Gaze, Brand, and Experience: An Integrated Framework for Understanding Luxury Tourism

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1. INTRODUCTION: THREE PERSPECTIVES BUT ONE SINGLE PHENOMENON

Understanding luxury tourism requires more than describing opulence and comfort. It demands observing the structures that sustain it and the rituals woven into it. This article aims, precisely, to explore that complexity by drawing on three theoretical frameworks—coming from different moments, with different intentions: John Urry's tourist gaze, Kapferer's luxury strategy, and Pine & Gilmore's experience economy.

Each of them represents a different, but compatible, way of looking at the phenomenon. Urry reminds us that tourism cannot exist without a specific way of seeing it—one loaded with expectations or comparisons. Kapferer, reveals that luxury is not a collection of expensive objects, but a symbolic system, an architecture made of scarcity and desire. And Pine and Gilmore point out that, today, we no longer travel only to consume services but to live experiences that might, at least a little, transform us.

Bringing these perspectives together makes it clear that luxury tourism is an arena where the gaze, strategy, and experience intersect almost without friction. They are not stacked layers, but dimensions that feed into each other. The luxury traveler sees the world through a particular aesthetic and social filter; brands design strategies to shape that gaze; and destinations create experiences that allow the whole mechanism to work.

Put differently: luxury tourism is a stage where the tourist's vision, the engineering of desire, and the dramaturgy of experience meet, stretch, and sometimes blur. This is why these three authors are necessary to understand it more deeply, even though none of them wrote specifically about Monte Carlo or about luxury tourism in the way we conceive it today.

2. JOHN URRY AND THE "TOURIST GAZE": LUXURY AS VISUAL PRODUCTION

When John Urry published The Tourist Gaze in 1990, he introduced an idea as simple as it was radical: tourism is not merely moving from one place to another—it is seeing that place in a particular way. This "tourist gaze" doesn't arise spontaneously; it is learned, inherited, shaped through images, narratives, expectations and, more broadly, by the visual culture produced by each society. Travelling, in that sense, becomes an act of recognition: we try to see what we already believe "should" be seen.

Within luxury tourism, it is not just about enjoying a beautiful landscape; it is about seeing what confirms one's status, or what projects the kind of life one aspires to. Desire, and comparison work as its silent engines.

Someone travelling from a position of high economic or symbolic capital does not merely look: they evaluate, contrast, compete; they compare themselves with other tourists and, occasionally, even with a previous version of themselves. Luxury adds an aesthetic filter that turns the gaze into a sort of internal showcase, where each perception is measured.

The luxury gaze, however, does not quite match the conventional tourist gaze. The latter gravitates toward the extraordinary in order to admire it from a certain distance. The former tries to enter the extraordinary, inhabit it, make it part of its own narrative identity. It does not seek only to admire a yacht—it wants to step onto its deck (or better yet, not need a photograph because such a setting feels "normal"). The luxury gaze, so to speak, expresses itself less loudly but with far more demands. It aims at a kind of performative authenticity that is rarely articulated explicitly.

Monte Carlo operates as a privileged stage. Here, the gaze does not merely observe; it participates. The visitor becomes part of the spectacle. In every corner, in every gesture, in every displayed object, Urry's idea is confirmed: the tourist gaze does not describe the world—it constructs it. And in Monte Carlo, it constructs it upwards, toward an endlessly renewed ideal of distinction.

3. JACQUES KAPFERER AND THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF LUXURY

Exclusivity, heritage, tradition, scarcity… these are not secondary attributes: they form the hard core that allows something to be read, or better, recognized as luxury.

Kapferer insists that luxury is not "sold" in the usual marketing sense. It is orchestrated. Cultivated. Protected. It does not strive for accessibility; quite the opposite—it depends on difficulty of access, on rarity, on being hard to obtain, on requiring a specific "cultural competence" to be truly appreciated. And here enters desire, that fragile and powerful engine. Luxury, according to Kapferer, is not built through functional arguments but through rituals, symbols, narratives that connect the individual with a promise exceeding the object itself: belonging, power, heritage, even a form of transcendence.

This logic becomes especially visible in luxury tourism because the product is not tangible. One cannot keep a sunset, or a tasting menu, or the atmosphere of a historical suite. But one can keep the significance of having lived it. That is precisely what brands understand better than anyone: luxury is intangibility turned into identity. A vessel is not transport; it is a metaphor of a lifestyle. Each detail—a heavy key, a silent butler, a particular scent—acts as part of a ritual. For this reason, Kapferer argues that luxury brands inevitably transform tourism into a theater of identity. The visitor does not buy an experience; they buy a role. And the destination becomes the stage where each gesture reinforces a certain idea of who one is (or who one wants to be).

Monte Carlo fits this logic almost perfectly. The Belle Époque facades, the Carré d'Or boutiques, the Casino, the marble-filled lobbies of the Hôtel de Paris… none of this exists merely to be admired, but to be interpreted. It is no coincidence that luxury rituals—personalized welcome, restricted access, hyper-individualized service—find one of their most refined temples here.

4. PINE & GILMORE: LUXURY TOURISM AS AN EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Luxury tourism absorbed this approach with surprising speed, perhaps because it fit with something the sector had already sensed for decades.

For these authors, the modern economy operates on an ascending scale:

services → experiences → transformations.

Luxury, almost by definition, operates on the top two rungs. And this is noticeable. A stay in a palace hotel is not limited to offering a bed or views; it aims to produce an aesthetic and symbolic effect that gives the trip a deeper meaning. Or, at least, a more exclusive one.

In contemporary luxury tourism, experiences are designed around the visitor's biography or preferences. The guest becomes a kind of co-producer of the trip they are experiencing. The experience is not "given," but rather negotiated and adapted in real time.

Another central element is immersion: the feeling of being inside of where everything seems to flow towards the same narrative. In luxury travel, this immersion is often supported by the multisensory: aromas or careful lighting, designed to reinforce an atmosphere that accompanies the story of the place.

Pine and Gilmore argue that the tourist experience is, in a way, an actor. In luxury tourism, this is amplified: the visitor participates in the symbolic construction of what they experience. It is not that brands deliver a closed experience, but rather that they design a setting where the guest can play their own role. That is why contemporary luxury is not only experienced: it is co-created. And therein lies perhaps its fundamental difference from any other form of tourism.

5. MEETING POINT I: LUXURY AS A STAGED SPECTACLE

The luxury tourist is not content with observing a landscape or hotel, they need to insert themselves into that symbolic universe.

The tourist gaze proposed by Urry becomes, under the codes of luxury, an "active" gaze. A gaze that constructs the world as it traverses it, but which also becomes performative: by looking, it also exposes itself. Kapferer helps us understand why. If luxury is a language, then every object and every presence becomes a social sign.

Luxury, in many ways, functions as a stage. A stage with implicit rules, learned rituals, and a recognizable aesthetic. In Monte Carlo, this is effortlessly perceived. The marble of the Casino, the impeccable geometry of the Carré d'Or, the superyachts that seem lined up to be photographed—all of this constitutes a setting where taste is

continuously executed—and judged. It doesn't matter whether the tourist intends to or not: by placing themselves in that environment, they become part of the performance.

The “Instagrammable” moments, so often criticized, are simply the contemporary form of this ancient need to show off. For the elites, the photo is not just a souvenir; it is a tool of distinction, a small act of visual legitimization. Of course, it is not always displayed publicly. Sometimes the value lies in sharing only with intimate circles, or in not sharing anything at all because “it is not necessary.” But the mechanism is the same: luxury needs to be seen in order to fully exist.

At this point, Urry contributes the theory of the gaze and Kapferer, the understanding of desire and symbol.

6. MEETING POINT II: LUXURY AS A DESIGNED EXPERIENCE

In luxury tourism, this theatricality becomes evident: hospitality that seems spontaneous but has been refined over years, cuisine that is presented as if it were a story, interiors that not only decorate but also “say” something. Even the silences are part of the design. Monte Carlo offers a perfect example of this idea. Breakfast on the terrace of the Hôtel Hermitage or a cocktail at sunset overlooking the harbor are not mere consumption; they are scenes. Moments created so that visitors can “feel inside” a broader narrative: that of European luxury, the Belle Époque tradition, the glamour of the Riviera. Here, the experience is not only lived; it is interpreted.

7. MEETING POINT III: THE EXPERIENTIAL GAZE—FROM DESIRE TO RITUAL

The tourist gaze described by Urry needs a framework, a set of signs. It is Kapferer who provides that symbolic system, that engineering of desire that transforms spaces into places of meaning. And finally, it is Pine & Gilmore who explain how that desire materializes in experiences that are not only consumed but can even seem transformative. Thus, the gaze of the luxury tourist is channeled, almost naturally, through strategically designed experiences.

The desire for distinction becomes a ritual. Nothing is random, although it is not entirely rigid either, that is the key. For luxury to work, the experience needs to seem personal but in reality it is sustained by layers of invisible design. It could be said that luxury tourism operates like a social choreography. They live the experience, but they also interpret it. The space affects them, but they also affect the space (or believe they do). This role-playing, this mixture of illusion and structure, is what allows luxury to maintain its charm, its rarity, its constant promise of something "more."

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY LUXURY TOURISM

Tourists have become aesthetic and strategic subjects. They do not travel just to contemplate, nor just to enjoy; they travel to construct a narrative about themselves, a narrative that they can later unfold—sometimes on social media, sometimes in very private social circles, or perhaps only in their own memory. This narrative, almost theatrical dimension is one of the clearest transformations in the sector. The transformational works because it responds to a growing need to give luxury a deeper meaning, even if that meaning is sometimes also a sophisticated form of distinction.

In this new scenario, storytelling becomes essential. You have to tell the story and wrap it in a narrative. Luxury operates as a symbolic exclusivity: it is not just about having access, but about belonging to the story that access implies. Traveling by yacht, staying in a palace, dining in a three-star restaurant are gestures that acquire value to the extent that they are integrated into a coherent personal narrative. And that narrative, although it may seem intimate, is always directed at an audience—visible or imagined.

References

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