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The central role of front-line employees in the Luxury Accommodation Product: evidence from Australia

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper investigates the importance of front-line employees' role in the Luxury Accommodation Product (LAP), in the context of Australian independent hotels.

Design/methodology/approach: In this qualitative study, participants were approached through a web-based survey. The sample comprised four managers and ten front-line employees, employed at a single independent luxury hotel in Australia.

Findings: The findings suggest that front-line employees are central to the LAP in independent hotels, and their behaviour directly impacts guest satisfaction and business longevity. It was also found that front-line employees understand their role as a highly complex, multi-dimensional position, affected by external and internal variables, such as the guest, operational and personal needs.

Practical implications: It is recommended that managers in the short term, should nurture front-line employees' loyalty and sympathy to business operations and business needs. In the long term, managers should explore the needs of the three central LAP stakeholders and consider how these needs can be addressed to reduce the likelihood of conflicting stakeholder needs.

Originality/value: Despite their central role in LAP operations, there is a deficit of academic research regarding front-line employees' understanding of the LAP, and their role within it.

This gap is addressed by the study's findings that challenge established theories on the front-line employees' role, discovered to be more complex than previously theorised.

Key words: Hospitality Industry; Independent Hotels; Luxury Accommodation Product; Front-line employees; Employee roles; Australia

Introduction

The accommodation sector is the largest financial contributor to the hospitality industry, contributing $3.41US trillion per annum to the global economy and employing 173 million people (Fletcher et al., 2017). Relevant to this study, Australia's independent luxury hotels and lodges account for approximately 90% of these rooms (ABS, 2021) and 9.9% of Australia's total accommodation products. Australia's independent luxury hotel market contributes a disproportionate 18.9% to Australia's total accommodation earnings (ABS, 2021). Despite a 54.5% higher average room rate cost, Australia's luxury hotels have consistently demonstrated a 14% higher average occupancy rate than other accommodation sectors since 2014 (ILTM, 2014). The independent luxury hotel sector has demonstrated a 33% higher market and consumer market growth rate than other accommodation classifications (Allied Market Research, 2021). This market segment has maintained economic prosperity even when other accommodation markets (budget and mid-priced) have witnessed flat or declining occupancy (Dobrosielski, 2019). Coupled with the increasing global demand for luxury hospitality products and services and a recorded 17% increase in consumer spending on Australia's accommodation products, there is potential for the industry to attain more wealth and value in the future (Rather & Sharma, 2017; TRA, 2019).

The Luxury Accommodation Product (LAP) combines tangible and intangible elements, (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2001), designed and delivered by a complex network of stakeholders, namely guests, managers, and front-line employees. Each stakeholder plays a role in delivering a successful LAP (Walker, 2017), with front-line employees appearing as key stakeholders of the LAP and guest experience formation (Wells, 2013). It can be deduced that front-line employees hold the greatest influence over the customer's experience of the LAP as they

are responsible for engaging guests with the LAP while satisfying the guests' needs and expectations (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014; Homburg et al., 2009).

The literature also suggests that the LAP is highly vulnerable to front-line employees' actions, affecting guest satisfaction, and eventually influencing long-term business sustainability (Ramphal, 2016). Another interesting fact from the existing studies is that managers and guests express, at times, contrasting role expectations of the front-line employees (Cetin & Walls, 2016; Harkinson et al., 2017; Iloranta, 2019). These differences generate a variety of expectations regarding the front-line employees' roles and, by effect, send conflicting messages regarding their roles and behaviour. Consequently, there is an increased risk for front-line employees to demonstrate dissatisfaction towards the guests, which would affect the stability of the business.

The existing research demonstrates a disparity in guests' and managers' understanding of the front-line employees' roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Cetin & Walls, 2016; Iloranta, 2019). This gap is particularly prevalent in research related to front-line employees, especially in independent luxury hotels (Harkinson, 2016). Therefore, this study investigates the research gap surrounding the front-line employees' understanding of their role and responsibilities within the independent LAP.

Literature Review

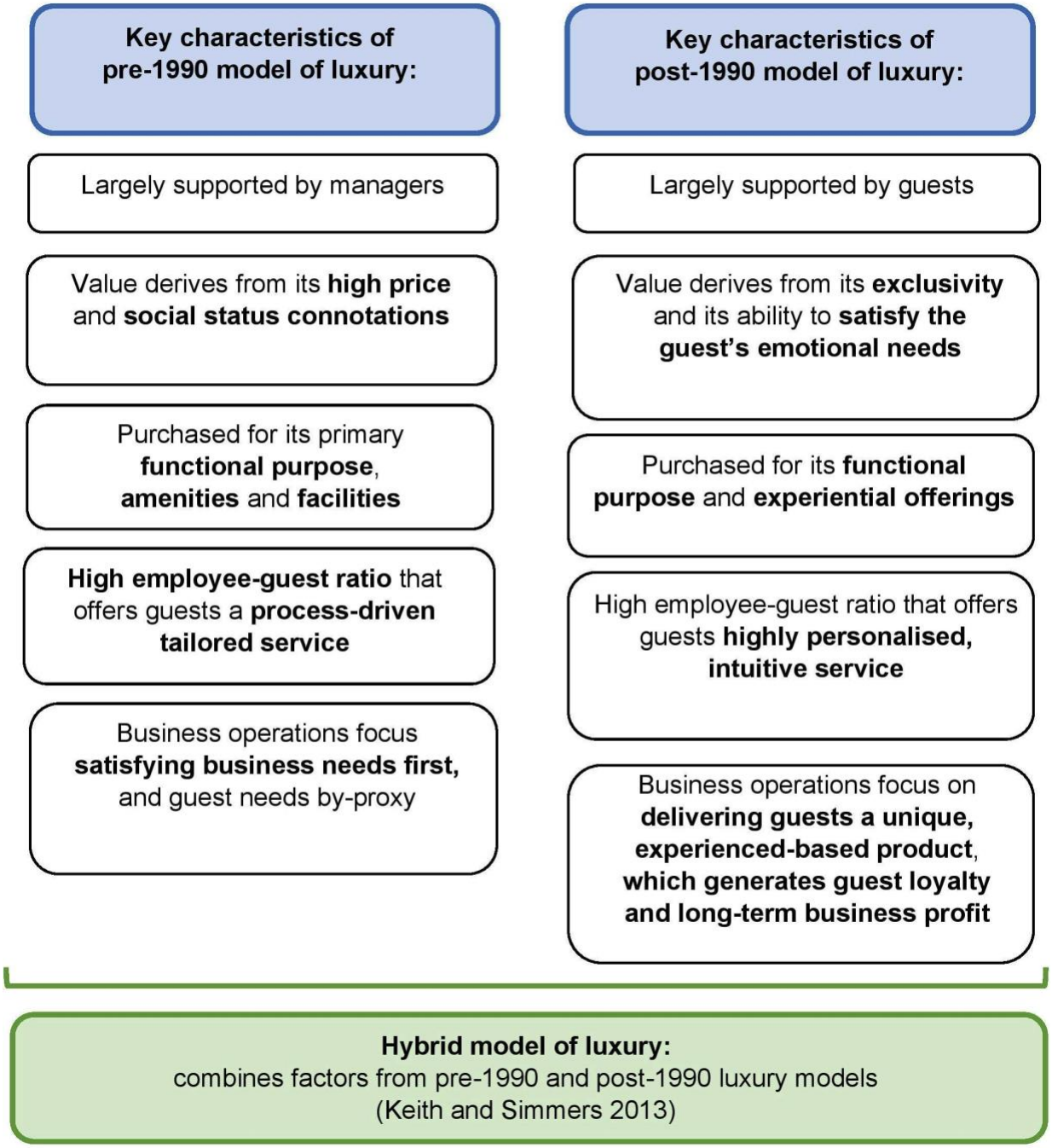
The concept of luxury in the accommodation sector

The word 'luxury' originates from the Latin word 'luxus', meaning 'excess, overstock, extravagance, luxuriance, abundance' (Simpson, 1982, p.373). Regrettably, these terms are subjective rather than quantifiable (Hayes & Lashley, 2017). Whilst Eysenck and Eysenck argue otherwise (cited in Lee-Ross, 2001), factors such as culture, class, personality, personal needs, age, context, and contemporary trends have all been evidenced as altering interpretations of luxury (Kopalle et al., 2010). Several studies suggest (Dahling & Perez, 2010; Fan et al., 2017) that these variations are found across both guests' and employees' understandings of the term and in relation to various accommodation products, owing to varied expectations and capabilities of the products (Walker, 2017).

Broadly categorised into pre- and post-1990s, the key characteristics of the different models and definitions of luxury within the luxury accommodation context are summarised in Figure 1. In pre-1990s definitions, an accommodation product was characterised as 'luxury' because of its quantifiable qualities, including its prime location, large number of rooms, and offered amenities and services such as 24-hour room service, fine dining, business facilities, valet parking, décor, and high price point (Davidson et al., 2006; Kucukusta et al., 2014). Widely recognised as the 'Accommodation Rating System' (Five Star Alliance, 2020), these quantifiable factors were utilised as an inventory for consumers to compare hotel products and services, and managers to model the Luxury Accommodation Products (Nunkoo et al., 2020). The existing research suggests that managers largely support this definition of luxury (Harkinson, 2016). The LAP market oversaturation during the 1980s provoked diversification away from the quantifiable and tangible elements of the LAP model (Jones et al., 2003). O'Sullivan and Spangler (1998) argue that contemporary LAP guests shifted from buying products to making purchases specifically for the experience and emotional satisfaction they deliver. This signpost the so called 'Experience Economy' (Pine & Gillmore, 2011) that affected the conceptualisation of LAP in the luxury hotel sector.

The post-1990s conceptualisation of luxury, largely supported by guests (Cetin and Walls, 2016), suggests that value comes from factors such as facilitating service and staff quality (Chung & D'Annunzio, 2018; Padma & Ahn, 2020), providing personalised services (Iloranta 2019; Lai & Hitchcock, 2017; Sorensen & Jensen, 2015), creating memorable experiences (Holmgvist et al., 2020) and providing 'beyond expectation' service delivery (Potavanich, 2015) over the LAP's tangible components. For example, Alhelalat et al. (2017) identified personal interactions with customers as more valuable than front-line employees' functional duties in the restaurant sector. The post-1990 understanding of luxury is also supported by the Progression of Economic Value theory (Banton, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 2011) which deduces that the more tailored a product or experience is to consumer needs, the higher value it holds. Cetin and Walls (2016) suggest that the guests' focus on the LAP's intangible elements is exaggerated in independent luxury hotels. Harkinson (2016), for example, argues that independent luxury hotel guests are becoming increasingly willing to overlook reduced opulence or reduced amenities if the hotel delivers more intangible experiential components.

Figure 1: Key characteristics of luxury models in hospitality



Despite the evidenced shift in guests' desires, much research suggests that the focus on the LAP's intangible qualities does not negate responsibility to deliver the pre-1990 quantifiable elements effectively and at high quality standards (Iloranta, 2019). Whilst not thoroughly explored

in the current study, this line of argument suggests that contemporary luxury should be understood as a hybrid model (Figure 1) of both pre- and post-1990s luxury conceptions (Keith & Simmers, 2013).

The ambiguity surrounding the LAP definition is a chronic challenge for the luxury accommodation sector, laying a foun dation of issues that challenge LAP's viability. The variation in the key stakeholder's interpretation of luxury impedes the effective design and delivery of universally understood and mutually beneficial products, practices and procedures. This, in turn, affects customer satisfaction, measured in various ways such as repeat business, recommendations and word of mouth (WoM), fiscal business health, and business longevity (Lovelock et al., 2015; Walls et al., 2011). It also challenges how the role of the front-line employees in the LAP is understood.

The following sections explore the LAP key stakeholders, focusing on front-line employees.

The Luxury Accommodation Product's stakeholders

The LAP comprises two core components: the tangible and quantifiable elements (such as facilities, equipment, and products) and the people who design and deliver the accommodation product and services. Operationally, the LAP is facilitated by a triad of stakeholders (Harkinson 2016): hotel managers, guests, and front-of-house employees, referred to as the front-line employees. Whilst the front-line employees are technically subordinate to the guests and managers (Walker, 2017), each of these stakeholders is imperative to delivering products (and services) that satisfy the guests' perceptions of quality of service (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2002; Lai and Baum, 2005) and business operation and needs (Walker, 2017). Managers are largely responsible for directing the production of the accommodation product in a profitable manner (Mola & Jusoh, 2011), guests consume said accommodation product (Walker, 2017), and front-line employees facilitate the basic operational functions of the LAP, as directed by the manager, and delivers service to the guest (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014; Wen et al., 2020).

Although it is possible to argue that front-line employees' low pay, low placement on the organisational hierarchy model, and lack of involvement in the LAP design processes reflect their

low power or value in the LAP operations (Slack et al., 2010). On the other hand, the counterargument suggests that the front-line employees hold the greatest influence over the guests' experience of the LAP (Sorensen and Jensen, 2015). Cambra-Fierro et al. (2014) suggest that front-line employees are the primary tool for delivering LAP to guests, and the primary point of contact for guests throughout the LAP experience. In addition, the front-line employees are statistically most likely to interact with guests at LAP (Ottenbacher et al., 2009). This proximity makes the front-line employees the most likely source for identifying and delivering the tailored product/service experience demanded of the contemporary LAP by its guests (Homburg et al., 2009). By proxy, erroneous front-line employees' actions may negatively impact the hotel's quantifiable ratings, guest perceptions of the product and long-term business sustainability (Ramphal, 2016). These points are pertinent in independent luxury hotels who possess a higher employee-to-guest ratio, more multi-disciplinary front-line employees roles and a flatter hierarchal structure that increases front-line employees to guests' proximity (Lai & Hitchcock, 2017; Nunkoo et al., 2020; Sherman, 2007). As a direct consequence of their role, front-line employees operate in a way that balances the guests' and managers' understanding of the LAP (Sorensen & Jensen, 2015).

The following section explores the role and responsibilities of the front-line employees in the LAP context. The Functional and the Authentic, Organic Behaviour (AOB) models are applied as key theoretical underpinnings for this discussion.

Theory of the Role and Responsibilities of front-line employees

The extant literature suggests two distinctive approaches. Following a critical literature review on this topic, the authors labelled these approaches as the Functional Model and the Authentic, Organic Behaviour (AOB) Model, respectively, as presented below (see also Table 1).

The Functional Model suggests that a front-line employee is a functional tool purposed to facilitate sales, control business costs, and deliver an impression of emotional engagement, which Hochschild (1983) describes as 'display acting'. This approach originates in the pre-1990 model of Luxury and Business Theory (Davenport & Beck, 2002). The Business Theory determines that quality control, revenue control and thus operational control are necessary to ensure standards of service and product are maintained, customer expectations are met, and the business remains

profitable (Burgess, 2014; Davenport & Beck, 2002). The Functional Model endorses the standardisation of LAP products and services (Jones et al., 1997; Ramphal, 2016). The Functional Model directs and controls the front-line employees' behaviour via standardised business service scripts (Douglas & Conner, 2003), standardised Role Theory (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996) and displaying situationally needed emotion and behaviour for the benefit of guest satisfaction and business needs (Hochschild, 1983; Homburg et al., 2009; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988). This model suggests that front-line employees should use the above processes to create impressions of employee-guest 'bonding' and meaningful encounters (Gronroos, 1994; Ogbeide et al., 2015). For example, as Iloranta (2019) demonstrated, front-line employees are trained to repeat a guest's name three times in employee-guest conversation. This has the effect of committing the guest's name to memory while delivering the impression of 'authentic, personalised service'. Finally, this model endorses micro-management to ensure employees comply with business processes (Crick, 2002; Nickson et al., 2005;). These systems are thought to reduce erratic front-line employees' behaviour and fiscal spending, which are liable to undercutting the stability of the fiscally fragile LAP business model (Rutherford & O'Fallon, 2007). These processes have been successfully applied to different LAP settings, such as the Ritz-Carlton Group (2021) and Marriott International (2020). Criticism regarding the Functional Model, includes the dismissal of guest and employee subjective understandings and expectations of luxury and the LAP components (Brewster et al., 2016; De Dreu & Nauta, 2009). Despite an inclination to read consumer needs cues or manipulate consumer behaviour, focusing on efficiency and business needs risks overpowering effective customer service and contemporarily demanded personal touches (Alhelalat et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the AOB Model suggests that the LAP front-line employees' roles and responsibilities are to deliver authentic, organic emotive and personalised experiences to guests (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1985; Knox & Walsh, 2005; Sherman, 2007). This model argues that front-line employees' personable and human qualities are central to a LAP's success, including front-line employees' 'creative' 'independently minded' and 'informal' qualities (Xie et al., 2019) and their ability to evoke similar feelings from the guest. This concept is further supported by studies, such as Harkinson's (2016) research, which highlights an increasing guest desire to break the wall between employees and guests and find "moments of truth in the story behind the place and the people that they encounter – and make[ing] connections in the process" (Hemmington, 2007, p.107). In addition, a few studies (such as Gary et al., 2013; Mensah-Kufuor et al., 2015)

support the idea of targeted front-line employees' recruitment based on their natural, emotive capabilities and social intelligence.

Table 1: Summary of the key characteristics of the Functional and AOB Models

Functional Model	AOB Model
Key Characteristics	
Purposed to satisfy business needs. Business longevity is achieved through product standardisation.	Adaptive to guest emotional needs. Thus, business needs are satisfied by fostering loyal guests.
Commodifies employees as a controllable business tool.	Employees are selectively recruited for their personal qualities.
Commodifies emotion by selling impression of the guest-employee emotional-engagement.	Employees have in-role freedom to provide appease guest needs, rather than delivering impression of meeting needs.
Supports employee emotional dissonance in the workplace.	Employees are valued for their familiar, organic and sincere interactions with the guest.
Main Weaknesses – Criticism	
Prioritises business efficiency over effective customer service.	Does not allow for heterogenous employee behaviour which contrasts with guest / business needs.
Does not accommodate variation in guest or employee needs and expectations.	
Indicative Key Theoretical Contributions	
Hochschild's (1983) Emotional labour work; Gronroos (1994) Nordic model of customer satisfaction; Bettencourt & Gwinner (1996) Categorical knowledge theory on guest needs; Solomon et al. (1985) scripted role modelling; Biddle, (1986) scripted front-line employees' behaviour; Hobfall's Conservation of Resources Theory (cited in Hobfall & Ford, 2007) ; Zaph (2002) Deliberate Dissonance Acting Theory; Homburg et al. (2009) Customer Need Knowledge theory; Vargo & Lusch (2004) The service-dominant logic.	Ashforth & Humphrey (1995) The three stages of emotional labour; Knox & Walsh (2005) Soft HRM Theory; Harkison (2016) The front-line employees' role in luxury accommodation experience; Gremler & Gwinner's (2000) work on the importance of front-line employee – guest bonding; Sorensen's work on the importance of service flexibility, innovation, and personalisation (cited in Sorensen & Jensen, 2015)

These 'natural talents' were found to be increasingly effective at engaging guests and generating sales, compared to employees receiving cognitive empathy training, perspective training and social intelligence training. To this end, AOB sympathetic scholars suggest that, if the right person is employed in the position, the front-line employees' personal needs, opinions and motivations are largely symbiotic with LAP business and guests' needs (Ashforth & Humphrey,

1985; Sherman, 2007; Xie et al., 2019). Consequentially, it suggests business operations should prioritise employing and enabling suitable LAP employees over implementing rigid, calculated, standardised employee behavioural models. Application of selective recruitment is also found in Forbes (2021), which provides statistical evidence that front-line employees are increasingly hired for their emotional capabilities. Criticism of the AOB Model stems from the reduced business control over the LAP. Despite the AOB's suggested advantages (Potavanich, 2015), it creates a fluid business model, enabling a certain degree of autonomy for front-line employees. This consequently reduces business control over front-line employees' behaviour. By proxy, this increases the risk of service and product inconsistency, ineffective business operations, increased business costs (Hemmington, 2007; Wells, 2013) and a decline in customer satisfaction (Holmovist et al., 2020). These factors challenge the stability of an already economically fragile business model (Rutherford & O'Fallon, 2007), and risks a business' economic longevity (Mandelbaum & Woodworth, 2019). A summary of the key characteristics of the Functional and AOB models can be found in Table 1.

The following section discusses the research approach and methods employed for this study's primary data collection and data analysis.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative web-based survey approach for its merits, detailed below. Usually associated with deductive research approaches (Saunders et al., 2014), a survey "collects information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions" (Check & Schutt, 2012, p.160). This research method tends to generate descriptive data on a targeted topic, which provides the researcher insight into participants' opinions and perspectives. The strength of the web-based survey derives from its ability to access geographically dispersed participants without the constraint of time zones and schedule clashes (Hewson et al., 2016). This was vital to the success of this study, considering challenges such as the geographical and time constraints (U.K., Australia), the travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19, and the short time frame available to complete this study. These challenges prohibited the postponement of the data collection phase to a later date (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008), when travel restrictions had been lifted. Web-based

surveys offered participants the opportunity to respond to questions in their preferred environment, and in their own timeframe, contrasting the time-constrained, often intensive environments of interview data collection methods (De et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the web-based qualitative survey has been criticised as juvenile (Hewson et al., 2016), and unreliable in its reach (Wright, 2005). It is also criticised for its reduced ability to establish strong researcher-participant rapport, capture extralinguistic cues, or probe participants on their answers, both adding value and depth to qualitative responses (Braun et al., 2020). Despite the above criticism, the web-based survey merits credit as a worthy research method (Davey et al., 2019) to achieve this study's aim. A successful application of this research method during the COVID-19 lockdown and travel ban is examined by Giousmpasoglou et al. (2021), who received valid responses from 50 luxury hotel general managers in 45 countries.

The survey consisted of three sections, each preceded by a brief introduction to the forthcoming section's rationale and scientific language. The first section explored the participants' demographic profile, role in this hotel and time spent with guests. The second section comprised four open-ended questions, exploring participant understanding of the key dimensions of the LAP. This section's questions replicated many of those found in Harkinson's (2016) study, which investigated a similar topic. The replication of prior tested research questions reduced the risk of creating questions subject to participant misinterpretation or misleading tendencies (Miles et al., 2014). The final section comprised five open-ended questions, exploring the participants' use of emotion in the LAP, a notable point of differentiation between the AOB Model and Functional Model, discussed in the previous section. Together, these three sections were created to collect data that provided insights necessary to achieve this study's aim. The total survey was designed to take 20-25 minutes to complete, as per the recommendation provided by Reips (2010).

Sampling

This study selected participants using the non-probability sampling technique, which relies on the researchers' judgment to decide on the research sample instead of random selection (Saunders et al., 2014), reducing the threat of data invalidation, by including responses from participants that are not qualified to comment on the subject (Dillman, 2000). In sum, the specialist nature of this exploratory study's focus encouraged and validated this type of sampling (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants were selected based on their experience working in front-of-house roles at a specific Australian independent hotel. This hotel is part of The Luxury Lodges of Australia (https://luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au/), a network of 19 independent luxury hotels, committed and competent at delivering high levels of service quality. Of the 21 hotel employees who were initially contacted to participate in this study, 19 responded positively, and 14 were finally selected (4 managers and 10 front-line employees). A ratio of three-to-one (front-line employees to managers) was sought to achieve this study's aim. The participants were initially contacted through a social media platform and responded to the survey through their social media accounts or email. Before they participated in this survey, all employees and managers received information regarding the study and digitally signed a consent form. The study received approval from the authors' University Research Ethics Committee prior to the fieldwork.

Data analysis

A three-step analysis process was employed to analyse the wide scope of data collected (Braun et al., 2020), including content analysis for emerging themes (open coding and thematic coding); cross-checking data across the entire dataset; and finally, comparing data with established academic research. Coding approaches data with focus and purpose, examined and built on, to find rationale and linked themes to make analytically-based conclusions (Miles et al., 2014, Brotherton, 2015).

The data analysis in this study followed the content analysis process. Data were compared to the Functional Model and AOB Model and investigated with both open and thematic coding, allowing other data themes to naturally emerge (Miles et al., 2014). This provided the opportunity to identify and open lines of inquiry in established models. Finally, the study's collected data were compared to primary data from Harkinson's (2016) luxury hotel focused study. This comparison enabled the study's data to be measured for validity (Miles et al., 2014), generalisability (Saunders et al., 2014), and added depth to this study's primary research findings (Brotherton, 2015).

Findings

The collected dataset from the qualitative survey questionnaire was investigated from various perspectives to attain a holistic understanding. Although the dominant themes were apparent from the employees' and managers' responses, the individual transcripts demonstrated a mixed affiliation to the AOB and Functional Models. Rather than voiding relevance or reliance on the data, it should be briefly noted that, all conclusions made should be understood as a guide rather than a rule or definitive conclusion (Crick, 2002; Harkinson, 2016). The discussion below summarises the participants' profiles and the study's emerging themes.

Table 2: Participant Coding and Demographic Profile

Participant Coding	Gender	Age	Nationality	Department	Length of Service	Time spent with guests
Managers						
M1	F	**32-38**	Polish	Front Office	2-3years	80-90%
M2	F	**39-45**	Australian	GM	8-9years	40-50%
M3	F	**32-38**	South African	Multiple departments	10+years	60-70%
M4	F	**32-38**	South African	Multiple departments	10+years	80-90%
Front-line-employees						
F1	F	**25-31**	Malaysian	Food & Beverage	2-3years	80-90%
F2	F	**18-24**	Zimbabwean	Multiple departments	2-3years	80-90%
F3	M	**46-52**	Australian	Porter	2-3years	60-70%
F4	M	**25-31**	Italian	Food & Beverage	10+years	100%
F5	F	**32-38**	Australian	Food & Beverage	-1year	80-90%
F6	F	**18-24**	Australian	Food & Beverage	2-3years	80-90%
F7	M	**25-31**	Australian	Multiple departments	6-7years	80-90%
F8	F	**25-31**	Canadian	Multiple departments	10+years	80-90%
F9	M	**25-31**	Indonesian	Food & Beverage	2-3years	80-90%
F10	F	**18-24**	New Zealand	Food & Beverage	2-3years	80-90%

Front-line-employees and their understanding of the Luxury Accommodation Product

Participants' profile

Data regarding participant nationality, gender, professional experience, and proximity to guests was collected to enable the researcher to gain insight into participants' personable variables (Saunders et al., 2014). All participants confirmed experience working in front-of-house related managerial roles or front-of-house front-line employee roles within the hotel. As such, all respondents qualified to participate in the study. 92.9% had worked in the luxury hotel industry for more than two years, suggesting that participant responses would be backed by experience. The respondents demonstrated a diverse range of ages, nationalities, and departmental affiliations. Demographic data presented minimal trends except for the high percentage of female respondents and the high response rate from full-time-permanent employees. As such, similarity in results should not be linked to participant variables but considered a reflection of the holistic sample group's understanding/opinion. A summary of the participants' main demographic characteristics and estimated time spent with guests can be found in Table 2.

As argued earlier in the literature review, the participants' understanding of *luxury* in the accommodation sector affects participants' expectations of the LAP. In addition, it explains front-line employees' behaviour and opinions (Lovelock et al., 2005; Mola & Jusoh, 2011). For this reason, this study chose to explore front-line employees' understanding of the LAP prior to exploring their perspective on their role. The first set of questions asked participants what they understood to be the defining features of the LAP and the LAP experience. A plethora of words and phrases were found to be repeated throughout the data, including *'service',* '*experience', 'personalise', 'detail', 'quality'* and *'staff'* (Figure 2).

Guided by comparing pre- and post-1990 definitions of luxury (see Figure 1), these words and phrases were coded by their reference to tangible or intangible LAP components. The tangible elements referenced the material construction of the LAP and demonstrated affinity to the pre-1990 definition of luxury. On the other hand, intangible elements referenced both employee action and guest-felt emotion, showing an affinity to the post-1990 definition of luxury. It was also found that front-line employees referenced the LAP's intangible elements more frequently (47% of total references). This supported Alhelalat et al.'s (2017) argument that the modern LAP is understood by the post-1990 definition of luxury, and suggested front-line employees may have an affinity with the AOB Model. Data also showed that 37% of front-line employees valued tangible and intangible elements as of equal importance in the LAP. This suggests that the front-line employees' understanding of LAP may be more complex than the established definitions. It also supports Keith

and Simmers' (2013) argument that stakeholder understanding of luxury may be evolving. Managers also presented a strong affinity to both these categories.

Figure 2: Most commonly repeated words in participants' responses

The first set of questions also investigated front-line employees' importance to the LAP. All participants indicated the centrality of the front-line employees to the LAP, from a guest experience perspective. Of these, the majority of the front-line employees argued that, employee action is the most influential element of the LAP experience. This supported the Cambra-Fierro et al., (2014) argument that front-line employees are the most definitive element of the LAP. Participants identified the guest-self-generated emotion as the most important factor, linking it to employee action. This reinforces the argument that front-line employees are a highly valuable element of the LAP; this is portrayed in the following participant responses: F1 suggests that "…guests want a thoughtful and individualised service," while F6 argues that "…a big part of a guest having a good experience is when they feel like you really care."

Front-line employees and their self-understood role

The second section of the qualitative survey questionnaire explored front-line employees' perception of their role and responsibilities in relation to the LAP. Three potential areas of enquiry from the data analysis emerged: 1) The employee's practical and functional role, 2) The employee's use of emotion, and 3) The employee's attitude to work (effort required to perform the role).

These areas of enquiry were analysed for their affinity to the Functional and AOB Models. It must be noted that primary data demonstrated participant-to-participant and question-to-question variation in answers and affinity to the two models. Thus, whilst dominant themes were apparent, any conclusions should be understood as a guide rather than an affirmative understanding or rule.

Practical and Functional use

Front-line employees unanimously suggested they are a functional/practical tool in the LAP, purposed to enable smooth business operations. In line with duties prescribed to front-line employees in their job descriptions, they argued the responsibilities central to their role involve "…delivering personalised and detailed check in process" (F10), "…creating positive atmosphere and deliver competent service" (F2), and "…make[ing] sure that everything about their stay is seamless" (F6).

Whilst front-line employees did use language indicative of the AOB Model in their responses, such as "*personalised*" and "*creating positive atmosphere*", a holistic analysis of primary data identified a tendency to deliver prescribed micro-level business operations, rather than acting out of their formally prescribed duties (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014). Responses that mentioned product/service personalisation on behalf of the front-line employees, usually originated from standard operating procedures and management direction. This supported the Functional Model arguments that the front-line employees can personalise products only per business processes (Homburg et al., 2009; Iloranta., 2019). This was further supported by data that implied that front-line employees were inclined to fulfil their managers' needs, regardless of the guests' needs and their desires and needs. This was exampled by F8 below:

> The management did not encourage a positive work environment which made it difficult to want to see them succeed. That being said, I would never want a guest to suffer or have a poor experience due to a behind the scenes issue, so I was still motivated to perform well in my role duties. (F8)

Similarly, front-line employees also exemplified the use of the Functional Model's simulated product personalisation, achieved via delivering the impression of personalising the product (Ogbeide et al., 2015). F5 evidenced this:

> [I am influenced by] management needs. This means I can point to something tangible if I need to – 'Company policy states...' In my opinion, if guests are increasingly disgruntled, and staff actions are in line with company policy, then it is an issue that needs to be changed in the policy from the management level. I do however try my best within the boundaries of management needs to satisfy the needs of the guests. (F5)

The findings suggest that the front-line employees understand their role and responsibilities in alignment with the Functional Model. On the other hand, several participants demonstrated behaviour away from their formal job duties. F1, for example, demonstrated that they had the freedom to plan and implement a surprise marriage proposal:

> I received request from guest to plan a surprise proposal over the dinner, it was very exciting for the whole team to plan it together with the guest from decorating table, preparing bouquet, filming, and clapping when the partner says yes to the proposal and carry[ing] on the celebration for their entire stay. (F1)

Planning proposals were not part of the front-line employees' formal responsibilities, but rather was an example of their extra-role behaviour and pragmatism. This alluded to the front-line employees' behavioural freedoms, as Hewegama (2015) suggested. It also supported Praveen et al.'s (2005) argument that employees are increasingly employed for their social intelligence and creative capabilities. Each of these factors supported the argument that the front-line employees

understand their role and responsibilities as akin to the AOB model. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated multiple counts of managerial support of front-line employees' extra-role behaviours:

> …[front-line-employee should] strive to identify my guests needs before they are even aware of it themselves and use these opportunities to go above and beyond. (M3)

Whilst managerial support of these freedoms can support the AOB's Model of in-role front-line employee freedoms, it may contradict or deviate from their role responsibilities which include compliance with rules and standardised procedures. The observed managerial support of in-role freedoms could alternatively suggest that these freedoms are a controlled design feature of the LAP's business operations. This is validated by business theory and acknowledgement of the fiscally fragile structure of the LAP (Rutherford & O'Fallon, 2007), which requires stable business operations to enable business profitability (Slack, 2004). Based on the above argument, the front-line employee (controlled) autonomy, may be viewed as management practice rather than affinity to the AOB model (Iloranta, 2019; Ramphal, 2016). This is also supported by Homburg et al.'s (2009) and Hochschild's (1983) arguments. Consequentially, though front-line employees may have understood their role as akin to the AOB Model, the above view suggests that the Functional Model more likely underpins the front-line employees' behaviour.

Use of Emotions

The use of emotions was unanimously perceived as fulfilling emotional guest's needs, holding a central responsibility of the front-line employees' role. Emotional needs refer to guests' desire to engage with a product (or service) and have a positive emotional experience during and after visiting the hotel (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1988). This is demonstrated by F2, who argues that they should make guests "…feel comfortable and at home". This responsibility can be facilitated by either the Functional Model's false acting, or the AOB Model's authentic, organic employee-to-guest interactions.

Three different types of emotion-related behaviour emerged from the study's findings. The first emotion supported the post-1990 understanding of luxury and the AOB Model. Based on the

findings, it can be argued that front-line employees genuinely and organically were inclined to engage emotionally with guests. F7 says that "…genuine emotions are bound to happen when you spend time one on one with guests, which happens often in small luxury lodges." A reference to processes and systems did not accompany demonstration of this type of emotion. Rather it bore true similarity to the AOB Model's suggestion that the independent hotel front-line employees are specifically recruited for their natural affinity to meet guest needs and desire for a guest-employee connection (Harkinson, 2016). This suggests a front-line employee affinity to the post-1990 definition of luxury, prioritising the intangible elements and LAP experience (Hewagama, 2015).

On the other hand, it was also suggested that employees used emotion to tactically distance their personal feelings and opinions from guests. Despite the front-line employees' freedom and ability to engage with guests, many participants appeared to reject this approach. All respondents, for example, demonstrated the use of false emotions while on duty; the exampled display of emotion (Hochschild, 1983) and emotional dissonance (Zapf, 2002) are found in the Functional Model. According to F10:

> One must obviously display emotion when working in a front-of-house role. These emotions are not always genuine. When you're busy and you're running your arse off… you're obviously stressed. However, it's important to look calm and controlled to guests. Guests come to dinner for both the food/drink but also for the atmosphere, it's an event. If you look like a headless chicken, you disturb the atmosphere. (F10)

Supporting Hobfall and Ford (2007) and Zapf (2002), the findings further implied that genuine acting was not always necessary or possible in the job role:

> …[the guests] had unachievable expectations, verbally abusive… I felt disrespected from the moment I extended my hand (as it was dismissed) during introductions and this continued attitude was emotionally taxing. I had to constantly appear calm and accommodating whilst expressing an outward happy welcoming and understating façade. This was deep emotional acting. It felt exhausting and demeaning. (M4)

Practically, this argument was supported by primary data, which evidenced that most participants (of front-line employees) relied on management guidance (70%) and business systems (90%), to inform them on how to display emotion when interacting with guests. It must be noted that, these figures included participants who contested that 'fake' displays of emotion are not acceptable, as well as participants that presented a sincere inclination to connect to the guests. Tactical use of displaying emotion for dissonance implies that the front-line employees view themselves as responsible for delivering practical duties and an expected image of the front-line employee, rather than responsible for delivering authentic, organic and emotional connections. This is further supported by the Functional Model's business theory (Burgess, 2014), which argues that employees should be objective in their behaviour and view their role as simply part of the business transaction. Furthermore, in contrast to the AOB model, data implied that front-line employees' emotions do not innately parallel or satisfy guest needs and emotions. Overall, this use of emotion holds an affinity to the Functional Model.

Finally, most front-line employees suggested that they used emotions to tactically influence guests for the benefit of the business, rather than for personal gains. F3, for example, argues that: "[staff should] display a happy vibe to bring a joyful experience to the guest". More specifically, most respondents suggested they used emotional interactions to gain more information on the guest and deliver a suitably tailored product/service experience. This argument is supported by Homburg et al. (2009), Hochschild (1983) and Iloranta (2019). As argued above, managerial support for this behaviour suggests that the LAP was likely designed to allow and enable these behaviours (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2002). To this end, the findings suggest that front-line employees deliver impressions of employee-guest bonding and meaningful encounters through endorsed manufactured systems and processes based on the Functional Model. Consequently, this tactically appeases the guest's desired LAP experience and influences guest behaviour in a business preferable way.

Effort required to perform the role

The findings also explored the front-line employees' attitude toward their role, or their interpretation of the amount of effort it takes to perform their role. The attitude, or perceived effort required to perform a job, can imply an employee's willingness to go above and beyond their job

duties (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1985). This can, in turn, demonstrate a participant's understanding of their job role. The AOB Model, for example, implies that an employee's personal needs, opinions and motivations are largely symbiotic with work or guest needs (Sherman, 2007). Therefore, the front-line employees' affinity for pleasing guest needs requires less effort. By contrast, the Functional Model implies that these factors do not necessarily come naturally or match the front-line employees' needs and opinions (Walls, 2011).

Four 'effort' categories were established from the literature and the study's findings (Table 3): Active Effort, Selective Effort, Detached Effort and Effortless Effort. In this case, effort refers to the amount of acting or labour the employee feels they need to commit to their role to satisfy their work responsibilities. These categories have connotations to Hochschild (1983) and Ashforth and Humphrey's (1985) studies in Emotional Labour. Significant to the following discussion, a distinguishable component of the Selective Effort category was that the extra-role behaviour was understood to be a choice, not an expectation of the front-line employees.

Table 3: Description of the Four Effort Categories

Active Effort: Employees are constantly interpreting, developing, and readjusting the LAP operational processes and how they behave with the guests. The aim here is twofold: to make the experience personalised to each guest's needs, and on the other hand meet the LAP expectations. This is suggestive of the Functional Model's display acting.
Selective Effort: Employees strive to make the LAP experience and employee-guest interactions appear personalised. Front-line employees need to interpret guest needs cues and tailor the LAP to their needs. In this case, the employees are not obliged to perform duties above their job specification and decide how much they engage guests and value-add behaviour.
Detached Effort: the guest experience derives from the LAP's tangible components and business operations. The front-line employees are tools to enable effective delivery of the LAP operations. They have no other obligations. This is suggestive of the Functional Model emotional dissonance theory.
Effortless Effort: The LAP is a completely immersive experience, in which employees 'host' the guest rather than 'serving' the guest or adapting the LAP product to the guest. Employees genuinely want to make guests feel at home. This holds similarity to the AOB Model, which implies front-line employees require no acting to perform their role.

Source: adapted from Hochschild (1983) and Ashforth and Humphrey (1985)

Most front-line employees demonstrated affinity to the Selective Effort model. Half of the front-line employees, for example, suggested that they could choose to go above-and-beyond their role duties, or otherwise (Selective Effort). F5 illustrated this:

> Presenting a professional disposition meaning respectful, helpful, and attentive [behaviour] is necessary. How much emotion is shared thereafter is usually something I would gauge case by case. (F5)

Furthermore, respondents implied that many of the front-line employees' personal needs underpinned their behaviour. F2, for example, demonstrated employee-guest interaction for self-gratification:

> …if the people like me and appreciate me, I feel validated and accepted and feel like I want to help them more. (F2)

Similarly, participant responses show decision-making not to engage in extra-role behaviour or emotively engage with guests:

> …if you check the guests in and first thing you hear is a complaint how hot it is…instead of how are you then I put a fake smile on and check the length of this guests stay hoping it is not too many days. (F6)

Finally, indirectly supporting the above, and similar to the Selective Effort category, data demonstrated that front-line employees recognised the power that their role had on the LAP. F2 exemplified this:

> It is the staff's responsibility to ensure that guests feel good emotion from the staff. I think everyone at one point has interacted with a negative person serving us. It feels horrible and makes us not want to go back. (F2)

The above front-line employee responses point to the Selective Effort Model. Whilst there was no evidence that front-line employees used their autonomy to damage the guest experience or

business needs, their responses challenge both models' understandings of the front-line employees' roles. The participants' responses partly reject the AOB model's argument that front-line employees engage in authentic, organic guest-employee interactions willingly and for mutually beneficial purposes. Furthermore, the AOB's selective recruitment strategy is also challenged (Forbes, 2021; Praveen et al., 2005). The findings also diverge from the Functional Model's position that the front-line employees are submissive to business needs (Homburg et al., 2009). The findings suggest that the front-line employees' personal motivation and needs may be more influential in affecting their role behaviour than either the Functional or AOB models allowed for. However, despite this, an overriding disposition submitting to the needs of management was identified. The Selective Effort category supports the LAP hybrid model by recommending an emerging third category in terms of the front-line employees' behaviour. On the other hand, the managers' responses presented the highest affinity to the Active Effort model. This is understandable considering that managers have more obligation to ensure business success (Walker, 2017). The discrepancy between the managers' and employees' responses reveals a gap in understanding the front-line employee roles.

The following section discusses the conclusion, implications, and recommendations from the above findings.

Conclusion

The study's findings propose that front-line employees are central to the LAP in independent luxury hotels, and their behaviour directly impacts guest satisfaction and business longevity, or the opposite. Positioned at the forefront of the LAP, front-line employees are responsible for implementing operational plans, personalisation, and guest emotional engagement. The findings also suggest that front-line employees understood the LAP in independent hotels as a complex, multi-dimensional product, composed of multiple elements such as, employee-induced components, tangible elements, operations elements, and guest-generated feelings. In contrast to the arguments that perceive the LAP as either a product purposed for profit (Burgess, 2014) or to evoke guest pleasure (Hochschild, 1983), this study advocates that, front-line employees understand the LAP as a combination of both. They understand the LAP as primarily an experiential product, enjoyed by guests, and delivered by a cohesive business model that supports

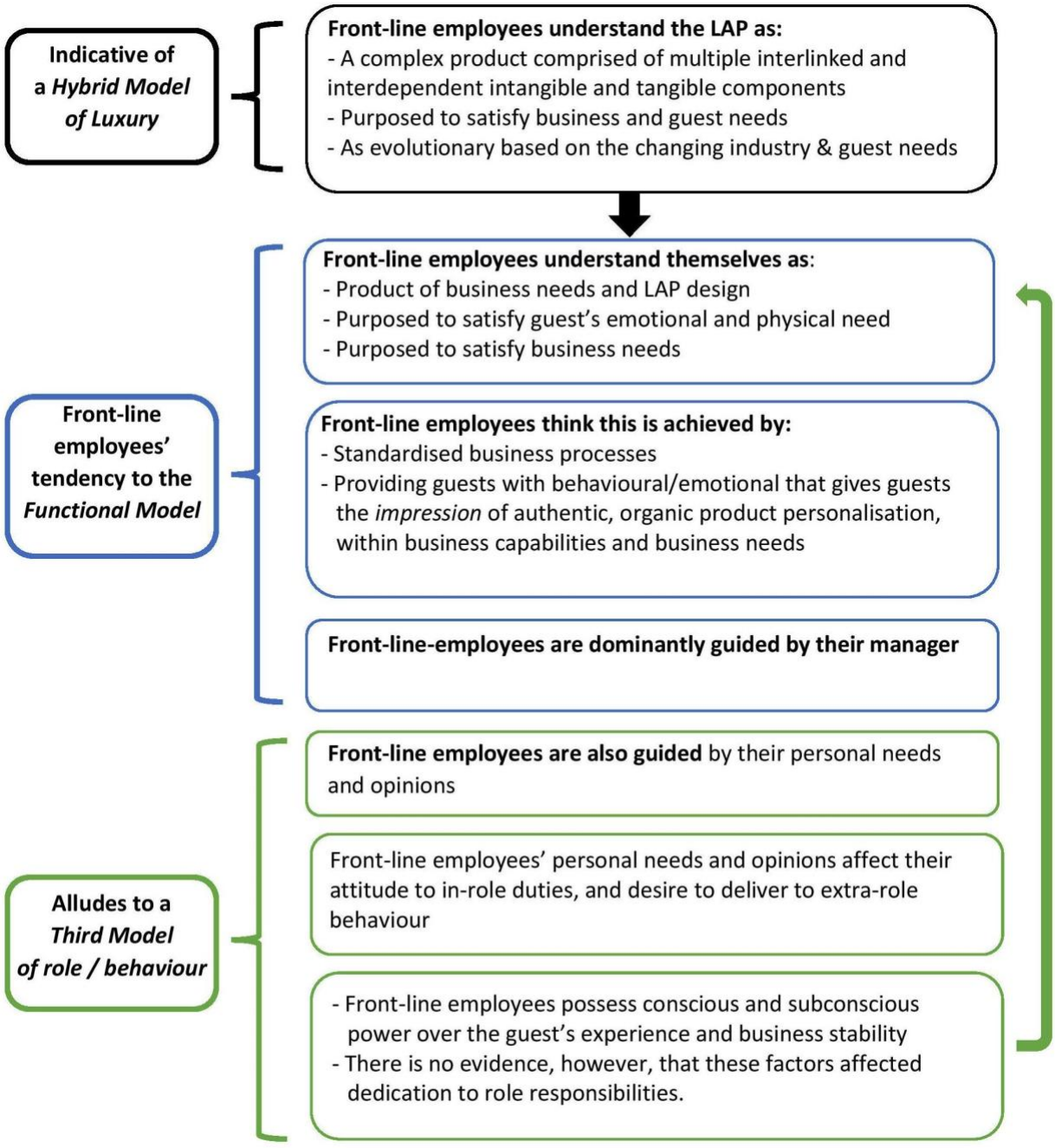
business economic and operational needs. It is not surprising that front-line employees view the LAP as a dynamic construction of these elements, based on their formally prescribed job duties, and their placement at the impact point of guest-business needs, opinions, and expectations. Whilst the employee in-role behaviour does not always reflect this view, it indicates that their understanding of the LAP differs from both the guests' and managers' understanding. This also suggests that front-line employees understand luxury that is closer to the hybrid model (see also Figure 1). The above aligns with the findings presented in Cetin and Walls (2016) and Harkinson's (2016) studies.

This study also suggests that the front-line employees largely understand their role as a product of business needs and business design in the LAP settings. In line with Cambra-Fierro et al. (2014) and Walker (2017), front-line employees prioritise rudimentary business operational duties purposed to ensure smooth business operations. Regardless of their internal desires or opinions, front-line employees demonstrate an over-arching disposition to fulfil management needs and expectations, above their own needs and guest needs. The findings also reveal a holistic front-line employee commitment to their formally conscripted functional and practical duties, and an overriding commitment to the business model's service script and role training. This was true even when the front-line employees' personal motivations and opinions conflicted with their business expectations. This holds parallel to the Functional Model. In addition, the findings suggest that the contemporary LAP product concerning the front-line employees' role is in a state of transformation, in support of Keith and Simmers (2013), Forbes (2021) and Praveen et al. (2005).

Front-line employees also unanimously agree that LAP guests have emotional expectations of the LAP. Within this argument, front-line employees suggest it is their responsibility to appease guests' emotional needs. However, whilst most participants demonstrate a desire to emotionally engage with the guests, they perceive this is not required as part of their role. In addition, emotional engagement with guests is largely discouraged by managers and viewed as avoidable. The front-line employees' inclination to use service scripts and managerial guidance to direct their emotional interactions with guests, supports the argument that front-line employees view their role as sympathetic to the Functional Model.

Theoretical implications

Figure 3: Summary of the study's key findings



The evidence presented above challenges both the Functional and AOB Models in terms of the front-line employees' roles and responsibilities. Despite being holistically submissive to business

needs, the front-line employees present decision-making capabilities in their role behaviour. The findings also demonstrate the front-line employees' self-awareness of their power, enabling satisfactory business processes and fulfilling guest expectations of the LAP. Holding parallels to Hobfall and Ford's (2007) findings, it is argued that the front line employees' heterogeneity, personal motivation and personal needs may have more leverage and consequence in the LAP transaction than the AOB or Functional Model are alluded to. Thus, while front-line employees demonstrate a holistic inclination to implement business operations as per their job descriptions and a disposition to submit to management needs, their recognition of power can cause issues in the future. Holding a parallel to the hybrid luxury model, data insinuates that the front-line employees may have an affinity to an alternative understanding of their role, yet to be described.

In summary, the front-line employees demonstrate affinity, and at the same time, challenge both the Functional and AOB Models. It was found that the front-line employees understand their role as a highly complex, multi-dimensional, position that is affected both by external variables, such as the guests' and business' needs, and internal variables, such as personal needs. Overall, the findings demonstrate that it may be too simplistic to define the front-line employees' understanding of their role as holistically akin to either the Functional or the AOB Model. Rather, front-line employees appear to understand their role and responsibilities as a complex-hybrid-model of behaviour. This suggests a third model of behaviour that is worthy of further research. The findings of this study have been summarised in Figure 3.

Managerial Recommendations

In response to the study's findings, managers are recommended to take the following measures, depending on the implementation time. In the short term, managers should nurture front-line employees' loyalty and sympathy to business operations and business needs. This approach is thought to reduce damaging front-line employee heterogeneous behaviour (Praveen et al., 2005). An example of this approach could be incorporating an employee rewards system into their business model. In the long term, managers should explore the needs of the three central LAP stakeholders and consider how these needs can be addressed to reduce the likelihood of conflicting stakeholder needs. This investigation should explore the three stakeholders' opinions and expectations of the front-line employees' roles and responsibilities. A greater understanding of

these factors enables the creation of a business model, that is mutually beneficial for all involved stakeholders (Lai & Baum, 2005), reducing business vulnerability to contrasting stakeholder needs or potentially unsavoury stakeholder heterogeneous behaviour. A cohesive and mutually beneficial business model would strengthen business longevity (Burgess, 2014), and thus the successful implementation of the LAP.

Limitations and Research Recommendations

Despite this study's merits, several limitations emerge, largely associated with time, travel and resource restrictions. The first limitation is related to the study's scope. Due to time constraints, this study focused on a single LAP property, which raises questions regarding applying the findings to the wider independent luxury hotel sector. The second limitation was a direct consequence of the chosen qualitative data collection method (web survey). Although it held merit in counterbalancing the study's geographical and time constraints, issues were identified regarding the strength of provided data and the ability to interpret the information in participants' responses, as predicted by O'Conner et al. (2008). For example, whilst the large portion of transcripts provided rich answers required for an interpretivist, deductive, qualitative study, some participants provided little to no rationale or insight into their answers. Therefore, the reduced opportunity to probe participants, or rather, reduced control over the data collection method, hindered data collection and should be acknowledged.

Several recommendations for future research have grown from this study's key findings and limitations. First, it is recommended that this study could be replicated with a wider scope of participants and luxury establishments in different locations/countries. It is also argued that the sample should include guests. According to Harkinson (2016), this would potentially strengthen and validate the current study's findings, increase insights into the discussion, and identify trends more clearly. Secondly, it is recommended that any future replication of this study, could use a semi-structured interview format to collect primary data. Whilst the interview method is not flawless, it has the potential to increase depth and clarity in participants' responses, which were occasionally missing in this study (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, it is recommended that future studies explore contemporary trends, such as the experience economy and co-creation, in relation to the LAP. This study demonstrates that these trends appear to directly impact front-line employee

perceptions of their role in the LAP. Consequentially, an investigation into these may provide further insights into the front-line employees' understanding of their role and contribute to the successful creation and implementation of future LAPs.

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