Abstract

Hospitality is a much-researched topic, but its definition is still debated. This paper is part of a larger research project into the perception of hospitality. Previous research using the Delphi-method (hospitality providers and experts) and the Critical Incident Technique (guests and consumers) yielded a concept of hospitality containing nine experiential dimensions. However, verbal methods require respondents to recognize and phrase their experiences, even though part of this experience is unconscious. Therefore, this paper aims to validate the dimensions of hospitality using a database of photos taken by students during field trips. Results show that all dimensions can be recognized. However, a large number of photos could be coded with more than one dimension, pointing at interdependency of dimensions. Also, the original description of the dimension welcome and safety was adapted, to avoid unnecessary overlap. Next step in the research will be validation of the dimensions using confirmatory factor analysis on a large-scale survey.

Key Words Hospitality, images, experience, dimensions, validation

Theme What’s going well in research?

Focus of Paper Theoretical/Academic

Introduction

What do people experience when they experience hospitality? The business sector has thus far dominated the literature on hospitality (Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011). The hospitality sector seems to need practical knowledge on hospitality. Therefore, literature is primarily about how the hospitality sector can set up hospitable organisations. But do we know what is meant by hospitality? There are remarkably few academic articles that tap into the meaning of the concept (Tasci and Semrad, 2016).

In 2014, two exploratory qualitative studies, with service experts (Delphi method) and consumers (interviews, Critical Incident Theory), were carried out in order to identify characteristics of the experience of hospitality (Pijls, Groen, Galetzka and Pruyn, 2015). These studies revealed that experiencing hospitality is the perception of a combination of nine so-called experiential dimensions of hospitality: welcome, safety, empathy, servitude, acknowledgement, autonomy, surprise, entertainment and efficiency. Furthermore, the results showed that human interaction is the key factor for a hospitable experience, but the environment in which the interaction takes place and its facilities contribute to the experience of hospitality as well. However, when asking people explicitly about hospitality, they remember especially experiences that involve being in contact with others. The reason is probably that people are aware of interactions and conversations. Instead, environmental cues like colours, music, lighting, materials and smell are perceived largely unconsciously (Holland, Hendriks & Aarts, 2005; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Furthermore, as shown in research into the meaning of cleanliness, respondents
may provide richer feedback when using images than when asked for a verbal description only (Pijls & Groen, 2012).

To examine whether the nine dimensions of hospitality also apply to environmental factors, in the present study different type of data (a database of photos representing hospitality) is used that forces participants to also take the physical environment with its facilities and amenities into account. The aim of the present study is to validate the nine dimensions of hospitality by using visual data rather than verbal associations, which make people dependent on their memory.

Theory

Existing literature on the meaning of hospitality approaches the concept of hospitality from various academic perspectives. For example, historians focus on hospitality by looking back at ancient times and describe how it developed over time (e.g. Ahn, 2010; Bell, 2007; O’Gorman, 2007). Philosophers and theologians examine hospitality from a moral point of view (e.g. Derrida, 1998; Levinas, 1987; Telfer, 2000; Reynolds, 2010; Santich, 2007). Anthropologists, sociologists, politicians and linguists concentrate on exchange processes between (groups of) people (e.g. Brotherton & Wood, 2000; Candea & da Col, 2012; Lashley, 2000; Selwyn, 2000). Finally, psychologists examine hospitality from an individual perspective, either from the perspective of the host (e.g. Magnini, Baker & Karande, 2013; Hochschild, 1983; O’Connor, 2005; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) or the perspective of the guest. However, literature regarding the guest perspective of hospitality, the focus of the present research, is scarce.

A few articles tap into the guest’s experience of hospitality. Hepple, Kipps, and Thomson (1990) performed a study on hospitality in a hospital environment. They found that according to hospital patients, friendly staff and smooth procedures are most relevant for a hospitable experience. Brotherton (2005) investigated hotel guest perceptions of physical as well as service aspects of hospitality. People’s associations with behaviour were amongst others: welcoming, friendly, polite and pleasant. Associations with the physical aspects of hospitality were: modern, clean, comfortable and bright. Hemmington (2007) defines five key dimensions of hospitality: the host-guest relationship, generosity, theatre and performance, lots of little surprises and safety and security. Groen (2014) showed that hospitality in a hospital setting mainly refers to interpersonal contact with hospital staff, but also to hospital rooms, facilities, signage, planning and logistics, and F&B.

Two studies describe the development of scales for measuring hospitality. Ariffin & Maghzi (2012) developed a questionnaire to measure hospitality in hotels. They distinguish five dimensions of hospitality: personalization, warm welcoming, special relationship, strait from the heart and comfort. Except the comfort, which is about the comfort in the hotel room, all dimensions refer to the behaviour of the hotel staff. Recently, Tasci and Semrad (2016) developed a scale of hospitableness for destination, hotel, and restaurant products. They revealed three factors of hospitableness: heart-warming (welcoming, courteous, respectful and kind), heart-assuring (trustworthy, honest, reliable) and heart-soothing (generous, sociable and open). Also this instrument focuses on the interaction between guests and employees. Blain and Lashley (2014) have developed a scale that measures hospitableness, containing three sets of questions, on the desire to put guests before yourself, to make them happy, and to make them feel special. Also this instrument is solely focussed on behavioural aspects.

A first step in the development of an instrument was to measure the experience of hospitality by looking for experiential dimensions that are part of the experience of hospitality (Pijls et al., 2015). Unlike Ariffin and Maghzo (2012) and Tasci and Semrad (2016) this instrument does not focus primarily on characteristics of the interaction with staff, but instead looks for aspects on a more abstract level of the organisation in order not to exclude the environment, facilities and procedures, which appear also relevant in experiencing a service organisation (Berry, Wall & Carbone, 2006). The dimensions have been developed based on face-to-face interviews and Delphi method with eight service experts and critical incidents of customers in various service organisations (healthcare, travel, hotel, theatre, business, funeral).

The study revealed nine experiential dimensions of hospitality: **welcome, safety, empathy, servitude, acknowledgement, autonomy, surprise, entertainment and efficiency** (Pijls et al., 2015). The dimension **welcome** has to do with the atmosphere of a service environment. This is about feeling welcome, a warm reception and an inviting and approachable atmosphere. Also the feeling of **safety** appears to be an experiential dimension of
hospitality. Feeling safe and relaxed, the reduction of stress, feeling at home, at ease and feeling confident belong to this dimension. **Empathy** is a third experiential dimension of hospitality and refers to the experience that the organisation understands what guests want and need. A fourth experiential dimension is **servitude**. This is the feeling that the organisation and its employees genuinely want to serve you, want to help their customers. A fifth experiential dimension, labelled as **acknowledgement**, refers to the experience of personal contact, acknowledgement, and the feeling that you are important and are taken seriously. A sixth experiential dimension of hospitality is **autonomy**. The amount of control over what happens seems to be part of the experience of hospitality. **Surprise** is another element of hospitality. According to the experts an experience can be characterised as hospitable when there is at least one element that really ‘hits’ you or exceeds your expectation. Customers also recognize elements of surprise, but according to them surprise is not a necessary element for a hospitable experience. The dimension **efficiency** relates to the smoothness of processes during the service delivery and even appears to be one of the dimensions that are most often referred to by customers. The final dimension, **entertainment**, means offering things to do (like magazines or a cup of coffee), mostly to make waiting time more pleasant.

In the present study these experiential dimensions of hospitality were validated using a database of photos representing hospitality.

**Method**

Using the method of participant-led photography (Reavy & Johnson, 2008; Pullman & Robson, 2007), first year students from the Hospitality Business School of Saxion University of Applied Sciences were asked to take photos representing 'hospitality' during field trips to organisations. These field trips were in the first month of their study programme. Lecturers involved in these field trips briefed the students about the assignment, and instructed them to send their pictures of 'hospitality' and 'no hospitality' to a university mailbox, including a short motivation why they choose these particular images representing (no) hospitality. Students received no other instructions on what hospitality is and were free to choose what to photograph.

A total number of 1582 images were collected. For the purpose of this paper all images were selected that represented hospitality and contained a brief motivation of the choice of image (n=438). Images and text were analysed using content analysis, based on the dimensions of hospitality in Pijls et al. (2015). Two independent researchers coded the images independently. Differences in coding were discussed till consensus was reached.

**Results**

285 Students (45 students Facility Management, 55 students Hotel Management and 185 students Tourism Management) have made 438 photos of hospitable situations in a service environment. The main part of the photos were taken in a hotel (31%), recreation (26%) or a sports environment (15%). 72% of the participants were female, 25% were male and for 3% of the participants the gender was unknown.

First of all, the categorisation of the photos showed that almost all photos could be categorised as one or more of the experiential dimensions of hospitality as defined in Pijls et al. (2015). Furthermore, all nine dimensions were represented in the photos.

The dimensions **entertainment**, **surprise**, **efficiency** and **autonomy** proved to be suitable codes for photos of hospitality. However, the dimensions **welcome** and **safety** showed considerable overlap. The original description of the dimension **safety** contained feeling at home, at ease and feeling confident. Therefore, **safety** would apply to photos with elements of safety (closed doors and limited entrance, turniquets, and signboards with feedback on the remaining waiting time), but also to photos representing comfortable seating in lobbies, homely ambiance and outdoor terraces. However, the last element is also part of the dimension **welcome**, leading to double coding of images. Photos may contain references to more than one dimension, but strong overlap between dimensions should be avoided (see Table 1 for examples of photos representing welcome, safety and photos showing the overlap). For this reason a clearer distinction between those two dimensions was made by moving 'feeling relaxed', 'at home' and 'comfortable' to the dimension **welcome**. This means that the dimensions **safety** is limited to feeling safe, trust, and clarity on what will happen and where you have to go.
The dimensions *empathy*, *servitude* and *acknowledgement* are closely linked, as they all refer to serving your customer, as a group and individually. As explained above, *empathy* refers to the organisation showing insight in customers' needs, *acknowledgement* to recognizing specific customers' needs and evidence of recognition, and *servitude* to the act of serving your customer. Based on discussion on allocation of dimensions to specific photos, the descriptions of these dimensions were refined in order to make the differences between the three dimensions clearer. Table 2 shows particular examples of the dimensions *acknowledgement*, *empathy* and *servitude*.

**Table 1. Examples of photos with comments for the dimensions welcome and safety and photos that showed the strong overlap between the dimensions welcome and safety due to the keyword ‘comfort’**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Welcome</th>
<th>Safety</th>
<th>Overlap welcome and safety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Welcome" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Safety" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Overlap" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'The picture with the flags is hospitality for me, because they are from every country, and show you are welcome.'</td>
<td>'Beautiful open reception area with clear signage and friendly receptionist.'</td>
<td>'I associate this picture with hospitality because I think it is important to offer other people (not being guests of the hotel) also a drink or a place where they can relax.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Welcome" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Safety" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Overlap" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'This I associate with hospitality: a romantic atmosphere with fresh flowers and candle light during day time.'</td>
<td>'This signboard indicates the remaining waiting time, so you know how long you have to wait in the cue. That is hospitality.'</td>
<td>'This is an example of hospitality, because it is important to provide customers comfort.'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, *servitude* was adapted to specifically refer to the service attitude of employees. *Empathy* should also include objects that indirectly show that the organisation understands his guests. *Acknowledgement* was
applicable when people were explicitly addressed by (group)name. Table 2 provides an overview of the dimensions, photos and comments that refer to the dimensions and the number of photos for each dimension.

Table 2. Examples of photos with comments for the dimensions acknowledgement, empathy, and servitude.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Servitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Acknowledgement" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Empathy" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Servitude" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Servitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘This signboard shows that the organisation takes us seriously.’</td>
<td>‘Individual visitors of the restaurant can eat without feeling lonely by using the built-in television screen.’</td>
<td>‘Hospitality, because when we entered the hotel, there were employees who were taking our coats. So there's a lot of service.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Acknowledgement" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Empathy" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Servitude" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Servitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘A large area of the restaurant was set apart (‘gereserveerd’) for us.’</td>
<td>‘They had an iron and a shoe shiner in the corridor. If I’m not mistaken, this was especially for a group of pilots and flight attendants that was staying at the hotel.’</td>
<td>‘A service employee assists a customer entering the boat, that’s hospitable.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. The experiential dimensions of hospitality, descriptions of photos with comments and the number of photos per dimensions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description of photos</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Number of photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Reception desks, entrances, table with coffee/tea or sandwiches, lounges, waiting areas with seats.</td>
<td>Feeling welcome, reception, comfortable, inviting, open, approachable, prepared for visit.</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Shoeshine machine, dog drinking bowl, blankets on a terrace, heated seats, wheel chairs, bible, automatic door.</td>
<td>Guest oriented, understanding, clients’ wishes and special attention for a specific group (disabled, children, different nationalities, religion).</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>Signboard with special welcome for the group (’Welcome Saxion’), a card with the text ‘Welcome back’.</td>
<td>Taken seriously, feel important, especially for you.</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Signage (in combination with autonomy)</td>
<td>Easy and quick, handy, saving time.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Signage (in combination with efficiency), toilet for children, supporting independency of disabled people, self-service check-in, meeting room with adaptable settings (light, colour, lay-out).</td>
<td>Don’t need to ask, find out yourself, your own preferences.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servitude</td>
<td>Staff taking of coats, friendly staff Employees taking care of you, helpful, friendly staff, passionate/enthusiastic staff, good service, take effort.</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Access gates, signs of security personnel/equipment, signboard with remaining waiting time, well-organised entrance, open architecture.</td>
<td>Have overview, feel safe, feedback on waiting time.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>Goodie bags, free bottle water because of warm weather, exceptional tour, special location (cinema) for a presentation.</td>
<td>Magazines for free, arranged especially for us, very special, unexpected amenities</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 3 photos representing *Welcome* are photos of entrances, reception desks, tables with something to drink or eat and photos of seats, often waiting areas near the reception desk. Participants argue that these photos refer to hospitality, because they feel that the organisation is prepared for their visit, they feel welcome, experience the organisation as inviting, comfortable, approachable and open. *Welcome* is the dimension most referred to (n= 265); apparently this is the dimension of hospitality that is most widely chosen when photographing 'hospitality'.

Photos representing *safety* are photos of access gates, signs of security personnel or equipment, signboard with an indication of the remaining waiting time, well-organized entrances where people immediately see where
to go and open architecture. Participants explain that the photos give them a feeling of safety, provide overview and give them information that they know what is going to happen.

*Empathy* is referred to in photos that show that the organisation takes the needs of customers into account, like a shoeshine machine, blankets on a terrace and heated seats. *Acknowledgement* is about photos of situations that guests treated personally or as a specific group. This is a dimension that is often experienced when guests have personal contact with staff. However, the analysis showed that a signboard containing a special welcome to the group students of Saxion evokes the experience of *acknowledgement* as well. Pictures of such signboards are dominant in this category, referring to both *acknowledgement* and *welcome*. Participants explained that these signboards make them feel important and taken seriously. Photos expressing *servitude* of the organisation are photos of employees who are smiling or helping guests. Participants comment that they experience the employees as passionate, enthusiastic, helpful, taking care and taking effort.

There is a small amount of photos that refer to either *efficiency* (i.e. amenities in a conference room) or *autonomy* (i.e. children’s toilet, magnetron). Photos of signage were frequently taken, referring to both *autonomy* and *efficiency*. Participants commented that signage helped them in easily finding their way (*efficiency*) and they argued that they did not need to ask staff where to go (*autonomy*). *Entertainment* is referred to in photos depicting things that people can do, like reading magazines, watching television, use bicycles, listen to or play piano music. Finally, photos were labelled as *surprise* when people explain that something was really special, like free gifts (magazines, bottle of water) or special treatments (guide, special location). It should be emphasised that without the commentary on the photos the dimension *surprise* could not be recognised.

The analysis further confirms that the dimensions are no mutually exclusive categories: many photos were coded on more than one dimension: about 31% can be coded in two dimensions, and 6% in 3 or 4 dimensions. Signage, for example, induces both *efficiency* and *autonomy*. Signboards welcoming Saxion students let the students feel both *welcome* and *acknowledged*. *Welcome* applies in combination with almost every dimension: *servitude* (i.e. staff at reception desks, staff for tour guides), *empathy* (i.e. flags of many nationalities at the entrance), *autonomy* (i.e. self-service check-in with an employee for assistance), *efficiency* (boards combining signage and welcome), *safety* (providing overview at the arrival) and *surprise* (surprising reception in a cinema) and *entertainment* (i.e. receiving people in a special room with a beautiful view). *Empathy* and *autonomy* also applies together, for example photos of children’s toilet or adjustments for disabled people.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

In sum, all nine experiential dimensions of hospitality are present in the photos student took of hospitable situations in a service environment. Some dimensions needed redefinition (*safety* and *welcome*) or refinement (*servitude, acknowledgement, and empathy*). The dimensions are no mutual exclusive categories. This is especially true for the dimension *welcome*.

The present validation study shows that the nine experiential dimensions of hospitality that have been developed based on interviews with experts and customers of service organisations all apply to photos of hospitable situations in a service encounter. The photos and the explanations of the participants revealed that except *servitude* and (with some exceptions) *acknowledgement*, the experience of the other seven dimensions could be induced by environmental factors like interior design, signage, amenities, facilities, offering things and comfort. Hospitality seems to be more than only direct personal contact between guests and service staff.

Alternatively, compared to the results of the interviews based on which the dimensions have been developed, the photos used in the present study show only a part of what people experience as hospitable, precisely because of the impossibility to photograph the dynamics of personal interaction. The dimension *acknowledgement*, for example, was only expressed in the photos with a signboard mentioning Saxion. Aspects like making real contact and the way employees pay attention to you is difficult to capture in a picture.

Although all nine dimensions apply to visual data representing hospitality, the definition of some dimensions appeared to be not precise enough (*servitude, acknowledgement* and *empathy*) or even needed some refinement. (*welcome* and *safety*). The difference between feeling relaxed, comfortable, feeling at home (*safety*) and a warm and welcoming atmosphere (*welcome*) was not clear. The distinction was originally made because *welcome* refers to a welcoming and friendly atmosphere, while *safety* was associated with relieving stress, which make
people feel relaxed, at ease and comfortable, together with feeling safe, having trust and overview. Upon closer inspection, feeling relaxed, comfortable and at ease corresponds to the welcoming atmosphere. Without these elements the redefined dimension safety refers to feeling safe, having trust and having overview in space and time.

Next step in the validation of the 9 experiential dimensions of hospitality will be a quantitative validation using confirmatory factor analysis. As this survey is based on the original descriptions of the dimensions, we expect to confirm the strong overlap between welcome and safety, and strong correlations between autonomy/efficiency, and empathy/acknowledgement/servitude.

References


