

Acceptance of Social Robots in Institutional Reception Services: Findings From a Focus Group Study Using Temi

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ABSTRACT

The integration of social robots into service environments is gaining increasing attention, especially in contexts that combine efficiency demands with interpersonal interaction. This study explores the potential use of the social robot Temi in the reception area of a Swiss institutional service setting and examines how reception staff assess suitable applications, acceptance conditions, and implementation-related concerns. Guided by the Service Robot Acceptance Model (sRAM), the study draws on an exploratory qualitative focus group with five reception staff members, complemented by reflection tasks, a live robot demonstration, and a final ranking exercise. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings show that reception work is valued primarily for its social and relational qualities, whereas repetitive information requests, routine technical questions, and frequent interruptions are seen as burdensome. Temi was therefore seen mainly as a complementary support tool for standardized, repetitive, and high-frequency tasks, especially wayfinding, room information, Wi-Fi access, and simple first-level IT support. Acceptance depended on reliability, ease of use, and clear, context-appropriate communication. Participants also emphasized the importance of voice, appearance, and first impression, as Temi needed to appear both approachable and appropriate to the institutional setting. Concerns about job loss were minimal; instead, participants highlighted data protection, maintenance responsibilities, and effort-benefit considerations. Overall, Temi was seen as most acceptable when relieving staff of routine tasks while preserving meaningful human interaction.

Keywords: Social robot, Service robot acceptance, Human-robot interaction, Reception services, Focus groups, Qualitative content analysis, Institutional services

INTRODUCTION

Service robots are increasingly discussed as frontline service agents that can provide information, support routine interactions, and complement human service work in public-facing environments (Belanche et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2018). Research on human–robot interaction suggests that responses to robots are shaped not only by technical performance, but

also by social perception, expectations, and interaction norms (Broadbent, 2017). Related work further indicates that experiences with service robots are multi-dimensional and include functional, affective, and interaction-related components (Huang et al., 2021). Together, these findings suggest that service robot acceptance depends on both what robots do and how they are perceived in concrete service encounters (Graaf & Allouch, 2013; Henschel et al., 2021).

This is particularly relevant for reception-related settings, where staff often serve as an organisation's first point of contact by greeting visitors, providing information, and coordinating access. Reception and concierge work is therefore not merely administrative, but combines informational, coordinative, and interpersonal functions in highly visible first-contact interactions (Brant et al., 2018; Hewitt et al., 2009). Studies of helpdesk and front-desk interaction further suggest that initiating contact is a socially organized part of the service encounter, rather than a purely technical exchange of information (Mortensen & Hazel, 2014). Against this background, the potential use of robots in reception settings raises questions not only about task suitability, but also about whether technological support fits the communicative and socially visible character of first-contact service work.

Although prior research has examined service robots in hospitality, retail, museums, and other public-facing service settings, the frontline employee perspective remains less developed than customer-focused research (Meyer et al., 2020; Paluch et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). In particular, little is known about how staff in reception-like institutional settings qualitatively evaluate task fit, trust, and implementation of conditions in early-stage deployment contexts. This gap matters because robot acceptance in reception settings is unlikely to depend on customer perceptions alone, but also on whether staff perceive the robot as compatible with everyday work practices, socially appropriate in first-contact situations, and organizationally feasible to integrate and maintain (Henschel et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2020; Paluch et al., 2022).

Against this background, the present study examines the potential use of the social robot Temi in an institutional reception setting in Switzerland. The study is embedded in an applied research project conducted in collaboration between the School of Applied Psychology at FHNW and a Swiss cantonal vocational education and training center. Its aim is to explore how reception staff perceive the possible use of Temi and which conditions shape its acceptance. More specifically, the study addresses three questions: (1) which reception tasks are perceived as suitable or unsuitable for Temi; (2) which functional, social, and emotional factors shape acceptance; and (3) which organizational and ethical conditions influence the perceived feasibility of implementation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research on technology acceptance has often been guided by models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory

of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT; Venkatesh et al., 2003). While these models provide an important foundation for understanding adoption, they were not developed for embodied technologies that appear as socially present actors in interaction, as is the case for many service and social robots (Henschel et al., 2021). In service contexts, acceptance therefore extends beyond usefulness and ease of use to include how robots are perceived in direct encounters and how interaction quality is experienced by users. This broader view is consistent with HRI research showing that people respond to robots through social expectations and interpretive frames, rather than based on technical capability alone (Broadbent, 2017).

To address this, Wirtz et al. (2018) outlined a service-robot-specific acceptance perspective, often referred to as the service robot acceptance model (sRAM), which extends classical acceptance models by considering dimensions that are especially relevant in frontline service roles. This perspective distinguishes between functional attributes, such as competence, reliability, and efficiency; social attributes, such as social presence and naturalness of interaction; and emotional attributes, such as warmth, liking, and trust. This perspective is particularly suitable for service settings in which task performance and interpersonal interaction are closely connected. This perspective is further supported by empirical work showing that customer experiences with service robots are shaped by cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, suggesting that acceptance is closely tied to how interaction is enacted and interpreted in service encounters (Huang et al., 2021). Moreover, recent work indicates that the service robot acceptance model can be meaningfully applied beyond classic hospitality settings, for example in museum environments that combine information delivery, public presence, and engagement (Wong & Wong, 2024).

For reception settings, this perspective is useful because front-desk work combines information provision, coordination, and first-contact interaction. At the same time, existing research suggests that employee-facing service contexts raise concerns that extend beyond robot characteristics alone, including role congruency, status implications, and the practical conditions of working alongside robots. Qualitative and workplace-oriented studies indicate that employees also evaluate whether robots can be meaningfully integrated into existing routines and responsibilities (Meyer et al., 2020; Paluch et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). In addition, research on human–robot interaction suggests that ethical concerns can directly affect intention to use a robot in service settings, indicating that trust and acceptance are linked not only to performance and usability, but also to perceived legitimacy and ethical acceptability (Etemad-Sajadi et al., 2022). For institutional reception settings, this implies that acceptance is likely to be shaped not only by perceptions of the robot itself, but also by organizational responsibilities, implementation effort, and the perceived fit between technological support and the social-practical requirements of reception work. Acceptance in such settings should therefore be understood not merely as an individual's attitude toward the robot, but as an organizationally embedded process.

The present study uses the social robot Temi as an empirical case. Temi is a mobile service robot with functions such as autonomous navigation, voice-based interaction, and screen-based information delivery (Robotemi, 2021). These features make Temi a plausible case for exploring reception-related tasks such as orientation, visitor support, and first-level information provision. In this study, the service robot acceptance perspective is used as a sensitizing framework rather than a fixed measurement model. It structures attention toward functional, social, and emotional dimensions of acceptance, while leaving room for additional context-specific themes to emerge inductively, including organizational readiness, maintenance effort, and data protection.

METHODS

This study used an exploratory qualitative focus group design with embedded individual reflection and ranking tasks. A focus group was chosen because the study aimed to explore how reception staff perceived the possible use of Temi and how these views were discussed and shaped through group interaction. The design was suitable for examining expectations, concerns, perceived task suitability, and acceptance-related conditions in an early implementation phase. The combination of individual elicitation tasks, live demonstrations, and group discussion made it possible to capture both immediate individual reactions and collectively negotiated evaluations of Temi.

The study was conducted in the reception area of a cantonal-operated center for agricultural vocational training in Switzerland. Reception work in this setting included visitor reception, information and orientation, support for staff and students, and coordination of everyday organizational requests. This context allowed participants to reflect on the possible role of Temi in relation to concrete and recurring reception tasks. Participants were five internal employees from the reception and concierge service. They were selected purposively based on their practical familiarity with reception work and their relevance to the research question. The aim of sampling was not statistical representativeness, but the inclusion of participants who could provide informed perspectives on the potential use of Temi in this specific work context. The focus group was conducted on 26 May 2025 at Strickhof Lindau and comprised three consecutive 45-minute sessions with short breaks in between. The procedure combined short individual tasks, group discussion, and a live demonstration of Temi. After an introductory briefing, participants first reflected their associations with robots and on meaningful, challenging, and repetitive aspects of their reception work. Temi was then introduced through a live demonstration supported by visual examples of possible use cases. This formed the basis for the main discussion, which addressed task suitability, social and institutional reactions, and conditions of trust, usability, and acceptance. In a later phase, participants generated possible reception-related functions for Temi and completed an individual ranking task to prioritize the functions they considered most useful. The focus group guide was informed by the Service Robot Acceptance Model (sRAM; Wirtz et al., 2018) and adapted to the reception context. It covered

functional, social, and emotional dimensions of acceptance and allowed room for additional context-specific concerns to emerge. The session was moderated by a moderator and an assistant moderator. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and the analysis was supported by field notes and written materials produced during the tasks. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following a deductive-inductive procedure (Kuckartz, 2019; Kuckartz et al., 2023). Initial main categories were derived from the sRAM and adapted to the study context. These included functional dimensions, social dimensions, emotional aspects, and design and interaction qualities. Inductive subcategories were then developed from the material to capture more specific themes within these broader dimensions. The ranking task was used as a supportive indicator of which functions participants prioritized most clearly at the end of the discussion. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, audio recording, anonymization, and the use of the data for research purposes. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription and reporting. Because the study was embedded in an applied pilot project, reflexive awareness was important throughout data collection and analysis to remain open to both positive and critical perspectives on the use of Temi.

RESULTS

Participants initially framed robots as technical devices than as social interaction partners. In the opening word-association task, responses were dominated by terms such as “machine,” “sensors,” “artificial intelligence,” and “technology,” whereas only a smaller number reflected affective or relational meanings. Some associations also suggested curiosity and mild caution rather than clear rejection, including terms such as “cautious,” “cuddlier,” “modern,” and “future.” Overall, participants approached the topic from a mainly functional and technically oriented perspective.

Within the functional dimension, participants described reception work not primarily as administrative processing, but as socially meaningful and practically relevant work. Positive aspects included welcoming visitors, helping others directly, being a visible point of contact, and receiving appreciation for solving problems. They also valued tasks that provided a clear sense of completion and visible usefulness. At the same time, repeated interruptions and low-complexity routine requests were described as burdensome, especially when they disrupted ongoing work. Overall, a clear distinction emerged between socially meaningful tasks that should remain human-centred and repetitive, standardized tasks that were seen as more suitable for technological support.

This distinction strongly shaped the evaluation of Temi’s possible role. Participants expressed the strongest support for tasks that were predictable, repetitive, and information-based, including wayfinding, room information, directions to events or meeting rooms, Wi-Fi-related support, voucher distribution, and simple first-level IT support. Small recurring requests were

seen as especially suitable because they frequently interrupted other work processes. More complex ideas, such as personalized assistance or identity-linked functions, were discussed more cautiously because they raised questions about technical feasibility, maintenance effort, and data protection. Overall, Temi was seen primarily as a complementary support tool rather than as a substitute for the relational core of reception work.

Within the emotional dimension, trust emerged as a particularly important theme. It was discussed mainly as a practical judgement of whether Temi would function reliably in everyday situations. Participants linked it to correct answers, time saving, understandable interaction, and behavior that matched the specific task and context. Confidence was strongest for simple and clearly structured support functions but was expected to decline if the robot produced incorrect answers, caused confusion, or required excessive explanation. Negative comparisons with existing chatbot systems further suggested that trust weakened when digital support was experienced as inefficient or unhelpful. The live demonstration also pointed to an embodied dimension of trust, as reactions to Temi's movement and voice influenced whether interaction felt comfortable and appropriate. In this sense, trust depended not only on informational performance, but also on how the robot behaved in shared space.

Within the social dimension, participants described reception as a strongly relational role. They emphasized that Temi's suitability depended not only on its usefulness, but also on whether robotic support would fit the social expectations attached to reception work. Participants also reflected on how different user groups might respond to the robot and whether its use could alter aspects of their own role at the reception desk. The robot was therefore evaluated not in isolation, but in terms of its expected effects on interaction, role boundaries, and the broader institutional setting.

Within the dimension of design and interaction qualities, voice, appearance, and first impression played an important role. Acceptance depended in part on whether people felt invited to engage with the robot in the first place. Temi was expected to be approachable and easy to understand, but also professional enough for a formal institutional setting. At the same time, its appearance was seen as not yet fully self-explanatory, which could make users hesitate if its purpose was not immediately clear. Playful or engaging elements were considered potentially useful for reducing hesitation, but only if they did not undermine the seriousness of the reception context.

As the discussion moved towards more advanced applications, organizational and ethical concerns became more salient across several dimensions. Participants raised questions about data protection, especially in relation to personalized information or facial recognition. They also asked who would maintain the system, update content, and ensure that the effort of implementation would be justified by its practical benefit. In this sense, the discussion addressed not only what Temi could do in principle, but also whether the institution could realistically support its long-term operation.

Taken together, the results suggest that acceptance of Temi in this reception setting depended less on general attitudes toward robots than on practical

balancing of usefulness, social appropriateness, trustworthiness, and organizational feasibility. Across the discussion, participants' evaluations were shaped by recurring tensions between approachability and professionalism, functional breadth and reliability, and openness to innovation and the need for institutional control.

Table 1: Main findings across acceptance dimensions

Dimension	Main Finding	Example
Functional dimensions	Reception work was seen as meaningful, while repetitive routine tasks were viewed as more suitable for robotic support	Wayfinding, room information, Wi-Fi access
Emotional aspects	Trust was linked to reliability, clarity, and ease of use	Correct answers, understandable interaction
Social dimensions	Acceptance depended on the relational role of reception work and expected reactions of others	Reception as a visible point of contact
Design and interaction qualities	Voice, appearance, and first impression shaped willingness to engage	Approachable but professional presentation
Cross-dimensional organisational concerns	Acceptance depended on feasibility in practice	Maintenance, data protection, responsibilities

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that acceptance of Temi in this reception setting was shaped less by general attitudes toward robots than by participants' assessments of its practical usefulness, social appropriateness, and organizational feasibility. Participants discussed Temi in relation to their everyday work, the meaning of reception tasks, and the conditions under which robotic support would be considered helpful and legitimate. Across the analysis, four interrelated dimensions were particularly salient: functional usefulness, trust and emotional evaluation, social role fit, and design and interaction quality.

A central finding within the functional dimension was the distinction between routine support tasks and the relational core of reception work. Participants were generally open to using Temi for repetitive, standardized, and interruption-driven activities such as wayfinding, room information, Wi-Fi access, and basic first-level IT support, but not as a substitute for socially meaningful parts of reception work such as welcoming visitors, handling context-sensitive situations, and maintaining human contact. This refines previous research by suggesting that, in reception settings, acceptance depends on whether a task is perceived as delegable without undermining the relational significance of the role (Graaf & Allouch, 2013; Henschel et al., 2021). This interpretation is consistent with research showing that frontline encounters are shaped not only by task execution, but also by relational

and emotional demands (Boninsegni et al., 2020; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Kinman, 2009). In the present study, participants described personal contact as meaningful, while repeated requests and interruptions were often experienced as burdensome.

Within the emotional dimension, trust emerged as a key condition of acceptance, but in a strongly practical sense. Participants linked trust to reliable performance, clear communication, ease of use, and context-appropriate behavior rather than novelty or emotional appeal alone. Trust therefore appeared to depend on whether Temi could be relied on in everyday interaction and whether its contribution seemed worthwhile. This is consistent with prior work suggesting that ethical concerns and trust-related evaluations in human–robot interaction can directly affect intention to use robots in service settings (Etemad-Sajadi et al., 2022).

The social dimension further showed that reception work was experienced not merely as administrative coordination, but as a relational and institutionally visible role. Participants considered not only whether Temi could support tasks, but also how its use might affect human contact, the meaning of reception work, and the expectations of visitors and other users. The robot was therefore evaluated not just as a tool, but as a visible participant in first-contact service situations. This resonates with interactional research on help-desk encounters, which shows that initiating contact is itself a socially organized part of institutional interaction rather than a neutral prelude to information exchange (Mortensen & Hazel, 2014). More broadly, this supports HRI research suggesting that people respond to robots through social expectations and interaction norms as well as technical considerations (Broadbent, 2017; Henschel et al., 2021).

Design and interaction quality also proved central to acceptance. Participants emphasized that Temi would only be used if people felt invited to interact with it and if its voice, appearance, and behavior matched the institutional setting. First impression, approachability, and intelligibility were therefore not peripheral design preferences, but core conditions of use. This is in line with research suggesting that experiences with service robots are multi-dimensional and shaped not only by functional performance, but also by affective and interaction-related cues (Huang et al., 2021).

At the same time, the findings suggest that established acceptance models such as the sRAM are helpful but not sufficient on their own for understanding robot acceptance in institutional reception settings. Functional, social, and emotional dimensions clearly mattered, but participants also highlighted issues such as maintenance responsibility, effort–benefit considerations, data protection, and organizational legitimacy. Acceptance was therefore shaped not only by perceptions of the robot itself, but also by whether its implementation appeared maintainable, governable, and appropriate within the institution. This does not contradict recent applications of the sRAM in other public-facing information settings, such as museums, but suggests that reception contexts bring additional organizational conditions into sharper focus (Wong & Wong, 2024). The findings therefore underline the importance of organizational readiness, understood here as the institution's capacity to maintain, govern, and practically support the robot's use.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that social robots such as Temi are most likely to be accepted when they are introduced in a clearly bounded and supportive role. Implementation appears more promising when the robot is assigned to a small number of well-defined, repetitive, and information-based tasks, while human staff remain responsible for socially sensitive and context-dependent interaction. For institutions, this implies that successful implementation depends not only on technical performance, but also on clear responsibilities, accurate content maintenance, understandable interaction design, and early clarification of ethical and organizational questions, including data protection and oversight.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a small sample from a single institutional setting and one focus group only. The findings therefore reflect the specific work practices and organizational context of this site and cannot be generalized without caution. Second, the study captures mainly expectations and early impressions rather than long-term experience with everyday robot use. Because participants discussed Temi based on a live demonstration and concrete scenarios, acceptance in actual practice may develop differently over time. Third, participants' responses were influenced by the specific stimulus situation, including the way Temi and its functions were presented. Finally, the study focused only on the perspective of reception staff and did not include other relevant stakeholder groups such as visitors, students, or teachers. Future research should therefore include additional organizational contexts, multiple stakeholder perspectives, and, where possible, observations of actual use after implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that acceptance of a social robot in reception services depends less on technological novelty than on whether the robot is perceived as a useful, trustworthy, and context-appropriate support tool. Reception staff clearly distinguished between the relational core of reception work and repetitive, standardized tasks that could be delegated more easily. Accordingly, Temi was seen as most acceptable in a complementary role, especially for wayfinding, room information, Wi-Fi access, and simple first-level IT support.

The findings further suggest that acceptance in institutional reception settings is shaped not only by functionality and interaction quality, but also by organizational conditions such as maintenance responsibilities, data protection, and role clarity. Social robots therefore appear most promising when introduced in a clearly bound and supportive role that relieves staff of routine tasks without replacing meaningful human interaction. More broadly, the study highlights that service robot acceptance should be understood as context-sensitive and embedded in everyday work practices rather than as a purely technological issue.

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