

## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the on-going debate on how hospitality should be defined and what constitutes hospitality as a social and commercial phenomenon. The paper takes a conceptual approach, reviewing the literature relevant to hospitality and funeral care provision, and proposing a reclassification of hospitality. The paper reveals that funeral care holds a number of core attributes that have long been associated with (more) conventional hospitality services. The paper articulates these similarities and introduces the notion of ‘last hospitality’, which is conceptualised as the hospitality services provided by funeral directors to the deceased and their families and friends. The paper argues that ‘last hospitality’ alongside the related services of funeral directors should be subsumed into traditional notions of hospitality. The paper discusses the implications of this inclusion for hospitality research, theory and practice.

## **Highlights**

- Revisits the traditional vision of hospitality as a social and commercial phenomenon
- Elaborates on the importance of hospitability in funeral care provision
- Introduces the notion of ‘last hospitality’
- Advocates the need to include funeral care into traditional understandings of hospitality
- Discusses the implications for hospitality theory, practice and research

**Keywords**

Hospitality realm; 'dark' hospitality; 'last' hospitality; 'final destination'; funeral care;  
funeral director

## **1. Introduction**

The gradual growth of the hospitality industry on a global and national scale has accelerated the development of an associated research agenda (Rivera and Pizam 2015). As a result, the scope of analysis in hospitality studies has expanded dramatically from (what can be considered as) rather traditional research areas, such as hospitality branding, marketing and management, towards new and previously un-explored study domains (Lugosi *et al.* 2009). These include the effect of the technological (O'Connor and Murphy 2004), experience (Loureiro 2014) and sharing (Cheng 2016) economies and the impact of political, economic and social turmoil on hospitality operations (Ivanov *et al.* 2017), among others. The perception of what constitutes hospitality and what underpins the provision of its services has also evolved (Brotherton and Wood 2008; Lugosi 2014), with increasing interest paid to the re-definition of hospitality, the reconceptualization of hospitality services and the development of innovative approaches to hospitality management (Lynch *et al.* 2011). Despite a growing research agenda, definitions of hospitality alongside the identification of variables that affect the evolution of these definitions are at the centre of scientific discourse in hospitality (Ryan 2015). More in-depth research on this topic is necessary to facilitate understanding of the industry's scope, and this carries implications for hospitality theory and practice (Ottenbacher *et al.* 2009).

As a social phenomenon, hospitality has traditionally been defined as a service of joy and gratification (Lugosi 2008). From a commercial vantage point, the entertainment element plays a crucial role in hospitality, especially in the context of foodservice provision and leisure (Hanefors and Mossberg 2003). Furthermore, the hospitality literature has always underlined the importance of offering exceptional quality customer care and establishing friendly, welcoming relationships between providers of hospitality services and their recipients (Pizam and Ellis 1999). To this end, the need to excite guests and amuse them with

little surprises or ‘sparkling moments’ has been emphasised (Hemmington 2007, p.753). Finally, the importance of delivering memorable experiences in hospitality is highlighted (Tung and Ritchie 2011), thus ‘adding value to human lives’ (Hemmington 2007, p.754) and enhancing the subjective well-being of consumers (Brotherton 1999) in pursuit of return custom and competitive advantage (Ryu and Han 2010). As a social phenomenon, hospitality has thus been viewed in a largely positive light (Lashley 2008).

From a commercial viewpoint, hospitality has been considered a (dis)continuous realm (Lugosi 2009), whereby the provision of hospitality services stretches from the moment of meeting and greeting guests to the time of their (temporary, with an intention to return) departure from the hospitality premises (Lugosi 2008). Due to its focus on return custom, commercial hospitality can be pictured as a circular phenomenon (Hemmington 2007), in which hospitality services re-occur every time a consumer returns, and every effort is made by hospitality providers to encourage this return (Poulston 2015) (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

While the positive, pleasurable nature of social hospitality and the circularity of commercial hospitality services are well appreciated, there is a less gratifying, ‘dark’ dimension to the hospitality realm which has been neglected in hospitality research to date. Hay (2015) introduced the notion of ‘dark hospitality’ though its definition was limited to the provision of comfort and pastoral care by hospitality managers and staff to those customers who had planned to die in their hotel room. While this is undoubtedly an important and overlooked area of hospitality, it is argued that the scope of ‘dark hospitality’ can be extended to cover funeral care.

Although there are many differences, funeral care reflects the main attributes of traditional hospitality services, namely intangibility, perishability and variability (Korai

and Souiden 2017). The provision of funeral services is emotionally challenging, as it deals with distressed and grieving customers, and thus requires refined emotion management skills and dignified manners (Bailey 2010; Hyland and Morse 1995; Tims 2014). Furthermore, funeral directors play a key role in comforting the family and friends of the deceased. Similar to the traditional vision of hospitality, this comforting role is based on human exchange (Brotherton 1999) and requires exceptional execution of the core customer care skills that any hospitality professional should possess, such as empathy and responsiveness (Crick and Spencer 2011). This points to the resemblance of the services provided by funeral directors to those of traditional hospitality providers, with the main difference lying in the definition of the customer and the more finite nature of ‘dark hospitality’ (see Figure 1). This is because it is unclear as to who constitutes the customer from the perspective of funeral directors, that is the deceased or their family and friends. Furthermore, the notion of the return customer as it is traditionally understood in hospitality cannot be applied to the funeral sector. The hospitality services provided by funeral directors can be seen to constitute the ‘last hospitality’ that a person receives, as opposed to the ‘meet and greet (and entertain)’ concept which underpins services provision in the traditional hospitality narrative. This article conceptualises funeral care as a form of hospitality and recommends its incorporation into the hospitality literature and into the associated research agenda. It finally elaborates on the implications of this development for hospitality theory and practice.

## **2. Defining the scope of hospitality**

To advocate the inclusion of funeral care into the hospitality realm, it is important to first understand the scope of hospitality. This is a challenge per se (Hemmington 2007) as, although hospitality research represents a rapidly emerging study domain, defining hospitality has proven difficult (Brotherton and Wood 2008), and there is an on-going debate

in the literature on what constitutes hospitality services (Lugosi 2008). Hospitality has been conceptualised from the social and commercial perspectives (Causevic and Lynch 2009), where the former manifests hospitality services as a form of emotional, social exchange between providers (hosts) and recipients (guests), while the latter considers hospitality as a means of facilitating this exchange in transactional, business settings (King 1995). Based on this social and commercial definition, a continuum of hospitality has been developed, which draws upon the difference between the ulterior and largely egoistic (commercial) and exterior and mainly altruistic (social) motives of offering hospitality services (Lashley 2015). For the host, the imperative is to balance out these motives to provide truly hospitable services to guests while concurrently maintaining the long-term economic viability of their business venture (Lashley 2000).

Furthermore, due to the blurred nature of hospitality definitions and substantial overlap of the main hospitality functions (Ryan 2015), there is no consensus in the literature as to what activities can be classed as purely hospitality-related. In their seminal work, Ottenbacher *et al.* (2009) distinguish between the core hospitality services that encompass lodging, foodservice, leisure, attractions, travel and conventions and the external forces that determine speed and influence the successful delivery of these services. Given the complexity of the world of hospitality and the multiple associated interactions, Ottenbacher *et al.* (2009) define hospitality as a field, rather than as an industry or an economic sector. They further suggest that the scope and scale of the field of hospitality are constantly evolving, driven by various political and socio-economic variables and facilitated by advancements in social science research. For instance, the definition of the core hospitality services as originally proposed by Ottenbacher *et al.* (2009) has since been extended to cover healthcare and nursing provision (Rosalind *et al.* 2016; Severt *et al.* 2008; Suess and Mody 2017) and religious missionaries (Brandner 2013). Likewise, recent technological innovations and the

rise of the sharing economy are the external forces that have reshaped the notion of hospitality and brought new definitions and phenomena into the hospitality literature, such as airbnbization (Richards 2017), networked hospitality exchange (Molz 2012) and hospitality (host-guest) value co-creation (Chathoth *et al.* 2016).

To summarise, the literature reveals that it is highly challenging to offer a universally accepted and stable definition of hospitality (Hemmington 2007; Brotherton and Wood 2008; Lugosi 2008). Environmental changes including, in particular, technological advances have challenged traditional definitions. Meanwhile, there have been academic redefinitions of hospitality services to include healthcare, nursing and religious missionaries. This paper argues that it is time now that funeral care is also treated as a form of hospitality. As Lugosi (2014) argues, hospitality can be offered and received in what can be thought of as non-traditional hospitality settings, which poses a challenge to managers and researchers. The same could be said for the on-going re-evaluation of what is classed as hospitality services.

### **3. Death and funeral care as research objects**

Death is a natural phenomenon. It is the most certain thing in life and, using travel terminology, a ‘final destination’ for every human being. In other words, it is an inescapable though unsettling fact of life (Heidegger 1962). For this reason, the societal importance of funeral care is high, as it represents the very last service offered to the deceased while concurrently providing comforting services to their family and friends.

Due to its ubiquitous, mysterious and disturbing nature, human death represents a well-established research object not only in medicine and psychology, but also in anthropology and sociology (Korai and Souiden 2017). Similarities and differences in how modern societies interpret and ritualise death have been recorded and research on dying as a sociological phenomenon has been undertaken not only through the lens of individual



nations, but also through comparative, cross-country analysis (Walter 2012). In contrast, despite its paramount role in providing (what can be defined as) an essential human service, funeral care has not been studied systematically and references to death in consumer studies are rare (Bonsu and Belk 2003). The situation is gradually changing and research has recently attempted to understand: the public experience of attending funerals (O'Rourke *et al.* 2011); the affordability of funeral care (Foster and Woodthorpe 2017) and the critical and growing issue of funeral poverty (Corden and Hirst 2016); the motivations and experiences of funeral directors of doing funeral business (Beard and Burger 2017); and the complexity of relationships between funeral directors and their clients (Howarth 2017).

Growing research interest in funeral care is driven not only by its critical societal role, but also by its magnitude as a commercial activity. Indeed, according to McClean (2016), in the UK alone, funeral services are worth circa £1.7 billion a year. This marks a more than twofold rise since 2002 when UK funeral services were valued at £0.8 billion (MacErlean 2002). This figure is unlikely to decline as, despite the on-going improvements in national health care provision and longer life expectancy in the UK, the mortality rate is expected to stay constant given continued population ageing (MacErlean 2002). Importantly, the UK figure of £1.7 billion a year only represents direct funeral care services and does not take into account the supply chain, i.e. the services of florists, masons, musicians, priests, catering and medical professionals, which can be extensive in the context of service industries (Zhang *et al.* 2009). For comparison with the hospitality industry as is currently understood, the current value of the UK funeral services is equivalent to circa 3% of the annual contribution of the 'traditional' UK hospitality industry, one of the largest industries on a national scale, to UK gross domestic product (GDP) (Oxford Economics 2015). Meanwhile, the US funeral services industry generates about \$20 billion per year (Boring 2014), which corresponds to over 10% of the US hotel market (Statista 2016). This is close to the annual value of the

Chinese funeral services industry which was estimated at \$25.5 billion in 2012 (Theron 2013).

The current lack of attention to funeral services in consumer research can be partially explained by the general public's unwillingness to face and discuss the topics of death and mortality. Indeed, from the consumer perspective, funeral care represents 'dismal' (Banks 1998), 'controversial' (Fam *et al.* 2004), 'unwanted' (Theron 2013) and 'unsought' (Schwartz *et al.* 1986) services, characterised by negative demand (i.e. no one actively wants to purchase them) and public aversion (Korai and Souiden 2017). Funeral experiences can be fraught with emotion, and they are therefore associated with difficulties in primary data collection among consumers (Peacock 2014).

The aversion to confronting the inevitability of death and the tasks associated with dealing with death among family or friends can be understood from a philosophical perspective. In *Being and Time* (1927; translation 1962), Heidegger argues that people live in a state of dread and anxiety. This is a natural response to the chaos of life and the inevitability of death, which, according to Heidegger, makes internal life fundamentally unsettled. Heidegger states that people flee from the knowledge of death; they engage in an 'evasive concealment in the face of death' (p. 297). This is a powerful drive that is hard to challenge. As Giddens (1991) observes, people avoid anxiety in order to maintain a state of ontological security.

Funeral care has been stigmatised due to a dominant public perception that it makes money from human pain and loss (Bailey 2010). This viewpoint may have shaped consumer hostility and determined people's unwillingness to discuss the topic of funeral care with researchers (Theron 2013). Lastly, the research ethics standards adopted by research institutions worldwide may obstruct research into funeral care given the high sensitivity of the issue and the potential emotional harm caused to participants. Perhaps a solution would

be to collect data only from those involved in the provision of funeral care, such as funeral directors, caterers, religious organisations, staff in venues that host wakes/celebrations of life, such as hotels and pubs. Having said that, the perspective of the mourners of the deceased is important to have insight into, therefore much thought needs to be put into how this population could be approached delicately and with care. Perhaps a retrospective view on the funeral experience could be captured, for example, six months after the event, when feelings are perhaps not so raw. Certainly, this is an area that needs much consideration and future analysis. Given the economic and social contribution made by funeral care, more research is needed in order to better understand the needs of consumers in modern society (Korai and Souiden 2017). Funeral care should also be better investigated from the standpoint of its market position and economic value creation. To date, no attempt has been made to establish what industry sector funeral services should be allocated to, which hampers the collection of statistical data and hinders research on funeral services as a commercial activity.

In summary, despite its economic and social significance, there has been little research on funeral care, though this situation is slowly changing. A challenge to conducting research on this important sector has been identified as a reluctance to discuss death and dying. Meanwhile, there are serious ethical issues to conducting such research that need careful consideration, in particular if data are to be collected from the bereaved.

#### **4. Death and funeral care in tourism and hospitality research**

Despite the stigmatisation of the topic of death and mortality, it represents a cornerstone of tourism research. Indeed, dark tourism (also broadly known as grief tourism and thanatourism) experiences have recently attracted increasing scrutiny (Light 2017; Stone and Sharpley 2008), which has accelerated studies on consumer motivations to engage in dark tourism activities (Biran *et al.* 2011) and the implications of visiting dark tourism destinations for tourism management (Kang *et al.* 2012). According to Stone (2012), there is

a fundamental public interest in death and mortality. However, this interest is usually manifested in observations of death from a (geographical or temporal) distance and of the others. The topic of recent deaths and deaths among family and close friends is still taboo and therefore understudied. Related to this is the observation of the importance of the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market segment in tourism (Moscardo *et al.* 2000), and the unexplored travel undertaken by tourists to attend the funerals of friends and relatives. People are generally reluctant to discuss the specifics of death and mortality, but are unconsciously prepared through dark tourism visits to glimpse the finitude of life (Cohen 2011). Dark tourism thus serves to develop a coping mechanism for the ultimate demise (Stone and Sharpley 2008).

The notion of dark tourism has recently been extended to include death tourism (Miller and Gonzalez 2013). In contrast to dark tourism, where people travel to observe death from a distance, death tourism (also known as suicide tourism or euthanasia tourism) describes physical travel undertaken with the purpose of participating in death itself (Dale and Robinson 2011). It is largely associated with Dignitas, a Swiss non-profit society which provides assisted suicide services to terminally ill people (Andorno 2013). The topic of death tourism is controversial but under-researched (Miller and Gonzalez 2013), which is underlined by similar reasons as those highlighted in the case of funeral care in section 3.

Lastly, tourist deaths when travelling represent an emerging research domain. Despite the explicit significance of this topic for tourism policy and practice, to date it has been examined from a medical (Connolly *et al.* 2017) and insurance (Hunter 2014), rather than a tourism, perspective. This is an essential knowledge gap given the steady growth in senior tourism (Losada *et al.* 2016), which could imply an increased chance of dying during the trip, bringing with it the need to cater to the deceased and their family and friends.

The topic of death and mortality has only recently been discussed in the hospitality context. Hay (2015) explored managerial and staff approaches to dealing with clients who have opted to die in a hotel. In a similar vein, Bering *et al.* (2017) studied the psychology of consumer attitudes to guest deaths in hotel rooms and examined the implications for hospitality management. Though seminal in introducing the notion of ‘dark’ hospitality to traditional hospitality, neither Hay (2015) nor Bering *et al.* (2017) considered funeral care to be part of social or commercial hospitality, though there are numerous reasons why the scope of hospitality should be extended to encompass funeral services provision.

First, just by looking at the semantics of key definitions, it can be observed that there are considerable similarities between funeral care provision and hospitality. Indeed, funeral services are underpinned by a unique, short-term, professional caring relationship that occurs between strangers, i.e. a funeral director and the family and friends of the deceased (Hyland and Morse 1995). Funeral directors are further expected to provide exceptional quality customer care and to foresee consumer demands (Bailey 2010) while demonstrating empathy and compassion (Parsons 2003). These attributes are typical of the core characteristics identified in the traditional hospitality literature (Brotherton 1999; Lugosi 2008; O’Connor 2005).

Second, funeral directors not only cater to the deceased, thus performing a utilitarian function and adopting the transactional role of a commercial enterprise, but they also look after the family and friends of the deceased (Parsons 2003). This imposes substantial emotional pressure on the funeral care provider who needs to balance the implicit discussion of money and an explicit demonstration of hospitability, empathy and compassion (Bailey 2010). This points to a tension between commerce and care in funeral directing, and contributes to an on-going debate in hospitality studies on the scope and function of hospitality (see section 2).

Third, funeral directors have been accused of making profit from human pain and loss (Bailey 2010): there are ulterior motives behind funeral care provision. However, in commercial hospitality, the motives for the host being hospitable are also ulterior (Lashley 2000) and there is an on-going debate as to how/if commercial hospitality can be truly hospitable, although Poulston (2015) identifies the potential coexistence of both altruistic and ulterior motives. This suggests that funeral directing is similar to many traditional hospitality services in so far as how they can or should integrate the social and commercial aspects of hospitality provision in their operations.

Fourth, the level of emotional distress experienced by funeral care providers is likely to be significantly higher than in traditional hospitality settings, such as in restaurants or hotels. Indeed, the amount of effort required to comfort the bereaved can hardly compare with the challenges of catering for a difficult (restaurant or hotel) client. Thus, from a social perspective, hospitability is deeply integrated in funeral care given the importance of establishing human contact, facilitating effective social exchange between providers and recipients of funeral services, offering exceptional levels of customer care and comforting those in mental pain (Bailey 2010; O'Donohoe and Turley 2006; Parsons 2003). The emotional labour that is commonly said to be required of hospitality staff is intensified among staff in the funeral sector.

Fifth, while people do sometimes choose to die in hotels (Hay 2015), these incidents are rare. Sudden death is not however rare in hospitals and nursing homes, which are now considered integral elements of hospitality (Erickson and Rothberg 2017). Removing death from the home environment has resulted in the 'professionalisation' of the dying experience (Hockey 2007), involving multiple specialists, including hospital doctors, employees of nursing homes and funeral directors, among others. Dealing with death imposes substantial emotional pressure on staff in hospitals, nursing homes and funeral care businesses. This

observation is relevant to academic discourse on work stress (O'Neill and Davis 2011), employee burnout (Pienaar and Willemse 2008) and emotional labour (Chu and Murrmann 2006) that have long concerned hospitality researchers.

The above commonalities between funeral care provision and (more) traditional hospitality services demonstrate that hospitability represents a cornerstone of funeral care. It is therefore argued that funeral services should be considered part of the hospitality (social and commercial) literature. It must be noted however that, as the title of the paper implies, the term 'last hospitality' is preferred to 'dark hospitality', given the focus on the hospitable services offered to mourners. Dark tourism is associated with an interest in or a fascination with death and mortality, and is linked with visiting sites of death and suffering (Light 2017). In the hospitality context, this understanding has little relevance. The use of the term 'dark' to refer to funeral care may have applications to the emotional work done by funeral care staff, but its negative connotations are challenged by the notion of hospitality as a gift, as put forward by Poulston (2015). In the provision of a funeral experience, the funeral home aims to honour the deceased and to care for the bereaved. As Poulston (2015) observes, hospitality workers are often motivated to offer the gift of hospitality even in difficult circumstances, and this clearly has applications to funeral service providers. The implications of integrating funeral care into the hospitality narrative for hospitality research, theory and practice will be discussed next.

## **5. The implications of integrating funeral care into understandings of hospitality**

### ***5.1. The notion of client***

The need to re-define the hospitality client is one of the main theoretical implications of integrating funeral care into hospitality discourse. As Howarth (2017) observes, the

relationships between funeral directors and their clients can be complex. Furthermore a key question begs itself: who is the customer of funeral directors, the deceased or their family and friends? The widespread notion in commercial hospitality is that a paying customer is the one to whom hospitality providers should cater (Lashley 2000). However, the family and friends of the deceased should arguably be considered the client(s) in funeral care as it is they who commission funeral directors to organise and manage a funeral. This is reinforced in the literature on funeral care where a number of studies have shown that funeral directors respond to the living client, rather than the deceased (Schäfer 2007). The services received by the deceased include the provision of technical advice and funeral logistics, which includes body decoration, burial and/or cremation (Howarth 2017). Meanwhile, family and friends are offered exceptional levels of comfort, compassion and pastoral care (Bailey 2010). Funerals are however often pre-paid, and funeral arrangements can be specified in advance in the deceased's will, which is legally binding (Lloyd-Williams *et al.* 2007): funeral directors have to closely adhere to the instructions of the deceased. Having said that, a funeral director has a number of legal obligations that they must comply with, and of course these vary by country, implying the need for future investigation, both from the perspective of consumer and provider of funeral services (Kopp and Kemp 2007).

## ***5.2. (Re-)purchase intentions***

Closely linked with the (re-)definition of the hospitality client is the notion of the repeat purchase that represents a keystone of the effective provision of commercial hospitality services. Consumer loyalty is paramount in hospitality business success (Shoemaker and Lewis 1999), and the intention to return is determined by multiple factors, where customer satisfaction plays a major role (Bowen and Chen 2001). In turn, customer satisfaction depends on the quality of product and service provision in hospitality ventures (Choi and Chu 2011) and becomes reinforced with each positive (past) experience (Oh 2000). However, the



notion of repeat custom is not applicable to funeral care provision as funeral directors offer unwanted societal services whose recurrence people tend to be in denial about (Korai and Souiden 2017). Reference to past experience is therefore of less relevance to funeral directors' customers. Furthermore, despite the exceptional quality of pastoral care, which funeral directors strive to provide to the family and friends of the deceased, it is usually difficult to find anything positive in a funeral experience. Nevertheless, repeat custom is possible in the case of subsequent deaths among family members and friends of those who attended the funeral service, if a good service was received. Word of mouth is known to be an important marketing tool in service industries (Harrison-Walker 2001). However, grief may get in the way of seeking recommendations from family and friends: this could be a line for further enquiry, the ethical considerations involved in consumer research on death notwithstanding.

### ***5.3. Marketing funeral services***

Marketing determines the success of commercial hospitality (Kotler *et al.* 1996) and showcasing positive (past) experiences is considered paramount in attracting new hospitality customers, maintaining the existing client base and reinforcing consumer loyalty (Viglia *et al.* 2014). Yet, in funeral care, marketing is unlikely to become the main motivator of purchase. Funeral advertisements are rare, and the key role of advertising in shaping the (re-)purchase intentions of funeral services is questionable in this arena. Indeed, traditionally, marketing campaigns are designed to stir (positive) emotions. However, exposure to funeral services is unlikely to make a positive impact on consumers given that funerals are associated with unpleasant feelings (Theron 2013). It is more appropriate to therefore assume that the main goal of funeral advertisement is to remind consumers about the finitude of human life and prompt them to make funeral arrangements in advance.

This topic holds significant (market) research opportunities. Indeed, while the studies of the effect of hospitality marketing campaigns on customer (re-)purchase decisions and loyalty are abundant (Kim and Cha 2002; Kim *et al.* 2007; Mossberg 2007), the impact of advertising such a controversial service as funeral care on consumer choice and (re-)purchase intentions has never been explored (Fam *et al.* 2004). And yet, there are advertisements for making wills and taking out life insurance, both of which allude to or directly mention death. Perhaps death in such adverts is far enough away in the future to allow people to avert their gaze. According to Heidegger (1962), people like to pretend that ‘death is a mishap which is constantly occurring’ (p. 296), but which has nothing to do with them. The challenges involved in and obstacles to marketing funeral services represent an exciting area of research.

#### ***5.4. Creating a memorable experience***

The rise of the experience economy has reshaped the nature of hospitality services provision and contributed to the development of more effective hospitality marketing techniques (Oh *et al.* 2007). The experience economy has urged managers of hospitality ventures to design and offer (more) memorable services to their guests in pursuit of positive feedback, new custom and consumer loyalty (Bharwani and Jauhari 2013; Gilmore and Pine 2002; Hemmington 2007). This is often achieved by adding an element of entertainment to hospitality services (Tung and Ritchie 2011). In this regard, memorable services are defined as those that are unconventional and extraordinary; those designed with an aim to stir positive feelings and prompt consumers to experience these feelings again and again (Ritchie and Hudson 2009).

This imperative of a memorable experience should be revisited in the context of funeral care. For many, funerals are painful and disturbing, which, at first sight, may challenge the value of creating a memorable experience. However, much thought is often put into a funeral by the deceased and/or the bereaved in terms of the design and content of the funeral service,

the venue for both the funeral and the wake, and the funeral meal. In some cultures, funeral ceremonies are designed to be remembered. In Ghana, for example, dancing is a funeral ritual and funeral attendees are usually entertained by professional dancers (BBC 2017). This is because funerals are viewed as occasions for the celebration of life (May 2013). Furthermore, some African cultures consider funeral entertainment as the last opportunity to cherish the deceased, lightening their journey to their 'final destination' (Newton 2014). In South Africa, for instance, music and car spinning represent widespread forms of funeral entertainment (Steingo 2016). Memorable funerals are also becoming popular in western cultures. For example, playing cheerful pop music is no longer considered extraordinary at funerals in the UK and it is now possible to prescribe the type of music played at funerals in the will (Coop Funeralcare 2016). This emphasis on experience gives rise to an important avenue for future research on consumer expectations of the funeral service as and the extent to which consumers want a funeral to be a positive experience to remember or whether the occasion is so painful that they want to get through it as quickly as possible. Grief affects people differently, and may also affect the type of service preferred (Doka 1985). Individual circumstances may also be influential: the age of the deceased and the manner of their death, for example. In this regard, it would be useful to understand how funeral directors prepare for differences in consumer expectations and demands.

Last but not least, given the profound role of information and communication technology (ICT) in hospitality management and marketing (Law *et al.* 2014), the potential for engagement with technological innovations in funeral care should be investigated, as these may well contribute to the creation of a memorable experience. There is evidence that online social network sites, such as Facebook, have been increasingly used to commemorate the dead (Gibbs *et al.* 2015). Walter *et al.* (2012) argue that the use of social media to honour or remember the dead is driven by a desire to stay connected with the deceased, and serves to

remind society of the presence and the power of death. Voight (2017) has created the term ‘cyberternity’ to refer to the opportunities offered by the internet to allow communication from beyond the grave. She gives an example of a mother who writes to her deceased son through the blog he created, which is still live, imagining that he somehow receives her messages. Another example that she offers is the website ‘Deathswitch’, which allows users to set up communication with their loved ones after their death; this sometimes stretches into years beyond their death. This phenomenon could be investigated further. Other technological innovations that could be investigated include the potential use of live streaming and Virtual Reality at funeral. Using these technologies may offer comfort to those who are unable to travel to the funeral in person. Of course, such practices would have to be handled with care so as to avoid causing offence to mourners at the funeral. The ethical aspects of funeral care and related research are again highlighted.

### ***5.5. Role of national culture***

The role of national culture in shaping different consumer perceptions of (social and commercial) hospitality and influencing managerial practices in hospitality is well recognised (Gilbert and Tsao 2000; Kirillova *et al.* 2014; Munasinghe *et al.* 2017). Extending hospitality to include funeral care will have far-reaching implications for cross-cultural research on funeral provision. Cross-cultural studies have been made on death and dying (Walter 2012), but similar research on funeral provision is lacking. Future research should identify cross-cultural discrepancies in determining just what constitutes a funeral and what is expected of funeral directors and mourners as well as what the service should contain. It will also explore the extent to which national culture may affect consumer attitudes to the job and function of funeral directors. While in some cultures funeral directing is assigned high societal status and funeral directors are considered respected members of local communities, there are cultures where funeral directing is delegated to the representatives of the lower classes (Thompson

1991). In India, for example, funeral care is the responsibility of the lower castes (Bregman 2010). Research findings will inform the design of dedicated policies and managerial interventions that will help to change negative public perceptions of funeral care services, thus enhancing public appreciation of the substantial societal and economic value of the funeral sector.

### ***5.6. Employment and workforce***

Lastly, employees represent a key area of interest when integrating funeral care into the traditional hospitality realm. Staff are the most valuable resource in commercial hospitality ventures (Cho *et al.* 2006) and this holds true for services of funeral directors. This is because a number of similar issues can be observed in traditional hospitality employment and funeral care employment, thus highlighting an array of identical areas for policy-making and management interventions. For example, similar to the commercial hospitality sector, where the majority of companies are small and medium-sized establishments (SMEs), UK funeral directing (with a few notable exceptions) is predominantly a family-run business (MacErlean 2002). This brings with it a lack of resources for such important human resources activities as staff training. However, as with traditional hospitality, employee training is paramount in funeral directing. The qualifications of staff employed by funeral care providers are usually low. According to MacErlean (2002), only 15% of funeral directors in the UK are university graduates, while there is a critical need in funeral care provision to possess a broad range of ‘hard’ (such as numerical and legal literacy) and ‘social’ (such as empathy, efficiency and emotion control) skills (Tims 2014). Emotional labour represents a major challenge in funeral services (Korai and Souiden 2017) and there is a continuous need for staff training in funeral directing to refine customer care skills and learn how to cope with work-related stress (MacErlean 2002; Tims 2014). Furthermore, funeral directing is underpaid. Indeed, while the salaries of funeral directors correspond to the UK’s income average (MacErlean 2002), the

level of emotional stress experienced by funeral employees on a daily basis is significant (Bailey 2010) and, arguably, incomparable with traditional hospitality employment (Tims 2014). The need to be flexible and the ability to work unsocial and unpredictable hours is another attribute of funeral care employment (Tims 2014), which further resembles traditional hospitality employment. As Poulston (2015, p. 146) notes, ‘despite its reputation for poor working conditions, and the potential for repetitive and unglamorous drudgery’, people are still attracted to work in hospitality. The negative aspects of hospitality work are perhaps exacerbated in the funeral sector. Considering the motivations of funeral care staff could also be very useful for those involved in the funeral sector. Poulston (2015) refers to the paucity of studies on the intrinsic motivations of hospitality workers; this is also true of research on the funeral care sector.

The issue of gender is of interest in the context of funeral care employment. Although the non-management level hospitality workforce in western societies has traditionally been female-dominated (Purcell 1993), the opposite is true of staff in funeral services where the majority are male (Arnold *et al.* 2007). Redressing this balance may be a challenge, as cultural attitudes may mean that women are less willing to take on these roles. Further research could investigate this supposition.

Lastly, future research could explore the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between mourners and funeral directors. It could be argued that there is an imbalance of power in favour of the funeral director, given the stress that mourners are under and the effect this could have on the capacity to make decisions. Such research could inform the training offered to funeral care staff to ensure that they delicately prompt mourners to make decisions that are best for them and their family.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper highlights that the notion of what constitutes social and commercial hospitality is constantly evolving. The field of hospitality as defined in the seminal work by Ottenbacher *et al.* (2009) has been steadily expanding to incorporate new operational dimensions based on the shared core attributes of hospitability and similar operational characteristics of the main services offered by hospitality ventures. Indeed, hospitality is now understood to refer to healthcare and nursing, and missionary work, in addition to traditional providers.

Funeral care shares a number of features with nursing and healthcare provision as well as with the more traditional hospitality services. Funeral providers are commercial operations that have to offer excellent customer service and a high degree of compassion. The emotional work done by staff of funeral directors echoes that done by traditional hospitality employees, though it is clearly more intense, and probably on a par with the emotional labour performed by nursing and care staff. Hospitability is central to the services offered by funeral providers. Indeed, funeral care is the last hospitable service that a person will receive. It is what has been described in this paper as the ‘last’ hospitality shown to people at the end of their life journey, thus taking the deceased on the pathway towards their ‘final destination’ and comforting their family and friends.

Yet, surprisingly, funeral care has never been considered part of the hospitality field. The paper uses philosophical insight to understand why the contemplation of death may be unsettling for people, and this may apply to researchers as well as to the general public. This paper argues for the inclusion of funeral care provision into the field of social and commercial hospitality. It has highlighted the areas where such inclusion would lead to a rethinking of some of the cornerstones of traditional hospitality theory and practice, and it has outlined research opportunities that will aid understanding of the role of funeral care provision in a revised hospitality narrative. Implications for management and research relate

to the following topic areas: the rethinking of the notion of client in the funeral director-consumer relationship; the untapped potential of repeat custom, consumer loyalty and word of mouth marketing; the role and impact of advertising and marketing funeral care services in consumer choice and purchase intentions, and the challenges these pose; the management of individual and cross-cultural differences in consumer expectations and demands; the role of technological innovations in marketing and the creation of memorable experiences; issues related to the welfare and development of staff, including training, remuneration, qualification level, gender representation, burnout and stress. This paper notes the important need for ethical issues to be considered in all research related to funeral provision and experiences, given the sensitivity of the topic for individual mourners and society's general squeamishness around discussions related to death.

Finally it is hoped that this paper will help to start a debate on the location of the funeral sector within hospitality theory and practice.



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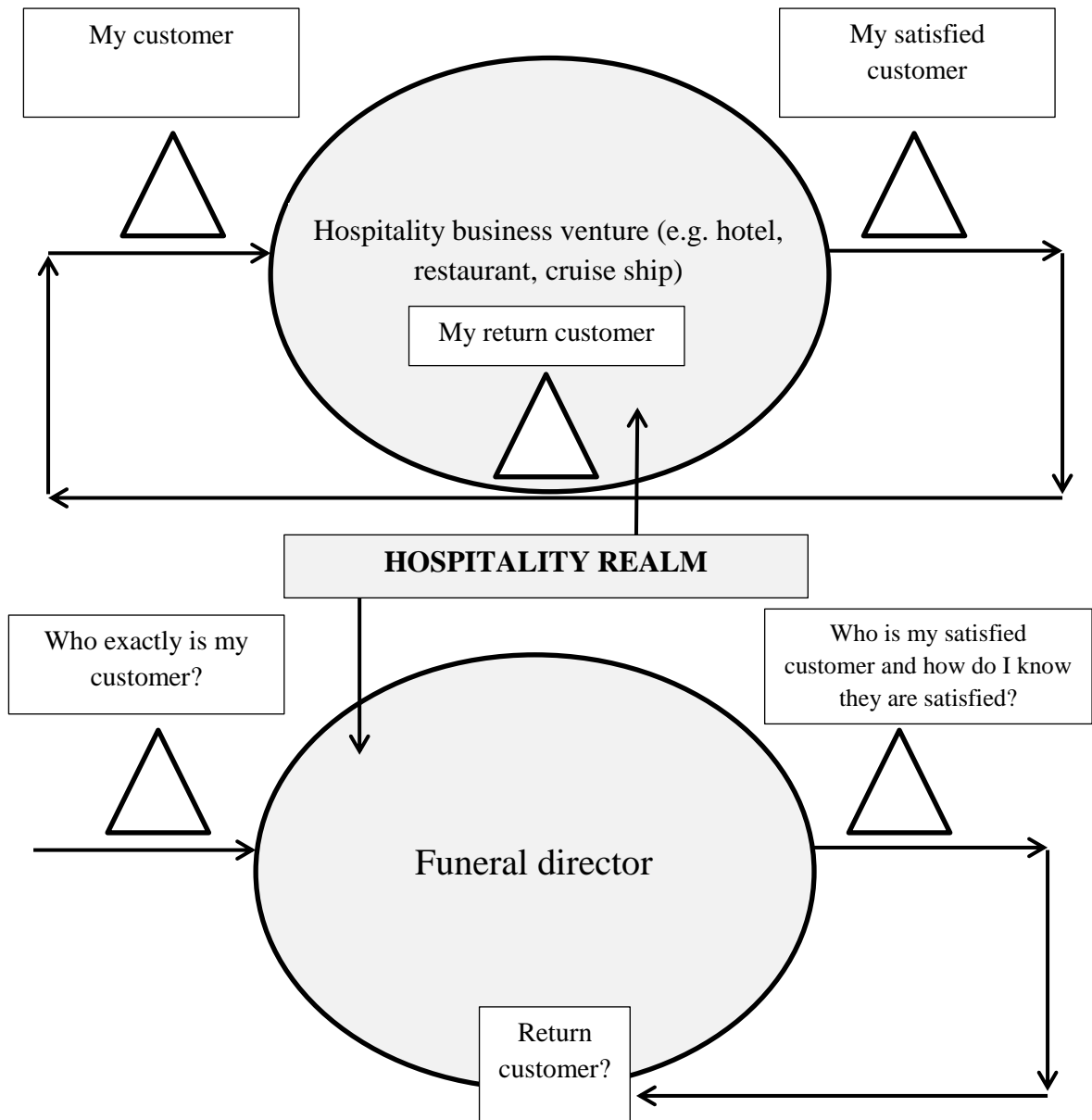


Figure 1. The explicit circularity of the traditional hospitality realm versus the more finite nature of 'last' hospitality.