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The Difference between Delivering a Service and Exercising the Role of Host: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

In commercial hospitality, there appear to be two different activities: service delivery and exercising the role of host. Service delivery is about accessibility, interaction, and customer participation. While service delivery is a well-established concept in service theory and the role of host is a well-established concept in hospitality, the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host is not described in existing research. The aim of this paper is to examine this difference with empirical evidence. Data were gathered through interviews with practioners in the hospitality industry. The practioners' view is that service delivery and exercising the role of host are two distinct phenomena but they are not easy to separate. Exercising the role of host is about developing an emotional bond with guests, and this bond development takes place in face-to-face interaction with guests, that is, in a specific part of the service delivery.

Key Words Hospitality, Service package, Hosting, Host, Interaction

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Introduction

People have taken on the roles of hosts and guests since time immemorial (Walton, 2017, p. 69). Historically, hosts in commercial hospitality have been innkeepers, and as such, the hosts, often a married couple, have served food and drink and/or provided a place to sleep for paying guests: Being host is a profession. Today, the very same commercial activities are understood as service offerings in the hotel and restaurant industries. This development has also changed the profession of host and given way to job titles such as server/waiter, restaurant manager, hotel receptionist, and hotel manager. Regardless of their precise job title, waiters and hotel receptionists deliver a service offering. The role of host may, implicitly or explicitly, be part of the job description of waiters or receptionists. However, specific job descriptions aside, one may ask, is there a difference between the roles of waiter/receptionist and the role of host, that is, between delivering a service and exercising the role of host and what may a possible difference be about? The aim of this study is to examine this distinction with empirical evidence.

Literature Review

A literature review of hospitality literature in a service context showed that the most popular topic in hospitality research with a service focus was the service experience, followed by topics such as operations management, human resource management, and accounting (Kandampully et al., 2014). The authors write that there was an increasing trend in the number of service-based articles published in the period. Sixteen percent of the total pool of published articles were service-related studies. However, the majority of papers were concerned with hospitality as a service context rather than focusing on service phenomena. The authors state that, “This finding suggests that further research may be warranted to examine the specific nature of service within the hospitality context” (Kandampully et al., 2014). The specific nature of service within the hospitality industry can, for instance, be about the differences in service delivery and exercising the role of host. Therefore, this paper will examine if exercising the role of host is different from delivering a service.

As pointed out by Kandampully et al. (2014), a challenge is that there is a lack of consensus on both the concept of service and on the concept of hospitality.

Hospitality Concepts Defined

In this study, hospitality follows the understanding of King (1995) and Hemmington (2007), namely that hospitality is about behavior. In the 21st century, hospitableness also became the focus of research: Hospitableness has been categorized as a value (Telfer, 1995) but is now also considered a trait that some people may have (Blain, 2012, Tasci & Sempì, 2014; Blain & Lashley, 2014; Telfer, 2017). As a trait, hospitableness can be categorized as a psychological phenomenon; in fact, hospitableness has been called “the psychology of hosting” in a major study of hospitableness (Blain, 2012, p. 30). Hosting has been defined as “exercising the role of host” (Vejlgaard, 2020), that is, hosting is a behavioral phenomenon; one can say that hosting is the behavioral dimension of hospitableness. The precise definitions of these three hospitality words can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of three hospitality words (Vejlgaard, 2020).

Term	Definition	Categorization
Hospitality (noun)	Treatment of guests.	Behavior
Hospitableness (noun)	A disposition to treat guests with warmth and generosity.	Trait
Hosting (gerund)	Exercising the role of host.	Behavior

In her hospitality model, King (1995) makes a distinction between “Social skills and polish” and “Job skills to carry out the service”. This implies that there is one skill set specifically required for service delivery, namely job skills, and another skill set, namely social skills, that may come into play when an employee at a restaurant or a hotel is exercising the role of host.

Service Theory

Several definitions of service have been introduced (Grönroos, 2015, p. 48; Lovelock, 1992; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014), but no ultimate definition of service has been agreed upon (Grönroos, 2015, p. 48). In the period leading up to the 21st century, services were typically compared with physical goods, although there was an awareness in both practice and research that goods and services are two different concepts that are best understood by different models (Grönroos, 2015, p. 49).

Today service carries at least two different meanings: 1. Service as a perspective on business and marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). 2. Service as an activity (Grönroos, 2015, p. 48). Although these two meanings are dissimilar, they are intertwined: As pointed out by Grönroos “When adopting a service logic (the perspective), all kinds of resources—goods as well as service activities and other types of resources—are presented to customers in a way resembling service activities” (Grönroos, 2015, p. 48).

Service offerings are different from products in that there is a service encounter, the period during which a customer interacts directly with the service (Shostack, 1995). A service encounter is a service process of buyer-seller interactions (Grönroos, 2015, p. 209). Service encounters can be categorized in different ways, for instance, as remote encounters, telephone encounters, and face-to-face encounters (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 83).

Grönroos views service delivery as an augmented service package (Grönroos, 1987; Grönroos, 2015, p. 209), which is a categorization of the service delivery process into three categories: accessibility, interaction, and customer participation.

Accessibility: Accessibility of a service can be about site accessibility, ease of use of the physical resources, contact personnel’s contribution to accessibility, ease of customer participation, opening hours, number of staff, location of supporting facility, servicescape, and IT (Grönroos, 2015, p. 209).

Interaction: Interactions with the service provider can take many forms but are mainly interaction between a customer and the service provider’s staff or system(s), number and type of touchpoints (face-to-face, physical equipment, or digital), and responsiveness (Grönroos, 2015, p. 209).

Customer participation: Customer participation means that the customer has an impact on the service delivery (Grönroos, 2015, p. 212). There may be low, medium, or high degrees of customer participation in the service delivery process. Customer participation can be illustrated with an example from food provision: self-service means that customer participation is high; when ordering food from the bar and having it served at the table by waiter customer participation is medium; when a waiter comes to the table to take the order and delivers the food and drink to the table and takes payment at the table customer participation in service delivery is low. The actual service delivery process will vary from industry to industry and from service concept to service concept.

Only a few service industries have a historical use of hosts in their service provision. Therefore, the industries that historically have used the profession of host are relevant when examining the difference between service delivery and the exercising of the role of host. These industries are the restaurant industry and the hotel industry (Walton, 2017; Brotherton, 2017, Lashley, 2017).

Method and Data-gathering

The data gathering method applied is qualitative interviewing (Kvale, 1997; Alvesson, 2011). The data gathering method was semi-structured interviews, based on an interview guide (Kvale, 1997). Informants were required to speak Danish fluently, work in the Danish hospitality industry, having had their current position in the eight months prior to the interview and be working at stand-alone Danish hospitality companies (which exclude international hotel brands).

The interviews were carried out as a part of a wider research project, with an interview guide with questions pertaining to a number of themes in the hospitality industry. However, in practice, the conversations did not follow the interview guide strictly, as it was desirable that the informants could speak freely. However, one specific question pertaining to the topic of this paper was asked at the end of the interview: “Can I ask you to comment on the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host?”

Informants were identified using the authors’ professional network. The primary criteria for selecting the informants were that the companies in which they work should be an upscale and upper midscale hotel or restaurant and have a certain number of touchpoints with physical interaction between guest and employees; therefore, self-service companies were not considered relevant. In order to be included as informant in the study, the employee had to be working full-time and have frequent guest interaction. Nine informants worked

in a hotel as either front-office manager or receptionist. The remaining six informants worked in a restaurant, primarily as a restaurant manager, but in two cases also as a waiter.

A total number of 15 semi-structured interviews was carried out between April 2019 and December 2019 among staff in the Danish hospitality industry; in all three major regions of Denmark. The interviews had an average length of 51 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. In this study, data pertaining to the question on the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host will be analysed and interpreted. Only quotes from nine informants are used in the analysis. These quotes were selected for their relative clarity to the question about the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host.

With a clearly pre-defined theme, the analysis was focused on categorizing and contrasting the informants' answers.

Analysis of Data

Informant #12 points states: "Service and exercising the role of host are two concepts that are difficult to separate." This informant, however, makes a clear distinction between service delivery and hosting: "Service can be about being able to lay a table and remove plates. However, exercising the role of host involves a personal touch. [...] A personal touch is about being alert, engaged and curious." In this quote, there is a subtext of caring for the guest in exercising the role of host.

That exercising the role of host is something that is not part of the service delivery as such is clear from Informant #06: "Service is the basic stuff that must be there so that you can provide good service. Exercising the role of host is almost a philosophy about being welcoming and open. It's a little bit more than just service."

Without having been told about the definition of hosting applied in this study, Informant #5 is very close to referencing the definition: "Exercising the role of host requires you to take on the role of a host. You have to do more for your guests. You need to be more personal. A good host is more personal. Service is all the stuff you have been instructed to do."

That hosting is something personal is also the viewpoint of Informant #04: "Exercising the role of host is about listening to guests and being there for them. It's not just checking them in, like a conveyer belt process which the guest has to get through, followed by: 'next, please'! Exercising the role of host involves paying attention to guests and listening to them." Again, a clear distinction is made between service delivery and hosting, with hosting being about relating to and listening to the guest, in order to create an emotional bond with the guest.

That hosting is about a personal or emotional bond between host and guest is very clear according to Informant #03: "Service is about content, what you provide or offer. Good service is about thinking how you best can provide for the guest, for example, it's good service to be able to show the guest to the nearest restaurant. Exercising the role of host is all about the interaction between the guest and host."

The same understanding is expressed by Informant #01: "Service is what the guest expects. Exercising the role of host is about showing concern and asking how you can assist the guest." Giving another example, this understanding is also expressed by Informant #06: "You can get service, but often bad service. Sure, I can give the guest the room keys and say 'Hi and have a nice day'. However, exercising the role of host in my world is more than that. You smile. You are interested in the person in front of you. Exercising the role of host means being a bit more interested in your guests." Although using other words, this informant also speaks about proactively caring for the guest.

Informant #07 speaks directly about an emotional connection: "There is a difference between service and exercising the role of host. Service is about delivering a product that you have promised. So it's about doing something extra that the guest hadn't expected. However, even this isn't what I would call exercising the role of host. When you are exercising the role of host, there's more personal contact. If you don't involve your feelings, it's not possible to exercise the role of host." It is indirectly expressed in the last sentence that the emotional connection is about getting close to the guest, metaphorically speaking.

Informant #09 is concrete when explaining the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host: “Service is about what we must do. It’s about procedures. Exercising the role of host is about personalising things so that you don’t just go through a check list. Maybe ask the guest: ‘Why are you here? Are you going to celebrate something this evening?’ Maybe something like: ‘I can see you have come from Odense. Is that well-known restaurant in Odense still there?’ It’s about trying to get a dialogue going. Asking questions.” Exercising the role of host is about pro-actively engaging in conversation with a guest as a way of bonding.

Concluding Comments

In conclusion, there is a difference between service delivery and hosting; it may be difficult to define for some practitioners but they are aware that there is a difference. Many informants can give examples that illustrate the difference, but some informants can also pinpoint what the difference is: A theme seems to be “relationship”, or to be precise: building a personal relationship with guests. While only one informant directly speaks of an emotional bond, the subtext in several of the quotes is that emotions play a role: the essence of exercising the role of host is about developing an emotional bond with the guest. A key theme to characterize the nature of the relationship that is central to exercising the role of host is “care for the guest”. Exercising the role of host is not about delivering a service but about creating an emotional connection with a guest.

That emotions play a role in the service delivery of hotel and restaurant and related services is well-established in research as well as in practice (Kandampully et al., 2014; Blain, 2012). However, when speaking about the difference between service delivery and exercising the role of host, it becomes apparent that the emotional part comes into play in exercising the role of host, *not* in the delivery of the service offering: Exercising the role of host is integrated into the service delivery process but is something distinct, “something” that is not the service delivery. Because it is integrated into the service delivery process, it may be difficult to say if—in the mind of a host—that exercising the role of host is an add-on to the service delivery because in commercial hospitality you in all likelihood cannot exercise the role of host without a service delivery of some kind. This is different from private hospitality, where a host can exercise the role of host without serving food and drink or provide a bed to sleep in: Friends and family meet just for the sake of being together, something that is not the case in commercial hospitality. Therefore, exercising the role of host cannot meaningfully be separated from the service delivery. But it can be pinpointed *where* in the service delivery that a host may exercise the role of host: While service delivery is about accessibility, interaction and customer participation, it is apparent from the analysis that hosts exercise the role of host only in the interaction part of the service delivery, and mainly in face-to-face communication. However, “customer participation” in the augmented service package model is about the guest taking part *only* in the service delivery. The interaction that is about the host exercising the role of host is reciprocal and the guest must take part, but this is *not* the guest taking part in the service delivery as customer participation; this is host and guest interaction on a personal level, for instance, having a conversation that has nothing to do with the specifics of service delivery.

Service delivery often takes place in touchpoints with personal interaction; however, it is *only* in these touchpoints that the role of host can be exercised. If there are no touchpoints with personal interaction, there is a service encounter, but without staff to interact with the guest, there is no host to exercise the role of host, and no emotional bonding between a host and guest can take place.

Exercising the role of host, that is, creating a bond with guests, is not an idea unique to the hospitality industry. In other industries, it may not be called exercising the role of host, but the aim of creating a bond with customers is the same. In sales of material goods, sales people may also have this focus. Service industries outside of the hospitality industry, for instance, the leisure industry, may also focus on building emotional bond with their guests. However, their possibilities for this, and eventual success, will be determined by the possibilities for human-to-human interaction (number of touchpoints) and the amount of time a provider spends with the guest/customer.

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