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## Research note

# Comfort and the tourism accommodation sector: A central, yet under-studied issue

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## ABSTRACT

While comfort as a word is utilised extensively within the hospitality and tourism industry there has been little research undertaken on comfort in the context of hospitality or tourism. Moreover, those studies that have examined comfort within a hospitality or tourism context have applied a very narrow interpretation of comfort. Consequently, this article draws attention to the notion of comfort, more specifically domestic comfort and its complexity, and highlights its importance in the evolution of tourist accommodation. In concluding, it is suggested that future research in hospitality and tourism studies should be grounded on the recognition of the complexity of comfort and research it is a holistic manner in order to aid the development of the hospitality sector in its pursuit of customer satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

While conducting a longitudinal study on the evolution of youth hostel facilities guests' need for comfort emerged as the most important influencing factor (anonymised for review). This emergent study was based around archival research in the archives of the German Youth Hostel Association,<sup>1</sup> mostly concentrating on the members' and employees' magazines that were first published in 1921 and 1951, respectively. A series of semi-structured interviews was also undertaken with current youth hostel managers. The data was collected between August 2013 and January 2014. In terms of analysis, [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) method of thematic analysis was followed which aligns with the emergent approach of the study.

Analysis of the concept of comfort in tourism and hospitality led to the realisation that it is a word that the industry uses extensively – for example, tour operators often try to sell holidays using the word comfort and there are many tourist accommodation providers that include comfort in their names (e.g. Comfort Inn, Southern Comfort Hotels), suggesting that part of what they are selling is comfort – to date there has been little research undertaken on comfort in the context of hospitality or tourism.

Moreover, while the findings of the above mentioned study suggest that comfort is a complex notion, when critically reviewing the small volume of peer-reviewed research conducted within the context of hospitality or tourism so far on the topic, it was found that most studies apply a very narrow interpretation of comfort. Consequently, the aims of this article is to draw attention to the notion of comfort, more specifically domestic comfort, discuss its complexity, and highlight its importance in the evolution of tourist accommodation.

## 2. The complexity of comfort

A review of the hospitality and tourism, and comfort literature shows that most of the studies that talk about comfort can be grouped under two themes: research that focuses on the thermal environment, and research that considers comfort as an attribute of hospitality and guest satisfaction. The first group of studies (e.g. [Ender & Matzarakis, 2011](#)) regard thermal comfort as one of the important factors that influence tourists' destination choice. The implicit meaning of thermal comfort in these studies is the tourists' thermal perception (i.e. comfortable climatic conditions, which are a combined effect of air temperature, humidity, solar radiation and wind). However, in the larger study in which this paper is based it was clear that it was not just thermal comfort that the German Youth Hostels were referring to (anonymised for review).

In the widely researched area of guest satisfaction comfort is often acknowledged as an important attribute ([Ariffin et al., 2011](#)). Some of these studies, in exploring what attracts travellers to a hotel in the first place, talk about comfort in the form of physical

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<sup>1</sup> The material in these archives that pre-date the fall of the Berlin Wall is from West Germany.

comfort (e.g. Cobanoglu, 2003). Other, mostly in the area of consumer research, studies consider psychological comfort (e.g. Barsky & Nash, 2002). In this context comfort means that customers find the service provider convenient and pleasant, and feel safe in relation to what they are offered by the provider. There is also a group of studies that combine psychological and physical comfort (e.g. Ariffin et al., 2011). These suggest comfort is becoming the most important dimension of guest satisfaction. However, throughout all of these studies there seems to be no clear definition of comfort. Rather, it is a concept that tends to be taken for granted, applied in the sense of being comfortable and safe. While these meanings are important parts of comfort, this paper argues there is more to this concept. Numerous different themes emerged from the German Youth Hostel data (anonymised for review) that suggested comfort was a multidimensional construct consisting of physical, physiological and psychological attributes. Therefore, it could not be understood in a singular way.

Since the hospitality and tourism literature could not identify any fundamental research focusing solely on comfort, the search for an appropriate foundation on which to base the finding of the German Youth Hostel study was extended. It was found that the notion of comfort has been explored across a range of disciplines and across the literature there is debate surrounding its meaning (Burriss et al., 2012). Behavioural scientists have concluded that because people experience only discomfort; suggesting that comfort as a physical phenomenon does not really exist (Rybczynski, 1987). Accordingly, Parsons (2003, p. 257), an ergonomist, describes comfort as 'a psychological phenomenon not directly related to the physical environment or physiological state', while Brager and de Dear (1998), who defined optimum comfort conditions from an engineering point of view, focus on the physiological state of the body and the surrounding environment. Following on from this, the link between comfort and building design has been studied extensively (Chappells & Shove, 2005).

Shove (2003), in exploring the socio-technical elements of comfort, identifies comfort as an achievement which requires an action or series of actions to reach. She proposes that the elements of comfort could follow a similar hierarchical structure to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This theory states there are some comfort elements, such as physical comfort, which, once satisfied, are likely to diminish in importance and leave individuals striving for the next comfort level. This may explain to some extent our constant striving for comfort. Shove's (2003) view is that when something is accepted by the broader public, such as comfort, it is followed by high levels of demand and acceptance. This situation hints at the existence of a complex relation between comfort and desire and luxury (see Walters, 2014).

Scitovsky (1976) distinguishes between comfort and pleasure and maintains that feelings of comfort and discomfort have to do with level of arousal and depend on whether arousal is at its optimum level. He associates comfort with the cessation of pain (i.e., discomfort) and considers it a passive state. By contrast, he talks of pleasure as an active state of change in arousal level. He proposes that too much comfort may preclude pleasure; sometimes we must choose between pleasure at some sacrifice of comfort and more complete comfort at the sacrifice of pleasure (e.g. one must be cold to appreciate a warm fire and hungry in order to really enjoy a good meal). Scitovsky also warns that as the standard of living rises, we get used to doing (or consuming) things a certain way, and these become a comfort, in the sense that doing without them becomes uncomfortable. This speaks of the social construction, and hence the ever changing nature of comfort (Rybczynski, 1987).

These descriptions of comfort justly show what a complex notion it is, but all of them have their fallacies. They only consider some aspects of comfort and disregard the rest, but comfort is a multidimensional construct consisting of physical, physiological

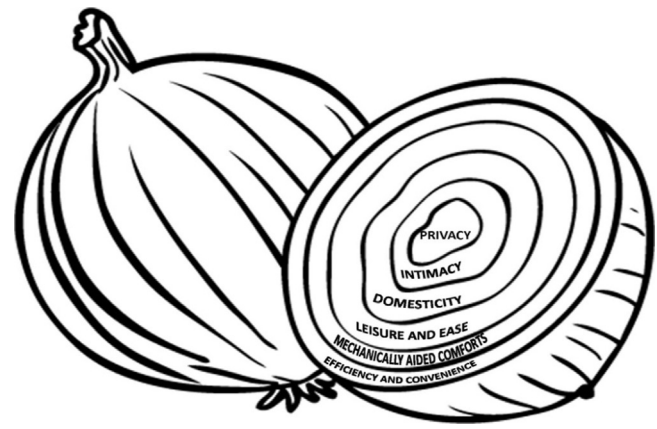


Fig. 1. Rybczynski's (1987, p. 233) Onion Theory of Comfort.

and psychological comfort. It is also specific to a particular time, situation, and individual. Therefore, comfort cannot be understood a singular way (Slater, 1985).

The examination of the nature of comfort in light of the emergent findings from the German Youth Hostel study aided the realisation that the general usage of 'comfort' is often found in the context of shelter or accommodation, suggesting a strong link between them. This turned the attention towards a more specific type of comfort, namely domestic comfort, which Rybczynski (1987), in his book: 'Home: The short story of an idea,' wrote about. He, failing to find a satisfactory definition, developed his own theory; the Onion Theory of Comfort (see Fig. 1). This theory, or perhaps more accurately, framework, provides an illustrative explanation of the complicated concept of comfort. It compares the concept of comfort to an onion that appears simple on the outside, just a spheroidal shape, but in reality it has many layers. Cut apart it is only a pile of onion skins, the original form disappears. Describing each layer separately one loses sight of the whole. Furthermore, the layers are transparent, so when looking at the whole onion one sees not just the surface but also something of the interior, though not necessarily clearly. Consequently, Rybczynski (1987) argues domestic comfort is both something simple and complicated. It incorporates many transparent layers of meaning (e.g. privacy, being at ease, convenience), some of which are buried deeper than others.

Rybczynski's theory also suggests the meaning of comfort has developed historically. This is represented in his model by the earliest meaning of comfort being at the centre of the onion which then grows, adding layers to the meaning of comfort in the process. In the early 18th century, comfort meant privacy, which lead to intimacy and, in turn, to domesticity. Later, the emphasis shifted to leisure and ease. In the 19th century emphasis shifted to mechanically aided comforts (e.g. light, heat, ventilation). Today, domestic engineers stress efficiency and convenience. This notion of layers is important, as it indicates that one layer is built on top of the other but in order for the onion to retrain its structure and nature the underlying layers, like the foundations of a house, are still important. In this way, looking only at the surface gives us only a limited understanding of comfort. Consequently, though privacy may have been an early meaning of comfort it has not become irrelevant as subsequent components of the meaning of comfort have been added over the top of it. It is arguably the failure to understand this that has resulted in previous studies of comfort in tourism and hospitality being constructed around limited definitions of comfort.

Rybczynski's (1987) theory described exactly those themes that emerged from the youth hostel data (anonymised for review), in the same chronological order. When talking about comfort the archival material and interviews mentioned, in the first place, the

guests' need for increasingly smaller bedrooms where they could be undisturbed by others (i.e. privacy). While in the 1920s dormitories hosting 20–30 people sufficed, by the 1940s 12 bed dormitories had become the norm, but 8 bed dormitories were wished for. Today, dormitories with 4–6 beds only and numerous private rooms fulfil the hostel guests need for privacy. Along with the need for privacy, the importance of forming a community, and later on, the need for separate bathrooms, providing an intimate sphere (i.e. intimacy, feeling at ease), emerged. Finally, during the economic upturn of the 1950s – and ever since – the need for comfort expanded to include better heating and lighting (i.e. mechanically aided comforts), as well as effective layouts and comfortable furniture (i.e. convenience and efficiency). These emergent themes imply that domestic comfort is not restricted to the home; it has penetrated youth hostels as well.

Rybczynski's theory is not without limitations. For one, the onion in Fig. 1 is set in time. As such, it fails to account for future emergent specificities of comfort. The lack of a temporal aspect also hampers recognition of the ability of perceptions of and desire for comfort to change over the life of the individual. In addition, we must recognise views of comfort are specific to the individual, even if many overlap to varying degrees. In other words, not all the onions in the field are identical. Furthermore, the individual's perception of comfort will be context dependent. For example, who is paying for a hotel room may influence the expectations and perception of comfort of the individual experiencing the hotel. Yet despite these limitations, the strength of the onion concept is that it recognises the multi-layered nature of comfort and the importance of looking at the layers together rather than individually. To take the analogy a little further, if we eat the different layers of an onion separately each will taste different. It is only by eating the layers together that the taste of the onion, in all its complexity, can be fully appreciated – the same goes for understanding comfort.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has shown that comfort is a complex notion, with many different components; therefore it cannot be understood in a singular way. The paper has also demonstrated that the hospitality and tourism literature to date has not looked at comfort as this complex entity, preferring instead to focus attention on one particular aspect of comfort. This is not to say that such an approach is not without meaning but that it provides an incomplete understanding

of the complexity of comfort. It is suggested that while Rybczynski's (1987) Onion Theory of Comfort may not necessarily be the only or ideal lens through which to study comfort it does offer a platform to build a more complex understanding of comfort on than currently exists within the hospitality and tourism literature.

This paper calls for future research within hospitality and tourism that recognises comfort as a complex, multi-layered and constantly evolving entity that needs studying beyond the confines of German youth hostels. Such work is needed to explore whether the issues raised in this paper and the wider study of German Youth Hostels (anonymised for review) are applicable to other types of tourist accommodation. Furthermore, work that explores comfort as a complex and constantly evolving entity is arguably needed as it has the potential to aid the hospitality in its pursuit of customer satisfaction.

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