

Service as performance: How do class differences affect hospitality interactions?

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Is your hairdresser seething with hidden resentment? Do you subconsciously want to dominate the people who serve you? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, customers and hospitality workers engage in a game of status that plays out in their everyday encounters.

"When we think about a service context in a high-end hospitality industry such as a spa, a luxury hotel or a cruise, the image that comes to our mind is a serene, peaceful setting with numerous friendly, empathetic service providers working hard to take care of the customers," write authors Tuba Üstüner (Colorado State University) and Craig J. Thompson (University of Wisconsin–Madison).

In this imagined world, satisfied, happy customers treat service providers with respect and reward them with generous tips. However, the reality behind that idyllic vision is quite different, the authors explain.

The authors interviewed consumers and employees in the hairdressing industry in metropolitan regions of Turkey, which caters to affluent and secular clients. Hairdressers are often young men, who come from rural, religiously conservative areas. "Hairdressing is regarded as a working-class trade, and hence, its labor pool is largely constituted by rural migrants, squatters, and other members of the urban underclass," the authors explain. What happens when these men (most of whom did not advance beyond primary school) are called upon to serve middle- or upper-middle-class women?

Turkish salons can include valet parking, music, and food and beverages. The salon's employees spend up to three hours pampering each client. But class roles are strictly enforced, and consumers set the boundaries for conversation and interaction.

"These service interactions are a performance, much like a theatrical one where each party has its roles to play," the authors write. "But the scripts are not neutral; rather, they reflect the customers' desire to reenact their class-based dominance over their hairdressers." However, service workers are not powerless in these situations: "On the contrary, the game that is being played is what we call an interdependent status game, where customers are as much dependent on the service providers as [service providers](#) are on customers," the authors conclude.

More information: Tuba Üstüner and Craig J. Thompson. "How Marketplace Performances Produce Interdependent Status Games and Contested Forms of Symbolic Capital." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online June 30, 2011). ejcr.org

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