Exercising the Role of Host in Commercial Hospitality: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

One of the unique aspects of the hospitality industry is the possibility of creating a unique bond between host and guest; however, in many textbooks about service management, the focus—naturally—is on delivering the service offering. Less attention appears to be on the concept of exercising the role of host, that is, creating an emotional bond with the guests, with the host expressing an emotional offering. The aim of this paper is to create a graphic model that illustrates how the concept of a host exercising the role of host may be part of delivering a service offering. This paper introduces a graphic model that illustrates how exercising the role of host in commercial hospitality is part of the service delivery: An emotional offering is not an independent offering, or an add-on activity, but is integrated into the service delivery.

Introduction

Lashley (2017) has pointed out that one of the unique aspects of the hospitality industry is the possibility of creating a unique bond between host and guest. In the hospitality industry, front office staff, in particular, may have a high proportion of employee-customer interaction, and they, therefore, have the opportunity to make emotional connections with guests. This point has also been made by Kandampully et al., who have 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).

The quote refers to person-to-person interaction between host and guest in commercial hospitality settings. An emotional offering is expressed when a host initiates to make an emotional connection with a guest, verbally or non-verbally. But how does this type of interaction fit within the concept of the service delivery? This is a question that staff, new to the industry and under training, may ask. Is it a service in itself, a supplementary serivice, or an add-on to the existing service? And is it delivered, and if so, how? These questions are fairly straight-forward; the answer, however, may be less straight-forward due the complex nature of a service delivery (cf. below).

The position of this paper is that a graphic illustration of how the concept of a host exercising the role of host, that is, a host also aiming to have an emotional connection with the guest, in a service delivery context, can help highlight this important aspect of service management. In this introduction to a conceptual model of how the role of host is exercised in a service context there are references to literature that service management students may read during the course of their study.

Graphic Models of Hospitality
A number of graphic models of hospitality from the 1990s and onwards has been created. In 1995, King introduced her hospitality model (King, 1995). King's model includes a description of aspects of the host's job as a host, and it mentions that the guest takes part in the service delivery, that is, there is interaction between the host and guest. The interaction is based in social rituals in connection with the arrival and departure of the guest.

In order to pinpoint the different areas of research in hospitality, Lashley has introduced a model of hospitality domains (Lashley, 2000), consisting of three domains that are relevant to hospitality studies: private, social, and commercial. Gehrels' hospitality industry model (Gehrels, 2017) is a graphic model that specifically illustrates the elements in commercial hospitality. Lashley has also introduced a model of a continuum of hospitality, with six different categories representing the range of ways that human beings practice hospitality (Lashley, 2017a). In his model of host-guest transaction (Lashley, 2017b), Lashley writes "the relationship between host and guest is at the center of successful or unsuccessful transactions" (p. 420). However, he does not elaborate on the element "host-guest transaction", which is placed in the middle of his model.

The models mentioned above provide us with insights into different aspects of hospitality. However, the models do not illustrate how the role of host is exercised in a service context in commercial hospitality.

The aim of this paper is to create a graphic model that illustrates how the concept of a host exercising the role of host may be part of delivering a service, for educational purposes.

A Conceptual Model
This paper introduces a graphic model that illustrates how exercising the role of host in commercial hospitality may be part of delivering a service. The model can be seen in Figure 1. The model has six elements: a) organizational context, b) service delivery of a service offering, c) host's emotional offering, d) interactive behavior and communication, e) guest's emotional response to the host, f) outcome of the interactive behavior and communication.

Figure 1. A graphic model that illustrates how the concept of a host exercising the role of host in commercial hospitality may be part of delivering a service.
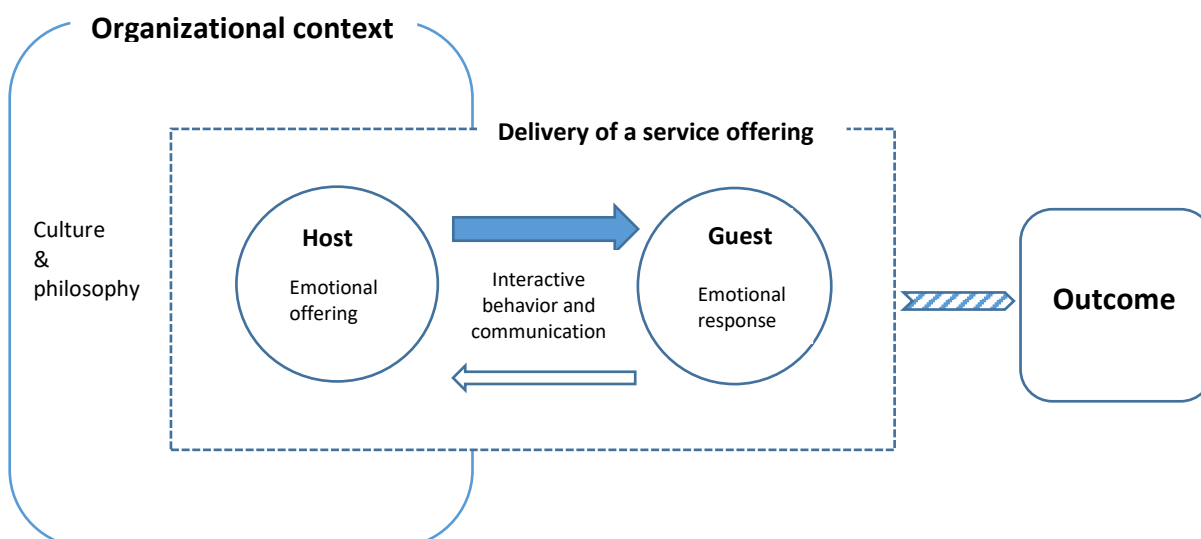
That emotions play a role in the service delivery of hotel and restaurant services is well-established in research as well as in practice (Blain & Lashley, 2014; Blain, 2012; Hochschild, 1983). However, "an emotional offering" does not appear to be a well-defined concept in service theory. Although the word "offering" alludes to something commercial, an emotional offering can only be offered when a service delivery takes place, that is, an emotional offering is not a service offering in itself. An emotional offering is expressed simultaneously with the delivery of the service offering, integrated or mixed into the service delivery. It is not an add-on service because it is not a service offering, and even though it can be there or not be there, if it is there, it cannot easily be separated from the service delivery. It can be explained, and with Figure 1 also illustrated, that there is interactive behavior and communication between a host and guest, and in this process the host may express an emotional offering, and the host may get an emotional response from the guest.

Organizational context *Large box to the left*
In this model, the context is commercial hospitality. In commercial hospitality, there is a business organization, a company that provides a service, for instance, serving food and drink and/or accommodation. The company has a specific location and will be under the influence of national, regional, or local culture at that location (as described by, for instance, Hofstede, 2022). Companies have a company culture (cf. Schein, 2010), that is, there are artefacts, values, and underlying assumptions in the company that both reflect and influence the employees' mindsets and behavior. There is also a management team, which manages staff based on certain perceptions of other human beings and management principles (McGregor, 1960). This component can be compared to the "Culture and philosophy" component in the service management system, as described by Normann (2007).

Service Delivery *Box in the middle with the dotted line*
In service theory, service delivery can be understood as an augmented service package, a categorization of the service delivery into three categories: accessibility, interaction, and customer participation (Grönroos, 1987; Grönroos, 2015, p. 209): *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* Service offerings are different from products in that there is a service encounter, the period during which a customer interacts directly with the service company (Shostack, 1995). A service encounter is a service process of buyer-seller interactions (Grönroos, 2015, p. 209). Service encounters can be categorized in different ways, for instance, as remote encounters, telephone encounters, and face-to-face encounters (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 83). 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 or digital), and responsiveness (Grönroos, 2015, p. 209). *Customer participation* Customer participation means that the customer has an impact on the delivery of service: There may be a low, medium, or high degree of customer participation in the delivery of a service (Grönroos, 2015, p. 212). The following examples can illustrate three levels of customer participation: In a fine-dining restaurant with highly trained service staff, customer participation is low: guests only have to study the menu and give their order; the rest is delivered by the staff. In a café, customer participation is medium if the customer has to order the food at the counter, but the food is served at the table by staff. In a cafeteria, customer participation is high if the customers have to serve themselves from a buffet, pay at the cashier before sitting down at a table, and if, after eating, the customers are expected to clear the table.

The delivery of a service will have a certain quality, a service quality, which is about the attributes of the service offering. Service quality is about the customer's *perception* of, for instance, reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness of a service offering (Parasuraman et al., 1994), with empathy being an emotional quality. However, empathy, that is, being able to understand another person's feelings and needs (Chaplin, 1985, p. 154), is not an emotional offering. However, a host who has empathy may be more prone

to express an emotional offering.

Host *Circle to the left*
Being host is a role that people can have in both private and commercial settings. In sociology and social psychology, roles are about behavior, and a role is exercised in a certain way (Jary & Jary, 2004). The behavior specific to the host is called hosting, defined as "exercising the role of host" (Vejlgaard, 2020).

In the model, a professional staff member has the role of host regardless of the job title being hotel receptionist, waiter, or tour guide. Some service industries use host as a job title, but a person with this job title does not necessarily exercise the role of host, that is, seeks or, indeed, are expected to, to create an emotional bond with a guest. The host is a person with a personality (personality traits). A host in a professional context has a number of traits, one of which may be that she/he is hospitable. Here, being hospitable is about the genuine desire to meet the guest's needs and to make the guest feel special (Telfer, 2017). Often, hospitable people will have high emotional intelligence, they will score high on extroversion, they will be emphatic, and they will be curious about other people (Goleman. 1996.

A host also has values, attitudes, and social skills that all come into play when he or she exercises the role of host. Possessing specific personality traits, having certain values, attitudes, and social skills influence how the host behaves and communicates with guests. This can, for instance, be about the host acknowledging the guest, taking an interest in the guest, and, ultimately, showing that he/she cares for the guest. However, it is not a given that a host wants to create an emotional bond with a guest. A staff person can deliver a service offering without making an emotional offering: A receptionist could check a guest in without smiling or without saying any words.

In private hospitality settings, a host is often likely to exercise the role of host in friendly, loving, and caring ways; these adjectives are descriptors of an emotional quality of a connection between people who are close. However, friendly and caring may also be emotional qualities that can characterize the quality of commercial relationships, although maybe with less intensity than what is the case in private relationships. Other emotional qualities that may be offered both in private and commercial hospitality settings may be warmth, generosity, and cordiality. Whether offered by a host in a private hospitality setting or a commercial hospitality setting, they may create feelings in the guest.

People exercising the role of host in private hospitality settings are likely to be aware that they are making an emotional connection with their guests. Emotional connections in commercial hospitality can vary enormously but the psychological principle at play is not different from what goes on between family and friends (only the strength and the duration is likely to be different). In both circumstances, it is about making an emotional connection. When there is a high proportion of staff-customer interaction, emotional connections between a staff member and a customer are more likely to take place. The longer time the host and guest spend together, the stronger the emotional bond may become (Vejlgaard, 2020b).

Interactive behavior and communication *Arrows in the middle*
The arrows in Figure 1 reflect interactive behavior and communication. There are several definitions of communication; the word at the most basic is about conveying meanings from one or more senders to one or more receivers (Craig, 2015; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). In this paper, communication is defined as "a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). This definition reflects a transactional understanding of the communications process. Transactional communication reflects that there may be continuous dialog, where sender and receiver listen to each other; that is, they both create and consume messages.

Aside from communicators, most communication models have components such as "communication channel" and "message". In a host-guest context, historically, the communication channel has typically been personal. In the present context, the message can be twofold: related to the delivery of the service offering or related to making an emotional connection with the guest.

The relation between the host and guest is illustrated with two arrows: a wide arrow from host to guest and a thin arrow from guest to host. The wide arrow illustrates that the host is expected to take the initiative in creating an emotional bond with the guest. When the host takes the initiative, for instance, by smiling and saying welcome, the guest then is expected to react with a response: the guest reacts reciprocally and smiles

back. Then, a dialogue can take place—a dialogue that can continue during the service delivery. In a hotel, the service delivery is, typically, checking-in and checking-out. When the hotel receptionist checks-out guests, she may say: "I hope you enjoyed your stay with us!" In a restaurant, a waiter will accept an order and serve the food and drink. When the food has been served and the guests have starting eating, the waiter may ask "Is everything fine?" This is dialogue that references the service delivery.

Dialogue that references exercising the role of host is about making an emotional connection: A hotel receptionist exercises the role of host, when he smiles to the guest and says, "Welcome" and asks, "How was the trip from the airport?" or "I can see you live in Bournemouth. It is a very nice place that I know from many of my own holidays". With these acts and this communication, the hotel receptionist starts to create an emotional bond with the guest. In the examples given here, the host acknowledges the guest and shows an interest in the guest.

Likewise, in a restaurant, the waiter exercises the role of host, when she says welcome with a smile and greets the guest, for instance, by saying "Good evening". Maybe at some point the waiter will ask, "Shall I get an extra pillow for your chair?" With these acts and this communication, the waiter begins to create an emotional bond with the guest.

Guest *Circle to the right*

In commercial hospitality, guests are also customers because there is a monetary transaction between host and guest. Telfer (2017) has classified different kinds of guests: those in a relationship to the host not simply that of guest to host; those in need; and friends proper. The first category includes host-guest relationships in commercial hospitality. Frequently, guests who interact with staff at hotels and restaurants are strangers to the staff (and vice versa).

Like hosts, guests have different personalities, values, attitudes, and backgrounds, all of which can influence how the guest reacts to the host. Walls et al. (2011, p. 177) have made a conceptual model that highlight the high number of variables that can play a role in the guest's circumstances – all parameters that can affect the guest's emotional response:

Personal characteristics: Personality, travel experience, expectations.
Trip-related factors: Purpose of trip, nature of destination, nature of travel party, experience continuum.
Physical environment: Ambiance, multi-sensory, space/function, sign/symbol/artefacts.
Human interaction – Fellow guests: Demeanor, behavior, appearance, socialization.

To this can be added personal needs, perceived service alternatives, self-perceived service role, situational factors (weather, random over-demand) (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993) and past experiences (Parauraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

Outcome *The small box to the right*

Both host and guest may be aware if there is an emotional connection between them. However, in a commercial hospitality setting, when exercising the role of host, the host who is a professional, may consider more precisely the feelings that he or she wants to create in the guest. This is about the outcome of interpersonal communication.

An outcome of a service exchange may be satisfaction (with the service) or loyalty (to the service provider). An outcome of a service delivery is often called a customer experience, with experience defined as "any sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from some level of interaction with different elements of a context created by the service provider" (Gupta & Vajic, 2000).

An emotional experience outcome occurs when a host succeeds in creating some specific feelings within his/her guest. According to Lashley (2017a), hosting is about welcoming guests and making them feel expected, welcome, at home, and safe. Guests may feel expected, welcomed, at home, and safe, as well as other feelings. The host's interactive behavior and communication may create inward feelings (joy; awe) and outward feelings (smiling; crying). Wong Ooi Mei et al. have commented that "quality aspects such as 'friendliness', 'helpfulness', and 'politeness' are likely to be interpreted differently by various guests and are

assessed subjectively (Wong Ooi Mei et al., 1999, p. 137). However, the guest's feelings may fall into categories such as "positive", "negative", or "neutral".

Concluding Comments

We believe this illustrative graphic model can help students understand the point that a staff person in commercial hospitality, besides delivering a service offering, in the role of host also can choose to express an emotional offering. In order to find out if the model is meaningful when teaching service management and hosting practices, the model has been introduced to 32+ lecturers and associate professors at a business college. After the introduction, the model was incorporated into the curriculum at the college.

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