality, with many of them related to the notion of transformative experiences (Sheldon, 2020). This notion answers calls made by other scholars for increased attention to the psychology of customer experiences (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Scott & Le, 2017) and encourages practitioners to devote more time, resources, and attention to the



psychological and, particularly, the emotional aspects of accommodation experiences. We recommend this focus be embedded as part of the service philosophy underpinning luxury lodge experience design and management, including staff training, and as a requirement in recruitment strategies to identify individuals capable of recognising, acting on emotions, and guiding guests' transformations.

Thirdly, the model presented bridges and refines existing experience quality models from various disciplines (e.g., marketing, management, psychology) (Bastiaansen et al., 2019; Dierking & Falk, 1992; Schmitt, 1999; Scott & Le, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2009) while preserving their integrity and theoretical significance. Previous models have often been devised and then tested through conceptual and quantitative work. Instead, the model presented in this paper is a representation of lived experiences grounded in empirical data. It demonstrates the applicability of existing theories in real-life situations, albeit through their adaptation and refinement based on the characteristics of the study context. From a practical point of view, the model can be utilised as an example for practitioners and educators to understand the value of theories and their application in industry scenarios while presenting an opportunity for scholars to collaborate more intimately with practitioners in extracting theoretical advancement from real-life practice.

Lastly, we extracted a “generic” model of service experience from the developed luxury lodge experience quality model with significant potential for applicability across various study contexts. While this paper was aimed at exploring luxury lodges experience quality, the Interactive Experience Quality model (IXQ) (Fig. 2) provides a blank canvas for future research to investigate experience quality across a multitude of service contexts. The model can also be utilised for various practical purposes, including as a map or blueprint for experience design and management, allowing practitioners to collect data and fill the model boxes to represent their organisation's service experience. It can also be adopted as a training and development tool for industry and education to convey the characteristics of specific experiences and identify what elements of such experiences can be influenced and manipulated by operators.

This research has some limitations and delimitations. While utilising a multiple-case study methodology enhances the generalisability of our findings, it is important to note that this study's key purpose was to paint a holistic picture of a particular phenomenon in time and space. However, we believe that the proposed IXQ model bares the ability to be applied more widely, hence extending its significance to different service settings and across disciplines. This study was also conducted at a time when Australian borders were closed for international tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and luxury lodges relied exclusively on the domestic market. However, this limitation is moderated by the characteristics of the participants, who have had extensive international travel and professional experiences and cultural heritages, therefore able to contribute to these findings with an international perspective. We, however, recommend future research to conduct comparative studies to better evaluate the role of culture in influencing experience quality.

The study findings also suggest potential future research directions. While this study has highlighted the importance of value co-creation, this paper has not provided an in-depth explanation of its function and the processes underpinning it. Given the importance of value creation in customer experience literature (Harkison, 2018; Manfreda et al., 2022), we encourage a future investigation of the topic. Similarly, authenticity has featured as a prominent theme in this study, concerning the connection with destination, the authentic bonds among experience participants, and the perception and display of “authentic selves” during the experience. Little research has yet been devoted to understanding what constitutes an authentic experience in commercial accommodation settings (Kandampully et al., 2022; Manfreda et al., 2022). Future research might wish to explore this area in more depth.

While luxury accommodation is often associated with the achievement of hedonic and symbolic outcomes (Correia et al., 2022; Manfreda et al., 2022), most of the identified outcomes are explicitly related to

psychological (emotional and cognitive) gains that past research has identified as being essential to obtain transformative experiences (Sheldon, 2020). Particularly, learning and, by extension, the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, is a recognised outcome of many tourism experiences (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and has more extensively been investigated in educational contexts (such as museums, zoos). However, it has rarely been explored in hospitality contexts, albeit its evident importance in the elicitation of transformative tourism experiences (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). This study has elevated luxury lodges as a potential catalyst for transformative experiences in their characteristic connection with the place (and communities) they belong to, the profound human connections that they develop and nurture within, and the characteristics of its guests and hosts. We believe this is an exciting and vital future research direction worth exploring.

#### Financial disclosure

None.

#### Funding

None.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.02.007>.

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