Commercial hospitality in tourism: A global comparison of what culturally matters

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ABSTRACT

As the hospitality academy matures it has worked towards bespoke theory development. Emerging literature has attempted to quantify, and develop measurements for, the intangible and situationally variable dimensions of hospitality and/or hospitableness. This paper aims to explore whether the importance tourists place on various aspects of 'hospitality' differs according to their culture, using country/region of origin as a proxy. A cross-national survey was conducted across multiple destinations in the Asia-Pacific and Europe. Data captured the importance 2248 tourists placed on 12 facets of hospitality. Results indicate that tourists' nationality influences the importance they place on all facets of the hospitality experience. The study contributes to theory by advancing our understanding of how different cultures evaluate the importance of the multiple aspects of commercial hospitality. Practically, the study challenges hospitality industry conventions, which standardize rather than personalize guest-host interactions.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary experience-based economy 'hospitality' is a critical key success factor for service providers. In particular in the tourism industry hospitable hosting behavior has become essential for tourism service providers who wish to distinguish themselves from competing organizations (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012) – for example those providing accommodation, food and beverage and experience-based products. Crafting a genuine hospitality experience for guests can enhance guest satisfaction and thus business performance (Pechlaner and Raich, 2007). In a commercial context this implies that hosts should understand and requite their customers' needs and expectations via an hosted performance aligning with their consumers' sensibilities. This is suggestive of a transacted experience exchange between guests and host employees that significantly influences guest perceptions of hospitality, despite an emphasis on the services offered (Ariffin et al., 2011; Teng, 2011). It is therefore vital that we have a solid understanding of guests' expectations of hospitality and the importance that they place on the many and varied facets that constitute its meaning – both material and intangible.

Over the past several decades, there has been a discernable increase in the attention afforded to hospitality in the literature, both within the hospitality (management) field and other disparate disciplines. Despite this substantial increased attention, a precise definition of the hospitality concept remains unclear (Ottenbacher et al., 2009; Obrador, 2020; Lynch, 2017). There is little general agreement or accepted definition of what hospitality specifically constitutes. Recent studies have repeatedly underlined that improved insights into the concept of hospitality is fundamental in advancing it's theoretical definitions and practical applications (Lashley, 2015; Lynch et al., 2011; Ottenbacher et al., 2009; Tasci and Semrad, 2016). Some works have focused on a hospitable culture within workplaces (e.g. Dawson et al., 2011; Omuris, 2019), yet the guest perspective is crucial in hospitality. Few studies have empirically explored what hospitality means for guests and what attributes/factors they associate with hospitality (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012; Bavik, 2016; Biswas-Diener et al., 2019; Brotherton, 2005; Nameghi and Ariffin, 2013; Tasci and Semrad, 2016). Until recently, there were few reliable valid measurement instruments available that can be used to evaluate the importance of the hospitality experience in a tourism business context and the emphasis hosts need to place on delivering the hospitality experience. Pijls et al. (2017) identified what customers experience as hospitality based on their development of a scale

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measuring customer's experiences of hospitality within various service organizations. Their scale assesses three experiential dimensions of hospitality – 'the experience of inviting', 'the experience of care' and 'the experience of comfort'. However, the application of their measurement instrument was limited to a context that focused only on the hospitality experiences of Dutch people. They acknowledged however, that culture likely mediated experiences of hospitality, which may be pertinent, was not investigated. To allow for a globally relevant understanding of what matters during the hospitality experience, this research paper investigates the relative importance that guests assign to various aspects of hospitality according to cultural background. Moreover, this paper responds to a greater interest generally of the import of culture vis-à-vis hospitality (e.g. Hoang et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2020). The research gap this paper addresses therefore, is that there exists relatively little knowledge regarding how a guest's cultural background influences what they value in a hospitality encounter. A nascent scale to measure the various facets of hospitality developed by (Stettler et al., 2018) was mobilized in the study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Hospitality as a concept

Even though hospitality, as a philosophy, a social practice, or an economic endeavour has persisted since the earliest epochs, it's adoption as a nomenclature for the commercial sector is a quite recent development (Brotherton, 2005). More specifically, the term hospitality has been used to describe a contemporary industry providing commercial accommodation, dining and drinking services. According to Romeiß-Stracke (1995), hospitality is one of several components of the quality of tourism services. For example, hospitality is defined by The Joint Hospitality Industry Congress, as "[t]he provision of food and/or drink and/or accommodation away from home" (1996, p.13). Consequently, there exists a preoccupation in the literature with the tangible aspects of customer service, service provision and the quality of service. However, this approach is directed by the industry's supply-side perspectives, and does not reflect the viewpoint, or language, of the demand-side, or consumers' experiences of hospitality. In short, this perspective does not reflect the customer experience, and could be considered an imposition. The reduction of the term 'hospitality' to solely represent the provisioning of food, drink and accommodation and in doing so describing the hotel and food service industries has been the subject of some criticism (Brotherton and Wood, 2008; Lashley, 2015; Lynch et al., 2011). Thus, the academic debate has somewhat fixated on the imposition of broader business and management-related concepts and theories (Hemmington, 2007) and shied away from advancing the field by developing bespoke discipline-defining theory.

The linkage of the term hospitality to the commercial provision of food, drink and accommodation is narrow and constrained (Lashley, 2015). Pechlaner and Volgger (2017) highlighted that hospitality involves emotional experiences of unique exchanges and relationships that transcend the economic worth of products and services. Similarly Smith (1994) emphasized that hospitality and service are two distinct aspects of the tourism product. Hospitality can be considered as the enriched provisioning – or the manner or style – in which service is delivered. Or paraphrasing famed American restauranteur and writer, Meyer (2006) service is something that happens *to* you and hospitality something that happens *for* you. Researchers emanating from a range of disciplines have recently examined the broader dimensionality of hospitality. These include, for example, philosophy (Derrida, 2000; Muna-singhe et al., 2017), urban geography/mobilities (Gibson, 2016; Morton and Johnson, 2019), anthropology (Cole, 2007) and sociology (Lynch, 2017). These perspectives challenge the dominant management-oriented research perspective that narrowly defines and translates hospitality as a set of instrumental organizational and service functions (Lugosi, 2008). Contemporary customers purchase

experiences as opposed to services. According to Lashley (2001a, 2001b) true hospitality is enacted when guests discern that hosts exercise generosity, the desire to provide pleasure and show genuine concern for them. Hemmington (2007), thus invoked a shift in thinking from discrete managerial pre-occupations with the quality of service and the efficiency of operations to a focus on the social and personable aspects of customer's experiences.

However, the commercial imperative creates a number of tensions and contradictions. In commercial hospitality there is a tension between the essence of hospitality and the economics of hospitality even in domains like homestay, AirBnB and traditional bed and breakfast operations (Lynch et al., 2016). Thus, the question arises whether the commercial sector can ever provision genuine hospitality? Commercial organizations and businesses might be better placed to capture a loyal consumer base if they had a fuller understanding of the nature of hospitality in these economic domains (Lashley, 2015; Pizam and Shani, 2009; Telfer, 2001). Hospitality's affordances include facilitating unique connections and relationships that transcend the economic worth of products and services (Pechlaner and Raich, 2007). Accordingly, hospitality businesses are challenged to augment guest experiences (Hemmington, 2007), by attentiveness to theatre, spectacle and performance, and value-adding by generosity and spontaneous surprises. These qualities have been empirically captured in commercial hospitality contexts as 'warm welcoming', 'personalization' and 'special relationship[s]' (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012). Subsequent work, showed that the performance of staff was of more import than the tangible facets of hospitality venues in creating memorable staying experience Ariffin et al 2013). Contrarily, some research questions whether hotel employees actually understand what constitutes hospitality (Golubovskaya et al., 2017).

Confusion regarding the meaning of hospitality amongst the academy and practitioners alike is unsurprising. It is important to acknowledge that the term 'hospitality' is a broad one, both tangible/objective and intangible/subjective, and one that extends beyond tourism into, for example, private and social domains. A specific delimitation to this study is that we were primarily interested in defining and measuring the abstract and intangible, or 'soft' dimensions of hospitality, rather than more tangible and environmental 'hard' aspects. The rationale is that the service, experience-/service-scapes literature (cf. Bitner, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1993) has defined and quantified many of the tangible aspects of commercial service environments, and indeed the impact of culture on perceptions of service (e.g. Callan and Tyson, 2000; Turner et al., 2001). Yet, as our literature has demonstrated, 'hospitality', in terms of its abstract and subjective characteristics, is still a black box.

What emerges from this brief overview of the hospitality literature is that its dimensionality is somewhat abstract, intangible, subjective, and prone to interpretation. Moreover, it is confounded by economic imperatives when applied in commercial contexts. Thus, compounding the question of what hospitality constitutes and how it can be improved, an important aspect to consider is how perceptions might differ according to different tourist characteristics. At this juncture it is pertinent to invoke the Kantian (1997) perspective that conceptually, hospitality can relationally be transacted between individuals (of similar or differing orientation) or between groups. Indeed, Kant's theorizations of cosmopolitan hospitality have informed our understanding of the civic and political domains of hospitality (Molloy, 2019) – whereby groups and entities can be conceived of as hosts and guests. Groups' characteristics and understandings of hospitality are culturally bounded as literature demonstrates in commercial hotel (Lam and Cheung, 2018), homestay (Zhu et al., 2019) and immigrant (Araya-Moreno, 2020) contexts. Nonetheless, although groups (in this paper country-based nationalities) are custodians of cultural idiosyncrasies, these ultimately devolve to the individual level and have import in person-to-person host-guest interactions.

2.2. Hospitality and culture

Returning to the individual level of analysis, earlier work has acknowledged that guest satisfaction greatly depends on the extent to which the customer service aligns with their expectations. There is evidence to suggest that these expectations may be shaped by demographic or personal factors (Webster, 1989). Thus, a number of influences can impact a customer's perception of abstract performances of hospitality. These may be personality driven (Auh et al., 2011), given individual's filter experiences via their own particular lenses. A values-approach has also been proposed as a key variant in how individuals interact and respond to environmental stimuli. Some scholars, notably Schwartz (1999), proposed an inventory of universal values – inter alia power, 'achievement', 'hedonism', 'stimulation', 'self-direction', 'universalism', 'benevolence', 'tradition', 'conformity', and 'security' – that transcend communities, societies, ethnicities and nations. On the other hand, Hofstede (1980) conceptualized a dimensionality of four bipolar values – 'high/low power distance', 'weak/strong uncertainty avoidance', 'individualism/collectivism' and 'femininity/masculinity' – that were nuanced across cultural orientations. Critically, in the context of this study, the group cultural background, or orientation, of a recipient of hospitality is considered salient (Hoang et al., 2017). Groups of similar cultural background are often co-located geographically. Indeed, sharing a cultural orientation is a defining characteristic of a nation state (country), and shared culture is historically mobilized in acts of self-determination (i.e. aspirations to nation-hood). While a country is an imperfect proxy for cultural groups in application, nonetheless it is an inherent assumption in widely adopted measures (e.g., Hofstede) and mobilized in hospitality studies according to regions (see use of culture re Asia and South-East Asia in Lam et al., 2020).

Given hospitality and culture are the two core constructs subject to investigation in this study, it is critical to qualify culture. In the hospitality field culture is often synonymous with corporate (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Ting-Ding, 2016), organizational (e.g. Bavik, 2016) or occupational (Robinson et al., 2016) culture. In broader usage culture denotes the values, mores, customs, traditions, ontologies and social norms of groups of people – and sometimes how this manifest in (high) culture (i.e. the arts). Inherently, cultural groups' behaviours and responses to behaviours are shaped according to their socialized world-views. The notion that culture referentially frames individuals vis-à-vis their perceptions of the world around them, in consumer contexts it is well established (McCracken, 1986). As culture underlies common values and societal norms which in turn have some influence on how people think, feel and act (Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001), it is not surprising that one's evaluation of service, as a consumable commodity, is culturally bound (Raajpoot, 2004; Hartman et al., 2009). While there is growing interest in intercultural service encounters (ICSE) where consumers and service providers from differing cultures are increasingly interacting (see; Tam et al., 2016; Gaur et al., 2017; Lam and Cheung, 2018; Sharma, 2019) there exists relatively little knowledge with respect to how a guest's cultural background influences what they value in a hospitality encounter (cf. Pijls et al., 2017), as opposed to a purely transactional or service encounter.

Given globalization's impacts on travel and leisure activities, an understanding of the cultural differences that may exist among international tourists in terms of the importance they place on various elements of the hospitality experience is crucial. A body of literature on memorable tourist experiences (MTEs) speaks to local culture facilitating close and sustained encounters with local people that can leave positive impressions of, for instance, their friendliness (Kim et al., 2012) – a key hospitality dimension. Furthermore, Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak and Morrison (2017) opine that interactions with locals can facilitate authentic experiences. Locals can be a gateway to cultural idiosyncrasies and traditions relating to hospitality - and to other authentic experiences where in turn tourists can gain further exposure to local hospitality customs. This is particularly so in tourists being able to access more naturalistic, as opposed to structured and staged, experiences via interactions with locals in day-to-day activities inter alia meal sharing and shopping (cf. Castellani et al., 2020). While the idea that culture is a determinant of how groups experience hospitality products and services is not new per se, this study aims to extend knowledge by developing a more nuanced understanding of which specific aspects of hospitality, as enacted between a host and guest, are valued more, or less, by different cultural 'guest' groups. In other words, relative to hospitality encounters, what matters for guests (or tourists) and how can this be explained drawing on relevant cultural dimensions? This paper will focus on tourism contexts specifically (as opposed to other commercial domains in which hospitality is exchanged) because in tourism typically the employee assumes the role of host and the customer that of their guest (Brotherton, 1999) thus representing an identifiable dyadic relationship.

3. Methodological approach

3.1. Measurement instrument

To measure commercial hospitality in a tourism context, Stettler et al., 2018 13 item scale representing the important elements of hospitality in commercial contexts was applied. These 13 items were developed following rigorous review of the literature, consultation with industry, several pilot studies and validated through expert interviews. In a subsequent study, Stettler and colleagues further validated the internal validity of the unidimensional scale reporting a more than acceptable Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 on removal of an item pertaining to friendliness and an average inter-item correlation of 0.32 (Steffen et al., 2020). To remain consistent with the original psychometric results, we too have eliminated the item. The rating scale for each item is based upon a five-point Likert-type scale, with the response selections ranging from 1 *completely unimportant* to 5 *very important.* The survey instrument also included a number of demographic items.

3.2. Data collection

The survey was pre-tested in English and German to ensure the readability and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. Thus, the pretests resulted mainly in wording adjustments. The survey was administered at tourism hotspots and hotels in Switzerland, Australia, Germany, South Tyrol and Thailand. Survey administrators across all sites were college students, who assisted researchers across the project. These countries were selected as they aligned with where the different members of the research team were located. A researcher judgmental sampling technique was used to determine the sample for each specific country, whereby respondents are selected according to how useful their responses would be, and how representative they were (Babbie, 2013). The fieldworkers approached groups of people who displayed typical tourist behavior, such as souvenir shopping and photo-taking. To ensure that respondents fitted the category of tourists they were asked if they had spent at least one night in the destination (Hunt and Layne, 1991) prior to being invited to complete the survey. Respondents were given the option to fill out the questionnaire via an electronic tablet or via a hard-copy version. Further, depending on the data collection site, respondents could opt to undertake the survey in English or the local language of the host destination. The survey took approximately 10 min to complete. Cases that contained more than 10% of unanswered responses were excluded from analysis. Ultimately, a total of 2329 usable questionnaires were subjected to analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS V24 package. Firstly, descriptive statistics were explored to define the sample's demographic profile; and secondly, the perceived importance of each item was

compared across multiple regions including; China, Europe, Australia, USA, South America, South East Asia and the United Kingdom.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of the respondents

In total, the views of tourists from 21 different countries and regions were captured in this study for comparison. Table 1 presents the quotas for each country. When compiling the list, countries that were poorly represented where combined into regions based on the assumption that these countries would share cultural similarities. For example, Europe Other comprised those from Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria. Northern Europe included Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

The majority of tourists who responded were of European descent with Germany being the largest cohort (21%) followed by Italy (13%) and Switzerland (12%). There was low representation from those from Africa, South Africa, Japan, Russia, the Middle East and India so these regions were therefore excluded from further analysis to enhance the homogeneity between the samples, leaving a final sample of 2248 respondents. Gender was fairly well represented with 56% of respondents being female and the most common age group among the respondents was 19–30 years old (32%). As shown in Table 2, the data collection across the different locations captured a small number of respondents under the age of 18 and these responses were not included in the analysis as the research design required a certain level of maturity and experience to obtain valid and reliable data. In all, 63% of respondents held a university degree.

4.2. Global differences in the perceived importance of hospitality

This study was interested in exploring whether the importance tourists place on various dimensions of hospitality differ according to their country or region of origin. A series of ANOVAs were conducted to confirm whether differences exist and where they lie. Given the uneven group sizes, Levenes' statistics for Homogeneity of Variance were inspected. This assumption was not upheld for every item and the results were therefore treated with caution. However, according to (Hair et al., 2006) ANOVA is reasonably robust to the violation of this assumption. Table 3 presents the ANOVA result for each dimension of hospitality and

Table 1
Number of Tourists for each Country.

Region	Total
[a]Middle East	19
Europe Other	64
South America	53
Australia / New Zealand	140
Eastern Europe	31
Canada	23
China	208
[a]Africa	5
Northern Europe	93
France	33
Germany	494
[a]India	22
South East Asia	257
Italy	308
[a]Japan	15
[a]Russia	10
Switzerland	268
[a]South Africa	10
Spain / Portugal	51
United Kingdom	110
United States	115
Total	2329

[a] Excluded from further analysis due to small sample size

Table 2
Age and Highest Education Level Obtained.

Age Group	Percentage
0–17	1.9
18–30	32.3
31–40	19.9
41–50	19.0
51–60	13.3
60 and above	13.1
Total	99.6
Education Level	
Secondary education	7.0
Post-secondary vocational education (including apprenticeships)	8.8
Post-secondary non-tertiary education	19.3
University degree	62.8
Other	1.8

illustrates that one's country of origin does indeed influence their views of what constitutes good hospitality.

The results above indicate that one's nationality may determine the importance they place on all facets of the hospitality experience. A series of Tukey's post hoc tests were conducted to reveal where the place of origin differences lie in accordance with each of the items above. Table 4 reports the mean scores and standard deviations for each country and region. Significant statistics are labelled using subscript letters (ab, cd, ef and gh) to illustrate where the differences lie. For example, the letter 'a′ represents the country or region that holds the most significant differences to other regions, 'b' represents the countries it is different from. As we work through the alphabet the number of differing regions become less, i.e. the mean score accompanied by a 'g′ signifies that the represented region is only significantly different to a small number of regions.

With regards to service expertise and professionalism, Italians and South East Asians were again at opposite ends of the spectrum, with Italian tourists placing high importance on this facet with a mean score of 4.89 and South East Asian tourists less so. Significant differences were found between those from Italy and neighboring countries (Europe Other, Switzerland, Spain, Northern Europe and Germany) as well as more distant countries such as Australia and New Zealand, Canada, China and the USA. Significant differences were also found between Germans and Americans.

It appears that the Swiss place significantly less importance on interest and openness compared to other cultures reporting a mean of just 3.92. Italian, Spanish and French tourists however placed more emphasis on the importance of this facet with no significant differences between tourists from these regions. Tourists from Germany, the USA and South East Asia, were not as concerned about interest and openness towards other cultures. An authentic service experience, however, is highly important to the Swiss and significantly more so than those respondents from the USA and the United Kingdom. Again, the Italians rated this facet significantly higher than all other countries and regions. Canadians rated this the lowest.

Cordiality, on the other hand, is viewed as significantly more important in a hospitality experience by those from European and South American cultures. While tourists from the United Kingdom, Spain and Portugal and Australia / New Zealand value cordiality less so. The Swiss can also be differentiated from Australia / New Zealand, China and South East Asia, placing higher importance on cordiality than tourists from these regions.

South East Asian tourists place significantly less emphasis on appreciation and respect when considering the hospitality experience than most other regions included in this study with the exception of the USA, Canada, Spain and Portugal. Italy again rated this dimension higher than all other regions. Significant differences are also noted between Germany, other parts of Europe and the Swiss in terms of the importance of appreciation and respect.

Attention, across the sample was rated comparably lower than the dimensions discussed thus far. The results indicate that tourists from

Table 3
ANOVA results for differences in the importance placed on dimensions of the Hospitality encounter according to place of origin.

ANOVA			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
How important do you rate the employees' service and professional expertise?	Between Groups	(combined)	84.226	15	5.615	10.791	.000
	Within Groups		1146.811	2204	.520		
	Total		1231.038	2219			
How important would you rate the employees' openness towards other cultures?	Between Groups	(combined)	141.934	15	9.462	14.286	.000
	Within Groups		1414.143	2135	.662		
	Total		1556.076	2150			
How would you rate the importance of employee empathy shown towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	95.798	15	6.387	11.149	.000
	Within Groups		1259.094	2198	.573		
	Total		1354.893	2213			
How important do you rate the authenticity of employee interactions with you?	Between Groups	(combined)	88.442	15	5.896	13.575	.000
	Within Groups		962.031	2215	.434		
	Total		1050.473	2230			
How would you rate the importance of the employees' communication skills?	Between Groups	(combined)	102.272	15	6.818	17.480	.000
	Within Groups		862.038	2210	.390		
	Total		964.310	2225			
How important do you rate the level of employee cordiality?	Between Groups	(combined)	120.637	15	8.042	14.409	.000
	Within Groups		1232.958	2209	.558		
	Total		1353.596	2224			
How important do you rate the appreciation and respect of employees towards you?[a]	Between Groups	(combined)	60.121	15	4.008	11.249	.000
	Within Groups		781.755	2194	.356		
	Total		841.875	2209			
How important do you rate the employees' level of attention towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	55.669	15	3.711	9.536	.000
	Within Groups		844.110	2169	.389		
	Total		899.778	2184			
How important do you rate the level of employee reliability shown towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	90.371	15	6.025	11.955	.000
	Within Groups		1097.140	2177	.504		
	Total		1187.511	2192			
How important do you rate the level of employee helpfulness towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	103.768	15	6.918	9.664	.000
	Within Groups		1423.059	1988	.716		
	Total		1526.828	2003			
How important do you rate the level of employee openness towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	86.489	15	5.766	11.298	.000
	Within Groups		1119.705	2194	.510		
	Total		1206.194	2209			
How important do you rate the level of employee generosity shown towards you?	Between Groups	(combined)	65.829	15	4.389	7.013	.000
	Within Groups		1368.488	2187	.626		
	Total		1414.143	2135	.662		

[a] Assumption for Homogeneity of Variance not upheld for this item.

China are less concerned about the attentiveness of hospitality staff than all European countries included in this study with the exception those from Spain and Portugal. Italians in particular will command attention. Notable differences are also revealed between German tourists, who rate attention as more important than those from Australia / New Zealand, Canada and Spain and Portugal.

With regards to the reliability of the hospitality encounter, again we see South East Asian tourists and Italian tourists as bipolar opposites. South East Asians care significantly less about this attribute than nine of the remaining fourteen countries with the exception of those from Canada, France, Spain and the USA, while Italians place a significantly higher level of emphasis on reliability than the majority of other nationalities with the exception of European other, Northern European and German tourists. Germans is also distinguishable from Spanish and Portugese and Americans on this dimension with German tourists rating this dimension more important than those from these two regions.

South East Asians rated helpfulness significantly less important to the hospitality experience when compared to most other countries. Tourists from Canada, Spain and the USA shared similarities on this dimension.

Italians rated this dimension the highest, however, their sentiment was shared with most of their European counterparts with the exception of the Swiss Spanish and Portugese. Italians also rated openness towards tourists as significantly higher than most countries.

When it comes to generosity, Italians view this as significantly more important that the majority of the other countries and regions featured in the study, South Americans were no different. Interestingly, compared to the other dimensions this item scored some of the lowest ratings.

Those from China rated communication skills as significantly less important than those from many parts of Europe excluding Switzerland and Northern Europe. South East Asian's also placed less emphasis on communication. Quite a number of cultures did not view communication as important as Italians, including Australians and New Zealanders, Canadians and Americans, the Spanish and the British.

Finally, with the exception of Italy, which maintained a consistent pattern of rating these dimensions of high importance, there were minimal differences between the countries and regions in relation to the importance of empathy.

Table 4
Mean scores and significant differences between place of origin and importance of hospitality dimensions.

Hospitality Dimension	Place of Origin														
	Europe Other	South America	Australia/ New Zealand	Eastern Europe	Canada	China	Northern Europe	France	Germany	South East Asia	Italy	Switz	Spain / Portugal	United Kingdom	USA
Professionalism	4.66[d] .750	4.38[b] .973	4.49[b] .766	4.67 .547	4.22[b] 1.126	4.42[b] .814	4.37[b] .770	4.47 .761	4.61[e,b] .699	4.24[c,b] .840	4.89[a] .341	4.59[d,b] .658	4.38[b] .635	4.38[f,b] .785	4.34[b] .886
Openness towards other cultures	4.45[b,d] .953	4.52[d] .804	4.47[d,b] .799	4.53[d] .681	4.36 .848	4.51[d,b] .730	4.41[d,b] .886	4.69[d,b] .592	4.40[d,b] .886	4.18[d,b] .867	4.86[a,d] .413	3.92[c,b] 1.022	4.66[d] .635	4.50[d,b] .664	4.35[d,b] .984
Authenticity	4.48[b] 7.92	4.37[b] .768	4.36[b,] .732	4.47 .776	3.91[b,d] .900	4.43[b] .765	4.35[b] .693	4.35[b] .839	4.41[b] .906	4.25[b] .777	4.90[a] .364	4.59[b,c] .720	4.24[b] .847	4.26[b,d] .738	4.30[b,d] .841
Cordiality	4.63[b] .579	4.67[b] .706	4.32[d,f,h] .737	4.50 .630	4.48 .730	4.33[d,f] .716	4.55[d] .618	4.47[d] .567	4.61[b,d,g] .650	4.29[a,f] .765	4.92[b,c] .280	4.60[b,d,e] .666	4.35[d] .805	4.39[d] .707	4.40[d] .870
Appreciation and Respect	4.68[b,f] .696	4.65[b] .653	4.61[b,d] .654	4.59 .682	4.17[d] .717	4.56[b,d] .692	4.60[b,d] .632	4.68[b] .599	4.70[b,d,e] .571	4.18[a,] .751	4.91[b,c] .349	4.66[b,d,] .542	4.37[d,f] .720	4.50[b,d] .663	4.33[d,e] .876
Attention	4.48[b] .763	4.46[b] .753	4.22[d,f] .832	4.16[d] 1.098	4.00[d,f] .953	4.07[a] .893	4.44[b,d] .705	4.58[b,] .765	4.55[b,e] .727	4.18[d,f] .756	4.83[b,c] .437	4.41[b,d] .745	4.12[d,f] .971	4.33[d] .782	4.32[d] .782
Reliability	4.73[b] .705	4.57[d] .608	4.59[b,d] .626	4.66[b] .553	4.52 .593	4.60[b,d] .659	4.63[b,d] .571	4.52[d] .677	4.76[b,d,e] .512	4.33[a] .741	4.90[c,b] .370	4.65[b,d] .605	4.44[d,f] .712	4.60[b,d] .595	4.49[d,f] .765
Helpfulness	4.69[b] .706	4.63[b] .658	4.57[b,d] .639	4.60[b] .563	4.35[d] .775	4.57[b,d] .658	4.70[b] .570	4.74[b,e] .445	4.69[b] .577	4.30[a,] .784	4.86[b,c] .433	4.61[b,d] .637	4.45[d] .673	4.62[b,d] .593	4.45[d,f] .721
Openness towards you	4.56 .794	4.48[b] .754	4.17[b] .916	4.40[b] .770	4.57 .662	4.35[b] .786	4.39[b] .671	4.37[b] .718	4.53[b,d] .691	4.26[b,c] .734	4.90[a] .342	4.35[b] .825	4.41[b] .606	4.40[b] .710	4.43[b] .740
Generosity	4.36[b] 1.064	4.58 .731	4.05[b] .921	4.18[b] .905	4.29 .784	4.19[b] .931	430[b] .852	4.00[b] 1.102	4.26[b] .927	4.20[b] .741	4.84[a] .480	4.25[b] .916	4.29[b] .913	4.14[b] .862	4.25[b] .896
Communication	4.69[b] .589	4.63[b] .595	4.53[b,d] .774	4.71[b,] .588	4.35[d] .775	4.22[a] .917	4.49[d] .638	4.71[b] .529	4.55[b,d] .772	4.27[d] .742	4.88[b,c] .370	4.39[d] .785	4.51[d] .674	4.53[b,d] .688	4.43[d] .715
Empathy	4.46 1.042	4.46 .699	4.33[b] .810	4.48 .626	4.50 .802	4.46[b] .743	4.35[b] .686	4.44 .716	4.37[b] .882	4.33[b] .805	4.81[a] .534	4.32[b] .784	4.27[b] 1.005	4.33[b] .810	4.30[b] .885

*At the 0.05 level of significance: a is significantly different to b, c is different to d, e is significantly different to f; g is significantly different to h

5. Discussion

Culture is operationalized in a variety of forms and contexts in the hospitality (and tourism) literature, for example as corporate (Zoghbi--Manrique-de-Lara and Ting-Ding, 2016), organizational (e.g. Bavik, 2016) or occupational (Robinson et al., 2016) culture. In this study we qualify culture as the values, mores, customs and social characteristics of consumers of hospitality – hospitality as the disposition and actions of hosts towards guests rather than the more tangible and scripted aspects of service. Evidently, the perceived importance of different elements of the hospitality encounter varies across different cultures, based on using countries as a proxy. These results offer further explanation to past research that has examined the effects of culture on customer service evaluations (see for example; Callan and Tyson, 2000; Turner et al., 2001; Lam and Cheung, 2018; Luo, Guchait et al., 2019) by identifying the elements of the hospitality encounter that are most and least important across 15 different nationalities. Furthermore, our findings reveal intraregional cultural differences that deem the works of Hofstede (1980), or Schwartz (1999), common 'go to's' for contrasts between cultures, as lacking nuance in the explanation of these outcomes. A number of studies have sought to more fully understand cross-cultural differences in a tourism and hospitality context have grounded their assumptions and corresponding findings in Hofstede's cultural dimensions (see for example; Mattila, 2000; Tsang and Ap, 2007). The current study however implies a level of heterogeneity among Hofstede's cultural segments when it comes to what different cultures value in their hospitality experience.

When reflecting on intraregional differences, this study finds significant differences in the importance tourists place on the hospitality experience between several European and Asian cultures. In Europe for example, with the exception of Italians who view almost all aspects of hospitality as significantly more important than other Europeans, we see significantly less importance placed on openness towards other cultures by the Swiss than all other European cultures. Germans are likely to command more appreciation and respect in their hospitality encounter than those from the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria (classified as Europe Other) and the Spanish and Portuguese. Germans will also command more attention than the Spanish and Portuguese tourists. The current study also sets South East Asia and China apart noting important cultural differences regarding the hospitality experience between Chinese and South East Asian cultures. For example, Chinese tourists value, appreciation and respect, reliability and helpfulness significantly more than their South East Asian counterparts do. This intraregional difference is important to recognize as often Asian tourists are treated as homogenous segments irrespective of their cultural differences (cf. Lee et al., 2004). There is little explanation in the literature for these findings, nonetheless – these somewhat surprising intraregional differences regarding what matters to tourists in commercial hospitality settings are indeed worthy of further exploration.

When considering the America's, we observe no differences between Canada, North and South America, hence culturally when it comes to what is important in the hospitality experience these segments do appear relatively homogenous. Australians and New Zealanders, like many other cultures, were not as extreme in their views as Italy and with respect to cordiality and attention, Antipodeans are seemingly more laid back than Germany and Switzerland. However, when comparing Australians and New Zealanders to the British, these segments display very similar opinions towards hospitality. Possible explanation for this may rest in the fact that many white Australians and New Zealanders hold British / Commonwealth heritage (cf. Craggs, 2014). The literature is silent however, regarding how this diaspora has influenced its migrants' views towards hospitality.

It can be said that Italians place significantly higher importance on the overall hospitality experience than other cultures. This is consistent with research undertaken by Callan and Tyson (2000) whose study on tipping behavior revealed that Italians, when compared with English

customers, place higher importance on the overall quality of the hospitality service experience. Those from South East Asian cultures place less value compared with the other countries on our six of the 13 hospitality dimensions. Those from South East Asian cultures care the least about the helpfulness of employees, their professionalism, intercultural awareness and understanding, cordiality and reliability. The finding pertaining to intercultural awareness concurs with that of Reisinger and Turner, 2012, who revealed mixed results in terms of whether intercultural awareness and understanding between the guest and host necessarily leads to customer satisfaction. The low importance of reliability on the other hand, like Tsang and Ap's (2007) study, questions the conclusive remarks from Mok and Armstrong (1998) that claim tourists, irrespective of background, are critical and demand service that is reliable, responsive and reassuring. This difference may be explained by the fact that the current study's sole focus was on the hospitality encounter as opposed to the SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman et al., 1986).

It is important to acknowledge that this study reinforces the complexity of the interface of the service encounter not only from a demand perspective but also from the perspective of the host environment. We have revealed that what matters in the hospitality encounter differs according to one's culture and this will in turn influence one's approach to the provision of hospitality. Our findings are in support of Johns et al. (2007), who found significant differences in service predisposition between European and Asian cultures.

6. Conclusions

While the specific purpose of this research was to establish whether culture is a key variable influencing perceptions of dimensions of hospitality there are several important contributions this study makes to the literature. This study is one of only a handful that has moved beyond the (albeit useful) conceptual and theoretical contributions (e.g. Lynch et al., 2009; Lynch, 2017; Hemmington, 2007) to empirically test dimensions of hospitality as perceived by guests. Thus, our paper contributes to theoretically-informed empirical definitions of hospitality, alongside four other similar works (Ariffin and Magzhi, 2012; Blain and Lashley, 2014; Pijls et al., 2017; Tasci and Semrad, 2016). These literature show that the operationalization of terms such as; welcome, help, appreciate, respect, generous, empathy, authentic, friendly, welfare and openness/mindedness, are forming an abstracted and scientific as opposed to semantic lexicon vis-à-vis hospitality. Of these studies however, our sample is the first that is genuinely multi-nationally diverse and thus our data lent itself to the exploration of what matters culturally, using nationality as a proxy, in the perception of hospitality in tourism contexts. This is no mean undertaking because as others have observed hospitality is a complex contextually, temporally and spatially, situationally, emotionally and culturally-laden construct. Indeed, as Derrida (2000) argues, hospitality may well be an aspirational ideation rather than an absolutist reality.

Therefore, of the previous empirical studies this is the first to be able to meaningfully explore cultural differences in the perception of hospitality, identified as a gap in the literature (Pijls et al., 2017). Without repeating the specific differences dissected in the discussion earlier, this study contributes to theory by advancing our understanding of how different cultures evaluate the importance of the multiple dimensions of commercial hospitality. On the basis of the findings our study suggests that existing cultural measures, for example Hofstede (1980) and Schwartz, 1999), that many studies use as an underpinning, lack explanatory value with such slippery and abstract concepts as hospitality. The study extends existing research that has also investigated the influence of culture (and cultural intelligence) in the evaluation of hospitality (see for example Lam and Cheung, 2018; Lam et al., 2020) and service encounters (see for example: Tsang and Ap, 2007; Sizoo, 2007 and Mattila, 2000) in multiple ways. Unlike recent studies that focused on the import of culture in particular contexts (e.g. Lam et al.,

2020) our study considered broader dispositions and sensitivities towards dimensions of hospitality. Finally, our study challenges the philosophical notion of 'universal hospitality' promoted in the works of Derrida, Kant, Levinas and others (Beghtol, 2002; Munasinghe et al., 2017), demonstrating that while at levels of abstraction there are cultural synergies, when observed in practice different cultures weight varying dimensions of hospitality dissimilarly in tourism contexts.

This study operationalized an instrument, complementary to several nascent scales that have emerged since 2010 (Ariffin and Magzhi, 2012; Blain and Lashley, 2014; Pijls et al., 2017; Tasci and Semrad, 2016) that measure the importance of attributes that collectively define a commercial hospitality experience. The instrument, previously reduced to 12 attributes after a multi-stage methodology (Stettler et al., 2018) measures both importance and satisfaction within a commercial hospitality experience. Focusing on importance, methodologically, we have demonstrated that the measurement instrument is meaningful across a variety of cultures with its content being easily translatable. Moreover, the operationalization of this instrument enabled the researchers to identify cross-cultural nuances and distances in relation to the importance guests place on each individual attribute. This in turn has allowed us to provide a comprehensive cross-cultural comparison relating to what guests view as important during the hospitality encounter.

6.1. Implications

This study offers important implications for the hospitality industry that tends to lean more towards the standardization as opposed to the personalization of their guest-host interactions (Sandoff, 2005). Indeed, the work of Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) identified personalization as a key factor in their study of customer expectations. Dwyer and Kim (2003) identify the hospitality offered by host destinations as a significant indicator of destination competitiveness hence its evaluation and monitoring is of critical importance in an increasingly competitive global tourism landscape. For commercial hospitality practitioners, it is important to identify the cultural variance that exists across their guest segments that in turn will influence how they evaluate their hospitality encounter. Tourists, whether domestic or international, spend considerable time in the hospitality service setting. As stated by Pearce and Moscardo (1984) one of the success factors behind the hospitality encounter is the match between the tourist and host value orientations. Understanding the importance an international guest places on various components of their hospitality experience may therefore improve host-guest relations and overall guest satisfaction levels with their visit and increase the desire for repeat visitation.

Practically, managers of commercial hospitality organizations should remain mindful that the host culture of the host country in which they are located may well determine how their staff treat their guests (Craggs, 2014). With an increasing globalized workforce, training in the international hotel sector would benefit from incorporating teaching and learning strategies that acknowledge and address differing cultural predispositions towards customer service. This adds weight to other studies that have ascertained the inter-cultural hospitality exchanges between hosts and guests in hotel contexts (Lam et al., 2020). Branded chains, whether in foodservice, or accommodation, often enshrine service standards in their standard operating procedures (SOPs). The authors conclude that there is scope for regional, country and culture-specific customization to attenuate for tensions that may arise due to a misalignment of cultural expectations regarding what matters in the hospitality encounter. This study adds further imperative to standardization-customization debate (see Sandoff, 2005) by encouraging the hospitality industry to also consider the positive impressions and memorable tourism experiences that authentic local interactions can generate Kim et al., 2012; Paulauskaite et al., 2017).

6.2. Future research and limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, the samples chosen were not selected at random but were limited to certain geographical areas in which the researchers had accessible networks, and therefore also to certain types of tourists. Despite the accepted practice of using country (e.g., Hofstede, 1980) or region (Lam et al., 2020) as a proxy for culture, we accept there are inherent assumptions in this approach. Nonetheless, given the inter-country differences and sample size we are confident it was a sound assumption for this study. Second, the elements of the hospitality experience explored in this study were guided in many cases by the views of western society and it is recognized that these views may not be transferable to non-western cultures. In addition, this study did not account for the sub-cultures that may exist among the cultural groups surveyed. Third, some countries were under-represented in the study with varying sample sizes which subsequently resulted in the violation of some statistical assumptions – although we do note the robustness of the statistical tests employed to these violations (Hair et al., 2006). Caution needs to be taken in interpreting the results as generally there was no indication that any of the hospitality attributes included in this study were unimportant, we simply identified where differences exist in terms of the extent of difference. Moreover, our study focused on defining and operationalizing the more abstract or soft attributes of hospitality setting aside servicescape and/or 'hard' factors.

Future research directions should further explore the nuances of these differences in disposition towards hospitality country by country regardless of their proximity to each other. Due to the emphasis of past literature on differentiating the East from the West, the reasons behind these cultural similarities and differences are yet to be revealed. There also lies an opportunity to explore the sub-cultural differences that exist among any given society to gain a better understanding of what matters to hospitality consumers at a regional level, while the views of non-Western societies towards the different facets of the hospitality experience also need further attention. At the abstracted level, this paper also challenges millennia of conventional wisdom assuming the universalism of hospitality. As Lashley (2015) and others have observed historically hospitality acted as common language of sorts – or cultural intermediary. Could indeed hospitality in an uber-connected world morph into medium – in both production and consumption – that expresses cultural differentiation? Regardless, this paper advances understandings of 'what is hospitality'? Future research, moving beyond management and business paradigms, should further explore this hitherto esoteric but fundamentally practical question.

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