Reframing Digital Innovation Through Emotional Intelligence: A Human-Centred Concierge Technology in Luxury Hospitality

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Abstract

This paper explores the development and implementation of a human-centred digital innovation in luxury hospitality: an internally used Concierge Tool designed by Maistra Hospitality Group. Rather than replacing human services, the platform augments concierge professionals through emotionally intelligent, context-sensitive technology. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that integrates thematic literature review and practice-based case analysis, the study examines how the tool supports personalised service delivery, enhances emotional connection, and preserves cultural authenticity in guest interactions. The findings reveal that when co-created with frontline staff, digital tools can empower rather than displace, aligning with recent scholarship advocating for human-in-the-loop and emotionally aware system design. The paper contributes to emerging debates on ethical AI in service industries. It offers a replicable model of quiet innovation—where technology serves as a discreet, intelligent partner in high-touch experiences.

Keywords: Human-centred design, luxury hospitality, concierge technology, emotional intelligence, digital augmentation, AI ethics

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Introduction

The hospitality industry is undergoing a profound paradigm shift amid rapid digital transformation. Technological innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and automated concierge platforms are increasingly integrated into operations, offering gains in efficiency, scalability, and responsiveness (Kim et al., 2024). However, scholars and practitioners caution that digitalisation must not come at the expense of emotional depth and human authenticity, core tenets of luxury hospitality (Hatton, 2025). In a separate line of inquiry, Mercier (2024) emphasises the emotional consequences of poorly integrated digital systems, arguing that innovation must respect the nuance and depth of guest-facing roles.

Contemporary guests seek efficiency and meaningful connections, particularly those in the luxury segment. According to Hatton (2025), the future of hospitality lies in 'quiet innovation'—the discreet integration of technology that enhances emotional precision rather than mechanical automation. In this spirit, Doborjeh et al. (2022) argue for emotionally literate AI frameworks capable of recognising contextual nuance. Sousa et al. (2023) highlight the need for human co-creation in system design to ensure cultural and emotional relevance. Without these safeguards, digital tools risk 'emotional flattening'—diluting interpersonal engagement and empathy (Mercier, 2024).

At the same time, empirical research shows growing guest scepticism towards emotionally tone-deaf AI interfaces. Applegate (2023) warns of hallucination risks in generative models, undermining trust and credibility in emotionally sensitive interactions. Cai et al. (2024) found that guests are less inclined to disclose feelings or expectations on platforms perceived as impersonal, which underlines the necessity of emotional authenticity in digital transformation.

Luxury service roles such as the concierge require intuition, improvisation, and local knowledge—elements that resist complete codification. Studies by Forman and Udvaros (2023) and Hollander (2022) emphasise that concierge excellence lies in emotional agility and contextual storytelling. Similarly, Le Luxure (2024) frames the concierge as an emotional bridge between guest and destination—a role that must be digitally supported, not displaced. Remountakis et al. (2023) reinforce this view, stressing that even advanced recommender systems must preserve emotional individuality and human interpretation.

This paper presents a case study of Maistra Hospitality Group's Concierge Tool—an internal digital platform developed not to replace human interaction, but to augment it with emotionally intelligent features. Designed through participatory methods and embedded in eight properties, the tool enables concierges to deliver personalised, culturally resonant recommendations while preserving relational richness.

By integrating emotional intelligence, human-centred design, and local authenticity, this study contributes to the discourse on technological human-centred innovations. It argues that in the future of luxury hospitality, success will not be measured solely by digital adoption, but by the emotional integrity of digitally supported service. The paper is structured into seven sections: a literature review, the case context, methodology, implementation, discussion, and conclusion.

This paper explores how digital transformation can serve, rather than supersede, emotional intelligence and personalised service by presenting a case study of Maistra Hospitality Group's Concierge Tool. This digital-first, human-centred platform was developed not to replace concierges, but to empower them. Built through participatory design and used daily across eight properties, the tool enhances frontline service with curated local content, intuitive tagging systems, and emotionally relevant personalisation.

Implementing digital concierge systems often risks alienating guests by depersonalising their journey (Chi et al., 2022; Longoni & Cian, 2022). However, this study challenges that paradigm by demonstrating how AI and IoT-driven systems can support empathy, presence, and local authenticity. The approach aligns with findings by Kim et al. (2024), who argue that successful AI in hospitality must be emotionally aware and culturally contextualised.

This paper situates the Concierge Tool within the broader discourse of technological human-centred innovations by focusing on emotional intelligence, cultural resonance, and co-created service flows. The contribution is twofold: (1) it presents an operational model of emotionally intelligent technology in practice; and (2) it expands the theoretical understanding of how digital tools can sustain the emotional core of luxury hospitality.

The paper is structured into seven sections: an introduction; a review of relevant literature on emotional intelligence and digital transformation; the organisational context and tool design; the methodology and development process of the Concierge Tool; its application and operational outcomes; a critical discussion; and concluding implications for the future of luxury hospitality innovation.

Case context: Maistra Hospitality Group and the concierge tool

Maistra Hospitality Group is a leading Croatian hotel company operating within the premium and luxury segment. With a strong regional identity rooted in Istria and the Adriatic coast, Maistra has consistently positioned itself at the forefront of experiential, emotionally resonant hospitality. As the hospitality sector increasingly seeks to integrate advanced technologies such as AI, IoT, and immersive digital interfaces to enhance the guest journey (Digitalguest, 2024), Maistra's innovation reflects the core values of Technological Human-Centred Innovations. These innovations aim not merely to digitise processes but to foster deeper guest connections through empathy, cultural fluency, and personalisation.

In response to this imperative, Maistra developed a bespoke internal Concierge Tool—a digital platform created not for public download but to augment the service capabilities of its concierge teams. Rather than pursuing automation for efficiency alone, the tool was designed to amplify the distinctly human competencies that define luxury hospitality: intuitive judgment, emotional intelligence, and localised storytelling. That aligns with recent academic and industry insights advocating technological augmentation to preserve high-touch excellence. Hatton (2025) underscores the importance of discreet, emotionally intelligent innovation in luxury hospitality. Forman and Udvaros (2023) illustrate how bridging technology and frontline hospitality requires tools designed in collaboration with staff, ensuring alignment with the emotional rhythm and improvisational logic of real service work.

The Concierge Tool functions through staff-operated tablets and is accessible via QR codes for guest exploration. It sources from a deeply curated repository of cultural, gastronomic, and experiential content, each tagged with emotional, thematic, and seasonal metadata. Concierge staff can offer real-time, adaptive, and contextually rich recommendations that reflect operational efficiency and authentic service identity. Hollander (2022) emphasises the concierge's role as a dynamic problem-solver and emotional interpreter—a function this tool reinforces without attempting to replace.

The development process was grounded in participatory design, consistent with the human-centred technological innovation framework. It involved interviews, workflow

mapping, shadowing, and iterative prototyping directly with concierge staff, ensuring that each function responded to actual service needs rather than abstract digital assumptions. As Dogru et al. (2023) and Li et al. (2019) argue, involving service workers in design is key to fostering emotionally intelligent and context-sensitive digital systems.

Three core principles guide the tool:

- **Emotional authenticity** – ensuring technology reinforces empathy, presence, and intuitive guest care;
- **Local relevance** – supporting culturally grounded service interactions that connect guests with the destination;
- **Quiet innovation** – applying digital technology in a manner that is non-intrusive, seamless, and emotionally coherent (Hatton, 2025).

Since deploying the tool across eight Maistra properties, it has supported hundreds of bespoke guest engagements each week. Staff feedback confirms enhanced responsiveness, reduced cognitive load, and greater emotional availability during service interactions (Maistra, 2024). Notably, it has improved concierges' ability to act with improvisational freedom, empowered by the platform but not subordinated to it. As Remountakis et al. (2023) caution, even the most advanced recommendation systems risk flattening emotional nuance unless rooted in human oversight. The Maistra Concierge Tool exemplifies how digital transformation can elevate, rather than erode, the human experience in hospitality.

Maistra's case underscores the central thesis of Technological Human-Centred Innovations by embedding technology that enhances human interaction rather than replacing it. It illustrates that when ethically and thoughtfully designed, cutting-edge tools can help balance automation's efficiencies with the irreplaceable depth of emotionally intelligent, culturally situated service.

Literature review

Human-centred innovation in hospitality

Human-centred innovation in hospitality refers to integrating technology to preserve and elevate human connection. In recent years, academic and industry voices have stressed the need to reframe digital transformation not as a replacement of human service, but as an augmentation. Hatton (2025) introduces the "quiet innovation" concept, describing how luxury hospitality must embrace digital tools only when they deepen emotional resonance and maintain discretion. This sentiment is echoed by Mercier (2024), who cautions against "emotional flattening"—a phenomenon where digitised services strip away the nuance and relational complexity that define memorable guest experiences.

Applegate (2023) offers a technical critique, noting that generative AI platforms can produce hallucinated or misleading information, potentially eroding trust when deployed in guest-facing contexts. To counteract this, Cai et al. (2024) argue for emotionally aware system design, showing that guests are more likely to express preferences and provide feedback when platforms are perceived as trustworthy and personal.

Digitalguest (2024) and Le Luxure (2024) provide practical case studies that reinforce these concerns. They argue that concierge services must remain emotionally intelligent and culturally informed, suggesting that meaningful service can only occur when technology reinforces, rather than replaces, the interpersonal dimension. Huangxiong Qi and Mo (2021) further validate this with big data analysis, revealing

that guest satisfaction is most strongly influenced by perceived emotional connection rather than technological novelty alone.

Emotional intelligence as a foundation for digital augmentation

A growing body of literature establishes emotional intelligence (EI) as foundational for effective hospitality practice, especially in luxury and high-contact service environments. Zhu et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review that found that EI directly influences job performance, guest satisfaction, and service quality. Their findings suggest that emotionally intelligent staff are better equipped to create lasting guest impressions, even in fast-paced or unpredictable contexts.

Jung and Yoon (2016) position EI as a critical coping resource for frontline employees navigating emotional labour, while Choi et al. (2019) explore how EI mitigates burnout and improves improvisational problem-solving. In tandem, Al Ghazo et al. (2018) demonstrate how organisational climate mediates the relationship between EI and counterproductive behaviour, offering insight into how emotional intelligence can be nurtured at both the individual and structural level.

Kwon et al. (2019) show that EI enhances guest personalisation and reduces surface acting when managerial support is high. Huang et al. (2018) similarly connect emotional intelligence to employee retention in luxury hotels, reinforcing that EI is not a soft skill, but a strategic imperative. Johnson and Park (2020) take this further, proposing mindfulness-based training to strengthen EI, especially in technologically mediated settings.

Technological augmentation, not automation

Contemporary literature increasingly supports the argument that hospitality technologies should augment, not automate, service delivery. Doborjeh et al. (2022) identify the limits of AI applications in tourism, particularly when systems lack emotional nuance and contextual understanding. Dogru et al. (2023) offer a comprehensive research framework advocating ethical, human-centric AI implementation, including employee co-creation, transparency, and real-time feedback loops.

Kim et al. (2024) analyse industry case studies and expert perspectives, demonstrating that emotionally intelligent technology ecosystems outperform generic solutions in terms of guest satisfaction and loyalty. Remountakis et al. (2023) warn that recommendation systems can undermine personalised service if they ignore cultural nuance or emotional tone. Bammens and Hünermund (2023) argue for decentralised AI approaches—such as federated learning—to preserve contextual accuracy and data privacy, particularly in small-scale, high-touch environments like boutique and luxury hotels.

Li et al. (2019) observe that awareness of AI and robotics among hospitality staff can enhance or hinder organisational engagement, depending on perceived support. Longoni and Cian (2022) distinguish between utilitarian and hedonic contexts, demonstrating that guest tolerance for automation is far lower in emotionally significant encounters, such as concierge interactions.

The role of the concierge in luxury service

The concierge plays a multidimensional role in luxury hospitality: curator, storyteller, and cultural translator. Hollander (2022) catalogues 35 core concierge services, underscoring the scope and spontaneity required of the role. Le Luxure (2024) adds that the emotional artistry of concierge work cannot be scripted—it depends on listening, adaptation, and local knowledge.

Forman and Udvaros (2023) explore the digital evolution of this function, arguing that concierge tools should be co-developed with staff to preserve improvisational agility and emotional tact. Their study supports a design philosophy centred on empathy and operational flexibility—key values in human-centred technological innovation.

Additional contributions from Swiss Education Group (2023) and Norbert Forman and József Udvaros (2023) argue for concierge training models combining technical fluency and emotional awareness. That aligns with contemporary pedagogies that view concierge services not as transactional, but as relational, grounded in the emotional economy of guest experience.

Together, these perspectives converge on a central insight: successful technological integration in hospitality does not come from replacing people, but from understanding and supporting them. Emotional intelligence, participatory design, and cultural fluency are not secondary to innovation—they are its foundation.

Methodology and development process

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology informed by a constructivist epistemology. This approach is appropriate for exploring how digital technologies—specifically a concierge support platform—can be developed and implemented within luxury hospitality settings to enhance human connection, emotional intelligence, and local authenticity, rather than replace them (Yin, 2009). Rather than attempting to quantify effects, the study aims to understand how service professionals and guests experience and interpret such technologies.

The methodological design integrates two components: a structured thematic review of relevant literature and a case-based analysis grounded in practice. The literature review spans scholarly and professional works published between 2016 and 2025. Zhu et al. (2021) present a meta-analytical review linking emotional intelligence to work outcomes in hospitality, providing foundational insight into the emotional competencies targeted by the concierge tool. Jung and Yoon (2016) further support this by highlighting the role of emotional intelligence in mediating the relationship between service quality and staff resilience under pressure.

Doborjeh et al. (2022) discuss broader methodological frameworks for AI adoption in tourism and hospitality, emphasising the importance of adaptive, context-specific system design. In parallel, Dogru et al. (2023) offer a conceptual model for responsible AI implementation, focusing on co-creation, ethical awareness, and embedded emotional intelligence.

Finally, Kim et al. (2024) explore the human dimensions of technological deployment in hospitality, arguing that practical innovation must integrate operational logic with cultural and emotional nuance. These sources frame the analysis of the embedded case and provide a theoretical context for the observed practices.

The empirical foundation of the study centres on the development of the Concierge Tool by Maistra Hospitality Group. While no new empirical data were collected through surveys or interviews conducted by the authors, the research draws from internal development documentation, staff feedback, and service workflow analyses. This practice-led approach aligns with the traditions of design ethnography and action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), which regard practitioners as active contributors to knowledge creation.

The tool's development followed an iterative, human-centred design process consisting of four phases:

- **Contextual immersion**, including semi-structured interviews and shadowing of concierge teams to map the emotional and functional elements of service work (Forman & Udvaros, 2023; Le Luxure, 2024).
- **Experience journey mapping** to identify key service pain points and emotionally charged moments requiring personalised attention.
- **Rapid prototyping and co-design workshops** generated iterative feedback on content tone, interaction flows, and localisation strategies (Dogru et al., 2023).
- **Implementation and reflective adaptation**, in which the tool was integrated into live service environments and iteratively refined based on user input (Kim et al., 2024).

This design process ensured that the tool supported, rather than supplanted, concierge discretion. The aim was to extend their cognitive and emotional capacities by offering a system that provides timely, context-aware suggestions without compromising empathy or cultural nuance. Hatton (2025) emphasises that innovation in luxury service should reinforce human resonance and subtlety. Bammens and Hünermund (2023) further argue that AI solutions in high-touch industries must be tailored to micro-contexts and emotional dynamics, not driven solely by scalability.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature on human-centred innovation by illustrating how technology can be ethically and effectively integrated into emotionally intensive service domains. It demonstrates that conceptual rigour and practical collaboration can yield design outcomes supporting guest satisfaction and employee empowerment, enriching the academic discourse on digitally augmented hospitality.

Application and outcomes

The Concierge Tool was implemented across eight premium and luxury properties operated by Maistra Hospitality Group, serving as an internal digital interface for concierge professionals. Unlike commercially available guest-facing applications, the platform was specifically designed to operate behind the scenes, enhancing rather than replacing the emotional and cultural expertise of the concierge team. The tool provides instant access to a curated database of localised experiences, allowing for emotionally resonant, tailored recommendations based on real-time guest input, contextual cues, and cultural knowledge.

Three principal outcomes emerged from the implementation phase. First, service delivery efficiency measurably improved. Concierges reported reduced time in assembling itineraries and responding to guest queries, enabling a shift in focus from data retrieval to meaningful dialogue. It aligns with Choi et al. (2019), who found that emotional intelligence enables service professionals to manage job stress and maintain high performance in emotionally intensive environments.

Second, the emotional depth of guest interactions was significantly enhanced. Staff consistently noted that the tool helped them "stay present" and engage with guests more personally, rather than retreat into screens or procedural tasks. This observation supports Zhu et al.'s (2021) assertions that emotionally intelligent service is a core driver of customer satisfaction, particularly in luxury contexts where discretion and empathy are expected.

Third, the system demonstrated adaptability across multiple service contexts, suggesting that emotionally supportive digital augmentation can scale across differentiated guest profiles and service environments without eroding authenticity. That supports the argument of Doborjeh et al. (2022), who found that adaptive AI

frameworks are more likely to produce sustained value in hospitality settings when they respond to situational complexity.

Crucially, the implementation underscored the importance of maintaining a human-in-the-loop design logic, in which final recommendations remain under the concierge's control. This approach mirrors the framework proposed by Dogru et al. (2023), who advocate for emotionally aware AI deployments that preserve discretion and contextual understanding. Such a configuration resists automation bias and protects against dehumanisation in service delivery.

Moreover, staff testimonials reinforce this approach: as one team member noted, "It helps me deliver more—and better—without losing the human touch." This sentiment reflects the ethos described by Hatton (2025), who identifies "quiet innovation" as the future of luxury service, in which digital interventions elevate rather than dominate the guest experience.

The outcomes also correspond to broader trends in concierge reprofessionalisation. According to the Swiss Education Group (2023), digital fluency and emotional insight are now co-requisites for concierge excellence. The Maistra Concierge Tool exemplifies this synergy: a back-end system that enhances intuitive, culturally embedded service through structured augmentation.

In addition, Huangxiong Qi and Mo (2021) show through big data mining that the most memorable hospitality experiences are those in which technological affordances are subordinated to emotional resonance. The Maistra case affirms this, revealing that guest satisfaction stems not from technological novelty but from the sense of being seen, understood, and cared for.

The tool's success demonstrates that human-centred technology can meaningfully support service professionals in delivering elevated, emotionally intelligent hospitality. Rather than digitising empathy out of service, it offers a compelling case for how innovation can work in quiet partnership with the human host.

Discussion

The findings from the Concierge Tool implementation reinforce the value of human-centred design in luxury hospitality innovation. Rather than automating human interaction, the tool affirms that technology can empower service staff to deliver more emotionally resonant, culturally situated, and operationally efficient experiences. That echoes Hatton's (2025) vision of "quiet innovation," which suggests that the future of luxury lies not in the visibility of technology but in its seamless augmentation of human capabilities.

The project also illustrates how technological augmentation aligns with established hospitality theories around emotional labour and service authenticity. As Jung and Yoon (2016) highlight, emotionally intelligent staff can better navigate the pressures of high-contact environments. By reducing cognitive load, the Concierge Tool allowed for more genuine, spontaneous interactions—an effect consistent with Choi et al. (2019), who emphasise the role of EI in managing service stress.

Strategically, the tool offers a model for balancing operational scalability with the nuanced needs of luxury guests. Its adaptability across different hotel contexts supports Dogru et al.'s (2023) assertion that emotionally aware AI systems can be designed to remain context-sensitive. At the same time, the insistence on human-in-the-loop control mitigates concerns over depersonalisation, aligning with broader ethical calls for responsible tech integration in service industries (Doborjeh et al., 2022).

From an industry perspective, the tool contributes to ongoing discussions about re-professionalising hospitality roles in the digital age. As the Swiss Education Group (2023) notes, the contemporary concierge must combine digital fluency with emotional

intelligence—qualities the tool was explicitly designed to support. Staff feedback confirmed this dual role: the platform was described not as a replacement, but as an intelligent partner in service delivery.

For hospitality leaders, the implications are clear. Effective digital transformation requires more than deploying new tools—it demands a paradigm shift in how technology is conceived, developed, and operationalised. Co-creation with staff, sensitivity to emotional dynamics, and content localisation are key to meaningful innovation.

However, challenges remain. As Bammens and Hünermund (2023) warn, there is a tendency in AI deployment to favour scalability over sensitivity, potentially undermining the human texture of guest experience. Similarly, Applegate (2023) raises concerns about the reliability and interpretability of generative AI systems in emotionally charged contexts, underscoring the need for oversight and ethical design.

In light of these insights, the Maistra Concierge Tool stands as both a case study and a call to action: to design with, not just for, hospitality professionals; to deploy tools that amplify, rather than diminish, human connection; and to redefine innovation through the lens of care, culture, and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

This study uses Maistra Hospitality Group's Concierge Tool as a case study to explore how human-centred technological innovation can enhance hospitality service delivery. The analysis demonstrates that technology designed in partnership with service professionals, rather than imposed upon them, can augment emotional intelligence, support operational agility, and reinforce cultural authenticity.

The literature review provided a conceptual framework grounded in emotional intelligence, responsible AI implementation, and participatory design. Findings from the application phase revealed improved service efficiency, heightened emotional engagement, and cross-contextual adaptability. Staff feedback affirmed that the tool enriched, not replaced, the human dimensions of guest interaction. These insights were contextualised within broader theoretical and practical discourses in the hospitality and tourism fields.

The study contributes to academic and industry knowledge by offering a model of digitally supported, emotionally intelligent service that avoids the pitfalls of over-automation. It demonstrates that quiet, ethically designed innovation can preserve the artistry and empathy at the heart of luxury hospitality.

While the study did not include primary empirical data collection, its methodological approach—combining thematic literature analysis with a grounded case study—offers a valid and transparent contribution to ongoing debates about digital transformation in hospitality.

Future research could explore guest perspectives, longitudinal impacts of such tools on staff performance and well-being, and the transferability of the model to other service-intensive sectors. As the hospitality industry continues to digitise, the need for human-centred, ethically grounded design frameworks becomes increasingly urgent. This paper provides one such example—and a foundation for further exploration.

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