Distinction, habitus, and symbolic capital: a Bourdieusian reading of luxury and the sociology of tourism in Monte Carlo

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1. INTRODUCTION

The starting point for applying Bourdieu's academic contribution to the field of luxury tourism sociology is his work Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (Bourdieu, 1979). This work is an influential analysis of the relationship between power and consumption based on culture. While the classical view of economics interprets consumption as an act of functional value, Bourdieu suggests that tastes—food, travel, aesthetics—act as mechanisms of social differentiation.

In contexts such as Monte Carlo, where social differences are represented and ritualized, Bourdieu's theory is of great academic value. This paper addresses the three central concepts that make up the structure of the theory: habitus, symbolic capital, and aesthetic capital, with the aim of analyzing their relationship in tourist behavior in the Principality of Monaco.

Monte Carlo is not just a destination; it is a highly codified social field, where individuals reproduce, negotiate, or perform status positions through taste, consumption, and occupation of space.

2. CLASS HABITUS: HOW LUXURY IS EMBODIED

Habitus is, according to Bourdieu, a set of embodied dispositions—ways of moving, speaking, choosing, valuing—that structure social practices. It is not only "what one has," but how one is in the world. In luxury tourism, habitus is expressed in multiple layers:

• ways of dressing, discreet or maximalist depending on class style;

• aesthetic preferences (contemporary art vs. classical tradition);

• ways of managing time (relaxation, exclusive experiences, quiet leisure);

• choice of accommodation (historic palace, boutique hotel, private yacht).

2.1. Habitus and Monte Carlo

Monte Carlo functions as a live social scanner:

• Habitus is visible in the way people move around the Carré d'Or,

• In how they interact in the Lobby Bar of the Hôtel de Paris,

• In their use of the Yacht Club space,

• In their relationship with the service staff,

• In the way they present themselves at events such as the Grand Prix or the Rose Ball.

Here, habitus is not only expressed: it is constantly evaluated and compared.

Monte Carlo demands “cultural competence in luxury”; visitors with less cultural capital may experience anxiety or overcompensation, while those with elite habitus tend to act naturally, exercising a gentle mastery of their surroundings.

3. SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: PRESTIGE, RECOGNITION, AND LEGITIMACY

Symbolic capital is the social recognition that legitimizes a position of privilege in which the possession of wealth is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by recognition. This is what gives legitimacy to capital, which is when it becomes symbolic.

In Monte Carlo, symbolic capital is embodied in:

- Membership in exclusive clubs (Yacht Club de Monaco, Cercle d'Or);
- Knowledge of aesthetic codes and unwritten rules;
- The ability to move effortlessly in exclusive environments;
- Access to elite circles and restricted events;
- Connections with prestigious brands and institutions.

Luxury tourists are seeking to participate in a game of symbolic legitimization, where their presence in Monte Carlo acts as a social marker in front of others.

Monte Carlo as a generator of symbolic capital.

The principality is an extremely effective “symbolic device” because:

- Its settings are iconographic (Casino, Hôtel de Paris, Opéra Garnier, Port Hercule);
- Its events bring together global elites (Grand Prix, Yacht Show);
- Its aesthetics evoke tradition, glamour, and historical exclusivity;
- Its global visibility amplifies the social value of having been there.

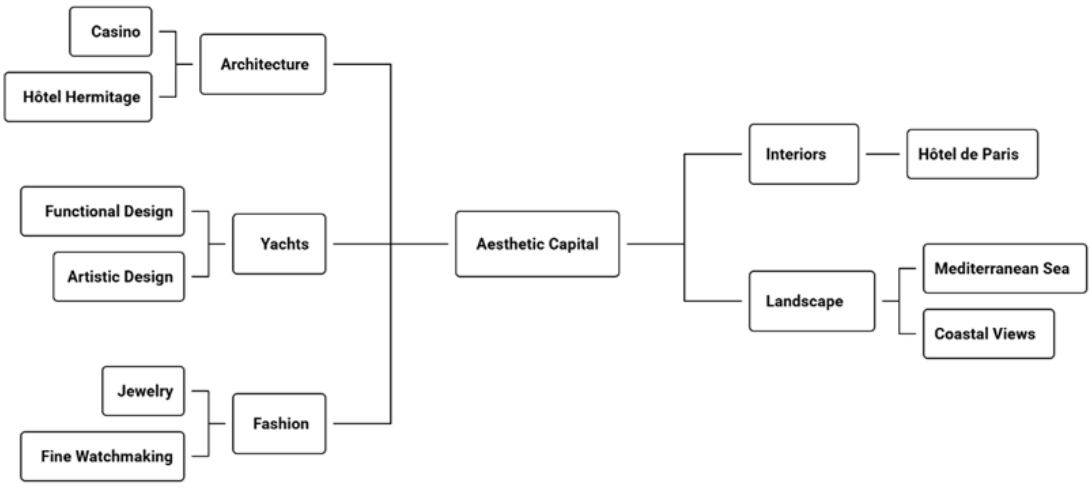
4. AESTHETIC CAPITAL: BEAUTY IS THE LEGITIMIZATION OF CLASS BASED ON OBJECTS, SPACES, STYLES, AND RITUALS CONSIDERED SOCIALLY SUPERIOR.

Aesthetics are a weapon of distinction. In Monte Carlo, aesthetic capital is displayed in:

- The Belle Époque and Art Nouveau architecture of the Casino and the Hôtel Hermitage;
- The neoclassical interiors of the Hôtel de Paris;
- Yachts as objects of functional and artistic design;
- The relationship with the Mediterranean landscape;
- Fashion, jewelry, and fine watchmaking as symbolic and aesthetic elements.

Figure 1.

Conceptual design of Monte Carlo's aesthetic capital



Cultural capital—taste, distinction—becomes essential.

• The established elites represent the pinnacle of symbolic capital with respect to the nouveau riche or aspirational visitors.

Internal structure of the Monegasque luxury field

We can distinguish several subfields:

1. The hotel field (Hôtel de Paris, Hermitage, Metropole).

2. The nautical field (led by the Yacht Club).

3. The gastronomic field (Michelin haute cuisine and private experiences).

4. The events and sociability field (Grand Prix, opera, galas).

5. The fashion and watchmaking field (Carré d'Or).

Each subfield has its own system of legitimation, but they all converge on a central logic: distinction.

5. DISTINCTION AS A PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE IN MONTE CARLO

The luxury tourist in Monte Carlo is not a passive consumer: they are a performer acting within a social script.

This performativity manifests itself in:

• The choice of spaces (Lobby Bar vs. Hermitage terrace);

• The mode of transportation (helicopter, sports car, yacht);

• The type of experience (signature cuisine, luxury watch shopping, charity events);

• The relationship with staff (ritualized courtesy, measured distance);

• The way of being seen (photographs, social media, strategic presence).

6. THE DEBATE BETWEEN DISCRETION AND OSTENTATION

In Monte Carlo, two forms of distinction collide:

1. Veblen's ostentation: yachts, high-end vehicles, visible jewelry, opulent events.

2. Bourdieu's discretion, in which elegance, cultural consumption, and private exclusivity are the protagonists of tourist activity.

Bourdieu suggests that the established elite favors the second approach:

• discreet habits,

• quieter hotels,

• less touristy areas,

• less presence in hyper-photographed areas.

Meanwhile, aspirational tourists tend to reproduce the visible logic of status.

7. SPACE, CLASS, AND AESTHETICS: MONTE CARLO AS THE CAPITAL OF TASTE

For Bourdieu, social space is a translation of physical space. Monte Carlo represents this translation in a visible way:

• The Carré d'Or or Port Hercule represent spaces of social visibility.

• In contrast, the Larvotto or the Casino gardens are spaces of separation between tourists and elite residents.

• The terraces of the Hôtel de Paris or the Hermitage are settings for mutual recognition among elites.

Urban aesthetics—lights, marble, terraces, flowers, cars, architecture—become aesthetic capital accumulated by the destination, used by visitors to reinforce their own distinction.

8. FINAL REFLECTION: BOURDIEU'S RELEVANCE IN MONTE CARLO

Monte Carlo, as the “world capital of luxury,” functions as a perfect laboratory for observing how global elites produce, reproduce, and stage symbolic inequality through consumption, taste, and aesthetics.

In this sense, luxury tourism in Monte Carlo is not only an economic activity: it is a cultural ritual that confirms hierarchies, identifies affiliations, and stages contemporary forms of power.

References

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