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Arrive as guests and leave as friends - The role of hedonic experiences in the luxury context.

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to understand the role of personalized customer service in the customers' hedonic experiences. A main objective was imposed in the research to fathom the relationship between the two factors, being made research the spectrum of luxury hospitality from the perspective of managers and customers. The purpose of the study falls under the principle that customer service is the key to a successful business. Twenty interviews were conducted with people on both sides of the coin – employees and guests – answering open-ended questions regarding the topic. In conclusion, it was found that personalized customer service undoubtedly impacts the guest's hedonic experience. Moreover, employees who are at the center of this effect play a major role in the overall hedonic experience.

Keywords: Hospitality, Personalized Customer Service, Luxury Hotels, Hedonic Experience

Título: Chegar como Hóspede e Sair como Amigo – O Papel que as Experiências Hedônicas têm no contexto de luxo.

Autor: Daniela Moita Veloso

RESUMO

Esta investigação foi conduzida para compreender o papel do serviço personalizado ao cliente nas experiências hedônicas dos hóspedes. Um objetivo principal impôs-se na pesquisa para compreender a relação entre os dois fatores, sendo feita a pesquisa no espectro da hotelaria de luxo na perspectiva de managers e clientes. O objetivo do estudo enquadra-se no princípio de que o serviço ao cliente é a chave para um negócio bem-sucedido. Foram realizadas entrevistas a vinte pessoas - empregados e hóspedes - respondendo a perguntas abertas sobre o tema. Concluindo, constatou-se que o serviço personalizado ao cliente sem dúvida impacta a experiência hedônica do hóspede. Além disso, quem está no centro desse efeito são os funcionários que desempenham um papel crucial na experiência hedônica geral.

Palavras-Chave: Hotelaria, Serviço Personalizado ao Cliente, Hotéis de Luxo, Experiências Hedônicas

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hospitality in the broad meaning of the word refers to a relationship between a guest and a host. Businesses, such as hotels, count on hospitality to function and produce revenue. They are different from traditional businesses in that their success is dependent on effective, positive communication with their customers and target audience. The term hospitality did open the study of the relationship between hosts and guests in all domains, private and cultural as well as commercial (Lashley, 2008). According to these viewpoints, hospitality is a fundamental and omnipresent aspect of human life, and hospitableness denotes a willingness to be hospitable, with no expectations of compensation or reciprocity (Lashley et al., 2007; Lashley & Morrison, 2000).

Luxury hospitality comprehends two industries intertwined in one extravagant experience. This niche specializes in creating outstanding hedonic experiences by reading guests' emotions beforehand and anticipating their needs and reaction to any interactions. Managers who work with luxury largely agreed that sentiments about luxury are the outcome of experiences and how they match or differ from expectations and the customers' daily lives. Hotels place a high value on providing customers with a sense of luxury and how guests perceive it in the hotel environment. (Yuan et al., 2015) Luxury experiences involve the vast use of storytelling creating an ultimate intimate and personal feel, seeking this way to offer an unforgettable encounter and establish prestige and symbolic worth through innovation. As observed in the research article of Michael and Fusté-Forné (2022), the analyzed visual storytelling offers a close look at certain hedonic moments, such as conveyances of love or delightful experiences which offer guests a touch of warmth and a sense of local hospitality. The luxury segment of the hospitality industry has grown significantly over the last decade. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the concept of perceived luxury values, and there is an absence of a valid framework to seize consumers' value perceptions from the perspective of luxury hospitality services (Yang & Mattila, 2016).

Customers want to feel important; people want to experience being home away from home, and to feel special and appreciated by companies. Guests staying at luxury properties want to have a meaningful experience that allows them to return to the hotel by creating value for the company. The views of male and female visitors on service quality differ. Women define service quality primarily in terms of feelings and emotions,

integrating service quality with concepts such as "feeling well" or "comfortable." Men are more inclined to equate cleanliness and convenience with service quality (Lu et al., 2015). As J. Willard Marriott said, "Take good care of your employees, and they'll take good care of your customers, and the customers will come back.", customer service is the undeniable link between customers and the business itself. This connection, the better it is the better it retains customers and extracts its value – as guests often emphasize the significance of hotel employee interactions when describing their sentiments and expectations regarding the quality of service (Lu et al., 2015). Businesses repay clients' acquisition expenditures by offering excellent customer service. This contributes to the development of a loyalty community that recommends new consumers; loyal customers are a terrific way to acquire new ones for free through word-of-mouth methods that convince one to interact with the recommended business. Frequently, positive recommendations are more effective than other marketing efforts and without doubt, cheaper too. The effect feedback mechanisms have on buyer trust is positive (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Customers who receive outstanding customer service are less price sensitive as well, after experiencing better service, behaviorally loyal customers focus less on price and instead shift their focus toward rewards and comfort, resulting in profit gains for the company. Overall, the positive link between behavioral loyalty and price sensitivity is mitigated by attitudinal loyalty resulting from a better service experience. (Umashankar & Bhagwat, 2016). Investing in customer service employees is a great strategy to increase customer lifetime value. Customers that have a positive experience with the company's customer care and support personnel are more likely to return to the organization. Employee human resource practices related to customer satisfaction are a primary focus of this subject (Bowen, 1986). At the very least, they'll tell others about their excellent experience, which helps organizations to create rapport with their consumer base, this allows exploring tactics for regulating consumer behavior as it contributes to the creation of the service they get (Bowen, 1986). Customer service increases new consumers' trust in the company and enables them to upsell and cross-sell more items with less friction. New users will be confident that the sales team is proposing items that meet their needs, resulting in a more pleasant purchasing experience for both the consumer and the employees. Customer experience comprises all aspects of a company's service, including quality of customer care and advertising (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

All of this is directly linked with the hedonic sensation behind the experience. Substantive servicescape staging was discovered to be an important premise for first-time customers' hedonic value perceptions, whereas emotional value is a more effective premise for repeat guests with re-visiting intentions (Dedeoglu et al., 2018). Understanding the value and what generates it is crucial, “recognizing that value involves experiencing pleasure or pain is critical to understanding the psychology of value” (Higgins, 2006, p.439).

As presented in the following literature review section, several articles are investigating both customer service and hedonic experiences individually and jointly, as well as luxury hospitality, and personalized customer service. However, lean studies were made examining the effect personalized customer service has on hedonic experiences in a luxury context. There is a necessity for research on the topic as “the increasing intensity of competition in several sectors, a revised corporate-marketing mindset with superior customer service as its core is necessary for attaining and sustaining market success over the long term” (Parasuraman, 2000, p.3). In this explanatory research, the final aim is to understand how personalized customer service affects hedonic experiences. Consumer ambivalence is important in hedonic environments, where cognitive and emotional factors influence consumer outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, loyalty, and patronage) (Prestini & Sebastiani, 2021).

The focus of this research is to assess the relationship between personalized customer service and customers' hedonic experiences by answering the following research question:

RQ: How does personalized customer service affect hedonic experiences?

Objective 1: Analyze the relationship between personalized customer service and hedonic experiences in the spectrum of luxury hotels from the perspective of customers and managers.

Advancing to the methodology section of the dissertation, the target is to understand the role of personalized customer service in the final customer hedonic experience and look deep into the luxury hotel spectrum.

This research will be made through qualitative research as this method is expressed in words. Since the main research question is about an overall experience, the qualitative research method would be the better fit as will enable in-depth insights into the topic. The

use of one data collection method will be applied; interviews, where open-ended questions will be asked verbally to a poll of ten individuals who already had a luxury hotel stay experience and ten employees who work in luxury hotels.

Subsequently, the Leximancer software will be used to analyze the previously acquired data. The analysis will be applied to the transcripts of the interviews and will be closely examined to identify common themes/patterns. The Leximancer software is a compelling analysis tool that allows for a clear comprehension of meaning beyond linguistic facts.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters to include all the important ideas and results necessary to answer the research question. The introduction discusses the research's direction and background. Following that is the Literary review, which provides more in-depth information on what has already been written and analyzed in prestigious journals. The methodology describes in detail how the research topic will be answered, and it concludes with the results and discussion, which list the key findings of this dissertation and contribute to the body of knowledge regarding personalized customer service in hedonic experiences in a luxury context. The last chapter will extract the key results of this project while also pointing out the main limits and future research possibilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Hospitality and the context of luxury hotels

Hospitality in the broad meaning of the word is used by different people in different ways. Accordingly, to King (1995), hospitality is identified by four characteristics, it is bestowed by a host on a guest who is not at home; it is interactive, as it involves the meeting of a provider and a recipient; it is made up of both tangible and intangible elements and the host ensures the guest's safety and psychological and physiological comfort. In recent years, specific usage of the phrase has emerged, denoting hospitality as the focus of the hospitality industry, sometimes known as 'commercial' or 'professional' hospitality: the provision of shelter, food, and drinks for individuals away from home for remuneration. (Dictionary of Travel, Tourism and Hospitality, 2012). Brotherton and Wood's (2008) alternative approach to hospitality is insightful. Two main themes were identified in connection to definitions of hospitality in social science literature in their endeavor to comprehend the meanings of hospitality: hospitality as a tool of social control and hospitality as a kind of social and economic exchange. The distinction between the two topics is debatable. However, the categorization is useful in summarizing significant themes in the literature and shifting focus away from thinking of hospitality as a localized activity and toward thinking of hospitality as a tool of societal analysis (Lynch et al., 2011).

Tourism, which includes the hotel sector as a big component, has become the world's largest industry, with the highest long-term global growth estimates of any business (The World Travel and Tourism Council, 2001). The evidence suggests that as people reach a level of living that allows them to afford to buy hospitality, the frequency with which they pick it over private hospitality increases (Vincent & Slattery, 2002). There is substantial literature on definitions of and approaches to hospitality across a variety of disciplines, but as this necessarily brief review demonstrates, there is neither a single definition of hospitality (though certain connotations dominate the discussion) nor a unified theoretical framework within which hospitality studies are situated (Lynch et al., 2011).

Defining luxury moreover in a hospitality context is ambitious and ambiguous, one should begin to understand what the word luxury means. As Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie (2011) state, the word "luxury" derives from *luxus* which means sensuality, splendor, and pomp (Mairinger, 2018). Marketers frequently use the term luxury to

indicate a higher degree of offer (Dubois et al., 2005). Luxury is characterized as "high-quality, expensive, and non-essential services and products that emerge as unusual, exclusive, reputable, and authentic, and that achieve superior degrees of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through guest experiences" (Tynan et al., 2010). Luxury has a significant value in any community, although sentiments regarding luxury fluctuate from person to person. Berstein (1999) said the way each individual perceives luxury is determined by their "luxury state of mind" (Lu et al., 2015). Truong & McColl (2011) revealed that intrinsically driven customers of luxury items focus on the product's real quality and potential to deliver self-directed pleasure, implying that acquiring luxury goods may be a strong approach to satisfying self-esteem. Personal fulfillment and authenticity rather than material values are what became the real shift in what customers look for in a luxury experience (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011). Studies show that the desire for emotional and pleasure value is growing over financial and utilitarian benefits (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014). As well, there is the suggestion that the perception of the value luxury has is related to intrinsic goals, customers seek further meaning from or meaningfulness in luxury (Cristini et al., 2017).

Luxury hotel customers often travel frequently and have high expectations of hospitality services (Presbury et al., 2005). Furthermore, consumers have increasingly sought greater value for money, which has been followed by calls for higher levels of service and facilities (Presbury et al., 2005). These premium vacation lodgings must provide an experience rather than only a product (Chu, 2014). The transformation to an experience-based economy has had an impact on the consumer market (Atwal & Williams, 2009). In this economy, luxury may be connected with an experience related to ownership of a luxurious product or brand, or with an experience obtained from a lavish service context. The meaning of luxury for the consumer does not necessarily necessitate the presence of an offering (i.e., a product, brand, or service) or a luxurious atmosphere (Cristini et al., 2017), but can rather come from a lived experience or activity. Guests choose luxurious hotels because they provide a luxurious experience, customers like the elegance, feel energized, and appreciate the exceptional services offered to them (Hung et al., 2018).

2.1.1. Hospitality through the pandemic

Several scholars have sought to distinguish between crisis and calamity to better their comprehension (Pillai et al., 2021). According to Faulkner (2001), the fundamental difference between a crisis and calamity is whether the situation is attributed to the organization itself or may be defined as emanating from outside the organization. Consequently, a crisis is described as a type of scenario in which the underlying cause of an event is, to some degree, self-inflicted through issues such as inept management practices and structures or even the inability to adapt to change; a calamity or disaster, on the other hand, is outlined as a scenario in which a company is faced with unexpected unpredictable cataclysmic changes over which it has very little and limited control (Faulkner, 2001). The hotel business is particularly sensitive to both, crises, and calamity, and is vulnerable to both internal and external threats (Henderson & Ng, 2004). COVID-19 is regarded as a disaster in the hospitality literature (Hao et al., 2020).

One of the most significant sectors in the world is the hospitality industry. This industry, directly or indirectly, employs millions of people all around the world (Alotaibi & Khan, 2022). Covid-19 has caused enormous damage to the hotel industry, the sector has been forced to lay off millions of people and face billions of Euros in revenue loss due to social alienation, limited movements, and shutdowns (Alotaibi & Khan, 2022). Hotel occupancy in 2020 was at an all-time low (Sharma & Nicolau, 2020). Both hotels and restaurants need special measures and another sort of support for post-covid recovery of the industry (Dube et al., 2020).

Following two years of substantial pandemic disruption, the hotel industry's business improved sharply in 2022. This comeback was caused by a surge in leisure and business domestic visitors and the reopening of borders to foreign tourists. Pent-up demand and the population's accumulated savings will assist the leisure travel recovery, albeit the timing will be greatly impacted by the efficacy of pandemic containment efforts, particularly vaccine roll-outs. The number of nights spent in EU tourist accommodation establishments totaled 1.8 billion in 2021, up 27% from 2020 but down 37% from 2019 (Eurostat, 2022). The number of nights spent in tourist accommodations in the EU rose at a 3.1% annual pace between 2011 and 2019. This phase of continuous expansion was followed by a dramatic contraction (down 50.5%) in 2020 - the commencement of the COVID-19 crisis - and a modest comeback (up 27.8%) in 2021. In 2021, the 27 EU

Member States will spend 1.8 billion nights on visitor accommodation. This total includes both domestic tourists (those going inside their own country) and inbound international tourists (those traveling from other Member States or non-EU nations). France, Italy, Germany, and Spain were the EU's top markets, with each posting 259-324 million nights spent in tourist accommodation (Eurostat, 2022).

2.2. Understanding Customer Service in Luxury Hotels

To better understand the following review, one must learn about the importance of customer service. According to Susskind et al., (2001) customer service is a collaborative effort between three organizational constituents: management, employees, and customers. Customer service is one of the most critical and pressing concerns confronting the hotel and tourist industries today. From the way customers are treated to the best approach to supply food to diverse markets, attention to detail matters and helps businesses survive and expand (Kahl, 2020). With the upcoming new age in luxury hospitality, it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy each luxury consumer while remaining exclusive and significant. With an expanding number of luxury hotel rooms in the global infrastructure, more mobility of customers, and a range of high-quality internet marketing, competition is heating (Mairinger, 2018).

Service companies and their workers vary from typical manufacturing and product-based organizations in that they deal largely with perishable, intangible products that are generated, presented, and consumed in a single episode or sequence of closely connected episodes (Susskind et al., 2001). Customer satisfaction and behavioral intention are both influenced by service quality (Lu et al., 2015). Several quantitative studies have found that service quality predicts consumer happiness (Ramseook-Munhurrun & Naidoo, 2011; Sudin, 2011). Satisfaction is defined as offering goods and services that generate particular levels of perceived value for the consumer, ensuring that the customer remains favorably engaged with the firm (Wicks & Roethlein, 2009). A conceptual model (see appendix 1) was designed to explain the underlying processes that lead to improved levels of customer satisfaction and, eventually, to desirable results such as fewer complaints, emotional connection, and a commitment to continue the present doctor-patient relationship (Shemwell et al., 1998).

Customer service quality has been defined as the "gap" between consumers' expectations and the performance they obtain. Customer service transactions are subjectively appraised, and service quality is determined by the extent to which a customer's perceived expectations are satisfied (Presbury et al., 2005). Customers believe that luxury hotels offer greater value than regular hotels in terms of reputation and quality (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). As a result, guests expect higher-rated hotels to give superior satisfaction through higher-quality service and facilities. High quality of service, a good atmosphere, and an enjoyable experience are all necessary for customer happiness (Wu & Liang, 2009).

2.2.1. Step forward and focus on Personalized Customer Service

For the opportunity to grant a better and more luxurious personalized experience for each customer, it is key to understand the customer's wants and needs (Mairinger, 2018). Management, to deliver an outstanding personalized service has to segment the market in great detail (Richard, 2017), as well there is the need to shift from market segmentation to individual expectations and preferences as this information will affect customer acquisition processes and the delivery of customer service for existing guests (Mairinger, 2018). That is, recalling the guests' preferences, assessing the specifics of the activities they participated in, what amenities they utilized, and what they drank throughout their stay. Using this information, the following visit will be more personalized and tailored to the needs of the clients (Talwar, 2012). Personalization is an essential customer-oriented process (Song et al., 2021; Tyrväinen et al., 2020) that involves offering tailored content based on consumer data (Pappas et al., 2016). Personalization is not a novel concept. (Lambillotte et al., 2022). For example, service agents have traditionally tailored their message and conduct to each client in face-to-face encounters depending on their understanding of the consumer (Shen & Ball, 2006).

How guests react to service experiences is a major concern for those in the service industry. As a result, a vast body of research has been conducted to investigate the effects and outcomes of service encounters (Susskind et al., 2001). According to Gundersen et al., (1996), customer satisfaction is one of the most valuable resources that a firm can have in a saturated and competitive market like the hospitality sector, and service quality is a strong determinant of customer retention and future patronage (Kandampully et al.,

2000). Hotels offering distinguishing degrees of higher service quality can develop a long-term competitive edge over their competitors (Presbury et al., 2005). In accordance with Teng (2019), studies have identified two main types of customer service behavior. The one that is of concern to this study is named extra-role service behavior, which goes above and beyond the official performance standards and job descriptions that workers display when servicing clients (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). These activities are sometimes referred to as service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (Limpanitgul et al., 2013). During a service encounter, service professionals go the extra mile in their job duties by delivering extra attention, putting in more effort, and providing spontaneous outstanding services to meet the demands of the client to achieve customer satisfaction (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Extra-role service activities in hospitality contexts include providing complimentary coupons, presents, extra blankets, and care for client requirements (Cheng et al., 2016).

Due to the fact the hotel business focuses on providing experiential products and services, it is an excellent place to research personalization (Bonaretti et al., 2020). The perceived quality of hospitality items determines their value, which is determined by the customer's a priori expectations and how they are met (Kotler et al., 2017). Given that service customization affects consumer expectations and their evaluation of the service, examining service personalization within an industry that relies on individual service encounters between the client and the service provider appears perfect (Ball et al., 2006). Customer service quality is essential to a company's reputation: it is determined by how quickly an organization replies to customers' requests and how pleased consumers are while seeking assistance (Liu et al., 2019).

2.2.2. The role of the employees in personalized customer service

Making personalized recommendations and adjusting and altering the service are simply seen as ways to increase guest happiness (Shen & Ball, 2006). Hotel employees thus play an important role in the satisfaction levels of hotel customers (Presbury et al., 2005). Baker (1998) suggests that the “service-profit chain” is a concept model that enacts a relationship between internal service quality and employee satisfaction, external service quality and customer satisfaction, and profitability. Therefore, hotels should implement and offer the highest level of service quality to internal customers (employees) for the same reasons they offer it to external guests – more effective performance, lower waste,

and lower costs. Accordingly, to Hart (1995), the service-profit chain conceptual model dictates that if improvements are made regarding internal service quality, managers should also expect improvements in external customer service quality. Favorable impressions of service providers of customer processes are connected to the positive perceptions of guests. When service providers have a strong commitment to their position in the service process, manifested as customer orientation, they are more likely to be driven to continually give satisfying service to their clients (Susskind et al., 2001). Moreover, employees that are passionate about their jobs have a strong desire to participate in work activities - they are involved in these activities and devote their energy and time to them (Teng, 2019). Intrinsically driven individuals are more likely to begin the attainment of career and organizational goals (Teng, 2019).

Lastly, the effect of employees providing individualized services on customer satisfaction and loyalty is a subject of research as well (Yun & Hanson, 2020). Customization such as individualized service that fits particular guests' demands necessitates collaboration between the service provider and the consumer (Yun & Hanson, 2020). Because personalized services are specially built to match the requirements of customers, they encourage consumer participation, resulting in better levels of customer satisfaction (Kasiri et al., 2017). Furthermore, because consumers' requirements are being met, good impressions of the company might emerge, improving customers' probability of sticking staying loyal to the firm (Auh et al., 2007). Overall, employees who provide more individualized services should experience better levels of client satisfaction and loyalty than employees who provide less personalized services (Yun & Hanson, 2020).

2.3. Customer Hedonic Experience in the Luxury Context

In all interactions, consumers are motivated by both hedonic and utilitarian outcomes (Chen & Schwartz, 2010). Studies point out that customers' motivation for consumption involves expectations for both hedonic and utilitarian results (Childers et al., 2001). According to a recent study (Chen & Schwartz, 2010), although being separate ideas, the two outcomes frequently coexist as motivators for the same consumer and the same consuming experience. However, for this particular study, the focus will be on hedonic experiences due to the Dedeoglu et al. (2018) study that suggests that customers' hedonic and utilitarian consumption patterns vary depending on the service type. Individuals visiting a school or hospital, for example, may engage in more utilitarian consumption,

whereas those visiting a hotel or amusement park may engage in more hedonic consumption (Dedeoglu et al., 2018).

The term "hedonic," derived from the Greek word for "sweet," refers to or is associated with pleasure (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1990 p. 561). Value experiences have traditionally been related to hedonic experiences, and hedonic experiences have been related to the fundamental motivational notion that humans embrace pleasure and avoid pain since the time of the Greeks (Higgins, 2006). Furthermore, Higgins (2006) points, as well, that value has additionally been defined in terms of the interaction between a present state and an end state that serves as a benchmark or reference point, with a value associated with pursuing the desired end state and avoiding undesired end states (Solomon, 2010) – making hedonic experiences have a crucial contribution to value.

Hedonic value contributes to long-term customer connections (Carpenter, 2008), and it is critical for generating loyal customers and forging intimate emotional links with target consumers (Dedeoglu et al., 2018). Creating great experiences for guests continues to be a priority for hoteliers since positive customer experiences are an essential consideration when a guest chooses where to stay (Kandampully et al., 2017). Guests have been proven to spend 140% more when they experienced great customer satisfaction in a hotel over a negative one (Kriss, 2014). Customers' hedonic value assessments about different products and services can influence their behavioral intentions (Dedeoglu et al., 2016). Such impacts, however, may differ between market categories (Dedeoglu et al., 2018). The hedonic advantages that first-time or repeat visitors have inferred from services are likely to influence their future intentions in a variety of ways. Whether a customer is a first-time visitor or a returning customer generates an essential segmentation for marketing departments, and these two divisions of the population should be investigated deeper (McKercher et al., 2012).

Luxury brands must deliver more hedonic cues to customers to remain successful and profitable (Kim et al., 2019). Additionally, hedonic messages elicit good feelings and pleasure, and it is believed that hedonic message appeals will improve brand experience by increasing the perception of the hotel's luxuriousness index (Chitturi et al., 2008; Amatulli et al., 2019). Hedonic motivation is often associated with a high level of customer involvement (Chen & Schwartz, 2010). Hedonic characteristics of luxury

purchasing are especially important for customers who purchase luxury products primarily to fulfill their taste and style rather than to convey status (Eastman & Eastman, 2015). As previously stated, the consumer experience has particular and major relevance to the hospitality industry (Zhang et al., 2020). For the luxury sector, it is fundamental to be aware that hedonic experiences as an intangible benefit are essential for guests (Tynan et al., 2010). The cultural-oriented hedonic experience of luxury hotel consumers has an impact and it is felt more broadly and comprehensively (Sun et al., 2014). Experimental authenticity and hotel image evaluate the influence on the perceived value of luxury hotel consumers. This alternative way of evaluating consumer perceptions allows for the assessment of both authenticity and imagination aspects, both of which have been identified as important influencers on consumers' behavioral decisions in cultural tourism (Park et al., 2019; Ryu et al., 2010). Additionally, cultural familiarity relates to the visual or mental image of a product or tourist experience and is crucial in many tourist decisions (Jang & Kim, 2015; Trianasari et al., 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, there is, firstly, a description of the research methods, followed by the data collection procedure, and finally, the data analysis approach.

3.1. Research Method

With both the research question and objectives in mind, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this dissertation. The goal of qualitative research is to gain a deeper knowledge of a particular situation rather than to portray it numerically. As a result, qualitative research is concerned with parts of reality that cannot be defined, concentrating on the comprehension and explanation of the dynamics of social relationships (Queirós et al., 2017). Semi-structured interviews are conducted to understand how personalized customer service affects hedonic experiences in a luxury context. Semi-structured interviews often have a series of questions that address the main topic whilst enabling the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, vary the sequence of questions, and discuss relevant subtopics during the conversation (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen for a better understanding of the subject, as they offer the chance for the interviewees to answer intuitively and incentivize them self-expression in sharing their thoughts, knowledge, and opinions, moreover, include open-ended questions (Malhotra et al., 2017; Horton et al., 2004). The methodology guidelines employed in this research were based on Walls et al. (2011) findings. The researchers designed a procedure for semi-structured interviews with luxury hotel customers, as well as a complementary interview for hotel managers, to compare and contrast the perspectives of the two distinct groups, this way made it possible to fulfill the second objective of this dissertation. This dissertation attempts to understand the impact of personalized customer service on the overall hedonic experience of the customer. Based on an assessment of relevant literature, an initial protocol of questions was devised and separated into three categories: Luxury, Personalized Service, and Satisfaction (presented in Appendix 2). Upon the conclusion of the interviews, the data is gathered and analyzed using Leximancer.

3.1. Data Collection

3.1.1. Selection of participants

Before beginning the data collection, two target groups were established: participants in this dissertation interviews were managers of luxury hotels and guests of luxury hotels matching the international classification of five stars to meet both of the objectives of this dissertation. A total of 20 participants are part of the interviewing process: 10 managers of luxury hotels and 10 customers of luxury hotels. From this sample, a total of 8 different nationalities' perceptions were accounted for by both groups of managers and customers. In regard to the age variable, the participants that enter the group of customers are aged between 23 to 50 years. Further, concerning gender, this study includes the observation of 5 female and 5 male customers of luxury hospitality. The manager's age and gender for this dissertation have neither a practical nor theoretical interest, what has weight for the research is their practical knowledge as professionals in the area.

As previously stated, data were gathered using semi-structured interviews that include open-ended questions. In order to be able to identify the right amount of interviews to be performed for this dissertation, the author did research as well. Guest et al., (2006) discovered that in studies that are homogeneous and use deliberate sampling, like most qualitative studies, 12 interviews ought to be enough to attain statistical power. Nevertheless, another study was conducted that has contrasting conclusions in regard to Guest's research, stating that what is necessary to detect meta-themes in interviews is between 20 to 40 interviews (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). The participants who are part of the customer group were discovered through the researcher's own social network and referrals during the interviews. Regarding the managers who were part of this study, as a first contact, an email, written in English was sent to each of the hotels, addressed to the managers of either the Food & Beverage department, Customer Relations department, or Rooms Division department (having in mind that all three departments are the ones that have guest contact). Of the initial effort of 20 luxury hotels approached, 10 managers of five stars hotels finally agreed to be interviewed. Each participant signed a consent form before the interview (presented in Appendix 3). All interviews were done in English. All participants will remain anonymous and will be disclosed by a particular identification number. The table below provides an overview of the responders:

Table 1

Overview of the interviews

Customer's Group			
Respondent ID	Gender	Age	Nationality
Customer 1#	Male	23	Chilean
Customer 2#	Female	32	Portuguese
Customer 3#	Male	38	Spanish
Customer 4#	Female	45	Dutch
Customer 5#	Female	36	Italian
Customer 6#	Female	27	Swedish
Customer 7#	Male	48	American
Customer 8#	Male	25	Dutch
Customer 9#	Female	29	French
Customer 10#	Male	50	Portuguese
Manager's Group			
Respondent ID		Hotel Rating	Nationality
Manager1#		5-stars - luxury	Portuguese
Manager 2#		5-stars - luxury	Portuguese
Manager 3#		5-stars - luxury	Portuguese
Manager 4#		5-stars - luxury	Dutch
Manager 5#		5-stars - luxury	Italian
Manager 6#		5-stars - luxury	Portuguese
Manager 7#		5-stars - luxury	Dutch

Manager 8#	5-stars - luxury	Spanish
Manager 9#	5-stars - luxury	Dutch
Manager 10#	5-stars - luxury	Spanish

3.1.2. Data Analysis Tool

The Leximancer software is a unique and compelling content analysis tool that displays the key themes obtained from the transcripts data and the relational and semantic information. Leximancer is a trustworthy instrument since it avoids human personal biases and allows for qualitative text analysis. (Sotiriadou et al., 2014; Cassar et al., 2020). This lexical analysis is extended to the statistical, data mining, and relational domains. It also benefits from the incidence of words and the co-occurrence of ideas, which are subsequently aggregated into primary groups (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer uses its own algorithm to analyze the meanings inside pieces of text by collecting the essential concepts and ideas (Tseng et al., 2015).

To answer the research question and aligned with the aim to reach this dissertation purpose the qualitative data will be graphically presented in a concept map format. The analysis is affected by both size and color: Leximancer (2021) clarifies that the main themes are red-colored (Cretchley et al., 2010), while purple is the least significant; while simultaneously, the larger the gray point, the bigger the occurrence frequency of the individual concepts. A line linking the concepts will also highlight their co-occurrence and interrelationship. As a result, the closer the concepts and topics are to one another, the more frequently they are repeated in the same context (Lin et al., 2019).

To summarize, this conceptual analysis allows for a clearer comprehension of meaning beyond linguistic facts. These findings aim to add to the research by highlighting the customer's and managers' perspectives on the effect personalized customer service has on hedonic experiences.

4. RESULTS

The following chapter unveils the collected data. It includes the graphic visualization of a conceptual map seized through the Leximancer software (Figure 1) and the ensuing conceptual analysis from these findings to move the literature's development towards realizing if personalized customer service influences hedonic experiences.

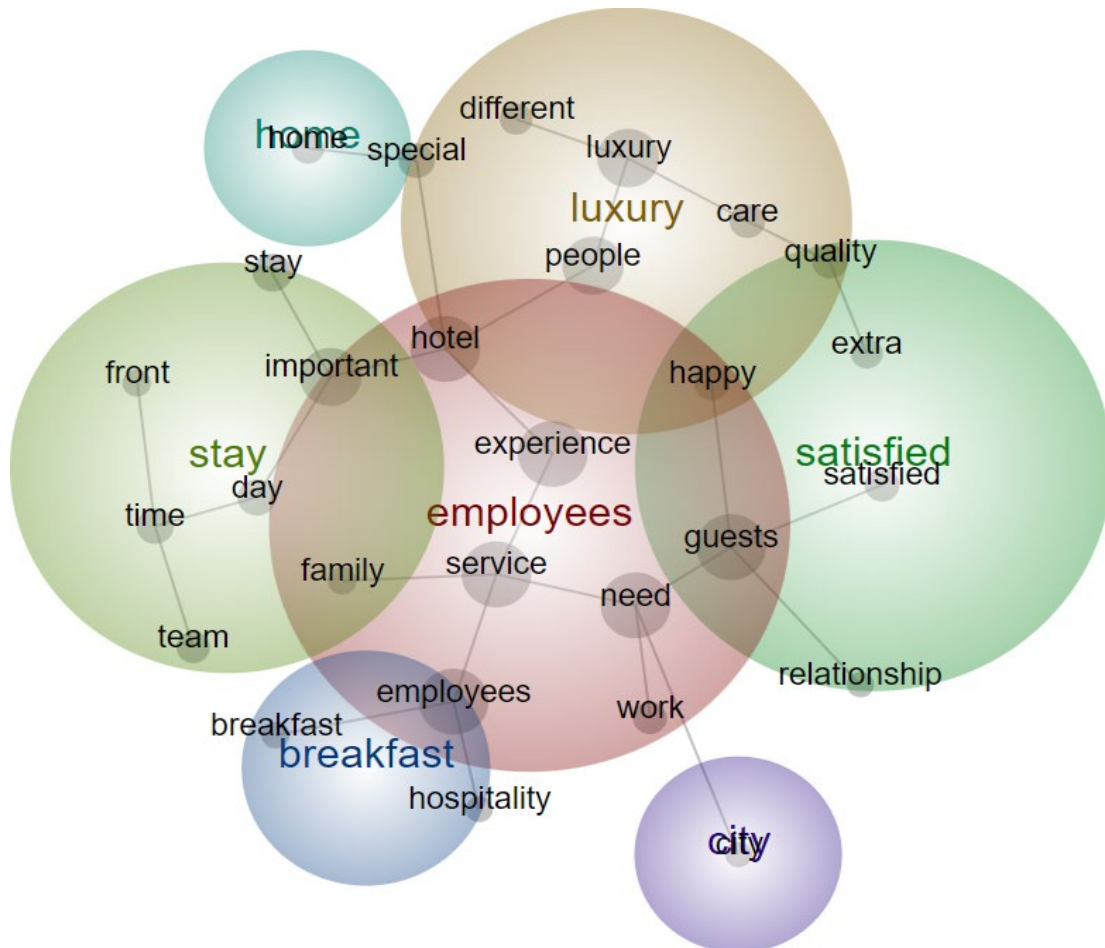


Figure 1
Concept Map

Source: Outputs from Leximancer

The customers' and managers' perceptions about the role that personalized customer service has on the hedonic experience of the customer in a luxury context are presented in a concept map composed of seven themes in the analysis: "employees" (140 hits), "luxury" (132 hits), "stay" (95 hits), "satisfied" (52 hits), "home" (25 hits), "breakfast" (21 hits) and "city" (9 hits).

In *Figure 1*, there was not made distinction between the interviews of the managers and customers but still, it is noticeable that the themes are closely associated with each other except for "city" which is as well the one with the least hits. In comprehensive terms, the

theme “employees” (140 hits) is the one that gathers more concepts associated with it and it shows that the employees have a huge role in the hedonic experience of the customers.

Table 2
Most frequently used words.

Concept	Count	Relevance Percentage(%)
Employees	140	8.41%
Experience	140	8.41%
Guests	140	8.41%
Hotel	140	8.41%
Need	140	8.41%
Service	140	8.41%
Luxury	113	6.79%
Important	112	6.73%
People	111	6.67%
Stay	45	2.70%
Day	42	2.52%
Time	39	2.34%
Special	36	2.16%
Care	33	1.98%
Quality	33	1.98%
Happy	33	1.98%
Satisfied	32	1.92%
Work	29	1.74%
Team	27	1.62%
Different	26	1.56%
Home	25	1.50%
Extra	22	1.32%
Front	14	0.84%
Family	13	0.78%
Breakfast	12	0.72%
Hospitality	10	0.60%
Relationship	9	0.54%
City	9	0.54%
Total	1665	100%

Personalized customer service in the customers’ hedonic experience in luxury hotels
Source – Outputs from Leximancer

From the manager’s perspective, it demonstrates awareness and ownership regarding having the right employees who deliver the product they are selling accordingly to the standards imposed, employees that have quality and sell a quality product and that are different and stand out. This aspect is reinforced by the level, both customers and managers are, respectively consuming and working with, which is “luxury”. All of this comes together and intertwines with the following themes, moreover, it creates strong support for “stay” and “satisfied” which the latter is directly linked with the hedonic experience of the customer.

Thus, these findings indicate the importance to explore the customer’s hedonic motivations related to their experience in a luxury context and further fathom the managers’ role in instilling the emphasis of offering quality personalized customer

Table 2 below lists the 28 most frequently used words in the interviews performed with both customers and managers for the purpose of this dissertation. Both perspectives together show that “employees”, “experience”, “guests”, “hotel”, “need” and “service” all have the same relevance as it describes their experience of staying and working in the luxury context.

As a qualitative analysis of the findings retrieved from the interviews themselves, from the customer’s perspective, Figure 1 anticipates the expectation one has that the employee is the one who makes the difference in the overall hedonic experience of the customer, that the service is extremely important and that in luxury people want to feel special and taken care of.

service to the guests. Overall, this aligns with the aim of the dissertation to further develop the literature in sight of the impact personalized customer service has on hedonic experiences.

5. DISCUSSION

As pointed out in the last chapter, the concept map was created to be the base to understand the different reasons how personalized customer service has an effect on hedonic experiences. Still, there was performed a qualitative analysis to go deeper into the perspectives of both customers and managers individually. The analysis is divided into two parts: Firstly, the effect that respondents directly mentioned are analyzed theme by theme and compared to previous literature. Secondly, a deeper analysis of the interviews will be made and the analysis of the two perspectives will be approached. For this: As a result of the perceptions of customers and managers with the alignment of this dissertation's purpose, there was a separation of clusters for a better understanding, and they are: Hospitality and the Luxury Context, Personalized Customer Service, and Hedonic Experiences in Hotels. Still, bearing in mind that inside the three clusters there is a distinction between the perspective of managers and customers (Table 3). The respective proximity of the themes endorses and validates the foresaw findings.

Table 3
Themes and Concepts

Cluster	Perspective	Themes	Concepts
<i>Hospitality and the Luxury Context</i>	Customers	Luxury, city, employees, stay	Employees, experience, guests, hotel, service, important, luxury, people, special, care, quality, happy, different, city
	Managers	Luxury, employees, satisfied	
<i>Personalized Customer Service</i>	Customers	Home, stay, employees, breakfast, satisfied	Employees, experience, guests, hotel, service, important, luxury, people, special, care, quality, happy, hedonic, work
	Managers	Employees, luxury, satisfied, stay	
<i>Hedonic Experiences in Hotels</i>	Customers	Employees, satisfied, home, breakfast, luxury, stay	Employees, experience, guests, hotel, service, important, luxury, people, special, care, quality, happy, hedonic, work, breakfast
	Managers	Employees, luxury, stay, satisfied, breakfast	

5.1. How does Personalized Customer Service affect Hedonic Experiences?

Employees

This study shows that the factor “employees” is majorly at the center of the creation of hedonic experiences. From the interviews and later analysis, a bottom-line triangle is perceived that makes the business work. The triangle has inside employees at the center, owners, and guests. To make this work, the employees need to be satisfied, well-paid, and well-trained to make the guests satisfied and return to the hotel, in turn, owners are happy as the business thrives and invests more in employees. Customer service is a collaborative effort between the three groups that play a role in it – management, employees, and customers Susskind et al., (2001). In the analysis, it is observed that employees are considered an asset of the company that is used to create opportunities and develop relationships that are key to offering hedonic experiences. As Radu et al., (2022) studied the willingness of employees to work is the driving force of the industry. Guests are expecting luxury hotels to offer them satisfaction through higher-quality customer service and facilities. High-quality customer service, a good-quality atmosphere, and an entertaining experience what it is necessary for customer happiness (Wu & Liang, 2009). It is proven that the alignment of managerial actions toward motivating and incentivizing employees to contribute to the development of the business will show to be a long-term investment that will result in higher performance in a competitive industry (Radu et al., 2022).

Luxury

The theme of “luxury” as previously mentioned is something that is broad. From the analysis, luxury is often looked at as something of high quality which is exclusive and distinctive. Tynan et al., (2010), agree, characterizing luxury as high-quality, exclusive, and non-essential while still achieving superior degrees of hedonic values through guests’ experiences. Customers seek luxury for several reasons, as analyzed it is noticed that this pursuit is derived from the fact that people have the monetary power to do so but more importantly because people like to be nicely treated and have delivered high-quality interactions to improve their stay. Studies show that the desire for emotional and pleasure value is growing over financial and utilitarian benefits (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014).

Stay

The “stay” is mentioned as the overall stay of the guests. This theme is the third most mentioned as it is not possible to speak of the main subject without talking about the guest’s stay. Customers have the perception that luxury hotels offer greater value than regular hotels in terms of reputation and quality and that is one of the reasons they come and stay (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). It is within the stay that the guest is impacted by the personalized customer service and has a hedonic experience. Customer service quality has been characterized as the difference between what customers are expecting and what they get. Customer service interactions are evaluated subjectively, and service quality is assessed by how well a customer's perceived expectations are met. (Presbury et al., 2005). In the analysis, it was discovered that when a guest speaks of their stay, they express how they would want or how it is their experiences in five-star hotels. In the analysis, is observed that managers speak of the stay of the guests as a benchmark to measure satisfaction rates. In a saturated and competitive industry like the hotel sector, guest satisfaction is one of the most precious resources a company can have, and service quality is a major predictor of customer retention and future patronage. (Kandampully et al., 2000).

Satisfied

“Satisfaction” is the theme that is directly linked with the term hedonic experience. It is understood that hedonic experiences are associated with the notion that humans embody pleasure since the time of the Greeks (Higgins, 2006). Additionally, it is observed in the analysis that satisfaction goes a long way from the moment the guest steps into the hotel to the moment one leave, more often than not the simple “extra-mile” actions that employees offer to the guests make their experience better. Higgins (2006), states that the interaction between a present state and an end state functions as a benchmark or reference point, with a value associated with pursuing the desired end state and avoiding undesired end states (Solomon, 2010) – making hedonic experiences have a crucial contribution to value. In the analysis, it is noticed that guests, in order to be satisfied seek a relationship of trust with the employees and are expecting to receive high-quality interactions. The satisfaction of the guest in a luxury property often depends on the personalized customer service offered by the employees, creating long-term relationships between the guests and the hotel – this way making guests loyal to the property or brand. Carpenter (2008),

studied that hedonic value contributes to long-term customer connections and it is critical for generating loyal customers and forging intimate emotional links with target consumers (Dedeoglu et al., 2018).

Home

The sense of “being at home away from home” is highly important for both customers and managers. Home has grown from a physical location, such as a house or a flat, to a complex of social, economic, and sexual relationships (Bowlby & Gregory, 1997). This notion, based on the analysis, is something that guests expect to feel, and employees are expected to deliver. The notion of “home” is understood as having the feeling that the employees customize their job around the guest and are not only thinking about revenue, it is based on a notion of trust. Guests feel at “home” when they have the feeling that the employees know them and give them the expected importance. In tourism, "home" study tends to focus on the spatial dimension. This focus either presupposes a "home" and "away" distinction or treats "everything is home" without a defined conceptual boundary. This is one facet of home, however, home can be characterized as a basic setting where individuals feel at peace. Scholars have lately argued that home is formed subjectively (Zhu et al., 2019). This concept revolves around the personalized customer service offered to each guest in particular and is a significant part of guest satisfaction, hence the hedonic experience.

Breakfast

The theme “breakfast” enters this analysis because usually, five-star hotels offer this service to the guest. Thus, breakfast time is a crucial moment in the guest’s hedonic experience as is often a complementary meal offered by the hotel that most guests take advantage of. In the analysis, is observed that the guest is expecting that even at breakfast they are offered an experience rather than just breakfast. Moreover, luxury customers are expecting to receive this service and as analyzed in the interviews most of them say that is normal for them to have this as a complementary service. The features that directly impact the process of selecting a hotel are referred to as deciding indicators, and they may become a factor of customer loyalty and distinctiveness of the hotel with respect to the competition, while a bad comment can negatively influence alternatives for a hotel (Aradhana & Mohan, 2022). A free product might become so appealing that consumers will forsake a far more preferable option. Because establishing a zero price for a single

component (e.g., breakfast) contained in a product (e.g., hotel room with breakfast) might unreasonably enhance demand for the product (Mathur et al., 2022). In Leite-Pereira et al., (2022) study, confirmed that customers find breakfast extremely important when staying in a hotel and it is found is on the top three attributes of guests when choosing a hotel.

City

The theme “city” is meaningful in this analysis as the majority of the interviewees often go to city hotels and work in luxury city hotels. It is mentioned as well, due to the importance of the location of the property within the city, that being an important fact as well when speaking of hedonic experiences. Place meanings serve to capture value in use and frame expectations for experiences, places (location) are the settings for tourism experiences, the environment for social-psychological interaction, and the phenomena that characterize, explain and predict this behavior (Mcclinchey & Carmichael, 2010). Humanistic approaches to the geography involved in locations show that people make relationships with places As a result, it was recognized that individuals may attach meaning to a place, experience a feeling of belonging to a place, and that location plays an essential part in the construction of our identities (Holloway & Hubbard, 2014). The meaning of location is a complicated phenomenon with many distinct interpretations. Place attachment, place reliance, and location identity all refer to people's interactions and experiences with a place, whether for utilitarian or hedonic reasons (Snepenger et al., 2004; Wickham & Kerstetter, 2000).

5.2. Qualitative Analysis of the Managers’ & Customers’ Perspectives

From this qualitative analysis of the interviews, several points were observed that go in line with the analysis made through the Leximancer software. As previously explained this section of the discussion will be divided into three clusters that are coherent with the previous literature. In this section and within the three clusters, both perspectives of the managers and customers are going to be discussed.

Hospitality and the Luxury Context

In this section, there were very interesting observations. From the customers’ perspectives when speaking about the luxury context most customers answered that they look for

luxury as they pursue receiving excellent service. Furthermore, they shared what they intended as luxury, and luxury for customers, in general, is something unattainable for everyone, is prestige, and the properties need to show and have good taste. Tynan et al., (2010), define luxury the same, as something expensive, and authentic that achieves superior degrees of hedonic value through guest experience. When asked why they prefer a luxury hotel rather than another, the majority answer that they want that feeling of being treated differently. Customer 4# states that the service itself makes a huge difference when choosing where to go, as one already takes for granted the fact that the rooms will be good and the environment as well. What customers aspire for in a luxury experience has shifted from monetary goods to personal fulfillment and authenticity (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011). Customers want more significance or meaningfulness from luxury, and their view of its worth is tied to intrinsic goals (Cristini et al., 2017). Most of the customers who were interviewed are customers who usually go to luxury properties in cities.

From a managerial perspective, managers state that luxury for them, as creators, is the feelings they generate in guests that value what they are providing and exceed guests' needs. Customers like luxurious hotels because they deliver a lavish experience; they enjoy the elegance, feel invigorated, and value the great services provided to them. (Hung et al., 2018). Satisfied customers are what makes their business run, and what allows them to continue to be a luxury property. Luxury from a managerial perspective is the memorable experience delivered to the guest. Cristini et al., (2017), show that luxury for the customer does not have to be the existence of an offering or a great environment, but may instead be derived from a lived experience or activity. All the managers interviewed were from distinct luxury properties, but still, all of them mentioned that what distinguishes them from other hotels is their location and moreover, the employees.

Personalized Customer Service

When asked about personalized customer service, and what they intend about it the answers were similar, customers say that personalized customer service is when the hotel can identify and remember their preferences even if it is their first time. Recalling the customers' preferences, examining the specifics of the activities they participated in, the amenities they used, and the beverages they drank throughout their stay. Using this information, the next visit will be more customized and matched to the guests' needs.

(Talwar, 2012). Personalization is an important customer-focused approach. (Song et al., 2021; Tyrväinen et al., 2020) that involves offering a tailored service. It is about recognition as well, for customers is important that employees remember who they are. The customers interviewed all had different experiences and Customer 1# shared that their last experience was not outstanding mostly because the service delivered was not what was expected by the guest. The others shared that their experiences were good, that they were satisfied and the service delivered was beyond their expectations. Regarding high-quality interactions, all of them said that it is important to have them, even guests who are more reserved like Customer 10# and do not appreciate having employees on top of him shared that high-quality interactions between guests and employees are quite important as employees need to know how to approach each distinct guest. Service employees need to tailor their message and conduct to each client in face-to-face encounters depending on their understanding of the individual as a consumer (Shen & Ball, 2006). Customers are expecting luxury properties to go the extra mile for them, it is the difference between having a standard and luxury treatment. Customer 5# said she wants that feeling of being at home away from home, and employees who can provide that for her by attending to her different needs as an individual and as a guest is what makes her satisfied and want to come back to the property. Hotels that provide distinct levels of greater service quality can have a long-term competitive advantage over their competition (Presbury et al., 2005). The breakfast for guests is where the hotel can stand out, more often than not, guests feel that a hotel that has a special and differentiated breakfast with proper service is something that makes them stand out amongst the competitors as well. The food service at a hotel may be one of the deciding factors in a guest's decision to not only pick a hotel but also to be content with their stay and remain loyal to it. In reality, cuisine is seen as a tourism commodity and is increasingly related to the choice of tourist locations (Leite-Pereira et al., 2022).

From a managerial point of view, personalized customer service is delivery, meaning that the professionals working must know their guests' names and preferences and should work towards knowing their guests better to be able to exceed their expectations. Still, Manager 3# said that they are always trying to give it a personal touch to achieve guest satisfaction during their stay and to generate the feeling that they want to come back. Managers comment that personalized customer service is what makes the guest experience memorable, they are aware that is what will the guest remember from their

experience. Furthermore, managers state that is highly important to have high-quality employee interactions for three main reasons. Firstly, Manager 7# states that is due to the fact that guests appreciate and make them feel special when employees go the extra mile for them. During a service encounter, service professionals go above and beyond their work responsibilities by paying additional attention, putting in more effort, and giving spontaneous great services to match the client's requests in order to achieve customer satisfaction (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Secondly, Manager 2# says that during these interactions, the employee is allowed to get to know the guest better and collect their preferences. Thirdly, Manager 9# states that is due to these interactions that it is possible to create better and improved personalized customer service and that is what makes employees being able to exceed guest expectations. Customer service quality is critical to a company's image since it is decided by how fast an organization responds to customer requests and how satisfied customers are when their needs are attended (Liu et al., 2019).

Hedonic Experiences in Hotels

Lastly, going into the final cluster from the customer's perspective, hedonic experiences are roughly something they do out of pleasure. It is not something they need meaning is not a basic need but something they do as an extra. Customers share that what they need in order to have a hedonic experience in a hotel goes through different stages. Meaning that Customer 7# wants the facilities that are offered to be spotless and with good taste. But most importantly, what they need to be satisfied and what they will remember at the end of their stay is the employees. Customer 9# shares the quality of the service one bought needs to be outstanding, and the products offered need to be high-quality. Personalized service, such as tailored service to meet the needs of specific customers, implies collaboration between the service provider and the guest (Yun & Hanson, 2020). Considering that personalized services are specifically designed to meet the needs of guests, they stimulate consumer engagement, which leads to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Kasiri et al., 2017). The most common key to satisfaction that customers shared is the service offered to them. Customer 1# stated that he can feel when employees are there just to work or if the employees are there because they enjoy being there and love what they do. When service providers have a strong commitment to their role in the service process, manifested as customer orientation, they are more likely to be motivated to offer consistently gratifying service to their consumers (Susskind et al., 2001). This set of customers, in general, achieve a state of satisfaction, hence, having the hedonic

experience when being well treated with passion, when employees offer them the personalized customer service discussed previously in this section. Employees who deliver more customized services should have higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty than those who provide less personalized services (Yun & Hanson, 2020). Guests mentioned that it makes them feel at home away from home when employees know their preferences and it makes them value and have a more hedonic experience when the employees anticipate their needs. Customer 6# wants to feel that the price she is paying for her stay is well enjoyed and wants due to that to feel special. All the customers interviewed said that without a doubt prefer to receive personalized customer service rather than a normal one and that is one of the main reasons why they pay for luxury over other properties in the industry. Lastly, the ten customers interviewed shared that the personalized customer service offered to them during their stay impacted their overall hedonic experience – they mention that when they are treated well, the experience goes smoother and is absolutely more pleasurable but when they are treated as they are home, it is an outstanding feeling that is memorable. Hedonic messages induce positive emotions and pleasure, and it is expected that will increase brand experience by raising perceptions of the hotel's luxuriousness index (Chitturi et al., 2008; Amatulli et al., 2019). Hedonic experience is frequently linked to a high level of guest interaction (Chen & Schwartz, 2010).

From the managers' perspective, the way they look at hedonic experience is similar to the way customers look at it as something that is experienced out of pleasure. A satisfied guest, hence, a guest who has a hedonic experience, for managers is a guest whose expectations were met and if possible, exceeded. To understanding the consumer's goals and demands is critical for providing a better and high-quality customized experience for each customer (Mairinger, 2018). To provide an exceptional tailored service, management must segment the market in great depth, furthermore, there is a need to change from market segmentation to individual expectations and preferences, since this knowledge will effect customer acquisition procedures as well as customer service delivery for existing customers (Richard, 2017). When asked if they believed that well-trained personalized customer service employees were the key to providing guests with a hedonic experience, all of them said yes but Manager 1# added that it is highly important to choose wisely who works for the company as sometimes people even if they have experience are just not tailored to work in the hospitality industry. Manager 6# shared

that employees need to have a special touch, so recruitment is a big part of the process as they need to make sure the hotel is recruiting potential over only experience. Thus, training is key but ultimately reaching the right profile to be the face of the company is also key. As a result, a substantial amount of research has been carried out to explore the consequences and outcomes of service contacts (Susskind et al., 2001). Managers 4#, 6# and 10# commented that they set high standards for personalized customer service with the aim of customer satisfaction, hence for them to have hedonic experiences but as well because they need to set high standards as they work in luxury properties that belong to big corporations which need to have those standards as they are brand. Lastly, they shared what their luxury property has to be able to offer a hedonic experience to the guest during their stay. To this, the answers were quite in line with the previous findings, managers stated that in order to be able to offer a hedonic experience to their guests they endure they have a way beyond service and most importantly, well-chosen, and well-trained employees who provided that outstanding service to their guests. Employees that are enthusiastic about their professions have a great desire to engage in work activities; they are actively interested in these activities and commit their energy and time to them (Teng, 2019), so, individuals who are naturally motivated are more likely to begin working for career and organizational goals. Furthermore, employees who have the training and touch to offer a personalized customer service have better rates of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Yun & Hanson, 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the conclusions of the conceptual analysis and aims to answer the research question that was previously defined in the Introduction chapter. In addition, the practical and theoretical contributions are underlined. Finally, the limitations will be discussed and afterward conclude with suggestions for future research.

6.1. Main Conclusions

The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that personalized customer service definitely impacts the hedonic experience of the guest. The research question proposed at the beginning of this dissertation was how personalized customer service affects hedonic experiences and the conclusions are clear. The collected data from 20 interviews with customers and managers of luxury properties were summarized in a map and a table and analyzed. The findings show that the employees are a huge factor in the customer's hedonic experience and along with it the service provided. Customers want to feel that the amount they pay for their stay is well spent, and they want to feel special as a result. Customers prefer personalized customer service over standard treatment, which is one of the key reasons they choose luxury. According to the findings, in order to be pleased, customers want a connection of trust with the personnel and anticipate high-quality interactions. Guest satisfaction in a luxury property is frequently dependent on the personalized customer service provided by the staff, resulting in long-term connections between the customers and the hotel, making guests loyal to the property or brand. Finally, customers feel that personalized customer service influences their overall hedonic experience.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

There have been several studies with regard to personalized customer service and studies in regard to hedonic experiences. However, there are few that focus on both of them at the same time and it should be noted that hedonism as a statement of value has not been thoroughly studied (Kazakeviciute & Banyte, 2012). This dissertation investigates the issue from the perspectives of both customers and managers, adding to the research by taking a different perspective into consideration. This dissertation comes to fill the gap in the literature, focusing on both phenomena together and equating the effect one has on

the other. Accordingly, the study comes to conclude that the employees are at the center of the hedonic experience of the guest.

6.3. Practical Contributions

The findings of this study are relevant for managerial purposes. First of all, personalized customer service has precedents in luxury hospitality and is something that managers pursue to instill in their employees. As proven by this dissertation personalized customer service plays an active role in impacting the customer's hedonic experience. This finding can be used to improve the overall service provided in luxury properties and in the standard operating procedures of the same. Furthermore, hedonic experiences are directly linked with satisfaction rates meaning that is in the greatest interest of the managers of luxury properties to seek to increase this rate. The study proves that the hedonic experience of the guest is impacted by several factors but at the great center are the employees. On this note, managers of luxury properties can take this into consideration and improve their recruitment process to be aligned with the managerial need to reach customer satisfaction rates. Moreover, it is highly important to improve training and diffuse the idea that employees need to add their special touch to everything they do that involves customers while working with passion to ensure that the guest gets that feeling of being at home away from home. This would ensure guest loyalty and create meaning behind increasing average daily rates. This would not only improve the perceived authenticity of the service provided and therefore the customers' experience in the property but also weaken the competition in the market.

6.4. Limitations

The research is aware of the three main limitations of this study.

Firstly, since luxury hospitality has a share on the global market, the data collection sample is not representative of every nationality as it should be. Thus, additional research on the subject is encouraged. Secondly, the research sharpens the conceptual examination of its qualitative dimensions, but the interpretation ignores the quantitative components. Lastly, the lack of time is a big limitation of this dissertation.

6.5. Future Research

This dissertation aims to contribute to a better understanding of the effects personalized customer service has on hedonic experiences. To further understand this relationship, more luxury properties and customers need to be studied as well. Especially, luxury properties outside Europe. Additionally, this relationship should be compared and analyzed in different scenarios to find out if the effect present remains the same or shifts with different scenarios. To improve the hedonic experience of the guests, it is also crucial to not only study the relationship with personalized customer service. Employees and high-quality interactions play a huge role in the experience itself. Hence, the author proposes to further analyze and go deeper into the relation employees and what type of employees affect the hedonic experiences of the customers during their stay.

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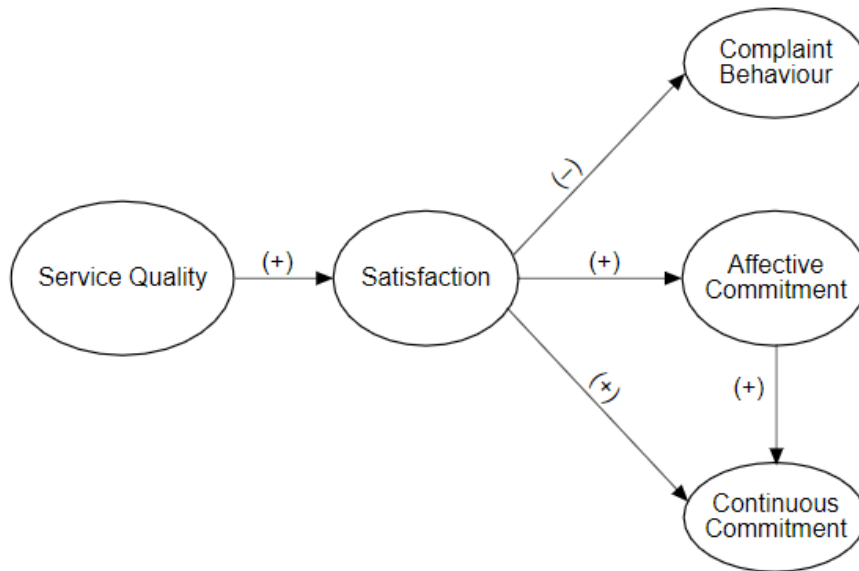
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LIST OF APPENDIXES

Appendix 1. Conceptual model which explains the underlying processes that lead to improved levels of customer satisfaction



Shemwell, D. (1998)

Appendix 2: Interview Protocols

– Customer Service Representatives

Issues of Interest <i>(Based on the literature)</i>	Source	Reframed Question
Hospitality and the context of luxury hotels		
The importance to discuss an open subject as luxury.	(Atwal & Williams, 2009; Walls et al., 2011)	What is luxury for you?
Review of luxury hotels.	(Chu, 2014; Walls et al., 2011)	How is your hotel luxurious?
Review of luxury hotels.	(Chu, 2014)	What, in your opinion, distinguish your hotel from others?
Personalized Customer Service		
Expanding knowledge – intrinsic value	(Zhou et al., 2022; Walls et al., 2011)	What does personalized customer service mean to you?
Expanding knowledge – distinguisher, loyalty, and retention factor	(Ball et al., 2006; Lambillotte et al., 2022)	How important it is for you as a customer service representative to offer a distinguished personalized customer service to your customers? Why?
Expanding knowledge – customer interactions and importance.	(Ball et al., 2006; Lambillotte et al., 2022; Walls et al., 2011)	How important it is for you to provide high-quality employee interactions to your customers? Why?
Expanding knowledge – business value	(Walls et al., 2011; Shen & Ball, 2006)	What does it mean for the business to offer high-quality personalized customer service to your guests?
Personalized customer service orientation item.	(Susskind et al., 2001)	As a manager of a luxury property, customers are certainly very important, why do you think a personalized customer service is what makes guests have hedonic experiences?
Hedonic Experience in Hotels		
The importance to clarify what is a “satisfied customer”.	(Kriss, 2014; Wu & Liang, 2009; Walls et al., 2011)	What defines a “satisfied customer”? Hence, a customer who just experienced an hedonic sensation.

For a better understanding of what distinguishes a satisfied guest from a demanding one and what is needed to meet both expectations.	(Walls et al., 2011)	How does the personalized customer service offered to your guests meet their expectations, in your opinion?
Standards for delivery of a hedonic experience.	(Susskind et al., 2001)	Do you believe that well-trained personalized customer service employees are the key to providing the guests a hedonic experience?
Standard for delivery of a hedonic experience.	(Susskind et al., 2001)	In your organization do you set high standards for personalized customer service with the aim of the customer having a hedonic experience or for any other reason? Why?
Standard for delivery of a hedonic experience.	(Walls et al., 2011; Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	In your opinion, what does your luxury property have to offer to make guests have a hedonic experience during their stay?

Issues of Interest <i>(Based on the literature)</i>	Source	Reframed Question
Hospitality and the context of luxury hotels		
The importance to understand what the customer defines as luxury.	(Walls et al., 2011)	What is luxury for you?
The importance to understand what the customer defines as a luxury hotel.	(Walls et al., 2011)	How is a luxurious hotel?
Expanding knowledge.	(Walls et al., 2011)	What makes you prefer a luxury hotel rather than another?
Personalized Customer Service		
Expanding knowledge – understanding what personalized customer service is for the customer.	(Walls et al., 2011)	What does personalized customer service mean to you?
Service experience.	(Walls et al., 2011)	As a guest, how important it is for you to receive a personalized customer service during your stay? Why?
Employee to guest encounters.	(Walls et al., 2011)	How important it is for you to experience high-quality employee interactions? Why?
Excellence and service experience.	(Mattila, 1999)	What does it mean to you when a luxury hotel goes the extra mile to offer personalized customer service to each guest (yourself included)?
Employee to guest encounters.	(Walls et al., 2011; Mattila, 1999)	During your stay at the luxury property did you feel like you received personalized customer service? If so, how did that make you feel?
Hedonic Experience in Hotels		
Expanding knowledge – understanding what a hedonic experience is for the customer.	(Higgins, 2006)	What do you understand of having a “hedonic experience”?
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Walls et al., 2011; (Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998;	As a luxury hotel guest, what do you need to be satisfied with? Hence, have a hedonic experience.

	Susskind et al., 2001)	
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the personalized customer service offered?
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	What makes you satisfied or dissatisfied with personalized customer service in general?
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Walls et al., 2011; Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	In your opinion, what does a luxury hotel have to offer to make you have a hedonic experience during your stay?
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	In your opinion, do you think that if you were to receive a personalized customer service you would be more satisfied rather than a regular one?
Service quality towards the hedonic experience.	(Kahl, 2020; Shemwell et al., 1998; Susskind et al., 2001)	As a luxury guest, do you think that the personalized customer service offered during your stay had an impact on your overall hedonic experience?
Demographics		
-	-	What was the main purpose of your trip?
-	-	How long did you stay at the property?
-	-	Nationality, age, married, and children.

Appendix 3: Consent Form for the Interviews

Consent Form for Interviews

Arrive as Guests and Leave as Friends – The role of hedonic experiences in the luxury context.

Master Thesis by Daniela Veloso, submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the MSc in Management with Specialization in Strategic Marketing, at Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics

Dear participant,

Firstly, I would like to thank you for your availability and for sharing your valuable insights with me. May everyone be as kind as you. In the following, you can find an overview of the research purpose of my dissertation. Furthermore, you will encounter the guidelines for your participation.

Research Purpose → This research was conducted to understand the role of personalized customer service in the customers' hedonic experiences. Two main objectives were imposed in the research to fathom the relationship between the two factors, one being made research the spectrum of luxury hospitality and the second, to scrutinize the effects the relationship of both factors has from the perspective of managers and customers. The purpose of the study falls under the principle that customer service is the key to a successful business.

Guidelines:

- I confirm that I am over 18 years old.
- I can withdraw during the interview at any point and do not have to answer all the questions.
- The purpose was explained to me.
- I had the opportunity to clarify any doubts or questions.
- I confirm that I am aware of and fine with my interview getting recorded.
- I understand that all information is completely confidential, and the information gathered will be kept strictly confidential.
- I acknowledge that my real identity will be anonymous, and I will be assigned a number that can be referred to.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

If you have any further questions or comments, you can contact me anytime at the following email: s-dmveloso@ucp.pt. Once more, thank you for your time and availability.

Appendix 4: Interviews Transcripts Examples

Interview Customer 2# (Female, 32, Portuguese)

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Good morning! I have already read to you the purpose of the interview and we will I will start by explaining to you how the interview will go we have three groups. The first one is hospitality and the luxury context then we will move to personalized customer service and end with hedonic experiences in hotels. Let's start with the first question: what is luxury for you?

Customer 2#

So, luxury is a very broad subject. It varies from person to person, but at its essence is a bit of the feeling of being taken care of and of having an experience that makes you feel valued as a customer as well. So, not only is about the service itself, the quality of the products that you buy or the experiences that you have, but also how people treat you and how they make you feel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How is a luxurious hotel for you?

Customer 2#

In the perception of viewing, it kind of needs to be grand and majestic in a way with the light coming in and not very dark, but it falls more on to the person that is giving you the service and offering the service and how they treat you and how they make your experience. So is felt in the experience and how it makes you feel so if a hotel has staff that really takes care of you and meets your needs and exceeds your expectations, then it's a luxury service.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What makes you prefer a luxury hotel rather than another one?

Customer 2#

Well, you have the benefits on luxurious hotels, not only in service but also room-wise and how everything is shown to you and all the amenities that they offer you. It's usually in the higher quality hotels than the non luxurious hotels. So having those products and having that attention to detail really differentiates them from a non luxurious hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Now we are going to the personalized customer service section. And the first question is, what does personalized customer service mean to you?

Customer 2#

Well, it means that they really understand my wants and needs. Because more often than not what we express sometimes is not really what we need. So having a person that can read under the lines and really understand what we're looking for and what kind of experience we're having. Then they can personalize their service to us and to our expectations as guests.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How important it is for you to receive a personalized customer service during your stay. And why?

Customer 2#

Well, it's really important because it's what makes you feel special. And it's what makes you have wow moments and not only a stay at the hotel that you will not remember. So when you have personalized service you remember and even for the hotel is good because then word of mouth comes into your hands and you will tell your friends and your family like yeah, I went to this hotel they were like super nice. They attend to all the needs. So you kind of recommend those services to others. So it's really important not only on the customer point of view that they feel special, but also for the hotel itself.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How important it is for you to experience high quality employee interactions and why?

Customer 2#

Well being humans we expect always a kind of empathy and a kind of understanding to our needs, especially in the service industry. So it's really important to not feel like you're bothering someone by what you're asking. So when someone is willing to offer you or give you what you asked it makes you feel understood and makes you feel appreciated and that you're not a burden. So having high quality interactions with the waitstaff members, it's really important to kind of feeling at home when you're away from home.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What does it mean to you when a luxury hotel goes the extra mile to offer a personalized customer service to each guests yourself included?

Customer 2#

Well, it always means a lot because even in luxury hotels you have obviously different kinds of rooms. So obviously you expect the different kinds of service according to the room that you reserve and that you're staying in. But even going to a standard room in a luxurious ambience you should have that personalized service and it really means a lot because it shows that the hotel does not care only about how much the guests is paying but they actually care about the guests and making their experience a memorable one so that they have loyal customers and they come back.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

During your stay at the luxury property. Did you feel like you received personalized customer service and if so, how did that make you feel?

Customer 2#

In my experience I always felt like the service itself was a bit personalized, maybe even if in the first day like I asked for an extra pair of towels. And then after that day, they made a note and every day there was an extra pair of towels. So those small things that you don't need to ask twice it's really heartwarming in a sense that they actually listening and they're making notes and taking care of you the way you want to and you expect to.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

This group is finished and we are moving on to hedonic experiences in hotels. The first question is what do you understand of having a hedonic experience?

Customer 2#

So hedonic experience it's a pleasurable experience. So it's something you do out of pleasure and because you want to not because you need to. So it's something that will give you a sense of like, pleasure and enjoyment of doing something.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What do you need to be satisfied with as a luxury hotel guests hence have an authentic experience?

Customer 2#

Well, you definitely need the human interaction experience to be positive but not only that, you also need the facilities to have standards. So you enter and you actually be like, wow, like this is really nice. Food wise in a hotel if you have breakfast included, it's also very important. So it doesn't become just like okay, I'm having breakfast, but you're actually having an experience.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the personalized customer service offered?

Customer 2#

In the hotel, I usually go I'm quite satisfied. They make note of the person's diet for example and their preferences and everything so they don't need to ask again. Obviously, there's always stuff to improve but on the grand scheme, I'm very satisfied.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And what makes you satisfied or dissatisfied with personalized customer service in general?

Customer 2#

Well, the thing is, sometimes everybody has good and bad days, and unfortunately that reflects on the work of people that work in the service industry. So yeah, it's not something that can be changed. It's a bit from person to person and how they deal with everything. But sometimes maybe some training on dealing with emotions and how to not let them show in your place of work would be useful. Because sometimes it's not like people want

to be rude or want to be distant. But sometimes it happens and for any other customer's point of view, it's not very nice to feel like you're bothering someone with your requests. It's a burden for people. For a positive side what makes me satisfied is when people anticipate my needs and make my experience even more incredible.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your opinion, what does a luxury hotel have to offer to make you have a hedonic experience during your stay?

Customer 2#

Well, yeah, it has to have the facilities, a good spa, a good pool if it's the case, a good breakfast, and good food offers. Importantly, the service itself needs to be outstanding. Yeah, people just also need to be nice. It's not only about what you see, but it's also about what you feel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your opinion, do you think that if you were to receive a personalized customer service, you would be more satisfied rather than receiving a regular one?

Customer 2#

Yes, in a hedonic experience? Yes. Definitely. When I travel for work obviously I want people to treat me nicely but when I go to enjoy myself I would much rather have a personalized customer service so I don't have to think about anything else except where am I going to eat.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Do you think the personalized customer service offered during your stay impacted your overall hedonic experience?

Customer 2#

Most definitely. It makes me feel special, and it makes me feel good when I am away from home. And it is amazing not having to think about every detail every time because

when you receive that personalized service they just know. It's that special touch that makes any experience even better.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Okay, so we are done. Thank you so much for your time.

Interview Customer 8# (Male, 25, Dutch)

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Thank you once again for agreeing to give the interview, let's start! What is luxury for you?

Customer 8#

To me luxury is something expensive, exquisite, it is something that the common person can't obtain or easily access therefore is something that only a reserved group of people can enjoy.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How is a luxurious hotel for you?

Customer 8#

A luxurious hotel should be clean, neat, it should have that wow factor when you walk in, employees must be nice and helpful whenever you need them, it should have light a nice decoration, an organized system so that no problems happen during the customers stay in the hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What makes you prefer a luxury hotel rather than another?

Customer 8#

Luxury hotels usually have a more personalized service to attend the costumers needs, they're more organized, they have better infrastructures than a cheaper hotel, better food more activities, all around they give the costumer a better experience that's why I prefer a luxurious hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Now, we enter the second group: Personalized Customer Service. The first question is: What does personalized customer service mean to you?

Customer 8#

A personalized customer service to me is when the staff at the hotel I'm staying show me they care about my well being, they attend to my needs whenever I need something from them, it's when they show/offer me the best experience I can get from their hotel, so that I feel welcome and comfortable.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

As a guest, how important it is for you to receive a personalized customer service during your stay? Why?

Customer 8#

It is very important to receive a personalized customer service during a stay, from the moment I walk in the hotel and throughout my stay, if the staff shows interest in giving me the best possible experience, if they show they care about me, it makes me enjoy more my time there and to feel more at ease and relaxed, and more probable to recommend that same hotel to friends and family or even visit the same hotel again.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How important it is for you to experience high-quality employee interactions? Why?

Customer 8#

Employee interactions are very important, an employee should be able to communicate easily with you and attend to your needs whenever help is needed, employes should be easy goin, polite and respectful towards their costumers, as if they're not it can be

something that stains your stay in the hotel and can be the difference between deciding to go back there/ recommend it or not.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What does it mean to you when a luxury hotel goes the extra mile to offer personalized customer service to each guest (yourself included)?

Customer 8#

It surely feels great when the employees at the hotel you're staying show "special" attention to you, it makes you feel special and more at ease during your stay, it can make you feel like you're at home therefore it provides you a better experience at the hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

During your stay at the luxury property did you feel like you received personalized customer service? If so, how did that make you feel?

Customer 8#

At my last stay at a luxurious hotel it was kind of a mixed feeling, some members of the staff did make me feel great and did their work brilliantly and attended to all my needs, they were super nice and showed interest in making me feel welcome there, but on the other hand when I had to deal with a problem with my room some members of the staff were lets say unconcerned about the problem and took ages to solve it, and that's something you don't want happening during your stay at a luxury hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Lastly, the third group: Hedonic Experiences in Hotels. What do you understand of having a "hedonic experience"?

Customer 8#

It is something I do for pleasure, something that I don't necessarily need but do to enjoy myself.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What do you need to be satisfied with as a luxury hotel guest? Hence, have a hedonic experience.

Customer 8#

Definitely have a personalized customer service, the hotel needs to have a nice environment that makes me feel at home, it has to have activities and nice entertainment.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the personalized customer service offered?

Customer 8#

From my last experienced like I mentioned before it was kind of a mixed feeling, but overall I was quite satisfied.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What makes you satisfied or dissatisfied with personalized customer service in general?

Customer 8#

If the employees are attentive and caring I will be satisfied with the customer service provided for sure.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your opinion, what does a luxury hotel have to offer to make you have a hedonic experience during your stay?

Customer 8#

Good activities, nice environment, great food, daily housekeeping, promoting and providing cultural experiences from the country where I'm staying, those should be the things that will make me feel like I have been part of an hedonic experience.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your opinion, do you think that if you were to receive a personalized customer service you would be more satisfied rather than a regular one?

Customer 8#

Yes for sure I will be more satisfied by receiving personalized customer service rather than a regular one.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

As a luxury guest, do you think the personalized customer service offered during your stay impacted your overall hedonic experience?

Customer 8#

From my last stay I know for sure that the more I got to experience a personalized customer service throughout my stay the more satisfied I was and the more it improved my stay at the hotel, whenever I didn't get that personalized feeling it impacted for the worst.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Thank you a lot for your time!

Interview Manager 1# (5-star Hotel, Portuguese)

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

I will first explain the purpose of the research. This research was conducted to understand the role of personalized customer service in the customers' hedonic experiences. Two main objectives were imposed in the research to fathom the relationship between the two factors, one being made research the spectrum of luxury hospitality and the second, to scrutinize the effects the relationship of both factors has from the perspective of managers and customers. The purpose of the study falls under the principle that customer service is the key to a successful business. Now, we have some guidelines to go through, you can withdraw during the interview at any point and do not have to answer all the questions. You have the opportunity to clarify any doubts or questions. The interview will be recorded by transcript software, but all information is completely confidential, and the

information gathered will be kept strictly confidential. Lastly, your identity will be kept anonymous. Thank you so much for agreeing to give me this interview and I will explain how is going to go. The interview has 13 questions and is designed to have three groups, the first one is regarding hospitality and the luxury context. Following, we will move on to Personalized Customer Service and finish with Hedonic experiences in hotels. Let's get started. Okay, the first question is, what is luxury for you?

Manager 1#

You begin with a tricky question. Well, for me luxury, it's service or products or interactions that really makes our day in the sense that we need to create and feel. First, as creators, we need to create a number of feelings in our guests that value what they are and give them what they are expecting to receive. Meaning that we cannot only say that luxury is “brands”, luxury is mainly interactions. Luxury is the care with the product, and luxury is anticipating needs. Luxury is to fulfill all the expectations or at least try to fulfill those expectations. As a guest, I just had an experience, very interesting experience, two weeks ago, and I experienced a luxury stay at [REDACTED] Hotel in Asia in a way that I was not expecting, it overlapped and overcome all my expectations. Why? Due to the smile, due to the care and attention to small details due to the product that was distributed, that was given to us. So, luxury is not a concept that is closed. I think that luxury is dedication. It's its willingness to satisfy and fulfill the expectations of others. That is what luxury is to me.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And how is your hotel luxurious?

Manager 1#

Well, my hotel is luxurious in several ways. I think that the main one it's staff related. We have people working with us that really love to work in hospitality, meaning that they will do their utmost to deliver the service that the guest is expecting. Nowadays, it is different, some years ago, luxury brands had very tight standards to provide luxury at that time, meaning that no one could go out of those patterns. Nowadays, luxury is personality. For example, in my teams, I don't have two people equal to the other one. I have different personalities. And I really encourage and make an effort so that they can apply their personality to the service. I give the basics and they say these are the basic standards that

we need to deliver. But now put your personality to it. It's the only way to create luxury experiences. So, my hotel is very strong on this. My hotel has a check-in either check out or in the encounters that they have in the front office, either in the club [REDACTED] or in f&b areas. It's special, we have special ways to deliver to the guests, for example, we are face to face with the [REDACTED]. And we have guests that go to [REDACTED] and then they come here because they prefer the ambiance here. They say it's not as stuffy as it is there. Another thing is rates and I'm not saying anything bad about the rates there, rates are top-notch, but it's our special way of delivering luxury. We deliver luxury, we don't have a swimming pool. We don't have outside, outside spaces, but we really have top-notch service that is based on the personality of each one.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And what, in your opinion, distinguishes your hotel from others?

Manager 1#

Well, every relationship that we have, or we have with our guests is based on confidence meaning that when I sell something to my guests, I need to fulfill its expectation and I think that we are very strong on this. We are very strong at delivering what the guest is expecting to have. I think that we are most of the time overlapping what is their expectations. It's very common that we have comments from our guests saying that we create an amazing memorable experience and that they are thankful for that. We overlap all these achievements and I think that what we can say is that service-wise, most of the hotels, the new hotels, the five-star hotels, they have done renovations, they have very good rooms, all of them have invested in all and say on the product itself. But what can make the difference is people, hospitality is still people and I think that we are very strong on that.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Now we will move forward to the next group which is personalized customer service. And the first question is what does personalized customer service mean to you?

Manager 1#

Well, one of the things that HGI group and company's strength is on managing information about guests, on those who allow us to keep the information meaning that we

know prior to the guest arrival who are they and what they like and that is the key. Let's say the key things that the guest would like to have in their service, the interactions that they have. We also know if a guest on the last day in another hotel of the company presented a complaint or not. So, we have all that information and personalized service. Sorry, can you repeat personalized...

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Customer service? Okay, it's personalized customer service and what does that mean to you?

Manager 1#

For me, it's the ability to manage information and then put it in place. The management of that information and the relationship with the guests. Meaning that if a guest likes soft pillows we have soft pillows in a room, if a guest likes to have the opening for the turn down at four o'clock in the afternoon. We do the turn down at four o'clock in the afternoon. If the guest wants to have 10 bottles of water in the room. We put bottles of water in the room. So, the management of the information and the management of information not only that comes from the company, but also that comes from the encounters that we have with the guests during their stay will allow us to fine-tune personalized service. And this is very important, and we need to create this ability on the teams to think that no matter what feedback the guest gives all the feedback is important because it will allow us to personalize even more the service that we provide to the guests.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Okay. Yes, absolutely. How important it is for you as a customer service representative to offer a distinguished personalized customer service to your customers and why?

Manager 1#

Well, I don't know if your future is in hospitality. But I can say that one of the things I'm working already in hospitality for 35 years, and one of the things that still make my day is when I receive a smile from a guest, and they say thank you. "Zhu Wang was amazing".

Or “Thank you, Maria was incredible”. So, thank you. You have a very good team in that x point. And this is really, this is really something that makes me happy, it's very important for us to create those memorable experiences. As I mentioned before, those golden encounters are important because each time you have an encounter with a guest, and you can personalize that encounter, it's a golden opportunity to make the guests feel good to make the guests feel happy. I'm not saying that you need to be like: “Yes sir. Yes, madam.” No. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with for instance the title of your thesis you want a customer to walk in as a guest and leave as a friend. And this is really important because we receive so many good comments. Also, we receive bad comments, but one of the things that and one of the tricky things that we need to do is that all the bad comments need to turn into good comments. And most of them, even those that you've seen on social media, we can turn the guests around and make the guests come again and show them that really was an exception to the problem that they have. So, for me, it's what makes my day it's to have personalized service to my guests.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And how important it is for you to provide high-quality employee interaction to your consumers and why? What I mean by high-quality employee interactions is how your employees interact with the guests. And how they present themselves. And on this line of thoughts how important it is that for you and why?

Manager 1#

If you don't stress the employees and, if you have employees that like to work in hospitality, you will have success. Success will come naturally, meaning that it is very important to empower people, to recognize people, to train people to give them the tools that they need to do their work and they will work alone. They will be happy to make others happy. So, it's not a question of what I can do or what I can control. It's a question, well, it's how I can give them the tools to be successful because if they are successful, I'm successful and they'll be successful. So mainly what I have and if you want to visit as I can show you around, but you will feel that they are happy to make others happy. And they have all the empowerment. I, for example, my mates have the empowerment to take decisions. Its decisions are related to housekeeping if a guest prefers bottles of water or prefers that the room is made two times a day. They do it. They just put a note saying that

these guests request this, and the housekeeping manager can manage the situation, but they do take the decision. It's important to empower but also to try and give the tools.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And what does it mean for the business to offer quality personalized customer service to your guests?

Manager 1#

It means two things, satisfaction, and revenue. Because if you have good comments, if you have good guest feedback, you can sell higher and as you can sell higher you have more money. So, it's always a relationship between having a healthy business and guest satisfaction. But we cannot only speak in guest satisfaction you have to have a triangle over there. You need to have guest satisfaction to have good business. You need to have employee satisfaction to have good business and you need to have owner satisfaction to have the business. So, this triangle between guests, employees, and owners will make the business very successful. If one of those stress points of the triangle doesn't work, either because you don't give the tools to the employees. If you don't give the tools if you don't pay correctly. If you don't give all the uniforms, if you don't train, you will not have guests satisfied. So, you cannot increase the average room rate. Yes, then the business will suffer. If you have owners that don't invest in the building and don't invest in good teams, salaries, etc. You will have problems in the business because you will not sell higher. So, it's an interesting relationship between business and guests and employees and owners.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And as a manager of a luxury property customers are certainly very important. And why do you think a personalized customer service is what makes guests have hedonic experiences?

Manager 1#

With the pandemic, hospitality has shifted a little bit. We weren't having a very high occupancy driven by a lot of guests in 2019. Then came COVID and we had ups and downs with the occupancy. After that, we were closed at different times in total for three months, or two months and a half, and then guests begin coming in. This is important because from 2020 and beyond 2022 we need to be noted as a shift on the guest perception

that never happened before. I have worked as I told you in the industry for years and it is the first time that I noticed that there was a shift in perception. First, the first guests that arrived during 2020 beginning of 2021 accepted everything, even the lack of service, and the lack of products because we were coming from a pandemic, and they just wanted to travel, and they understand that we were suffering, etc. and they were excusing a lot. Our, let's say adjustment to the new reality that from 2021 onwards middle of 2021 and till now, the end of 2022 the demand of guests is growing more and more meaning that we need to be smart in giving attention to each guest. We need to really define what is our strategy for the different guests that we have. You can say okay, but you have 331 rooms, and we have 600 guests. Yes, but we can put them in books, we can create a group in one way, and we need to understand the thing inside that group we need to pinpoint some guests because they are special. They have special needs and they have told us in any way that "look I'm in the group but I don't believe I don't belong to the group. I want to be treated as an individual." So, we need to be able to shift our way of working to the different types of guests that we have in front of us, and this is the success of our mission. You, if you can do it, will be successful.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And we will now go to the last group which is hedonic experiences in hotels. And the first question I have for you is what defines a satisfied customer. Hence a customer who just experienced a hedonic sensation?

Manager 1#

Can you just clarify what you mean by hedonic?

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Yes, so we have two types of experiences, we have hedonic experiences and utilitarian ones. The hedonic experiences are the ones that we do out of pleasure, or we do out of enjoyment. We don't really need them, but we want them, while utilitarian ones are the ones that we need. We go to the supermarket because we need toilet paper, or we need to eat which is utilitarian. When you go to the supermarket because you really want a bar of

chocolate is a hedonic experience in this sense of way. This pleasure and satisfaction sensation that the guest takes out of going to your hotel.

Manager 1#

Okay, well here. We can create a hedonic experience here in the sense that the guest comes here for mainly three reasons. Firstly, because he's loyal to the brand. And as he's loyal to the brand to get the points and wants to keep increasing his points mainly we are talking about corporate clients that most of the bills are paid by the companies and that will have points for themselves. Then we have those same guests that don't come as corporate they come as leisure because they are using those points that they have. And the other way. We have other guests that come here due to the quality relationship between quality and price, they feel that it is quality and price. Then finally we have those that come here for the location, though we are already considered to be on the outskirts of the city center. It's amazing that it's real. We are central and there are a lot of guests that consider us already in the outskirts and we are far away from the city center. So, it's something that we need to deal with these days. Most of the guests that come for that make the reservation they are expecting then I think that is the only experience we can have in this situation. They are expecting upgrades to the Duplex Suite or to the terrace suites that we have or to rooms with a terrace that we have, where they can experience other ways of being in the hotel. And, we have the club [REDACTED] which is something that we can really create and is very, very interesting to experience. And I think that it's very difficult for us to manage these expectations for the guests that want to have an unique experience with us. Most of them we can achieve but it's difficult. It's not an easy task to fulfill all the feelings for the chocolate as you said it's a tricky thing in hospitality because we are a city-like city destination. It can be really a difficult thing to create those hedonic experiences for the guests.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And I think you answered perfectly, but I would like to go back to what you think defines a satisfied customer.

Manager 1#

What defines a satisfied customer? A satisfied customer is basically a customer that has the feeling that they had a good relationship between the price that he paid and the service

and product that he received. As I told you, the guests who come here, that work and receives points from the company and those are the most difficult guests because their expectations are based on assumptions that the company told them, and we need to fulfill those assumptions. For example, the free upgrade. For example, the late check-in and the availability delay check out and the availability. For them, the word is only early check-in and late check-out, there is no under-availability. This is not on their mind. Also, the upgrade is under availability some others are mandatory, but they don't care if we do the double or triple upgrade in rooms. Upgrade for them is I booked a room I need to have a suite. So, this relationship with the guests is already part of the value for money. It's the other part that is important for them. And we only feel that we succeeded because when it was time for the checkout, we ask How was your stay and the guests said it was wonderful. It's one of the best hotels that we have here, all the guests say so. And then we have actions to make the guests feel happy. So, for me, I know when a guest is satisfied due to the body language when I speak with a guest I can understand if he's happy or not on the body language on the smile, the wording, and the mention that you have a different service.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How does the personalized customer service offered to your guests meet their expectations in your opinion?

Manager 1#

Well, I think that we are very strong, and they really meet most of the expectations meaning that from 34 [REDACTED] in Europe we were number five with 330 rooms. The other ones that are better than us are hotels with 50 rooms, big rooms. So, 331 rooms and 80% of occupancy being the fifth hotel in Europe it's really a mark that we can say yes, we made it. We are really personalizing most of the encounters with the guests so that they can evaluate us in a good sense. Still, we are struggling to get to all the guests and our personalized service. We cannot, we are not able to achieve all the guests. But nevertheless, we try our best to offer that personalized service and we aim to do it in 2023 because I'm going to hire a number of guest relations exactly to that kind of service.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And do you believe that well-trained personalized customer service employees are the key to providing guests with a hedonic experience?

Manager 1#

Yes, but not only. You need to choose very well and wisely the people that work with you. Sometimes it's difficult because there is a sort of shortage of people to work in hospitality. But you know, you need to invest in schools. You need to invest in universities, you need to sell the image to the schools and to the universities saying we are the best place to work, or we are the best place to be in your, your pass on hospitality. Meaning that we need, if we can choose the personality, you'll have the training that is super important. But you also have people that are willing to work in hospitality. Moreover, there is the need to offer good food to guests, good uniforms, and recognition to employees and work on career opportunities. Because for example, in the front office of this hotel, that is under my supervision and I have done a turnover of people that it's very high not because they are going outside but because they are growing in their career inside either for the commercial department either for the finance department, either for other hotels in the chain. So, it's important not to think and to look into the employees as only employees, but they're really important assets that we need to support to create opportunities and to develop. This is key to offering guests hedonic experiences and having happy and well-invested employees.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And in your organization. Do you set high standards for personalized customer service? With the aim of the customer having this hedonic experience or for any other reason and why?

Manager 1#

We set high standards first because we need to have them as [REDACTED], but also because we need to create those hedonic experiences. I will buy that word from now on and to create those hedonic experiences as I mentioned and I cannot stress this enough we can create all the standards of the world but if you don't have the right people to apply them, the right people with the right personality, the right company that supports those employees, you will not, you will not succeed. For sure.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

And last, it's our last question of the day. In your opinion, what does your luxury property have to offer to make guests have a hedonic experience during their stay?

Manager 1#

What has to offer or what we have to offer in the future? Both? Okay, so we are working on variables and a lot of projects I think that we need the swimming pool we need the outside spaces. We made some balconies for the guests which was a success. They are always sold because it's the only hotel that has big balconies. When I say big, they are really big, big balconies to see the river, to see the city to make things happen but to make guests feel really surprised by what they see. But we need to have other things, we need to have a different f&b area, more modern, trendier so that we can really create the experience for guests. I think that on the room side we are very good. We have the feedback. I can tell you that from zero to 100. We are always between 95%, and 98% of positive answers. So, it's very high. Meaning that gets us super satisfied.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Okay, this was more towards the future and besides the room, which is good, what do you have now that makes the guests have hedonic experiences?

Manager 1#

We have in the restaurant like table chef that we can create really a memorable experience for F&B, if the guest wants, we have a signature cocktail in the bar with the new bartenders that are very trendy, and very interesting to look at. We just renovated our entrance, and we are growing exponentially because guests really have the wow factor. We have the club [REDACTED] where we can really say that we have a luxury experience in the sense that it is a very private club that only guests that have access can go in and they have private breakfast they have happy hour they have all day as snacks and drinks. They can have a meeting space; they can debate so it's really a place where guests who need to have more privacy can use it and they use it very often. Also, we have the banquet inside where we are really good at the events. And the feedback is really very good. To finish, most definitely our staff, it is amazing. They absolutely love to work and

have great and very different personalities. They really are the heart of the business and I think that is something that helps guests to have an overall hedonic experience.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Well, good. I thank you so much really for having the availability and the time.

Interview Manager 5# (5-star Hotel, Italian)

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Good morning, after reviewing all necessary guidelines, let's start! The first group as I explained before is Hospitality and the luxury context and the first question will be: What is luxury for you?

Manager 5#

Luxury goes beyond material goods that are pleasing to the eye. Luxury is ambience, atmosphere and when you feel like you are important.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How is your hotel luxurious?

Manager 5#

We make sure that the entrance of the hotel is always sportless and is pleasing to the eye so that the first impression of the guest is of amazement, afterwards we complement the aesthetic part with the personal and we try to give each guest the required attention to make them feel that we are glad to take care of them. We keep track of guest demands and needs in our system so that we can anticipate them during their stay and if they come back.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What, in your opinion, distinguish your hotel from others?

Manager 5#

Well since our hotel is part of a big chain we have the ability to share a system where the information regarding guests are shared so even if you come to our property for the first

time but you have been in any hotel of the chain we have your information and requests so you do not need to make them again. Moreover, one of our unique selling points is our infinite swimming pool that offer a breathtaking view of the city and oozes luxury.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Thank you for your answers. Let's move to the second group: Personalized Customer Service. What does personalized customer service mean to you?

Manager 5#

Personalized customer service is one of the most important aspects in a high scale hotel. It encompasses all the guest experience and how we satisfied them, personalized customer service is paying attention to each guest and offer them what they expect and then more.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How important it is for you as a customer service representative to offer a distinguished personalized customer service to your customers? Why?

Manager 5#

It is very important because at the end of the day it can be what makes the guest come back or not. If a guest feels like they are being taken care of and that they do not feel like a burden with their demands he will have an excellent stay and will have a good impression of the hotel which means that the possible retention of that guest is very high.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How important it is for you to provide high-quality employee interactions to your customers? Why?

Manager 5#

Here in this hotel we like to think that we are welcoming every single person into our home therefore, we want them to feel comfortable and happy. This is only attainable if the interactions they have with our staff are excellent.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

What does it mean for the business to offer high-quality personalized customer service to your guests?

Manager 5#

As I mention before to offer personalized customer service in a successful manner is what retains guests. From a business perspective, guest loyalty is extremely important because it's how we generate income and having recurring guests also means that they will recommend our property to their friends and family meaning that they will bring more guests that we can retain.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

As a manager of a luxury property, customers are certainly very important, why do you think a personalized customer service is what makes guests have hedonic experiences?

Manager 5#

In order to have a pleasurable experience the guests need to feel happy and taken care of and that is only achieved when the right service is provided.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Moving to the third group: Hedonic Experiences in Hotels. The question is: What defines a "satisfied customer"? Hence, a customer who just experienced a hedonic sensation.

Manager 5#

A satisfied customer is a customer who is happy with their experience and that will come back.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

How does the personalized customer service offered to your guests meet their expectations, in your opinion?

Manager 5#

When coming to a luxurious property there are some standards and expectations that the guests have that are only meetable through personalized customer service, which in my opinion is what differs luxury from non luxury.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Do you believe that well-trained personalized customer service employees are the key to providing guests with a hedonic experience?

Manager 5#

Not particularly, I do believe that it improves the experience but I do not find it necessary. You can have a hedonic experience just by the facilities provided by the hotel.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your organization do you set high standards for personalized customer service with the aim of the customer having a hedonic experience or for any other reason? Why?

Manager 5#

We set high standards because we are a 5 star hotel which means that there are expectation to be met. Guests expect a high level of service so we do train our staff to accommodate and surpass these expectations.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

In your opinion, what does your luxury property have to offer to make guests have a hedonic experience during their stay?

Manager 5#

We have our facilities that are outstanding and we complement that with the service that we provide. We always keep an eye on our guests to make sure they have everything they need and help them in anyway that we can.

Daniela MOITA VELOSO

Thank you so much for your time and availability!