Chapter 61

The Influence of National Culture on Customer Service Experience: Case of China

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ABSTRACT

Hofstede’s cultural framework has been very instrumental in furthering an understanding of cross-cultural management and taken center stage as the dominant cultural paradigm to show respect for norms, values, and management styles across cultures. However, recent research on cross-cultural management suggests to go beyond Hofstede’s cultural framework and use non-Western, Asian cultural norms which might provide additional insights into the impact of cultural values on service quality dimensions and the resultant implications for customer expectations and satisfaction. This chapter attends to this call and examines the practice of service quality in hospitality sector in the Republic of China (Taiwan) so it may serve as a reference point against which to interpret the fieldwork data of cross-cultural service quality research and its implications for customers’ perceptions towards service quality.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the current role and contribution of service sector in general and hospitality industry in particular to the economy and rapid pace of internationalization of service companies, it is difficult for hospitality practitioners to establish a universal marketing strategy which can be effectively used across a complex of diverse national cultures. This also poses a challenge to academics to propose a ‘vanilla, one size fits all’ approach or the existing Western-driven theoretical cultural
models to offer prescriptions for organizational success and survival in the competitive global business environment of hospitality sector. To a considerable extent these challenges are attributed to the broad economic reach of the hospitality industry, global community of its customers, and more specifically their cultural differences. So focusing on the generic service quality gap models (e.g. SERVQUAL – see Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990), although valid instruments for explaining a great deal of customers’ expectations and perceptions towards service quality offerings and the resulting quality gaps, cannot, in itself, serve as the only point of reference for delighting and retaining customers.

Analysis of cross-cultural customer behavior issues, drawing upon the global nature of the hospitality industry and its diverse constituents (e.g. workforce, guests, shareholders, owners), has come to the fore in the service quality management research over the past two decades (Lockyer & Tsai, 2004; Furrer et al., 2000; Mattila, 1999; Wang et al., 2008; Winsted, 1997; Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011; Camillo & Di Pietro, 2014). These scholars argue that customer behavior is largely ‘culture-bound’ and stress the importance of understanding cultural components of customer behavior, if an organization is to survive and succeed in the competitive global business environment (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011, pp. 181). In this respect, the Hofstede (1980) dimensional model of national culture (i.e. individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity, & long- versus short-term orientation) has led the way with its hypothesized connection between national cultural norms and associated differences in customer behavior over the past three decades. However, this chapter draws upon non-Western, more specific cultural values as a theoretical lens to further interpret a customer’s behavior dynamics in the global hospitality industry. More specifically, it gains insight from Chinese cultural values of Gunaxi (關係), Mien-tzu (面子), and Hé (和) to both enhance the theoretical base of cross-cultural service quality research and to help practicing hospitality managers delight their customers. Given the role of China and its consumers in the global economy, the substantial (in)direct contribution of hospitality sector to the country’s GDP (with a faster growth rate than the total economy) (see WTTC, 2013) and previous call for more cross-cultural consumer behavior research (see Camillo, 2014), this study brings new insights into the long-standing debate on service quality and culture.

More specifically, the primary aim of this chapter is to examine the influence of Chinese cultural values on expectations of service quality. In doing so, it poses a challenge to the marketing and service research scholars in terms of applicability of Western-dominated cultural frameworks to study customer expectations of more specific cultural contexts. Overall, this chapter makes a contribution to the advancement of Asian management research by diverting its emphasis from primarily Western-dominated service management research context to the more unique context of the Asian region so as to explore and examine the peculiarities of Chinese cultural norms and values and its implications for customer expectations and perceptions of service quality. For comparative purposes and in an attempt to unravel the practice of culture-bound behaviors of customers, we focus on the results of a recently conducted survey research on ‘service quality and culture’ in the context of hospitality sector in the Republic of China (Taiwan). In comparison to other economic sectors in the mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the hospitality sector has significantly contributed to GDP and created competitive employment opportunities for local, regional and international businesses (see National Statistical, 2009).

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first discusses the nature, characteristics and significance of services and the determinants of service quality. Second, it presents an overview of hospitality industry in terms of definition,
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