

Asianness in Hospitality: The Case of Luxury Hotels in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the extent to which two Asian and two non-Asian luxury hotel brands operating in the business district of Bangkok, Thailand, incorporate ‘Asianness’ into their designs and their operations as part of signaling luxury. As a specific approach to design and service provision in the luxury segment of the hotel sector, Asianness relies on particular traits of Asian culture such as sincerity, love, forgiveness, balance, and attention to small details. Various qualitative research techniques were used to collect data: interviews with managers from the four hotel brands, observation at these hotels, documentation (their official websites, and netnography (an analysis of reviews on TripAdvisor). Findings indicate that the four hoteliers incorporate Asianness in various degrees and various ways in the design and style of their hotels as well as in their customized services and in the customer-centricity of their approach to luxury. The level of Asianness (and “Thainess” in one case) is more consistent in the case of Asian luxury brands. Different characteristics of Asianness are nonetheless found across the four hotel brands.

Keywords: Asianness, Thainess, Luxury Hotel, Custom-Centric Services, Design

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has been growing by leaps and bounds over the last decades. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international arrivals worldwide have doubled between the years 2000 and 2017, reaching 1.33 billion by the end of 2017. This exponential growth has had a major impact on the strategy of major international hotel brands and also on the business plans of smaller and less known brands, i.e., smaller companies, which, while enjoying national or regional recognition, have yet to become household names beyond these confines. Among others, it has led a number of them to enter or step up their presence in well-known popular destinations outside of their native countries or regions (Cai & Hobson, 2004). One such investment destination is Thailand, which has witnessed a significant rise in the number of hotels, both indigenous and non-local, as well as a shift in focus from the economy segment to the luxury market (Wattanacharoensil, Kobkitpanichpol, & Chon, 2014).

Asian hotel brands, in particular, have gained a strong reputation for their high standard of service and emphasis on Asian cultures and values and won awards that recognize this specificity and the quality of the services provided (Hotels Magazine, 2019). For example, in 2019, the Mandarin Oriental, an iconic Hong Kong luxury hotel company, won the 13th Annual

World Luxury Hotel Awards (World Luxury Hotel Awards, 2019). Several other Asian hotel companies have established a strong presence in the luxury category in their home market or across the region (e.g., The Oberoi, Banyan Tree, and Shangri-La). They all have in common a rich Asian-based concept applied to practical contexts. Referred to as Asianness, this specific approach to design and service provision involves, as its name suggests, Asian culture, i.e., sincerity, love, forgiveness, balance, attention to small details, and initiative providing services (Chin, Pinthong, Kang, & Chon, 2016). This concept has drawn the attention of hospitality industry researchers (e.g. Chin, Pinthong, Kang, & Chon, 2016; Piuchan & Pang, 2015). Previous research, however, has failed to establish the relationship between the Asian cultural emphasis on hospitality and luxury hotel brands (Lam, Ho, & Law, 2015). The focus has essentially been on the definition of the concept of Asianness (Wan & Chon, 2010), the role of emotional intelligence and service culture in Asian hospitality (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2014), and the uniqueness and characteristics of Asian hospitality (Chin et al., 2016) with little attention, if any, paid to the influence of Asianness on luxury hotel brands.

This paper seeks to fill this gap. Specifically, it aims to explore the extent to which luxury hotel brands operating in Bangkok, incorporate Asianness into their designs and operations as part of signaling luxury. The hotels selected for this study includes two Asian and two non-Asian luxury hotel brands located in Bangkok business district (Silom and Sathorn). Their incorporation of Asianness is largely dictated by their location, Asian staff members and need to serve the Asian market and its demand for ‘things’ Asian. The selection of this location also reflects the high potential for the hospitality industry in this area (Kasikorn Bank, 2019). The study seeks to address the following two research questions:

- 1). How do Asian and non-Asian hotel brands located in the main business district of Bangkok define ‘luxury’?
- 2). Do these Asian and non-Asian hotel brands incorporate Asianness differently in their delivery of luxury to their guests?

Although this study is conducted in the context of Thailand, it has practical implications for other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the hotels discussed serve ASEAN customers. There is also room for cooperation between Thailand and ASEAN business partners.

2. Key Operating Concepts and Study Framework **- *Luxury Hotels***

In general, luxury goods refer to products with premium quality, recognizable style, reputation, and/or limited accessibility (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). The concept of luxury involves a relationship between tangible and intangible features and price. The tangible function of luxury goods with regard to price is low and the proportion of intangible value in respect to price is high (Nueno & Quelch, 1998). Whereas ordinary customers typically assess a product or service in light of four value components – acquisition value, transaction value, in-use value, and redemption value (Grewal, Monroe, & Krishnan, 1998), luxury customers tend to focus on the luxury value and therefore evaluate the product’s prestigious image and quality (Jang & Moutinho, 2019). In the hotel industry context, luxury is conceptualized as an extravagantly furnished lodging that offers a complete range of high standard and highly tailored services (Tracey & Hinkin, 1996), which among others include fine dining facilities and well-trained staff. Hotel customers tend to hold different expectations and preferences, depending on the type of accommodation selected, e.g. economy vs. luxury (Qiu, Ye, Bai, & Wang, 2015). Unsurprisingly, whereas luxury hotel customers are concerned about the location and service quality (Zhang, Ye, & Law, 2011), economy hotel customers are considerably influenced by price and promotion (Qiu et al., 2015), Luxury elements play an important role in

increasing/decreasing customers' willingness to spend on hotel services and fulfilling customers' overall experiences (Maxwell, 2002). Given the intense competition among accommodation providers, including within the luxury segment, hotel companies are under pressure to maintain or increase their market shares. For small- and mid-scale hotel brands, this means competing with through pricing strategies. But for luxury hotel brands, this means constantly creating innovative products and services for their hotel guests (Patiar & Mia, 2009). Another challenge hoteliers face is to uphold the high standard of their services and products and consistently provide hotel guests with the finest experience that money can buy (Bernsteine, 1999). Therefore, luxury Asian and non-Asian hotel brands needs to carry out the brand's unique characteristics through the settings and products while delivering exclusive experience to their guests.

- Asianness

The concept of Asian hospitality was developed as a way for luxury hotels operating in the region to differentiate themselves from the Western context and signal the fulfilment of certain expectations with regard to the quality and style of service (Wan & Chon, 2010). Due to the high-end service standards associated with it, Asian hospitality has become popular, especially as the number of Asian hotel brands is expanding globally (Lam et al., 2015). It also stems from its uniqueness (Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2016; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2014). Asianness in hospitality practice involves sincerity, love, forgiveness, balance, a keen attention to small details, and the initiative to deliver services (Chin et al., 2016). Piuchan and Pang (2015) determined that Asian hospitality incorporates the cultural ideology of Feng Shui, which relates to the philosophy of landscape and Chinese beliefs in traditional principles. The setting and environment of numerous Asian hotels reflect this sense of Asianness, which has become a part of their guests' experience. The reputation of the Asian hospitality has attracted hotel guests and induced a yearning for experience (Chin et al., 2016). Wattanacharoensil et al. (2014) noted that Asian hospitality gears toward customer-centricity and guest satisfaction.

Asian employees are perceived to have the right attitude and an inclusive understanding of an Asian approach. Moreover, religion and culture also underlie the practice of Asian hospitality through staff members' kindness, tolerance, and attention to details (Chin et al., 2016; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2014). Whereas Western hospitality tends to be standardized in terms of operations and delivery process, Asian hospitality applies sociocultural concept to its practice (Wan & Chon, 2010). Several European hotels have embraced Asianness and adopted Asian hospitality into their practice to distinguish themselves from others (Chen & Chon, 2016; Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2016). This study seeks to identify the manifestation of Asianness in the four hotels selected and understand how the Asian paradigm has influenced these hotels' operating principles and their service and product delivery practice.

Study Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the framework developed for this study is adapted from Walls, Okumus, Wang, and Kwun's (2011) Consumer Experience Model and Bitner's (1992) Servicescape concept. Customer experience can be influenced by both the tangible and intangible components of a product or service (Heo & Hyun, 2015). The key factors that affect customer experience therefore include the physical setting/environment and service features. Servicescape includes the ambience, multisensory perception, space, signage, service feature, and human interaction (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). Bitner (1992) indicated that these dimensions can provide a holistic sense of perceived Servicescape to customers and service employees. Similar to a luxury hotel firm, a number of specific service environment dimensions can affect the luxury experience of hotel customers (Walls et al., 2011). Thus, Servicescape is considered an important concept that influences people's cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses to a service firm. Personality traits and situational factors (expectation, mood, plan,

and trip purpose) are also important features that affect the process of creating an internal response. For all these reasons, this paper adopts the research framework developed by Bitner (1992) and Walls et al. (2011) to examine the Asianness components and luxury features that influence service delivery and customer perception. This study applies the concept of Asianness as articulated by Chin et al. (2016) and Wattanacharoensil et al. (2014) to investigate identified research gaps. Figure 1 displays the proposed framework of luxury service delivery that incorporates the concept of Asianness.

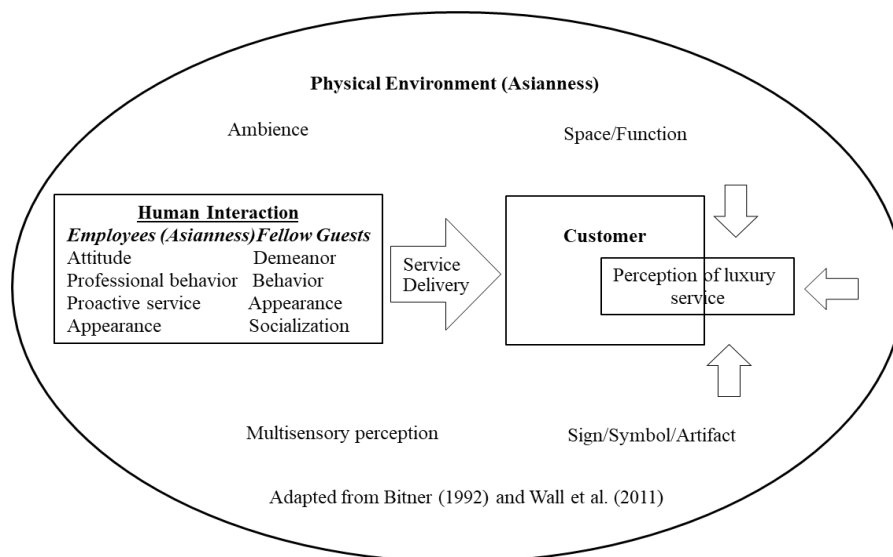


Figure 1: Luxury Service Delivery Framework

Source: Adapted from Bitner (1992) and Walls et al. (2011).

3. Research Methodology

Gratton and Jones (2010) indicated that a qualitative approach to obtain data is suitable when constructing a model, theory, or explanation. Qualitative research consists of alternative methods that include interviews, observation, focused group discussions, and case studies as primary choices (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This study applied a multiple-case study approach to gather data from available through observation and in-depth interviews. Yin (1994) suggests that a multiple-case study method should be applied when more than one case is included in the same investigation. This is because “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust.” (Yin, 1994, p. 45).

Primary and secondary data were collected from four luxury hotels in Bangkok using convenient and purposive sampling methods to select Asian and non-Asian hotel brands. The researchers selected two Asian and two non-Asian hotels located in central Bangkok’s main business district areas in Bangkok (Silom and Sathorn) due to the limited time and financial constraints in conducting field works. The selected hotels are listed as upscale/luxury types on their hotel websites and as 5-star hotel on TripAdvisor. With their 5-star rating, high-end amenities, and upscale branding, the four hotels meet Hotelanalyst (2018) criteria and can target customers who seek a luxurious experience. Owing to the accessibility to tourist attractions in the vicinity of those business districts, customers of three of these hotels are leisure and business guests. Hotel 4’s customers, however, are mostly business people.

- Primary Research

To answer the two central questions in this research, interviewees (hotel representatives) were asked four open-ending questions. Recall from above that the two questions in this study read as follows. (i) How do the four hotels located define luxury? (ii) Do these four hotel brands incorporate 'Asianness' differently in their business model? Based on the operative concepts discussed earlier in this study, the following four open-ending questions were used for interviews:

1. How does your hotel brand define the term "luxury service"?
2. Which of the luxury services offered by your hotel are perceived as unique?
3. What is it different about providing luxury services to Asian and non-Asian guests?
4. What is the difference between Asian and non-Asian luxury services?

To reduce selection bias when selecting interviewees representatives of the target population (Alexander, Lopes, Ricchetti-Masterson, & Yeatts, 2015), the interviewees selected work in various capacities and hold managerial positions in their relevant departments, either in decision making (corporate offices), product sales and promotion (sales and marketing departments), and product delivery (the executive club floor). Therefore, with years of experience in the hotel industry and, given their current managerial responsibilities, the seven hospitality professionals were in a position to explain the level of incorporation of Asianness of their respective hotels. Even though there was a high response rate (six out of seven interviewees), the study followed the purposive sampling's (judgment sampling) requirement of selecting interviewees who were best placed to provide the information sought (Sekaran, 2003). By satisfying the aforementioned qualifications, the interviewees are considered knowledgeable on all the issues discussed regardless of their native cultures.

Conducting in-depth interviews enables researchers to clarify concepts and their relationships with other variables (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. One of the benefits of this type of interview is flexibility. It allows researchers to alter questions whenever necessary (Patton, 1990). Each interview took approximately 30 minutes, and all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researchers. Data were also gathered through observation during the interviews and hotel visits. Observations focused on the physical environment and human interaction.

- Secondary Research

In support of the primary data, this study also used secondary data gathered through online documentation and the netnography approach to analyze elements of Asianness. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) noted, a research that employs documents as data source provides means of revealing hidden features in the content as well as in the cultural norms. The documentary analysis method can be especially useful when researchers are limited by time and monetary constraints (Fakfare, 2019). Thus, all the documents available to the public on websites were reviewed and analyzed to determine their relevance to the concept of "luxury."

This study also used the netnography research method to investigate online reviews on TripAdvisor.com, the most popular travel social media platform among tourists worldwide as it offers a wide range of travel-related businesses. With currently 8.4 million related businesses with over 795 million reviews and 490 million users registered on the platform (TripAdvisor, 2019), TripAdvisor is an informative source for investigating online reviews. Scholars have suggested that text readability and reviewer profile are the most promising factors influencing users' perception of value (Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016). Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay (2015) determined that tourists tend to trust online reviews or online word-of-mouth from the actual user experiences and reliable sources. Furthermore, in some contexts, online reviews can be employed as a substitute for actual interviews (Tontini, Bento, Milbratz, Volles,

& Ferrari, 2017; Zhou, Ye, Pearce, & Wu, 2014). Netnography was conducted based on selected hotel reviews from TripAdvisor during the peak season of Thailand's tourism (December-February). A total of 98 reviews for Hotel 1, 23 reviews for Hotel 2, 17 reviews for Hotel 3, and 47 reviews for Hotel 4 were downloaded. However, only ten of them 10 per hotel were selected as top contributors and analyzed for content.

4. Findings

- Findings from Interviews

In this study, interviewees were recruited based on their relevant experiences in the hotel industry. Most of the participants hold managerial positions in their workplaces. Table 1 shows the interviewees' profile (hotels 1 and 2 are Asian hotel brands and hotels 3 and 4 non-Asian hotel brands).

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees

Respondent Number	Hotel	Position
1	Hotel 1	Assistant Director, Sales
2	Hotel 2	Executive, Public Relations
3	Hotel 3	Senior Manager, Sales
4	Hotel 3	Senior Executive
5	Hotel 3	Senior Executive
6	Hotel 4	Assistant Manager, Marketing Communication
7	Hotel 4	Manager, Club Floor

Table 2 summarizes the in-depth interviews. The seven interviewees were initially asked to define the term "luxury services" and identify the uniqueness of the services offered by their hotels. Table 2 summarizes the main points discussed. As it shows, different views were expressed by the interviewees. Asian culture, particularly Thai culture, was heavily relied upon by the interviewees from the Asian hotel brands to define perceive luxury services. For example, Respondent 1 views "Luxury services as hospitality products or services provided in a Thai way, which should involve high standards so as to meet the needs and wants of customers." Likewise, Respondent 2 defines "Luxury services as the delivery of quality, innovative, and consistent products and services, with a touch of Asian and Thai hospitality. This includes a family-like atmosphere and a warm welcome to guests. While they stay with us, we want to make them feel like they are a family staying at home." Respondents from non-Asian hotel brands, however, offered different definitions. First, they agreed that luxury is reflected by modernity. Hotel 3 branding is unconventional in that it offers lifestyle products or services in a playful environment. Respondent 7 (Hotel 4) perceives luxury services as "providing ultimate comfort by offering exceptional dining, accommodations, meeting rooms, and seamless service to the customers."

The interviewers also investigated whether these four hotels adopted a different service approach when serving Asian and non-Asian hotel guests. Findings indicate that this is generally not the case as all these hotels typically follow service standards articulated by their corporate brands. Non-Asian hotels, however, tend to customize their services to meet the needs and wants of their various customers. Respondent 6 (Hotel 4) stressed that the services had to "meet Asian guests' expectations because [the hotel] can never find out if the guests are not satisfied with something until they check out, they end up with a poor rating on TripAdvisor or a complaint letter." Since the majority of its customers are Japanese, Hotel 4 thus adopts a customer-centric approach. As to Hotel 3, Respondent 5 indicated that: "Even though the services which the hotel provides needs to meet European standards, local adaption or Asian

ways of serving must be applied to be in accordance with the needs of customers. Hotel 3, for example, “serves Asian breakfast in addition to Continental or American ones.” “There is also a cultural link between the European and Asian cultures in the way services are delivered to customers.” With regard to the differences between Asian and non-Asian luxury services, most of the respondents agreed that what essentially characterizes Asian-style service may be the higher values accorded to respect, care, attentiveness, and helpfulness. “The Asian way of providing services is considered humbler, compared with non-Asian styles” (Respondent 7). As Respondent 2 stated: “The special touch and neatness of the services provided obviously reflect Asian culture.” According to “Respondent 1, “We tend to be flexible when delivering service to our guests. In case there was an issue to our product or service, we would try to compromise and apply a diplomatic way to get through the problem.”

The findings show that the concept of Asianness – Thainess in particular – has been largely integrated into the manner in which Asian luxury hotel brands deliver services. Recall from above that Thainess is a “set of cultural, social, and political beliefs and practices that are intuitively understood, maintained, and practiced by all true Thais” (Hoy, 2014, p.1). Unlike Hotels 1 and 2, non-Asian hotel brands, however, do not fully apply the concept of Asianness to their operations. Both hotels are nonetheless flexible enough to adjust their service delivery to meet the needs of their Asian customers if necessary.

Table 2: Summary of Interviews

<p>Hotel 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Luxury – Providing ultimate hospitality in a Thai way with very high service standards - Uniqueness of Service – Thainess in all the products and services offered - Approach in Serving Asian and non-Asian Guests – Standardized - Differences between Asian and non-Asian Luxury Services – Attitude to services, flexibility, and genuine desire to help 	<p>Hotel 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Luxury – Innovation, arts, and technology as a lifestyle - Uniqueness of Service – Providing more and more care - Approach in Serving Asian and non-Asian Guests – Standardized with some local adaptation - Differences between Asian and non-Asian Luxury Services – More reliance on technology - Challenges – Guest used to a more traditional style
<p>Hotel 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Luxury – Providing innovation, quality and consistency of products and services with a sense of Asian heritage and culture - Uniqueness of Service – Family-like service and atmosphere - Approach in Serving Asian and non-Asian Guests – Standardized but can be customized to fit the needs of customers - Differences between Asian and non-Asian Luxury Services – The touch and neatness in the way services are provided - Challenges – Keeping the hardware up to date 	<p>Hotel 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Luxury – Providing services and ultimate comfort beyond guest expectations - Uniqueness of Service – Quiet Zone Curbside program (sleep advantage), express check in - Approach in Serving Asian and non-Asian Guests – Standardized and custom-centric (in the case of Japanese guests) - Differences between Asian and non-Asian Luxury Services – More humbleness in the way services are provided

- Findings from Observation

The four hotels were observed following the structure of the study’s framework. Table 3 summarizes the authors’ observations. One researcher served as a key analyst of the observed data. In the meantime, others cross-checked and verified the results of the first-round analysis. Each researcher took turn as a primary observer. Differences in opinions were resolved through

group discussion (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the next several paragraphs show, Asianness and the sense of luxury that emanates from it come in various forms and degrees.

- *Hotel 1:* During the multisensory experience, Thainess was observed in the physical environment of the hotel; Thai music was played in the lobby and a Thai aroma vaporized around the hotel. Moreover, Thai sculptures and arts ornate public or guestroom areas, where the golden color is omnipresent. In addition to the physical environment, a strong sense of Thainess could be observed in the manner employees serve their guests. The 30-minute observation in the lobby confirmed the staff’s humble ways of greeting customers (“Wai” and “Sawaddee”) and their obvious genuine willingness to serve, not to mention the famous “Thai smiles.” Asianness was also manifest in their uniform.

- *Hotel 2:* As with Hotel 1, Asian aroma is diffused in public areas. The Asian touch also comes from the music and lighting. This hotel, however, relies on a more contemporary Asian style of decoration to achieve the elegant atmosphere that is its hallmark. In observing employee-to-guest interactions, it was found that the staff consistently greeted customers in a Thai manner and interacted with them respectfully, showing a genuine willingness to help, all characteristics generally associated with Thainess. In short, both the physical environment and the employee–customer interactions carry strong Asian and cultural characteristics.

- *Hotel 3:* A similar observation method was used for Hotel 3 to determine whether and how Asianness was incorporated into its operations. Although the hotel operates under the brand umbrella of a European hotel group that expectedly complies with European standards, it has managed to adapt to the local environment as attested among others by the hotel’s architecture and interior design. Inspired by the landscape of a nearby park, there are tangible manifestations of local adaptation and display of elements of Asian wisdom (earth, fire, water, wood, and metal). Another clear indication of the hotel’s intent to embrace Asianness and Thainess and its traditions is the ancient Thai alphabets painted on the wall of the hotel lobby. This desire to blend the hotel’s foreign identity with the local culture is also reflected in the menus and the dishes they serve as well.

- *Hotel 4:* As with the other hotels observed, Hotel 4 owes its elegance to its physical environment and impeccable service. Although it is part of an international luxury hotel group evidenced in the materials used and decorative accents. Moreover, services are provided in a very humble and emphatic manner and staff members use extremely gentle and proper language. Given that the majority of their guests come from Japan, they have adjusted the way they interact to meet Japanese guests’ expectations, thus confirming the hotel’s incorporation of Asianness (the Japanese way) into their Thai operations.

Table 3: Summary of Hotel Observations

Hotels/Attributes		Physical Environment	Human Interaction (Employees/Guests)
Asian Hotels	Hotel 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thai atmosphere • Thai style decoration • Multisensory observations (Thai music, Thai aroma, golden color, lighting, Thai touch, etc) • Elegance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates Thai style service (Wai, Sawaddee, showing humility, etc) • Appearances, traditional Thai uniforms • Behavior: strong genuine willingness to help
	Hotel 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary Asian atmosphere and decoration • Multisensory perceptions (Asian music, aroma, golden color, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly and respectful • Efficient and knowledgeable • Thai style interactions with guest

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elegance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine willingness to help and cater to guests' needs
Non-Asian Hotels	Hotel 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lively atmosphere • Use of the five elements of Asian wisdom in the design • Unique architecture with Asian influence • Elegance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive in providing services • Quick responsiveness • Lively and engaged staff • Trendy
	Hotel 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary design influenced by Asian culture, particularly Japanese touch • Calm environment • Complete business facilities • Elegance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deference and humbleness at all levels • Adherence to Japanese norms • High sense of propriety in the communication

- Findings from Documentation

As explained earlier, the documentation findings come from both the analysis of the official hotels' websites and the netnographic investigation of TripAdvisor.

- Findings from the Hotels' Websites

The data extracted from the websites solely relates to the physical environment construct (for obvious reasons, the human interaction construct cannot be objectively evaluated from hotel brochures). The frequency of each dimension is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

- Hotel 1: For this hotel, the top-three most frequently mentioned dimensions are elegance, comfort (ambience construct), convenience (additional construct), and the hotel club's privilege (additional construct). As shown on the website, the incorporation of Asianness through the 'elegance' dimension is referred to as "embedded Thai heritage" and is visible in the graciousness and artistry of the Thai-styled decoration, Thai themes, and in the hotel room names. Regarding the 'comfort' dimension, the website states that the Thai elements will help guests relax and escape from the hectic city. Asian of materials as demonstrated by the use of silk and teakwood. Another element of Asianness is provided by the 'customization' construct, namely, 'crafting the meeting and event packages' as service is tailored for each guest.

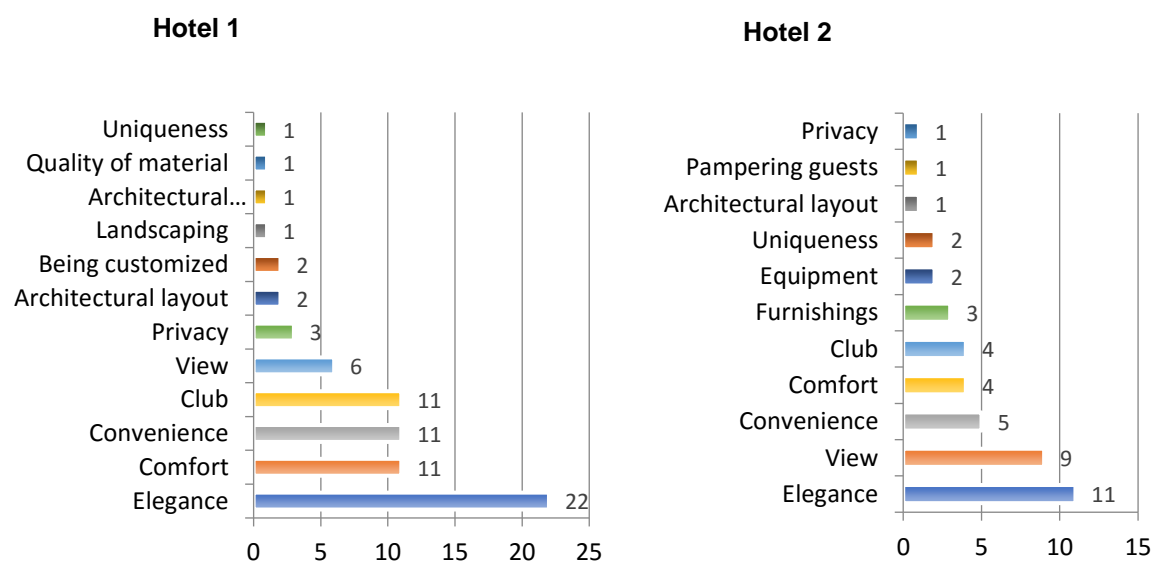


Figure 2: Documentation Findings for Hotels 1 and 2
Source: Hotels' corporate websites

- *Hotel 2*: This Asian-branded hotel shares two of *Hotel 1*'s top three dimensions, namely, elegance (1st) and convenience (3rd). The 'view' dimension, which comes under the 'additional' construct, is ranked second. Asianness is thus incorporated through the elegance of the Thai-inspired decoration, the signature restaurant and the treatment spa.

- *Hotel 3*: The top three dimensions are similar to *Hotel 2* and the hotel's incorporation of Asianness especially evident in the 'elegance' dimension. Thai designers and Asian-inspired artists were engaged to create the main story and design of the hotel. The result is a combination of old-era Thai style and 19th century French style. Furthermore, the 'customization' dimension involves elements of Asianness through the use of advanced technology to provide customized services for each guest and through tailored event facilities - *Hotel 4*: Convenience, elegance, and comfort are ranked as the most frequently considered dimensions. The adoption of Asianness in this hotel is highlighted in the 'customization' dimension through a large variety of rooms to cater each guest's needs and preferences.

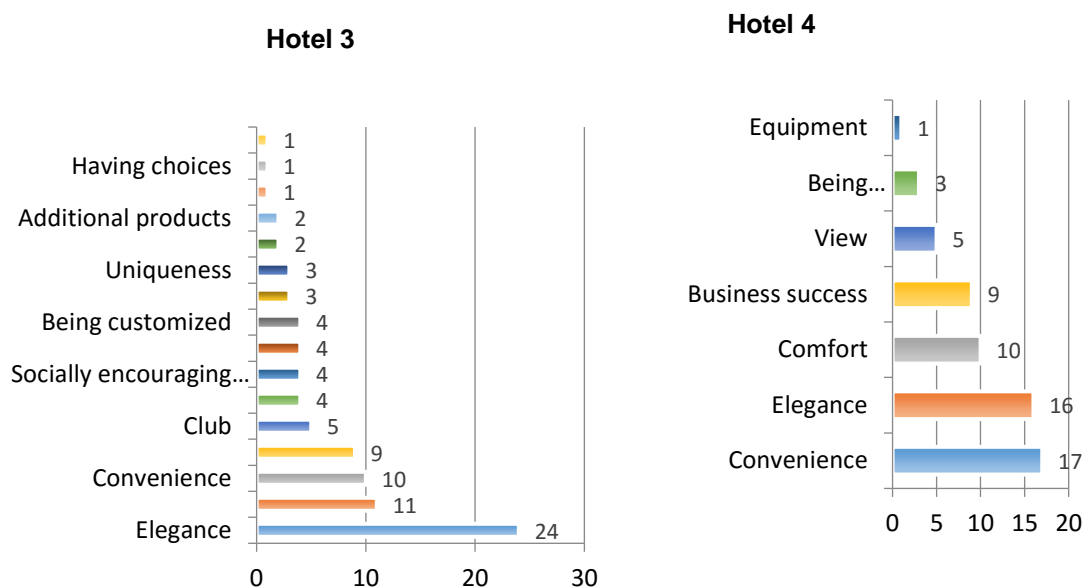


Figure 3: Documentation Findings for Hotels 3 and 4
Source: Hotels' corporate websites

- *Findings from the Netnographic Analysis*

The netnographic analysis of 40 reviews posted on TripAdvisor are shown in Tables 4 and 5. They indicate that the most often discussed 'physical environment' constructs from a customer perspective include the following elements: additional features, ambience, multisensory experience, and space/function. Recall from above that in this study, the physical environment refers to tangible and intangible structures. Space/function and sign/symbol/artifact are tangible parts and ambience and multisensory perception intangible ones. All these constructs are ranked similarly in most of the hotels. While the reviews selected for *Hotel 1* disregard the 'multisensory' construct, they mention the 'sign/symbol/artifact' construct, which refers to the quality of the materials in the hotel rooms. Although 'additional features' was not part of previous studies, it seems to be an important issue for reviewers to whom space, architectural layout, furnishing, and equipment matter most. View is the most frequently mentioned positive attribute and noise a negative attribute. With regard to human interaction (employee dimension), the most discussed issues in respect of *Hotel 1* are attitude, proactive services, and behavior, and regarding *Hotel 2*, proactive service, attitude, and appearance. Similar issues

were brought up regarding Hotels 3 and 4. Obviously, proactive service is a positive attribute widely recognized by hotel guests. When investigating each dimension, three issues were discussed; location, outlet, restaurant, and club rooms and executive lounge facility (see Table 5). Interestingly, club room, and executive lounge facilities, which are privilege benefits customized for special guests as per each hotel’s policy, are merely mentioned in non-Asian hotels. Ambience is also a concern for the guests, with elegance, cleanliness, and comfort recurring as issues among guests in the four hotels.

Table 4: Summary of Consumer Experience Constructs from Hotel Reviews

Hotels/Attributes		Physical Environment	Human Interaction)Employee(
Asian Hotels	Hotel 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional feature (9) • Space/function (8) • Ambience (6) • Sign/symbol/artifact (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude (5) • Proactive service (4) • Behavior (1)
	Hotel 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional feature (8) • Ambience (7) • Multisensory perception (4) • Space/function (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive service (10) • Attitude (1) • Appearance (1)
Non-Asian Hotels	Hotel 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional feature (8) • Ambience (5) • Multisensory perception (4) • Space/function (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive service (6) • Behavior (3) • Attitude (2)
	Hotel 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional feature (8) • Ambience (6) • Multisensory perception (2) • Space/function (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive service (5) • Behavior (2) • Attitude (2)

Table 5: Dimensions of the Physical Environment Constructs from Hotel Reviews

Hotels /Physical Environment Constructs	Additional features	Ambience	Space/ function	Multisensory	Sign/ symbol/ artefact
Asian Hotels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location (8) • Outlet and restaurant (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elegance (4) • Cleanliness (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space maintenance (3) • Architectural layout (1) 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outlet and restaurant (7) • Location (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elegance (5) • Comfort (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furnishing (2) • Equipment (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View (4) 	
Non-Asian Hotels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Club room and executive lounge facility (4) • Location (3) • Outlet and restaurant (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elegance (3) • Comfort (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furnishing (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View (4) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location (6) • Outlet and restaurant (3) • Club room and executive lounge facility (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort (4) • Cleanliness (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architectural layout (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noise (1) 	

Table 6 presents the intangible constructs, those related to employee/guest interactions (human interaction). One issue which guests are mostly concerned about is the proactive attitude (or the lack thereof) of the hotel staff. In fact, attentiveness to guests is the only positive attribute mentioned by all reviewers. Attitude is significant in terms of service delivery and friendliness, smiling and appreciativeness also are preferable to guests even though the legendary “Thai smile” is only mentioned in the review of Hotel 1 as a Bangkok landmark. Excellent service from all the hotel outlets with helpful and cheerful staff –the Thai smile”) (TripAdvisor, 2019). This suggests that smile may be associated with quality service rather than with a national trait. Consistent smiling, though, is not mentioned by reviewers from non-Asian hotels. The professional behavior issues mentioned in the reviews include proper language communication skills and professionalism (only found in reviews of Hotel 4). Appearance is for the most part ignored as there is only one comment regarding the classy look of the staff (Hotel 2 review), which suggests this may be taken for granted.

Table 6: Dimensions of Human Interaction Constructs Discussed on TripAdvisor

Hotels /Human Interaction	Attitude	Professional Behavior	Proactive service	Appearance
Asian Hotels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly (2) • Smiling (2) • Appreciative (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper language communication skills (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentive to guests (4) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently Smiling (1) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentive to guests (10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classy (1)
Non-Asian Hotels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper language communication skills (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentive to guest (6) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentive to guests (5) 	

5. Discussion

The analyses of the interviews, observations, documents, and netnographic show differences in the level of incorporation of Asianness by the four Bangkok-based hoteliers discussed in this study. While the local adoption of Thainess and use of Thai-inspired elements is fully part of the luxurious branding of Asian hotels, non-Asian hotel brands, unevenly apply the paradigm to their operations. Hotel 3 offers a combination of French style, which reflects the corporate brand’s origin, and traditional Thai arts which is reflected in the hotel’s design. Hotel 4 has no apparent locally adopted characteristic, which guests would notice right away. Another dimension related to Asianness is customer-centricity and service customization. Three of the four hotels offer service customization to their guests. Hotels 1, 3, and 4 provide event arrangement crafted according to each guest’s preference. Hotel 3 offers tailor-made services aided by technology and Hotel 4 provides a large variety of customized rooms.

Guests’ perception toward luxury-related offerings incorporating Asianness, is slightly different from the hoteliers’ presentation as indicated by the netnography findings. They view the ‘customer-centricity’ and ‘customized services’ dimensions as reflected by the staff’s attentiveness to each guest’s need (all hotels) and the customized club room and executive lounge that caters to VIP guests’ needs (Hotel 3). The “Thai smile,” omnipresent in Asian-branded hotels is also viewed as an essential element of Asianness and its practice.

While the tangible and intangible aspects of the four luxury hotel brands exhibit Asian characteristics, the two Asian brands’ fully incorporate Thainess and Thai-inspired elements in their luxury offers whereas the two non-Asian brands show only a partial incorporation, which,

in the case of Hotel 3, is reflected in the mixture of French and traditional Thai style. While incorporating elements of Thainess, Hotel 4 provides a strong sense of Japanese culture in the hotel's setting and the way services are customized to cater to its largely Japanese guests. Thus, although the extent of Asianness varies from one hotel brand to another, Asian characteristics are in view in all four luxury hotels.

The 'customer-centricity and service customization' dimension is present in one Asian brand and the two non-Asian brands. This finding is in keeping with the results of studies conducted by Wattanacharoensil et al. (2014) and Chin et al. (2016) in which it was determined that this dimension is part of the Asianness concept. Asian hospitality is naturally driven toward customer-centricity and emphasizes staff's attention on all small details. This is also consistent with Tracey and Hinkin's (1996) definition of luxury, which refers to highly customized services for guests. Thus, customer-centricity and service customization increase the perception of luxury.

As noted earlier, the level of incorporation of Thainess varies among Asian and non-Asian hotel brands. As suggested by Wan and Chon (2010), Thainess is only one of the many forms of Asianness. What it shows is the exploitation of local resources and cultural heritage. Mixing Thainess with Japanese cultural traits (Hotel 4) is also a form of Asianness. Much of the extent to which Thainess is incorporated has to do with the origin of the guests and the interpretation of the concept of luxury. Such differences in the level of local adoption are consistent with each hotel's unique characteristics (Bernsteine, 1999). Hotel 3's combination its brand's unique European characteristics drives its partial local adoption and Hotel 4 communicates its brand's uniqueness through high-quality facilities for Japanese business and therefore can only partially rely on Thainess to do so.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

When asked to define the concept of luxury, each hotel brand uniquely defines the term. Unsurprisingly, the two Asian brands amply referred to Thainess and Thai-inspired elements to define the term. The two non-Asian brands, however, did not resort to the notion of Thai inspiration to explain what luxury meant to them. This discrepancy in their answers highlights the varying degree of incorporation of the concept of Asianness in their hotel design and business model as well as different perception of the notion of luxury, which can be achieved with or without (or with a mix of) Asianness. The extent to which each brand incorporates Asianness is also clearly a function of how the hotels respond to the need of their target customers. Since the two Asian brands possess an Asian brand identity and Asian focus, they apply Asianness in all aspects endorse full local adoption, including the "Thai smile" which they include in their definition of luxury. Conversely, the two non-Asian brands, which did not use Asianness to define luxury, still exhibit some degree of Asianness as a response to the needs of their target customers (customer-centricity and service customization). So, regardless of their brands' origin, the luxury services provided by all four selected hotels are influenced by Asianness, albeit to different extent given their own specific interpretation of the term "luxury." This shared incorporation of Asianness is consistent with the findings from Chen and Chon (2016), and Kolesnikov-Jessop (2016), who argued that combining the Asianness concept into their practices help non-Asian hotel brands distinguish themselves through Asian hospitality.

This study offers academic and practical applications. The findings further confirm that Asianness can be embraced by Asian and non-Asian hotel brands as part of delivering luxury services. They also support the Asian paradigm according to which global hospitality and the tourism industry have cumulatively evolved and moved away from European and American trends toward incorporating Asianness (Tse, 2012). This paradigm can be used to further

explore the Asianness concept within extended boundaries. In terms of practical contribution, the discrepancy between luxury as provided by hoteliers and perceived by guests could be reduced based on the data obtained in this study. On TripAdvisor reviews, hotel guests positively refer to customer-centricity, customization, and the Thai smile. These features should be enhanced by hoteliers. However, local adoption is not clearly perceived by guests, which suggests that more communication between the hoteliers and guests maybe be needed to bridge the gap in terms of guest perception. Moreover, the concept developed in this study could be used in ASEAN member states and cooperation with ASEAN's business partners be developed. The concept of Asianness lends itself to such collaboration.

- Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As is the case with all studies, this paper exhibits a number of limitations. One is the time and monetary constraints during the data collection process. Therefore, to extend the generalizability of the findings to a greater number of luxury hotels, a sample greater than our current sample must be investigated. Furthermore, areas other than Bangkok that share the same conditions in terms of tourist attractiveness, Thai staff members, and Asian guests should also be observed in future research studies. In addition, since all the available data sources could not be investigated due to limited time and resources, future studies with more resources may investigate all available relevant data sources. They may, for instance, consider increasing the number of interviewees and expand the number of online and offline hotel documents to be analyzed.

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