
Observing Guests in the Hospitality Industry: A List of Meaningful Observable Phenomena

Henrik Vejlgard, Copenhagen Business Academy, Copenhagen, Denmark
Dorthe Simonsen, University College Lillebælt, Odense, Denmark
Rasmus Nissen, Copenhagen Business Academy, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

In professional hospitality contexts, finding out whom the guest is may help the host in understanding and creating a bond with the guest. Since, in most cases, guests are strangers to the staff when they first meet, applying observation skills become particularly important for the host. Based on four focus group interviews with hotel and restaurant staff, this study examines which clues to look for in order to be better at exercising the role of host. By using a combination of the three senses – seeing, hearing and smelling – the informants explain what they observe when trying to get a first impression of a new guest. The practical implication of this study adds new insights to our understanding of the complex process of a host establishing an emotional bond with the guest.

Key Words: *Hosts, observation, body language, non-verbal communication, artefacts*

Track: Industry Track

Focus of paper: Industry/Applied

Kind of submission: Paper

Introduction

In professional hospitality contexts, finding out whom the guest standing in front of you is, may relate to both service delivery and to exercising the role of host, that is, creating an emotional rapport with the guest (cf. Kandampully et al., 2014). Having knowledge about a guest can help a waiter or hotel receptionist in understanding, among other things, the needs of the guest, whether they are service-related or social/emotional. With an understanding of who the guest is, a host can better deliver the (right) service offering, but also better create a bond with the guest.

The challenge is that guests in the hospitality industry are often strangers to the staff (and vice versa) when they first meet, which has also been addressed in hospitality research (Lashley, 2017; Walton, 2017). Staff in hotels and restaurants who interact with guests often have no or little advance knowledge of the guests (unless, maybe, in luxury hotel concepts, where staff do research on guests in advance of their arrival. Consequently, staff in non-luxury contexts may ask themselves how they can acquire knowledge of the individual guest – that is, to find out who the guest is. One likely answer may be “Observe them on the spot”.

The host finding out whom the guest is is - likely - the first step in an interaction that involves many skill sets of the professional host. Exercising the role of host is about skills and active behavior (Authors, 2020); the particular skill that involves finding out whom the guest is at the very first encounter, before interacting with the guest, is likely about observing the guests. Observation of people is a well-established human phenomenon, in everyday life as well as in social science. In many private social contexts, guests can be

observed and hosts and guests can ask questions of each other. However, in the hospitality industry, staff do not always have the option of asking questions because it is not *comme il faut* out of the blue to start out by asking questions of the guests (except questions relating to the service delivery). However, staff can look at the guest, and take note of what he or she sees, and look for signs (clues) as to how he or she can start developing a bond or relationship with the guest, as part of exercising the role of host. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine which signs (clues) professional hosts in hotels and restaurants meaningfully can look for in order to be better at exercising the role of host, that is, creating an emotional bond with the guest.

Literature Review

Research has shown that engagement between staff in the hospitality industry and their guests in interactive situations results in mutually beneficial collaboration and generates value (Im and Qu, 2017; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Ivanova-Gongne (2015) suggests that interaction is the interplay between people through the expressions of attitude, voice, and body language (also known as kinesics). Nonverbal communication is categorized into four essential groups, namely, kinesics, physical appearance, paralanguage, and proxemics (Jung and Yoon, 2011). The literature has established that staff communication skills are a key resource and are crucial for generating value (Lusch, Vargo, and O'Brien, 2007; Madhavaram and Hunt, 2008).

With the above in mind, it is notable that “explorations of nonverbal communication in the hospitality industry have been academically overlooked and practically underemphasized” (Islam, 2019, p. i). Research on how hosts observe guests in a hospitality context, with a focus on how a host may use a mix of observations to establish an emotional bond with the guest, appear to be nonexistent.

Observable Phenomena

Of the five senses, three senses - seeing, hearing, and smelling – may be at play when staff meets a guest for the first time. Thus, in this study, sight, sound and smell are considered phenomena that can give input to who the guest is in the sense that they can be observed (cf. Mehl and Conner, 2012).

In principle, what can be observed are all aspects of culture: values, behavior, artefacts, and language (cf. Vejlggaard, 2017) (Of these, values are likely the most difficult to observe because they are not visible to the eye.). Language consists of a number of categories (Hall, 1959): a. verbal language, b. para-verbal language, c. non-verbal language. Language is not only what is communicated (the message), but also how things are communicated, that is, para-verbal language, and language particular to a specific region or social group (dialect, sociolect, ethnolect). Non-verbal language is facial expressions, gestures, and other body movements (ibid.), which are all also part of the behavior category. Behavior is also about proxemics, a term introduced by Hall (1966) to describe "space as a system of communication". How far or close a person stands when communicating with other people, especially strangers, is also observable.

Artefacts also communicate, known as object communication, or objectics, which is a part of nonverbal communication (Katz and Katz, 1983). Objectics is defined as “all intentional and nonintentional display of material things, such as implements, machines, art objects, architectural structures, [...] the human body, and [...] clothes [...]” (Ruesch and Kees, 1956, p. 189).

Social psychologists have pointed out that “many of our day-to-day choices about what to wear [...] are influenced by a desire to symbolize or represent important group memberships” (Brewer and Miller, 1996). Vejlggaard has pointed out that objects play a significant role in how we define ourselves and classify other people (Vejlggaard, 2010, p. 103). Object are individual objects but combinations of objects, such as clothes and accessories, may also constitute a dress code (Vejlggaard, 2010, p. 104). According to Vejlggaard (2010, p. 105), a dress code consists of objects in seven categories of artefacts, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Elements in dress codes (Vejlgaard, 2010, p. 105)

Object categories	Examples
Head/hair	Hairstyle, hair band, hat, earring, colored hair
Face	Make-up, piercings, glasses, sunglasses
Body	Clothing, tattoos
Feet	Shoes, boots, socks, ankle bracelets
Accessories	Jewelry, watch, bag, glove
Symbols	Branded clothing, religious symbols, political symbols, corporate symbols
Miscellaneous	Membership cards, mobile phones, knives

With objectics, humans utilize objects to send content messages (Katz and Katz, 1983, p. 163). The principle at work can be likened to coded language. “We [...] use coded language on the status of certain artists, objects, brands, and art forms (like music) [...]. Codes, in this context, is a system of artefacts, behaviors, and language with symbolic/emotional meaning (Vejlgaard, 2010, p. 28). It has been pointed out that “in all societies, past and present, we use symbols, objects and names to communicate who we are and to classify ourselves and other people” (Vejlgaard, 2010, p. 29). In the present context, a sign is a visual expression and a symbol is an emotional expression (Vejlgaard, 2010, p. 29). Coded language is about creating taste hierarchies that can vary enormously from one lifestyle group [...] to the next” (Vejlgaard, 2013, p. 157). Codes can, for instance, be words such as “trendy” and “mainstream”. The coding is the result of thoughts and feelings, that is, values (cf. Vejlgaard, 2017).

Finally, to visual and auditory observations can be added olfactory observations. Olfactics is the science of studying smells that a human may have (Hall, 1966). A classic example is sweat, but a person can also smell of perfume, smoke and other pleasant and disgusting smells.

Method and Data Gathering

This paper is part of a comprehensive study examining hosting in a Danish hospitality context. In this section, the methodological approach will be elaborated and it will be explained how data has been collected.

According to Pratt (2009), qualitative research is useful for addressing “how-questions”, and allows the researcher to produce in-depth explanations. The aim of qualitative research is to examine meanings and attitudes of the informants in relation to the specific research topic (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Thus, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to generate new understandings of how staff observe their guests.

The data collection was carried in two phases. In the first phase, a total number of 17 semi-structured interviews were carried out between April 2019 and December 2019. All the informants had practical experience with working as hosts in either the hotel or restaurant industry. Based on key findings in the first phase we decided to expand our data collection. Thus, four focus group interviews were carried out in October 2020. The purpose of using focus groups was to produce new insights into hosting behavior through group interaction and discussion (Morgan, 1997). The topics of the focus groups focused on how our informants exercise the role of host and how they observe guests, among other topics. In this sense, the themes to be discussed in the focus groups partly derived from the first phase of data collection. Using focus groups can thus be seen as a way of doing data triangulation (Patton, 1999). The focus groups were video and audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. This paper builds primarily on data collected through the focus groups.

Analytical Approach

According to Alvesson (2011), interpretation is the cornerstone of analyzing qualitative data. Inspired by Kvale (1997), we analysed the four focus group transcripts using a strategy called meaning categorization. Meaning categorization involves that transcriptions are coded with the purpose of reducing and structuring lengthy text material into more analyzable parts. Inspired by Larkin et al (2006), we conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. This process consisted of three steps: In step one, transcripts were read as a way of getting a preliminary impression of each interview. Initial reflections were noted in the margins while reading. Secondly,

step two consisted of a comparison between transcripts with the purpose of identifying and labeling themes based on what each interviewee had been saying (Larkin et al., 2006). Finally, in step three main themes identified were written into an empty document, and key quotes from each interview were transferred to the document. The outcome was a document consisting of main themes with a number of interview quotes to support each theme. This enables us to bring interview quotes into the analysis. This is a way of giving voice to the interviewees and to empirically support the arguments being presented (Kvale, 1997).

Profile of the Informants

Four focus group interviews with a total number of 17 informants were conducted.

Table 1: Overview of informants

Informant #	Type of company	Function
1	Hotel	Conference coordinator
2	Hotel	Front office coordinator
3	Hotel	Conference and Front office manager
4	Hotel	Front office manager
5	Hotel	Front office and restaurant assistant
6	Hotel	Hotel manager
7	Restaurant	Restaurant owner
8	Restaurant	Restaurant owner
9	Restaurant	Waiter
10	Restaurant	Waiter/consultant
11	Restaurant	Chef/restaurant owner
12	Restaurant	Hospitality management student/waiter
13	Hotel	Front office manager
14	Hotel	Ass. Front office manager
15	Hotel	Hospitality management student/receptionist
16	Hotel	Receptionist
17	Hotel	Receptionist

Analysis

Most of the informants were quite clear, when expressing what they would be observing in their first encounter with a guest. According to informant #4, “it is all about body language, the facial expression”. This is confirmed by another informant (#6), who states “body language and facial expressions are some of the things that I definitely observe at first... You make a visual check of the guest, right? I mean, you don’t give them the elevator eyes, but you watch and observe...” And informant #14 is very clear: “For a start, I judge 100% how the person looks, the body language, socio-dialects, etc.”. The quotes emphasize the importance of observable phenomena such as language, especially non-verbal language, when a host meets a guest for the first time.

According to informant #1, she looks for clues about the guests “when reading their body language, what kind of signals they send, and also why they’re here: Are they here for a conference or a stay?” Informant #5 explains even more specifically that when meeting the guest “I always take a look at the guests when arriving – we all do of course, but... I make an assessment. So, when we say hello: Are you young, old, bring lots of luggage, smell of smoke, or similar things?”. To this informant, visual as well as olfactory observation are both important tools that can provide the host with important information about the guest.

A receptionist (informant #16) is well aware that she herself can go to a restaurant without make-up and being dressed in floppy clothes, but it does not mean that she is a floppy type. She continues: “some guests are having more money, even if they wear baggy clothing... - they don’t really care about what they are wearing.” The quote highlights an important aspect of observing other people, that is the potential pitfall that you actually misinterpret the clues you observe.

Informant #8 elaborates why it is not always easy to read other people: “Reading another person can be very, very difficult. And it’s not something you can... you can do automatically and just make up some rules. You can’t read off, like in the old days when you had, you might say, some standards for how to dress and certain cultural signals, which... because then you could put people in boxes. People are so individualistic today that it demands much more of the role of the host and the psyche and the personality you use when meeting other people.”

Informant #7 agrees with the difficulty in reading other people and argues how observing artefacts such as clothing is not enough in order to get to know the guest: “Well, I don’t think it’s possible to limit yourself to look only at the clothes and the shoes they are wearing. Because this can be terribly tricky. The thing about entering a place, and then, because someone is wearing a sweater and clogs, you think: Well, he probably doesn’t need anything. And then he might be the one planning the biggest event.”

Several of the informants are well aware of how being prejudiced might influence how staff observes the guests. An assistant front office manager explains: “...The first 20 seconds, and then you have prepared a generalizing analysis of the person entering – this being based specifically on the signs/codes you receive, and clothing is often a very good indicator” (informant #14), and he admits that “For me... I have a bias – an opinion in advance – that I can’t deny”. A waiter (informant #12) admits that having a bias in reading the guests is hard to avoid and that “it’s somehow our intuition and our own biases against how we think the guest looks, how his/her appearance is. Well, it’s our own biases or experiences regarding how that person moves or talks or looks.”

Finally, besides looking at body language and a person’s looks, one informant (#10) is also considering the context as a clue: “As a starting point you need to look at the room we’re in, before we look at the guest. ...Then I try to figure out if the guest is in the right place. And I do that by – you know – does the outfit match? Very simply. ... And what kind of atmosphere is that person looking for, but also bringing into the room?” In this perspective, exercising the role of host also includes the organizational context in which the hosting takes place.

Concluding Comment

The purpose of this study has been to examine what staff in professional hospitality contexts meaningfully can observe in order to get an impression of the guest standing in front of him/her. By applying the senses of seeing, hearing and smelling, hosts can get valuable insights into whom the guest is. In particular, this study has highlighted how the body language and the facial expressions of a guest are meaningful observable

phenomena in the first encounter. At the same time, artefacts such as clothing and luggage can add information that a host can use to find out what kind of person the guest is. However, several of the informants involved in this study emphasize that using observations of artefacts may be problematic due to the risk of stereotyping. Consequently, the observations of the guest needs to be analyzed: The host needs to make sense of the observations and then decide how to act. How hosts act based on the clues gained from observation is an idea for future research.

References

- Alvesson, M. (2011). *Interpreting Interviews*. London: SAGE.
- Authors, 2020.
- Brewer, M. B. & Miller, N. (1996). *Intergroup Relations*. London: Open University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. Handbook of qualitative research, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, SAGE.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co.
- Hall, E. T. (1966). *The Hidden Dimension*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Hall, E. T. & Hall, M. R. (1975). *The Fourth Dimension in Architecture: The Impact of Building on Behavior*. Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone.
- Im, J. & Qu, H. (2017). Drivers and resources of customer co-creation. A scenario-based case in the restaurant industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 64: 31-40.
- Islam, M. S. (2019). *Nonverbal Communication in Hotels as Medium of Experience Co-creation*. Ph.D. dissertation. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Hotel and Tourism Management, Hong Kong.
- Ivanova-Gongne, M. (2015). Culture in business relationship interaction: an individual perspective. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 30(5): 608-615.
- Jung, H. S. & Yoon, H.H. (2011). The effects of nonverbal communication of employees in the family restaurant upon customers' emotional responses and customer satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 30: 542-550.
- Kandampully, J. Kim, P. B., Keating, B., & Matila, A. (2014). Service Research in the Hospitality Literature: Insights from a Systematic Review. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 55(3): 287-299.
- Katz, A. M. & Katz, V. T. (ed.) (1983). *Foundations of Nonverbal Communication*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kvale, S. (1997). *InterView. En introduktion til det kvalitative forskningsinterview [InterView. An introduction to the qualitative research interview]*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Larkin, M., Watts, S. & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 102-120.
- Lashley, C. (2017). "Research on hospitality: the story so far/ways of knowing hospitality". In: Lashly, C. (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Hospitality Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Lusch, R. F., Vargo, S. L., & O'Brien, M. (2007). Competing through services: Insights from Service-dominant Logic. *Journal of Retailing*, 83(1): 5-18.
- Madhavaram, S. & Hunt, S. D. (2008). The service-dominant logic and a hierarchy of operant resources: Developing masterful resources and implications for marketing strategy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36(1): 67-82.
- Mehl, M. R & Conner, T. S. (2012). *Handbook of research methods for studying daily life*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). Focus groups as qualitative research. 2nd Edition. SAGE.
- Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research* 34(5): 1189-1208.
- Prahalad, C. K. & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3): 5-14.
- Pratt, M. G. (2009). From the Editors. For the lack of a boilerplate: Tips on writing up (and reviewing) qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52 (5).
- Ruesch, J. & Kees, W. (1956). *Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human*

- Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Vejlgaard, H. (2010). *The Lifestyle Puzzle: Who we are in the 21st Century*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- Vejlgaard, H. (2013). *Style Eruptions: How 6 Different Groups of Trendsetters Make Trends Happen*. Copenhagen: Confetti Publishing.
- Vejlgaard, H. (2017). The Cultural Triangle: A Conceptual Framework. Conference paper. EuroChrie 2017, Nairobi, Kenya.
- Walton, J. K. (2017). "The hospitality trades: A social history". In: Lashly, C. (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Hospitality Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Vargo, S. L. & Lusch, R. L. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1): 1-17.