

Consumer Participation in Commercial Hospitality

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Abstract

Purpose of this paper

This paper examines customers' participation in the production of commercial hospitality. Drawing on a study of queer consumers (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals), the paper considers the ways in which frequently circulated understandings, or myths, shaped consumers' actions. The case study is used to highlight previously under examined dimensions of participation.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper draws on an ethnographic study of bar culture. The principal method of data collection was participant observation, which involved working at one venue for 27 months, as well as social visits throughout a five year period. Participant observation was complemented by semi-structured interviews with 26 informants, 19 of whom were interviewed repeatedly during the research.

Findings

The paper suggests that three myths were evident in consumers' behavior: commonality, mutual safety, and the opportunities for liberated, playful consumption. Focusing on two particular aspects of participation: performative display and frontline labor, the paper discusses the ways in which these myths influenced patrons' actions.

Research implications

The study suggests that an examination of the cultural dimensions of patronage provides crucial insights into consumer participation. The results will be relevant to social scientists and management academics seeking to understand the relationship between shared interest and

identity, consumption, and the production of hospitable spaces.

Originality/value

This study provides a new understanding of both the nature of and motivations for consumer participation. This challenges existing approaches, which have tended to focus narrowly on the managerial aspects of participation in the service sector.

Keywords: Hospitality, Consumer Participation, Lesbian, Gay, Ethnography

Type of paper: Research Paper

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Introduction

Consumers play a key role in the production of commercial hospitality. As well as sources of income, their participation in the service delivery ensures that the operation functions efficiently and that they receive the desired service outcome. Much of the existing literature on customer participation in the hospitality industry focuses on the roles of consumers as either sources of income or proxy marketing agents who disseminate information about particular venues or brands (cf., Bareham, 1995; Bowie and Buttle, 2004; Sargent and Lyle, 1998). Jones (1988, 1990) points to the increased use of self-selection and self-service in foodservice operations, and argues that customers should be seen as another organizational resource which can be mobilized to increase productivity. Ford and Heaton (2001) go further and speculate that customers may also take responsibility for entertaining fellow consumers, directing the behavior of staff and guests, and providing informal consultancy services for organizations through their critical feedback. These authors have begun to conceptualize customers as productive agencies within the service encounter. However, this emerging body of work is principally theoretical and these authors make no attempt to provide a contextual examination of consumer participation.

While many academics recognize that consumers have roles to play in the service experience, primary research on customer participation in the hospitality industry, and the licensed sector in particular, is difficult to find. Lugosi (2006a) has begun to question the nature of participation in the licensed sector. He examines several dimensions of participation, including the dissemination of information, the development and filtering of the customer base, and the education and socialization of patrons. This paper extends this earlier work by considering two aspects of consumer participation: performative display and frontline labor. By doing so, it attempts to

understand the influence of broader cultural factors in shaping the nature of participation. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a bar with a large gay and lesbian client base, this paper explores the consumers' roles in the production process. The discussion illustrates the ways in which notions of shared interest and identity informed patrons' actions. The paper argues that the consumers perpetuated a series of understandings, or myths, which were critical in shaping the nature of their participation. The discussion considers how these myths were reflected by and translated into consumer labor.

This research raises three issues that have implications beyond the study. First, it highlights the limitations of existing work on customer participation, which has a narrow management focus and ignores the cultural factors that shape participation. Second, it suggests that an examination of the frequently recurring myths surrounding commercial hospitality venues, and the people who occupy them, can inform our understanding of both the nature and the underpinning rationale of consumer participation. And third, it demonstrates the ways in which social and commercial manifestations of hospitality may become entangled in the management of service operations.

Consumer Participation

Dimensions of participation

Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml (1997) suggest that consumers may participate in the construction of service experiences in three ways: as productive agencies, as contributors to quality, satisfaction and value, or as competitors. As productive agencies, customers provide such inputs as information, which then assures that they receive the required service. Furthermore, customers may also assume the roles of frontline staff and perform service functions within the organization. As contributors to quality, satisfaction and value, customers take partial responsibility for the sense of satisfaction offered by the consumption experience. For example, patrons of a bar may see it as partly their responsibility to entertain themselves in the venue. Therefore, if they do not enjoy the experience, they do not necessarily blame the organization. Lastly, according to Bitner *et al.* (1997), consumers may become competitors by choosing to provide services for themselves, for example, by purchasing alcohol and consuming it at home.

Bitner *et al.*'s (1997) approach undeniably helps to conceptualize the nature of participation. However, their concern with service industry management has a number of limitations. Firstly, by focusing on the service dimensions of the consumption experience, they do not consider that these functional aspects may represent a relatively small part of the overall experience, or that the quality of that experience may be determined significantly by the actions of other consumers. Secondly, in considering the customers' contribution to quality, satisfaction and value, Bitner *et al.*'s focus on the service ignores the broader cultural factors that influence both consumers' motivations and their consumption experiences. For example, within a consumer space patronized by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender consumers (LGBT), participation is shaped by a series of ideological assumptions, which the narrow focus on the service encounter fails to consider.

Determinants of participation

Rodie and Kleine (2000) argue that there are three factors that determine the nature of customer participation: role size, the ability to participate and the willingness to participate. Role size refers to the level of customer input and the proportion of the service that is produced by the

consumers (Bowen, 1986; Rodie and Kleine, 2000). Role size may be determined primarily by the envisaged nature of the service encounter. For example, customers can expect to have a smaller role size in a bar where table waiting service is provided than in a bar where it is not. Role size may also be determined by the level of capital investment available to the operation. Furthermore, as the case study illustrates, it may also be shaped by the ideological values entangled in the consumption experience, and the extent to which consumers can and wish to perpetuate them.

Rodie and Kleine (2000, pp.118-120) suggest that customers' willingness to participate is determined by the perceived benefits of their input, which may be increased efficiency, increased efficacy or hedonistic/emotional benefits. Consumers may therefore become productive agencies because, as Bitner *et al.* (1997) suggest, their contribution is underpinned by the belief that it ensures quality, satisfaction and value. However, because consumption may be tied to specific ideological constructs that are perpetuated by a consumer group or community, customers' willingness to contribute may stem from the fact that membership of such a social entity is tied to specific obligations to perform certain roles and duties.

Several studies attempt to account for the process of role formation among consumers. This body of work continues to focus inward on the service encounter rather than the broader cultural factors that are part of the experience, though are not formed or perpetuated exclusively through that context. Mills and Morris (1986) and Namasivayam (2003) argue that the service encounter can be thought of as a contractual agreement in which providers and consumers have roles, which, when performed appropriately, combine to form a satisfying consumer experience. As Lengnick-Hall (1996) maintains, for service organizations it is therefore essential to select and target those consumers who contribute appropriately to the service experience. More important, organizations must direct and coordinate the activities of consumers to ensure that they continue to perform their roles. Mills and Morris (1986) suggest that consumers are prepared and trained to assume certain roles within the service environment. In part, role expectations and role sizes emerge through engagement with promotional material and such orientating cues as signage, physical design features and music. Consumers are also socialized into particular roles as they observe the behaviors of others and as new customers are instructed and initiated by existing ones. However, in a service context catering for LGBT clientele, the behavioral norms of the venue's patrons are tied to broadly circulated discourses of sexual dissidence and gender transgression. Haslop, Hill and Schmidt (1998) argue that these venues play a crucial role in socializing individuals into the community, although it is important to recognize that the process of socialization into sub-cultural norms begins away from the venue.

Clothing, body language, speech acts and acts of intimacy between same sex couples become signifiers of sexual dissidence and gender transgression. Consequently, wearing particular styles of clothing and adopting specific mannerisms can be conceived as performed expressions of queer identity. Within a venue catering for LGBT clientele, the very presence of queer consumers and their displays of sexual dissidence and gender transgression reify the social significance of that space. The visible and audible articulation of queer identity therefore becomes a crucial part of consumer participation.

Myths, queer consumption and commercial hospitality

Throughout history, bars, pubs and taverns have continued to be important sites for LGBT consumers, acting as focal points where individuals form new alliances, articulate common identities and assert social distinctions (cf., Achilles, 1967; David, 1997; Kinsman, 1996). Such commercial hospitality venues have often been hidden spaces where consumers are shielded from surveillance (Brown, 2000; Weightman, 1980; Wolfe, 1992). However, it is increasingly evident that consumption in hospitality venues may also be a form of economic and political visibility (Binnie, 1995; Casey, 2004; Lewis, 1994).

Lugosi (2007) argues that, for LGBT consumers, consumption within venues is tied to the pervading notions that a) patrons in such a hospitable space are, to some extent at least, a collective entity whose members have a shared interest in maintaining their social space by b) protecting those who invest capital of various sorts (social, economic etc) in reproducing the values associated with that space, and c) allowing patrons to engage in activities that are subject to sanction outside that space. Lugosi (2007) refers to these as the myths of commonality, safety and liberated play. To call these myths is not imply that they are falsehoods. Drawing on the earlier work of Barthes (1977, 1993), Lugosi argues that myths should be seen as more or less stable conceptions that continue to circulate in contemporary culture. Central to this argument is the idea that objects, actions, images, narratives and sounds convey messages. Myths are produced as people mobilize these objects, actions, images, narratives and sounds, and as others then interpret the potential meanings they carry. Myths exist only as far as they are consistently produced and interpreted; nevertheless, they have a normative function in shaping the actions and perceptions of those who perpetuate them.

The operators and patrons of the venue discussed here had a shared interest in maintaining the myths associated with both the bar and the experience of consuming within. For patrons, the reproduction of these myths ensured that it continued to be a hospitable space; for the operators, the perpetuation of these myths helped guarantee income. Consequently, the social aspects of consumption became entangled with commercial agendas. The myths of commonality, safety and play underpinned patronage, and they were critical in shaping the consumers' role in the production process.

Queer consumption, hospitality and consumer participation

A number of studies point to the role of queer consumers in producing the values associated with commercial hospitality venues. Drawing on an extensive study of bars, cafes and nightclubs, Moran, Skeggs, Tyrer and Corteen (2001, p.415) note that “ways of dancing, ways of looking; modes and topics of speech and attitude” were important in defining the symbolic properties of venues, although they did not elaborate any further. Chauncey's (1994) research on the history of sexual dissidence and its regulation highlights specific speech acts and gestures that codify the sexual characteristics projected on to hospitality venues. Chauncey (1994, p.344) argues that, for state authorities who wished to regulate lesbian and gay bars, “men referring to each other as ‘her,’ ‘sweetheart,’ and ‘dearie’; speaking in ‘high-pitched voices’ and commenting on each other’s hair and dress; ‘swagger[ing] their hips’; putting their arms around one another’s waists; and, on one occasion, kissing” clearly defined the sexual qualities of a venue. This reinforces the notion that commercial hospitality venues appear to become hospitable spaces through the often subtle performances of its patrons. However, others argue that LGBT consumers often take a

more active role in delineating their spaces. In Cavan's study, the patrons of a gay bar subjected strangers to overt surveillance, objectification and ridicule to reinforce both the sexualized character of the space and the inferior status of outsiders (Cavan, 1963, pp.26-28). In other cases, lesbian patrons have had to resort to physical violence to delineate and defend their social space (Kennedy and Davis, 1993, pp.90-95).

These studies have pointed to the relationship between the consumption of patrons and the production of the myths associated with the venues they occupy. However, these studies have shied away from conceptualizing the patrons of hospitality venues as active producers of the consumption experience. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the inseparable relationship between the social and commercial manifestations of hospitality. In contrast, it is argued here that consumer participation may be a key factor that ensures the commercial and social sustainability of such a venue. This study illustrates the ways in which the patrons of one venue defined and produced the myths that underpinned the consumption experience. More important, it demonstrates that the consumers of this venue actively participated in the management of the commercial operation, and in the maintenance of the social order among its patrons.

The study

Research context

The Freelands was a small bar located in the peripheral residential district of Compton, a suburban town in the south of England [1]. The bar was leased by a small operating company, Emerald Inns. The company installed managers to run the Freelands, but provided minimal investment in equipment, furnishing, decoration, entertainment or advertisement. The managers initially received 15% of the takings, but this changed to a fixed income of approximately £400. There was a £70 allowance for the cleaners, but no extra funds were provided for staff. Any additional staff were paid from the cleaning allowance and the managers' wages. This financial arrangement and low level of general investment was particularly important in determining both the ways in which the bar was managed, and the role size of its customers. The lack of economic capital needed to maintain this venture was substituted by the mobilization of social capital, and the operators relied on their relationships with customers to sustain the operation. Customer participation was therefore essential to the viability of the commercial organization.

In 1999, Emerald Inns recruited two gay men to manage the bar, and instructed them to target gay and lesbian consumers. Prior to this, the nearest venue to Compton overtly targeting LGBT consumers was located over five miles away. It is misleading to suggest that the Freelands became a gay bar: its size and location meant the managers could not rely exclusively on LGBT consumers. The operators actively encouraged heterosexual men and women from the local neighborhood to patronize the bar, and the gay and straight [heterosexual] clientele continually mixed. The managers nurtured close social ties with patrons, and encouraged customers to participate actively in both the operational and social aspects of the Freelands.

Methodology

The research utilized a mixture of overt and covert methods (see Lugosi, 2006b). The principal method of data collection was participant observation, which involved working at the Freelands for 27 months, as well as regular social visits throughout a five year period. During

visits to the Freelands, short notes were made in the toilet, the kitchen area at the back of the bar and, sometimes, openly in the bar itself. These notes were expanded on in a formal research diary, usually on the same day or night of the visit, and the information was later coded to identify specific themes and issues.

Participant observation was complemented by taped, semi-structured interviews with 26 informants, 19 of whom were interviewed repeatedly over the 27 months. Informal contact was maintained with all but two informants throughout the fieldwork, which allowed further exploration of emerging issues. Initial interviews were mostly conducted in the bar, and subsequent ones in other bars, restaurants, parks and informants' homes. Interviews were generally conducted on a one-on-one basis, but 24 informants were also interviewed in groups of two and three.

Consumer participation and the myths of commonality, safety and play

Performative display

Within the context of the Freelands, as in other venues targeting LGBT patrons, performative display was a core aspect of consumer participation. However, performance has two interrelated but separate dimensions. First, the notion of performance can be used to understand the ways in which consumers articulated their queer identity. As noted above, sexuality and gender transgression is coded in behavioral norms (i.e., body language and speech acts) or displays of particular objects (e.g., clothing). The reproduction of these behaviors and the display of these objects by customers could therefore be conceived as a semiotic performance, which reinforced the notion that the bar was indeed a space for LGBT consumers. Being overtly queer within the venue therefore signified both common interest and the possibility that, in that space, open expressions of queer identity were permissible.

A second dimension of performance relates to spectacular, playful displays of transgression. More specifically, as the diary extracts below illustrate, the performances of customers reinforced the notion that the Freelands was a space occupied by LGBT consumers. Such displays demonstrated the possibilities for patrons to transgress particular moral values and normative behavioral codes.

Dillon was dancing in the middle of the bar tonight. When three men started cheering him on, he brought a chair into the middle of the bar and started to perform a 'sexy' dance routine for them. They and others around them laughed, and Dillon kept doing this for another five minutes. He then went around apologizing for his behavior to everyone – explaining that he wasn't like this usually. Within five minutes he was doing it again.

Alternatively, in another incident:

Karen [one of our regular lesbian customers] stood on one of the tables, told [the DJ] to stop the music and shouted 'who wants to see my breasts?' There was a huge cheer from the rest of the bar and she pulled up her shirt and bra. This prompted an even bigger roar.

Dillon and Karen's spectacular performances reified the myths of safety and liberated play.

Their actions reinforced the idea that, within this social space, consumers were permitted to openly reject sexual and gender norms, without fear of verbal abuse or physical assault.

Frontline labor

The lack of investment, coupled with the close-knit relationship shared by managers and patrons, meant consumer participation often took the form of frontline labor (i.e., work in the frontline service operation). For example,

They had a lock-in again tonight and it was left to Daniel [the customer whose birthday it was] to run the bar. [The manager] counted out a float, gave him the key to the front door and told him to sort out who was coming or going. ... Daniel ended up serving behind the bar all night.

(Research diary extract)

Regular customers frequently helped to collect glasses, clean ashtrays, and serve in the bar in the daytime and during busy periods in the evening. Customers painted signs for the bar, accompanied and sometimes even chauffeured managers during shopping trips to local supermarkets. They also took an active role in creating the consumer experience.

It was Karen's birthday tonight. When I got to work at 5.55, the place was being decorated by Shawn, Matt, Joyce and Simon. They blew up balloons and the colorful disco lights were already turned on. For a centerpiece, Matt drew a near life size nude picture of Karen with huge breasts. It looked like a sort of erotic Dadaism.

(Research diary extract)

The questions for the weekly bar quiz were written, read out and marked by customers; and, on several occasions, regulars also put on drag shows and cabaret entertainment. Small amounts of money were paid for some of these services, but managers most often reciprocated with drinks. One young man became the bar's chef for several months, and in return was allowed to live on the premises with his boyfriend. In general, those willing to help run the bar were allowed into the back and upstairs areas. They could also participate in after-hours drinking, and their disruptive or inappropriate behavior often received lighter sanctions than those of others less willing to contribute to the bar's operation. Many of these individuals worked as paid bar-staff at some stage, and all the staff were recruited from this group of trusted clientele.

Customers also had a role in policing the behavior of other patrons and in maintaining boundaries. For example, it was common practice among regulars to instinctively lower the blinds and to lock the front door after 11pm. When prospective customers rung the doorbell after closing time, those standing by the door were often left to assess the legitimacy of potential entrants and either allowed them in or turned them away. Customers also helped staff to break up fights and eject troublesome people from the premises. The perpetuation of the myths of commonality and safety through consumer participation thus ensured both the efficient running of the operation and the maintenance of the social order of the bar.

Conclusion

The need to maintain a hospitable space provided a clear basis for association for the bar's consumers. Patronage reproduced the notion that the Freelands was a delineated social space for LGBT consumers, and the continued expression of queer identity ensured that it remained a hospitable place. The ideological dimensions of patronage, encapsulated in the myths of commonality, safety and liberated play, subsequently defined the nature of consumer participation. Customers reproduced the queer sensibility of social space through performative display and their participation in the service provision. In short, obligations towards the patrons were transformed into obligations towards the service operation, and patronage simultaneously served social and commercial interests.

The Freelands is undoubtedly a unique case: other hospitality venues and their consumers may not have such coherent myths associated with them. Customers of other venues may not be motivated by the need to engage with such communities, or have such obligations towards their fellow patrons. Finally, the design of the service experience in other operations, and the financing that underpins the enterprise, may not require customers to participate so actively in the production process. Nevertheless, it is clear that customers are not passive recipients of a service: they are active producers of the consumption experience. Furthermore, this case demonstrates that existing studies of customer participation offer a limited explanation of either the forms of or the underpinning basis for consumers' contributions.

To understand consumer participation, it is necessary to reconsider the very essence of the consumption experience. More specifically, there is a need to distinguish between service relationships and hospitable relationships. Existing studies of customer participation have focused on service relationships: functional exchanges between the client and provider. Hospitable relationships and the need or desire to create a hospitable space have broader social, political and ideological dimensions. These factors may not be exclusive to specific service contexts, but they are inherently tied to the consumption experience in those places. Conceptualizing the consumption experience in these terms raises important questions about the role of group values and norms, and the obligations that individuals have in articulating a sense of collective and individual identity. A detailed examination of the social and cultural aspects of consumption provides unique insights into consumer behavior and the nature of their participation in the production process. More important, by considering these issues, research on consumer participation can help to understand hospitality as social experience as well as an economic enterprise.

Notes

1. The names of all the people, places and the company have been changed to maintain the anonymity of patrons and informants.

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