
Experiencing hospitality: an exploratory study on the experiential dimensions of hospitality

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Abstract

What is hospitality? Only few academic articles tap into the meaning of the concept of hospitality. Especially academic investigation of hospitality from a guest perspective is scarce; the combination of 'hospitality' and 'experience' has received hardly any attention. The present paper describes a first step in the understanding of what people in service environments experience as hospitable. Two exploratory qualitative studies, with service experts and consumers, were carried out in order to identify characteristics of the experience of hospitality. The studies revealed that experiencing hospitality is primarily a perception of personal attention. Furthermore, the research resulted in nine so-called experiential dimensions of hospitality: welcome, safety, empathy, servitude, acknowledgement, autonomy, surprise, entertainment and efficiency.

Key Words *hospitality, experience, service, perception*

Experience Theme *Consumers' experiences*

Focus of Paper *Theoretical/Academic*

Introduction

The business and managerial sector has thus far dominated the literature on hospitality (Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011). This makes sense, since in this sector there seems to be a need for practical knowledge on hospitality. But do we know what is meant by hospitality? There are remarkably few academic articles that tap into the meaning of the concept. To illustrate, no single paper presented at the ICHRIE conferences was about what hospitality means to customers, and how they experience it. The immediate needs of the hospitality industry for practical insights to improve the hospitality business may be the reason that the first step of empirical investigation on what hospitality means is unintentionally left out. This first step is, however, essential for the development of a theoretical framework. It is necessary to further explore, define, investigate and apply hospitality (Brotherton, 1999; Lynch et al., 2011; Ottenbacher, Harrington & Parsa, 2009).

Existing literature on the meaning of hospitality approaches the concept of hospitality from various academic perspectives. The historical perspective focuses on hospitality by looking back at the societal roots of it and how it developed over time (e.g. Ahn, 2010; Bell, 2007; O'Gorman, 2007). Other literature, like in the domains of philosophy and theology, contains discussions on 'ideal hospitality', examining it from a moral point of view (e.g. Derrida, 1998; Levinas, 1987; Telfer, 2000; Reynolds, 2010; Santich, 2007). In domains like cultural anthropology, sociology, politics and linguistics, discourses on the meaning of hospitality concentrate on exchange processes between (groups of) people (e.g. Brotherton & Wood, 2000; Candea & da Col, 2012; Lashley, 2000; Selwyn, 2000). Finally, from a psychological perspective hospitality is studied on an individual level. Within this individual perspective, attention is primarily given to the host, the provider of hospitality. This literature seems to focus on the appearance and behaviour of employees in (service) organisations (e.g. Magnini, Baker & Karande, 2013; Hochschild, 1983; O'Connor, 2005; Warhust & Nickson, 2007).

However, literature regarding the 'reception' of hospitality, the perspective of the guest, is scarce. Likewise, literature on service experiences in the field of services marketing seldom takes the guest perspective into account. The present paper focuses on this individual guest perspective. It aims to make a first step in the understanding of what people in service environments experience as hospitable.

Theory

An initial systematic literature search on *the experience of hospitality* rendered only few articles on the subject. Brotherton (2005) investigated hotel guest perceptions of physical as well as service aspects of hospitality. People's associations with behaviour were amongst others: welcoming, friendly, polite and pleasant. Associations with the physical aspects of hospitality were: modern, clean, comfortable and bright. Hepple, Kipps, and Thomson (1990) performed a study on hospitality in a hospital environment. They found that according to hospital patients, friendly staff and smooth procedures are most relevant for a hospitable experience. Hemmington (2007) stresses the importance of defining hospitality as an experience by defining five key dimensions of hospitality: the host-guest relationship, generosity, theatre and performance, lots of little surprises and safety and security.

Looking beyond the sparse empirical studies on the experience of hospitality, on a more descriptive level the literature provides some indications on what guests will probably experience as hospitable. Ancient writings on hospitality already contained experience-related words. For instance, O'Gorman (2007) states that in Homeric writings hospitality was associated with providing a warm welcome, a comfortable place to sit, charming company and entertainment. Taken together, these descriptions of hospitality refer to a number of characteristics of a hospitable experience: a warm welcome, providing safety and security, pleasure or entertainment and to a lesser extent servitude and empathy.

To start with a warm welcome, Burgess (1982, p.50) describes hospitality as 'the social relationship fostered by the warm, friendly, welcoming, courteous, open, generous behaviour of the host, creating the hospitable social environment'. Hepple et al. (1990, p.308) refer to psychological and physiological comfort and Brotherton and Wood (2008) propose warmth, friendliness and feeling welcome as characteristics of hospitality. The second characteristic, safety, also seems to be a central characteristic of hospitality (e.g. Burgess, 1982; Nailon, 1992, Hemmington, 2007; Hepple et al. 1990; Telfer, 2000). For instance, Telfer (2000, p.39) points out that 'traditionally the most important responsibility of all was the guest's safety'. The third characteristic of hospitality, entertainment or giving pleasure, is referred to in works of e.g. Telfer (2000), King (1995), Burgess (1982) and Hemmington (2007).

Also servitude and empathy appear in descriptions of hospitality, although less frequently. Telfer (2000) describes servitude as 'genuine needs to please and care for the guests'. Lashley (2000) argues that hospitality involves 'the desire to please'. Generosity is another word that is frequently associated with servitude (e.g. Brotherton & Wood, 2008; King, 1995; Lashley, 2000; Hemmington, 2007). Although in popular literature empathy is probably the element that is most often mentioned in relation to hospitality, in the academic literature only few authors refer to it. 'Reading the signs of the customer' (Matzko, 1996), 'understanding the guest' (King, 1995) and 'meeting the needs and desires of the guests' (Tideman, 1983) are phrases referring to empathy.

The majority of the literature discussed thus far, focuses on hospitality from the viewpoint of the host. The host provides safety and security, is generous, friendly, entertaining etcetera. Few articles take the perspective of the guest. Moreover, the literature is mainly conceptual and descriptive in nature. There is scant evidence that the experience-related words authors use to describe hospitality indeed reflect how consumers experience it. This is subject to the present two exploratory studies. It is assumed that service providers consciously think about how to create hospitable experiences and therefore will be able to reflect on it. On the other hand, mental processes of consumers experiencing service environments may occur mainly on less conscious levels. Therefore both service providers and service consumers were involved in the present research.

Study 1: Service providers

To explore whether the experience of hospitality as described in the literature is in line with the view on the meaning of hospitality in the service industry, service experts were consulted to share their expertise and opinion on what hospitality is.

Method

Eight experts on service experience participated in this qualitative study (first round of a Delphi study (Rowe & Wright, 2001)). The participants were managers in service organisations, who deal with or advice about creating consumer experiences. As the focus was on services in a broader sense, experts from different types of service contexts were recruited. The respondents were experts on services in business (r1 and r2), healthcare (r3), hotels and restaurants (r4 and r5), travel (r6), entertainment (r7) and the built environment (r8). Although stationed in the Netherlands, most experts have international working experience and/or deal with an international population of consumers.

The respondents were interviewed face-to-face in October and November 2014. They were instructed to talk about hospitable and/or inhospitable experiences, to provide associations with hospitality, to share their thoughts on the meaning of hospitable experiences, and they were asked what their organisation does to create a hospitable service environment. Interviews lasted about one hour each.

The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed with help of the software F4Analyse for qualitative data analysis. Data-driven (inductive) thematic analysis took place (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, phrases that refer to characteristics of hospitality were labelled (open coding). Second, these labels were grouped into a number of overarching themes/dimensions (axial coding). To improve the inter-rater reliability, a second assessor independently coded two of the interviews. This resulted in minor changes to the original coding scheme.

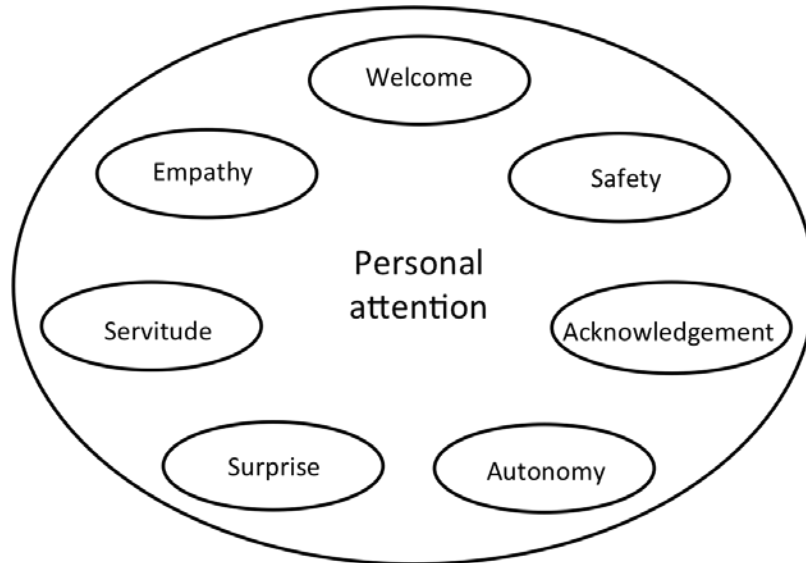
Results

The main theme that emerged from the interviews was personal attention. According to the service experts the core element of a hospitable experience is the perception of personal attention. To illustrate, ‘hospitality is about attention for you as an individual’ (r5), ‘hospitality is about personal attention’ (r6), and ‘it is about the feeling that there is attention...’ (r3). Personal attention is perceived by the experience of a number of sub-themes, from now on called ‘experiential dimensions’ of hospitality. Figure 1 presents an overview of the dimensions that arose from the interviews.

The experiential dimension *welcome* has to do with the atmosphere of a service environment. Respondents talked for instance about ‘feeling welcome’ (r1, r2), ‘a warm reception’ (r2, r4) and ‘a cosy atmosphere’ (r2). Also the feeling of *safety* appears to be an experiential dimension of hospitality. Feeling safe and relaxed, the reduction of stress, feeling at home, at ease and feeling confident belong to this dimension. *Empathy* is a third experiential dimension of hospitality and refers to the experience that the organisation understands the needs of their guests. It is about ‘reading the guest’ (r3, r4), ‘understanding the needs of your guests’ (r4, r8) and ‘understanding of their motives and responding to their needs’ (r7).

A fourth experiential dimension is *servitude*. This is the feeling that the organisation and its employees genuinely want to serve you. ‘It was special that they made every effort to make me feel good’ (r4), ‘the willingness to serve you, without the expectation of receiving something in return’ (r3), ‘you need to feel that the intention is genuine’ (r5) and ‘it is about pampering your guests’ (r7). A fifth experiential dimension, labelled as *acknowledgement*, refers to the experience of personal contact, acknowledgement, and the feeling that you are taken seriously. ‘It is about real contact, the connection between people’ (r4), ‘getting respect, appreciation and acknowledgement as a guest’ (r3) and ‘this was personalized service, especially for me’ (r5).

Figure 1. Experiential dimensions hospitality study 1 (host perspective)



A sixth experiential dimension of hospitality is *surprise*. According to the experts an experience can be characterised as hospitable when there is at least one element that really ‘hits’ you or exceeds your expectation. ‘The fact that they washed the windshield of my car was something special that I did not expect’ (r3), ‘those are the magical moments’ (r7), ‘I call it ‘wow’, something really unexpected that I experience as really hospitable’ (r5). The final experiential dimension is *autonomy*. The amount of control over what happens seems to be part of the experience of hospitality, at least in the hotel and entertainment sectors. ‘Being hospitable is offering your guests the freedom to do what they want in your environment’ (r4) and ‘it is hospitable when visitors have the freedom to do it their way’ (r7).

Table 1. The experiential dimensions for six service sectors

Dimension	<i>Business</i>	<i>Healthcare</i>	<i>Hotel/restaurant</i>	<i>Travel</i>	<i>Entertainment</i>	<i>Built environment</i>
Welcome	•	•	•	•		•
Safety	•	•	•	•	•	•
Empathy	•	•	•	•	•	•
Servitude	•	•	•	•	•	•
Acknowledgement	•	•	•	•	•	•
Surprise	•	•	•	•	•	•
Autonomy			•		•	

The results of the interviews provide a first impression of what consumers may experience as hospitable. Table 1 provides an overview of the service sectors for which the seven experiential dimensions seem to play a role. At this stage this overview is just a raw impression, as most sectors were just represented by one expert. Further investigation (a second round in the Delphi-procedure) will show to what extent the dimensions are equally relevant in each service sector.

Conclusion

Welcome, safety, empathy, servitude, acknowledgement, surprise and *autonomy* are seven experiential dimensions of hospitality that were mentioned by the service experts in our study. The overarching dimension is personal attention, apparently the core element of hospitality. *Welcome, safety, empathy* and *servitude* confirm the expectations based on the literature. However, despite the suggestions from the hospitality literature, the experts did not mention *pleasure* or *entertainment* as a dimension of the experience of hospitality. Instead, the study suggests three other (or: 'new') dimensions: *acknowledgement, surprise* and *autonomy*.

Besides knowledge from service providers, whose daily business it is to create hospitable moments for their guests, it is essential to investigate what consumers experience as hospitable. This is the topic of study two.

Study 2: service consumers

In order to explore what guests experience in hospitality conditions, consumers of two types of service environments (a hotel and a hospital) were asked to share their experiences and opinions on hospitality. Based on Yin (2003) these two service environments were selected as cases to obtain maximal variation and therefore cover different areas of the service industry. Most importantly, the two service environments differ in the reason of visits (voluntary versus involuntary).

Method

Eighteen guests of a hotel (business and leisure guests) in The Netherlands and 14 outpatients of a Dutch hospital (seven arthritis patients receiving long-term treatment, and seven patients with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) receiving short-treatment) participated in the study.

In November 2014, the respondents were interviewed face-to-face. A combination of Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and the projective technique of storytelling was used. CIT, originally developed by Flanagan (1954) was used to gather examples of hospitable and inhospitable experiences in hotels and in hospitals (Gremler, 2004). Storytelling was used (e.g. Koll, von Wallpach & Kreuzer, 2010) to collect ideal scenarios of hospitality in a hotel or hospital. The beginning of the scenario was given and the respondents were asked to complete it. In the hotel, guests were approached after their check-in. In the hospital the receptionist who registers the patients when they come in asked the patients to participate in the study. The average duration of the interviews was about ten minutes in the hotel and twenty minutes in the hospital.

As in study one, thematic data analysis was carried out to look for experiential dimension of hospitality. For the analysis the data of the CIT and the ideal scenario were taken together. The coding scheme with the seven dimensions from study one was the starting point for the analysis. The interviews of two patients (one suffering from arthritis, one from CTS) were left out from the analysis, since they did not reveal relevant information.

Results

Table 2 provides for each experiential dimension of hospitality the number of respondents that mentioned phrases referring to that particular dimension. As can be seen in Table 2, all seven dimensions resulting from study one were also mentioned in study two. In addition, two extra experiential dimensions emerged, both for hotel and hospital, namely *efficiency* and *entertainment*. *Efficiency* relates to the smoothness of processes during the service delivery and even appears to be one of the dimensions that are most often referred to. *Entertainment* means offering things to do, mostly to make waiting time more pleasant. Examples are magazines to read, toys for children (hospital) and offering something to drink. For both a hotel and a hospital feeling *welcome*, feeling *acknowledged* and *efficient* services are often mentioned in relation to hospitality. In a hotel, feeling *safe* and the perception of *servitude* are salient additional characteristics of the hospitality experience.

Further zooming in on differences between the experience of hospitality in a hotel and in a hospital, the results show that besides *autonomy*, which seems not to be relevant in a hotel, all dimensions of hospitality play a role in a hotel as well as in a hospital. However, the emphasis within some of the dimensions may differ. For example, for the dimension *safety*, hotel guests mainly prefer having overview and information on facilities (business guests) and feeling at ease and at home (leisure), while hospital patients desire a reduction of stress and

uncertainty by feeling calm, relaxed, secure, and confident. The number of respondents is small, so further research is needed to test these assumptions.

When looking at differences between business and leisure guests in a hotel no clear differences appear from the data. Also patients with a longer relationship with the hospital (arthritis) and patient with a shorter relationship (CTS) do not seem to differ in the dimensions they experience as hospitable.

Table 2. The number of respondents that refer to each of the experiential dimensions

Dimension	Hotel		Hospital	
	Business (n=9)	Leisure (n=9)	Short term treatment (n= 6)	Long term treatment (n = 6)
Welcome	8	5	5	3
Efficiency	7	6	4	4
Acknowledgement	7	4	4	4
Servitude	4	5	5	4
Safety	2	3	4	5
Empathy	2	4	4	3
Surprise	3	3	4	2
Entertainment	1	3	4	1
Autonomy	0	0	1	2

Concerning the methods, the CIT and the storytelling (based on ideal scenario) were supplemental. Both methods revealed knowledge about dimensions of hospitality. The main difference between the two techniques was that there was no reference to either efficiency or entertainment in the critical incidents (in neither hotel nor hospital), whereas these two dimensions had a dominant role in the ideal scenarios.

Conclusion

Study two supports the existence of the seven experiential dimensions of hospitality found in study one, but adds two additional dimensions for both hotels and hospitals: efficiency and entertainment. *Entertainment* is in line with the hospitality literature. Also *efficiency* is not totally new, as Hepple, Kipps, and Thomson (1990) have already mentioned ‘smooth procedures’ as being relevant for a hospitable experience in a hospital. The present study suggests that the nine dimensions generally apply to different types of service organisations, but the prevalence of the dimensions may differ between service contexts.

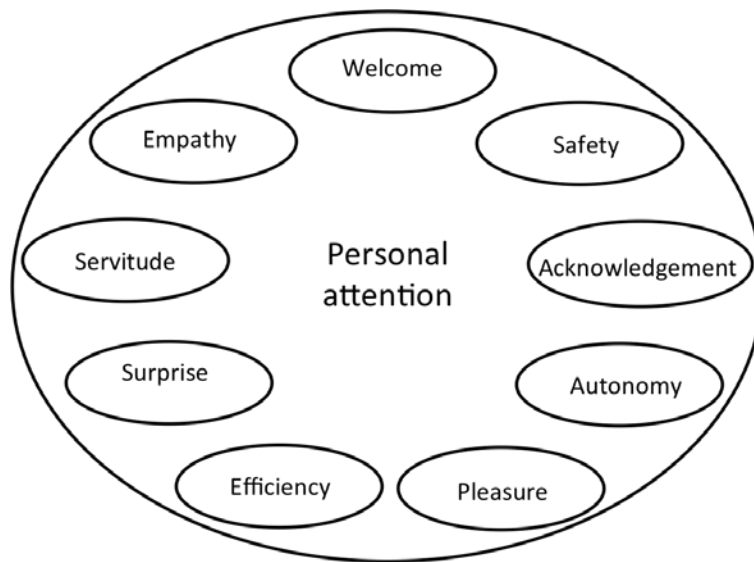
General conclusion and discussion

Figure 2 summarizes the results of both studies. Interviews with service experts, hotel guests and hospital patients resulted in a better understanding of the concept of experiencing hospitality. In a service environment, experiencing hospitality seems to be almost synonymous with the perception of personal attention, that may be experienced through a mixture of nine experiential dimensions of hospitality: welcome, safety, empathy, servitude, acknowledgement, autonomy, surprise, efficiency and entertainment. However, further research is necessary to deeper investigate differences in the existence and relevance of these experiential dimensions in different types of service contexts.

This paper aims to add knowledge about the individual perspective on hospitality. It contributes to the understanding of the concept of hospitality from the side of the guest who experiences the hospitality in interaction with an organisation. Moreover, this paper attempts to unify our knowledge of hospitality from a variety of different perspectives, and it adds evidential support to academic fields where interpretive research is prevailing. For instance, this study provides support for Telfer (2000), who studied hospitality from the moral perspective and

believed that hospitality is about providing safety and genuine needs for employees to care for others (dimensions safety and servitude). Moreover, it supports findings of O’Gorman (2007), who studied hospitality from a historical perspective and stated that hospitality has to do with ‘a warm welcome’, ‘feelings of safety and comfort’, and ‘entertainment’ (dimensions welcome, safety and entertainment). It also provides support for Lashley (2000), who took an exchange perspective and emphasized ‘generosity’, ‘a desire to please’ and ‘genuine regard for the guest as an individual’ as characteristics of hospitality (dimensions servitude and acknowledgement).

Figure 2. Experiential dimensions hospitality study 1 and 2



The identification of experiential dimensions of hospitality may provide service organisations insight in how customers experience hospitality in service organisations, and it may help to develop instruments to improve the experience of hospitality of their customers.

This study has a number of limitations, however: the limited number of subjects, the lack of inter-rater reliability scores (interpretation of data was performed by only one of the researchers), and the fact that study 2 incorporated only two service environments. However, study 2 is the first phase of a broader study that in addition explores the experiential hospitality dimensions in other service organisations. Furthermore, a quantitative study will follow to validate the experiential dimensions that arose from these qualitative studies and investigate the relevance of the experiential dimensions for different types of contexts and different types of consumers. The central concept of personal attention and its 9 dimensions of hospitality experience may set the floor to the development of an instrument to measure hospitality experience in service processes.

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