

Robot Bartenders on Board!



Source: Lo, A. (2025)

Background

It has become a common practice to introduce robots to assist with service and operation in today's hospitality industry. As the world's leading cruise line, Royal Caribbean International (RCI) has always committed to innovation and incorporating automation into its service. Reinventing the use of service robot, the company introduced Bionic Bar featuring robot bartenders on nine of its ships (Metro, 2024).

Powered by an Italian robotics company Makr Shakr, Royal Caribbean's Bionic Bar is a marvel of modern technology. Guests can choose from the classics or customize their own drink via the bar's tablets (Royal Caribbean YouTube, 2018). Once the guests have made their order, the robotic arms carefully extract from the 127 bottles of spirits and mixers hanging off the bar's ceiling (The Verge, 2014). Then watch the robots shake and dance as they shadow the movements of a ballet dancer from New York (Royal Caribbean YouTube, 2018).

Once the order is completed, guests can collect their drink by swiping the SeaPass dedicated to them or have their drink delivered to their table by a human staff (Business Insider, 2019). The extra step of requiring guests to pick up with their card guarantees that no one can touch the drink except the guest or a member of staff.

The robot bartenders can mix up to 2 drinks per minute and serve up to a thousand glasses each day (Royal Caribbean YouTube, 2018). While waiting, guests can view electronic display boards that show real-time updates on drink preparation, queue lengths, and fun statistics such as the most popular drink of the day (Royal Caribbean International, n.d.; Business Insider, 2019). This combination of efficiency, entertainment, and personalization makes the Bionic Bar a unique attraction onboard.

Challenges

Despite becoming a signature feature of Royal Caribbean, the Bionic Bar is currently available on only nine ships, limiting access to this high-tech experience. Additionally, due to the bar's unique infrastructure, replacing robotic bartenders with humans in the event of a technical malfunction is not feasible, potentially leading to guest dissatisfaction and increased pressure on other bars onboard.

Another challenge lies in the lack of human interaction. While the robotic bartenders offer precision and spectacle, some guests feel the experience lacks the warmth and connection typically associated

with human bartenders. For many, the social aspect of conversing with a bartender is a vital part of the bar experience, something that robots, for now, cannot replicate (Business Insider, 2019).

Discussion Questions

1. What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of replacing human bartenders with robots in terms of customer satisfaction and service quality?
2. How important is human interaction in a service experience, and how might technology replicate or enhance this emotional connection?
3. How could the limited availability of Bionic Bar affect Royal Caribbean's brand image and customer expectations? What can be done to mitigate this?
4. In what ways can Royal Caribbean further innovate its service provided at the Bionic Bar?

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