The hospitality consumption experiences of parents and carers with children: A qualitative study of foodservice settings

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom, this paper addresses two questions: first, how is parenting and childcare provision performed within restaurants, cafes and pubs; and second, how are different aspects of hospitality provision entangled with parent, carer and children's experiences? The findings show how gestures of hospitality, particularly service interactions that are tailored to meet the specialist needs of these consumers, can create positive emotions and encourage customer loyalty. Furthermore, the data show the importance of recognising children as sovereign consumers. We conclude that responding directly to children's needs can augment their experiences and hence, those of their carers and other patrons. The paper identifies a number of implications for management practice and several avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Families are an important segment of the hospitality and tourism market. It has been suggested that in the United Kingdom alone, family dining out comprises of 3.18 billion visits worth £16.1 billion to the foodservice sector (NDP, 2014). There has been growing interest in family consumption of hospitality and tourism (Chen et al., 2015; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2015; Mottiar and Quinn, 2012), with researchers recognising that families take many different, non-nuclear and non-hetero-centric, forms and that parenting and childcare is not performed exclusively by parents (cf. Carr, 2011; Schänzel and Carr, 2015; Schänzel et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2014). Academic researchers have recognised that restaurants, cafes, pubs and bars are important sites in which family leisure and parenting are performed and brought into public domains; nevertheless, it is acknowledged that little is known about these everyday practices in spaces of commercial hospitality (Karsten et al., 2015). Market researchers and professional commentators, assuming a provider-advocate perspective, have identified factors that can entice families to foodservice outlets (Harrington, 2013; McWattie, 2014; Quinn, 2013). However, recent studies have stressed that academics have largely ignored the experiences of

parents and other childcare providers who patronise hospitality venues (cf. Lugosi et al., 2015). Drawing on interviews conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom, this paper addresses this gap in knowledge by responding to two research questions: first, how is parenting and childcare provision performed within restaurants, cafes and pubs; and second, how are different aspects of hospitality provision entangled with parent, carer and children's experiences?

This study adopted a constructivist position, utilizing an inductive, qualitative approach to considering consumer experiences (Lincoln and Guba, 2013; Robinson et al., 2014). There is a well-established body of work examining experiential consumption and experience management in hospitality, leisure and tourism (cf. Morgan et al., 2010; Ryan, 2010; Walls et al., 2011a for an overview of the field). Much of the existing work has been developed within the positivist paradigm, seeking to test hypotheses by exploring relationships amongst predefined constructs (Knutson et al., 2009; Oh et al., 2007; Walls, 2013). In contrast, the paradigmatic approach adopted in the current study posits that the themes and constructs developed from research are co-constructed between the respondents' and researchers' interpretation of reality. Inductive, qualitative approaches may be more appropriate for examining consumer experiences because a) they allow the research participants to define and explain their experiences, enabling their narratives to open new lines of enquiry rather than relying on preconceived constructs, and b) they can explore thoughts and feelings

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not easily reducible to numerical measures (cf. Holloway et al., 2010; Osman et al., 2014; Walls et al., 2011b; Ziakas and Boukas, 2013). An inductive approach was thus more appropriate for giving greater 'voice' to the experiences of parents and carers.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on the consumption of leisure amongst parents and carers with children, and the very limited body of literature that has considered the experiences of parents and carers with children in hospitality venues. Following the section on the study's methods, the findings and discussion consider five interrelated themes: (1) welcoming families; (2) focusing on children as sovereign consumers; (3) family-oriented service; (4) family-friendly servicescape and (5) the role of other customers. We conclude by discussing the implication of the findings for experience design, operations management and service development, identifying avenues of further research and reflecting on the study's limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consuming leisure as parent and childcare provider

A rich tradition of social science research has highlighted that the consumption of leisure, tourism and hospitality for a parent or childcarer should be seen as different from those without childcare responsibilities (Carr, 2011; Mottiar and Quinn, 2012; Schänzel et al., 2012). Moreover, leisure is experienced differently by men and women, with women often continuing to be responsible for childcare provision within leisure settings (Davidson, 1996; Larson et al., 1997; Mottiar and Quinn, 2012; Shaw, 1992). Research has shown how leisure consumption for those responsible for children is simultaneously recreational and laborious: the divide between leisure and work is thus blurred. Added to the practical challenges of caring for children are the social expectations placed upon parents and care-providers to be 'good' parents, mothers, fathers and carers (Collett, 2005; Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010; Lee et al., 2014; Miller, 2005, 2011; Tardy, 2000). Such expectations bring with them social and psychological risks: perceptions of external scrutiny and judgement for failing to conform to parental ideals. These can lead to self-doubt, social exclusion and even depression among childcare providers.

Consumption becomes another social domain through which parents and care-providers articulate their sense of identity (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006; Lugosi et al., 2015; Miller, 2014). The purchase, use and display of goods and services can complement the acts of childcare and parenting (Johnstone and Todd, 2012; Lugosi et al., 2015; Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006). Studies by Johnstone and Todd (2012) and Lugosi et al. (2015) also suggested that consumption servicescapes such as retail and foodservice venues may facilitate social interaction thus helping to negotiate the challenges associated with parenting.

This body of literature is significant for the current study because it provides a sensitising theoretical framework for approaching parent and carer consumption. The literature stresses the ongoing interaction between leisure consumption and childcare responsibility such that the blurring between leisure and the 'work' of parenting may be a source of tension. Lugosi et al. (2015) for example argued that the wellbeing and satisfaction of parents and care-providers within consumption settings was directly linked to that of their children. In short, if their children were unhappy or misbehaving, parents and care-providers had a compromised experience. The consumption of hospitality, and more specifically, food and drink related experiences, must therefore be examined in relation to the requirements, tensions and opportunities of childcare provision.

2.2. Parents' and carers' consumption of hospitality

Recent studies have highlighted that parents' and carers' consumption of hospitality in food and drink service contexts has largely been neglected by academic research (Karsten et al., 2015; Lugosi, 2010; Lugosi et al., 2015). Insights into their consumer experiences come from two principal sources: first, social scientific studies mainly of culture, parenting and childcare provision in public spaces, and health and nutritional science studies regarding consumer behaviour; and second, practitioner commentary and market research on foodservice consumer trends. Sociological, anthropological and geographical studies of motherhood and parenthood make short references to conscious parents' food choices (Nash, 2012), feelings of scrutiny or inhospitality in particular foodservice venues, and avoiding some venues during the difficult periods of pregnancy (Longhurst, 2007). Restaurants and cafes often emerge in studies of breastfeeding as places where women faced surveillance and exclusion (Boyer, 2011, 2012; Lane, 2014; Mahon-Daly and Andrews, 2002). Laurier and Philo (2006) show how women with strollers negotiate cafe environments and how fellow diners assist a female carer clean up a spillage. However, there are no attempts in these studies to examine in any detail the hospitality dimensions of consumers' experiences in foodservice settings.

Schortman's (2010) observations of Honduran culture suggest that parents take children out for a number of reasons: international branded restaurants offer clean food, of consistent quality, and polite service. Fast food venues also provide opportunities for parents to interact with others whilst their children can play in safe, controlled environments. Schortman (2010) also suggests that marketing to children by large multinational foodservice chains shapes their tastes and their demands, thus influencing parents' choices to patronise such venues. Her reflections help to consider the practices of consumption in their social context, but the study does not focus on the products and services that shape the consumer experience per se.

More recently, Karsten et al. (2015) examined family leisure time in cafes, bars and restaurants. They considered the way entrepreneurs targeted families alongside the difficulties operators faced when catering for these market segments. Karsten et al. (2015) also studied parents' and children's interactional routines, focusing largely on different patterns of sociality. In a related study, Karsten and Felder (2015) suggested that interaction and consumption in such leisure spaces was part of children's socialisation. However, they neglected to consider the broader hospitality dimensions of their consumer experiences, or how the practices and experiences of parenting/care-provision shaped those hospitality elements.

Academics in the public health and nutrition fields provide alternative insights into the consumption practices of parents and carers with children. Studies have considered in some detail the factors that shape decision-making in out-of-home food consumption (Pinard et al., 2015), with particular emphasis on the influence of menu design and labelling on the food purchasing behaviour of children and families (Tandon et al., 2011). These studies are laudable insofar as they help to understand the factors influencing poor dietary choice in foodservice settings. However, this body of research offers limited information about the hospitality consumption experience more generally.

Further insights regarding family experiences in foodservice settings have emerged in the practitioner-focused literature. Recent consumer trend data, for example, has identified the top products and services that parents require e.g. crayons and colouring material, high chairs, baby-changing facilities and child-friendly staff (Harrington, 2013). Little, though, is revealed in these studies about the detailed nature of the consumer experience. Journalistic