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Informal & Relaxed: Exercising the Role of Host in the Hospitality Industry in Denmark

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Abstract

Historically, the formality of European “grand” hotels represents social rituals originating in courtesies that reflect the behavior in the royal courts of Europe. Also today, many luxury hotels practice formality. If we were to replace “formal” with “informal” in King’s hospitality model, the social rituals, which guests would experience, are likely to be different from the formal social rituals of “grand hotels”. The aim of this paper is to examine a hosting practice that reflects “informality”, that is, a hosting practice that is the opposite of grand hotel formality. The data gathering method is semi-structured interviews. Data were gathered among upper-midscale and upscale hotels and restaurants in Denmark as Denmark, with a very low powerdistance, represents a relatively informal work culture. The findings show that the hosting practice in Denmark is informal and relaxed, in line with the informal culture in Denmark.

Key words *Culture, Hofstede, Rituals, Service delivery, Interaction*

Track *Industry track*

Focus of Paper *Industry/Applied*

Kind of submission: *Paper*

Introduction

In King’s hospitality model, “formality” is a characteristic of the host’s behavior towards the guest. The formality that King alludes to is that of European “grand” hotels, which have social rituals originating in courtesies that can be traced back to the Middle Ages” (King, 1995).

Grand hotels also exist in the 21st century, an example of which is the American-based Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, which (still) subscribe to the motto: "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen" (ritzcarlton.com, 2020). King (1995) writes that the origins of the service process “involving ladies and gentlemen (persons of status) will be found in the behavior of courtiers in the [royal] courts of [present-day] Europe” (King, 1995). King quotes Visser (1991) when defining formality in a grand hotel context: A respectful physical distance between host and guest, formalistic courtesies, and only little familiarity and closeness between host and guests. King sums this up as being formal and deferential.

If we were to replace “formal” with “informal” in King’s hospitality model, the social rituals, which guests would experience, are likely to be different from the formal social rituals of “grand hotels”. The aim of this study is to examine a hosting practice that reflects “informality”, that is, a hosting practice that is at the opposite end of the type of grand hotel formality to which King alludes.

Theory on Rituals

According to King, social rituals are about “the initial greeting and welcome of the guests upon arrival and upon departure, the parting, thanking, and the invitation to return [...] These rituals define the guest’s status as one to be catered to” (King, 1995). King also refers to the host’s social skills and polish and a code of politesse, commonly known as social etiquette.

Bell (1997) makes a distinction between formalistic rituals and ritual-like activities and underlines that “Most forms of socially polite behavior are readily considered ritual-like in nature” (Bell, 1997, p. 142). She points out that many forms of social etiquette is about variability of formality, that is, there are rules, but “the rules are not necessarily hard and fast” (Bell, 1997, p. 142). Bell also stresses that formality is not necessarily empty or trivial (Bell, 1997, p. 141): Formality helps structure the relationship between hosts and guests: Formalized activities can communicate complex sociocultural messages very economically, particularly messages about social classification, hierarchical relationships and position in the social nexus (Bell, 1997, p. 141). Although greetings and farewells are themselves formalities of social conversation and interaction, there can be great differences in the degree of formality (Bell, 1997, p. 142). Our sense of the ritual-like nature of greeting and farewell also derives from the way these involve bodily and verbal modes of expression (Bell, 1997, p. 142).

Ritual is term that has also been used by Goffman to denote the routine practices of everyday life (Jary & Jary, 2004, p. 522; citing Goffman). These routines have different names, for instance, routine rituals, miniature rituals, interaction rituals. These are ordered sequences (Bell, 1997, p. 141) but are very different from the highly formalistic rituals that Bell otherwise describes. They reflect the definition of practice, namely: repeated or customary behavior (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

Neither social rituals nor practice are un-changeable; this is, for instance, reflected in the changes in the various versions of etiquette books, the guidelines “for doing things in ways that make people feel comfortable” (Post, 2004, p. 5). A change that has taken place is the distinction between the formal and the informal; as Bell has pointed out: “Any modern American guide to social etiquette makes an explicit distinction between informal and formal entertaining” (Bell, 1997, p. 144). In the first 21st century version of *Emily Post’s Etiquette*, one of the classics of such books, distinctions were made between what is formal and what is informal social etiquette. As pointed out by Bell, etiquette books carefully spell out the differences between what is informal and what is formal (Bell, 1997, p. 144). Formality and informality are at opposite ends of a continuum.

Grand hotel “formality” has not been static in the 20th century; also formal behavior may change. This is reflected in different ways: with luxury hotel concepts that are less formal and grand, for instance, luxury boutique hotels and up-market hotel chains that do not subscribe to the formality that King refers to.

Informal Culture

Research has shown that there are national cultures (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). In this study, a national culture that is at the informal end of the formal-informal continuum is presumed to also influence how staff will treat guests in the hospitality industry, that is, in an informal culture staff will treat guests in a way that reflects this informal culture, be it an informal national culture or a nation-wide informal work or industry culture.

Denmark has been identified as having an informal national culture (Gesteland, 2015; Vejlggaard, 2015; Jenkins, 2011, Reddy, 2008). Informality also characterizes private hospitality (Bille, 2018; Bille & Sørensen, 2007; Linnet, 2011). The perception among people in Sweden and Norway is that people in Denmark are informal (Vejlggaard, 2018).

In this study, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions concept can give an indication of how formal/informal work culture is in different countries. Countries like France and Japan are presumed to have formal work cultures; Scandinavia and New Zealand are presumed to have informal work cultures; the United States are presumed to be in between. Two of Hofstede’s dimensions can give an indication of how formal a culture is: Powerdistance and Uncertainty Avoidance.

Table 1. Comparison of two dimensions among eight countries (Hofstede, 2020).

Country Dimensions	France	Japan	US	Fin-land	Sweden	Norway	New Zealand	Den-mark
Powerdistance*	68	54	40	33	31	31	22	18
Uncertainty Avoidance**	86	92	46	59	29	50	50	23

**Powerdistance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. **Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these (Hofstede, 2020).*

Table 1 illustrates that there are differences between the eight countries and that Denmark has the lowest score on the two dimensions. Both scores indicate that Denmark is at the informal end of the formal-informal continuum: With a score of 18, only Israel has a lower PowerDistance than Denmark. “Denmark ranks highest amongst the EU27 countries in terms of employee autonomy. With a very egalitarian mind-set the Danes believe in independency, equal rights, accessible superiors [...]. Power is decentralized and managers count on the experience of their team members. [...] Workplaces have a very informal atmosphere with direct and involving communication and works on a first name basis” (Hofstede, 2020; underscores added)

With a score of 23, Denmark scores low on Uncertainty Avoidance. This means that that Danes do not need a lot of structure and predictability in their work life. Plans can change overnight, new things pop up and the Danes are fine with it. It is a natural part of their work life. Curiosity is natural and is encouraged from a very young age” (Hofstede, 2020; underscore added). In the workplace, “the low score on Uncertainty Avoidance is also reflected in the fact that the Danes tell you if they are in doubt or do not know something. It is ok to say ‘I do not know’ and the Danes are comfortable in ambiguous situations in the workplace” (Hofstede, 2020).

The national culture in Denmark represents an informal culture, and therefore, Denmark, is chosen as context for this study.

In a study of private hospitality in Denmark, a hosting practice for commercial hospitality reflecting Danish culture was prescribed. This can be seen in Figure 1. This hosting practice is different from an American hosting practice (Vejlgaard, 2020) and is likely to represent a relatively informal hosting practice.

Figure 1. Prescribed hosting practice in commercial hospitality (Vejlgaard, 2020).

<p><i>Behavior:</i> As host, take a pro-active role towards the guest; only in departure should you sometimes be re-active. Take the initiative in interacting with guests; take responsibility of the proceedings in courteous ways.</p> <p><i>Form of address:</i> Use the name of guests when appropriate; however, do not use the name incessantly.</p> <p><i>Speech acts:</i> Use courteous speech acts pro-actively. The exact speech acts used when greeting and saying goodbye can be varied based on how formal/informal/intimate you are/have become with the guest. Upon departure, some kind of verbal evaluative speech acts about the mutual experience are important.</p> <p><i>Conversation:</i> Small talk, relevant to the context, initiated by you, is essential.</p> <p><i>Para-verbal language:</i> Your tone of voice should be warm, the pitch natural to you, and the pacing of your speech unhurried.</p> <p><i>Non-verbal language:</i> Acknowledge the guest with body language when initiating contact, for instance, with a nod or a smile. Greet guest with a smile and appropriate body language. Smile when appropriate but not incessantly. Keep eye contact in an appropriate way when talking to a guest but do not prolong eye contact. Use appropriate body language and hand gestures when saying goodbye.</p> <p><i>Objects:</i> Use material and/or perishable elements, relevant to the situation.</p>
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The prescribed hosting practice in Figure 1 is to be used as a conceptual framework for analyzing the hosting practice in the hospitality industry in Denmark.

Method and Data-gathering

The data gathering method applied is qualitative interviewing (Kvale, 1997; Alvesson, 2011). 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). A total number of 15 semi-structured interviews was carried out between April 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. An overview of the informants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of informants

Informant #	Type of company	Function
1	4 star classic hotel	Front office manager
2	5 star boutique hotel	Receptionist
3	4 star boutique hotel	Front office manager
4	3 star modern hotel	Receptionist
5	4 star modern hotel	Front office manager
6	3 star modern hotel	Receptionist
7	4 star modern hotel	Front office manager
8	4 star modern hotel	Front office manager
9	4 star modern hotel	Receptionist
10	4 star modern hotel	Restaurant manager
11	1 star Michelin	Waiter
12	4 star hotel restaurant	Waiter
13	Upscale restaurant	Restaurant manager
14	4 star hotel restaurant	Restaurant manager
15	Upscale restaurant	Restaurant manager

The interview guide did not include questions alluding to informality; however, the informants were asked to describe the company and give examples of staff behaviour towards guests. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. After transcription, the interviews were read through with the purpose of identifying themes that reflect informal behaviour towards guests. The analysis was focused on categorizing the informants' answers into themes indicating informality.

Analysis of Data

Informant #3 states: "We don't want it to be too stiff. We want it to be relaxed". Informant #8 also uses the word relaxed: "we are a hotel that are very much into things being relaxed."

Informant #12 states: "you try to be a little bit relaxed towards [the guests] [...] you want the guests to feel like at home, not for them to act as if they are playing a role in a Mrs. Hyacinth program"(a reference to the BBC television sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances* about a woman who is very focused on social etiquette).

Informant #3 speaks of a certain flexibility in the approach to guests, varying with the type of company they represent: "There may be two different approaches. You can be a little more loose and cocky towards one group than with the other".

The same flexible approach is also mentioned by Informant #4 "all [guests] are treated in a way that suits them, that is, we sort of customize with consideration for who you are". Informant #6 states: "It is about not giving the same standardized welcome. It is very individual – always with a smile and "Welcome" etc. But from there on they are treated differently".

The flexibility is directly mentioned by Informant #7 in describing the atmosphere: "Informal atmosphere—there is a flexibility".

Informant #7 has a historical perspective on formality: "Before staff—us—were just supposed to be present and not draw attention to ourselves in any way. If you poured a cup of coffee without being seen, that was preferable. The receptionist desk is a relic from then when there was a distance between guest and staff. Today receptionist desks are discarded and thrown out. Then there is not the distance between us and the guests anymore. Instead there is dialogue".

Informant #10 describes how they can clean cutlery and glasses in front of the guests: "Then you take the glasses into [the restaurant], also the cutlery, and you start polishing. This is visible. Then the guest can see that [the staff] also has to do this. I also don't mind that [my staff] bring a cup of coffee along and place it behind the buffet desk. Then they can polish the cutlery with a cup of coffee in their hand; that is OK. The guests can see them. The guests can see them working which they cannot when they are in the back areas".

Hygge, the Danish code for informal relaxation (Vejlgaard, 2017), is often mentioned by the informants: Informant #10 states: "we want it to be nice and quiet, and *hyggeligt*". Informant #1 states: "we want to create *hygge* [for the guests]".

Informant #15 states: "We are mindful that our staff is not so self-important. [but that they create a] *hyggelig* atmosphere". Informant #8 states "We clearly stand out from [our competitors] in that we have a *hyggelig* and homey atmosphere; [guests] can relax".

One of the informants mentions that they do not have a manual that they have to follow: Informant #8 states: "we do not follow a script" and continues: "You often see that there is a kind of a check-list; then you are totally focused on that list. And then it become a little harder to [navigate]. Therefore, we do not have a pre-determined script or playbook".

The form of address is mentioned by Informant #1 states: "the hotel staff uses first names when addressing guests." Form of address is also mentioned by Informant #2: "We don't always use last name. We do have some guests when we use only first name. We have some regular guests whom we find it weird to use a last name even though we are five-star hotel".

With respect to specific language, three informants (#1, #4, #10) state they use the informal "Hej", in English "Hi"; they may add "Welcome" (#10). Informant #2: "We don't have a certain way of welcoming over the telephone or greeting the guest upon arrival". This flexible approach is also stressed by Informant #12: "You can see [from looking at the guests], if you say "Hello", "Hi", or "Good evening".

Several informants also characterize the conversations a staff member can have with guests: "we have a professional approach, but we do not want it to be too formal, either. Well, you can chitchat with the guests, so we try to be professional, but still informal" (Informant #5). Informant #14 also mentions small-talking with guests. Informant #7 states: "If you are present you can get into all kinds of conversations with guests", that is, there are not a lot of rules and restrictions for engaging with guests.

One informant will sometimes give an informal wave with the hand to a guest: "and wave, which I do often; sometimes the guests are a little bit "OK, then I will wave back" (Informant #4).

One informant addresses that objects also play a role and must reflect the relaxed atmosphere: "it has to be relaxed; we try to do this through the way we exercise the role of host; it is also about uniforms etc. for our staff; it cannot be too stiff" (Informant #3). The informant goes on to speak about other material aspects of the social rituals: "If you make it very visual and very physical [...] then take the interior design of lobby bar area as an example, our social areas, they have the same atmosphere as a typical Danish living room [...] it is actually like stepping into a typical Danish living room [...] there is a raw and industrial style here, but it is *hyggeligt*" Informant #3 goes on to comment on all the material elements that play a role in the relaxed atmosphere: "It is about the interior design, the music, it is about lit candles."

Concluding Comments

In the hospitality places examined in this study, the formality is low. There is not a basis for categorizing the practice as formalistic rituals; this is clear also from the use of the word "flexibility" by some informants: flexibility is not typical of formalistic rituals. The behavior and communication that form the hosting practice are about routine practices, although there are some miniature rituals and interaction rituals. However, they are not the formal and deferential behavior described by King (1995). Compared to the formalistic style of grand hotels, past and present, the hosting practice at upper-midscale/upscale hotels and restaurants in this study is characterized as informal and relaxed.

The conclusion is that staff treat guests informally; the staff use this descriptor themselves and their descriptions of their behavior and communication also reflect informality. There are likely variations in how informal and relaxed the hosting practices are at hotels and restaurants in Denmark. However, no matter how wide the variation is, the general hosting practice in Denmark is likely to be at the informal end rather than the formal end of the formal-informal continuum. If that is the case, foreign tourists who come to Denmark and eat at upper-middle/upscale restaurants and stay at upper-middle/upscale hotels will be treated relatively informally.

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