
“Have a Magic Trip”: Social Rituals in Disney Cruise Line Pre-Cruise Host-Guest Interaction

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Abstract

In King’s hospitality model, hospitality is about social rituals, that is, a host’s behavior in a hospitality place follows a certain formalistic procedure when interacting with guests. In this study, social rituals are defined as social interaction that follows a formalistic and set sequence of acts, performed in a sequestered place. Based on this definition, it is not given that hosts de facto perform social rituals when interacting with guests; they may simply have a business practice or work routine centered on service delivery. In this qualitative study, data on the host-guest interaction at Disney Cruise Line, an American cruise company within the Disney group of companies, were gathered by interviewing a seasoned DCL cruise host. The analysis shows that the formalistic nature of DCL social interaction, both described and practiced, are social rituals. These can be viewed as directional hints for interacting with guests.

Key Words Hospitality industry, Guest relations, Communication, Nonverbal language, Company Culture

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Introduction

Rituals are aspects of many cultures around world: especially religious cultures (Bell, 1997). Rituals may also be part of company cultures, although the word ritual is not necessarily used when analyzing company culture. However, it has been suggested that in one industry, the hospitality industry, social rituals are a defining characteristic (King, 1995). In some cases, it may also be a characteristic of host-guest interaction in the travel industry.

In King’s hospitality model (1995), social rituals are about how a host exercises the role of host. In the present study, social rituals are defined as social interaction that follows a formalistic and set sequence of acts, including but not limited to words, gestures, and artefacts. The study will examine social rituals as these are described and performed by a company known for its unique approach to host-guest interaction, the Walt Disney Company, which is known for “guestology”, a focus on the guest experience rather than traditional business efficiencies (Solnet, Kandampully, & Kralj, 2010). Walt Disney developed an internal language based on Hollywood terminology: Staff are cast members, a job description is a script, HR is casting etc. This is hospitality as theater and performance (Hemmington, 2007). It has been pointed out that “This analogy with show business helps immerse both staff and guest in the imaginary world of Disney, putting everyone in the

spotlight (Hudson & Hudson, 2013, p. 3). In 1979, one Disney World host explained his job as follows: “Our job, every minute, is to help the Guest enjoy the park” (Pope, 1979). This approach is also applied to other Disney brands, such as Disney Cruise Line (DCL).

The purpose of this study is to examine the social rituals in pre-cruise host-guest interaction, which takes place at airports, in hotel lobbies, and at cruise ship terminals.

Although strongly associated with the hotel and restaurant industries, hospitality is a concept that also applies to other industries; this has to do with the understanding of hospitality as being about a place, not only stationary places, but also mobile places. A stationary hospitality place can be, for instance, hotels, restaurants, bars, cafes; a mobile hospitality place can be, for instance, airplanes, cruise ships, ferries (Brotherton, 2017; Brymer & Petersen, 2000, p. 6). However, hospitality is a word that is likely to give different associations to different people. This has to do with the fact that it is used in different ways. At the most basic, however, hospitality is a human exchange (Brotherton & Wood, 2000, p. 143). However, this human exchange can take place in different domains: Private, social, commercial (Lashley, 2000, p. 4). As this paper is about hospitality in the cruise industry, this paper focuses on the commercial domain.

A Theoretical Perspective on Rituals

Rituals are everywhere in social life, both in formalistic life and in everyday life. However, as a concept in sociology, anthropology, and history, ritual is not the most accessible phenomenon. It has been pointed out that “ritual has proved to be a particular complicated phenomenon to analyze due to the variety of activities that may be considered ritual and the multiplicity of perspectives from which they may legitimately be interpreted” (Bell, 1997, back cover). In ritual studies, a research field, research has different perspectives. Bell has summed up three perspectives: 1. The origins and essential nature of ritual. 2. The role of ritual in the social organization and dynamics of human societies. 3. Ritual as a form of cultural communication that “transmits the cognitive categories and dispositions that provide people with important aspects of their sense of reality” (Bell, 1997, p. 2). This study belongs to the third perspective.

In ritual studies, rituals can be categorized into a. rites of passage, b. calendrical rites, c. rites of exchange and communion, d. rites of affliction, e. feasting, fasting and festivals, f. political rites. Over time, many rituals become “imbued with shared social meanings which are culturally transmitted through custom and tradition” (Jary & Jary, 2004, pp. 522-523). Ritual can have different functions; one of which is to “create magic” (Bell, 1997, p. 13), not as conjuring tricks, but to give something extraordinary to peoples’ lives.

A characteristic of ritual-like activities is formalism. Formality is one of the most frequently cited characteristics of rituals; it is often understood in terms of contrast and degree: Formal activities can be contrasted to informal activities, and formality can also be exercised in different ways. In general, “the more formal a series of activities of movements and activities, the more ritual-like they are apt to seem to us” (Bell, 1997, p. 139).

“When analyzed, formality appears to be, at least in part, the use of a more limited and rigidly organized set of expressions and gestures, a ‘restricted code’ of communication or behavior in contrast to a more open or ‘elaborated code’ (Bell, 1997, p. 139). As pointed out by Bell, “Formal speech [...] tends to be more conventional and less idiosyncratic or personally expressive. Likewise, formal gestures are fewer in number than informal ones and are more prescribed, restrained, and impersonal” (Bell, 1997, p. 139). Rituals are also about limitations: “By limiting [...] *how* something can be expressed, restricted codes of behavior simultaneously influence *what* can be expressed as well” (Bell, 1997, p. 139).

In some research, ritual is viewed as a performance, in a variety of activities: theater, sports, and public spectacles (Bell, 1997, p. 75). Rituals can be “social drama”, with a temporal or procedural structure that can be analyzed in terms of stages (Bell, 1997, p. 39), like acts in a theatrical production. However, the drama is not necessarily spectacular: Goffman (2010) also uses ritual to denote routine practices of everyday life, and King (1995) suggested that social ritual in hospitality is simply about “saying the right things and through body language.” This may involve social etiquette and advice on social manner, which, far from being a matter of “empty ritual”, etiquette “can go to the heart of constructing relationships” (Bell, 1997, p. 133), which precisely

is the point of etiquette books, such as, for instance, *Debrett's Etiquette & Modern Manners* (Morgan, 1999) or *Emily Post's Etiquette* (Post, 2004).

In formalistic rituals, symbols play an important role; they may also play a role in mundane matters (with symbols understood as something that invokes emotions). This “something” can be artefacts, humans and their behavior, animals, and natural phenomena. In everyday practice and in commercial practice, this is about verbal and nonverbal language and object communication. Verbal language can be about specific speech acts (cf. Searle, 1969). Nonverbal language is about body language, gesti, facial expressions, eye movements, eye contact, proxemics, touching, odors (Hall, 1959; Hall, 1966). Objects, colors, and images (for instance, pictograms) can also communicate, and are termed object communication (Katz & Katz, 1983).

Greetings and farewells are typical formal conventions for social interactions, often considered so-called “patterned routines” or miniature rituals, or systems of signs that convey symbolic information (Firth, 1973, p. 29). Symbolically, greeting and parting express and affirm the existence of an acceptable social relationship (Bell, 1997, p. 141). “Although greetings and farewells are themselves formalizations of social conversation and interaction, there can be great differences in the degree of formality” (Bell, 1997, p. 142): “Hi” and “good evening” are both greetings but represent different levels of formality. Greeting is possibly one of the most widespread miniature social rituals (Schreuer, 2017, p. 175).

Method and Data Gathering

This study uses two data gathering methods: interview and document data. An informant who has worked for DCL as a cruise host for three years, with work experience from hotels and other cruise ship companies, was interviewed. Cruise hosts work at the welcome desk in the arrival hall at airports, staff hospitality desks in the lobby area of partner hotels, and at cruise ship terminals. The interview was semi-structured, the purpose of which was to make the informant speak openly about his/her knowledge in relation to the topic in question, with the researcher having the option of asking additional and follow-up questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The interviews took place in August 2017 and August 2018 and were subsequently transcribed.

The informant made several references to written manuals that are a handed-over to DCL staff who interacts with guests and to his hand-written notes on the manuals. Instead of quoting the informant reading quotes from the manuals and the informant's own handwritten notes aloud, the researcher ended up quoting from the manuals and hand-written notes directly, with the informant's consent. Thus, the study also uses document data. According to Bowen (2009), documents can be manuals and background papers, which provide verifications of findings from other data sources. According to Yin (1994), an advantage of documents as sources is their exactness.

The documents used in this study are distributed to potential DCL employees during their training, without giving any instructions that they are confidential. Indeed, it would not make sense that are confidential because they are descriptions of the services delivered to the guests. Some of the documents are also given to the guests.

The document data describe desired behavior; the interview data reflect the behavior of one individual, as recalled by the individual in question in an interview some time after the occurrence. The informant communicated that the desired behavior was practiced, as described in the manual. Quotes from the interviews were selected based on pre-selected themes with inspiration from studies of rituals. For space reasons, only a small part of the interview is used. While service delivery was also discussed in the interview, the analysis will focus on possible ritualistic behavior, not on aspects of service delivery.

Analysis of Data

Traditions and customs are important in rituals. It takes time for a tradition to evolve and for a social ritual to be imbued with shared social meanings. Disneyland and Disneyworld were established in 1955 and 1971 respectively (Fanning, 2015, pp. 8-17), that is, it has been possible for Disney Cruise Line, established in 1996 (Bloomberg, 2020), to follow a Disney tradition.

Inclusion of symbolic artefacts can stimulate the creation of social rituals. DCL provides cruise hosts with DCL merchandise that hosts are required to use. Among the artefacts that are handed over are “Mickey Gloves

and/or Mickey Hand Signs” (Doc5). “If you are a man, you will be wearing the Mickey gloves, for instance, when waving goodbye to the busses leaving for the cruise ship terminal and when the ship is leaving port. We would be standing on the pier, and waving to guests going away. I only saw men wearing the glove which makes sense because Mickey is male” (Informant).

Waving goodbye is an example of a miniature ritual that is part of everyday life. However, in the Disney version, the ritual has been imbued with one of the iconic Disney characters. This becomes a formal gesture that is prescribed and thus likely restrained and for the host maybe impersonal; it is more about sticking to the ritual than making a personal expression. The degree of formality of the parting ritual with the Mickey glove is not high. However, the symbolic value is.

Again and again, the documents use words such as “show”, “perform” and “onstage”. One of the messages that is repeated again and again from the training sessions is “show” (Doc7). The Sample Departure Letter states in the first sentence: “Welcome to beautiful (homeport). The Cast and Crew of the Disney (Ship) are looking forward to your arrival.” The word cast is a theatrical word. However, being a cruise host is not about wearing a Disney costume; cruise hosts are not Disney characters although their uniform is called a “costume” (Doc1; Doc2).

In Doc1, on page 5, under the headline “Disney Show and Costume Details”, there is another theatre word: “To maintain our Disney Show [you as a] Disney Cruise Line Representative should do the following to perform your role:” What is written in the section are statements that reflect aspects of what is typical of how a host exercises the role of host; however, in the text there is a reference to an important aspect of many rituals, namely magic:

- “Use proper scripting or spiels, where applicable
- Remember to perform “Onstage”
- Present a “show-ready” area
- Make eye contact and smile
- Display appropriate body language
- Preserve the magic
- Treat every Guest as a V.I.P. and EXCEED their expectations
- Be friendly, courteous, professional and respectful to Guests of all ages
- Use courteous phrases
- Seek out Guest contact – greet and welcome each Guest
- Make personal connections
- Thank each Guest”

The reference to magic is a meta-reference, not a description of the actual magic taking place. What the magic is, may be a bit abstract. However, the informant states, “It’s a phantasy world.” (Informant). He goes on to refer to the Disney characters that guests can interact with in a photo session at the pier and onboard the ship. “That’s when the real magic begins.” (Informant).

The 46 words are not a manual, with precise instructions. This is notable, because the rest of the text of which it is a part, is 42 pages of densely written text. However, the 46 words do not stand alone:

According to the informant, Disney Cruise Line HQ visits all the embankment port destinations two weeks in advance of the arrival of the guests: “there were two persons from the company that trained us. It seems that they do this in all ports and it is exactly the same procedure in the other ports. This was mandatory every season, also when you had worked for [DCL] before” (Informant).

The informant has worked for seven other cruise lines, also as cruise host. “None of the other companies put the same effort in training as Disney. There were two days of training; it was not just about listening; it was about rehearsal and doing exercises. Their instructions are very clear; everything is very step-by-step in how to deal with guests. [...] Very much into details” (Informant).

During the training sessions, the informant wrote in his notes: “Direction role. Different roles, direction role, [unreadable] role, support role, additional roles” (Doc7). In the interview, he said “the instructor used the word role a lot” (Informant). Doc4 do not use job title, but instead use the word role to denote an employee: “All roles at the Port: Wear a nametag [...]” (Doc4).

Again and again, the vocabulary alludes to theater and social drama. That the staff has to be familiar with a role, also as cruise hosts, is clear from the training activities: “We had to learn a very specific vocabulary; this seemed to be very important. Everybody was to use the same words” (Informant). In the hand-written notes, the informant has written:

“Disney Cruise Lines, not DC Lines
ship, not boat
guest, not passenger
stateroom, not cabin
verandah, not balcony
port adventure, not shore
crew member, not staff
officers, not supervisors” (Doc5).

The informant’s description of the training sessions and his hand-written notes reveal that the expressions and gestures are rigidly organized, that is, there is a ‘restricted code’ for communication/behavior. This is underlined by the informant: “We also had to use the word motorcoach; not the word bus. This was a bit strange because it is not a word that I had heard before” (Informant). This word is also used in the written documents: “Verify motorcoach is show ready. Escort Guests to the appropriate motorcoach. Assist Guests with boarding motorcoach. Provide motorcoach spiels” (Doc4). “The use of the word ‘Spiel’ was also a special word they used instead of [saying] speech” (Informant). This statement also underlines that there is a series of formal activities of movements and activities. In general, rituals need to be carried out in the exact same way every time; otherwise, they may lose their “magic”. In Disney’s case, the “Disney magic” would also go away if not a carefully staged social ritual.

Formality is one of the most frequently cited characteristics of rituals, often understood in terms of contrast and degree: DCL has formalized rituals for communication and behavior; however, the rituals are not very formal but they are unique.

According to the informant, there were many instructions about how to address the guests, but they had to do with problem solving and organizing, and this was not so different from how you are supposed to act when working for other cruise lines. However: “We were instructed to not say ‘Goodbye’. We had to say ‘See you really soon’. And we should not say ‘Have a nice trip’; we should say “Have a magic trip” (Informant). Language that is specific to certain behavior is about speech acts but it is also a characteristic of rituals. The greetings and farewells of this ritual are formalized but they have a low degree of formality. In this case, the speech is idiosyncratic but it is not personally expressive; it represents a formalistic ritual.

Concluding Comments

DCL limits how staff can express themselves but the social rituals guide staff as to what can be expressed. The DCL social ritual guidelines are not a manuscript but can be viewed as directional hints. If the Disney characters were included in the analysis, it might have been apt to talk of a play being performed in front of the guests; however, the cruise hosts are themselves, not characters, and they interact with guests who are active, not passive like an audience. For a superficial consideration, this study may seem to be about mundane host-guest interaction; however, the DCL host-guest interaction is not mundane routine; the DCL host-guest interaction is unique, to some guests the DCL host-guest interaction may even be magical.

The formalistic nature of the social interaction between DCL staff and guests qualifies as social rituals. It is possible for Disney to turn their host-guest interaction into a social ritual because the ritual is imbued with Disney’s history and brand. What for other hospitality companies is mostly a business practice or work routine, DCL has turned into a unique social ritual.

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