
Host-Guest Emotional Bond Development in Luxury Travel: A Case Study

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Abstract

Emotions play a role in many aspects of human life, also in relationships in commercial travel. This study focuses on the development of emotional bonds between a tour guide and a traveler in the accessible luxury travel category. For this case study of how a bond may develop, a hosting practice, prescribed for the hospitality industry, is applied as a framework. With inspiration from the concepts of service quality and service outcomes, two other components are applied: emotional quality and emotional outcome. Data are a logbook from an 8-day round trip in Sri Lanka, provided by a traveler who took part in the trip. The analysis shows that the host, a chauffeur-guide, almost to a fault followed the prescribed hosting practice. During the trip, the host and guest developed a bond that can best be described as an interim friendship, the highest level of service intimacy for one-time service offerings.

Key Words *Hosting practice, Emotional quality, Emotional outcome, Travel, Host role,*

Track *Industry track*

Focus of Paper *Industry/Applied*

Kind of submission: *Paper*

Introduction

An important aspect of human life for many people, is to create bonds with other people. These emotional connections can have different outcomes, with love and friendships being two of the strongest bonds that exist. Such outcomes are typical in people's private life, that is, in relationships that are not based in commercial activity. However, 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). A high proportion of employee-customer interaction can also be seen in the travel industry, especially in the relations between tour guides and their guests. The interaction is likely particularly high in extended travel arrangements.

This study will focus on emotional bond development between a tour guide, having the role of a host, and a traveler, having the role of a guest, in luxury travel. The global luxury travel market size was valued at \$891 billion in 2018, spread in in three categories: absolute luxury, aspiring luxury, and accessible luxury (alliedmarketresearch.com). This study focuses on the accessible luxury market, within the customized and private vacations category.

The aim of this paper is to examine how an emotional bond may develop between a tour guide and a traveler in the accessible luxury travel category and the emotional outcome of this interaction.

A Host-Guest Approach

Despite the importance of the luxury travel market, research on the emotional relationship between guides and clients is lacking. However, in a study of adventure guides, the concept of emotional performance was introduced, defined as “the effective, genuine expression of role-required emotion” (Carnicelli-Filho, 2013). Emotional performance cannot be considered genuine because it does not represent an emotion felt but an emotion managed in order to satisfy a role requirement. However, this study is not about the host’s emotion, but on how the guest is treated and about how a host behaves towards and communicates with guests, which is related to emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). In a study by Vejlgard (2020), this has been summed as a hosting practice. This study introduced a prescribed hosting practice in commercial hospitality, a hosting practice that may develop an emotional bond with guests; this hosting practice can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Prescribed hosting practices in host-guest in commercial hospitality (Vejlgard, 2020).

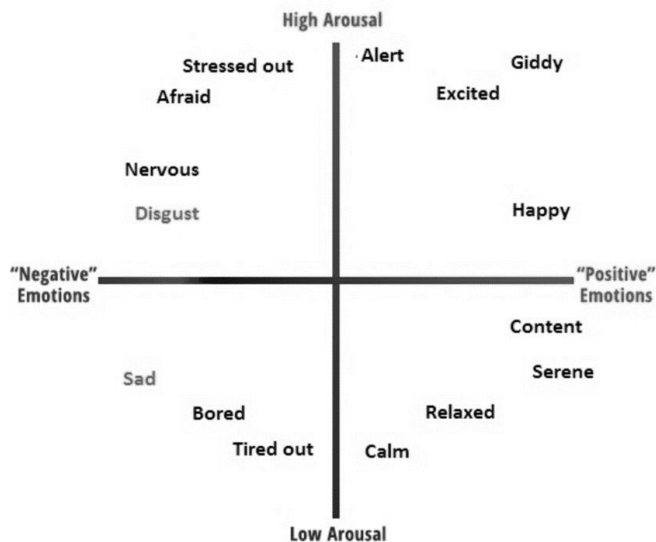
<p><i>Behavior:</i> As host, take a pro-active role towards the guest; only in departure should you sometimes be re-active. Take the initiative in interacting with guests; take responsibility of the proceedings in courteous ways.</p> <p><i>Form of address:</i> Use the name of guests when appropriate; 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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Service delivery has a certain quality, a service quality, which is about the attributes of the service offering. Service quality is about the customer’s perception of how the service is delivered (cf. Parasuraman et al., 1994). In private hospitality settings, a host may exercise the role of host in friendly, caring, and loving ways; these adjectives can be viewed as the quality of the hosting practice practiced by the host, as perceived by the guest.

The guest’s perception of how a host exercises the role of host, that is, the emotional quality, has an emotional outcome (emotional response). The perception will create a feeling in the guest. Feelings are conscious experiences activated either by external stimuli or by various bodily states (Chaplin, 1985, p. 151). The host’s behavior and communication are external stimuli affecting the guest (cf. Chaplin, 1985, p. 176); in other words, the guest’s perception of the stimuli affects how he/she feels.

Feelings are measured along two dimensions: positive/negative valance and low/high arousal, as can be seen in Figure 2. The guest’s feelings may be inward (joy; awe) and outward (smiling; crying). When describing feelings, we use words such as, for instance, sad, bored, excited, happy, or calm.

Figure 2. The two dimensions of feeling (Munoz-de-Escalona & Cañas, 2017).



Emotional responses in tourism have been studied and found to have wide variation. Emotional responses in guests can vary from interest and surprise to unease and resentment (Chang, 2008).

The bond that develops between a host and a guest may also be described by the guest, based on how close the guest feels he/she is with the host. Timm (2008, p. 5) has suggested that in on-going customer relationships there are four levels of customers’ relationships: customer, client, member, friend, with each level having increasing service intimacy.

Method and Data-gathering

This paper is a retrospective study of an 8-day round trip to Sri Lanka in October 2019. After the return from the trip, one of the two travelers on the trip was interviewed informally about the trip; the author asked the traveler if it would be possible to see photos, artefacts, and a logbook from the trip. This was accommodated by the traveler. The author subsequently asked if the material could be used as data for a study. This was granted. In the end, only the logbook became a source in this study. Thus, the logbook represents document data.

Bowen has pointed out that documents “may be the most effective means of gathering data when events can no longer be observed or when informants have forgotten the details” (Bowen, 2009). Documents can have a variety of forms, for instance, diaries and journals. One of the advantages of documents are that they are “unobtrusive” and “non-reactive” (Bowen, 2009), that is, they are unaffected by the research process.

The data documented the entire service delivery of the trip. However, only data pertaining to the hosting practice will be analyzed in this study, that is, the commercial aspects and the service delivery will not be included. Data were analyzed primarily through narrative analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Reissman, 1993), using a line by line reading of the logbook text, looking for quotes that illustrate or highlight the hosting practice, emotional quality and emotional outcome, that is, the themes were pre-selected prior to the analysis.

The trip was organized by a bespoke travel agency in England. The travelers were a couple (a woman (C) and a man) in their 50s; they were accompanied by a Sri Lankan chauffeur guide (a man; here named S; approx.. 40 years old (Personal communication with traveler)).

Analysis of Data

Day 1: From the very first meeting, the host clearly acknowledges and greets the guests: “S greeted us in the arrival hall with a big smile and two bottles of water.” The host used non-verbal language and had been proactive by preparing refreshments: “He had also prepared a plate of fresh fruit [...]” Here are two instances of the host using perishable elements, appropriate to the situation.

“He related immediately to the fact that we were weary after the long trip [...]”. Thus, the host took the initiative to bond. However, “During the transfer to the hotel, he was very polite and you could sense that he was very considerate and attentive to our needs. [He] only talked if he could sense that we were up to it.” He paid attention to the guests in a considerate way. In the first meeting, the emotional qualities are “polite”, “considerate”, and “attentive”. The host engages in small talk that is appropriate to the situation.

The guest wrote in the logbook about her feelings: “[S] immediately made us feel safe and taken well care of. I felt so at ease [...]” She continued: “I felt that I could be myself and that his intentions were authentic and warm. It was a great beginning because we knew that we were going to spend a large part of the vacation with this ‘unknown’ man.” The guest alludes to two emotional qualities: “authentic” and “warm”.

Day 2: The next day, “S made sure that we were comfortable installed in the van [...]”. This is a reference to a courteous speech act. The host shows that he is considerate. The guest wrote about her feelings in the logbook: “I sensed that he was very eager to get to know us and to get a deeper understanding of what we were interested in.” He was curious about his guests. “We had a conversation about my interest in elephants and wildlife [...] Suddenly, [S] stopped the car and he pointed [...to] a tree – ‘Look [C.] there is a Coppersmith barbet’”. He listened to his guest. After seeing her first ever wild elephant, the guest writes, “I felt so happy. I could feel that S really wanted to heighten my experiences [...] by communicating in such a friendly and interested manner [...] it made my experience even stronger.” Happy is a strong word, and while the tourist experience is central in the quote, the guest alludes to the emotional quality by using the words “friendly” and “interested manner”. The host shows he is interested in the guest and the relationship becomes closer.

Day 3: During a climb, “S was attentive [as to] how I was doing during the whole climb. [...] It was done in such a nice and caring way.” The host is caring. The emotional quality is described by the words: attentive, nice, and caring. In the next sentence, the guest writes about her feelings: “I felt almost like his daughter that he wanted to protect and make sure did not slide and get hurt.” In this sentence, there is another emotional quality: Protective.

Day 4: No notes in the logbook.

Day 5: During a trip to a local village, “S was very observant that I got the opportunity to engage in conversations with the villagers and made sure that I got answers to all the questions I had.” The host had presence. Though not expressed explicitly, there is an emotional quality in the quote: care for the guest, and again the host acts in a pro-active way. Commenting on the experience in her logbook, the guest wrote: “It was as if he read my mind —since I think that this is very important [...] to show respect—and especially when there is such a difference in material wealth between us.” Yet another emotional quality is mentioned: respect.

Day 6: The guest commented on a syrup that was often served with yoghurt at meals; the host remarked that it is rare and expensive but he could get it at a local farm. The host listened to the guest, and he was thoughtful: “When we arrived at the farm, S went in to collect it from the farmer and returned back to the van with two bottles of syrup. He wanted me to have the larger bottle, even though it was something that was difficult for him to find in the local markets in the capital city where he lived.” The emotional quality is implicit: generosity.

The guest commented: “I felt that he really wanted to give me the better part just as if we were dear friends. [...] I was really emotional[ly] moved [by] this man who was so kind and did everything he could to go out of his way in order to give us a wonderful experience.” The quote alludes to an emotional outcome for the guest, an inward feeling.

“We had a planned visit to the temple [...] in the afternoon that day. S asked us if we were ok with visiting the temple in the evening instead of the afternoon, as one of his friends was able to get us in ahead of the crowds

[...]. I knew that he was going to have the evening off, so I asked him if he really was sure that he wanted to spend the evening with us instead of relaxing.” The host said: “[C], to me the most important and rewarding is that I get to share the beauty and holiness of this temple and share it with you [...]”. The quote highlights that the host is generous with his time and his schedule. The host used the guest’s name. The guest wrote in the logbook, “I was quite moved by his words and again I thought that I had never ever in my life, with [my] extensive traveling around the world, experienced such a wonderful and genuine host as S.” By now, the guest has concluded that the host is genuine in his expressions.

Day 7: On this day, the car broke down. “S [...] told us that he had to get the car fixed and unfortunately wouldn’t be able to take us along to the safari early next morning since he had to get a spare part for the van.” It is implicit that he would not be able to join the guests for dinner that evening as had been planned. After dinner, the guest wrote: “We had a great evening, but we actually missed our chauffeur guide so very much [...]. It felt so empty all of a sudden. We had had such great experiences and had been tied together in so many ways during our week together. It felt like he had become almost like a good friend.” The precise nature of the relationship can now be named: friendship.

Day 8: On the last leg of the trip, “we [...] felt a little blue. Somehow, there was a feeling of sadness and I could already sense that we were going to miss him deeply. I felt that S had been such a great and essential part of our whole experience [...].” In the last logbook entry, the guest wrote: “[W]hen we had to part – both my fiancé and I actually had tears in our eyes since we felt so moved by the way S had been taking care of us.” The host has showed again and again, that he cared for the guest, and relationship has gotten very close. There was now an outward feeling: crying, because of a new emotion: sadness. This feeling was likely felt because there was a finality to the relationship.

Concluding Comments

The tour guide’s behavior and communication followed the prescribed hosting practice almost to a fault. During the trip, 12 different emotional qualities were reported by the guest, notably caring, friendly, attentive, and generous. These emotional qualities are almost identical to a fault to what Kandarpully et al. (2014) highlights as important qualities in host-guest transaction: caring attitudes, warmth, and generosity. That the bonding was based on many emotional qualities and that they were expressed throughout the trip is without a doubt important in order to understand the feelings that evolved, namely happiness and sadness. Despite the fact that the guest is 10 years older than the host, she writes about feeling “like a daughter”, a deep bond, and an emotional outcome that can best be described as an interim friendship, the highest level of service intimacy that is possible in one-time service deliveries, that is, when there is not going to be an on-going commercial relationship, which was the de facto outcome of the trip (Personal communication with the traveler 5 months after the trip). The traveler did not at any time indicate that she perceived the host’s behavior and communication as an emotional performance.

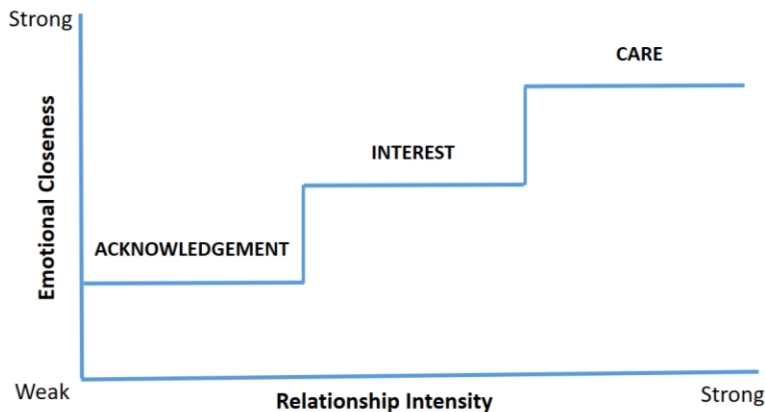
The relationship intensity increased (the time the host and guest spend together) and as the relationship intensity increased so did the host’s specific behavior and communication. There were changing themes in the host’s behavior and communication as the trip progressed: On the first day, the theme was acknowledgement, greeting, and attention. As the host and guest spent more time together, the theme was interest, curiosity and listening. As the host and guests spent still more time together, the theme was care, presence, and thoughtfulness.

This study has shown that in commercial hospitality situations with prolonged host-guest interaction, a strong emotional connection with a guest, who starts out being a stranger, can develop. However, the bond will not develop automatically; it was the host’s behavior and communication that brought the host and guest closer and closer together. The host has to be consistent in his behavior and communication; the more consistent the host is in his/her behavior and communication, the stronger the emotional bond with the guest. The host was consistent; his behavior reflected a progression in his emotional expression: acknowledgement, greeting, attention, interest, curiosity, listening, care, presence, thoughtfulness.

These emotional expressions can be viewed as steps on the way to develop a bond with a guest, who starts out being a stranger. The steps can be conceptualized into three steps: Acknowledgement, Interest, Care.

By following these three thematic steps, a host can develop a bond with a guest. There seem to be two dimensions at play: emotional closeness and relationship intensity. The three steps can be visualized as an emotional closeness ladder. This can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Emotional closeness ladder.*



The emotional closeness ladder is a conceptualization of a causal connection that is likely common; the more time we spend together with someone whose behavior and communication has positive messages, the stronger positive feelings we are likely to develop, regardless of market category.

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