



The Evolving Work Environment for Generation Z in Luxury Hospitality: A Critical Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Luxury hospitality is an under-studied niche in the process of its role as the demographic foundation of the hospitality industry as generation Z (born around 1997-2012) is rapidly joining the industry as their elder peers retire. Yet luxury properties rely on discretionary emotional labour, personalisation and super deferential service scripts, and are required to hire and keep a cadre of people who value flexibility, autonomy, purpose, psychological safety and swift career development. This paper provides a critical review done thematically of research work on employment within the hospitality sector for Generation Z, with a particular focus on the luxury sector. The literature review points to six dimensions of the shifting work environment that

are intertwined: flexibility and work–life balance, career development and mentorship, technology and human–technology relationship, purpose, sustainability, and ESG, well-being, and psychological safety, and compensation, recognition and a distinctive “prestige paradox.” We believe that each dimension creates a unique strain when the general expectation of Gen Z is juxtaposed with the operating logic of luxury service. We bring together these lessons in an integrative framework, connecting macro drivers with employment outcomes, while taking into account the tensions specific to the luxury industry, and map existing evidence on a maturity-by-specificity map. The paper ends with an organized future research agenda with prioritized research questions and methodological recommendations. The review offers a re-framing of the literature that has been predominantly approached as monolithic, and offers direction for the luxury industry that wants to ensure that its service delivery meets the expectations of the new generation of employees.

Keywords: Generation Z; luxury hospitality; work environment; employee retention; talent management; future research agenda

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is going through a historic generational shift. The older cohorts are retiring, while the younger cohorts, also known as the Millennials, are starting to fill front-line and guest-facing positions in large numbers, and are expected to form a significant part of the leadership pipeline in the hotel industry in the future (Goh & Lee, 2018; Goh & Okumus, 2020). Past generations have been linked to a high rate of turnover in the hospitality industry, making it important to gain insight into Gen Z's attitudes, values and working conditions when they are related to the industry to make it a priority in the field of human resources rather than a peripheral issue (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Sakdiyakorn, Golubovskaya, & Solnet, 2021).

Recent research has started to chart the differences between this generation and their predecessors. The Generation Z workforce is consistently portrayed as “digital natives” who rely on technology seamlessly, appreciate informality and transparency in communication, actively seek continuous learning and fast-track career progression, and are especially sensitive to sustainability, diversity and social responsibility in their job selection decisions (Seyfi, Vo-Thanh, & Zaman, 2024; Twenge, 2017). Concurrently, the attitudes of hospitality workers seem to be labile and strongly dependent on the job context, such that positive perceptions of hospitality jobs can turn into exit intentions upon experiencing a lack of schedules, autonomy, or opportunities for growth (Goh & Lee, 2018; Zhou, Chi, & Wen, 2024). This volatility means that design of the workplace - not recruitment marketing - is the crux of the retention challenge.

However, a surprising gap in the literature is the absence of a consideration of the concept “hospitality” as an employment environment. Luxury hospitality is not just an up-market version of the same role. The intangible qualities of anticipatory, personalised and emotionally attuned service are what luxury properties compete on, and the staff are often said to be artisans of experience whose discretionary effort is the product. It is known that it is particularly challenging to keep talent in this segment as

there is an exceptionally high level of expectations and competitive salaries are more of a baseline level. The operation of luxury flawlessness, deference, availability and craft run in tension with a number of the very characteristics that define Gen Z as a generation.

This paper aims to fill that gap. Its aim is three-fold: (a) to critically synthesize the knowledge available about the Gen Z work context in the hospitality sector; (b) to re-read that knowledge in particular through the operating conditions of the luxury sector, highlighting the tensions it generates; and (c) to plan a structured and prioritized research agenda for the future. The review provides a slice of a maturing but still rather undifferentiated body of literature and for its part provides luxury operators with a diagnostic map of where the expectations of its emerging workforce and the demands of prestige service's most keenly divergent.

2. Review approach

This study does not follow a fully systematic approach; instead, it takes a critical approach and follows a narrative-synthesis approach, both of which are suitable for the exploratory and integrative goals of the review, and in line with recent critical reflections in the same field (Seyfi et al., 2024). Where the aim is to question and restructure a collection of work around an alternative approach to considering the work, as in this instance the luxury segment, then a critical review is called for, rather than an exhaustive list of effect sizes.

The literature base was gathered from peer-reviewed hospitality, tourism and management journals, as well as some seminal literature on generational theory, and from credible evidence in the industry where scholarly work on the luxury sector is scarce. Empirical and conceptual research on Gen Z as consumers was postponed if the study did not shed light on effects on the workforce, as was the case for the majority of these studies. The sources were read and categorized by theme; each was classified by the work-environment dimension that it addressed, by whether or not it explicitly mentioned the luxury/up-market segment, and by whether or not it indicated any tensions should a conflict between cohort expectations and service demands be identified. These recurrent dimensions were then consolidated to the six theme structure presented below.

Two boundary conditions of the approach should be clearly expressed. First, the synthesis applies parts of the general evidence in hospitality as well as the well-known features of luxury service, and as such is considered a proposition for testing, rather than a fact. Second, a narrative synthesis is always interpretive and is not as reproducible as a systematic search. The fact that the limitations themselves are informative is itself revealing, since they outline much of the research agenda put forth in Section 6.

3. Conceptual background

3.1 Generational theory and its cautious application

The idea that cohorts have enduring values goes back to Mannheim's (1952) suggestion that shape of the impressionable years formulates a generation. This has been translated in management scholarship as the idea that cohorts have different work values and attitudes that are shaped by the shared experiences (Schewe and Noble, 2000), which has shaped much hospitality research about generational difference (Gursoy et al., 2008). Carefully applied, cohort thinking can gain some understanding of why Generation Z expects things differently from Generation X or the Baby Boomers, born into a world full of connectivity, financial insecurity and increasing social and environmental awareness.

The framing should be used carefully, however. Life-stage effects may be mistaken for cohort effects, there may be within-cohort heterogeneity, and sweeping generational stereotypes have the potential to essentialise a diverse population (Seyfi et al., 2024). These size factors below are therefore viewed in an empirical manner to influence the design of work rather than as an attribute possessed by all Gen Z workers.

3.2 Why luxury hospitality is a distinctive employment context

While luxury hospitality may not differ significantly from the hospitality industry as a whole, there are some differences that are important when considering workforce design. It's intangible, highly personalised and anticipatory service, delivered to discerning guests, which requires constant emotional work, brand fidelity and flexibility about working outside of normal business hours. In this part, talent is not necessarily about being able to do the job well, but is about being able to make a customised experience in a highly routinised service culture. It is therefore considered a greater challenge to retain in luxury than in your typical, standardised mid-market operations and competitive compensation is seen as a minimum requirement – not enough alone. Such a distinctiveness is exactly what makes the segment-specific interpretation of the evidence interesting. Table 1 places Gen Z in the context of the cohorts that are currently working in the hospitality sector, and outlines the orientations of work that are most relevant to this review.

Table 1. Generational cohorts in the contemporary hospitality workforce

Cohort	Approx. birth years	Formative context	Salient work-related orientations
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	Post-war growth, organisational careers	Loyalty to employer, hierarchy, long tenure, defined career ladders
Generation X	1965–1980	Economic restructuring, dual-income households	Independence, pragmatism, work–life boundaries, scepticism of institutions
Millennials	1981–1996	Digital adoption,	Feedback-seeking, purpose,

Cohort	Approx. birth years	Formative context	Salient work-related orientations
(Gen Y)		globalisation	career expectation, mobility (Kong et al., 2015)
Generation Z	1997–2012	Ubiquitous connectivity, precarity, social awareness	Flexibility, transparency, purpose, conditional attachment; autonomy, learning, well-being;

Note. Birth-year boundaries are approximate and vary across sources.

4. The evolving work environment: A thematic synthesis

The literature examined reveals six dimensions that are the content of what Generation Z describes as their workplace. We briefly summarise the general evidence of hospitality for each and then highlight the tension that arises from applying the dimension to the operating logic of luxury service. These dimensions are presented in an integrative framework in Figure 1, each of the subsections that follow details each of these in turn, and Table 2 presents the synthesis.

Figure 1. An Integrative Framework of the Gen Z Work Environment in Luxury Hospitality

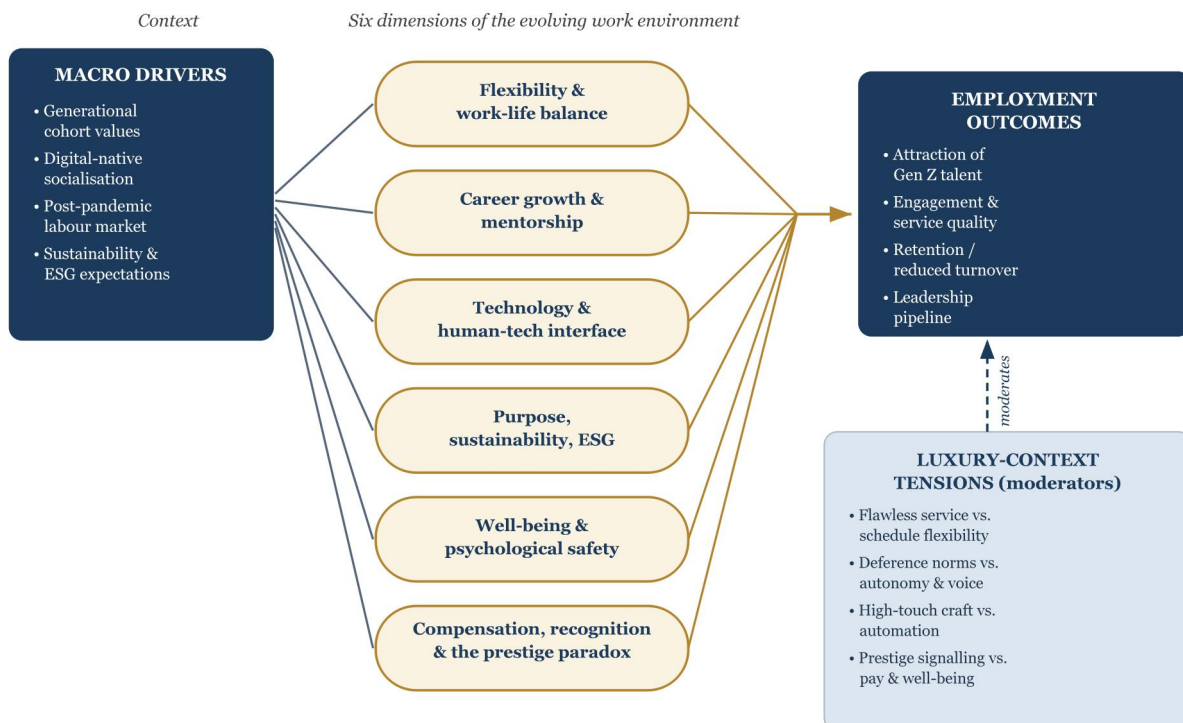


Figure 1. An integrative framework of the Gen Z work environment in luxury hospitality. Macro drivers shape six work-environment dimensions that jointly influence employment

outcomes; luxury-context tensions moderate the strength of these pathways.

4.1 Flexibility, scheduling and work–life balance

Flexibility tops the list of priorities for Gen Z workers, with this being the top priority across every survey. Evidence from survey and focus groups suggests that this group values work–life balance and having a tight control over their schedule and if they feel they do not have this, they are likely to lose engagement or even leave the organisation (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024; Deloitte, 2024). Hospitality has a structural disadvantage as it has long and irregular hours, and hours which are not social, just on the very trait that Gen Z has the most (Deery, 2008). The luxury tension is sharp: Five-star service should be effortless, non-stop 24/7 service, and it's not something that can be planned and staffed by employees. Balancing overnight service levels and schedule autonomy is thus a key design challenge for luxury operators, and the answer to which the current evidence gives only partial solutions.

4.2 Career growth, mentorship and continuous learning

Second, development opportunity is a priority that is very close to the top. A key factor for newer hospitality employees that predicts a high level of satisfaction is meeting their expectations regarding career advancement opportunities. Clear advancement opportunities include regular feedback and continuous learning, while the lack of this is found in the "not meeting career expectations" category. (Kong, Wang, & Fu, 2015; El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024) Reynolds & Dolasinski (2023) point out that, micro-learning and multi-modal training tools fit well with the learning preferences of the cohort. In concept, luxury hospitality is well served here: prestige properties can provide cross-departmental rotation, opportunities to sister properties, and authentic leadership pipelines, which are attractive. The tension is of a pace and a patience. Whereas the traditional course of service for crafts involves long-term apprenticeship and gradual accumulation of tacit skills, it is Gen Z's expectation to see their skills progress visibly and quickly, which can otherwise make for a good development offer but cause turnover in learning organizations if the progression pace is not fast enough (Zhou et al., 2024).

4.3 Technology and the human–technology interface

"Digital natives" are accustomed to seamless and user-friendly technology in the workplace and are growing impatient with outdated technology and cumbersome manual processes (Seyfi et al., 2024; Twenge, 2017). Effective tools can eliminate friction and allow staff to focus on the interpersonal aspects of their job – which seems more compelling to Gen Z. Wherever luxury comes into play, however, the human touch is the product. A technology that could be clearly an efficiency increase in the middle market can in a prestige environment become a de-personalized, high-tech process that can lose the fine touch and hand that the brand relies upon. The design challenge is how to position technology in a way that extends, not replaces, the

artisanal service that Gen Z is being recruited to provide; one that has barely been explored in the luxury world in the literature.

4.4 Purpose, sustainability and ESG alignment

Gen Z is often described as the generation most dedicated to social and environmental causes to date, and as being more aware than ever about the authenticity of an employer's values (Seyfi et al., 2024; Deloitte, 2024). Sustainability, diversity and social responsibility are a draw and a requirement for ongoing attachment. The luxury hospitality industry is coming face to face with a particular credibility test here – opulence, resource-heavy and conspicuous consumption may seem to clash with sustainability promises and Gen Z employees are no fools, they're trained to spot and reject “greenwashing.” Companies that are able to put their sustainability and social commitments into practice in their everyday operations can turn a liability into a unique employer brand opportunity.

4.5 Well-being, psychological safety and emotional labour

The top priority for Gen Z when assessing work is well-being. The cohort is even more willing than their forebears to give mental health a priority, and to walk away from positions they feel are detrimental to it while at the same time, industry buzz about luxury has turned the well-being of staff a prerequisite for the emotional generosity guests demand. It is in this dimension that the expectations of luxury are most demanding; the emotional labour, exacting expectations and norms of deference imposed in this dimension are real psychological burdens, and the pandemic increased turnover rates in the hospitality sector, due to fear, anger and burnout (Popa, Lee, Yu, & Madera, 2023). The confidence to express voice, admit to error, and voice concerns may be especially salient in hierarchical luxury cultures where flaws are valued and where mistakes are stigmatised. Well-being and voice are embedded within the service design - not as a welfare add-on - and are a key retention lever for this cohort.

4.6 Compensation, recognition and the prestige paradox

The importance of compensation to Gen Z is evident, but what it is doing is more attracting the riders' commitment than retaining it this is where recognition, embeddedness and growth take the heavy lifting (Ampofo & Karatepe, 2022; Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, & Callan, 2014; Bharath, 2023). This gives rise to what we term the prestige paradox of luxury employment. The prestige and branding of working at a prestigious luxury property are much advertised and added to a CV and operators have always used this as a substitute for pay, flexibility or wellbeing. However, prestige by itself is unlikely to make up for lack on the other five dimensions to a pragmatic group who will be leery of exploitation and unwilling to stay on when it is not great. More frequent, transparent and linked to development-based recognition is more likely to achieve a real commitment than prestige-based recognition.

Table 2. Thematic synthesis: dimensions, evidence, luxury-context tensions and representative sources

Dimension	Key findings from the literature	Luxury-context tension	Representative sources
Flexibility & work-life balance	Top-ranked priority; rigid rosters drive disengagement	24/7 seamless service vs. employee-controlled schedules	Deery (2008); El Hajal & Losekoot (2024)
Career growth & mentorship	Expect rapid advancement, feedback, continuous learning	Craft apprenticeship tempo vs. expectation of fast progression	Kong et al. (2015); Zhou et al. (2024)
Technology & human-tech interface	Digital fluency expected; tools free staff for meaningful work	Automation efficiency vs. high-touch personalised craft	Seyfi et al. (2024); Twenge (2017)
Purpose, sustainability & ESG	Authentic values are attraction and retention conditions	Opulence & resource use vs. credible sustainability	Seyfi et al. (2024); Deloitte (2024)
Well-being & psychological safety	Willing to leave roles harmful to mental health	Heavy emotional labour & flawlessness vs. voice and safety	Popa et al. (2023)
Compensation, recognition & prestige	Pay is a hygiene factor; recognition & embeddedness retain	Prestige used to substitute for pay/well-being (paradox)	Ampofo & Karatepe (2022); Robinson et al. (2014)

5. Toward an integrative framework

The six dimensions are a system of dimensions that are read together and not a checklist. As illustrated in Figure 1, the six work-environment dimensions are influenced by the macro drivers – generational cohort values, socialisation with the digital generation, a post-pandemic labour market and the rise of ESG expectations – and ultimately impact on employment outcomes: attraction of Gen Z talent, day-to-day engagement and service quality, retention, and strength of the future leadership pipeline (Goh & Okumus, 2020). The theoretical leap unique to this review is to situate tensions between luxury contexts as a moderator between the design of the work environment and outcomes. In a luxury context, for example, the same flexibility policy, the same technology deployment or recognition scheme will result in engagement and retention less efficiently, since the return on otherwise good practices is dampened by the luxury's requirements flawlessness, deference, craft, and

availability.

This "humane" perspective reinterprets the retention issue. It suggests that luxury operators are not just able to bring in wide sector best practice and apply it to the tensions but must create their own. It also produces testable propositions that are most clearly evident in the case of the luxury tension, those most explicitly targeting it will be more effective than those that are more generic; and that the marginal effect of each dimension of a work environment on retention will depend on segment. The propositions form the agenda in the next section.

Proposition 1. Other things being equal, the effect of design of the workplace in alignment with the Gen Z is less pronounced on retention in luxury than in standardised hospitality work environments. **Proposition 2.** Specific luxury-tension remedies are more successful in the areas of service quality and retention than generic Gen Z engagement remedies.

6. A future research agenda

There are considerable opportunities to learn more about Gen Z in the luxury hospitality sector, as dedicated research into this segment is still limited. Figure 2 positions the six dimensions on two axes how mature the existing evidence is, and how specifically that evidence engages the luxury context to help prioritise effort. The areas in the upper-left quadrant, including well-being and emotional labour, and the prestige paradox, are salient in luxury products, with limited evidence and thus are priority gaps; areas of consolidated evidence, such as flexibility, are more general, but need to be explained in the context of luxury products.

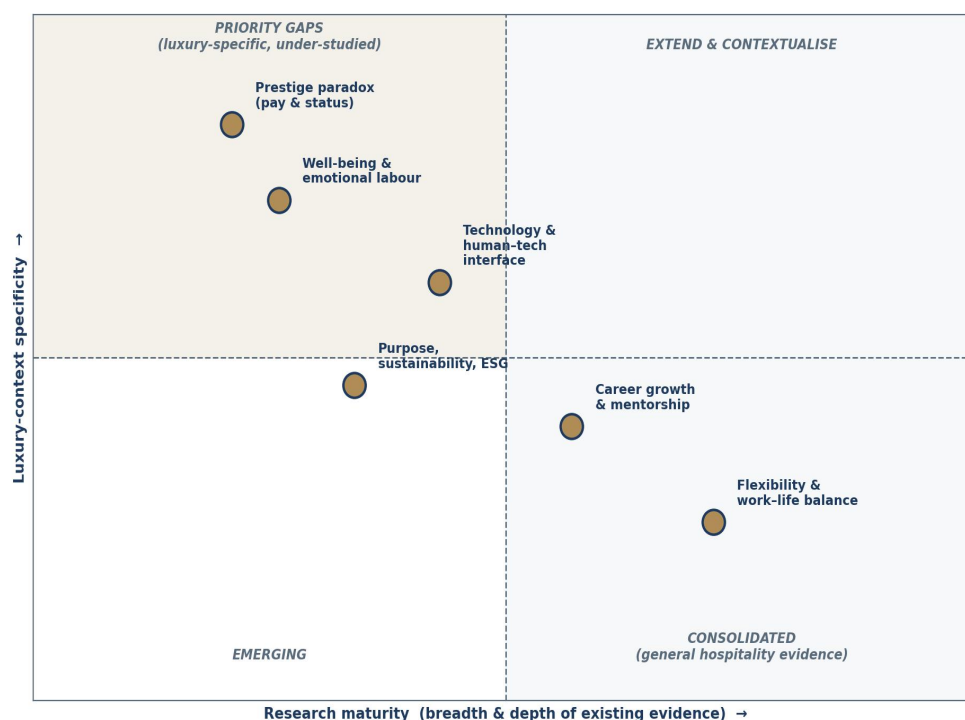


Figure 2. Positioning the research agenda. Themes are plotted by research maturity

(horizontal) and luxury-context specificity (vertical); upper-left themes are the priority gaps.

The synthesis generates five directions that cut across: Firstly, the field requires primary evidence, specific to one of the segments: most claims about luxury are based on general hospitality or practitioner commentary, and empirical research within luxury properties is necessary to validate the moderated model. Secondly, research should shift from a one-dimensional perspective to a configurational design that considers the interaction between dimensions, as Gen Z considers the overall work environment and compromises between dimensions are possible. Third, the well-being and psychological-safety aspect requires specific focus on the emotional labour of luxury service and the specific impact of its nature on the different groups. Fourthly, automation in luxury brands is virtually unexamined in the human–technology interface in what are known as high-touch settings. Finally, longitudinal and cross-cultural designs are required, because attitudes are dynamic and fluctuating over time, and luxury hospitality is a global industry with cultural diversity (Zhou et al., 2024; Barron, Leask, & Fyall, 2014). The following section offers these directions in the form of illustrative research questions and suggested methods (Table 3).

Table 3. A structured future research agenda

Research domain	Illustrative research questions	Suggested methods
Segment-specific evidence	Do the drivers of Gen Z retention differ in magnitude between luxury and standardised properties? Does luxury moderate the design–outcome link?	Multi-group SEM; matched-sample surveys; segment-comparative designs
Configurations & trade-offs	Which combinations of the six dimensions best secure engagement and retention? How do Gen Z employees trade flexibility against prestige or growth?	fsQCA; conjoint / discrete-choice experiments; latent-profile analysis
Emotional labour & well-being	How does sustained luxury emotional labour affect Gen Z burnout and turnover? Does psychological safety buffer it?	Diary / experience-sampling; longitudinal panels; moderated mediation
Human–technology interface	When does service automation augment versus erode perceived craft and meaning for Gen Z staff and guests?	Field experiments; mixed-method case studies of luxury tech adoption
Authenticity & ESG	How do Gen Z employees distinguish substantive from performative sustainability, and how does this shape attachment?	Qualitative interviews; vignette experiments; employer-brand audits

Research domain	Illustrative research questions	Suggested methods
Longitudinal & cross-cultural	How stable are Gen Z work attitudes over tenure? How do luxury norms and cohort values interact across cultures?	Multi-wave longitudinal studies; cross-national comparative research

7. Practical implications

Luxury operators will have some actionable priorities from the review. Managers don't need to import general Gen Z practices, but should create specifically for these tensions. It also relates to scheduling autonomy mechanisms, such as self-scheduling within service-critical constraints, predictable rosters and genuine control over time off that allows for protection of seamlessness while granting the flexibility valued by the cohort (Deery, 2008; El Hajal & Losekoot, 2024). On development, luxury's innate benefits of rotation, sister-property exposure and structured leadership tracks should be complemented by noticeable, relatively swift development milestones to prevent craft apprenticeship from becoming a no-growth development path (Kong et al., 2015).

On technology, automation needs to be used to strip out the friction in back of house and administrative duties whilst maintaining the high touch guest moments that make the luxury product and much of the joy that Gen Z gets from the job. Sustainability and social pledges need to be made tangible, substantive and actionable in order to be sustainable in the face of a generation that is both sensitive and adept at identifying "greenwashing". However, from a well-being perspective, fostering psychological safety and voice within a demanding service culture (normalizing the expression of concerns and errors) focuses on the dimension in which luxury's requirements are greatest (Popa et al., 2023). Lastly, operators need not to depend on prestige as an alternative to pay, flexibility or well-being; frequent, transparent and developmental recognition more likely to make luxury posting become a commitment (Ampofo & Karatepe, 2022).

8. Conclusion

Generation Z is transforming the hospitality industry – and luxury hospitality is taking this leap on particularly challenging grounds. The sector's self-perception as a uniform entity hides a set of tensions which are particular to the luxury sector, where the operating logic of flawless, deferential, high-touch service is juxtaposed with a cohort that values flexibility, autonomy, purpose, well-being and rapid growth. The paper allows diagnosis of practitioners in six interacting dimensions and a roadmap for scholars in an integrated moderated framework, as well as a mapping of the state of knowledge to a maturity-by-specificity grid. The bottom line is that prestige is not enough to secure the loyalty of this generation from luxury operators, they need to redefine the work environment so that the conditions for exceptional service and the expectations of an exceptional workforce come into harmony instead of being left in conflict. The next step will be to test the propositions that have been laid out here, particularly in a segment-specific, configurational, and longitudinal research.

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