The role of culture and purchase motivation in service encounter evaluations

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Abstract *This study was developed to shed some light on the role of culture and purchase motivation in influencing consumers' evaluations of services. More specifically, the goal was to contrast Asian and Western travelers' perceptions of brief, routine-type service encounters in a hotel context. The results of this empirical study suggest that culture-based biases in the evaluation process might depend on the consumers' purchase-related goals. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the use of expressed emotions as an indicator of how the customer feels about the service might be restricted to Western customers. Managerial implications of this study relate to the training of customer-contact employees.*

Introduction

As global competition increases, understanding the cultural impacts of services becomes more critical for service firms (Riddle, 1992). Because culture provides the framework for social interactions, the social rules and customer expectations that are related to service encounters are likely to vary from culture to culture (Pucik and Katz, 1986). For example, the international travelers least satisfied with airline in-flight service are likely to be Japanese, as indicated by customer satisfaction surveys conducted by international airlines (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).

Good employee-customer interactions are key

Because service delivery inherently includes customer contact and interaction with employees, cultural factors may exert greater influence on consumers' evaluations of services than on their evaluations of tangible goods. For high-contact services especially, good employee-customer interactions are key to successful relationship building (Chase and Tansik, 1983), and a better understanding of how to adapt service delivery behavior to the values of major cultural groups would be highly beneficial to service managers.

Despite the relevance of this topic, however, very little research has examined the influence of culture on service perceptions (Malhotra *et al.*, 1994), and our understanding of how customers from different countries evaluate service encounters is very limited (Winsted, 1997). This study attempted to close that gap by empirically investigating the influence of culture on consumer perceptions of service encounters. As an example of a service in which customers experience a high level of contact with front-line personnel, we chose to investigate first-class hotels (Lovelock, 1983; Chase,

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1978; McColl-Kennedy and White, 1997). Our investigation concentrated on two main groups with very different types of cultural backgrounds:

(1) Asians; and

(2) Westerners.

Although it can be argued that the spread of Western consumption patterns and popular culture might have influenced Asian values, the central or core values of these societies have not become Westernized (Huntington, 1996). The debate over the myth or reality of a common core of Asian or Western values is ongoing (Blackburn 1994), yet Asian and Western cultures can be clearly differentiated along dimensions that are relevant to studying service encounters. The main contrasts between Western and Asian cultures have been described as occurring in the cultural dimensions of communication context (Hall, 1984) and power distance (Hofstede, 1980).

Current understandings of the basic cultural differences between Asian and Western consumers and their goal-directed behaviors provided the theoretical framework on which our predictions were based. This paper begins with a brief summary of the relevant literature.

Asian versus Western cultures

The current popularity of global marketing underscores a growing homogenization of markets and increasing similarities in the tastes of consumers around the globe (Thomas *et al.*, 1996). Nevertheless, the religious and cultural traditions of East and West are deeply ingrained in people's attitudes (Kugler, 1998). In some Asian cultures, despite varying degrees of Westernization, Confucian philosophy remains vital (Tan and McCullogh, 1985). In emphatic recognition of the vitality of traditional Asian values, the Ritz-Carlton hotel advertisements in Asia emphasize respect for tradition and wisdom even as the hotel embraces the future (Schmitt and Simson, 1998, p. 261).

Differences between Western and Asian consumers' perceptions of service quality

Our study focused on the differences between Western and Asian service consumers' perceptions of service quality. Some prior empirical evidence suggests that, in different cultures, different types of behaviors indicate good service (Winsted, 1997). In a study employing a recall method, for example, Japanese and Western students gave differential ratings to many behaviors of restaurant employees (Winsted, 1997).

Because first-class hotel services are delivered by people, cultural factors are likely to mediate the hotel customers' attitudes toward the service component of their hotel experience. Broadly speaking, service styles in Asia are more people-oriented than in the West, where the efficiency of the service delivery is highly valued (Riddle, 1992). In the service culture of Asia, even consumers of low-cost services expect a relatively high level of service (Schmitt and Pan, 1996).

A credible theoretical framework for the differential level-of-service preferences between East and West has been provided by Hall (1984), who observed that Western cultures endorse communications that are explicit, direct and unambiguous, while Asian cultures endorse less verbal communication modes. Hall (1984) categorized explicit communication as low-context and less verbal communication as high-context. In addition, because Asian cultures place a primary emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relationships, the quality of interaction between employee and customer might be a key factor in the Asian customer's service-encounter

evaluation (Riddle, 1992). For Western customers, the functional quality (Gronroos, 1990) of a service may be less important than its offering of efficiency and time-savings. In Western cultures, a primary focus is on goal completion, and Western consumers might prefer efficient delivery even if that delivery is impersonal (Riddle, 1992).

Power distance

Another culture-based variable that might explain the differences in service expectations among Western and Asian consumers is *power distance* (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), a term that describes the extent to which differences in status are expected and accepted within a culture. The cultures of Hong Kong, India, Singapore, Thailand and most other Asian countries are characterized by relatively large power distances (Hofstede, 1991) that reflect social hierarchies. Chinese culture, for example, focuses on courteous rituals that encourage individuals to maintain the hierarchical social order (Hwang, 1983). In such cultures, the lower social status of service employees requires them to provide customers with high levels of service.

Conversely, the cultures of Canada, Germany, the UK, the USA, the Scandinavian nations and many other Western countries are characterized by small power distances (Hofstede, 1991). Consumers from these cultures are less accepting of status differences and tend to expect more egalitarian service.

In any encounter between two people, nonverbal communication comprises more than 60 percent of the interaction (Riddle, 1992), and nonverbal cues tend vary wildly across cultures (Tansik, 1985). For example, depending on the culture, direct eye contact may connote either polite attentiveness or lack of respect. To gain further insight into culture-based differences in service encounters, in our investigation we supplemented data collected from surveys with data acquired as a result of direct observation of employee-customer interactions. A customer's emotional response to a service interaction is a critical input, but in interactions across cultures the probability for misjudgment of the customer's felt emotion is high (Bond and Hwang, 1986).

Following prior research in other domains (e.g. Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989), we focused on a particular subset of non-verbal communication cues, displayed emotions. Emotions are social and cultural products, and the culture teaches people which emotions should be expressed as well as when and where (Kitayama and Markus 1995). Asian cultures set high value on group harmony (de Mooij, 1997) and commonly place restraints on expression of emotions in public (Argyle *et al.*, 1984). Confucian thought counsels individuals to refrain from showing joy or sadness in order to avoid imposing one's feelings on others and thereby disrupting the harmony of the group (Song, 1985; Bond, 1986). In light of this cultural inhibition of emotional display, it is not surprising that Chinese individuals tend to score high in self-monitoring (Yang, 1981).

Dichotomies

To summarize, Western and Asian cultures exhibit dichotomies in two basic dimensions:

(1) communication context; and

(2) power distance.

Based on these differences, we could expect Asian and Western customers to have dissimilar perceptions of routine service encounters. However, current research in consumer behavior suggests that the motivation behind a purchase decision can greatly influence the customer's evaluations of the

service or product. In fact, some researchers propose that most purchase decisions are made within the context of goal pursuit (e.g. Lawson, 1997). Purchase-related consumption goals might then mediate the extent to which culture-based biases are present in consumers' evaluations of service encounters. To gain a richer understanding of the role of culture in influencing customer perceptions of a hotel's services, we incorporated some motivational aspects of the purchase decision into our research design. The following section presents a brief discussion of the importance of consumer goals in consumption situations.

Consumers' goal-directed behavior

Consumption may be construed as a problem-solving effort through which the consumer intends to achieve various goals (Ratneshwar *et al.*, 1996). Although consumers may be in pursuit of goals that are quite general and even abstract (such as self-esteem, for example) (Lawson, 1997), our investigation focused on concrete and product-specific consumer goals.

Travel and tourism industry

The travel and tourism industry has long recognized that the consumption-related needs and expectations of business travelers can be very different from those of leisure travelers (Johar and Sirgy 1995; Kaynak and Yavas, 1981; Mansfeld, 1992). Moreover, purchase motivation has been shown to influence travelers' perceptions of service quality of hospitality products (Gilbert, 1991). Efficiency-driven business travelers seem to value any time savings that hotels can offer them, while vacationers seem to place more emphasis on the positive feelings they experience as a result of interactions with the hotel's service employees. Gaining some insight into how purchase occasion might interact with customers' affective responses to service encounters is important given the centrality of emotions in understanding the consumption experience (Oliver, 1997). Mood literature suggests that consumers' affective responses influence post-consumption evaluations (e.g. Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Cohen and Areni, 1991; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Price *et al.*, 1995) and brand attitudes (e.g. Batra and Stayman, 1990). In explaining the service evaluations of Western and Asian travelers, our predictions incorporated not only the cultural factors discussed in the previous section, but purchase motivational and affective factors and as well.

Propositions

To accommodate our predictions we purposely selected the study context of a first-class hotel's front-office activities. Routine hotel check-out service encounters are excellent examples of the type of brief encounter that can be very unsatisfying to a customer who desires a high level of service, especially when compared to extended customer-employee encounters that provide much greater opportunities for offering people-oriented service. For an excellent discussion on types of service encounters, see Price *et al*. (1995). We anticipated that the lack of personal attention in these brief encounters would adversely affect Asian leisure travelers' evaluations of the service encounter and of the service firm. However, the routine nature of check-in and check-out interactions was not expected to influence the evaluations made by either Asian or Western business travelers because these customers' purchase goals would be focused on efficient service delivery. Hence, we advanced two related propositions, as follows.

P1: Customer evaluations of the service encounter will be significantly lower for Asian leisure travelers than for their Western counterparts. For business travelers, no differences will be found.

P2: Customers' overall service quality evaluations will be significantly lower for Asian leisure travelers than for their Western counterparts. For business travelers no differences will be found.

Asians are more emotionally reserved than Westerners

As a result of the widespread influence of Confucian philosophy on Asian cultures, many Asians are more emotionally reserved and habituated to self-restraint than many Westerners. Effects of this difference in the cultural mores affecting emotional display were expected to be observable during service encounters. Consequently, we proposed the following proposition:

P3: The degree to which customers display emotions in a service encounter will be lower among Asian travelers than Western travelers.

We further proposed that purchase motivation would influence the affective reaction of the customer to the service encounter, leading to the following prediction:

P4: Leisure travelers will be more interested than business travelers in the emotional benefits gained from the customer-employee interaction.

Research design and study sample

Establishing equivalence at the various stages of the research process is a major concern in any cross-cultural investigation (Douglas and Craig, 1984; Leung, 1989; Usunier, 1996). Consequently, the survey instrument was pre-tested among both Asian and Western travelers ($n = 24$). The results from the pilot test indicated that, overall, hotel customers who had chosen Singapore as their destination had no real difficulty in understanding the questionnaire written in English. The target population of this study comprised international travelers and hence their familiarity with a simple satisfaction survey is not surprising. Furthermore, the choice of respondents contributed to relatively homogenous samples in terms of demographic variables, thus ensuring comparability between the two ethnic groups. Two hotels in Singapore, each offering high quality services in the high-price range, granted us access to their customers and front-line employees. At each hotel's front desk, a trained research assistant observed the behavior of every third customer and recorded the length of the service encounter. After completion of the interaction, this research assistant approached the customer and asked that individual to complete a short survey. Although the survey instruments were in English, the research assistant was fluent in Mandarin and in Japanese to assist non-native English speakers. A relatively high rate of customer participation (approximately 75 percent) resulted in a total sample size of 200 customers.

The respondents

The average age of the respondents was 39 years; 70 percent were male. Nearly half were traveling for business purposes. The routine nature of the service encounter was indicated by a short average time, 3.29 minutes. Of the study's respondents, 49 percent were Western and 51 percent were Asian (42 percent Chinese, 4 percent Japanese, and 5 percent nationals of other Asian countries). Although cultural differences certainly exist among Asian nations, this study grouped travelers from Hong Kong with their counterparts from Japan, Taiwan (ROC), Thailand, People's Republic of China and South Korea, all societies that share certain notable norms and values resulting from the influence of Confucian philosophy. The Western sample was composed of travelers from Australia, Canada, the UK, the USA and the Scandinavian nations. All the hotel employees in this study were Asian; 86 percent Chinese, 9.5 percent Malay and 4.8 percent Indian.

Measures

To remain consistent with prior research, the measures used were taken or adapted from previous studies in marketing, management and psychology.

Customer's mood state. A four-item mood short-form scale was employed (Peterson and Sauber, 1983). Customers were asked to indicate their feelings on the following five-point Likert scales:

- "At this moment I feel edgy or irritable";
- "For some reason, I am not very comfortable right now";
- "As I answer these questions, I feel cheerful"; and
- "Currently, I am in a good mood".

The Cronbach alpha coefficient of reliability for this four-component measure of mood was 0.79. The mood scale was used to test *P4*.

Pleasant-unpleasant dimensions

Displayed emotions. The mechanics of displayed positive emotions were of interest to this study (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990). Prior research suggests that the simple pleasant-unpleasant dimensions are useful in measuring expressed emotions across cultures (Ekman and Oster, 1979). The index measuring the customer's expressed emotions comprised eye contact, smiling and thanking behaviors. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.63 and thus very similar to the findings reported elsewhere (e.g. Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990). Eye contact indicated the number of times a customer attempted to establish eye contact with an employee. Smiling was defined as a noticeable uptwist of the lips as recommended by Tidd and Lockard (1976). Thanking showed whether or not the customer offered a polite verbal comment to suggest that a service encounter has ended. The displayed emotions measure is applicable to *P3*.

Service evaluations. To measure customer evaluation of the service providers, a five-item scale was developed. This scale incorporated the five basic dimensions identified in prior studies (Price *et al.,* 1995):

(1) mutual understanding;

(2) provision of extra attention;

(3) perceived authenticity in the interaction;

(4) competence of service provider; and

(5) meeting of customer expectations.

The Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.88, indicating sufficient internal reliability. This multi-item scale was used to test *P1*. A single-item, seven-point Likert-scale question probed the respondent's perception of the overall service quality provided by the hotel. This measure is applicable to *P2*.

Bipolar seven-point scale

Overall assessment of service firm

Because acquiescence and moderation of extreme responding may be culturally variable (DeMooij, 1997; Van Vivjer and Leung, 1997), measures reflecting the customer's overall evaluation of the hotel were included in the survey. Three items were measured on a bipolar seven-point scale:

(1) customer satisfaction;

(2) repurchase intention; and

(3) word-of-mouth referral.

To rule out alternative explanations, the customer's familiarity with first-class hotels and observation time were included as covariates in the data analysis. Prior research postulates that transaction time might interact with employee behavior (e.g. Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990) and thus have a direct impact on customer evaluations of the service encounter. To ensure measure equivalence, controlling for the customer's past usage of first-class hotels was deemed necessary (Parameswaran and Yaprak, 1987).

Results
Customer evaluations of service encounter and service quality
The ANCOVA results for the five-item service encounter scale are shown in Table I. The main effect for the ethnicity factor ($F = 10.9$, $p = 0.001$) was significant, whereas the main effect for the purpose of stay was insignificant. However, the ethnicity main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between ethnicity and purpose of stay ($F = 9.29$, $p = 0.003$). The cell means, shown in Table II, revealed that Western leisure travelers gave significantly higher ratings to their encounters than did their Asian counterparts. The differences between the Asian and Western groups of business travelers were insignificant. Taken together, these findings provide support for *P1*.

As expected, a similar pattern of results emerged for customers' overall service-quality assessments. The ANCOVA results are indicated in Table III and the cell means are shown in Table II. The interaction between ethnicity and purpose of stay was significant ($F = 5.67$, $p = 0.018$). Among leisure travelers, Westerners gave significantly higher ratings to the hotel's overall service quality than did their Asian counterparts. Among business travelers, no significant differences were found. Whereas the main effect for ethnicity

Source	SS	DF	MS	F
Ethnicity	9.66	1	0.98	10.91*
Purpose	1.72	1	1.72	1.94
Interaction	8.23	1	8.23	9.29*
Covariates	1.97	2	0.98	1.11
Model	23.73	5	4.75	5.36*
Residual	146.99	166	0.88	
Total	170.72	174	0.99	

Note: *denotes significant at $p < 0.05$

Table I. Analysis of covariance of service encounter evaluations by purpose of stay and ethnic background

Source	SS	DF	MS	F
Ethnicity	4.09	1	4.09	3.17
Purpose	13.06	1	13.06	10.14*
Interaction	7.31	1	7.31	5.67*
Covariates	0.56	2	0.28	0.219
Model	28.82	5	5.76	4.47*
Residual	216.5	168		
Totals	245.34	173		

Note: *denotes significant at $p < 0.05$

Table II. Analysis of covariance of service quality evaluations by purpose of stay and ethnic background

Source	SS	DF	MS	F
Ethnicity	3.014	1	3.014	3.45*
Purpose	5.36	1	5.36	6.93*
Interaction	1.46	1	1.46	1.88
Covariates	0.49	2	0.247	0.319
Model	12.62	5	2.52	3.26*
Residual	129.17	167	0.773	
Totals	141.80	172		

Note: *denotes significance at $p < 0.05$

Table III. Analysis of covariance of customer mood state by purpose of stay and ethnic background

was insignificant, the purpose of stay main effect was large ($F = 10.13$, $p = 0.002$). These findings are consistent with *P2*.

To control for culture-based biases in response style (Zax and Takashi, 1967; Chun *et al.*, 1974), overall satisfaction with hotel stay, repurchase intention, and likelihood of recommending the hotel to others also were analyzed using the ANCOVA method. For all three dependent variables, the interaction between ethnicity and purpose of stay was insignificant, as were the two main effects, suggesting that the results obtained with the service-related measures could not be explained by consistently higher or lower responses.

Emotional measures
Owing to the categorical nature of the observational data, a non-parametric test procedure was used to compare the degrees to which Western and Asian customers displayed emotions. For frequency of eye contact and smiling, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated significant differences in the location of the two subpopulations (Asian versus Western): 3,243 for eye contact, $p < .001$; and 3,165 for smiling, $p < 0.001$. The results for thanking behavior for these two groups, however, did not significantly differ. These findings provided support for *P3*.

With regard to self-declared mood states, leisure travelers appeared to be in a more positive affective state than business travelers immediately following the encounter. The ANCOVA results are shown in Table IV and the cell means are reported in Table II. The main effect for purpose of stay was significant ($F = 6.93$, $p = 0.009$), whereas the main effect for ethnicity and the interaction term failed to reach statistical levels of significance. These findings were consistent with *P4*.

Encounter	Business	Leisure
Asian	5.73	5.46
Western	5.85	6.43
Service quality	Business	Leisure
Asian	5.51	5.58
Western	5.5	6.36
Mood	Business	Leisure
Asian	5.69	5.82
Western	5.83	6.33

Note: *range 1-7 for all measures

Table IV. Cell means for dependent variables by purpose of stay and ethnic background

Discussion

Potential for creative new approaches

The international management of services enjoys a unique status that offers rich potential for creative new approaches (Bradley, 1995). The involvement of people in service delivery implies that cultural diversities and norms quickly come into play when customers evaluate service encounters. For high-contact services especially, the interactions that take place within the customer-employee dyad are key to successful relationship building (Chase and Tansik, 1983). However, our study's results suggest that, while encounter-level evaluations may be culture-dependent, the magnitude of the impact of culture may be mediated by the individual consumer's purchase motivation.

In this study, business travelers acted as a relatively homogenous target market regardless of cultural background. Asian and Western business travelers rated the service encounter and the service firm in a very similar fashion. This finding can be explained by the goal-directed behavior of this group of travelers. Business travelers tend to focus on the output, not the style, of the service delivery. For this target market, efficiency (including the speed of service) is more crucial than the functional quality of the interaction.

Leisure travelers, however, tended to be more heterogeneous in their needs than in their expectations. Their idiosyncratic goals or motivations enabled the culture-based differences in service perceptions to surface. As compared to their Western counterparts, Asian leisure travelers gave significantly lower ratings to the service encounter and the overall service quality. These perceptual differences were expected because service-oriented Asian cultures (Schmitt and Pan, 1996) support high service expectations. In addition, many Asian cultures are characterized by high-context communication (Hall, 1984) and large power distances (Hofstede, 1991). These two cultural dimensions help us to understand why the Asian leisure travelers who participated in this study were less happy with the service provided by the hotel than their Western counterparts. Asians tend to prefer high-context communications in which non-verbal cues are more crucial than explicit utterances. This emphasis on contextual cues highlights the importance of the quality of the service interaction (Riddle, 1992). The routine and brief nature of the studied transactions did not accommodate the need of Asian leisure travelers for people-oriented service delivery. Consequently, these travelers arrived at lower evaluations of the service encounter than their Western counterparts who expected less personal service delivery.

Differences in the ratings by Asian and Western leisure travelers

Power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 1991) is another cultural dimension that might explain the differences in the ratings provided by Asian and Western leisure travelers. Most Asian cultures are accepting of large power distances and support expectations of status differences between customers and service employees. As customers, Asian leisure travelers expect to be treated as deserving of high-quality service regardless of the type of service encounter. Prior research suggests that Japanese consumers, for example, are more interested than Western consumers in the ritualistic aspects of employee behavior (Winsted, 1997). Brief routine customer-employee interactions, designed in Western cultures that downplay the importance of status differences are less accommodating of Asian views of the status differential than are longer, more involved, service encounters. As a result, Asian leisure travelers were less happy with the service they received than their Western counterparts.

While it could be argued that the employees who participated in this study may have treated the Western and Asian travelers differently, our observations of the studied encounters did not lend support this alternative hypothesis.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature of affect in consumer behavior literature. Our results indicated that Asian consumers might be less willing than Western customers to reflect their feelings in their facial expressions. Specifically, Western travelers who participated in this study made more eye contact with employees than Asians and also smiled more. Culture-based rules governing display of emotions provide plausible explanations for this finding. Asians have many rules concerning appropriate public expressions of emotions (Argyle *et al.*, 1984) and in Asia imposition of one's feelings on others is widely considered as a threat to group harmony (Song, 1985). Consequently, it is not surprising to find differences between the two ethnic groups regarding eye contact and smiling behaviors. Thanking behavior, however, is not related to emotional responses and hence the null differences between the ethnic groups in this regard were to be expected.

Purchase motivation

Finally, our results suggest that purchase motivation may influence how people feel in service encounters. Consumers come into service consumption situations with different service-specific goals (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Lawson, 1997) that influence their pre-consumption expectations, including their affective expectations (e.g. Dube, 1990). In this study, regardless of cultural background, leisure travelers were in a more positive mood state than business travelers immediately following the service encounter. This finding suggests that the need for arousing emotional responses among consumers might depend on their purchase motivations. In other words, leisure travelers might be looking for emotionally-laden service encounters with the hotel staff whereas business travelers may be looking for a good service-delivery outcome.

To summarize, the findings of this study indicate that service managers might benefit from knowing which parts of the service delivery are influenced by their customers' cultural backgrounds. The individual customer's sensitivity to culture-based norms in service encounters, however, might be mediated by that person's purchase motivation. In this study, Asian and Western leisure travelers had highly different perceptions of the quality of the focal service encounter, but Asian and Western business travelers showed only insignificant differences in these perceptions. The importance of affect in the service encounter, as further indicated by the results of this study, might depend on the customer's consumption-related goals. Finally, our results suggest that customers' expressed emotions may be better predictors of satisfaction with service encounters for Westerners than for Asians.

Managerial implications

Culture

Because culture plays an important role in determining how customers expect services to be delivered (Tansik and Chase, 1988), today's service managers should be aware both of their ability to leverage culture-driven expectations and of the costs of ignoring cultural norms. Nevertheless, a service firm's degree of need for cultural customization will depend on the customer's purchase motivation, the length and type of customer contact, and the complexity of the service task. The managerial implications of this study are limited to brief, routine-type interactions with a high level of customer-employee contact.

The findings of the present investigation highlight the importance of understanding the customer's purchase motivation. Leisure travelers may have affective expectations regarding service encounters, suggesting that service delivery style for these customers should be caring and empathic. Business travelers driven by a need for efficiency, however, might focus on the service outcome rather than on the feelings generated by the service encounter. An understanding of the customer's motivational factors might enable the customer-contact employee to emphasize appropriate cues in the service delivery and thereby maximize the customer's and the employee's satisfaction with the service encounter.

In addition, the results of this study indicate that service firms might benefit from providing cultural training to their customer-contact employees. Hall and Hall (1990) suggest that the concept of high- versus low-context culture might need to be considered when developing employee training programs for customer-contact employees in the hotel industry. The dominant cultural values of the service firm's target markets will impact the degree to which cultural customization is necessary. Prior research suggests that the customer's definition of what constitutes a hospitality product might depend on his/her cultural heritage (Houghton and Trembley, 1994). This study's results were limited to Asian versus Western customers of hotel services.

The cultural heritage of many Asian consumers dictates an emphasis on personal attention during the service encounter. Consequently, training employees to be sensitive to the customer's cultural background might enhance customer perceptions of service quality, particularly for leisure travelers who may be more affected by their cultural norms than business travelers whose needs are relatively homogenous. Finally, because Asians tend to be more restrained in expressing emotions, customer-contact employees may have difficulty correctly ''reading'' the facial cues of customers with a different cultural background. Thus, the employee should be alert to the possibility that reliance on a customer's facial expressions as indicators of his or her mood state may not produce an accurate assessment of that customer's perception of the service encounter.

Limitations and research directions
Probably the most important limitation of this study is its field study design. A controlled laboratory experiment is needed to validate our findings. Furthermore, due to the single-study nature of this investigation, replications and extensions to other types of services are needed before strategic implications can be based on a solid foundation of empirical evidence. Finally, to supply more stringent tests of our reasoning, the dimensions of culture should be measured in future studies.

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