

Playing with emotional states in hospitality: How can ambient music influence the satisfaction of luxury hotel guests?

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INTRODUCTION

Defined as a genre that emphasizes atmosphere over formal structure, ambient music is intended to subtly shape mood and perception without commanding guests' attention (Hultén, 2011). Research shows that ambient factors, including background music, significantly influence guests' satisfaction, their overall impression of the hotel, and loyalty intentions (Suh et al., 2015). In luxury hospitality settings, live ambient music interacts synergistically with visual aesthetics, scent, lighting, and service quality. Research indicates that live music serves as a powerful tool for mood regulation, stress reduction, and enhancing perceived value within service environments (Kemp et al., 2019). Live ambient soundscapes utilize slow tempos, minimal structure, and soft dynamics to foster a calming and luxurious atmosphere. Research indicates that these characteristics promote emotional ease, reduce anxiety, and enhance the overall guest experience (Chen et al., 2023). Studies have shown that congruent, well-designed soundscapes enhance evaluations of both space and staff performance (Magnini & Parker, 2009 ; Sweeney & Wyber, 2002).

However, much of the existing research has focused broadly on music in retail or general hospitality contexts (Spence et al., 2014). Consequently, a clear knowledge gap persists in the understanding of how live ambient music specifically functions within luxury hospitality environments to influence emotions, perceptions of luxury, and overall guest satisfaction. For example, much of the current research emphasizes general characteristics such as tempo or volume (Magnini & Parker, 2009). Furthermore, although studies have explored the role of sensory éléments in creating luxury experiences (Spence et al., 2014), there is relatively little empirical data on the role of live ambient soundscapes.

The need for this study arises from the growing importance of experience design in luxury hospitality. As the industry grows more competitive, there is a continuing need for hotels to discover subtle and meaningful ways to differentiate themselves and foster emotional connections with guests. Live ambient music appears to be a potentially valuable, yet relatively underexplored, element in this context : when piano, jazz or soul live music may represent a cost for hotels, could such entertainment help make the difference for gaining international tourists ? This study aims firstly to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of live ambient music, offering insights that may be beneficial for both academic research and hospitality practice. By situating itself at the intersection of music psychology, environmental design, and hospitality management, the study hopes to contribute an integrative perspective to the ongoing discussions within these fields.

METHOD

Luxury hotels are defined here not only by their tangible éléments, but also by their ability to deliver emotional satisfaction, create memorable experiences, and adapt to evolving consumer and societal expectations. Such hotels are characterised by their "stately exteriors, magnificent architecture, luxurious food and service to perfection - practically" and thus create an image of luxury (Kanwal & Van Hoya, 2020). Their key milestone is to offer customers a "wow experience", which can be a mixture of material provision and immaterial considerations that can be bridged to emotional engagement and uniqueness (Kanwal & Van Hoya, 2020). Experiential value is then a hallmark of luxury hotels.

This study employed a qualitative research approach and utilized multiple data collection methods. Specifically, surveys were conducted with key stakeholders, including luxury hotel managers and hotel guests. In addition, an analysis of online reviews was performed to gain further insights. For the interview-based research, convenience sampling was employed to recruit 30 participants in two periods (Spring 2025, October 2025), including hotel managers and hotel guests. To select hotels, we used the

2025 labelling system provided by “Atout France” (France National D.M.O). Among the 31 palace hotels labilized by Atout France, only 4 offer live piano bar at teatime, and for night bar service. We added to this selection 4-star hotels offering live piano bars, live jazz or soul music; all of them are in Paris, in sea resorts like Dinard or Deauville, and in mountain resorts (Courchevel, Alps). We then obtained a list of 15 establishments for France, where 80% of customers are international leisure tourists (KPMG Hospitality, 2024). To gain insights from a broader range of guest experiences, online reviews were collected from 4 major platforms : Google Reviews, Booking.com, Expedia, and TripAdvisor. These platforms were chosen based on their prominence in hotel review data, as identified in the *Hotel Review Benchmark Report* published by the Shiji Group (2023), which highlights them as the leading sources for guest feedback. For the analysis of online reviews, this study adopted a combination of purposive sampling and quota sampling, with a target of 100 reviews. We applied quota sampling to enhance diversity in the dataset. The dataset was structured to ensure representation across different guest demographics, hotel categories, and cultural backgrounds. To analyze the data collected, we employed thematic analysis. To systematically categorize and interpret the data, an inductive coding process was applied, ensuring that the themes emerged organically from the data.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of interviews with hotel managers and guests revealed shared and contrasting perspectives on live ambient music in luxury hotels. 14 recurring themes emerged, showing how live music influences emotional responses, guest behavior, and brand perception. Participants highlighted live music’s role in enhancing atmosphere, aligning with cultural expectations, and adapting to different spaces and times. These insights reflect live music’s broader impact on the luxury hotel experience. Several guests emphasized that silence can negatively affect the hotel experience. One interviewee said, *“without music, there’s no ambiance—and without ambiance, there’s no personality... it makes me feel unwelcome”* (Interview ID R4). Similarly, mismatched tempo and volume were mentioned as emotionally disruptive. *“If the background music is too fast, it makes me feel rushed... it doesn’t suit a relaxing environment,”* one guest explained (Interview ID R4). From the staff’s perspective, music also influences workplace dynamics. One hotel manager noted that it should *“create a welcoming atmosphere that makes everyone feel good”* while not interfering with staff performance (Interview ID R6). Thematic analysis of online guest reviews uncovered consistent patterns in how live ambient music shaped guests’ hotel experiences. 8 distinct themes emerged, illustrating how live music enhanced emotional enjoyment, supported rest and relaxation, aligned or failed to align with hotel atmospheres, and influenced perceptions of sound management and customization. The data collected highlights that live ambient music significantly shapes guests’ emotional responses and overall experiences in luxury hotels. However, the study also reveals several challenges: selecting live music that suits diverse guest preferences, managing technical issues, avoiding repetition, and ensuring appropriate volume control. From a practical perspective, managers could use soft, slow-tempo live ambient music in lobbies to evoke calm and sophistication, while employing more energetic yet unobtrusive music pieces in dining areas to subtly enhance sociability. Moreover, integrating live music planning into broader service design—alongside lighting, scent, and décor—will create a more coherent and emotionally effective servicescape. Additionally, the study demonstrates how live ambient music can reinforce brand identity. When music is congruent with a hotel’s overall aesthetic, service ethos, and intended cultural message, it helps create a coherent and emotionally resonant guest journey.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that live ambient music exerts a significant influence on guests’ emotional responses, particularly feelings of calmness and well-being. The emotional and psychological impact of live ambient music emerged as one of the most consistent findings across both interviews and online reviews. Guests frequently described how live background music enhanced their feelings of calm, relaxation, and welcome, while inappropriate or continuous music contributed to stress and discomfort. Guests and managers alike emphasized how music that matches the space can enhance atmosphere and satisfaction. Notably, the research revealed that guests do not always consciously register background live music, yet its effects on mood and perception may be nevertheless profound. This aligns with the

theoretical concept of live ambient music as “aural architecture” (Blesser & Salter, 2007), which subtly shapes emotional experience without requiring active attention.

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