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**THE ROLE OF DESTINATION AESTHETICS IN
IMPROVING GUEST SATISFACTION IN LUXURY
HOTELS: A CASE OF LUXURY HOTELS IN CENTRAL
EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND, THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Master thesis

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This Master thesis has been compiled independently. All works by other authors used while compiling the thesis as well as principles and data from literary and other sources have been referred to.

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INTRODUCTION

The Master thesis provides an overview of the developments and trends in the concept of destination aesthetics, expectations and needs of luxury hotel guests, and possibilities of using the principles of destination aesthetics in the development of luxury hotel services and enhancing positive guest experience.

The whole tourism sector has enormously suffered from COVID-19 restrictions, showing a sharp decline of more than 50% in Travel and Tourism's contribution to GDP in 2020 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022, p. 5), and its recovery to the pre-pandemic volume is happening gradually, requiring time, investments and extra effort from all the stakeholders. However, even in a challenging time of post-COVID recovery there are sectors which are demonstrating financial sustainability and fast-paced development. Thus, these years luxury hospitality industry is proving its status of a dynamic niche of the overall global hospitality market (Correia et al., 2022, p. 392). What is more, a fresh report from Fortune Business Insights (2023, as cited in Jain et al., 2023, p. 1) forecasts the future expansion of the luxury hospitality industry during the next five years – from USD 93.4 billion to USD 238.5 billion. This highlights the importance of the research on peculiarities of the luxury hospitality as a promising niche of the hospitality industry for this decade.

The key distinguishing feature of the luxury hospitality, which has been defined by many scholars, is that this niche of hospitality is aimed at providing guests with experiential value through driving their emotional experiences from interactions with physical environment of the hotels as well as human interactions during their stay (Chaney et al., 2018, p. 413; Correia et al., 2022, p.392; Jain et al., 2023, p. 1; Kim et al., 2020, p.1). Reflecting on the complexity of the experiential value that is being created for customers in hospitality industry, Kirillova and Wassler (2019, pp. 159–160) summarized its main dimensions, such as visual cues of physical environment, multi-sensory atmospheric

elements and human interactions by stating that altogether they compile an aesthetic experience of the guests. All in all, modern marketing strategies especially in such a human-centered and highly rivalry industry as hospitality are devoting their main focus to creating customer experience as a way to make them buy a particular service in the end (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 3; Llego et al., 2022, p. 5).

Destination attractiveness and aesthetics have been proved by academics to have a direct impact on driving guest experience, and positively affect guest satisfaction (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 5), which is one of the main indicators of a successful hospitality business (Llego et al., 2022, p. 3). However, regardless of the mentioned acknowledged correlation between guest satisfaction and beauty and aesthetics of the destination, research on this topic in tourism and hospitality context is very limited (Kirillova & Wassler, 2019, p. 154), and first attempts to discover this topic have started to appear during this decade since the publication of the pioneering article (Kirillova et al., 2014).

Taking into account, high competitiveness of the hospitality industry which is forecasted to increase (Llego et al., 2022, p. 2), as well as growing guests' demands which they expect to be exceeded by the authenticity of provided hotel experiences (Santos et al., 2020, p.262), findings about the impact of destination aesthetics in luxury hospitality on guest satisfaction could provide insights on how luxury hotels can enhance their guest experience and get a competitive advantage on the market (Hauser et al., 2022, p. 1). Although in the recent study by Lies (2020, p. 106) it is mentioned the consumption is becoming more and more influenced by the aesthetics of the offer rather than by its basic features, a systematic literature review performed by Kirillova (2023, p. 10) showed that there is still a definite scarcity of academic research on the topic of destination aesthetics. However, Breiby and Slatten (2018, p. 9) even in their earlier research highlighted that there is a high necessity to study relationships between aesthetic features of the tourist experience and their satisfaction. Genc and Temizkan (2023, pp. 21–22) as well as Yang et al. (2022, p. 14) enriched the research database with their fresh scientific articles on the influence of destination aesthetics on tourists in their local settings, but suggested that the future research is needed to contribute to an expanded geography of the findings by conducting researches on the similar topic with a sample of tourists from different regions like Europe, since existing findings are limited only to particular settings.

An above-mentioned problem of the research scarcity combined with a definite business need in the topical knowledge as well as overall trends of the competitive hospitality industry, and demands of the consumers in the age of experience economy led to defining the research problem of this Master thesis: How can luxury hotels improve their destination aesthetics in order to drive guest satisfaction? In this context each luxury hotel is considered to be a complete destination where aesthetics is among the factors which influence hotel's competitiveness on the market by creating unique appeal to guests.

The goal of the Master thesis is to find out how different aspects of destination aesthetics influence guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh and make the proposals on how stakeholders of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh can improve their guest satisfaction through managing destination aesthetics of the hotel.

In order to reach the goal of the thesis while conducting the research the author is intended to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do different aspects of destination aesthetics influence guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh?

RQ2: How can luxury hotels in central Edinburgh improve their destination aesthetics in order to drive guest satisfaction?

The main body of the thesis is divided into two chapters. Thus, a theoretical chapter is aimed at providing an understanding of destination aesthetics as a factor of guest satisfaction in luxury hotels as a result of analysis of findings from the recent academic articles, books and statistical data about the concept of destination aesthetics and its peculiarities in luxury hospitality, as well the relationship between guest satisfaction and destination aesthetics. Whereas an empirical chapter gives an overview of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh, introduces a design of the research and provides justification of the choice, presents the results of the questionnaire survey conducted among guests of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh and reflects the discussion part of the research with proposals for managers of the hotels. Also, the Master thesis includes an introduction, a conclusion, a reference list, a resume in Estonian language and appendices.

1. DESTINATION AESTHETICS AS A FACTOR OF GUEST SATISFACTION IN LUXURY HOTELS

1.1. Meaning, structure and development of destination aesthetics

This subchapter provides an overview of definitions and meanings behind “aesthetics”, and more specifically – “destination aesthetics”, which are present in the academic literature so far. Also, an author is aimed at describing main models and frameworks which are used by scholars to study the phenomenon of destination aesthetics. Furthermore, in this subchapter author makes an attempt to depict how approaches to studying and applying the concept of destination aesthetics have evolved with time.

A destination is defined in many ways, if more broadly understood as the place to which a person travels or is sent, or even the specified final place of the trip. For the purposes of the Master thesis a luxury hotel is considered as a separate tourist destination, which is in line with academic conclusions stating that modern hotels are so focused on differentiation and getting unique individual features that they are becoming not just business units but rather ultimate tourism destinations offering holistic experiences. (Hackett & Melia, 2012, pp. 2–3).

Destination aesthetics is a complex term consideration of which should be started from understanding of the meaning of the main word – “aesthetics”. According to the research done by Porteous (1996, as cited in Wong et al., 2023, p. 412) “aesthetics” takes its roots from the Greek “aisthanesthai” (to perceive) and “aistheta” (things perceptible). Thus, Lies (2021, p. 107) defined aesthetics as the perception of beauty, and indeed for a long time this term was studied mostly just in terms of the philosophy and art. However, as noted by Zhang and Xu (2020, p. 2) aesthetics as a concept was firstly broadly researched by Baumgarten three centuries ago, who determined it as a product of processing human

senses. Later on, many authors concluded a multi-sensory nature of aesthetics which goes far beyond sight senses, involving touching, smelling, hearing and tasting (Kirillova, 2023, p. 9). Hence while considering aesthetic image of tourism destinations researchers argue that it implies the whole complex of tourists' perceptions of multiple aesthetic attributes and emotions of the destination (Cheng & Yu, 2022, p. 85). Briefly concluding the meaning of aesthetic consumer experience in service industry it has been worded as a "sense of beauty from employees, products, services, events" (Todd, 2009, as cited in Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 3).

Interest to aesthetics as an important aspect of the tourism industry appeared while the humanity after satisfying most of the fundamental basic needs switched to the concept of the experience economy where human's feelings and emotions obtained a prime importance (Hauser et al., 2022, p. 1). Therefore, companies started trying to offer experiences to their customers rather than plain products and services how it used to be before (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 3). Breiby and Slatten (2018, p. 2) prove the opinion that the modern trends in demand-supply relationships are requiring producers and service providers to shift to more curated offers considering specific demands of their customers, and providing them with more of "the symbolic value of products", while special attention should be paid to aesthetics since it is one of the core values for humans.

At that point aesthetics presented the whole field to be researched and where many answers to the requests of the business could be found. Thus, Strannegard and Strannegard (2012, p. 2002) defining aesthetics brought a new meaning to it as a separate form of communication implying the language of senses and the one which is able to evoke the whole spectrum of sensory experiences (for example, "fascination, happiness, indulgence, or excitement"). As if confirming these findings, Uzumcu et al. (2016, p. 703) stated that assessment and measurements of aesthetics are based on the extent to which visual cues and other sensory aspects of the service performance are capable of arousing feelings in guests. After all, the conceptual meaning of aesthetics was summed up as "a general sense of learning" (Breiby & Slatten, 2018, p. 3) which has both tangible symbols and experiential qualities able to provide customers with an added value to the services and products they experience.

Noticing the fact that aesthetics as a research subject appeared to be far more complex than it used to be perceived, scholars started to deconstruct this term into several dimensions. So, the first aspect of aesthetics was devoted to notable visual elements in a tangible setting, like attractiveness of the space, color scheme, arrangements of the objects, etc.; whereas the second dimension was focused on investigating the feelings and emotions created around/by the service (Yang et al., 2022, p. 3).

Since the topic of the Master's thesis is dedicated to conducting research not just about aesthetics in general, but is narrowed down to the destination aesthetics in the context of luxury hotels settings, it is important to introduce a definition of a tourism destination in order to link all these terms. According to the definition given by the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism, n.d.), a tourism destination refers to any physical setting which implies the whole combination of products, services, activities and experiences which add a tourism value. It also possesses an intangible element related to its image and identity which might drive destination's competitiveness. Therefore, as it is noticeable from the definition, one of the major distinguishing factors of any tourism destination is created by its aesthetical capability of producing an added value and differentiation. A similar conclusion can be driven from Lies (2021, p. 105) where aesthetics considered as an extra value which provides products, services and destinations with more benefits rather than their functional core, and contributes to the creation of hedonic experiences. A crucial role in determining a tourist behavior is attributed to the destination aesthetics which can help to make a tourism experience be very different from the visitor's mundane life involving all the aspects and senses and, thus, satisfy their quench in memorable and unique experiences (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 3).

The role of aesthetics in destination planning is not to be underestimated since this process by definition is referred to developing strategies aimed at creating "positive images of the destinations" among potential visitors in order to drive tourism revenue and set a healthy environment for investments (Beeton, 2016, p. 53). Ability of the destination to offer experiences through its image which is comprised of both tangible and intangible (symbolic) elements is considered to be its fundamental selling point and competitive advantage which influences actual travel decisions of visitors (Beeton, 2016, pp. 59–61). By destination aesthetics scholars mean the range of convictions and perceptions

developed in the tourist's mind about destination's ability to meet their needs. What is more, such a "sense of place" is formed based on physical dimensions of the destination as well as on its multifaceted attractiveness (Reitsamer et al., 2016, pp. 93–94).

Due to the complexity of the destination aesthetics scholars have developed several different multi-dimensional models and frameworks in order to structure "destination aesthetics" as a phenomenon. For example, Cheng and Yu (2022, p. 86) in their research looked at aesthetics from the perspective of two levels – biological and cultural. According to the authors, biological aspects of aesthetic preferences of humans are inherent and principles behind them are formed around "common survival experience". Hence, considering tourist destination aesthetics from the biological level authors highlighted such aesthetical attributes as a location and views, exterior decorations as well as interior objects. From this standpoint humans perceive safe and convenient spaces to be more aesthetically pleasant. Whereas cultural aspects of aesthetical perceptions pretty much depend on the cultural backgrounds of people. At this level of the destination aesthetics attention is paid to authenticity of the place and human touch implying interactions between personnel and guests which can differ by the level of friendliness, feeling of being welcomed and accepted to the local environment. From the cultural side of destination aesthetics cultural diversity of the environment is considered to be more aesthetically attractive.

A completely different framework to study aesthetic features of tourism destinations implying three levels was proposed by Kirillova and Wassler (2019, p. 154). Their model allows to solve the dispute around the core nature of aesthetics, where first group of opinions considers aesthetics as a phenomenon which can be perceived mainly visually, while another group of opinions insists on the multisensory nature of aesthetical experiences (Kirillova & Wassler, 2019, p. 156). Thus, the three-level framework consists of:

- the first level which implies aesthetic appreciation of the physical dimensions of the destination such as architecture and surrounding landscape;
- the second level which is built upon a multisensory nature of aesthetics highlighting a necessity of consistency and congruency of smells/sounds/textures/tastes with a physical environment;

- the third level which is devoted to the human factor where interactions between tourists and employees or/and residents are considered as a crucial factor influencing aesthetic experience (Kirillova & Wassler, 2019, p. 156).

This framework gained interest among scholars due to its holistic nature, and hence, the most recent research dedicated to studying destination aesthetics from the perspective of tourists in Turkey was conducted applying the above-described model (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 3). All the levels of destination aesthetics are interlinked; however, they have different impact on guest satisfaction on different stages of the customer journey. Thus, physical dimensions of aesthetics play the most important role in the beginning of the customer journey when a guest makes a decision for choosing a particular luxury hotel as a destination as well as upon guest's actual arrival to the hotel when the first impressions are made. Multi-sensory cues of the hotel's aesthetics are the in creating an added experiential value during the guest stay. While aesthetics of human interactions become an indicator whether luxury hotel meets upscale perceived standards of upscale quality which is expected to go beyond basic attributes towards emotional experiences, and so has a primary importance at the last stages of the customer journey where the loyalty and advocacy are being formed.

Destination aesthetics, unlike aesthetics of the objects, is focused on the experience of visitors from interactions with an overall atmosphere of the environment (Sun & Tai, 2022, p. 4). Planning of the holistic aesthetic design of destinations is important in order to create a coherent image of the place which will evoke positive feelings, emotions and associations in visitors' minds because pleasant stimulation of the senses is considered to be a prime factor for arousing appreciation, which in its turn is essential for a high-quality mental tourism experience (Yang et al., 2022, p. 3; Cheng & Yu, 2022, p. 84; Hauser et al., 2022, p. 1). This implies that developing and sustaining an exceptional aesthetic value as a factor of differentiation and a competitive advantage is one of the key tasks and driving forces of tourism development (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 2). Since looking for a mental aesthetic experience for satisfying recreational needs is becoming among the top motivations for tourists to choose a particular destination (Yang et al., 2022, p. 3).

Summing up this theoretical subchapter it is important to note that the phenomenon of aesthetics is rather multi-dimensional, especially in the times of shifting to an experience

economy when creating memorable experiences for customers through aesthetics is becoming a new trend (Breiby & Slatten, 2018, p. 3). Key marketing activities as a part of tourism destinations' strategies are aimed at curating symbolic and tangible images of destinations which will be appealing for the visitors (Beeton, 2016, pp. 60–61). Different models and approaches are applied by scholars in order to research the phenomenon of destination aesthetics. However, at the end of the day aesthetical experience of tourists remains to be a completely subjective process which happens when multiple senses of an individual are being stimulated by complex of aesthetic attributes (Genc & Genc, 2023, p. 533). And thus, the main point behind aesthetics can be shortly summarized as a source of pleasure at a destination (Kirillova, 2023, p. 7), which in its turn awakens aesthetic appreciation towards the environment stimulating all human senses and plays a vital role in a tourism experience (Kirillova & Lehto, 2016, p. 516).

All in all, analysis of the academic literature performed in this subchapter revealed the complexity of the term “aesthetics”, which nowadays goes far beyond bare beauty and visual appeal, covering dimensions of the holistic emotional experience. Thus, studying different theoretical models enabled the author of the thesis to distinguish the key layers of the destination aesthetics that include aesthetical characteristics of the physical environment, multi-sensory experiences and human-to-human interactions.

1.2. Specific aspects of destination aesthetics in the context of luxury hotels

The Master thesis is focused on studying destination aesthetics in a particular setting of luxury hotels, and thus it is crucial to analyze specific features of luxury hotels, as well as what characteristics and functions aesthetics have in this particular environment.

Luxury hotel industry has already been considered as one of the most fast-growing markets in the world-wide tourism for a few decades with a constant and gradual increase in arrivals and revenue (Trihas et al., 2020, p. 62). Whereas during the recent years, analyzing negative effects of the global economic crisis, luxury tourism appeared to be among those few industries which continued their growth regardless (Trihas et al., 2020, p. 62), and will continue following such a trend for at least next five years (Fortune

Business Insights, 2023, as cited in Jain et al., 2023, p. 1). Such results of the analytics make luxury travel industry to be very appealing both for practitioners and academics, because along with the perks of its economic sustainability this industry is characterized by high demands and constantly growing demands of the guests, increasing competition and drastic shift to the experience economy where details and intangible elements of the service and products gained a prime importance (Lin & Choe, 2022, pp. 1–2). Considering mentioned challenges and remarkable profitability of the luxury market in tourism (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2023, p. 1023), it is quite natural that among scholars luxury tourism is also becoming a research topic of an increasing popularity.

Due to the abovementioned reasons luxury goods and services attracted quite a lot of attention from the academics. However, till now there is no unified definition of what luxury hotel actually means (Heyes & Lashley, 2017, p. 18). Trying to study such a phenomenon as a “luxury hotel” it is suggested to break it into the main parts – “luxury” and “hotel” in order to analyze them and find those points where these two terms are interlinked. Thus, the word “luxury” takes its roots in the “luxus” which is in translation from Latin means a noun used to describe an “extravagant lifestyle in order to satisfy desires that quite often exceed the usual daily needs” (Trihas et al., 2020, p. 63). According to the study performed by Holmqvist et al. (2020, p. 510) the concept of luxury is researched from the point of experiential economy and claimed to be a form of escapism which is characterized by such key features as “hedonism, aesthetics, authenticity, and exclusivity”. What is more, the findings highlight that luxuries as a phenomenon are rarely linked to the basic technical purpose of the product or service described as a luxury one, but rather they provide sensory meaning to the experience of using such a product or service (Wirtz et al., 2020, p. 674).

Defining the hotel which can be named as a luxury one, there is a presumption among academics that a hotel classified as 5-star property could reflect this term (Heyes & Lashley, 2017, p. 18) since according to the definition (Buehring & O’Mahony, 2019, p. 362) it is an exceptional hospitality setting aimed at ensuring that the guests are getting memorable experiences due to remarkable service and high-quality physical attributes. 5-star properties are distinguished by the staff eager to use full spectrum of their emotional intelligence in order to live up and exceed guests’ expectations, as well as by the hotel

design curated on the principles of guests' comfort, high quality and authenticity. Quite similar conclusion about what to consider as a luxury hotel was made by Ariffin et al. (2018, pp. 2–3), where the author pointed out that the luxury hotel offers premium services to their guests through both physical and non-physical dimensions paying special attention to developing emotional attachment in guests' minds with a final goal to create memorable experiences.

Analyzing the terms of luxury and luxury hotels, the narrative about their multifaceted nature including tangible and intangible elements in order to appeal to multiple human senses and create an experience rather than just deliver a basic service is easily noticeable, which highlights the fact that aesthetics of the luxury hotel as a destination is one of the main factors of its differentiation (Lies, 2021, p. 106). As noted by Kirillova (2023, p. 10), tourist expectations nowadays cannot be lived up with basic features satisfying their primary needs, so have to be supported by attributes focused on creating memorable and holistic experiences, and that is exactly where aesthetics can become a key aspect to be considered. Thus, during the latest years the number of hotels which devote particular attention to their aesthetic image has significantly increased (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 1997).

For hotels the aesthetics become a point of getting a competitive advantage, defining their brand positioning and setting a distinctive image (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 2009; Hauser et al., 2022, p. 1). Wong et al. (2023, p. 413) state that due to the fact that customers perceive the meaning and the quality of experiencing a particular service or product through the aesthetics of this process, aesthetic design becomes a strategic instrument for tourism destinations which allows companies to deliver the message about their brand identity, character and distinctive value propositions to visitors. What is more, Kirillova & Chan (2018, p. 1788) proved with their research that hotels with a high aesthetic value are perceived by guests as ones providing better quality of their services, which is extremely important for luxury hospitality businesses whose customers are seeking for high quality, authenticity, symbolism and emotional values (Michael & Fuste-Forne, 2023, p. 1).

Thus, according to Wong et al. (2023, p. 416) premium travelers cannot be anymore attracted to ordinary hotels since nowadays they are searching for the hotels which can offer multiple aesthetic attributes at once such as cognitive (reputation and positioning of the brand, quality of the services, pricing), sensory (ambience and amenities) and affective attributes (safety, entertainment, level of comfort). For luxury hotels it is vital to show that their hospitality is tailored specifically for their target clients in order to provide their guests with the desired feelings of authenticity, prestige and exclusivity (Michael & Fuste-Forne, 2023, p. 1) through developing aesthetic experiences as a result of co-production between hotel personnel, other guests and material attributes (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 2010).

Carrasco-Santos et al. (2023, p. 1024) in their latest research of the luxury tourism destinations presented the whole portrait of the luxury guest in the modern era, stating the main thought that modern tourists prioritize originality, personalization and uniqueness of travel experiences over simple materialistic possession of expensive attributes of luxury. In fact, guests of upscale hotels tend to become more creative, have higher education, possess a long track of past travel experiences, which results in their increasing demands and expectations (Hackett & Melia, 2012, p. 3). Also, it is worth saying that there are two main categories of the customers who are looking for luxury tourism destinations. The first group of luxury travelers seek for a destination image which reflects a certain type of luxury lifestyle they already lead. Whereas the second group can be called “occasional luxury tourists” since their main motivation for choosing luxury tourism destination derives from desire to try out a special once-in-a-lifetime experience (Trihas et al., 2020, p. 63). However, regardless of the group, all luxury guests bear in mind the same list of essential features which upscale hotels should possess, such as excellence in service, high quality, exclusivity and rarity (Trihas et al., 2020, p. 63). All in all, luxury visitors of the new age choose hotels based on their potential to ensure “unique experiences, new challenges, and multi-entertainment in the form of action, emotion, entertainment and aesthetic adventure” (Hackett & Melia, 2012, p. 3).

In order to ensure an upscale quality of experiences which guests are expecting to be provided with during their stay in luxury hotels there is a special position of the Guest Experience Manager whose main responsibilities are related to the “aesthetics with

service issues” (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 1997). Thus, their duties involve supervision of all the front of house processes happening in the hotel, such as the proper cleaning of the rooms, serving of the food, preparing in-room amenities matching guest’s personality, proper scheduling and delivering of extra services for the guest like taxi, portage, restaurant reservations, etc. Basically, Guest Experience Manager is the one who makes sure that experience curated for the luxury hotel guest is in line with the aesthetic image of the hotel brand.

From the analysis of the luxury guests’ expectations from the hotel it is noticeable that experience is the most sought-after element in the context of luxury travels. An experience within luxury tourism is linked to non-essential products and services of a top-notch quality which can be described as exclusive, rare and prestigious and which imply a high level of symbolic and emotional meanings in addition to its materialistic usability (Michael & Fuste-Forne, 2023, p. 1). Lin & Choe (2022, p. 3) summarizing the meaning of experiential value in a luxury hotel setting, highlighted the aspect of the aesthetic value which is defined as a guest’s state of enjoyment from experiencing the product or service, while leaving aside their main utility purpose and focusing exclusively on the personal feelings and emotions from the process. Hence, the role of destination aesthetics for hotels is clearly vital. Luxury hotels as a phenomenon play the role of “identity building blocks” having an original and unique ambience which is capable of delivering a message about its “aesthetic distinctiveness” (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, pp. 2010–2011). Creation of aesthetic value in the hotel setting happens by means of physical attributes of the material design which contains some one-of-a-kind features, visual attractiveness and caring attention to details, sensory factors such as music, noise, lightning, indoor temperature, interactions with the staff and multi-entertainment dimensions (Correia et al., 2022, p. 393; Lin & Choe, 2022, p. 3) , and the hotel itself can be considered as “independent work of art” (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 1996).

All in all, one of the main goals that luxury hospitality pursues in their activities is to evoke in guests a strong “emotional attachment” towards the hotel via aesthetic appeal which is based on five key principles of hospitality such as personalization, warm welcoming, special relationship, “straight from the heart” and comfort (Ariffin et al., 2018, p. 3). Following all these principles luxury hotels have to provide both physical and

psychological value to cover the listed dimensions, for instance, an aspect of aesthetic personalization could be fulfilled by special bespoke in-room amenities from the material side, and by individual attention from the staff.

Summarizing the subchapter, it is important to highlight that the essence of the luxury hotel goes far beyond expensive material artifacts, instead it defines an upscale hotel as a tourism destination with the main purpose of creating experiences for the guests through activation of all five human senses by means of interactions between the guest and hotel staff, multi-sensory ambience, material attributes and other guests (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 2010). After analyzing specific behavioral patterns of luxury tourists, it has been defined that while choosing an upscale hotel they seek not only for the functional benefits but also expect to get a unique experiential value from the services (Correia et al., 2022, p. 392). That is why, destination aesthetics provide a luxury hotel with its unique “expressive marker” (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012, p. 2009), identity and positioning asset which allow to attract clients who seek luxury travel experiences and win competition on a fast-growing market.

This subchapter enabled the author to develop an understanding about what specific features the concept of destination aesthetics obtains while being applied in the luxury hotel industry context.

1.3. Aesthetic components of guest satisfaction in luxury hotels

The third theoretical subchapter’ goal is to introduce the phenomenon of the guest satisfaction with particular attention to its peculiarities in the luxury hotel setting. What is more, academic assumptions and/or findings on the links between aesthetics and guest satisfaction are to be presented in this subchapter.

Management of luxury hotels always ready to invest enormous volumes of different resources into improving their guests’ satisfaction as it is considered to be one of the prime factors which affect overall hotel success. Hotel performance and guest satisfaction are circularly interlinked because clients become satisfied or dissatisfied due to the current hotel performance, while the level of their satisfaction results in spreading either

positive or negative word-of-mouth, quality of the hotel's reputation and its brand image and loyalty of the clients (Li et al., 2020, p. 1714).

Several scholars (Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 7; Li et al., 2020, pp. 1715–1716) state that due to subjective nature of the guest satisfaction it is rather hard to explicitly define this term in a standardized way. Thus, Khuong et al. (2015, p. 187) offer to perceive guest satisfaction as a psychological phenomenon related to feelings of pleasure and well-being derived from experiencing product/service in a way that meets or exceeds their initial expectations and hopes. Definitions offered by other academics have significant similarities between each other. Most of the scholars agree on the fact that guest satisfaction is based on emotional perceptions of the quality rather than on its objective evaluation (Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 2; Ariffin et al., 2018, p. 6; Breiby & Slatten, 2018, p. 4; Lu et al., 2015, p. 170). Several authors offered to study guest satisfaction through the lens of an expectation-disconfirmation model (Li et al., 2020, pp. 1715–1716; Lu et al., 2015, p. 171; Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 7). According to this approach, customers develop certain expectations about quality and performance of the product or service before experiencing it, while after trying out the good/service they would necessarily compare their primary perceptions and hopes against actual experience (Lu et al., 2015, p. 171). Disconfirmation happens at this post-purchase stage and it has either positive or negative nature. If perceived experience exceeded initial expectations, then it is a positive disconfirmation and a manifestation of customer satisfaction from the product/service. Whereas if client's expectations are not met, negative disconfirmation occurs and leads to dissatisfaction (Li et al., 2020, pp. 1715–1716).

From the analysis of the “guest satisfaction” term it is clear that expectations which clients have about the experience they will get from the product or service influence their final satisfaction either in a positive or negative way. Research shows that in the context of luxury hotels guests would have higher initial anticipations towards the quality of provided services (Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 2), they expect upscale hotels to deliver excellence in services in a consistent manner through all the stages of the customer journey (Padma & Ahn, 2020, p. 5). Such findings show that image of the luxury hotel obliges it to prove its superiority by providing their guests with services which go beyond standards. However difficult this task is but in luxury hospitality it is crucial to work

consistently upon foreseeing guests' wishes and perceptions, and delivering services in a way that makes them satisfied, because unwavering guest satisfaction allows hotels to build remarkable reputation and brand image which in their turn result in gradual growth and financial sustainability (Sharma & Bhat, 2022, p. 92). Furthermore, the high level of customer satisfaction is what determines high revenue streams in luxury hospitality.

So, if expectations of the guests in luxury hotels are of a fundamental importance, what are they? According to Santos et al. (2020, pp. 261–262) customer satisfaction in luxury segment of hospitality depends on both tangible variables such as good location or comfort of the furniture in the room, and intangible features like visual appeal of the facilities, personal treatment and overall multifaceted ambience. Using a three-factor theory of customer satisfaction factors which evoke satisfaction can be divided into three groups – basic factors, factors of excitement and performance factors (Li et al., 2020, p. 1717). Basic factors constitute some sort of minimum requirements to the service or product, and if provided as expected, they do not create feeling of satisfaction, but arouse dissatisfaction if their performance is poor or not present at all. In the context of luxury hotel high quality of ingredients and attributes, thorough cleanliness, access to wellness facilities, timely service and helpful hotel staff are basic expectations of the customers. To excitement factors belong that kind of attributes which are considered to be extra and are not generally expected by guests, that is why if they are absent, it does not lead to negative disconfirmation, whereas their presence drives levels of positive satisfaction. For instance, getting personalized in-room amenities upon check-in is not anticipated by guests, but becomes a highly pleasant experience if occurs; the same with a holistic hotel atmosphere which creates a pleasant multi-sensory experience – it is a very satisfying bonus rather than a prime demand. The last group implies those factors which are related to performance and hence produce a linear and symmetric impact on the guest satisfaction. Thus, tasteful design, attentive and caring staff, selection of amenities – these are all factors of the performance, and depending on it guests would be either satisfied with their experience or not (Li et al., 2020, p. 1717).

Research of Padma and Ahn (2020, pp. 2–5), discovering attributes which influence satisfaction of luxury hotel guests, revealed that in the case of an upscale hospitality customers tend to appreciate both features related to physical or room-related

environment and social or symbolic attributes. This finding is exclusively relevant for luxury hotels because studies about guest satisfaction in more budget hotels led to different conclusions. So, in the context of luxury hotel industry key attention is paid to the holistic experience of the guest stay – satisfaction appears to be a result of the consistent coherency between quality of tangible elements and service performance, guest-staff interactions and an added value of its atmosphere (Buehring & O’Mahony, 2019, p. 358; Lu et al., 2015, p. 171; Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 7). All in all, from the perspective of upscale guests, satisfaction is something that arouses from pleasant feelings and emotions which clients were able to experience due to proper luxury hospitality (Sharma & Bhat, 2022, p. 93). Studies confirmed that in a luxury hotel setting to make a guest be satisfied means to go far beyond basic material attributes, and to create a pleasant atmosphere, entertaining experiences, heartfelt guest-staff interactions as well as taste and authenticity in details (Ariffin et al., 2018, p. 5; Khuong et al., 2015, p. 188; Lu et al., 2015, p. 171). Research of Jain et al. (2023, p. 1) also demonstrated that clientele of luxury hotels is enticed by emotional appeal, unique ambience, bespoke elements in service provision and genuine welcoming attitude from the staff. Cicerali et al. (2017, p. 718) stated that guest satisfaction is mostly derived from their perceptions of the comfort of hotel’s environment as per the concepts of organizational-environmental psychology. Above-mentioned highlights a direct link between guest satisfaction in luxury hotels and destination aesthetics, which has already been confirmed by multiple studies, stating that aesthetics has a positive impact on driving guest satisfaction (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 20; Li et al., 2020, p. 1722; Kirillova & Lehto, 2016, p. 515). This finding provides a valuable insight for luxury hotels since an overall concept of tourist destination aesthetics which was widely explained in the previous subchapters is highly correspondent with experiences that customers seek for while opting for luxury hospitality.

The choice of premium travellers is largely based on the factors driving experiential value (Correia et al., 2022, p. 392) which can be created through aesthetics of the hotels. Thus, Genc & Genc (2023, p. 531) admitted that aesthetics has a significant impact on the overall tourist experience and lead to their satisfaction. Lin & Choe (2022, p. 7) researched how performance of particular factors which constitute an aesthetic value result in a better luxury hotel customer experience and help to drive brand love. Buehring & O’Mahony (2019, p. 359) conducted research of value generating factors that create

memorable experiences for guests in luxury hotels, and their results revealed that all the features which have a major experiential benefit for guests can be divided into five categories – technology construct, services construct, atmosphere construct, culture construct and sensory construct. Such a grouping allows to draw direct parallels between value generating factors for guest satisfaction in luxury hotels and the concept of destination aesthetics. Also, findings of the study of memorable experiences in the context of a 5-star hotel (Guzel & Dortyol, 2016, p. 31) proved a key role of the multisensory stimuli in developing an aesthetic appreciation of the guest experience. Lu et al. (2015, pp. 176–177) summarized influence of different indicators on guest satisfaction in a hotel setting and most of them could be grouped as ones related to employees, hotel’s physical environment and atmosphere. Later on, in the empirical part of this Master’s thesis author will apply mentioned frameworks and literature findings to design original research about the role of destination aesthetics for driving guest satisfaction in luxury hotels.

To conclude, guest satisfaction has a vital role in determining an overall success of a luxury hotel performance. From guests’ perspective, experiential value of the hotel stay affects their satisfying or dissatisfying feeling from the hotel. In their turn luxury experiences are based on the “aesthetic appearance and employee attitude cues” (Kim & Baker, 2021, p. 5), which makes the concept of destination aesthetics highly relevant and interesting for both academics and practitioners as a direct or indirect driver of guest satisfaction, especially in the context of luxury hotels (Lu et al., 2015, p. 168) where high quality of holistic experiences is a main distinguishing feature.

This subchapter allowed to find traces of destination aesthetics components in a guest satisfaction phenomenon, which is particularly important for the luxury hotel industry.

All in all, theoretical part of the thesis made a good basis for original research to be performed in the empirical part of the Master thesis, through the analysis of fresh literature closely related to the main topic of the study. Thus, key terms such as aesthetics, destination aesthetics, luxury hospitality and guest satisfaction were defined and considered in their evolution, main frameworks and study approaches were discovered, as well as potential relationships between the main phenomena of the research were established based on the findings from the latest scientific articles.

2. IMPROVEMENT OF GUEST SATISFACTION IN CENTRAL EDINBURGH LUXURY HOTELS THROUGH DESTINATION AESTHETICS

2.1. Overview of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh

The sub-chapter provides an overview of the luxury hotels in central Edinburgh and the need to pay more attention to the problems related to the aesthetics of the destination, as well as discusses the research methodology of the Master thesis.

For conducting an empirical part of the Master thesis research author decided to focus on studying relationship between destination aesthetics and guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in the context of a particular cultural and geographical setting as it was recommended for the future research by several scholars (Genc & Temizkan, 2023, pp. 21–22; Yang et al., 2022, p. 14). Thus, this study will be devoted to the case of upscale hotels which are located in the central part of Edinburgh, Scotland, the United Kingdom, and this choice is to be justified further. First of all, a luxury hospitality market in the United Kingdom was chosen since, according to Padma and Ahn (2020, p. 1), for a British upscale hotel industry getting an understanding about expectations, preferences and other behavioural patterns of the guests is rather crucial due to enormous impact of this industry on the national and global economy.

While narrowing down a huge luxury hotel market of the UK, author took into account economic sustainability of regional markets to pick up the one which demonstrated good recovery results after the disruption caused by COVID-19, to build up the research upon successful cases. Hence, as per a Scottish Accommodation Occupancy Survey Report (SOAS) (Visit Scotland, 2023, p. 3), occupancy rates on a Scottish hotel market for September 2023 experienced 8.48 percentage point increase when comparing percentage room occupancy rates with September 2022 – from 74.97% in September 2022 to 83.45%

in September 2023. Such statistics show that Scottish hotels are steadily returning to their pre-pandemic rates, for instance, in 2019 before the global shutdown annual occupancy in the capital of Scotland – Edinburgh was around 74% (Visit Scotland, 2020, p. 5).

Specifying the market to study further, author decided to conduct the research on the case of Edinburgh and its luxury hotels in the central part. Edinburgh is the most sought-after tourism destination all over Scotland both by domestic travellers from different parts of the UK and from overseas (Visit Scotland, 2020, p. 4), with 5.3 million overnight stays per year. For the purposes of the research, Edinburgh luxury market is very interesting due to its diversified customers with 22% of hotel guests coming from Scotland, 35% – from the rest of the UK, 21% – from Europe, 10% – from North America and 11% of tourists from the rest of the world (Visit Scotland, 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, central Edinburgh is a place where luxury 5-star hotels provide their guests with holistic experiences – starting from the hotel buildings’ roles in the Scottish history (InterContinental® Edinburgh The George, n.d.; Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, n.d.; The Balmoral Edinburgh, n.d.) to the services they perform as well as the hospitality they create. Even though neither of the 5-star central Edinburgh hotels is a resort hotel, due to their segment – upscale luxury – they are expected to provide guests with holistic experiences including full list of hotel services (food and beverage, gym, spa, concierge, events, etc.), this fact allows the author to refer to aesthetics of each hotel as to aesthetics of separate destinations.

In author’s opinion, due to the listed reasons the case of luxury hotels located in central Edinburgh for the research would provide a good understanding on the importance of destination aesthetics for guests in upscale hotels and their satisfaction, and allow to find answers to the research questions and ultimately – to fulfil the goal of the thesis.

2.2. Research design

The research of the Master’s thesis is devoted to studying the role of destination aesthetics in improving guest satisfaction in luxury hotels based on the case of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh. In order to achieve this goal and to get an understanding on the relationship between aesthetic component and guests’ reaction on it, it is crucial to clearly define the way how the research will be designed.

As a basis for the research design, the author has decided to focus on the three-level framework offered by Kirillova and Wassler (2019, p. 159) where destination aesthetics of tourism experience considered to imply three main layers: an outer layer of physical aesthetics of the destination; middle – represented by multi-sensory stimuli of aesthetics; a core layer involves human interactions in the environment which is considered to be a complete destination. Such a choice is supported with conclusions of many previously analyzed academic articles (Jain et al., 2023, p. 1; Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019, p. 358; Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 7; Lu et al., 2015, p. 171) which state that guest satisfaction in luxury hotels has a multi-dimensional nature and depends on a plethora of factors such as tangible elements of the atmosphere, guest-staff communication and holistic ambience.

Taking into account specific features of the issue of guest satisfaction where the particular experience of hotel stay should be evaluated by the guests following the list of destination aesthetic aspects, to achieve valid results a quantitative research design has been selected as the most relevant for conducting the study. This choice has been supported by multiple research papers investigating guest satisfaction in hospitality (Baquero, 2023, pp. 8–9; Genc & Temizkan, 2023, p. 8; Lin & Choe, 2022, p. 6; Santos, 2020, p. 262; Ying & Al-Khaled, 2023, p. 8) which are built upon a quantitative research design. The quantitative method is applied in the majority of researchers in hospitality and tourism industry (Cakar & Aykol, 2021, p. 24) and perceived as a particularly useful method for examining causal relationships (Truong et al., 2020, p. 1564). Since the first research question of the thesis is devoted to finding an answer to how different aspects of destination aesthetics influence guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh, quantitative research is rather relevant to be applied. What is more, quantitative research methods benefit from their objective nature since results obtained from the larger population are considered to be less biased (Xiong, 2022, p. 957). Also, this research design allows to significantly save time during data collection and analysis stages. However, this method has a drawback of the possible “capturing cross-cultural response styles” which can provoke results misreading (Dolnicar, 2018, p. 3414), especially in the case of conducting research in the hospitality industry notorious for its multicultural nature. Thus, respondents depending on the cultural background they are coming from may give different assessments of their satisfaction levels while actually being on the same level (Dolnicar, 2018, p. 3414). But, in the end, mentioned perks of the method outweigh this disadvantage.

Questionnaire survey has been chosen as a data collecting method for performing quantitative research in this Master's thesis since it allows to get a complete picture not only about the attitudes of the guests towards destination aesthetic elements but also their spread and possible correlations between the particular groups of respondents and their choices (Veal, 2017, p. 312). Questionnaire surveys are frequently applied as a data collection method in hospitality industry since they provide researchers with complex information on the guest satisfaction and perceptions presented in a rather clear form of graphics and Excel spreadsheets (Veal, 2017, p. 312; Huang, 2017, p. 79). As a way to collect answers for the questionnaire survey a self-administered (respondent-completion) approach was chosen, which is a common choice for hospitality studies (Ying, 2023; Santos, 2020; Baquero, 2023) where respondents prefer to stay anonymous, not revealing any sensitive information. Also, this approach benefits from low expenses, possibility to get a relatively big number of replies in a short period of time. However, the main obstacle the researcher has to face is the low response rate (Veal, 2017, pp. 315–316).

According to Huang (2017, p. 80) questionnaire should be perceived not just as a simple instrument to procure answers but as “a conversation with a purpose between the researcher and respondent”, that is why it is important to build it in a way that it was easy to comprehend for the respondent who is not familiar with specific terminology and compelling enough to give motivation to complete it. With this in mind, it has been decided to make a questionnaire out of closed questions which are very popular in hospitality research due to the fact that they can save completion time spent by respondents as well as their simplicity for the further analysis (Huang, 2017, p. 83). Since while developing a questionnaire for the research of the role of destination aesthetics in luxury hotel guest satisfaction author chose to rely on the three-level framework offered by Kirillova and Wassler (2019, p. 154), a curated questionnaire was divided into five context blocks. The first block was formed with six standard pre-coded questions to collect demographic information from the respondents. Whereas, the second, the third and the fourth blocks were devoted to three levels of tourism destination aesthetics – each block covered a different level (physical environment, multisensory aspects and personnel). The questions for every of these blocks were developed on the basis of the findings from the topic-related scientific studies discussed in the theoretical chapter, in Table 1 the list of the questionnaire statements could be found along with references to

the articles, from where they were either taken or modified. The last block includes four questions for assessing the actual level of guest satisfaction. The questions for all context blocks, except for the demographic one, have been designed applying an item-specific (IS) Likert-type scale format with a 5-point scale. Usage of the item-specific Likert-type scale allows to curate scale labels for every block of questions in the most suitable way so to make options more direct and related which results in a better quality of the collected data (Huang, 2017, p. 84). The developed questionnaire is presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1. The list of the questions with references

Questionnaire statement	Source
Hotel's common areas have attractive interior design & décor	Lin & Choe, 2022, p. 7
Rooms are well-designed & spacious	Buehring, 2019, p. 369
Rooms have inspiring views	Buehring, 2019, p. 369
Hotel is thoroughly clean	Lin & Choe, 2022, p. 7
Hotel's amenities are provided and easily available (drinking water/umbrellas/tea & coffee, etc.)	Lu et al., 2015, p. 176
Background music is pleasing	Lin & Choe, 2022, p. 7
Furnishing & décor materials are pleasant to touch	Buehring, 2019, p. 369
Bathroom amenities have pleasant & expensive smell	Buehring, 2019, p. 369
Hotel areas are pleasantly scented	Guzel & Dortyol, 2016, p. 35
Hotel is decorated with original paintings/frescoes	Lu et al., 2015, p. 175
The hotel staff gives me authentic smiles all the time	Ariffin et al., 2018, pp. 10–11
The hotel staff makes me feel like an important person	Ariffin et al., 2018, pp. 10–11
The hospitable behavior of the hotel staff seems to be genuine regardless of any control	Ariffin et al., 2018, pp. 10–11
The hotel staff is knowledgeable about local insights (where/what to eat, what to see, etc.)	Buehring, 2019, p. 372
The hotel staff makes me feel at home	Ariffin et al., 2018, pp. 10–11

In order to achieve representative and valid results it was crucial to define correctly the target population of the research, in other words the group of subjects or objects

conclusions of the research are about (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020, p. 183). For this Master's thesis research, the population consisted of all the guests who had ever stayed in luxury hotels (5-star segment) in central Edinburgh. The next important step was to define a sample for the research. Sampling is a procedure that implies choosing a much smaller number of representative items from the whole population of the research which still enables a researcher to draw representative conclusions about the entire group (Sharma, 2017, p. 749, Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020, p. 181). In the conditions of the thesis research the most favourable type of sampling was a non-probability one. Since luxury hotels in central Edinburgh, which the research is based on, have strict policies in regard to their guest data the researcher was unable to get a list of the guests to choose a questionnaire participant using a random criterion ensuring that all the elements of the population had an equal non-zero chance of being included (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020, p. 185).

That is why participants for this questionnaire were selected on a non-probability basis, in particular, using a voluntary (self-selection) sampling via a web-survey. Thus, the questionnaire was put into the web-format using a Google Forms tool, and was published on LinkedIn groups of "The Luxury Travel World Community", "Travel, Tourism & Hospitality Group | Wellness Travel, Luxury Wellness & Other Niche Travel Trends", "Luxury & Lifestyle Professionals", "Luxury Travel Scotland" as well as the link to the web-questionnaire was published on Instagram stories of an Edinburgh travel blogger Viktoriia Telfer with an active audience of more than eleven thousands of followers. The questionnaire was opened to accepting responses between 27th February 2024 and 8th March, 2024. Such a placement of the web-questionnaire allowed the author to reach and invite to participate in the questionnaire survey potential representatives of the population on the basis of their interest in luxury traveling, luxury hospitality and Edinburgh tourism. Even though it might have decreased chances of senior respondents to take part in the questionnaire survey (Vo et al., 2022, p. 297). Nevertheless, the final sample consisted of those who were willing to participate in the survey, and were matching the requirements – the author put a filter-question in the beginning of the questionnaire "Have you ever stayed in the luxury (5-star) hotel in central Edinburgh?" and respondents were given access to the questionnaire only in case of a positive answer. Voluntary or self-selection survey was chosen as an alternative where respondents were given an opportunity to decide to take part in the research on their own record, since the author was not able to

get the permission from the managers of the case hotels for spreading questionnaires among their guests via emails due as it was firstly planned. Voluntary sampling allowed to override this obstacle and reduce the time required for searching for suitable respondents. What is more, one of the advantages of voluntary sampling was that participants were more eager to complete the survey accurately since it was their own decision (Sharma, 2017, p. 752). However, such a type of the sampling increased the chances of self-selection bias where the decision to take part in the research already represented some type of the guest behaviour (Sharma, 2017, p. 752).

Prior to launching the questionnaire spreading through the above-mentioned channels, author conducted a pilot study to examine the relevance and comprehensiveness of the questions as well as to test the average duration of the questionnaire filling. Thus, the pilot study was held from 17th February 2024 to 21st February 2024 and involved seven participants who represented the population of the study. Adjustments based on the pilot study were related to the visual design of the questionnaire form and simplifying the wording of some questions. All the changes were made before the main data collection process.

Sample size was calculated using the size of the entire population and a confidence interval. For this research the size of the entire population was the number of guests who had ever stayed in any luxury hotel in central Edinburgh, and considering the fact that in Edinburgh the number of overnight hotel stays is more than 5.3 million per year (Edinburgh and Lothians Factsheet, 2020, p. 4), the entire population was presumed to be more than 500.000, which according to Veal (2017, p. 427), conditioned that the sample size for confidence level 95% and confidence interval 5% had to be not less than 384 participants in order to obtain representative results of the survey. However, the actual number of valid responses which the author was able to collect during two weeks when the questionnaire was open is 290 responses. As it was discussed previously and confirmed by the academic literature (Veal, 2017, pp. 315–316), self-administered questionnaires are notorious for having a low-response rate. Furthermore, the target audience of this survey is very specific since respondents are required to have an experience of staying in a 5-star hotel in central Edinburgh, which makes it more difficult to reach such participants using a voluntary sampling. Due to these reasons, collecting

75,6% of replies from the planned sample size is considered to be a justified and adequate number.

Research design also implies defining data analysis methods and tools used for processing collected data. This research has a descriptive nature aimed at finding out the means and frequencies of guest satisfaction with particular aesthetic aspects in luxury hotels in order to make recommendations on what to be improved. That is why for data analysis the author has selected Excel Spreadsheet software which is one of the most popular tools to analyze obtained data in quantitative research (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020, p. 182). Microsoft Excel has been chosen as a suitable software for analyzing data since it works well with relatively small datasets and the author is better familiar with its interface. For the purpose of the Master's thesis research, it is important to define and explain relationships between destination aesthetic factors and satisfaction of hotel guests, as a method for completing this research task a crosstabulation analysis has been chosen. Crosstabulation analysis allows to see relationships between different variables. This analytical method is widely used in scientific research of hospitality issues while analysing quantitative data (Lin et al., 2022, p. 3988; Chang, 2018, p. 86; Gyuracz-Nemeth et al., 2016, p. 55). In order to determine the strength of impact that three main dimensions of destination aesthetics have on ultimate guest satisfaction, correlation analysis is to be applied.

Having defined the research design through the choice of the main theoretical framework, research method, sampling type and size, structure and contents of the questionnaire, data analysis methods and tools, this subchapter prepared all the fundamental pillars for performing actual research.

2.2. Results of the research

In this chapter an overview of the collected via the questionnaire survey data is presented with the results of its descriptive analysis. As it was mentioned in the research design description, over two weeks between 27th February, 2024 and 8th March, 2024 the author managed to collect 290 unique valid responses from the respondents who are meeting the main requirement of having a previous experience of staying in any 5-star hotel in central Edinburgh.

As per the design of the questionnaire, in the beginning survey participants were asked to provide answers to 5 questions which would help the author to define their demographics. Summarized data on the gender, age, origin, purpose of stay and guest composition is depicted in Figure 1.

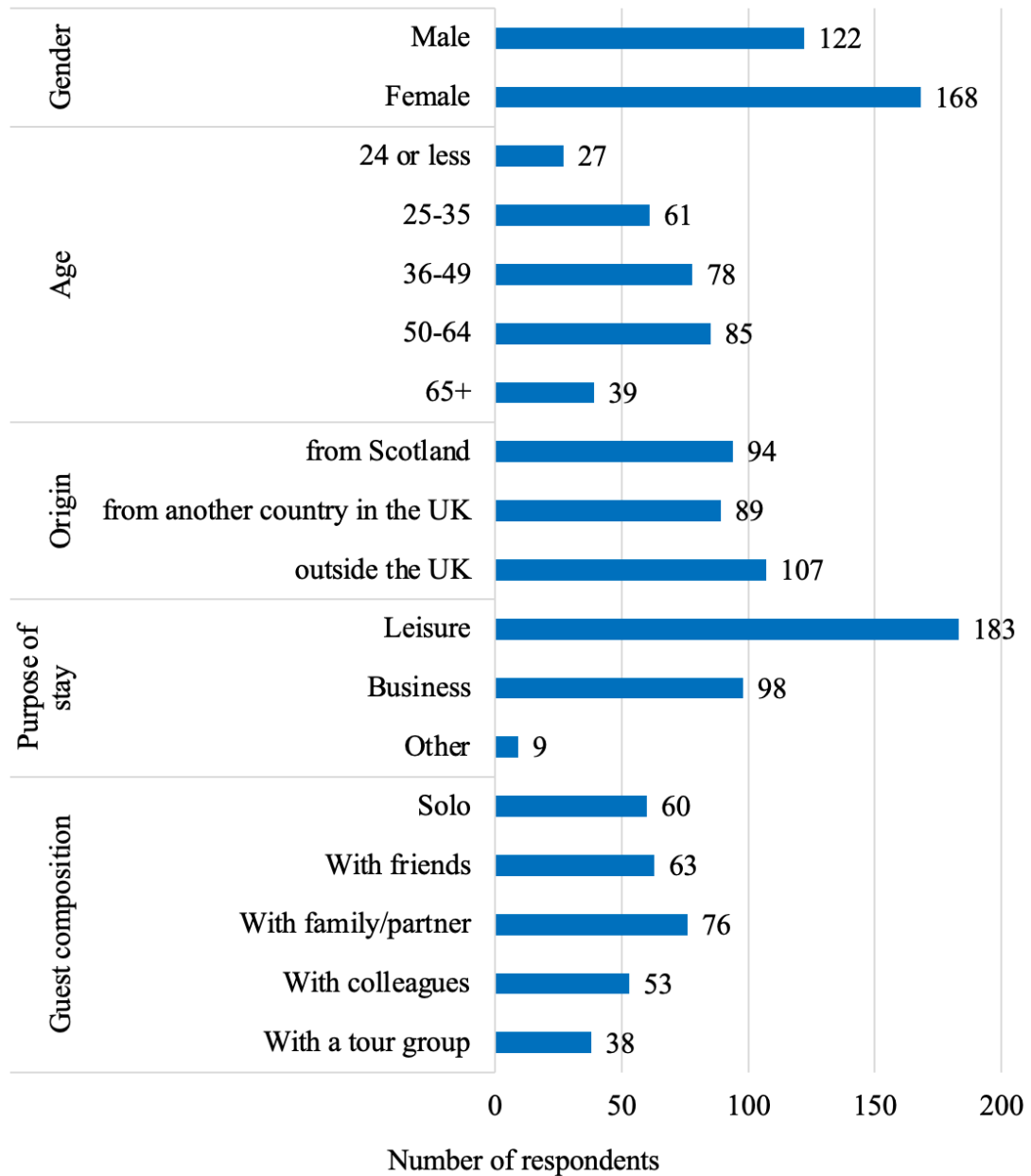


Figure 1. Summarized demographic information of the sample (N = 290)

A gender ratio of 290 respondents is split in a way that 57.9% of filled questionnaires came from females and 42.1% from males. No participant chose “Prefer not to say” option

while specifying their gender. Such a ratio makes obtained survey results well-balanced in regard to the gender criteria. Age-wise the biggest share of replies (29.3%) was obtained from the respondents from the 50–64 age group, followed by 26.9% of replies from the participants aging 36–49. 21% of filled questionnaires were collected from 25–35-year-old respondents. The minority age groups who completed the survey are represented by the oldest respondents (65+) with 13.4% of responses, and the youngest ones who are 24 or less years old with 9.3% questionnaires submitted. Concerning origins respondents were given three options to choose from, and the most of replies came from the participants from outside the UK – 36.9%. Whereas Scottish respondents constituted 32.4% from the total number, and 30.7% of replies were collected from representatives of another country in the UK. Therefore, the balance of the participants’ origins is almost equitable. In regard to the main purpose of the last stay in luxury hotel in Edinburgh the majority of respondents (63.1%) chose a “Leisure” option, while business goals were pursuing 33.8% of the survey participants. An option “Other” was selected only in 3.1% of the cases in the context of the hotel stay purpose. The last demographic question was related to their guest composition during the respondents’ last luxury hotel stay in Edinburgh. Thus, five different options were given to the participants to choose from. The most popular answer which gained 26.2% from all the responses was “With family/partner”. Options “With friends” and “Solo” were selected in 21.7% and 20.7% of cases correspondingly. 18.3% of the participants stayed in a 5-star central Edinburgh hotel the last time with their colleagues. The least common answer was “with a tour group”, which gained 13.1% of the responses.

Questionnaire was designed in a way that there were two main context blocks of questions. The first block was devoted to getting an understanding on the influence of different factors of destination aesthetics on guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in Edinburgh, in its turn this block was subdivided into three sets of questions based on the nature of the factors. The second block was aimed at providing insights on the current level of guest satisfaction in Edinburgh 5-star hotels.

Figure 2 depicts attitude of the survey participants towards different aspects of the physical environment aesthetics of luxury hotels and their importance for getting satisfaction with a hotel stay.

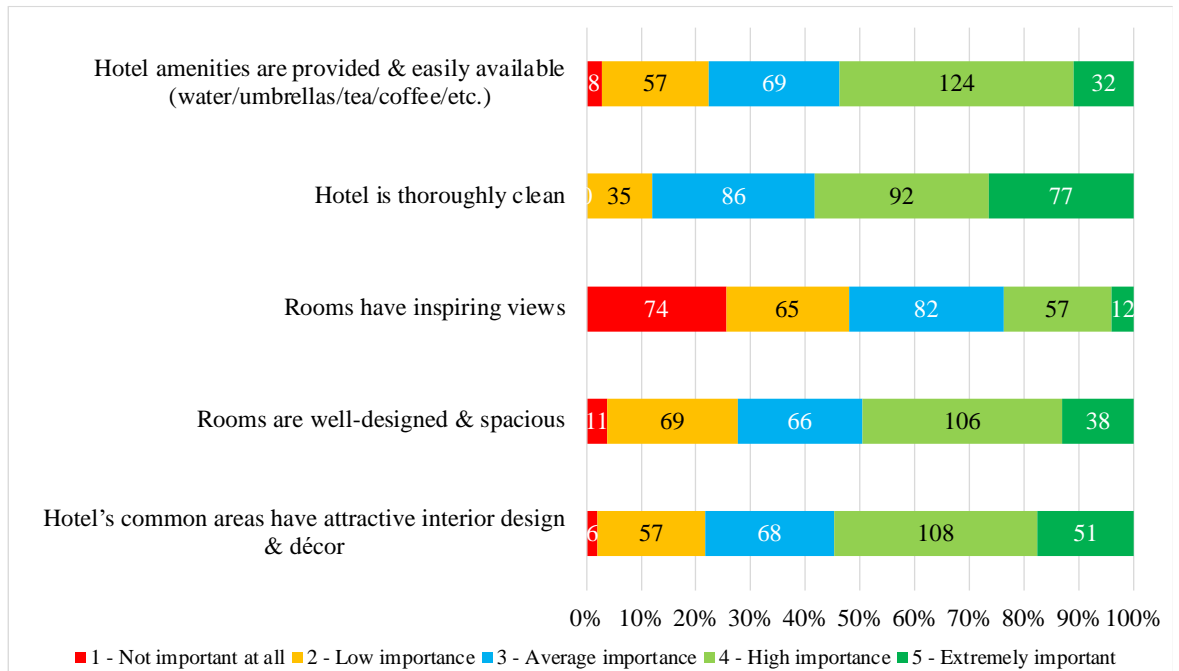


Figure 2. Importance of the physical environment aesthetics aspects for guest satisfaction

It is clearly visible that the biggest number of “Extremely important” replies – 26.6% respondents attributed to the hotel’s cleanliness, and there was no survey participant who would assign a zero value to this aspect while evaluating importance of the factors of physical environment on their satisfaction. Whereas inspiring views from the hotel room received the biggest number of “Not important at all” replies – 25.5%, and the least of “Extremely important” answers – 4.1%.

To support clarity of the obtained results and draw a straightforward picture of the role of each physical environment aesthetics aspect in guest satisfaction the author calculated weighted average of importance as well as standard deviation for every factor using SUMPRODUCT and SUM functions in Excel. The results of calculations are presented in Appendix 2. Thus, apart from highlighting the most significant role of the “Hotel is thoroughly clean” factor for guest satisfaction in luxury hotels, the analysis made it more noticeable that attractive interior design and décor has a major significance for guest satisfaction with a weighted average importance at the level of 3.486. Whereas weighted average scores of such aspects as spacious and well-designed rooms as well as availability of extra hotel amenities show that they have an intermediate importance for guest satisfaction.

Cross-tabulation analysis using Excel was applied in order to examine if there are any relationships between main demographic characteristics of Edinburgh luxury hotel guests such as age, gender and travel purposes, and their opinions regarding the importance of different aspects of physical environment aesthetics for their satisfaction.

In regard to the interior design and décor of the hotel’s common areas two different groups of opinions are clearly distinguished (see Table 2). Thus, 51.9% and 45.9% of respondents from age groups 24 or less and 25–35 correspondingly assigned “2 – Low importance” to this aesthetic aspect of the physical environment. Whereas survey participants from all other older age groups on the contrary assigned to this aspect “4 – High importance” with a percentage above 45%.

Table 2. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the hotel’s common areas’ interior aspect

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	11.1%	51.9%	14.8%	7.4%	14.8%
25–35	3.3%	45.9%	27.9%	11.5%	11.5%
36–49	0.0%	11.5%	23.1%	52.6%	12.8%
50–64	0.0%	5.9%	21.2%	45.9%	27.1%
65+	2.6%	2.6%	28.2%	48.7%	18.0%

Cross-tabulation based on the gender criteria has revealed that female respondents assign higher value to attractiveness of hotel’s interior design and décor than male. As a matter of fact, 47.6% and 25.0% of all female survey participants believe that this factor has either a high importance or an extreme importance for their satisfaction correspondingly. While most of the responses from male participants were scattered between scores “2 – Low importance” (29.5%), “3 – Average importance” (36.1%) and “4 – High importance” (22.95%). Analysis based on the purpose of travel criteria has not showed any major patterns of relationship between hotel stay intentions of guests and their attitude towards interior.

Concerning design and size of the hotel rooms respondents from 36–49 and 50–64 age groups share a common pattern – they perceive this factor to be of a high importance for their guest satisfaction in luxury hotels. While representatives of the oldest generation

(65+) consider room’s size and interior to be of a low or average importance in 38.5% and 33.3% of the cases (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the aspect of room’s design and size

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	11.1%	22.2%	14.8%	29.6%	22.2%
25–35	6.6%	32.8%	13.1%	31.1%	16.4%
36–49	2.6%	16.7%	26.9%	41.0%	12.8%
50–64	2.4%	17.6%	23.5%	45.9%	10.6%
65+	0.0%	38.5%	33.3%	20.5%	7.7%

Responses from male guests did not show any defined opinion on the importance of spaciousness of hotel rooms on their satisfaction since responses are almost equally distributed between all the evaluation scores from “2 – Low importance” and “5 – Extremely important” including score options in between these two. Whereas more than a half of all the female participants (53.5%) claimed high importance of spacious and well-designed rooms on their satisfaction. Division of the respondents by the hotel stay purpose did not show any significant relationship with their opinions about this aesthetic factor.

Cross-tabulation analysis showed that male respondents tend to be rather indifferent towards inspiring views from the hotel rooms with 47.5% of “1 – Not important at all” evaluation options. Whereas, women did not reveal a common attitude towards this factor. Analysing responses of different respondent groups based on their age and purpose of hotel stay about the importance of inspiring views from the room no specific pattern of relationship was detached between the variables.

Cleanliness of the hotel as a central for guest satisfaction aspect of aesthetics of the physical environment was never considered to be not important at all by any of the respondents. However, noticeably that younger generations of 35 years old and less in their majority (51.9% and 44.3%) stick to the opinion that this aspect has average importance for their satisfaction with a hotel stay. Unlike the age groups 50–64 (43.5%)

and 65+ (41%) who evaluate cleanliness as a factor of a high and extremely high importance (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the aspect of the hotel’s cleanliness

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	0.0%	33.3%	51.9%	11.1%	3.7%
25–35	0.0%	27.9%	44.3%	18.0%	9.8%
36–49	0.0%	9.0%	23.1%	38.5%	29.5%
50–64	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	37.6%	43.5%
65+	0.0%	5.1%	28.2%	41.0%	25.6%

The same relationship pattern was also detached between the gender and attitude towards cleanliness, revealing that 50.8% of male respondents assign average importance to this factor. Whereas females associate hotel’s cleanliness with high (40.5%) or extremely high (39.3%) role in their guest satisfaction.

Concerning availability and ease of getting extra hotel amenities, there is an absolute agreement among all the groups of respondents based on different demographic criteria that this factor has a high importance on their feeling of satisfaction in luxury hotels.

The second set of questions from this questionnaire block was devoted to multi-sensory aspects of destination aesthetics in luxury hotels, and general opinions on their importance for guest satisfaction are presented below in Figure 3.

It is easily notable from the chart that pleasant and expensive smell of bathroom amenities has a significant impact on guest satisfaction in luxury hotels since this aspect of aesthetics received the biggest number of “Extremely important” responses combined with the lowest share – only 0.7% – of opinions that it is not important at all. Also, only 1% of survey participants think that pleasantly scented hotel is not contributing to their guest satisfaction.

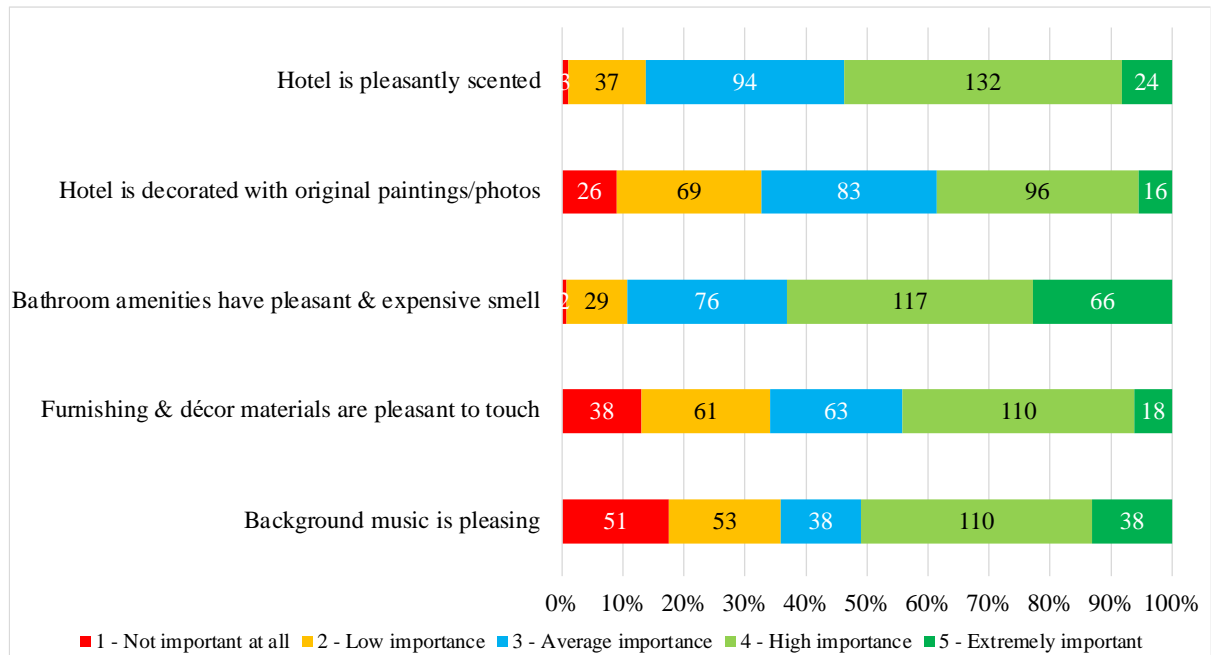


Figure 3. Importance of the multi-sensory aesthetic aspects for guest satisfaction

For a clearer picture of the importance of particular multi-sensory aspects of aesthetics in luxury hotels author calculated the weighted averages separately for every single factor accompanied by their standard deviation (see Appendix 2). According to the weighted average analysis, smells are being followed by sounds in terms of their role for driving satisfaction – as a matter of fact, pleasing background music gained a 3.107 weighted average score.

In order to determine if there are any connections between gender/age of the respondents or their main purpose of the last 5-star hotel stay in Edinburgh, and value they assign to different multi-sensory factors of aesthetics in luxury hotel settings a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted separately for each aspect.

Gender-wise, pleasing background music play a highly important role in female guest satisfaction in 47.02% of the cases. Whereas the share of male respondents who support the same opinion is noticeably lower – 25.4%. In regards to the age criteria, pleasing background music has high importance for the guests who are older than 36 years, whereas almost 60% of survey participants from the age group 25–35 consider this aspect of aesthetics to be either not important at all for them or has a low importance (see Table 5).

Table 5. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the aspect of pleasing background music

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	29.6%	18.5%	7.4%	25.9%	18.5%
25–35	27.9%	31.1%	21.3%	13.1%	6.6%
36–49	9.0%	19.2%	14.1%	53.8%	3.8%
50–64	10.6%	11.8%	11.8%	47.1%	18.8%
65+	25.6%	10.3%	5.1%	33.3%	25.6%

Hotel guests with business purposes tend to appreciate pleasing background music in more cases than guests with leisure or other purposes for staying in the luxury hotel, with 42.9% of responses claiming this factor to have a high importance on their satisfaction.

Regarding the importance of the pleasant to touch furnishings and décor materials no specific relationships between age of the respondents or the main purpose of their stay, and value of this factor for their ultimate guest satisfaction were detected. Representatives of all groups were mostly avoiding such scores as “1 – Not important at all” and “5 – Extremely important” while evaluating importance of pleasant to touch furnishing and décor materials, sticking to more neutral options from 2 till 4. Whereas gender-wise it is noticeable that female guests are way more sensitive towards pleasant to touch materials used for the hotel furniture and décor than males, with 50.0% of their scores assigned towards “4 – High importance”.

The factor of expensive and pleasant smell of bathroom amenities was recognized as an important one by all the age groups as presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the bathroom amenities smell aspect

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	55.6%	33.3%
25–35	0.0%	8.2%	39.3%	34.4%	18.0%
36–49	1.3%	3.8%	21.8%	41.0%	32.1%
50–64	0.0%	12.9%	18.8%	44.7%	23.5%
65+	2.6%	17.9%	48.7%	28.2%	2.6%

However, from the cross-tabulation analysis it is noticeable that the most significant value to this aspect is assigned by the youngest guests aging 24 or less with 55.6% of responses stating that it has a high importance for their satisfaction, while senior guests stay more neutral towards the smell of amenities. Gender-wise, it is noticeable from Table 7 that female guests get more satisfaction from the pleasant and expensive smell of bathroom amenities than males, even though both genders recognize high importance of this factor (34.4% of men and 44.6% of women).

Table 7. Cross-tabulation analysis for the bathroom amenities smell aspect based on gender criteria

Gender	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
Male	1.6%	19.7%	36.1%	34.4%	8.2%
Female	0.0%	3%	19.1%	44.6%	33.3%

Original paintings and photos used for decorating hotel areas are considered to be highly important for arousing satisfaction by 61.5% of the respondents aging more than 65 years. On the contrary majority of the youngest survey participants assigned a low importance score to this factor, and for 18.5% of them it is not important at all. Although age groups were less extreme about original paintings and photos, there is still an easily noticeable pattern (see Table 8) that older respondents are more eager to associate this visual aspect of aesthetics with higher guest satisfaction.

Table 8. Results of cross-tabulation analysis for the original paintings/photos aspect

Age	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
24 or less	18.5%	44.4%	22.2%	14.8%	0.0%
25–35	19.7%	26.2%	29.5%	18.0%	6.6%
36–49	6.4%	26.9%	41.0%	25.6%	0.0%
50–64	2.4%	22.4%	24.7%	43.5%	7.1%
65+	5.1%	2.6%	15.4%	61.5%	15.4%

Gender-wise, there was no particular pattern of relationship defined in terms of attitude to this visual aesthetic factor. Whereas in regards to the purpose of the hotel stay it was

defined that leisure guests tend to assign high importance to original paintings/photos in the luxury hotel more frequently (37.7%) than business guests who in 35.7% of the cases consider this aspect to be of an average importance for their satisfaction.

Although pleasantly scented common areas of a luxury hotel are a rather important factor for guest satisfaction regardless of their age group, participants of the survey aging 36 years or more typically assigned higher importance scores to this aspect. Thus, 52.6% of respondents from a 36–49 age group and 54.1% of respondents aging between 50 and 64 years perceive pleasant scent of hotel’s common areas as a highly important factor which influences their overall satisfaction with a luxury hotel.

In terms of the gender-based distribution (see Table 9) of the scores assigned to the importance of the hotel’s scent aspect for guest satisfaction, majority of female respondents (63.7%) claim this factor to be highly important for them to feel satisfied with a luxury hotel, whereas men tend to be more neutral towards scents with 49.2% of them assigning average importance to this aspect.

Table 9. Cross-tabulation analysis for the hotel’s scent aspect based on gender criteria

Gender	1 – Not important at all	2 – Low importance	3 – Average importance	4 – High importance	5 – Extremely important
Male	2.5%	25.4%	49.2%	20.5%	2.4%
Female	0.0%	3.6%	20.2%	63.7%	12.5%

The last set of questions aimed at examining general importance of different aesthetic factors on guest satisfaction in luxury hotels was devoted to the aesthetics of human interactions between guests and hotel staff. Figure 4 reveals summarized results of the questionnaire. Thus, it is clear that 3 out 5 aspects of this aesthetic dimension have an unrivalled importance for guest satisfaction in a luxury hotel setting. For upscale guests it is highly important that personnel of 5-star hotels gave them authentic smiles, made them feel as important people and genuinely behaved in a hospitable manner without external control. These factors gained no “1– Not important at all” scores and around 75% of replies stating that they have high or extremely high importance on guest satisfaction.

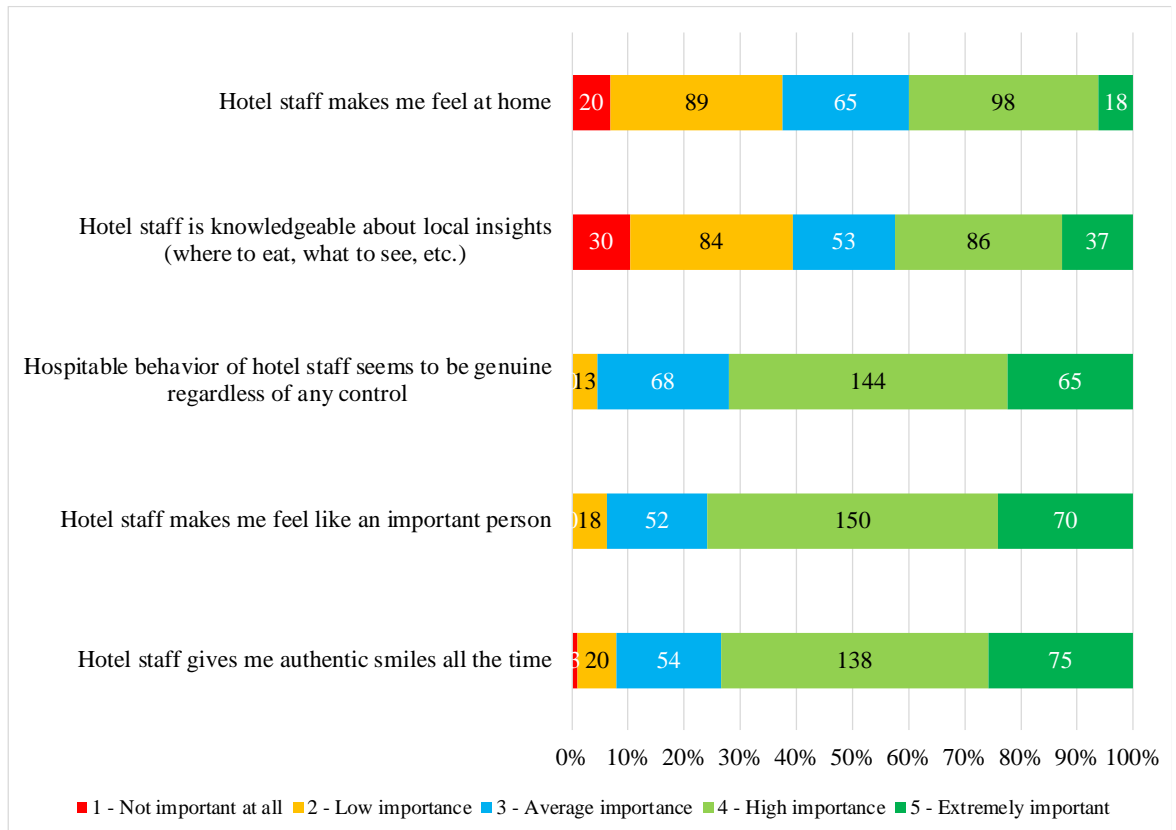


Figure 4. Importance of the human interactions’ aesthetics for guest satisfaction

Feeling of home derived from the hotel employee behaviour as well as staff knowledgeability about local insights got rather controversial importance scores from the respondents where almost equal number of replies stood for high or extremely high importance of these factors as well as for low importance or absence of importance of these aesthetic aspects of human interactions for guest satisfaction. In order to try to find any correlations between respondents’ profiles and attitude towards these two aspects of the aesthetics of human interaction, a cross-tabulation analysis was performed. The first independent variable for performing a check was age. Thus, mostly for the survey participants aging 24 or less (40.7%) as well as for senior 65+ respondents (59%) it is highly important that hotel staff made them feel at home during their luxury hotel stay to increase their satisfaction. Whereas in regard to another aesthetic aspect such as staff knowledge about local insights no specific relationship pattern between age and assigned importance was found. That is why, the author decided to perform an analysis based on the gender criteria, and it was detected that 41% of the male guests consider staff knowledgeability about local insights as a factor of a high importance for their

satisfaction, whereas in responses of females there was no common attitude towards this aspect. Cross-tabulation analysis using other independent variables from the demographic profile did not reveal any clear relationship patterns.

The last block of questions that respondents were asked to fill out with their responses was devoted to examining their actual level of guest satisfaction with aesthetics of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh they had experience to stay at. Summarized results grouped by main dimensions of destination aesthetics as well as an overall satisfaction are presented in Figure 5.

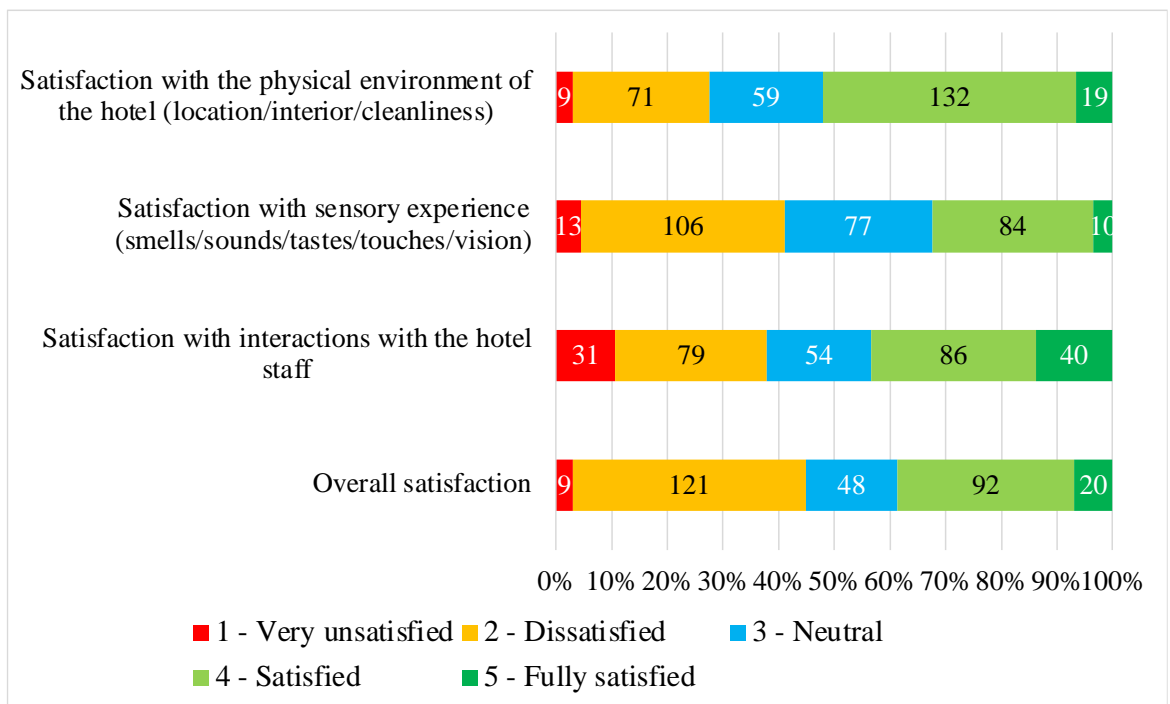


Figure 5. Actual current guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh

From this visualization of results, it is clear that the survey participants do not have a common opinion on the level of guest satisfaction derived from services provided by 5-star hotels in central Edinburgh. The biggest shares of responses to all the questions are split between two satisfaction scores – either “2 – Dissatisfied” or “4 – Satisfied”, with the least preference given to extreme scores such as “1 – Very unsatisfied” and “5 – Fully satisfied”. However, an aesthetic aspect of human interactions became an exception to this pattern. Evaluating their satisfaction with staff interactions guests were more categorical than while replying to other questions. In order to get more clarity on the

current situation with hotel guest satisfaction in Edinburgh, a method of comparing weighted averages for each satisfaction aspect was applied.

Summarizing results of the current state of guest satisfaction with services provided by luxury hotels in Edinburgh, it is noticeable both from the Figure 5 and calculations of the weighted averages, and standard deviation of satisfaction (provided in Appendix 3), that currently guests have the highest satisfaction with the physical environment of the hotel. Whereas sensory experiences provided by Edinburgh luxury hotels are not satisfying at all, since the weighted average of satisfaction with this factor is 2.9, which is lower than an average score of 3 points. Overall guest satisfaction with aesthetics is also at a low level in upscale hotels gaining 2.98 points on average.

Noticeably, destination aesthetics of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh requires major improvements to increase current low levels of guest satisfaction. In order to be able to further give any recommendations, it is crucial to see if there is any correlation between guest satisfaction with particular aspects of destination aesthetics and their overall satisfaction with a luxury hotel stay, and to determine its strength. Therefore, a correlation analysis applying the Pearson correlation method was performed in Excel, obtained Pearson's correlation coefficients are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Results of the correlation analysis

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient		
Human Interactions - Overall Satisfaction	0.685071117	STRONG
Physical Environment - Overall Satisfaction	0.31268988	WEAK
Sensory Experience - Overall Satisfaction	0.469633832	MODERATE

According to Dwyer et al. (2012, p. 20), if the Pearson's correlation coefficient is around and more than $|0.7|$, it would imply strong relationship between analysed variables; whereas if it is around or less than $|0.3|$ – such a coefficient would suggest that there is a weak correlation between them.

Correlation analysis to measure the impact of satisfaction with aesthetics of sensory experience on the overall satisfaction with the hotel stay brought out the correlation coefficient $R = 0.4696$ ($p < 0.05$), which means that there is moderate statistically significant positive relationship between sensory experiences of the guests and their

satisfaction with luxury hotels. The value of R square equal to 0.22 indicates that 22% variation in overall guest satisfaction is contributed by their satisfaction with sensory experiences.

Correlation coefficient explaining relationship between guest satisfaction with aesthetics of the hotel's physical environment and their overall satisfaction ($R = 0.3127$, $p < 0.05$) shows that there is a weak but statistically significant positive correlation, whereas $R^2 = 0.098$ allows to make a conclusion that 9.8% variation in overall guest satisfaction is linked to their satisfaction with the hotel's physical environment.

Analysis of correlation between satisfaction with aesthetics of human interactions in the luxury hotel environment and final overall guest satisfaction showed that there is a strong statistically significant positive relationship ($R = 0.685$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the value of R square equal to 0.469 implies that 46.9% variation in overall guest satisfaction with a luxury hotel is explained by satisfaction with aesthetics of human interactions during the stay.

So, from the performed analysis the author can conclude that aesthetics of human interactions has the biggest direct impact on the overall satisfaction of luxury hotel guests in Edinburgh. On the contrary, aesthetics of a hotel's physical environment has a weak correlation with overall guest satisfaction. Sensory experiences which guests get during their hotel stay have a moderate influence on their overall satisfaction.

2.4. Discussion and recommendations

This chapter is devoted to comparing the results of the survey questionnaire analysis with theoretical findings from the literature in order to highlight similarities and explain possible differences. Also, here the answers to research questions are outlined and followed by the recommendations to the management of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh for improving levels of guest satisfaction by amending destination aesthetics of the hotels. The limitations of the study are provided, highlighting how they affected data collection process as well as final results.

Thus, the most significant limitation was that all the luxury hotels in central Edinburgh that author approached in order to get a permission for conducting questionnaire survey

based directly on their cases declined the query due to very strict policies in regards to the guests' data. That is why, the author had to find an alternative way of spreading questionnaires among the respondents who had an actual experience of staying in upscale hotels in Edinburgh. The idea of using topical social media accounts for this purpose allowed to reach representatives of the population for the research. However, it significantly slowed down the process of data collection and made it impossible to analyse obtained replies singling out case hotels separately. What is more, using social media as a main channel for spreading questionnaires put significant limitations on the audience that could be reached, comparing with the initial plan to collect data via emails from the actual guests of the case hotels. On the other hand, such an independent process of data collection enabled author to design the questionnaire making it the most suitable for the research purposes without consideration of hotels' policies and managers' requests.

Sample for the questionnaire was formed on a non-probability basis using a voluntary sampling via a web-survey which was published on several topical social media accounts on LinkedIn and Instagram. As a result of a self-selection process to participate in the survey, a well-balanced number of male (42.1%) and female (57.9%) respondents took part in the questionnaire. Such a gender-wise ratio is very similar to the demographic profiles of respondents from the recent study on customer satisfaction in modern hotels (Baquero, 2023, p. 9). In regards to the age, more than a half of replies (56.2%) came from the participants aging 36–49 and 50–64 years, which is also in line with the respondent profiles from fresh related studies (Baquero, 2023, p. 9; Santos et al., 2020, p. 263). It is a rather expected balance of the participants' age groups, taking into account the main filter requirement of having a previous experience of staying in a luxury hotel in central Edinburgh as well as social media as the main questionnaire distribution channel. Thus, youngest people who are 24 or less have fewer chances to have already experienced 5-star hotels in Edinburgh (Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019, p. 366), whereas representatives of the oldest age group (65+) are typically less active on social media, as it was detected during hotel guest online review performed by Vo et al. (2022, p. 927). Origins distribution is rather equally balanced between domestic Scottish guests, those who are arriving from overseas and traveling from another country of the UK. Two-thirds of the 5-star hotel guests in Edinburgh are leisure travellers. It is the most common to stay in Edinburgh upscale hotels with family/partner or with friends. Such a respondent profile

is common while conducting research for luxury hotels in tourist locations (Ariffin, 2018, p. 9).

Analysis of the responses to the first context block of the questionnaire survey gave insights on the influence of different destination aesthetic aspects on guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh. Considering aesthetics of the physical environment, hotels' thorough cleanliness accompanied by its attractive interior design and décor are the factors that have the strongest impact on guest satisfaction in upscale hotel environment. This finding is conflicting with the results of the research performed by Lin & Choe (2022, p. 8), according to which these factors of aesthetic value do not substantially contribute to ultimate guest satisfaction. Such a difference between obtained results could be explained by comparing demographic profiles of the research participants. Thus, analysis of the Master's thesis survey revealed that female respondents from older age groups (36+) were assigning high or extremely high importance to the hotel's cleanliness and its interior attractiveness, while conclusions of the research done by Lin & Choe (2022, p. 7) are based on the responses from the sample where 77.7% of participants were aged 35 or younger. The findings of the thesis survey also showed that younger generations of luxury hotel guests do not attach a high importance value to cleanliness. Analysis of thesis survey results revealed that hotel room's spaciousness and inspiring views from the room have an intermediate impact on the ultimate feeling of satisfaction among luxury hotel guests. According to Buehring & O'Mahony (2019, p.369) these factors are important for creating positive attitude to the hotel; however, their effect is most noticeable once combined with other multi-sensory attributes, confirming a rather supportive role of these factors.

In regards to the aesthetics of a multi-sensory environment, analysis of the responses from the questionnaire survey showed that olfaction has a key importance among all other senses in influencing guest satisfaction in luxury hotels, since respondents assigned high importance levels to pleasant and expensive smell of bathroom amenities as well as pleasant scent in hotel areas. Buehring & O'Mahony (2019, p.371) came to the similar conclusion stating that guests of upscale hotels expect in-room amenities only from luxury brands – this way they perceive high quality of their hotel stay. Another study (Guzel & Dortyol, 2016, p. 36) concluded that even though olfactory stimuli do not play

a primary role in shaping luxury tourism experience, an appealing lobby scent is one of the factors that contribute to creating guests' attachment towards the place as well as increase memorability of their hotel stay experience. The level of impact of pleasant to touch furnishing and décor materials on the ultimate guest satisfaction is not of a paramount strength. However, at the same time results showed that for half of the female participants this factor is important to feel satisfied with a hotel stay, since they can easily determine the difference between cheap and expensive materials (Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019, p. 371). Therefore, sensory stimuli belong to the group of dissatisfiers for the luxury hotels guests (Li, 2020, p, 1722), implying that these aesthetic factors are not able to positively drive guest satisfaction on their own, but could bring dissatisfaction unless provided to a luxury standard of a high quality.

The results of the survey analysis indicated that aesthetics of human interactions have the strongest direct impact on the overall guest satisfaction, these findings aligned with the ones from the topical studies (Ariffin, 2018, p. 13; Buehring & O'Mahony, 2019, p. 368; Li, 2020, p, 1722). Among all the human-to-human factors the biggest influence on guest satisfaction play hotel's staff ability to make the guest feel as an important person, show genuine hospitable behaviour regardless of any control and constantly give authentic smiles. Such conclusions are completely in line with research performed by Ariffin (2018, p. 13) where factors of aesthetic items from "personalization" and "straight from the heart" dimensions showed the strongest correlation with guest satisfaction. According to Buehring & O'Mahony (2019, p. 369) insider wisdom that guests could get from the hotel's staff has a strong impact on creating a satisfaction value. Although results of the questionnaire survey conducted by the author revealed that for respondents who experienced luxury hotel stay in central Edinburgh this factor does not have a paramount influence on their satisfaction, it was still detected that 41% of the male guests consider staff knowledgeability about local insights as a factor of a high importance to feel satisfied. Feeling at home derived from the aesthetics of guest-staff interactions was recognized as the second most powerful guest satisfaction driver by Ariffin (2018, p. 14) in the study where demographic profile was represented by the majority of 20–25-year-old respondents. Thesis research also indicated that for most of the survey participants aging 24 or less as well as for senior 65+ respondents getting home-alike feeling while staying in a luxury hotel is highly important to increase their satisfaction.

Analysis of the survey responses revealed that currently guests of luxury hotels in central Edinburgh are the most satisfied with aesthetics of the physical environment created by the hotels. However, this dimension of aesthetics showed a weak relationship with ultimate guest satisfaction, which hotel managers are seeking to increase since right now its weighted average score is lower than 3 points. Whereas the least satisfactory dimension of aesthetics appeared to be the one linked to the sensory experience, which in its turn has a moderate and significantly significant impact on driving hotel guest satisfaction. Therefore, actions have to be taken by the hotel managers to make positive changes to this aesthetic dimension. Thus, since majority of the respondents stressed high importance of olfactory stimuli for their feeling of satisfaction, in particular assigning high value to pleasant and expensive smell of bathroom amenities as well as pleasantly scented hotel areas, upscale hotels in central Edinburgh have to work together with famous luxury brands that produce room scents as well as bath and body products. For instance, hotels in a partnership with perfume producers can create their own signature scents to be used in room diffusers and branded cosmetic products. This way, not only can guests' satisfaction levels increase, but also it will allow hotels to turn an olfactory construct of sensory experience they provide into their unique selling point which distinguishes them from the competition (Buehring, 2019, p. 369). Also, pleasing background music showed to have a significant positive impact on guest satisfaction. In the context of upscale hotels, where guests are looking not just for a high quality but also for uniqueness and exclusivity, live music could provide a solution – classic piano is a go-to idea for 5-star hotels, but also using Scottish traditional music instruments such as bagpipes could add a cultural value to the sensory hotel experience.

Looking for a solution how hotels in central Edinburgh can increase levels of satisfaction among their guests, it is crucial to make changes in the human-to-human dimension of aesthetics since it has the strongest statistically significant relationship with ultimate guest satisfaction. To improve this dimension, hotel managers should pay attention to a proper training of the hotel staff and ensuring a healthy corporate culture because as per the results of the research for the luxury hotel guests it is highly important to feel that attentive and hospitable behaviour of the employees is a natural extension of their characters rather than a result of constant control. Guests choosing upscale hotels seek not just an implacable service but also recognition of their status and importance. Therefore, hotel

managers have to build their human resource and operations strategies in a way that there is enough staff and means to provide guests with a personalized approach to satisfying their needs. For example, welcome amenities have to be tailored according to the tastes, travel purposes and dietary requirements of particular guests. Furthermore, within the context of luxury hotels it is important to create an added individual value for the guests, engaging them emotionally. Thus, hotel staff has to be knowledgeable and ready-to-share insider wisdom in regards to any queries guests might have such as places to visit, activities to do, the weather to expect, food spots to have lunch or dinner at, etc.

To sum up, research showed that among all the dimensions of destination aesthetics human interactions make the most noticeable impact on guest satisfaction in the luxury hotel environment of central Edinburgh, followed by multi-sensory experiences. Such findings prove that clients of upscale hotels are seeking an emotional added value while booking a stay in a 5-star hotel rather than just a range of basic services and physical attributes (these factors are perceived to be a bottom level in luxury hospitality). Analysis of the current guest satisfaction of Edinburgh luxury hotel guests revealed that multi-sensory aesthetics has very poor satisfying levels scoring lower than 3 points on average. Furthermore, current state of the most important aesthetics dimension for driving ultimate satisfaction – guest-to-staff interactions – received a poor recognition from the survey participants. Based on such insights recommendations for improving guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh were made with a particular attention to human resource strategy as well as a multi-sensory ambience and brand image of the hotels, such as:

- setting up partnerships between 5-star hotels and luxury perfume producers to create signature hotel scents to be used in room diffusors and branded cosmetic products;
- ensuring upscale live music experiences by playing piano in the lobby and adding cultural value by playing Scottish bagpipes;
- conducting consistent and diverse training for the staff (to improve their hard and soft skills, increase knowledgeability about local insights);
- implementing human resource strategies aimed at setting a healthy corporate culture.

Listed solutions are universal and can be easily adapted to peculiarities of specific luxury hotels.

CONCLUSION

Luxury hotel business is one of the key and most massively expanding segments of the hospitality industry. It is notorious for constantly growing guests' demands who choose hotels based on the added experiential value they could provide rather than just on the list of physical attributes and standard services. Such an approach makes a competition on the upscale hotel market very difficult – to win it hotels must come up with creative solutions how to exceed customers' expectations. Destination aesthetics was claimed to be one of the fields of knowledge that can give insights on how to evoke an emotional appeal towards business and as a result to drive guest satisfaction and increase their brand loyalty. Scarcity of existing studies on this topic inspired the author to devote Master thesis research to investigating an actual role of different dimensions of destination aesthetics in guest satisfaction in luxury hotel environment based on the cases of upscale hotels in central Edinburgh, and compiling proposals on how managers of these hotels can improve levels of satisfaction among their guests.

In order to reach the goals of the Master thesis, the author thoroughly analysed current findings in the topical literature regarding the meaning and structure of the destination aesthetics concept, its application in the context of the luxury hotel business as well as how aesthetic components relate to the guest satisfaction. Analysis of academic studies allowed the author to design the research by using as a basis a three-level framework which considers destination aesthetics as a combination of physical attributes, multi-sensory experiences and human interactions. The Master thesis study adopted a quantitative approach with an application of the questionnaire survey. The aim was to collect responses to 24 closed questions from the people who had ever experienced staying in a 5-star hotel in central Edinburgh about the importance of different aesthetic factors for them to feel satisfied as well as about current levels of their satisfaction. To meet this objective the author used Instagram accounts and LinkedIn groups about tourism in Edinburgh with high numbers of followers as a channel for spreading the

questionnaire, which resulted in collecting empirical data from 290 respondents. Obtained data was analysed in Microsoft Excel by running a descriptive, cross-tabulation and correlation analysis to see the importance of different aspects of destination aesthetics for luxury hotel guests to feel satisfied as well as to determine the strength of relationship between main aesthetics dimensions and overall guest satisfaction.

The results of the research enabled the author to give the author to provide the answers to the research questions. In regards to the first question on how different aspects of destination aesthetics influence guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in central Edinburgh, due to application of 100% stacked bar charts and a method of comparing weighted averages the author was able to measure the level of importance of each of 15 factors from 3 different aesthetic dimensions (physical, multi-sensory and human) for guest satisfaction. While cross-tabulation analysis allowed to detect relationships between respondents' demographics and their opinions onto destination aesthetics. Therefore, from the physical dimension of aesthetics thorough cleanliness, and attractive interior design and décor appeared to have the biggest impact on guest satisfaction, especially for the guests who belong to older age groups such as 50-64 and 65+. In terms of multi-sensory experiences, the most meaningful sensations belong to olfaction, with an absolute agreement among all the demographic groups of respondents on the fact that it is highly important that bathroom amenities had an expensive and pleasant smell. The study revealed that human factors of human interactions have primary importance for guest satisfaction in luxury hotels, in particular, upscale clients seek authentic smiles and genuine hospitable behaviour from the staff regardless of any control.

In order to answer the second research question about the ways how luxury hotels in central Edinburgh can improve their destination aesthetics in order to drive guest satisfaction, the author analysed levels of current guest satisfaction with destinations aesthetics and strength of relationships between 3 aesthetics dimensions and overall satisfaction. Obtained findings showed that first of all aspects of human interactions and multi-sensory experiences have to be actioned by luxury hotels, since these dimensions have the strongest impact on guest love and the lowest levels of current satisfaction. That is why, the author proposed hotel managers to pay closer attention to human resource strategies in their hotels to set healthy corporate culture, train staff consistently and

minimize understaffed periods. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with luxury cosmetic brands was advised as a solution for improving olfactory experiences of the guests and obtaining unique selling proposition to compete on the market.

The findings of the research and provided recommendations could bring benefit to (but not exclusively) management of the 5-star hotels in central Edinburgh, since this study gives independent insights on the current levels of guest satisfaction on the Edinburgh luxury hotel market as well as allows to see the clear picture of correlation between different factors of destination aesthetics and customer's happiness with their hotel stay. What is more, specific practical recommendations are based on the respondents' replies and thus benefit from their high relevance. Apart from hotels' stakeholders, the results of the Thesis could enrich scarcity of the research which has been conducted so far on the topic of destination aesthetics in the context of hospitality.

The limitations of the study caused by strict hotel policies concerning revealing any guest related data did not allow the author to analyse responses separately by each hotel, which makes impossible to make conclusions based on luxury hotel types and their selling points. Therefore, future research could focus on conducting similar studies on cases of particular types of upscale hotels such as boutique hotels, resorts or grand hotels to see which specific aesthetic features present primary importance for the guests in each type of luxury hotels.

To conclude, the questionnaire survey was a good choice for conducting this research since it allowed to clearly determine roles of different destination aesthetics dimensions in guest satisfaction, also, closed questions enabled the author to gather a significant number of responses for making generalizations. However, social media as a distribution channel caused a slowdown in data collection due to a typically low response rate and difficulties to reach representatives of the research sample.

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Appendix 1. The questionnaire

Hello dear Respondent!

I'm Oksana, an international Master's student of Wellness Service Design & Management from the University of Tartu (Estonia).

Since I'm passionate about luxury hospitality and aesthetics of Edinburgh city, I would love to research how factors of destination aesthetics influence guest satisfaction in luxury hotels in Edinburgh.

If you also love Edinburgh and eager to help making aesthetics of Edinburgh luxury hotels better, please, spare 5 minutes of your precious time to make a change!

Your gender: a) male b) female c) prefer not to say	Your age: a) 24 or less b) 25–35 c) 36–49 d) 50–64 e) 65+	You are: a) from Scotland b) from another country of the UK c) outside the UK
What was the main purpose of your last stay in luxury hotel in Edinburgh? a) leisure b) business c) other	Who did you stay in the luxury hotel in Edinburgh with? a) solo b) with friends c) with family/partner d) with colleagues e) with a tour group	

Please, evaluate the importance of each factor listed below for your satisfaction with a hotel stay. Please, use the scale from 1 (Not important at all) to 5 (Extremely important).
(Please, evaluate general importance of the factors to you, NOT your satisfaction with them during this particular stay)

Appendix 1 continued

Aesthetics of the Physical Environment					
	Not important at all	Low importance	Average importance	High importance	Extremely important
Hotel's common areas have attractive interior design & décor	1	2	3	4	5
Rooms are well-designed & spacious	1	2	3	4	5
Rooms have inspiring views	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel is thoroughly clean	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel amenities are provided & easily available (water/umbrellas/tea/coffee/etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Multi-sensory Aspects of Aesthetics					
	Not important at all	Low importance	Average importance	High importance	Extremely important
Background music is pleasing	1	2	3	4	5
Furnishing & décor materials are pleasant to touch	1	2	3	4	5
Bathroom amenities have pleasant & expensive smell	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel is decorated with original paintings/photos	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel is pleasantly scented	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 1 continued

Aesthetics of Human Interactions					
	Not important at all	Low importance	Average importance	High importance	Extremely important
Hotel staff gives me authentic smiles all the time	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel staff makes me feel like an important person	1	2	3	4	5
Hospitable behavior of hotel staff seems to be genuine regardless of any control	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel staff is knowledgeable about local insights (where to eat, what to see, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Hotel staff makes me feel at home	1	2	3	4	5

And now, please, evaluate your actual aesthetic satisfaction with your last stay in luxury hotel in Edinburgh on the scale from 1 (Very unsatisfied) to 5 (Fully satisfied).

Satisfaction					
	Very unsatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Fully satisfied
Satisfaction with interactions with the hotel staff	1	2	3	4	5
Satisfaction with the physical environment of the hotel (location/interior/cleanliness)	1	2	3	4	5
Satisfaction with my sensory experience (smells/sounds/tastes/touches) during the hotel stay	1	2	3	4	5
Overall satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for your time! Your contribution to the research is much appreciated.

Appendix 2. Aspects of aesthetics and weighted averages of their scores

Physical aspect of aesthetics	Weighted average	Standard deviation
Hotel's common areas have attractive interior design & décor	3.5	1.1
Rooms are well-designed & spacious	3.3	1.1
Rooms have inspiring views	2.5	1.2
Hotel is thoroughly clean	3.7	1.0
Hotel amenities are provided & easily available (water/umbrellas/tea/coffee/etc.)	3.4	1.0
Multi-sensory aspect of aesthetics	Weighted average	Standard deviation
Background music is pleasing	3.2	1.3
Furnishing & décor materials are pleasant to touch	3.0	1.2
Bathroom amenities have pleasant & expensive smell	3.7	0.9
Hotel is decorated with original paintings/photos	3.0	1.1
Hotel is pleasantly scented	3.5	0.9
Human aspect of aesthetics	Weighted average	Standard deviation
Hotel staff gives me authentic smiles all the time	3.9	0.9
Hotel staff makes me feel like an important person	3.9	0.8
Hospitable behavior of hotel staff seems to be genuine regardless of any control	3.9	0.8
Hotel staff is knowledgeable about local insights (where to eat, what to see, etc.)	3.1	1.2
Hotel staff makes me feel at home	3.02	1.1

Appendix 3. Weighted averages of aesthetic satisfaction scores

	Weighted average	Standard deviation
Satisfaction with the physical environment of the hotel (location/interior/cleanliness)	3.3	1
Satisfaction with sensory experience (smells/sounds/tastes/touches/vision)	2.9	0.98
Satisfaction with interactions with the hotel staff	3.1	1.2
Overall satisfaction	2.98	1.06

RESÜMEE

SIHTKOHAESTEETIKA ROLL KÜLALISTE RAHULOLU PARENDAMISEL EDINBURGHI KESKLINNA LUKSUSHOTELLIDE NÄITEL

Oksana Kononenko

Luksushotellide turule prognoositakse kogu maailmas järgnevatel aastatel kiiret kasvu. See omakorda toob kaasa suurema konkurentsi väga nõudlikul turul, kus klientide ootused järjepidevalt kasvavad ning põhiteenuste kõrval soovitakse üha rohkem saada külastuskogemusele lisaväärtust. Sellises turuolukorras otsivad luksushotellide omanikud ja juhid loomingulisi lahendusi, kuidas rahuldada oma nõudlikke külalisi, saavutada konkurentsieeliseid ning luua ainulaadseid müügipakkumisi.

Üheks võimaluseks on suurema tähelepanu pööramine sihtkohaesteetikale, mille all mõeldakse eelkõige külastaja kodukeskkonna ja sihtkoha tajutavat erinevust. Sihtkoha käsitlusi on mitmesuguseid, hõlmates teatud piirkondi, aga ka näiteks hotelle kui sihtkohti. Mitmed uuringud on näidanud, et sihtkohaesteetikal on positiivne mõju külaliste rahulolu suurendamisele. Probleemiks võib aga pidada seda, et sihtkohaesteetikaga seonduvat temaatikat on siiani veel kaunis vähe uuritud, sealhulgas ka luksushotellide kui sihtkohtade kontekstis, kus esteetilistel teguritel on külaliste rahulolu kujundamisel kanda väga oluline roll. Probleemist tulenevalt seati magistritöö uurimisprobleemik vajadus uurida, kuidas saavad luksushotellid sihtkohaesteetika toel suurendada oma külaliste rahulolu. Uurimisprobleemile püütakse lahendusi leida Edinburghi kesklinna luksushotellide sihtkohaesteetika uuringu toel. Luksushotellide külalistele on olulised holistilised esteetilised külaliskogemused, mis omakorda toetavad ka hotellide majanduslikku jätkusuutlikkust. Magistritöö eesmärk oli uurida, kuidas sihtkohaesteetika erinevad tegurid mõjutavad külaliste rahulolu Edinburghi kesklinna luksushotellides ning teha ettepanekuid, kuidas saaks suurendada külaliste rahulolu

hotelli sihtkohaesteeetika juhtimise toel. Selle eesmärgi saavutamiseks sõnastati kaks uurimisküsimust:

K1: Kuidas mõjutavad sihtkohaesteeetika erinevad tegurid külaliste rahulolu Edinburghi kesklinna luksushotellides?

K2: Kuidas saavad Edinburghi kesklinna luksushotellid suurendada külaliste rahulolu sihtkohaesteeetika juhtimise toel?

Magistritöö eesmärkideni jõudmiseks ja vastuste leidmiseks uurimisküsimustele selgitatakse magistritöö esimeses peatükis teaduskirjandusele tuginedes sihtkohaesteeetika tähendust ja mõjutegureid, vajadust nende silmaspidamiseks ja juhtimiseks luksushotelliäri kontekstis ning seostest külaliste rahuloluga. Magistritöö uuringu disain põhines kolmetasandilise raamistiku rakendamisel, mis käsitleb sihtkohaesteeetikat füüsiliste omaduste, multisensoorsete kogemuste ja inimeste interaktsioonide kombinatsioonina. Andmete kogumiseks kasutati kvantitatiivset uurimismeetodit ankeetküsitlust. Uuringu sisulisel ettevalmistamisel tugineti magistritöö esimeses peatükis viidatud teaduskirjandusele. Küsitlusankeet koosnes 24 küsimusest, mis olid jaotatud viide teemaplokki: demograafiline profiil, sihtkohaesteeetika füüsilised tegurid, sihtkohaesteeetika multisensoorsed tegurid, inimsuhtluse esteetika ja külaliste rahulolu uuringuga hõlmatud luksushotellides. Valim kujunes mittetöenäosuse alusel, eelkõige veebiküsitluse kaudu vabatahtlikku osalemist uuringus. 290 saadud vastust analüüsiti Microsoft Excelis, kasutades kirjeldavat, risttabeli ja korrelatsioonianalüüsi. Uuringust selgus, et inimsuhtluse esteetilised tegurid on luksushotellides külaliste rahulolu jaoks esmatähtsad, millele järgnevad multisensoorsed kogemused. Luksushotellide külalised otsivad eelkõige töötajatelt autentseid naeratusi ja ehedat külalislahket käitumist, samuti meeldivaid meelte-, sealhulgas lõhnaaistinguid.

Tuginedes teaduskirjandusele ja magistritöö uuringu tulemustele esitab autor ettepanekud Edinburghi kesklinna luksushotellide juhtidele, keskendudes võimalustele külaskogemuste parendamiseks sihtkohaesteeetika juhtimise toel. Magistritöö eesmärk täideti ja leiti vastused uurimisküsimustele. Magistritöö tulemused võimaldavad anda teatud vastuseid laiemale uurimisprobleemile ning sellega tutvumisest saaksid ideid sihtkohaesteeetika parendamiseks ka teised hotellid.

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