LUXURY HOSPITALITY IN SOUTHERN FRANCE: NAVIGATING THE SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION

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Introduction

In the realm of luxury hospitality, sustainability has evolved from a niche preference to a critical indicator of quality and prestige. Historically associated with excess and abundance, the luxury sector is now under intense scrutiny to reconcile exclusivity with environmental responsibility; high-end travellers increasingly demand ethical transparency without compromising comfort, forcing luxury hotels to innovate. Given that luxury properties typically have a higher carbon footprint per guest compared to standard accommodation, the shift towards sustainable operations is imperative for maintaining social license and brand equity.

Purpose, Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate how the luxury hotel sector on the French Riviera is integrating sustainability into its value proposition. The research is driven by three key objectives: *i)* to explore how luxury hotel managers perceive the trade-off between opulence and eco-efficiency; *ii)* to identify specific barriers hindering sustainable practices in high-end environments; and *iii)* to determine whether sustainability initiatives act as a genuine competitive differentiator in the luxury market. A central focus is placed on comparing the strategies of independent luxury boutique hotels versus those belonging to international luxury chains.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon the triple bottom line sustainability framework – environmental, social, and economic – adapted for the luxury context. Literature highlights a tension in luxury hospitality: while guests expect premium services, they also seek meaningful, responsible

experiences. In terms of economic and environmental sustainability, technological advancements – including AI, IoT, and renewable energy systems – are cited as key enablers for both reducing waste and costs without diminishing the guest experience; social sustainability (e.g., fair labour, community engagement etc.) is equally critical for the human-centric service model of luxury hotels (Juvan et al., 2026).

Methodology and Methods

A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed to enable an in-depth analysis of the sector (Yin, 2009). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with general managers of 14 luxury hotels located on the French Riviera. Using purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), the study focused on five-star and palace hotels with established environmental commitments, including both properties managed by international luxury groups and independent family-owned establishments. Data were analysed following a grounded theory approach (Gioia et al., 2013), allowing the identification of distinct patterns in luxury management practices.

Main/Expected Findings and Contribution

The findings reveal that while sustainability is a priority across the board, the implementation strategies diverge significantly. Luxury hotels belonging to major groups leverage significant capital to deploy high-tech solutions, such as AI-driven energy management systems and advanced water recycling plants, effectively hiding sustainability behind technology to maintain seamless service. Conversely, independent luxury hotels, lacking comparable financial muscle, focus on artisanal sustainability. They emphasize exclusivity through deep ties with local culture, such as sourcing hyper-local organic food and eliminating single-use plastics in favour of bespoke, locally crafted amenities. The study finds that while groups use sustainability to meet corporate compliance, independent luxury hotels use it to narrate a story of authenticity and heritage.

Originality and Value

This research contributes to hospitality literature by dissecting the ownership luxury paradox of the French Riviera: global brands pursue eco-technological efficiency, while independent icons pursue eco-cultural authenticity. This distinction provides a novel framework for understanding how different ownership structures interpret luxury in the age of sustainability.

Research Limitations

The study is geographically confined to the French Riviera, a mature luxury destination, which may limit the applicability of the findings to emerging luxury markets. Nevertheless, the framework of eco-technological efficiency and eco-cultural authenticity may be conceptually transferable to other established high-end coastal destinations facing similar sustainability pressures. Furthermore, the focus on top-tier luxury properties may restrict the transferability of the findings to broader upscale and premium hospitality segments.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study challenges the notion that luxury and sustainability are incompatible, proposing a model where sustainability enhances rather than dilutes exclusivity. In the long term, these sustainability-driven positioning strategies are likely to dictate brand survivability and resilience, transforming corporate compliance into market-leading brand equity for chains, and cementing deep-rooted guest loyalty for independent hotels. Practically, the findings suggest that independent luxury hoteliers should double down on their unique asset – i.e. local identity – rather than trying to compete with chains on technological infrastructure. For policymakers, the results highlight a need to support independent luxury properties through incentives for heritage preservation and energy retrofitting, which are often more complex in historic independent buildings than in modern chain hotels.

References

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