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Guests' perceptions of emotionally expressive and non-expressive service providers within the hospitality context

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ABSTRACT

Emotions produce outward cues, such as facial expressions, that regulate our social lives, and these visible signals are generally interpreted by perceivers as valuable information. Service providers are often called on by their organisations to display emotions publicly within the organisation's accepted levels. Nonetheless, because of personal and cultural factors, guests may misinterpret, condemn or discard certain displays coming from others, such as employees and hosts. By allowing guests to share narratives of their own personal experiences, this study explores how receivers perceive expressions of emotion from service providers within the hospitality context. Our findings from informal interviews with hospitality receivers yield both theoretical and managerial implications. These advance our understanding of how people perceive the emotional expressions of others within a field that supposedly promotes intense human transactions and fosters relations between hosts and guests.

1. Introduction

Discourse advocating the role of emotions in our lives has summarised them as multifaceted concepts that are describable at different levels (Newberry, 2013). The study of emotions has gained considerable significance in a wide range of social disciplines, including tourism studies (Lin et al., 2014). Emotions focus our attention on important information (Schupp et al., 2007) and act as a key mediating factor in repeat patronage (Io, 2016). They produce outwardly visible cues that are interpreted by perceivers, and such emotional signals regulate our social interactions and our lives (Davies et al., 2016; Rouby et al., 2016). During interpersonal interactions, people are called on to exert effort to publicly display certain emotions while hiding others (Cote, 2005). Within a workplace context, emotions must often be displayed by employees through both surface acting and deep acting (Hoffmann, 2016). Within the services sector, employees amplify their displays of enthusiasm as a way of delivering quality service (Pugh, 2001); they are expected to express positive emotions, even if they are experiencing negative emotions (Shani et al., 2014). This is especially the case within the hospitality field, in which the role of emotional labour is believed to be imperative (Shani et al., 2014). For instance, Lashley (2017) located the hospitality experience at the intersection of the private, commercial and cultural domains, which require individuals to be hospitable and to act hospitably. Nevertheless, it may be argued that certain individuals

at the receiving end of such acting may not value particular emotional displays – even displays of positive emotions – if they perceive them as inauthentic. According to Bakker et al. (2004), consumers expect employees not only to be friendly but also to display authentic emotions during interactions. Furthermore, on the basis of norms that distinguish 'emotional' cultures from 'neutral' cultures, some people may view others as irrational or accuse them of lacking emotion (Trompenaars and Wooliams, 2003). Nevertheless, guests may demand particular displays of emotion from service providers in order to fulfil personal needs; Lashley (2017) claimed that, for some commercial guests, the service encounter suggests a relationship of superiority and inferiority between guest and host.

Extant research on emotions within the workplace has focused mainly on aspects related to emotional labour; for instance, on the ability of employees to understand and regulate emotions and on the consequences of emotional labour for employees (Hoffmann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Grandey et al., 2012). Although these studies have equipped us with some interesting insights, the deeper aspects of how guests perceive employees' expressions of emotion are yet to be explored, in spite of the fact that evaluation of experiences is affected by perceptions (Van Dijk et al., 2011, p. 40) and that perceptual input is connected with the action system (Knoblich and Flach, 2001). A better insight into the deeper meanings of people's perceptions within the service field will help us understand how the

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end-receiver observes service providers. Within a contemporary society in which values and circumstances are constantly shifting.

The changing nature of perceptions of guests and the rigidity of obligations for hosts to meet socially defined standards of hospitality is an important issue for future research in host and guest relations. (Lashley, 2007, p. 220)

The focal point of this study is the receivers: specifically, guests and how they perceive the expressions of others. This is a particularly important issue within the context of hospitality, a field that fosters human interactions and the members of which are required to carry out emotional labour (Shani et al., 2014; Taegoo (Terry) et al., 2012). We focus our attention beyond the approval commonly given to affectionate displays towards people who are offered hospitality. Instead, we let individuals within a sector highly governed by human transactions tell us, through their narratives, how they perceive the emotional displays of the other. The main aim of this research is to explore how receivers of hospitality perceive expressions of emotion by those who offer them hospitality. Thus, we provide a more holistic perspective on emotional display transactions, particularly from the recipient's point of view, which has escaped researchers' attention to date. Existing studies have focused on the consequences of emotional labour (Wong and Wang, 2009) and the perspectives of employees (Čivre et al., 2013); research on the broad topic of the perceptions of guests has focused only on specific aspects, such as their perceptions of a hotel's location (Lee et al., 2010).

Therefore, the potential contribution of the present study is twofold. First, we offer new theoretical perspectives based on a conceptual framework that explains how guests appreciate the formation of emotional displays and how they perceive them. A qualitative approach is employed, which is apposite for in-depth understanding (Wong and Wang, 2009). Our key finding is that the guest takes the lead role in establishing the boundaries of the emotional transaction between the two parties. This finding questions the extent to which emotional management yields desirable outcomes for a hospitality organisation; employees' efforts to display certain emotions – even positive emotions – may be perceived as exaggerated and unwelcome. We propose a cubic matrix and an associated framework that conceptualise guest perceptions of emotional displays, and these provide a basis for further exploration of the topic. Second, our aim is to enable service providers to become more aware of how their expressions are perceived by the end-receiver; as a result, we discuss the practical implications of our findings for hospitality providers. We begin with a discussion of how people express and decode expressions of emotion within the hospitality context, in order to highlight the need for further research into the topic.

2. Expressions of emotion within the hospitality context

One of the most important functions of emotions is to serve as symptoms of our internal states and as signals for others to take action (Rouby et al., 2016). Cues displayed and the interpretations of these cues prevail in social interactions. This is particularly relevant in service environments, such as within a hospitality setting, which are highly governed by guest–host interactions (Lashley, 2015). A number of researchers have attempted to explain the dynamic nature of the relationship between the tourist and the local resident (Griffiths and Sharpley, 2012; Lashley, 2017). In particular, the guest–host relationship has been recognised as a fundamental element within the social transaction process that tourism entails (Reisinger and Turner, 2002). Lashley (2008) introduced a three-domain model as an initial means of understanding the guest experience within the hospitality context. The basic theory (also referred to as the 'domain theory of hospitality') was illustrated in a Venn diagram showing the three interrelated areas of the sociocultural, private and commercial domains, with the guest–host relationship as its focal point. Although a number of theories have explored guest–host relationships, Lashley's model was novel as it focused

on hospitality and the dynamics of the guest experience. Certain researchers (e.g., Slattery, 2002) have found Lashley's framework difficult to accept on the grounds that it is too crude; admittedly, even its originator criticised it as over-simplistic. Yet it provided a structure within which to locate the study of hospitality and it has been used by researchers as a tool to explain the guest–host relationship, or the guest experience specifically through the prism of hospitality (Gehrels, 2017; Ruiter, 2017).

The private domain covers the obligations to be hospitable that are learnt by individuals in their home settings. Individuals in the workplace may express emotions according to their personal characteristics (Shani et al., 2014). In addition, humans generate complex facial expressions while communicating a diverse range of emotions (Jack et al., 2016). Indeed, bodily and facial cues, such as a smile, may convey hospitable and welcoming states. According to Jacob-Dazarola et al. (2016), observers can identify external manifestations such as facial gestures, bodily postures, voice tone and pitch that accompany people's emotional experiences. Developmental studies have suggested that all humans have the same facial musculature. For instance, expressions of positive emotions share a single set of facial muscle movements and thereby portray a genuine smile, known by psychologists as the Duchenne smile (Kalat, 2011). Recent studies investigating perceptions of Duchenne and non-Duchenne smiles have found that people producing Duchenne smiles are rated more positively: in other words, they are found to be more genuine, authentic, real, trustworthy and attractive (Gunnery and Ruben, 2016). People's expressions vary, and this variation may be based on individual characteristics as well as on factors such as gender (Chaplin and Aldao, 2013). Within the hospitality setting, the sociocultural domain involved in the guest experience covers various degrees of societal obligation to be hospitable. Researchers have identified different types and expressions of hospitality exhibited by members of different cultures. For instance, in African foraging cultures hospitality manifests itself through activities such as welcome dances (Ruiter, 2017). Culture seems also to shape the manner in which a society's members physically express their emotional states, and this applies within the workplace environment. According to Chenstsova-Dutton et al. (2007), there are group variations in people's tendencies to produce certain expressions, and these variations are based on cultural factors.

Indeed, facial expressions of emotion consist of specific facial movements that are the result of biological and social evolutionary pressures (Jack et al., 2014), and recent findings have suggested that perceptions of emotion based on facial expressions depend on cultural and conceptual contexts (Gendron et al., 2014). The commercial domain is concerned with the industrialisation of hospitality. Slattery (2002) argued that restaurant and hotel services involve management activity and that the transaction between guest and host is essentially an economic one. Service organisations are governed by commercial laws and often call on their members to display behaviour that will meet the company's objectives, even if this requires employees to camouflage their true emotions behind a joyful mask. The members of a hospitality organisation are usually required to engage in emotional labour; for example, when dealing with unhappy consumers (Beal et al., 2006) they may fake positive emotions by exhibiting happiness or a fake smile (Wang and Groth, 2014; Glomb and Tews, 2004). This emotional labour may lead to favourable outcomes for companies (Wong and Wang, 2009), but it often has negative consequences for service deliverers, such as a reduced sense of well-being and increased levels of stress (Bechtoldt et al., 2011; Beal et al., 2006; Heuven et al., 2006).

To date, the academic literature has focused on understanding how emotional displays and emotional labour are shaped by organisational procedures and tactics, especially within the service sectors of hospitality and general tourism (Shani et al., 2014; Wijeratne et al., 2014). Such findings have equipped us with knowledge of how management may interfere in the process of employees delivering certain displays in

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