Decoding Observable Phenomena in the Hospitality Industry: A Way to Learn About Guests' Unstated Needs

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Abstract

In professional hospitality contexts, staff observes guests as a way to get to know the person standing in form of them. Decoding is a mental process that de facto means making sense of some specific clues inherent in what is observed; in this case, observations of body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guest, and smell. Based on interviews and focus group interviews with hotel and restaurant staff, this study examines how waiters and hotel receptionists decode observable phenomena. The concept of the unstated need is a frame of reference for staff in the hospitality industry. However, the process is also about getting insights about how one as host can relate to the guest in a restaurant or a hotel. 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, non-verbal communication, needs, sense-making*

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Introduction

Truly understanding the needs of guests in the hospitality industry is often a challenge to the staff because the guests in restaurants and hotels are often strangers to the staff (the word guest originally meant stranger (Merriam-Webster, 2021)). Often guests entering a restaurant or arriving at a hotel will introduce themselves to the staff; but in the subsequent host-guest interaction, it is often up to the host to be pro-active in engaging with the guest(s). In order to get input for this interaction, it appears that professional hosts observe guests in the hope that they will get clues as how to interact with the guest (Authors, 2021).

The process is about non-verbal communication and about staff being observant of whom the guest is, by observing the guest's body language, facial expression, artefacts belonging to the guest, and olfatics (smell) (Authors, 2021), applying the senses of seeing, hearing, and smelling. However, this process does not end with making the observations. There is a subsequent step, in which the host is likely to decode the observations. The purpose of this paper is to examine how this decoding takes place.

Literature Review

Research on how hotel staff decode a mix of guests' body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guest, and olfatics (here termed observable phenomena) appear to be nonexistent in hospitality research. In a recent literature review, it was concluded that "Explorations of nonverbal communication in the hospitality industry "have been academically overlooked and practically underemphasized" (Islam, 2019, p. i). However, the author pointed out, in his subsequent study of nonverbal communication in the hospitality industry, that nonverbal communication comprises expressive emotions, subtle cues, or gestures that customers and hotel staff mutually detect and decode (Islam, 2019, p. i).

Decoding is a word that is used in different areas of research, typically with a meaning specific to the area of research in question. In psychology, decoding non-verbal cues is an established human phenomenon: In at study of decoding emotional facial expressions (Fujijama et al, 2012), decoding was understood as rating, identifying and discriminating between different study objects. Research has examined the human face as a transmitter of expression signals and the brain as a decoder of these expression signals (Smith, Cottrell, Gosselin and Schyns, 2005), that is, there are empirical evidence that this process takes place in the human mind (Russell, Bachorowski, and Fernandez-Dols, 2003). Much of the research has focused on decoding emotions (for instance, Hall, Hutton, and Morgan, 2010).

Decoding is often understood as a technical process that may involve a key to the code used. In this context, decoding is not a technical process but a mental process that de facto means making sense of some specific clues inherent or supposedly inherent in what is observed. Sense-making is the process by which individuals give meaning to their experiences. In organization studies, the concept of sense-making was introduced by Karl Weick. The concept of sense-making is defined as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). In this understanding of sense-making, there is no pre-defined frame of reference to use; this has to be created. Sensemaking is to create a frame of reference.

A hospitality perspective on how hospitality staff makes sense of a mix of observations of body language, facial expressions, artefacts belonging to the guest, and olfatics is lacking.

Needs Theory

A way of making sense of observations in a commercial hospitality context may be about creating a frame of reference related to the needs of the guest. This may not be about making a marketing analysis of needs but rather having an awareness of the needs that some guests may have based on the host's observations of the guest.

Needs have been studied by Abraham Maslow, who saw needs as the basic human requirements for air, food, weather, clothing, and shelter (basic needs). Human beings also have social needs and esteem needs and a need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1987, pp. 32-45). All of these needs can be at play in commercial hospitality contexts. However, in commercial contexts, distinctions are made between needs, wants, and demands. Needs become wants when directed to specific products and services that might satisfy the need (Kotler and Keller, 2016, p. 31). Wants are shaped by the concrete circumstances and context of the individual. Demands are wants for specific products and services backed up by an ability and willingness to pay.

Marketing management makes distinctions between five types of needs: a. Stated needs. b. Real needs. c. Unstated needs. d. Delight needs. e. Secret needs (Kotler and Keller, 2016, p. 31). The nuances of the different types of needs can be described by using an example: The consumer has a need to be entertained, and she wants to be entertained by watching television (the stated need). The consumer wants a television subscription package (real need). The consumer wants a no-fuss television subscription package (unstated need). The consumer wants to be able to self-select the channels in the television subscription package (delight need). The

consumer want to be able to talk about interesting movies or news events with her family and friends (secret need).

Guests' needs are not necessarily connected to wants and demands, that is, have a commercial element. They may have a need for conversation or a need for boasting, which can be the starting point for a host to create a bond with the guest. The guest may (also) have secret needs, for instance, a need to tell other people about what a great experience it was to eat in a restaurant or stay at a hotel.

The aim of this paper is to examine the phenonmenon of decoding guest observations in the hospitality industry. Observing and decoding guests is understood as a sense-making process; however, in this paper, the sense-making process is a black box.

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 have been collected.

As stated, the purpose of this paper is to examine the decoding of observable phenomena and how they may be linked to the needs of their guests. 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 hosting behavior.

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 working as hosts in either the hotel or restaurant industry. The interviews were transcribed. Based on key findings in the first phase, we decided to expand our data collection. Thus, four focus group interviews, with a total of 17 informants, 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 decode the needs of their guests. 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.

Analysing Data

According to Alvesson (2011), interpretation is the cornerstone of analyzing qualitative data. Inspired by Kvale (1997), we analysed the 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 and focus group quotes to support each theme. This is a way of giving voice to the informants and to empirically support the arguments being presented (Kvale, 1997). In the following, informants that were interviewed are indicated with "A"; informants from focus groups are indicated with a "B".

Analysis

The informants confirm that they observe and that decoding takes place. Informant #A1 states: "We must have some insights into human behavior; we have to be able to read our guests".

Another informant states: "It is paramount to read the guest as soon as he steps trough the door. If comes with a computer or a book under the arm, then we do know that he probably does not want to talk " [unstated need] (Informant #A2). The informants focus on both body language and artefacts: "Sometimes you can sense that the guest needs a lot of information; other times they just want to get the key and leave. You can look at their body language and see hos they react". [unstated need] (Informant #A3). Another informant states: "For us, it is about firs timpressions. The clothes you wear, the jewelry you wear, the shoes you have put on; from that you can make a judgement" (Informant #A4).

The informants acknowledge that that decoding observations can be challenging: "Well, it is the individual in front you [you] must read, in that specific situation. This is something you learn as you grow older; it becomes easier the more experience you have" (Informant #A5) Informant #B12 states: "You can learn to be good at reading people. But it comes more natural to some people […] if you have been in the business for many years, then decoding is, like, second nature." Informant #B11 concurs: "Yes, you do all the time".

Informant #B14 "I am determined to find out what is best for [the guest] – I want to guide. […] I am willing to go rather far in order to make sure that other people are content. And decoding other people, being able to understand their needs fairly quickly, and maybe even trying to exceed them. […] this is what I try to apply when I exercise the role of host".

Decoding, as a skill, is something that some informants master, but they also underline if it is not "second nature", it can be learned: Informant #B12 "if you are not good at it or it isn't in your nature, then it can be learned […]" Informant #B8 states: "Well, reading another person can be really, really difficult. It is not something … automatically, and then just make some rules." This informant goes on to add: "People are very individual today, which requires more of you in the role of host. […] What you see on the outside can turn out to be something different when you have been interacting for some time […] there are some needs and other stuff that you right away cannot see or read […]."relates to unstated needs].

Informant #4 can relate to observing and decoding guests: "It all about … being present and read [the guests], their facial expressions […]"

The decoding process may be supplemented with asking questions: Informant #B14 sees the decoding and understanding of needs as an investigation, because "if people, if the guests, don't offer anything… then you have to take the role of a detective once in a while. Try to ask a few questions and see if you can interpret…"[related to unstated needs].

Some guests are easier to read and by that decode. According to informant #B13: "We have many, also elderly peoply, whom – I think – you can read pretty fast. It is my opinion at least, because they start looking around, and then I think: They have something on their mind."[unstated need].

However, decoding is not always easy. According to informant #B8,

> *Well then… it might be that what you read on the outside turns into something different, when you have been in contact with the guest some time and find out: well… there are some needs and things that you couldn't see or read yourself, and you still become surprised.* [related to unstated needs].

The importance of understanding the guests' needs, without knowing them in advance, is on the mind of the informatants: "what kind of character are we dealing with? What will I be facing? Because this will be decoded into: How can I hit the right target? So you don't build two bridges that'll never meet" [unstated needs] (informant #B9).

Informant #B5 states. "Sometimes they hardly know, what they need, but if you look carefully at them and listen between the lines, you can hear what they are trying to tell us. [unstated needs]. And she continues: "If the guests bring a dog, if they smell of smoke, well then they might need a room close to the exit in order to go outside" [unstated needs]. Informant #2 agrees that "in reality it's perhaps – well, reading between the lines, and not just reading what we really see, but… You have to dare take an interest in the guest, you're facing." [relating to unstated needs].

Informant #B16 states: "if you read the guests … you know at once they will not be happy with this standard double room … they have booked this [room], but they have probably done this because it was the cheapest price but they seem to be the types of guests who need [a superior king room]" [referencing unstated needs].

Some situations even become challenging, when the staff, based on experience, knows better how to decode the needs of the guests, even if the guest him-/herself surpresses the need. A conference and front office manager (informant #B3) often faces this kind of challenge, when welcoming conference organisers having visited the hotel several times. The conference organiser often turns down any assistance offered with the response that "well, I know, were I'm going, and this was the same room last time" accompanied by a closed body language. According to the informant "now it's time to pull oneself together and tell the organiser that we are here to assist you, and we will accompany you to the room anyway", because she often experiences that when they reach the room,"the organiser typically ends up asking questions anyway, because we have made ourselves available for it." [unstated need].

Informant #B15 further explains how he in the role of host interprets the guest's needs based on the different clues: "it might be in a sales situation, where you have a winelist with prices ranging from DKK 300 to DKK 10,000, and it can be difficult to figure out to whom you should recommend the wine that costs DKK 10,000. Then you have a point with the watch, if it's an expensive watch that maybe costs DKK 50,000. […] this is more a guidepost for selling". "The clothing – I think this is about culture". He continues: "the clothing and the jewellery you are wearing also says something about your taste, not necessarily the taste in food and wine, but in art, music and cultural stuff." He makes a distinction between using his observations for selling and as input for exercising the role of host: "If [guests] comes into the restaurant [which is at a 5-star hotel] wearing baseball caps, then I am not going to address them "Good evening, gentlemen. […] It is part of exercising the role of host, decoding quickly the look, age and all that […] you decode if they from Hellerup [a posh area in Copenhagen]". He finally states that in this context, [Selling and exercisng the role of host] are two different things".

Concluding Comment
Staff in the hospitality industry does use observation and decoding in their professional capacity. Without necessarily being aware of theoretical distinctions between different types of needs, the informants the example expressed by the informantants all relate to a specific type of need: the unstated need. It seems that the concept of the unstated need is the frame of reference staff in the hospitality industry use when they try to make sense of the observations. This frame of reference is not (necessarily) about needs in a commercial sense: Staff do seem to have a focus on the needs of the guests that are not commecial: they want to use the observations in ways that will make them (the staff) good hosts. The observations and the subsequent decoding can also be used for communication purposes, for instance, how to adresss the guest, as well as for small-talk, which are aspects of exercising the role of professional host. Thus, there may be a dual purpose of observing and docoding guests: Understanding the needs of the guests in a commercial sense but also understanding how one as host can relate to the guest in a restaurant or a hotel. While both understandings may be intertwined, in reality it may also be that the staff person has a focus on only one of the understandings. For instance, a waiter in a

restaurant or a receptionist in a hotel "simply" want to have input for interacting with the guest(s) in order to be a good host, without wanting to sell more to the guest. How hosts may act upon their decoding of needs is an idea for future research.

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