Hosting Practice in Private Hospitality:
An Empirical Study

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Abstract
One of the unique aspects of the hospitality industry is the possibility for a host to create an emotional bond with guests. However, research on the hospitality cycle and books on customer service techniques do not appear to make a distinction between service delivery and the process of building a bond with guests, which is likely a reflection of practice. It may be difficult to make a distinction in real life; however, in this study, a distinction between service delivery and a hosting practice that develops an emotional bond with guests is made. The aim of this paper is to examine which host behavior and communication that may result in an emotional connection between a host and a guest, without service delivery taking place. Based on a participant observation study of private hospitality in Denmark, a general hosting practice based on Danish private hospitality practice is described.

Introduction
It has been pointed out that in the hospitality industry, "service provision has a particularly high proportion of employee-customer interaction that requires an emotional offering, which, in turn, mandates genuinely caring attitudes, emotional connections to guests, warmth, and generosity" (Kandampully et al., 2014). Lashley (2017) has also pointed out that one of the unique aspects of the hospitality industry is the possibility of creating a bond between host and guest.

The topic of creating a connection with guests is discussed in books on customer service, whether they are based on academic research or "common sense" advice. In his book *What Customers Like about You*, consultant David Freemantle (1998) writes about emotional connectivity. This connectivity occurs "when people in an exchange are tuned in to the genuine feelings people have about the situation and each other" (Timm, 2008, p. 117). Freemantle writes that the host sending out warm and positive signals to guests will result in an emotional connection (Freemantle, 1998). A signal is "something that incites to action" (Merriam-Webster, 2020). When books give advice on how to connect with customers, they write about certain behavior/communication (for instance, Timm, 2008). The advice is about what to say and do and about how to say and do it; what in services marketing is called interactive behavior and communication (Grönroos, 2015, p. 211). King (1995) makes a distinction between behavior/communication that relate

specifically to service delivery and behavior/communication that relate specifically to exercising the role of host by distinguishing between job skills and social skills: Job skills are skills required for delivering a service; social skills are skills required for exercising the role of host. However, the books on customer service techniques do not make a distinction between delivering a service and developing a bond with guests. The behavior/ communication relating to service delivery and host role is integrated into each other.

The aim of this study is to examine which host behavior and communication that may result in an emotional connection between a host and a guest, without service delivery taking place. The study will not examine if such an emotional connection de facto takes place.

Service Delivery
Service offerings are "economic activities offered by one party to another" (Lovelock & Wirts, 2011, p. 37), that is there is an economic exchange. Services are delivered to customers in a process that can be viewed as an augmented service package (Grönroos, 1987; Grönroos, 2015, p. 209). This service package 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.

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 takes orders and delivers the food and 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.

In a hospitality context, service delivery takes place in what is called the hospitality cycle: Arrival, Familarisation, Engagement, Departure (Blue and Harun (2003). This hospitality cycle is divided into activities (service delivery) and language used to deliver the service. A point is that a waiter can serve food and a hotel receptionist can check guests in without saying "Welcome", without the use of guests' name, and without smiling. Thus, there are interactive behavior and communication that, strictly speaking, are not required for delivering services such as providing food and drink and sleeping accommodation.

By reading books about customer service techniques, it is possible to get a more precise understanding of the difference between service delivery and the warm and positive signals that may connect a host to a guest. In books by Timm (2001) and Timm (2008), which are sometimes referenced in other books about customer service (for instance, Hudson & Hudson, 2013, pp. 92-93), it is possible to make a distinction between what are about service delivery (including selling) and what are warm and positive signals. The following advice is about the former: "Use effective service vocabulary" and "Get customers to interact with your organization" (Timm, 2008, pp. 32; 37). However, Timm (2008) also has focus on elements that are not focused solely on service delivery, for instance, advice such as this: "*Promptly greet guests*", "*Call customers by their name (if known)", "Smile freely and often*" (here quoted from Hudson and Hudson's (2013) summary of Timm (2008)). However, the advice does not appear to be based on empirical data on how to exercise the role of host, and the advice is based on mainly one culture, American culture. There appear to be a gap in our knowledge on the precise nature of the behavior/communication that may create an emotional connection between a host and a guest *without* service delivery taking place, outside of an American service technique context.

Method and Data-gathering
It has been pointed out by Darke and Gurney that "good practice in commercial hospitality is a simulation of

a visit to the home of an ideal host" (Darke & Gurney, 2000). Lashley has also pointed out that "The overlap between the commercial and private domains is much under-researched yet offers fascinating insights" (Lashley, 2017). Therefore, this study aims to examine how hosts in private hospitality settings behave and communicate with their guests. The serving of food and drink does not have an economic function in private homes, that is, there is no service offering. If what goes on in a private home is not a service offering, then there is no service delivery. However, there is behavior and communication that are here presumed to be about host-guest emotional bond development.

It will be meaningful to carry out participation observation of host-guest interaction in a culture that is different from American culture. Compared to the United States, Denmark is a relatively small country and a relatively homogenous culture (Jenkins, 2011; Reddy, 2008). With respect to Hofstede's dimensions of culture, Denmark is very low in power distance and low in masculinity; the United States is very high in individualism, which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Country comparison for three cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2020).

Country Cultural Dimensions	US	DK
Power distance	40	18
Masculinity	62	16
Individualism	91	74

With the purpose of observing which behavior and communication a host may "signal" in private homes, a method for gathering data based on participant observation, an ethnographical method, was designed, based on Guest, Namey, & Mitchell (2013, Chapter 3). Participant observation is "a technique of research where the incorporation of the researcher into the group he or she wants to study is a fundamental element" (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014, p. 3).

As suggested by Darke and Gurney (2000), good practice in commercial hospitality can be a simulation of a visit to the home of an ideal host. However, what is an ideal host is subjective. While surveys could conclude what a majority would think characterize an ideal host, there simply is not "one host fits all". In this study, hosts and guests with the following profile were chosen for observation: urban, middle class, high-school and college-educated, between the ages of approx. 40-70+, mix of genders and sexualities.

The data were gathered in private homes in Denmark. The occasions were non-randomly selected by the author, based on opportunities that presented themselves. On 13 different occasions, with 13 different hosts, data were gathered: Four brunch parties and nine dinner parties, with between four and 16 guests. Guests were family or friends of the host, representing the reciprocal hospitality tradition (cf. Lashley, 2017, p. 4). At some of the occations, the host would be meeting one or more of the guests for the first time. The summed up number of hours spent on participant observation is 38½ hours.

The aim was to gather data about the interaction between the host(s) and guests, not between guests. On all occasions, observations were written down diary-style *after* the participation observation had ended. Each observation resulted in notes varying in length (832–1451 words). Host and guests were all anonymized in the notes. Neither hosts nor guests were informed of the intension to observe beforehand. However, all hosts were informed afterwards. No objections to observations having been made were uttered by the hosts when informed of the observations.

Findings
In Denmark, guests are typically invited. Prior to a visit, host and guest interact through interpersonal, analogue and/or digital communication channels leading up to a visit. The host typically has specified an occasion and what, if anything, will be served during the visit (coffee, dinner, etc.).

Upon arrival of the guests, the host will typically open the door and greet the guests smiling, saying "Welcome" with a welcoming tone to his/her voice. The greeting can take place in different ways, based on intimacy level between host and guest. With a high intimacy level, the most frequent way of greeting is a hug (typical among men) and touching cheeks (typical among women). With a low intimacy level, the most frequent way of greeting is a handshake. The host is likely to utter phrases such as "Happy to see you". The host acknowledges guests that are waiting to be greeted with a smile, nod or both.

The host knows the name of all quests and vice versa; the host will sometimes say the name of the guest when greeting but otherwise the use of names is infrequent. The host and guest always use the informal form of address "du" and address each other on a first name basis.

The host sometimes makes introductions but guests frequently also introduce themselves. If there are people present who have not been to the premise before, the host will give an introduction to the premise (for instance, indicating where the toilet is) and to the proceedings of the visit so that guests can familiarize themselves with the setting and the home. The host has often made some preparations, involving fresh flowers arrangement, lit candles, and/or playing of music.

The host will by his/her verbal communication let it be known that he/she has prepared to serve food and/or drink, and the host will at a certain time announce when it will be served. The guests volunteer comments about the food; the host never asks. Other courtesies are paid; however not excessively and not out of a specific context. In general, there is a lot of small talk, and many different topics and issues are commented on or discussed. During conversation, eye contact between the host and guests are frequent but not prolonged.

After a certain time, guests will take the initiative to leave. The host and guest will say goodbye to each other; the guest may thank the host for "A nice evening". Sometimes the guests will say, "What a nice time we had!". The host may say, "I am glad you could come". Kissing on the cheeks or a hug are common ways of saying goodbye.

Analysis and Conceptualization

There is a difference between the procedures in a restaurant and in a private home: Private hospitality also involves food and drink; however, in the situations observed, there was no ordering, no waiters to serve the food, no payment by guests. Therefore, in the private hospitality observed (that is, situations with no professional help), no service delivery akin to what can be found in restaurants takes place. An example that illustrates the difference is that the hosts do not ask if the food is to the liking of the guest; in private hospitality the guest volunteer what they think of the food.

However, otherwise hosts have a pro-active role in private hospitality settings; this is about being prepared and being in control of the proceedings. With respect to verbal communication, there are some specific speech acts as well as general conversation; what can be categorized as small talk but not bland talk. The use of names are important; however, names are used infrequently. There are some specific speech acts that are frequently used: Greeting and saying goodbye seems to be somewhat ritualized, and both host and guests seem to be interested in giving an "affirmation" or "appreciation" of the proceedings, when saying goodbye. In departure, the host has a re-active role.

Whenever speaking, the host's tone of voice is warm, the pitch is natural, and the pacing of the speech is unhurried (reflecting para-verbal communication). During conversation, there is frequent eye contact, however not in an intense way. The host smiles from time to time but only when it seems natural to do so. There is a considerable amount of non-verbal communication, especially when greeting and saying goodbye.

The conclusion is that there are specific behavior and communication that may result in an emotional connection or maintain an existing emotional connection. Some of this behavior/communication can be relevant also in commercial hospitality. How this can be summed up and communicated as a prescribed hosting practice in commercial hospitality can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Prescribed hosting practice in commercial hospitality.*

Behavior: 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.

Form of address: Use the name of guests when appropriate; however, do not use the name incessantly.

Speech acts: 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.

Conversation: Small talk, relevant to the context, initiated by you, is essential.

Para-verbal language: Your tone of voice should be warm, the pitch natural to you, and the pacing of your speech unhurried.

Non-verbal language: 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.

Objects: Use material and/or perishable elements, relevant to the situation.

Concluding Comments

There are many similarities between the practice suggested in books on customer service techniques and the prescribed hosting practice advice in Figure 1. For instance, both practices requires social skills, or the wider concept of soft skills (people skills, social skills, communication skills) (Weber, 2009). However, there are also notable differences between the advice in the books and the prescribed hosting practice: the book advice is much more specific and detailed than the hosting practice. The book advice does not include para-verbal language. However, this seems meaningful, especially when you often hear speech acts and scripted messages, for instance, on aircraft, that are monotone and hurried.

Compared to the American book advice, the prescribed hosting practice is restraining in the use of names, compliments and non-verbal communication, which are exemplified in Table 2.

Table 2. *Some differences between American and Danish hosting practices.*

American book advice	Danish hosting practice
"Say 'please', 'thank you' and 'you're welcome' (Timm, 2008, p. 29).	Less use of polite speech acts and polite interjections. ("Please" is not a polite interjection that exist in the Danish language (Author's observation)).
"Reach out and touch [the guests]" (Timm, 2008, p. 31).	Restrained with touching, except when greeting and saying goodbye.

"Make and maintain eye contact with customers" (Hudson & Hudson, 2013, p. 93).	Avoidance of prolonged eye contact.
"Smile freely and often" (Hudson & Hudson, 2013, p. 93).	Focus on smiling when it feels natural.

The differences in the two approaches are likely based in cultural differences. Therefore, culturally based behavior/communication are never universal and what is meaningful and appropriate for one culture is not necessarily meaningful and appropriate for other cultures. However, concretely, it will also depend on the type of guests a hospitality concept has as a target group. An American concept in Denmark that has Americans as target group will likely have the most satisfied guests with an American approach to hospitality. However, a Danish hospitality concept with Danish guests will most likely have the most satisfied guests with a Danish approach.

In international service concepts, service routines may be the same across the world, but the hosting practices may vary. The hosting practices may vary even more than what has emerged from this study, as there are bigger cultural differences among other cultures. Therefore, hospitality schools should be critical of the American approach that seems to dominate much of hospitality training.

Like the book advice, the hosting practice that is prescribed in Figure 1 will not have universal appeal. It may reflect traditions in what is called "Protestant Europe" in the Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map (WVS, 2014), and it may be appropriate only in Scandinavia: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The prescribed hosting practice can be adapted to specific hospitality concepts. However, for the prescribed hosting practice to work in Scandinavia, it should not be presented as rules but as directional hints. This will make the behavior and communication be felt more genuine than behavior and communication that is scripted and based on rules.

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