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Abstract

This paper argues that the patronage of women with children has been largely ignored by hospitality academics. It establishes the context for the study of the subject as well as helping to set the research agenda by reviewing existing literature, identifying relevant bodies of literature which may underpin the future study of the subject, and pointing to gaps in current knowledge. The paper discusses the organisational challenges and opportunities in targeting or hosting these consumer segments. It focuses on venue design, facilities and the spatial strategies for accommodating women with children in venues. The paper also discusses issues concerning emotional labour and consumer co-creation, and it argues that studies of consumer experience in hospitality need to shift emphasis from dyadic relationships, involving hosts and guests, to considering triadic relationships, involving hosts, guests and others, including other guests and consumers not directly involved in the consumption experience.

Keywords: women, children, hospitality, gender, space

Introduction

The consumption of women and children in hospitality venues, particularly cafes, and restaurants, are undoubtedly multidimensional experiences in which notions of work, function and necessity are inseparably entangled with elements of escape, relaxation and pleasurable consumption. Their custom also presents a series of opportunities and challenges for venue operators, and for the other patrons of venues. Existing research into hospitality venues has considered women consumers (Schmitt and Sapsford, 1995; Pratten and Lowatt, 2007); there has also been limited work conducted into the factors influencing families' restaurant choice (Elder et al, 1999); and, more recently, the differences between men and women's expectations of venues (Moss et al, 2009), but the patronage of women with children has largely been ignored by hospitality academics. A few studies offer brief glimpses of their consumption, but they are limited in depth and do not offer detailed insights into their subjective experiences (see Laurier and Philo, 2006). Law (2000) is one of the few hospitality management researchers to address the topic, but the focus of his research note is on the problems associated with breastfeeding

rather than the broader issues surrounding patronage. The absence of studies into the experiences of women with children raises a number of questions, which invite responses through empirical research.

This paper establishes the context for the study of the consumption of women with children, while helping to set the research agenda: it reviews existing literature, identifies relevant bodies of literature that may underpin the study of the subject, and points to gaps in current knowledge. The paper discusses the organisational challenges and opportunities in hosting these consumer segments. It focuses on venue design, facilities and the spatial strategies for accommodating women with children in venues. The paper also discusses issues concerning emotional labour and consumer co-creation, and it argues that studies of consumer experiences in hospitality should shift emphasis from dyadic relationships, involving hosts and guests, to considering triadic relationships, involving hosts, guests and *others*, including other guests and consumers not directly involved in the consumption experience.

Women's leisure, motherhood and spaces of consumption

A substantial body of work has considered women's experiences of space (cf., Valentine, 1989, 1991, 1992; Henderson and Bialeschki, 1991; Pain, 1997; Day, 2000; Sandberg and Tollefsen, 2010) and more specifically of motherhood, which suggests that its embodied nature creates specific subjectivities in women and thus specific subjective experiences of spaces (see e.g. Dyck, 1990; Longhurst, 2005; Madge and O'Connort, 2005). Previous research has also highlighted that women's leisure experiences are often inseparably entangled with notions of work, as leisure continually intersects with responsibilities for various domestic duties and caring for children (Shaw, 1992; Davidson, 1996; Larson et al, 1997). The literature on gender, space and leisure indicates that discourses of motherhood may blur the distinction between work and leisure during visits of hospitality venues, which may consequently influence *what* women expect from the consumption experience, in terms of the servicescape, the services and the hospitality product, but may also shape *how* women with children experiences hospitality spaces.

It is important to stress that, despite the intellectual and epistemological overlaps, particularly in adopting a critical, feminist approach, the literature on women's geographies, geographies of motherhood and women's leisure represent different bodies of research. It is therefore necessary to question how notions of gender interact with those of motherhood and leisure consumptions. Moreover, a number of studies have considered how sexuality, ethnicity and class intersect with notions of gender in leisure participation and the experience of leisure spaces (Scraton and Watson, 1998; Skeggs, 1999; Mowl and Towner, 1995; Pritchard et al., 2002). Therefore, there remains a need to examine how notions of class, ethnicity, gender or age influence notions of motherhood/parenthood and the subsequent consumer practices of women with children in specific hospitality venues.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasise that existing research did not focus on hospitality or

on hospitality venues. Considering the experiences of women and children in venues can shed light on which spaces they consider inclusive, safe, empowering, relaxing, facilitating positive leisure experiences and which are, or do, not. Moreover, exploring through empirical research the ideological, normative or norm governed and situational dimensions of hospitality (see Lugosi, 2009), which considers the psychological, material and embodied – performed aspects of human experience can help to understand the processes through which spaces are rendered hospitable/inhospitable.

Organisational perspectives on women and children as customers

From a managerial perspective, it is necessary to question the benefits of targeting this market segment; or, even if they are not overtly targeted, the value of hosting women with children in venues. The exclusion of women with children is socially and morally problematic, and welcoming them are fundamental gestures of inclusion and hospitality. However, even if operators choose to ignore the ethical dimensions of hospitality provisions and the production of hospitable spaces there are financial and operational challenges facing the sector that cannot be ignored. Research suggests that income in public houses from drink or drink promotions is not enough to ensure survival and that they have to look to alternative income streams and broader market segments (Mintel, 2009a). Food provision is increasingly important to public houses (Thomas, 2009); but, Mintel (2009b) also suggests that, despite the recession, dining out remains an important aspect of consumer spending, and that restaurants can thrive during the recession, partly by taking advantage of downtrading, but also through offering menu flexibility and good value to consumers. Finally, despite the fact that many cafe chains are struggling to survive, cafes and coffee shops remain the second most popular places for consumer visits after pubs and bars (Mintel, 2009b). Recent research suggests the families market is shrinking, partly because of contemporary economic pressures but also because consumers felt foodservice operators did not deliver appropriate healthy, nutritious or quality offerings (see e.g. Kühn, 2009; NDP, 2009). Nevertheless, commentators have advocated families and children – recognising their role in parents' venue choice and purchase decision making (Stephenson, 1996) and highlighting the positive aspects of welcoming them (cf., Prisble, 2002; Gerard, 2009). It is important to question what kind of financial and operational benefits can be gained from welcoming women with children and what specific challenges accompany their custom.

The presence of children can have negative impacts on the consumption experiences of other patrons. Divisive issues such as breastfeeding has led to conflicts between customers on a number of occasions (see e.g. Law, 2000; thisisdorset.net, 2008) and children are undoubtedly a disruption for others (for example, see dooyoo.co.uk, 2009, eGullet.org, 2003 or stltoday.com, 2009 for debates among operators and consumers on the topic of children in restaurants). However, it is also important to consider the potential contributions of their custom, for example, in generating demand during off-peak hours; and, how number of visits, group sizes and spend per visit could be increased, if one or more of these options was deemed to be a positive business strategy. Women with children may be a positive source of customer participation (Lugosi, 2007), both by disseminating information about venues, through personal networks alongside such

virtual channels as netmums.com, and also by encouraging visits. Understanding the patterns of visiting, through quantitative survey work and the experiential nature of these visits through qualitative techniques could provide important insights into the potential benefits of these consumer groups and how the positive aspects of their custom can be maximised, and the negative impacts negated.

Consumer and professional commentaries have highlighted critical success factors that underpin positive consumer experiences (see e.g. Restaurants and Institutions, 1994); they have also identified good practice among operators in catering for children and families, alongside ways in which their inputs, for example into menu choice and design, can be a source of information (e.g. McDowell, 1994; Buchthal, 2006). Many operators provide children's menus, high chairs, balloons, and entertainment kits often consisting of activity placemats and colouring pencils or crayons; although venues have, in the past, augmented this with different sized high chairs, baby changing facilities for both sexes, smaller sized meals from the main menu rather than a limited children's menu, and such additional features as a babysitting service (McDowell, 1994). Some restaurant chains have attempted to understand children's cultures to build their services and experiences. As Stephenson (1996) noted, this strategy relied on operators following and understanding children's television and building consumer experiences on characters and toys; however, these business strategies are based on particular, American-centric discourses of children's culture and themed foodservice business models, and some US operators purposefully rejected these, using child-centred food rather than giveaway souvenirs to build specific *propositions of hospitality* (see Lugosi, 2009 for a lengthier discussion of the notion of propositions).

More recently, UK and European operators have hosted children as a way to teach them about food, gastronomic culture and sustainability (Harmer, 2008). According to Harmer (2008), the Bordeaux ministry of agriculture went as far as providing funding for schoolchildren to visit a regional starred restaurant. Meanwhile, operators such as IKEA, have incorporated specific design features such as access to microwaves and inward facing bar-style dining tables with a play area where children remain visible, into their foodservice offerings. In the UK context, some operators, for example *Cafe Rouge*, have consciously developed their core and augmented offering for family visitors; the pub operator *Marston's* has used free meals to children to promote their general children's offering and to entice adults to visit their venues (Eley, 2009), while others, such as *Giraffe*, overtly position themselves as family oriented operations (see White, 2009 for further details of Giraffe and the company ethos). Attempts to cater for families and children have also motivated manufacturers to develop new children's activity packages (Wilson, 2009), and for food manufacturers to bring to the market children-oriented product lines and to simultaneously target operators and consumers in their promotion (see babydeli.co.uk and Caterer and Hotelkeeper, 2009). However, these commentaries offer a fragmented picture and there remains a need to evaluate different business models and specific child/family-oriented strategies to identify appropriate sustainable synergies and best practice.

Facilities and design

From a consumer perspective of the operation, it is also useful to know what women with children actually desire from venues, in terms of design and facilities. Baby changing facilities may be obvious examples, but other design features include access to, from and inside the venue; safe, visible spaces in which to store strollers and buggies or spaces where children can move safely, while remaining visible may also be important. There remains a need to examine what type of facility layout and interior design supports the positive experiences of women with children and what may exclude. For example, a cafe in Poole (in Dorset, UK) does not overtly discourage children but has banned buggies and strollers from the premises on the grounds that they represent a trip hazard. Parents must leave buggies outside and can only see them if they occupy one of the outside seats or the few indoor tables near the window. This leaves buggies vulnerable to thieves and the elements, and it makes it difficult to leave sleeping children outside, unguarded. Parents can choose to bring their sleeping children inside, but this risks waking them and the associated stress for the child, the parent(s) and other guests.

The examination of design also needs to consider the aesthetic alongside the functional. Previous studies have considered the psychology of design in facilitating particular meal experiences (see e.g. Ryu and Jang, 2008a, 2008b), but the specific needs of women and children remain unexplored. The potential application of qualitative methods, alongside quantitative instruments to measure the impacts of physical design, can give a rich, holistic understanding of consumer experiences (see e.g. Lugosi, 2008, 2009 and Lynch, 2005 for specific examples of qualitative methods, and Morgan and Watson, 2009 for a more general discussion of experiential research).

Examination of the design and layout of facilities must also take into account the spatial strategies for accommodating women with children. Gerard (2009), for example, points to different strategies for hosting women and children and family parties, which can be summarised as integration and separation. Within integration strategies family parties are placed in amongst the other guests, while separation involves different degrees of "containment" as family parties are placed either in designated sections of venues or in different parts. The specific approaches used either systematically or on ad hoc basis need further examination and evaluation to identify best practice – both for frontline staff, operators and different guests.

Service performance, emotional labour and experience (co-)creation
Beyond the physical and spatial aspects, it is useful to consider the emotional dimension of service work among frontline staff who interact with women with children, alongside other patrons who may be disturbed by and even resent their presence. There is a growing literature on the nature of emotional labour among frontline hospitality workers (e.g. Erickson, 2004; Seymour and Sandiford, 2005), but the specific nature of emotion work required for these consumer segments remains unexplored. Some relevant issues may be specialist emotional skills in dealing with women and children, and other "affected" patrons, the nature of knowledge co-creation among staff in developing performative and emotional repertoires (cf., Lugosi and Bray, 2008; Lundberg and Mossberg, 2008) and coping strategies among frontline staff.

An examination of the patronage of women with children also raises important questions concerning the multiple agencies involved in the production of consumption experiences. Lashley et al (2007) and Lugosi (2008, 2009) have demonstrated that notions of host and guest are complex and that these roles are often assumed by different agents at different times. However, there is a need to further challenge dyadic conceptions of service and hospitality provision. In other words, rather than assuming that hospitality is produced through interaction between the host and guest, the organisation and customer, or even the frontline staff and patron, it is necessary to examine the *triadic* nature of hospitality – involving hosts, guests and *others*, which may include other guests or consumers not directly involved in the specific consumption experience.

Emerging research highlights how other consumers mediate and co-create consumer experiences (see e.g. Lugosi, 2007, 2008, 2009). Lugosi (2008), for example, demonstrates how consumer interaction transformed a mundane consumption experience in a bar into a collective, expressive consumption experience as patrons started to sing together. Lugosi (2007, 2009) also demonstrated how consumers assumed the role of frontline staff in service provision, while also welcoming/excluding others and engaging in expressive performances of selves that created a playful, hospitable space. Laurier and Philo (2006) also demonstrate how, in a cafe environment, customers assisted mothers with children in cleaning up spillages, making space and in entertaining their children for short periods. Again, empirical research can shed light on how different individuals shape, both positively and negatively, the consumer experiences of mothers and children, and vice versa. Examining these relationships can then help to understand how triadic relationships influence the processes and outcomes of consumer experiences in other organisational settings. Moreover, rather than relying exclusively on quantitative instruments, it may be useful to take a qualitative, experiential approach that examines the holistic nature of consumer experiences (see e.g. Morgan and Watson, 2009 for a more detailed discussion of the experiential approach to researching consumer experiences).

Conclusions

To conclude, it is useful to stress the broader outcomes and contributions to knowledge of research into the experiences of women with children in hospitality spaces. Firstly an examination of the experiences of women and children in venues addresses notions of social justice and in particular how social inclusion or exclusion may be reproduced, mediated or contested through consumption in hospitality venues. More specifically, it can help to understand how consumption in venues reinforces gendered expectations of women- and mother-hood. Alternatively, it can help to understand how venues become safe, inclusive, even empowering places for women with children where they can have positive leisure experiences, participate in behaviours that are considered to have positive health benefits, for example breastfeeding or maintaining healthy diets, engage in relationships or construct multiple identities as women, mothers, consumers, citizens etc.

Secondly, recent debates among hospitality academics have attempted to produce a

broader research agenda both for the study of hospitality (Lashley et al, 2007; Lugosi, 2008, 2009) and for hospitality management research (Lugosi et al, 2009). More specifically, it has been argued that examining the various manifestations of hospitality can help to conceptualise the workings of societies, cultures and their spaces (See Derrida, 2001; Bell, 2007; Lashley et al, 2007; Lugosi, 2009. Examining the experiences of women with children provides opportunities to explore how transactions of food and drink, offers of shelter and the social interactions associated with hospitality/hospitableness create inclusive or exclusive spaces. Examining these themes can therefore enable hospitality research to contribute to broader academic debates about space and gender, experiences of motherhood and women's leisure. Perhaps even more importantly, by examining how commercial and social dimensions of hospitality interact, it can help to develop positive, socially responsible business practices that have benefits for a wide range of stakeholders.

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