

## **Understanding hotel hospitality and differences between local and foreign guests**

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*The main purpose of this paper is to compare the levels of expectations on hotel hospitality between local and foreign guests. This exploratory study, involving 305 respondents, employed self-completed questionnaire survey to collect data from local and international hotel guests. Factor analysis is used to identify the dimension for hotel hospitality. This study found three dimensions of hotel hospitality namely personalization, comfort and warm welcoming. Personalization explains most of the variances for hotel hospitality. This study also found that local guests have slightly higher expectation on hotel hospitality compared to the foreign guests.*

**Field of Research:** Hospitality Marketing, Hotel and Tourism Marketing

### **1. Introduction**

The study of hospitality has been all-encompassing and has included experts from various backgrounds and disciplines drawn from many fields in the social sciences and arts. The study of hospitality as a human phenomenon directly deals and essentially involves the relationship between host and guest. From the social context, hospitality can be referred to as the act of being hospitable while from the commercial perspective, hospitality can also be regarded as a sub-sector of the service industry. Ottenbacher et al. (2009) contended that hospitality was still considered as a relatively new research discipline with no consensus on its definition and concepts although it was claimed to be the world's largest industry. According to Lashley & Morrison (2000), hospitality required the guest to feel that the host was being hospitable through feelings of generosity, a desire to please and a genuine regard for the guest as an individual. Hospitality is therefore more than just about the host providing food and accommodation to the guests but also about entertaining the guests.

Hospitality is vital in the services marketing context because it is the "service enhancer" which would help provides added-value to their core service provisions. Eventually, this would lead to high level of customer satisfaction with the overall hotel services. Despite the importance of hospitality in creating "memorable staying experiences" for hotel

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guests, there has been no reliable and valid measure that can be used to evaluate the level of their hotel's hospitality. It is also interesting to investigate the difference between local guests and their foreign counterparts with respects to their levels of expectations on hotel hospitality. This input is important for hotels to put together a strong service plan and strategies to achieve the standard of world class hotels. More specifically, the objectives of this study were:

1. To determine the underlying dimensions of hospitality for hotel services.
2. To compare the levels of expectations on hotel hospitality between local and foreign guests.

## **2. Literature Review**

Hepple, Kipps & Thomson (1990) argued that hospitality consists of four basic characteristics. Firstly, hospitality is a behavior conferred by a host on a guest who is away from home. Secondly, it is interactive in nature and involves personal contact between the provider and receiver. Thirdly, hospitality comprises of a blend of tangible and intangible factors. Finally, the host provides for the guest's security, psychological and physiological comfort.

To understand the relationship between hospitality in the social context and as the one practiced in the commercial context, Lashley (2000) has proposed a three domain model. The three interrelated domains are identified as cultural/social, private/domestic and commercial domains. Hospitality in the social domain is motivated by the intention to entertain or serve the guests without immediate promise of reward. It is seen as an obligation demanded by both cultural and religious institutions. Telfer (2000) suggests that truly hospitable behavior is motivated by genuine needs to please and care for the guests, and should not be practiced to deliberately impress the guests or with the expectation of repayment.

Hospitality in the private domain refers to the hospitality behavior offered in a more private setting such as at home. Private hospitality usually acts as the standard to evaluate the "hospitality" behavior in the commercial context (Lashley, Morrison & Randall, 2005). In the commercial context, the obligation to provide hospitality services is critically more important if the organization's service mission is to create "memorable experiences". Hemmington (2007) identified five key dimensions of commercial hospitality as host-guest relationship, generosity, theatre and performance, lots of little surprises and safety and security. Lashley et al. (2005) revealed that emotional aspects were found to be much more influential than the quality of the food in creating memorable dining experiences. Lashley (2008) further argued that guest satisfaction would be then generated by the quality of the emotions generated from these memorable experiences.

Authenticity of the hospitality act is also an important aspect of commercial hospitality. Langhorn (2004) found that guests are less impressed with "surface acting performances" of the customer contact staffs who tried to hide their true emotions in the service encounters. However, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) argued that to obtain satisfied

customers, smiles need to be displayed whether they are authentically felt or not. The quality of the hospitality provided can help to increase or decrease the level of satisfaction with the core service provision (Lovelock et al. 2005). It can be concluded from this argument that hospitality is one of the “enhancing supplementary services” that surround the core service. This conclusion was supported by Severt et al. (2008) that explored the concept of hospitality centric philosophy (HCP) in hospital settings. The authors defined hospitality centric philosophy as “a distinct organization-wide philosophy for enhancing service excellence that is applicable across industries” (Severt et al. 2008, pp. 661). In the context of the study, the sole purpose of an HCP was to enhance the psychological and emotional well-being of the patient. Thus, without satisfactory hosting behavior, customers would not be delighted or impressed with the overall service quality even though the functional needs are fully satisfied.

According to Dominici & Guzzo (2010), hotel guest satisfaction is largely hooked on the quality of service offered in the hotel industry. The reciprocal long term relationship between guests and the hotel is becoming increasingly crucial due to the highly positive correlation between guests' overall satisfaction levels and the possibility of their repeat visits to the same hotel (Choi & Chu 2001). Specifically, Kim et al. (2001) found that the concept of “relationship quality” has a remarkable positive effect on the spread of favorable news by word of mouth as well as increased return visits. Hospitality is one of the enhancing services that can contribute substantially to the high relationship quality.

### **3. Research methods**

The main method of data collection for this study was questionnaire survey. The respondents were the local and foreign hotel guests who had at least one night experience staying at four or five star hotels in the city of Kuala Lumpur for leisure purposes. Only hotels of at least four stars are included in this study because hotels of this category generally aim to create memorable staying experiences for their guests. According to Lashley (2008, pp.81), “If the guest experience is to be such as to create memorable experiences and ultimately enable guests to feel a bond of friendship, hosting behavior needs to reflect the traditions of hospitality and hospitableness.”

The data were collected via central location intercept across multiple tourist attractions as well as main shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur city centre at various times of the day. Respondents were randomly approached and asked whether they were interested to participate in the study. A total of 324 completed surveys were collected. 19 questionnaires were discarded due to incomplete responses, resulting in 305 questionnaires usable for further analysis. The proportions for the local and foreign guests were 148 and 157 respectively.

Measurement for the hospitality construct was developed based on Churchill (1979) and Lee & Crompton (1992). An initial pool of items were generated from related measures, extensive literature search, and construct domains. In-depth interviews were also conducted to generate hospitality items that were specifically related to the context of hotel services in Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted with two frequent hotel

guests as well as with two hotel managers. A total of 32 items were generated from these two sources after taking into account identical or equivalent items. These items were then refined and edited for content validity by a group of three expert judges who are academicians with research interests in tourism and hospitality. This procedure resulted in a final set of 22 items and measured on a five-point scale from 1(Not important at all) to 5(Extremely important).

The Principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted on the 22 items to purify the scale of the hospitality construct. Item-to-total correlation was also run to check on its construct validity. A confirmatory factor analysis (Gerbing & Anderson 1988) was then employed to assess the dimensionality scale. Finally, independent sample t-test was performed to compare the levels of expectations on hotel hospitality between local and foreign guests.

## **4. Research findings**

### ***Dimensions of commercial hospitality***

The factor analysis performed on the 22 items did not produce clean results on the first run. Six of the items were deleted due to factor loadings of less than 0.40 as well as having item-to-total correlation of below 0.25. The second round of the factor analysis after deletion of the six items also did not produce clean results. Five of the items needed to be dropped due to cross-loading on more than one factor, resulting in only 11 item left for further analyses.

The subsequent round of factor analysis eventually managed to produce clean results. A total of three factors with eigenvalue of more than 1 were extracted from the factor analysis. The three factors explained 69.7 percent of total variances. The resultant Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.911 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant which illustrates that the items for hospitality measurement were appropriate for factor analysis. All resultant factor loading for the items were above 0.6 except for one item with loading of 0.55. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis showed that the overall fit statistics of the model was satisfactory according to Hu and Bentler (1999). The  $\chi^2 = 94.467$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ; GFI=0.821; AGFI=0.726; NFI=0.807, NNFI=0.912; CFI=0.911; RMSEA=0.055; and SRMR=0.06. The correlations between the three dimensions were in the range of 0.66 to 0.71 while the reliabilities were ranging from 0.79 to 0.84. These results indicated that discriminant validity exists since the reliability estimates were greater than the correlations between the three dimensions (O'Cass 2002, Gaski & Nevin 1985, So & King 2010).

The first dimension was labeled as "personalization" and it contributed 27.2 percent of the total variance. The Cronbach's alpha for this dimension was 0.84. The second dimension which explained 21.3 percent of the total variance was known as "comfort". The alpha for the second dimension was 0.72. The final dimension was labeled as "warm welcoming", explained 21.2 percent of the total variance and the Cronbach's alpha was 0.79. The results of the factor analysis were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of factor analysis

Factor/Items	Factor Loading	Total Variance Explained
<b>Factor 1: “Personalization”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The hotel staff treated me with full respect</li> <li>• The hotel staff made eye contact with me during conversation</li> <li>• The hospitable behavior seemed to be rendered as a natural extension of their character regardless of any control and incentive systems</li> <li>• The hospitable behaviors seemed to be motivated by genuine needs to please and care for their guests and not to deliberately impress the guest</li> <li>• Ensure the security of all guests</li> <li>• The hotel staff gave me authentic smiles all the time</li> </ul>	0.818 0.746 0.673 0.654 0.624 0.552	27.20%
<b>Factor 2: “Comfort”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensured that the room was comfortable for me</li> <li>• Felt as if I was at home while staying at the hotel</li> </ul>	0.880 0.880	21.32%
<b>Factor 3: “Warm Welcoming”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presented with an unexpected welcoming token or gift</li> <li>• Walked to the hotel room by the staff upon check in</li> <li>• Given a warm welcome at the door step.</li> </ul>	0.851 0.756 0.736	21.21%
		69.73%

**Expectation on hotel hospitality: Local versus foreign guests**

As presented in Table 2, compared to the foreign guests, local guests or the Malaysian recorded slightly higher mean scores for all the three dimensions of hotel hospitality as well as for the construct of hospitality in its overall. However, the difference was minimal as the gap for the construct “overall hospitality” was only 0.06. A series of t-tests were then performed to determine the statistical differences between local and foreign guests with respects to expectation level on hotel hospitality. The results however revealed that there were no significant differences between the two segments of guests with respects to the three dimensions of hospitality as well as hospitality in its overall.

Table 2: Mean Scores for Hotel Hospitality

Dimension	Segments	N	Mean	SD
Personalization	Local Guests	148	3.83	0.64
	Foreign Guests	157	3.77	0.71
Comfort	Local Guests	148	3.50	1.09
	Foreign Guests	157	3.39	1.04
Warm Welcoming	Local Guests	148	3.27	1.02
	Foreign Guests	157	3.23	0.89
Hotel Hospitality	Local Guests	148	3.62	0.71
	Foreign Guests	157	3.55	0.67

## 5. Discussion

The three-dimensional structure of hotel hospitality found in this study supported the core ideas that hospitableness is about a welcoming attitude and environment (Brotherton 1999, Oh & Pizam 2008). These two characteristics of welcoming and comfort, backed by genuine personalization hosting behavior, go beyond superb service to create “memorable stay” experiences (Hemmington 2007).

Personalization is the dimensions that best explained what hotel hospitality should be all about. This study found that personalization involves three major components namely respectfulness, authenticity, and security. Hospitality requires the guests to be treated with full respect as a human being and regardless of their physical or cultural differences. Nouwen (1975) and Lashley (2008) contended that all guests should be accepted as equally valued persons regardless of their characteristics. Developing eye contact with the guests during conversation is one of the most crucial ways how the guests describe “respect” in the host-guest relationships in hotel experiences.

Personalization is also about offering authentic service acts which need to be rendered as a natural extension of the staff’s character regardless of any incentive rewards. Smiling faces is globally considered as the icon for hospitality at cultural as well as commercial domain. The concept of “emotional labor” is therefore very crucial in the hospitality organizations. Service providers should have certain level of emotional intelligence to predict and fulfill the emotional needs of their guests (Lashley, 2008). “Ensuring the security of guests” is also considered as a component of personalization where the hotel workers should personally show their concern on the safety of all guests throughout their stay in their hotels.

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This study found that “comfort” is the second most important dimension of hotel hospitality. Basically, comfort refers to all aspects of the guest room which should provide comfort to the guests. Apart from comfort in the form of physical environment, comfort in the context of this study also refers to the guest’s emotional state or feeling of comfort while staying at the hotel. Comfort will lead to the feeling as if they were staying at their homes while staying at the hotels. It can therefore be concluded that the dimension of “comfort” is derived from both functional and emotional aspects. Hepple, Kipps & Thomson (1990) contended that hospitality comprises of a blend of tangible and intangible factors.

“Warm welcoming” is the final dimension of hotel hospitality. The most critical part of the ritual is the act of door opening of door as well as friendly greeting for the guests that happened at the hotel’s main door. This study also found that appreciation tokens such as welcoming drinks upon checking-in at the counter is also considered as one of the crucial aspect of hospitality for hotel services. However, a more memorable service experience could be created if the gift presented is something beyond the guest’s expectation. In other words, the gift or token provided to the guests must be unique compared to other hotels and need to be personalized each time the same guest visits the hotel. The aim of hospitality is to convert “strangers” into “friends” and as friends, the hotel staff must walk with the guests to their rooms upon check-in. The staff needs to ensure that all aspects of the room are in good conditions before leaving the room.

By just looking at the raw mean scores, it is clear that the local guests have slightly higher expectations on hospitality of hotels located in their own country compared to the foreign guests. However, the result does not mean that Malaysian people have relatively greater level of expectation on hotel hospitality compared to the non-Malaysian. Malaysian might also have higher expectation on hotel hospitality when they visit other countries.

Foreign guests have lower expectation on the hospitality of local hotels amongst others because they do not have a specific standard to evaluate the “hospitality” behavior in the commercial context. For the local guests, they can easily form their expectation based on the standard of the “social hospitality” domain of local culture which they are already familiar with. As the local residents of a country, they might know a lot of information about the hotels and this include all the explicit as well as implicit service promises the hotel made in their promotional materials. All these value propositions promoted by the hotel marketers would help formed their expectations towards the hotel services. Explicit service promises particularly would have a direct effect on service expectation Zeithaml et al. 2009).

On the other hand, for the foreigners their expectations towards a hotel service are usually formed based on the internet or third parties sources of information. Internet information is not completely reliable. For that reason, their levels of expectations on hotel hospitality are slightly lower than the local guests. As local residents, they are also exposed to more options of hotels to choose from. If customers they have many service providers from whom they can obtain service, their level of expectation are relatively

higher than those of customers who have not many options available. However, the results of independent sample t-tests showed that there is no significant difference between local and their foreign counterparts with regards to the level of hotel hospitality.

## **6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

One major limitation of this study is pertaining to its relatively small sample size of only 305 respondents. Thus, the generalization of the findings was not strong enough to the whole population of local and foreign hotel guests. Based on the above limitations, several directions can be taken in future research with regards to hotel hospitality. As this study was an exploratory study to understand the concept of hospitality in the context of hotel, additional empirical attention should be given to the conceptual framework in future research. To produce more comprehensive results, the sample size must be large enough and include other segments of hotel such as business travelers, meetings, and incentives guests. Since the dimensionality of commercial hospitality implies the importance of emotional value, further research is required to understand the emotional aspects of hospitality and its influence on guest satisfaction and loyalty.

## **7. Conclusion**

The hospitality of hotel hosting behavior can be explained using the three-dimension structure namely personalization, comfort, and warm welcoming. The most vital factor in describing hospitality of hotel services is personalization. Among the important elements of personalization are treating all guests with full respect and developing eye contact with the guests. Comparing the mean scores between local guests and foreign guests revealed that local guests have slightly higher expectations on hotel hospitality in its overall as well as for the three dimensions of hotel hospitality. However, the results of independent sample t-test showed that there is no significance difference between the two segments of hotel guests.

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