



A Search for Thai Hospitality Dimensions in Hospitality and Tourism Industry

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Abstract

One of the factors influencing tourists to revisit a destination is the hospitality of staff who come into direct or indirect contact with tourists. It is the quality of these contacts and interactions that will give a hospitality business an edge over its competitors. The objectives of this study were to identify the key characteristics of Thai hospitality from the perspectives of tourists and to classify the dimensions of hospitality attributes in the Thai cultural context. A mixed methods research design was used. A sample of 12 international tourists participated in an in-depth interview and a survey questionnaire with 1,200 complete samples were collected. Content analysis and domain analysis were used to analyse the Thai hospitality characteristics. Factor analysis was used to define the underlying structure of Thai hospitality.

The results identified 38 Thai hospitality characteristics from qualitative. Based on the results of factor analysis, Thai hospitality can be conceptualised as a seven-dimension construct that is important and recognised for international tourists in Thailand. These seven factors were identified as follows: thoughtfulness, modesty, compromise, respect of culture, enthusiasm and calibre. The identification of these characteristics and dimensions are valuable for the Thai hospitality and tourism industry as guidelines for shaping the behavior of service staff whose interactions are with tourists.

Keywords: Thai Hospitality, Thai Hospitality Dimensions, Thai Cultural Values, Thai Hospitality Characteristics

Introduction

In the tourism industry, the success or failure of a service encounter depends on the direct or indirect communication process that staff use in their interactions with customers because conflicts and misunderstandings can easily occur due to the differences in religious beliefs and values amongst tourists (Al-Ababneh, 2017; Chaston, 2012; Crick & Spencer, 2011; Tsang, 2011). People in the service sectors also offer different elements of hospitality depending on the culture of the host country (Reuland, Choudry, & Fagel, 1985; Schwartz, 1994). For instance, Thailand has been characterised as being 'caring-considerate' and 'friendly' in their hospitality (Knutson, 2004; Komin, 1990). These characteristics are formed and created by Thai cultural values. Many researchers have viewed cultural factors as being dominant in framing people's behavior in intercultural communication (D'Andrade, 2008; Hofstede, 1980; Mattila, 1999; Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2007; Stauss & Mang, 1999; Tsang & Ap, 2007; Yau, 1988). It can, therefore, be implied that national cultures influence host behavior in the service delivery process.

Besides, the cultural values of tourists also play an important role in influencing the manner in which they evaluate service (King, 1985; King & Garey, 1997), suggesting that the attitudinal and behavioral responses of both service staff and customers in the interaction between them play a key role in affecting perception of service quality and tourist satisfaction (Gallarza, Arteaga, Chiappa, & Gil-Saura, 2015; King & Garey, 1997; Tsang, 2011). It is challenging for hospitality and tourism organisations to understand which hospitality characteristics are important to tourists and to recognise these in the development of more effective human resource management



strategies. Furthermore, understanding how tourists want products and services to be delivered is also important for improving tourist satisfaction and retention (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Yuksel, 2001).

Notwithstanding that hospitality services have been the subject of considerable interest by both practitioners and researchers for many years, little or no effort has been made to understand the components of hospitality (Tsang, 2011; Winsted, 1997). Several researchers (e.g. Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002; Tsang, 2011; Wall & Walsh, 2011) stated that the relationship between the level and quality of the host's hospitality and services, and the contact–interaction with customers, is unclear as most previous studies on service management do not offer any insight into this means to customers (Winsted, 1997). However, as most major hospitality orientations and dimension have been developed and tested in the western and Chinese settings (Hsu & Huang, 2016; Tsang, 2011), it could be argued that these may fail when transplanted to a different cultural or religious setting. Moreover, the hospitality and tourism industry is a major industry in Thailand and international tourists have become the largest source of income for the Thai tourism industry over the last decade. Thus, the study sees the necessity of investigating the Thai hospitality characteristics from international tourists' perspectives. The findings generated from this study will help to understand various Thai hospitality characteristics and dimensions that important for human resource management to guidelines behavior of service staff so that business and individuals can interact more smoothly.

Objectives

1. To identify international tourists' perspectives on the characteristics of Thai hospitality
2. To classify the dimensions of hospitality attributes in the Thai cultural context

Research Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages. In stage one, in–depth interviews were conducted to develop a comprehensive list of Thai hospitality characteristics. According to Miller & Crabtree (2004), in–depth interviews allow a researcher to gain an understanding of the actions and reactions of people to a broad range of issues that may be relevant to the study. In qualitative research, data collection should be terminated at the point of saturation which may be reached with as few as twelve and usually no more than twenty participants (Kumar, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, saturation was reached after 12 participants from international tourists were interviewed. A Content Analysis was subsequently used to analyse these in–depth interviews transcripts. Consideration and coding of the categories identified included grouping of codes with similar meaning to avoid duplication, and subsequently a list of 38 Thai hospitality characteristics was developed (Table 2).

In Stage two, a structured, self–administered questionnaire was used to examine the perceptions of respondents on Thai hospitality characteristics. The selection of Thai hospitality characteristic items included in the questionnaire was based on the 38 characteristics from stage one. Respondents were asked to rate these characteristics on a 5–point Likert scale: ranging from 1 = Not at all relevant to 5–Very relevant. The questionnaire was pre–tested on a random sample of 30 international tourists visiting Bangkok, whose responses enabled the instructions to be refined and minor modifications to be made to Thai hospitality characteristics scales. Internal consistency between the dimensions was determined by Cronbach's coefficient and correlation analysis. The Cronbach's alpha of all scale was 0.7, and thus the contents of the questionnaire were considered appropriate (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002).

The data were collected between February and May 2017 with 1,200 respondents (convenience sample) from the main tourist destinations for domestic tourism: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chonburi, Kanchanaburi, Khon Kaen and Phuket. The profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Profile of the Respondents (n = 1,200)

Variables		Frequency	Variables		Frequency
Gender	Male	58.30%	Occupation	Government Official	5.30%
	Female	41.30%		Company Employee	26.10%
Age	18-24	18.10%		Business Owner	16.50%
	25-34	39.80%		Student	18.10%
	35-44	18.90%		Retired	8.70%
	45-54	10.50%		Other	25.30%
	55 or Above	12.40%	Continent	Europe	54.90%
Education	High School and Below	14.60%		Australia	5.16%
	University	52.50%		North America	10.16%
	Postgraduate	32.30%		South America	3.50%
				Africa	1.08%
				Asia	17.00%

In analysing the data, descriptive statistics were examined for all variables. The initial analysis included the compilation of frequencies for the demographic items and mean scores for the Thai hospitality characteristic items. Principle Component Analysis (PCA) was used to reduce the total number of variables by identifying a smaller set of underlying dimensions.

Results and Findings

Objective 1: To Identify International Tourists' Perspectives on Thai Hospitality Characteristics

Table 2 presents a list of Thai hospitality characteristics from the perspective of international tourists. On the 5-point Likert Scale, the respondents rated these characteristics as follows:

Table 2 Thai Hospitality Characteristics (n = 1,200)

Thai Hospitality Characteristics and Meaning	\bar{X}	Thai Hospitality Characteristics and Meaning	\bar{X}
Kindness: Be kind to others and lend a helping hand to those in need	4.55	Attaching Importance to Long-Lasting Relationships rather than Gain: Maintain customers relationship	3.86
Friendliness: Be friendly	4.48	Courtesy: Exhibit good manners and conform with local customs	3.82
Respect for Tradition: Show respect for someone's wishes, rights, or customs	4.46	Pragmatic/Practical: Practical	3.80
Tolerance of Others: Willingness to patience about something	4.41	Confidence: Be positive and confident	3.80
Joyful: Fun-loving pleasant interactions	4.37	Responsible: React for one's needs	3.78
Calmness: Personal steadiness and stability	4.30	Self-Discipline: Tolerate all matters	3.76
Caring: Show an interest, pay attention	4.22	Formality: A way to provide service to customers	3.75



Table 2 (Cont.)

Thai Hospitality Characteristics and Meaning	\bar{x}	Thai Hospitality Characteristics and Meaning	\bar{x}
Industrious/Working Hard: Work hard to achieve one's goal	4.21	Personal Connection: Networking	3.74
Sincerity: Being honest, true and real	4.18	Commitment: Keep one's words	3.68
Solidarity with Others: To promote solidarity among members	4.13	Competitiveness and Competence: Have a competitive edge in one's work	3.67
Veneration for the Older: Respect for older	4.11	Moderation: Not have excessive desires	3.67
Harmony with Others: A harmonious atmosphere without fighting	4.10	Self-Cultivation: Educating oneself, rectifying one's mindset	3.65
Patience: The capacity to accept or tolerate delay without getting angry or upset	4.06	Personalisation: Remembering one's details	3.60
Prudence/Careful: Considerate for other	4.05	Down-to-Earth: Not caught up in superficial things	3.54
Honesty: Conduct business with integrity	4.00	Adaptability: Being able to adjust to new conditions	3.45
Avoiding Confrontation: Compromise	3.95	Face: Not disgracing oneself	3.40
Humbleness: Not arrogant	3.94	Persistence: The continued or prolonged existence until success	3.39
Respect for Legal Practice: Belief in the necessity of abiding by laws and regulations	3.92	Power Distance: Hierarchical relationships by status and observing this order	3.37
Sense of Obligation: Be accountable at work	3.91	Promptness: Quick reactions	3.31

Based on Table 2, “Kindness” (mean score 4.55), “Friendliness” (mean score 4.48), “Respect for tradition” (mean score 4.46), “Tolerance of others” (mean score 4.41) and “Joyfulness” (mean score 4.37) were the five most standing out Thai hospitality characteristics. On the other hand, “Persistence” (mean score 3.39), “Power distance” (mean score 3.37) and “Promptness” (mean score 3.31) were the three least relevant.

Objective 2: To Classify Dimensions of Hospitality Attributes in the Thai Cultural Context

The second objective was to determine the underlying dimensions of hospitality attributes in the Thai cultural context that are acknowledged by international tourists in the service delivery process. Principal Component Analysis was employed to identify the minimum number of factors accounting for the maximum proportion of variance. First, the correlation matrix for all 38 variables was computed to ensure that the data matrix had sufficient correlations to justify the application of factor analysis. The results showed that most of the correlations between variables were greater than 0.3, indicating that factor analysis was appropriate (Field, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Second, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was used to test that the correlation matrix was an identity matrix; that is, all diagonal terms were 1 and all off-diagonal terms were 0. The value of the test statistic for sphericity of the 38 variables was large (9538.836) and was statistically significant at the 0.00 level (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Third, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used to examine the degree of intercorrelations among the variables and the appropriateness of factor analysis. The value of the overall KMO statistics for the 38 variables was 0.707. According to Kaiser (1974), the KMO values above 0.6 are acceptable, indicating that the data set was well suitable for factor analysis.

The analysis presented ten factors. Reliability analysis was performed to test the reliability and internal consistency of each factor. The ten factors were ranging from 0.16 to 0.84. Nunnally (1978) suggested that the minimum values of 0.5 can be considered an acceptable level for basic research. Thus, some variables (respect for tradition, self-cultivation, joyful, courtesy, sense of obligation) were deleted from further analysis. This



analysis left 33 Thai hospitality characteristics loading on seven factors (Table 3). The variables in a factor are based on factor loadings of 0.45 or better and an eigenvalue equal or greater than 1 (Field, 2013). The percentage of variance, extracted from the 36 variables, was 59.30.

Table 3 Results of Factor Analysis of Thai Hospitality Attributes in the Thai Cultural Context

Factor	Mean	Factor Loading	Communality	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Reliability Coefficient
Factor 1 Thoughtful	3.92			8.204	21.59	0.82
respect for legal practice	3.92	0.75	0.68			
confidence	3.80	0.74	0.67			
honesty	4.00	0.73	0.72			
sincerity	4.18	0.67	0.67			
prudence/careful	4.05	0.58	0.72			
competitiveness and competence	3.67	0.57	0.59			
pragmatism (practical)	3.80	0.62	0.62			
Factor 2 Modest	3.77			3.403	8.96	0.82
humbleness	3.94	0.73	0.68			
attaching importance to long-lasting relationships rather than gain	3.86	0.71	0.72			
down to earth	3.54	0.69	0.72			
caring	4.22	0.65	0.58			
persistence	3.39	0.64	0.69			
commitment	3.68	0.57	0.71			
Factor 3 Compromise	3.88			2.957	7.78	0.77
adaptability	3.45	0.78	0.74			
avoiding confrontation	3.95	0.73	0.71			
self-discipline	3.76	0.61	0.59			
harmony with others	4.10	0.49	0.67			
solidarity with others	4.13	0.46	0.68			
Factor 4 Respect	3.66			2.597	6.84	0.84
personal connection	3.74	0.79	0.76			
formality	3.75	0.72	0.73			
power distance	3.37	0.65	0.75			
face	3.40	0.63	0.80			
personalisation	3.60	0.48	0.68			
veneration for the elderly	4.11	0.48	0.61			
Factor 5 Culture	4.42			2.128	5.60	0.63
tolerance of other	4.41	0.79	0.76			
kindness	4.55	0.70	0.65			
calmness	4.30	0.45	0.66			
Factor 6 Enthusiastic	4.25			1.755	4.62	0.63
industrious/working hard	4.21	0.83	0.76			
patience	4.06	0.73	0.69			
friendliness	4.48	0.50	0.57			

**Table 3** (Cont.)

Factor	Mean	Factor Loading	Communality	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Reliability Coefficient
Factor 7 Calibre	3.59			1.486	3.91	0.66
responsible	3.78	0.72	0.72			
moderation	3.67	0.69	0.69			
promptness	3.31	0.55	0.73			
Total Variance Explained					59.30	

As shown in Table 3, factor one is labelled “*Thoughtful*”, which refers to the key Thai hospitality characteristics such as confidence, honesty and sincerity that place a strong emphasis on the attitude and behavior of service staff that effect on their performance when dealing with tourists. The second factor is labelled “*Modest*” which shows how Thai staff behave themselves when interacting with tourists such as humbleness, caring, persistence and commitment. The third factor is called “*Compromise*” with an emphasis on being understanding and adaptable in their behavior. The fourth factor is called “*Respect*” which focuses on hierarchical values including authority in interpersonal relationship and social orientations. The fifth factor is labelled “*Culture*” which includes the cultures that influence people’s behavior such as tolerance of others, kindness and calmness. The sixth factor is labelled “*Enthusiastic*” is associated with characteristics such as working hard, patience and friendliness when delivery services to tourists. The last factor is called “*Calibre*” which shows that the integration values are associated with the work standard performances that be recognised by tourists in the Thai service delivery process such as being responsible, moderation and promptness.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the factor analysis, Thai hospitality dimensions can be conceptualised into of seven components. These seven factors are: thoughtful, modest, compromise respect, culture, enthusiastic and calibre. The first factor “*Thoughtful*” is associated with the largest number of Thai hospitality characteristics, including characteristic items such as honesty, sincerity and confidence. These characteristics influence the attitude and behavior of service staff and affect their performance quality. This findings support Komin’s work (1978; 1990) who found that most Thai interactions are honest and sincere, and that Thais value sincere and deep reciprocal relationships. Therefore, there is a clear structure that directs employees on how to interact with tourists. These results help managers to better understand which dimensions of hospitality are the most important and which tourists’ experiences they should effectively manage in the organisation to gain tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

The second factor “*Modest*” shows an interest/care in tourists. Characteristics such as humbleness, down to earth, caring and persistence are included in this dimension and emphasise care giving from the heart and loving concern. Winsted (1997) viewed these attributes as behaviors that help the service industry to better meet tourist expectations and build tourist loyalty. The results indicate that “caring” has the highest factor mean score rating (4.22) for international tourists. Caring is often mentioned as a characteristic of Thai people and is related to a culture of attention-to-details (Knutson, 2004). Markus and Kitayama (1991) explained that people in Asian cultures have an interdependent self-concept that emphasises concerns with interpersonal connectedness, caring for others, and social conformity. It can be concluded that for service industries, this dimension facilitates human interactions among staff and tourists.

The third dimension “*Compromise*” contains personality traits values reflecting work principles. The value of compromise is reflected in the behavioral adaptability of service employees to specific tourists and specific situational demands. Compromise is seen as including values such as adaptability, avoiding confrontation and seeking harmony with others when it comes to relationships or workplace settings. The study showed that “solidarity with others” and “harmony with others” are highly valued by respondents (4.13 and 4.10 respectively). “Harmony with others” was also seen to play an important role in a relationship as it cannot be accomplished without peaceful interaction. Influenced by the Buddhism emphasis on harmony, Thai people tend to avoid confrontations and criticism as this could result in the fracture of the relationship and in losing face (Komin, 1990; Risseuw, 2017). One of the most important theories developed relevant to the cultural dimension is that of Hofstede (1980; 2004) who explained at this point in time that people in collectivist cultures are more willing to cooperate and they tend to avoid conflict. As such, service employees will avoid conflict rather than clarify the true meaning because direct conflict can affect the relationship, especially when the other party to the discussion or problem is of a higher social status. Also, this factor is similar to the ‘flexibility and adjustment orientation’ purposed by Komin (1990) which focuses on people’s response to situations. Many authors (Bhattacharya, Gibson, & Doty, 2005; Gerwin, 1993; Steers, 1975; Suárez, Cusumano, & Fine, 1995) noted that the value of compromise can be used to maintain productivity and prevent moral from deteriorating as it helps to avoid the appearance of favoring certain groups or individuals over others and everyone involved can attain a measure of satisfaction. Thus, service employees need to be given the power to adapt their behaviors to the demands of every service encounter because it is a way of enhancing flexibility in behavior that can help to achieve purposeful and ethical interactions (Chebat & Kollias, 2000). On the other hand, some have argued that there is a need to maintain a specific degree of compromise because the key to success is to be flexible without compromising too much (Barney, 1991; Sánchez, 1995).

The fourth dimension, “*Respect*” is associated with the authority, hierarchical and networking values that place strong respect on power in social relationships. Hierarchies of social status may appear in nearly every interaction and in many forms, such as demand, control, influence and authority (Knutson, 2004). Respondents in this study viewed tourists as authority figures in business – perhaps the customer is always right viewpoint – thus, it is important for service employees to please those in higher social positions (guests). Similarly, Chen and Chen (2004) noted that without face, trust cannot continue to exist. Therefore, Thais resolve issues in “non-assertive” ways to avoid all potential embarrassment for others. As Komin (1990) observed “face-saving” is a key criterion for a great relationship. This may be attributable to the fact that one of the core Buddhist values is to create a relative higher acceptance of social hierarchy (Jackson, 2003; Kaw, 2005; King, 1964). Tourists may consider themselves authority figures and it is not uncommon for them to demand special favors from hotel and tourism staff. On the other hand, businesses themselves also believed that they will not reach the maximum efficiency in the long term if their employees fail to meet customer expectations (Güçer, Pelit, Demirdağ, & Arslanturk, 2016). According to this view, service employees then perceived that their operations are fully controlled by tourists. Hofstede (1980; 2004) found that Thailand has a high degree of power distance within the Thai culture. This means that Thai people tend to accept a high degree of unequally distributed power.

The fifth factor, “*Culture*” emphasises social values in people’s interactions. Characteristics such as tolerance of others, kindness and calmness are included in this factor. Table 3 shows that the “kindness” of service employees is the most recognised for tourists, with this factor attaining the highest factor mean score rating (4.55).



Respondents also placed a high value on “tolerance of others” for service employees in interactions. Many aspects of collectivist cultural orientation, including kindness and calmness, also stem from Buddhist principles. The religion contains within its traditions and cultures teachings on adoption of positive characteristics. As Tangkuptanon (2001) observed, Thai culture is influenced by the Sekhiyavatta of Buddhist teaching, which develops characteristics of loving-kindness, compassion, and polite humanity through spirituality. The values of culture have profound implications in people’s interactions, especially for hotel employees. As Lu, Berchoux, Marek, & Chen (2015) indicated, hotel staff interactions are one of the key factors for evaluating the quality of service because it can enhance customers’ level of satisfaction. Wu and Liang (2009) claimed that the interactions between the customers and employees are related to a customer’s perception of the hotel stay. Similarly, Thai people consider maintaining positive interactions is key to success in life (Komin, 1990).

The sixth dimension, “*Enthusiastic*” is associated with interactions in the service delivery process between service staff and tourists. Values such as working hard, patience and friendliness are included in this dimension. The study showed that “friendliness” is highly valued by tourists (4.48). Similarly, some studies (e.g. Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994; Lymperopoulos, Chaniotakis, & Soureli, 2006) claimed that friendly staff can help to maintain smooth interpersonal interactions and helps the development of place identity. This result is supported by Thailand’s stereotype image of being the “Land of Smiles”. Moreover, Thais prefer to avoid showing anger and displays of emotion in public because it is seen as good manners to maintain a positive and friendly attitude, a sense of humor, and a smile.

The last factor “*Caliber*” is associated with the Thai hospitality characteristics, including value items that emphasise the value of employee performance and work standards (i.e. responsible, moderation and promptness) in the service delivery process. The value of employee performance and work standards can be attributed to religion and they are found throughout society and the workplace. According to several researchers (Doran & Natale, 2011; Kutcher, Bragger, Rodriguez-Srednicki, & Masco, 2010), religion can influence people in both their individual behavior within a workplace and on the overall business environment. For example, it has been found that values associated with Christianity influence business practices in Western countries (Cornwell et al., 2005), while Confucian ideology has been attributed with having an influence on modern business practices in Chinese and East Asian organisations (Jaw, Ling, & Wang, 2007; Yan & Sorenson, 2004). In the context of Thai hospitality, Thai culture is deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism and the role of ethnic Chinese in the business environment, both of which encourage people to take responsibility and commit to their work (Chanthanom, 1998). Findings showed that the caliber values of being “responsible, moderate and prompt” were ranked as the most important value. This result is consistent with previous studies, especially in hospitality settings where those values are vital in the service delivery process to enhance the level of tourists’ satisfaction (Gallarza et al., 2015). Turkey and Sengul (2014) further noted that the behaviors displayed by service employees are critical to customers’ satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, it is not surprising that service employees must provide excellent service to keep customers happy.

Conclusion

Thai hospitality characteristics can be conceptualised into seven influencing factors of tourist satisfaction in the tourism industry. A total of 33 Thai cultural values associated with Thai hospitality characteristics among international tourists were identified. Some values (e.g. harmony with others, face, self-discipline and friendliness)



identified consistent with previous research. However, as the society continues to change, new characteristics emerged from the study (e.g. attaching importance to long-lasting relationships rather than gain, personalisation and personal connection or networking). Thus, it is important for human resource management to train service teams in the right skills for managing tourists' needs.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirmed both the traditional and modern values from previous studies (Komin, 1989; 1990; 1991; Shawyun & Tanchaisak, 2005). The present study further established that Thai cultural values are evolving rapidly toward the tourism and hospitality industry. Moreover, the Thai hospitality characteristic items identified in this study can serve as a valuable source for further scale development in measuring contemporary Thai hospitality characteristics and seeking cultural explanations of Thai staff behaviors.

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