

Conceptualizing Luxury Services and Consumption Trends in Romania within the European Context

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Abstract. Luxury represents a complex and multidimensional concept, encompassing economic, sociological, psychological, and marketing perspectives. While the literature on luxury goods is well established, the conceptualization of luxury services remains fragmented, often implicitly derived from theories developed for tangible products. This gap highlights the need for an integrative framework that addresses luxury within the specific context of services, characterized by intangibility, simultaneity of production and consumption, and value co-creation. In contemporary economies increasingly dominated by the service sector, services play a crucial role in enhancing quality of life, while also representing a significant component of household expenditure, GDP formation, and employment. Within this context, luxury services emerge as a distinct segment, reflecting both the diversification of market offerings and the evolving structure of consumption. The expansion of companies providing highly specialized and personalized services suggests the existence of a growing demand, supported by increasing purchasing power among certain consumer segments. These services range from advanced risk-management solutions and personalized domestic assistance to high-end medical care delivered in private settings, illustrating the breadth and complexity of luxury service provision. This paper aims to conceptualize luxury services within a coherent theoretical framework and to examine consumption trends using empirical evidence from Romania in a European context. By integrating theoretical insights with Eurostat data, the study explores the extent to which luxury services reflect genuine needs or symbolic consumption patterns, offering insights into their economic and social implications.

Keywords: *luxury services, conceptualization, trends, Romania,*

Introduction

The first systematic conceptualization of luxury appears in the works of Thorstein Veblen (1932), who introduces the notion of conspicuous consumption. In this paradigm, the value of a good or service does not derive primarily from its functional utility, but from its ability to signal social status. Goods in Veblen's conception present an atypical characteristic: demand can increase with price, because price functions as an indicator of rarity and social position. In the context of luxury services (private air transport services, exclusive concierge, membership clubs), price is not only an economic mechanism, but also a mechanism of social selection.

Continuing the economic perspective, Pierre Bourdieu (1979) offers a sociological interpretation of luxury through the theory of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic). Luxury functions as a mechanism for the accumulation and display of symbolic capital, reinforcing distinctions between social classes. Luxury services amplify this dimension because they facilitate access to closed social networks, involve specific cultural rituals and codes and produce experiences that are difficult to replicate. Thus, luxury is not just consumption, but an instrument of social positioning.

Jean-Noël Kapferer (2012) argues that luxury operates by “anti-laws” to traditional marketing. These include increasing rarity with success, maintaining distance from the customer, selective communication, not mass marketing, price as a symbol, not as a result of competition. In the case of luxury services, these principles translate into: controlled access (membership, invitation), extreme personalization, avoidance of promotions or discounts, emphasis on heritage and authenticity.

Starting from Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels (2007) who proposed a multidimensional model of luxury value for material goods in the case of services, we find in the specialized literature, in addition to the 4 values valid for material goods such as functional value (quality, performance), financial value (price, investment), individual value (hedonic, emotional) and social value (status, recognition), the following:

- relational value (human interaction);
- experiential value (memorability);
- discretion value (confidentiality, intimacy);
- rarity value (limited access).

This extension is essential because services involve continuous interaction and co-production. The characteristic of inseparability but also the co-producer relationship transferred to the sphere of luxury services can be given the following theory (Lusch & Vargo, 2014):

1. luxury is not delivered, but co-created;
2. the experience is the result of the customer's active participation;
3. value is phenomenological and contextual.

In luxury services (5* hotels, concierge, high-end wellness), the customer actively contributes to the configuration of the experience. Thus, luxury becomes a relational process, not a static attribute.

The luxury experience includes sensory (aesthetics, atmosphere), emotional (attachment), cognitive (authenticity) and social (recognition) components.

Therefore, luxury services must be analysed from the perspective of the quality of the experience, not just satisfaction.

Exclusivity is the structural core of luxury. Rarity produces desire through psychological mechanisms associated with the perception of increased value. However, an excessive level of accessibility leads to the dilution of symbolic value — a phenomenon called the “democratization of luxury”.

Managing the tension between expansion and rarity is one of the central strategic challenges of luxury services management.

From the analysis of the literature, it results that luxury services can be conceptualized as: “relational systems of creation and distribution of symbolic capital, mediated through co-created experiences, supported by controlled rarity and multidimensional value” (Wiedmann et al, 2009).

Luxury, in the context of services, is not reducible to price or superior quality. It represents a complex architecture of social differentiation, identity construction, experiential co-creation and strategically managed rarity.

1. Luxury Services: Conceptual Delimitations and Typologies

Luxury services represent the premium segment of the market, characterized by exclusivity, extreme personalization, impeccable operational standards and memorable experiences. They are not based solely on high price, but on perceived value, rarity and clear differentiation.

1.1. Characteristics of Luxury Services

The essential characteristics of luxury services are:

1. Exclusivity – limited access (selected members, private invitations, discreet locations)
2. Advanced personalization – experience tailored exactly to the customer’s preferences
3. Impeccable quality – uncompromising operational standards
4. Absolute confidentiality – essential for consumers
5. Emotional experience – storytelling, symbolism, status

Luxury services can be classified into the following *luxury categories*, namely:

1. Traditional luxury – hotels, jewelry trade, fashion
 2. Experiential luxury – private safaris, private islands, Michelin-starred dinners
 3. Quiet luxury – ultra-personalized services, without ostentatious branding
 4. Ultra-luxury – aimed at UHNWIs (private islands, art collections, personal security)
- Subsequent paragraphs should be indented by 5 mm.

1.2. Luxury Services and Premium Services

There is a conceptual distinction between true luxury services and so-called “premium” services, highlighting their defining characteristics and underlying value propositions (Table 1). This distinction is essential because the two categories are often used interchangeably in both academic literature and market practice, despite reflecting fundamentally different levels of exclusivity, personalization, and consumer perception.

Table 1. Differences between real luxury services and "premium" services

<i>Premium</i>	<i>Lux</i>
High quality	Operational perfection
High price	Rarity + limited access
Well-known brand	Symbolic status
Good/ good service	Transformative experience

Source: Author’s own elaboration

1.3. Trends of Luxury Services

Luxury services currently operate according to the following *trends*:

1. Data-driven personalization, for which luxury service organizations use: behavioral analytics, advanced profiling, predictive AI and globally integrated CRM. Personalization becomes a stronger source of differentiation than the product itself to anticipate preferences before they are expressed. Examples of personalization in the field of services are: hotels that pre-configure the room according to the customer's history; private banking with dynamic portfolios adapted to the risk profile; concierge that anticipates personal events, etc.
2. Sustainability (responsible luxury) meaning that luxury is no longer just a rarity, but also ecological responsibility, ethics in the supply chain and positive social impact. Sectoral examples in this regard are eco-integrated hospitality; private banking with sustainable portfolios; regenerative tourism. A paradox also appears, namely sustainability must be integrated without diluting the specific exclusivity of luxury services.
3. Digital concierge & AI. AI is used for: personalized recommendations, itineraries optimization, financial portfolio management and real-time behavioral analysis. Luxury does not eliminate the human component — it creates a model: AI for efficiency + human expert for relationship and trust. There is also a risk that over-digitalization can erode the perception of exclusivity.
4. Discreet private experiences imply a reduction in ostentatious display, preference for experiences inaccessible to the general public, private clubs, islands, after-hours access.

5. Luxury services are emerging in emerging markets, namely in Asia (China, Singapore, India), the Middle East and Central and Eastern Europe.

Contemporary luxury services are evolving from models based on visible opulence towards relational, hyper-personalized, discrete and technologically advanced ecosystems, in which value is co-created through data, expertise and symbolic capital.

1.4. Examples of Luxury Services

Contemporary luxury services are evolving from models based on visible opulence towards relational, hyper-personalized, discrete and technologically advanced ecosystems, in which value is co-created through data, expertise and symbolic capital.

A. Luxury services in the context of private medical clinics

Applying the concept of luxury to the medical field involves a structural tension absent in other industries: medicine is simultaneously a public good, a regulated profession and a competitive market. (Ucieklak-Jeż et al, 2018) In this context, luxury cannot be reduced to hotel comfort, but must be correlated with superior clinical competence, advanced technology, medical personalization, absolute discretion and confidentiality, holistic experience.

Unlike ostentatious consumption intended to signal status, not necessarily utility, a form of discreet luxury (“quiet luxury”) prevails in health, in which symbolic value derives from access to rare expertise and personalized care.

In the clinical field, symbolic capital (Bourdieu) acquires a particular dimension, namely professional legitimacy. The symbolic capital of a luxury clinic derives from: the reputation of doctors (international training, academic affiliation), state-of-the-art technologies, certifications and accreditations, access to global medical networks, institutional discretion.

Here, luxury is not only social differentiation, but also epistemic assurance — the patient perceives the reduction of medical uncertainty through association with professional elites (Kreuzer et al., 2020).

The experiential dimension (the value directly experienced by the individual — emotional, sensory, symbolic — beyond the functional utility of a product or service) in luxury clinics has the following component: minimized waiting times, personal coordinator (medical concierge), investigations integrated into a single visit, therapeutic architecture and design, calm, non-institutional ambiance, comfort comparable to 5* hospitality, continuity with the same doctor, proactive communication, direct access (personal phone, quick consultation), belonging to a restricted circle, access to rare expertise, association with global standards.

Thus, the luxury medical experience goes beyond punctual treatment and becomes a personalized health ecosystem (Klaus, 2018).

In luxury medical services, exclusivity is predominantly: quantitative (limited number of patients per doctor); temporal (fast scheduling, no waiting lists); relational (direct relationship, without bureaucratic intermediaries). So, discretion becomes not only an added value, but a structural condition of medical luxury.

Luxury medical services in health are found below: Full personalization, Dedicated physician, Exclusive / rare technology, Strategic discretion, Focus on long-term relationship

The luxury medical clinic can be conceptualized as: a medical institution with high symbolic capital, which offers rare expertise and deep personalization through relational co-creation, in a framework of discretion and strategic exclusivity. Medical luxury is not opulence, but control over biological and social uncertainty, mediated through expertise, technology and relationship.

B. Luxury services in the tourism sector

Luxury in tourism differs from the luxury associated with tangible goods by its deeply experiential and temporary nature. While luxury products can be owned and displayed, luxury tourism services are consumed through experience and memorability.

Luxury tourism can be defined as a set of tourism services characterized by controlled rarity, advanced personalization, high symbolic capital and memorable experiences, intended for a narrow

segment with superior economic and cultural resources. The central dimension is not comfort itself, but the experiential and symbolic transformation of travel (Iloranta & Komppula, 2022).

According to the theory of social differentiation (Veblen; Bourdieu), luxury travel functions as a tool for accumulating and displaying symbolic capital.

In tourism: destinations become status symbols, access to private or inaccessible locations produces distinction, bespoke experiences reinforce the identity of the elite.

Relevant institutional examples: Aman Venice – intimacy and historical heritage, Six Senses Zighy Bay – natural integration and exclusive wellness, private island resorts (Maldives), ultra-exclusive safari lodges (Serengeti)

Tourism is the field in which the theory of the experience economy reaches its maximum expression. Luxury tourism involves: carefully orchestrated scenography; personalized experiential rhythm; multisensory elements (architecture, gastronomy, environment); story and cultural authenticity.

Rarity and exclusivity in tourism manifest themselves through spatial exclusivity (private islands; secluded villas, destinations inaccessible to the masses), experiential exclusivity (private access to museums or monuments; meetings with experts or artists; restricted events) and relational exclusivity (membership clubs; travel circles; access by invitation). Rarity is a strategic tool for maintaining symbolic value.

Contemporary luxury tourism highlights a transition from visible opulence (public visibility, monumental architecture, ostentatious branding, social media display) to discreet and quiet luxury (discretion, natural integration, personalized experience, intimacy).

Contemporary luxury tourism values: natural heritage conservation, local community integration, eco-friendly architecture, authentic, non-extractive experiences. Thus, luxury becomes compatible with social responsibility (Birinci et al, 2025).

Luxury tourism can be conceptualized as: a co-created experiential system, which generates symbolic capital through strategic rarity, deep personalization and cultural authenticity, producing emotional attachment and relational loyalty. Tourist luxury is not simple comfort, but experiential transformation convertible into social and identity capital.

C. Luxury banking services

Luxury banking services refer to the private banking and wealth management segment aimed at high-net-worth individuals (HNWI – High Net Worth Individuals; UHNWI – Ultra High Net Worth Individuals).

These services include: personalized portfolio management; tax and succession planning; wealth structuring; access to alternative investments (private equity, hedge funds, art advisory); family office services; strategic consulting for intergenerational capital preservation (Lee & Lee, 2020).

In luxury banking services, value is not primarily hedonic, but is associated with:

- control over financial uncertainty;
- asset protection;
- intergenerational continuity;
- privileged access to rare investment opportunities.

Banking luxury is not ostentatious, but operates predominantly in the quiet luxury register: discretion, personal relationship, exclusive expertise (Driga et al., 2009).

D. Other categories of luxury services

Concierge & Lifestyle Management are integrated lifestyle management services that manage complex requests (personal or professional), providing access to resources, networks and opportunities that are difficult to access for the general public. It is characterized by exclusive access to private events, clubs, launches, previews, validated international network (art, fashion, real estate, gastronomy, legal), rapid resolution of sensitive requests, contracts based on strict confidentiality, selective membership model, relational capital as the main asset. Interior Design & Bespoke Architecture refers to the fully personalized design and implementation of premium spaces, adapted to the client's lifestyle, identity and heritage. It is characterized by unique projects (not standard solutions), rare materials, craftsmanship,

high-precision execution, integration of private collections and heritage objects, complete supplier management, multidisciplinary coordination (architect, designer, engineer, artist), "end-to-end" experience (Klaus, 2025).

Art Advisory & Collection Management, more precisely strategic consulting for the acquisition, evaluation, structuring and management of art collections or rare objects. The characteristics of this category of services refer to exclusive sourcing (access to private transactions), evaluation, authentication and due diligence, cultural or investment diversification strategy, professional cataloging and archiving, logistics and specialized insurance

Personal styling & Bespoke tailoring which includes services dedicated to optimizing personal image through stylistic consulting and the creation of personalized clothing pieces. It is defined by morphological and personality analysis, strategically built wardrobe (not just aesthetically), made-to-measure or fully bespoke tailoring, long-term relationship with dedicated consultant, absolute discretion

Private Chef & Personalized Gastronomy refers to the creation and delivery of exclusive culinary experiences, individually designed and held in private spaces with the following characteristics: menu adapted to preferences, culture and context, premium ingredients or gastronomic rarities, interactive experience (chef explains, personalizes), small events, intimate atmosphere, total control over quality and details, central value: personalized sensory experience.

Premium Security & Executive Protection includes specialized personal, residential and reputational protection services, designed for individuals with public exposure or high net worth, featuring personalized risk audits, advanced devices and technology, protection teams trained to international standards, permanent monitoring, operational discretion

Personalized Education & Development refers to educational and individual development services built based on the client's profile, objectives and potential, which involves dedicated 1:1 tutors, personalized executive coaching, adapted (not standardized) curriculum, access to experts and elite networks, continuous monitoring and optimization of progress.

2. Empirical Insights from Romania within the European Context

While the previous section has provided a conceptual clarification of luxury services, including their defining characteristics, market trends and differentiation from premium services, the inherently abstract nature of this concept requires empirical grounding. In the absence of a direct statistical classification of luxury services, the present study adopts a proxy-based approach in order to capture consumption patterns associated with this segment.

Accordingly, the empirical analysis focuses on selected categories of household consumption that reflect discretionary and experience-oriented spending, namely recreation and culture, restaurants and hotels, and miscellaneous services. These are examined in relation to economic development indicators, particularly GDP per capita, in order to explore the extent to which luxury service consumption is linked to purchasing power and market maturity.

This section presents empirical insights from Romania within the European context, aiming to identify emerging trends and structural differences in consumption patterns.

In order to empirically support the analysis of luxury services, this study relies on secondary data extracted from Eurostat, focusing on household final consumption expenditure by purpose (COICOP classification).

Given the absence of a direct statistical classification for luxury services, the research adopts a proxy-based approach, selecting consumption categories associated with discretionary and experience-oriented spending.

Specifically, three COICOP categories are considered: recreation and culture (CP09), restaurants and hotels (CP11), and miscellaneous goods and services (CP12). These categories capture dimensions of consumption that are closely related to premium, personalized, and non-essential services, often associated with luxury markets.

The selected indicators, along with GDP per capita (PPS), are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of Indicators and Consumption Categories Used in the Empirical Analysis

Code	Indicator	Description	Relevance for Luxury Services
CP09	Recreation and culture	Expenditure on cultural, recreational and leisure activities	Reflects experience-based and discretionary consumption
CP11	Restaurants and hotels	Expenditure on hospitality and dining services	Captures lifestyle-oriented and premium consumption patterns
CP12	Miscellaneous goods and services	Includes personal care, financial and other services	Proxy for personalized and high-value services
GDP (PPS)	GDP per capita	Economic output per capita adjusted for purchasing power	Indicator of purchasing capacity and market potential

Although these categories do not explicitly represent luxury services, they capture key dimensions of discretionary and experience-oriented consumption. Therefore, they provide a relevant empirical basis for analyzing the emergence and development of luxury services within the broader service economy.

Based on these indicators, the following section presents empirical insights from Romania within the European context, focusing on consumption trends and their relationship with economic development.

The analysis is conducted comparatively for Romania and the European Union (EU27), using consumption data expressed in purchasing power standards (PPS) per capita, ensuring cross-country comparability. Due to data availability constraints in Eurostat, the time frame is limited to the period 2015–2022.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of GDP per capita and selected consumption categories (PPS per capita) in Romania and EU27 (2015–2022)

Year	RO_GDP_PPS	EU_GDP_PPS	RO_CP09	EU_CP09	RO_CP11	EU_CP11	RO_CP12	EU_CP12	RO_vs_EU_GDP %	RO_vs_EU_CP09 %	RO_vs_EU_CP11 %	RO_vs_EU_CP12 %
2015	15.543,50	27.797,20	310	1.250	150	1.180	180	1.660	55,92	24,80	12,71	10,84
2016	16.602,20	28.491,50	360	1.290	170	1.240	220	1.700	58,27	27,91	13,71	12,94
2017	18.502,80	29.653,00	430	1.350	170	1.320	270	1.750	62,40	31,85	12,88	15,43
2018	19.915,40	30.642,50	440	1.380	270	1.380	270	1.810	64,99	31,88	19,57	14,92
2019	21.713,90	31.696,80	470	1.420	300	1.440	290	1.850	68,51	33,10	20,83	15,68
2020	21.808,90	30.513,00	410	1.180	240	910	290	1.780	71,47	34,75	26,37	16,29
2021	23.919,20	33.262,30	470	1.290	270	1.090	330	1.900	71,91	36,43	24,77	17,37
2022	25.908,00	36.137,00	560	1.530	330	1.560	390	2.070	71,69	36,60	21,15	18,84

Source: Author's own processing based on Eurostat data (nama_10_co3_p3 – Household final consumption expenditure by COICOP; nama_10_pc – GDP per capita)

The data presented in Table 3 show several important trends regarding the relationship between economic development and consumption patterns associated with luxury services.

First, Romania exhibits a clear process of economic convergence toward the European Union average, as reflected by the steady increase in GDP per capita from 55.92% of the EU average in 2015 to 71.69% in 2022. This upward trend indicates an improvement in purchasing power, which represents a fundamental prerequisite for the development of luxury service markets.

Second, the analysis of consumption categories shows a similar upward trajectory, albeit at lower levels compared to the EU average. Expenditure on recreation and culture (CP09) increased significantly, from 24.80% of the EU level in 2015 to 36.60% in 2022. This suggests a gradual shift toward experience-based consumption, a key characteristic of luxury services.

A comparable pattern is observed for restaurants and hotels (CP11), where Romania's relative level increased from 12.71% to 21.15% over the same period. Despite remaining substantially below the EU

average, the growth indicates an expanding demand for hospitality and lifestyle-related services, which are often positioned within the luxury or premium segment.

Similarly, expenditure on miscellaneous services (CP12) shows a consistent increase, from 10.84% in 2015 to 18.84% in 2022. This category includes a wide range of personal and specialized services, further supporting the idea that the Romanian market is gradually diversifying toward more sophisticated consumption patterns.

However, the data also highlight a persistent gap between Romania and the EU average across all analyzed categories. This suggests that, while luxury services are emerging, their development remains constrained by structural factors such as income levels and market maturity.

Overall, the results support the hypothesis that the expansion of luxury services is closely linked to economic convergence and rising purchasing power. At the same time, the relatively low levels of consumption compared to the EU average indicate that luxury services in Romania are likely to remain concentrated within niche market segments.

These findings confirm that luxury service consumption in emerging economies such as Romania is still in a developmental phase, characterized by gradual growth, increasing diversification, and strong dependence on macroeconomic conditions.

Conclusions

Luxury services represent a complex and evolving phenomenon, shaped not only by economic factors but also by subjective perceptions, social norms, and individual expectations. As highlighted in the theoretical analysis, luxury cannot be defined solely through objective criteria such as price or exclusivity, but rather through perceived value, personalization, and the experiential dimension of consumption.

The empirical findings further support this perspective, revealing that consumption patterns associated with luxury services are closely linked to economic development and purchasing power. In the case of Romania, the gradual convergence toward the European Union average in terms of GDP per capita is accompanied by a steady increase in discretionary consumption, particularly in categories such as recreation, hospitality, and personal services.

At the same time, the interpretation of luxury remains inherently subjective, varying across individuals and cultural contexts. What may be perceived as a necessity for some consumers may represent extravagance for others, reinforcing the complexity of defining and measuring luxury services.

Overall, the study contributes to a better understanding of luxury services by integrating conceptual insights with empirical evidence, highlighting the need for further research on consumer behavior, market dynamics, and the role of luxury services in the broader service economy.

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