



# Measuring the experience of hospitality: Scale development and validation



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## ABSTRACT

This paper identifies what customers experience as hospitality and subsequently presents a novel and compact assessment scale for measuring customers' experience of hospitality at any kind of service organization. The Experience of Hospitality Scale (EH-Scale) takes a broader perspective compared to existing scales, which predominantly measure hospitable behavior of service employees and are specifically developed for organizations in the hospitality industry. A thorough approach containing two qualitative and two quantitative studies resulted in the thirteen-item EH-Scale. The scale measures three experiential factors of hospitality: the experience of *inviting* (open, inviting, freedom), the experience of *care* (servitude, empathy and acknowledgement), and the experience of *comfort* (feeling at ease, relaxed and comfortable).

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## 1. Introduction

Since the economy has increasingly moved from a service economy to an experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), the focus of service organizations is no longer on what they deliver but on how they deliver their services. The growing attention to hospitality as means to distinguish themselves from other organizations fits within this development. The attention paid to hospitality not only applies to the hospitality businesses, such as hotels, restaurants and leisure, but is also becoming a relevant topic in fields as diverse as healthcare and financial services. However, organizations need tools to help them improve the hospitality they offer to their customers.

Academic attention for hospitality has also been growing. In recent decades, the amount of literature and the number of disciplines in which hospitality has been studied has increased enormously. However, despite the substantial amount of published papers, the concept of hospitality remains ill-defined (Brotherton and Wood, 2008; Lashley et al., 2007; Lynch et al., 2011; Ottenbacher et al., 2009; Tasci and Semrad, 2016). As Ottenbacher et al. (2009) state, 'hospitality is a relatively new research area' and there is a 'lack of definitional consensus on the term hospitality' (p.263). However, improved insight in the concept is essential to

further explore, define, and apply hospitality (Brotherton, 1999; Lynch et al., 2011; Ottenbacher et al., 2009).

The sparse research that does explore the meaning of the concept during the service encounter mostly examines hospitality from the viewpoint of the host, focusing on the appearance and behavior of employees (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012; Blain and Lashley, 2014; Derrida, 1999; King, 1995; Nailon, 1982; O'Sullivan, 2004; Pfeifer, 1983; Reynolds, 2010; Ritzer, 2007; Tasci and Semrad, 2016; Telfer, 2000). Although a meaningful approach, it is limiting in two ways. Firstly, a necessary first step to improve an organization's hospitality is to understand what *customers* experience as hospitable during a service encounter. As the business and managerial sector has thus far dominated the literature on hospitality (Lynch et al., 2011), the need for immediately applicable knowledge on hospitality may be the reason that this first step of empirical investigation on what hospitality means to customers has so far been neglected. Secondly, the literature on customer experience shows that a service experience is not only based on the customer's interaction with service staff, but also on the environment in which the service encounter takes place (e.g. Baker et al., 2002; Berry et al., 2006; Bitner, 1992). In defining the experience of hospitality, the focus should therefore not be limited to the experience of employee behavior, but also incorporate the experience of the service environment.

Although there are validated instruments to measure customers' evaluation of service encounters for constructs such as *service quality* (scales based on SERVQUAL developed by Parasuraman et al., 1988), *customer satisfaction* (such as the ACSIS-scale developed by Angelova and Zekiri (2011) and scales that

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**Table 1**  
List of experience-related words associated with the experience of hospitality.

Attention <sup>c,d</sup>	Friendly <sup>c,d,e,g,m,n</sup>	Safety <sup>f,o</sup>
Care <sup>a,d,o</sup>	Generous <sup>c,d,e,f,h,i,n</sup>	Security <sup>e,f,g,k,m</sup>
Comfort <sup>a,b,d,e,g,k,m</sup>	Helpful <sup>a,b,n</sup>	Understanding needs <sup>a,h,j,m,p</sup>
Courteous <sup>e,m,n</sup>	Open <sup>e,n</sup>	Warmth <sup>a,c,d,e,m</sup>
Desire to please <sup>a,b,i,o</sup>	Pleasure/happy <sup>b,c,d,h,n</sup>	Welcoming <sup>a,c,d,e,m,n</sup>
Entertainment <sup>e,f</sup>	Polite <sup>c,d,n</sup>	
Feel important/special <sup>a,b,m</sup>	Respectful <sup>a,n</sup>	

Note. Only words that are mentioned in more than one article are included in the table.

<sup>a</sup>Ariffin and Maghzi (2012).

<sup>b</sup>Blain and Lashley (2014).

<sup>c</sup>Brotherton (2005).

<sup>d</sup>Brotherton and Wood (2008).

<sup>e</sup>Burgess (1982).

<sup>f</sup>Hemmington (2007).

<sup>g</sup>Hepple et al. (1990).

<sup>h</sup>King (1995).

<sup>i</sup>Lashley (2000).

<sup>j</sup>Matzko (1996).

<sup>k</sup>Nailon (1982).

<sup>l</sup>O'Gorman (2000).

<sup>m</sup>Sim et al. (2006).

<sup>n</sup>Tasci and Semrad (2016).

<sup>o</sup>Telfer (2000).

<sup>p</sup>Tideman (1983).

elaborated on Oliver (1997)) and *customer experience* (such as Brunner-Sperdin et al., 2012; Klaus and Maklan, 2012; Knutson and Beck, 2004), there is still no well-grounded instrument to measure the *experience of hospitality* in service environments.

## 2. Aims and research questions

The aim of this paper is twofold. The first aim is to clarify the concept of the experience of hospitality. What do people experience when they experience hospitality? What dimensions of hospitality can be distinguished? Subsequently, the second and main aim is to develop a scale to measure the experience of hospitality in service environments. We wish to develop a straightforward scale that is applicable in any service environment and incorporates not only hospitable behavior of service employees, but also includes the experience of hospitality offered by the organization as a whole, also incorporating the physical service environment. For the scale development a rigorous multi-method approach is taken: a combination of an extensive literature study, two exploratory qualitative studies and two confirmatory quantitative studies.

## 3. Literature review

Tapping into the sparse studies on the meaning of hospitality, it firstly appears that the terminology authors use to describe (aspects of) hospitality is ambiguous. Authors such as Tideman (1983) and Pfeifer (1983) define hospitality as the basic provision of products such as food, drink, shelter, and hygiene amenities for travelers who are away from home. However, Smith (1994) and Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) use hospitality to refer to the attitudes and behavior of service employees. Others also refer to the attitudes and behavior of employees, but label this as 'hospitableness' (Blain and Lashley, 2014; Tasci and Semrad, 2016; Telfer, 2000).

Hospitality and hospitableness are both used to describe what a host offers to his or her guests. However, instead of focusing on this provision of hospitality, the present research focuses on the reception of hospitality by recipients. Therefore, the term 'experience of hospitality' will be used, referring to the experience of staff behavior as well as the experience of the physical service environment including its facilities. Note that the 'experience of hospitality' is different from 'hospitality experience', which refers to an experi-

ence in an organization in the hospitality industry, such as a bar, restaurant or hotel (for example Hemmington, 2007; Lugosi, 2014).

An initial systematic literature search on the meaning of hospitality to customers yielded a few articles that examined the concept, mostly in the context of hotels (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012; Blain and Lashley, 2014; Brotherton, 2005; Brotherton and Wood, 2008; Hepple et al., 1990; Sim et al., 2006; Tasci and Semrad, 2016). Hepple et al. (1990) performed a study on hospitality in a hospital environment. Patients were asked to rank hospitality factors in the order in which they considered them to be important. The authors found that hospital patients rated friendly staff and smooth procedures as most relevant for experiencing hospitality. Brotherton (2005) and Brotherton and Wood (2008) explored hotel guest perceptions of the physical as well as the service aspects of hospitality. Words guests mostly associated with hospitable service delivery behavior were: welcoming, friendly, polite, pleasant and warm. Associations with the physical aspects of hospitality were: comfort and cleanliness. Sim et al. (2006) investigated hospitality as the 'behavior factor' of satisfaction in hotels. In their research they refer to employees greeting people with courtesy, being friendly, polite, cheerful, meeting customer needs, being patient, taking time, communicating well, letting customers feel important, secure and 'treated like a king or queen', and creating a mood of comfort and relaxation.

Ariffin and Maghzi (2012), Blain and Lashley (2014), and Tasci and Semrad (2016) investigated the meaning of hospitableness by developing scales for measuring hospitable attitudes and behavior in the hospitality sector. Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) developed a questionnaire to measure hospitableness in hotels. They distinguish five dimensions: personalization, warm welcoming, special relationship, straight from the heart and comfort. The scale developed by Blain and Lashley (2014) contains three dimensions: the desire to put customers before yourself, to make them happy, and to make them feel special. Recently, Tasci and Semrad (2016) asked people to rate the importance of several characteristics for employees of destinations, hotels and restaurants for being hospitable. This resulted in a three-factor scale of hospitableness: heart-warming (welcoming, courteous, respectful and kind), heart-assuring (trustworthy, honest, reliable), and heart-soothing (generous, sociable and open).

Beyond the limited empirical research on this topic, at a more descriptive level the literature on hospitality also provides indica-

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