THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
香港理工大學

Transforming Hospitality and Tourism:

Insights from SHTM Research 2022/2023

Hospitality and Tourism Research Centre
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

45 years 1979-2024

shtm
SCHOOL OF HOTEL &
TOURISM MANAGEMENT

Established by the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM), the Hospitality and Tourism Research Centre (HTRC) is dedicated to bridging the gap between hospitality and tourism theory and industry practice. The Centre is a unique, research-based platform with an expansive network of hospitality and tourism academics from our School and partner institutions, as well as executives from leading industry organisations. The primary research strengths of HTRC are Smart Tourism, Performance Measurement and Management, Tourism Futures and Forecasting also Policy and Planning.

Contents

The Power of a Profile Picture

Booking the perfect getaway has never been so easy. As China's online peer-to-peer accommodation market continues to grow, so too does curiosity about how hosts can drive up their listings, popularity, and earnings. In exciting recent work, the SHTM's Hengyun Li, Qian Wang, and Danting Cai, along with their co-author Gang Li, investigated how hosts' profile picture attractiveness, reputation, and self-disclosure sway consumer decision making in the peer-to-peer accommodation market. More open, accurate, and high-quality information could help hosts – and platforms – to win the loyalty of new, satisfied guests.

A Reliance on Facial Beauty

The world of temporary accommodation is dominated by peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb and the China-based platform Tujia. However, renting that all-important holiday getaway from total strangers and paying online comes with risks. There is no guarantee that your accommodation will be as advertised, no real assurance that hosts will fulfil promises, and sometimes blind faith that the desired services will even be available at all. "Transactions on these platforms often occur among people who do not know each other; therefore, uncertainty pervades consumers' decision-making", note the researchers.

Red flags for potential guests can come in many forms – maybe there is a worrying lack of reviews, the occasional 2-star rating, or a cartoon profile picture that says nothing about the host's personality, reliability, or moral values. Faced with these worrisome signs, guests scramble to find more information that will allow them to gauge hosts' reliability and, as a result, to reduce uncertainty. Sometimes, however, all they have to go on is hosts' profile photos. "Hosts are already encouraged to share authentic personal photos to mitigate consumers' concerns", say the authors. "Therefore, it is worth exploring how photo disclosure influences consumers' attitudes and behaviour".

The "beauty premium" is a phenomenon in which people respond positively to beautiful things – including faces. This means that we tend to perceive attractive people as having desirable qualities such as kindness and trustworthiness. Research has already shown that hosts' facial attractiveness positively influences Airbnb listing prices, but it remains to be seen how judgements of hosts' beauty influence consumer decision making when booking accommodation. "Most work has overlooked the role of consumption vision, evoked by the visual stimulus of hosts' facial attractiveness in profile photos, during the pre-booking stage", report the researchers.

According to stimulus–organism–response theory, a "stimulus", such as a profile photo, elicits a "response", i.e. customers' booking intention and willingness to pay. This theory could explain the beauty premium effect. Delving deeper, the researchers explored the role of guests' perceived enjoyment and threat. They reasoned that the "mental imagery" of a positive or negative future stay underlay the influence of hosts' facial attractiveness on booking intention. "When consumers see an attractive host on Airbnb, they are likely to imagine a more positive future stay", they hypothesised. Envisioning an enjoyable stay could increase booking intention and willingness to pay for accommodation, whereas an anticipated negative experience, often triggered by less attractive host photos, could reduce booking intention and willingness to pay.

Overriding Superficial Judgements

It is natural for us to avoid uncertainty and threat, and to be less willing to invest in a situation that could jeopardise our enjoyment, finances, and time. We already know that access to more information decreases uncertainty surrounding purchases. In the accommodation context, we also know that host reputation and self-disclosure are integral to guests' booking decisions. To probe this topic further, the researchers examined whether perceived threat and perceived enjoyment mediated the effect of profile photo attractiveness on booking intention and willingness to pay. "When confronted with a less attractive host, people might imagine greater threats during their experiences", predicted the authors. Nonetheless, there may be ways to overcome these snap judgements.

Information on hosts' reputations could reduce uncertainty and lessen the indirect effect of host facial attractiveness on booking intention and willingness to pay through perceived enjoyment and threat. With more salient information, "the tendency to form subjective judgments based on the consumption vision evoked by hosts' facial attractiveness declines", explain the researchers. Similarly, the degree of hosts' self-disclosure was predicted to moderate the mediating effect of perceived enjoyment on the influence of facial attractiveness. "According to social penetration theory", say the authors, "interpersonal relationships become closer when people voluntarily open up". Thus, greater breadth and depth of self-disclosed information could reduce uncertainty and stranger-danger bias, foster trust, and aid decision making.

Three Experimental Studies

In three in-depth studies conducted in China, the participants were asked to imagine that they were about to book accommodation for an upcoming trip before viewing an online accommodation option. To determine the effect of facial attractiveness on consumer decision making, the participants were presented with host profile photos that were either "unattractive" or "attractive". Initial results confirmed that the varying degrees of facial attractiveness within the host profile pictures, designated as attractive and unattractive, were indeed perceived as such by the participants, and this perception influenced their booking intention.

Study 1 additionally investigated the mediating roles of perceived enjoyment and perceived threat – the "organism" factors within the stimulus–organism–response paradigm – with 125 participants using a questionnaire. Study 2, which included 212 participants, measured how hosts' "reputation", including the presence or absence of a Superhost badge, the number of online reviews, and the average rating, impacted the attractiveness-based willingness to pay and booking intention. Study 3 assessed the effect of hosts' text-based self-disclosure on 210 participants. Hosts' self-disclosure was manipulated in terms of (a) the length of the self-description and (b) the number of topics covered in the self-description.

Reputation Outweighs Beauty

As expected, consumers tended to book more and pay more for accommodation when it was offered by an attractive host. Additionally, hosts' facial attractiveness had less influence on purchase decisions when reputation information was available. This indicates that the initial impressions based on hosts' profile images can be quashed by the host's reputation. "Thus", say the authors, "hosts whose faces are not dominant in profile photos should seek to improve their personal reputations on the platform to compensate". They can do so by attaining more Superhost badges, more positive reviews, and/or higher ratings by providing excellent services.

The researchers also found that self-disclosure weakened consumers' reliance on hosts' facial attractiveness when making purchase decisions. When self-descriptions contained less information, consumers were more likely to make appearance-based decisions. This shows that hosts should consider writing more in-depth self-descriptions that will help prospective consumers learn more about them. "The identity, characteristics, and emotions displayed in hosts' self-disclosure increase multi-perspective information and thus facilitate guests' rational thinking when making decisions", explain the authors. In other words, providing plenty of self-disclosure information means that booking decisions become less reliant on hosts' profile pictures alone.

Onboarding for Hosts

Taken together, these striking results show that online peer-to-peer booking platforms could play a more proactive role in helping hosts. For instance, platforms could offer more opportunities for hosts to showcase themselves with vivid information to reduce consumer uncertainty and enhance guest–host communication. "Airbnb generally allows hosts to upload only pictures; however, videos would provide a more comprehensive introduction to the host and their property", suggest the researchers. Actively giving advice on hosts' profile photos and listing content during their onboarding could encourage hosts' self-disclosure and thus facilitate the provision of clearer information, less uncertainty, and more positive imagery.

Points to Note

- The facial attractiveness of hosts on online accommodation booking platforms positively affects guests' intention to stay.
- The effect of attractiveness is weaker for hosts with better reputations, i.e., positive reviews and badges.
- Hosts can also overcome the effect of attractiveness by disclosing more about themselves.
- Facial attractiveness works by influencing guests' mental imagery of their upcoming stay.

Li, Hengyun, Wang, Qian, Li, Gang, and Cai, Danting (2023). Do Looks Matter for Hosts on the Peer-to-Peer Sharing Accommodation Market? *Annals of Tourism Research,* Vol. 98, 103510.

Prime Time for Service Robots

The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted the hospitality industry into a more digitised future. Coupled with the vast social changes and prominent safety concerns, this wave of technological innovation could transform the hospitality workforce, according to Seongseop (Sam) Kim of the SHTM and co-authors. Service robots could solve many of the safety concerns felt to this day, but how are they perceived by customers? To probe these issues in more depth, the researchers investigated how feelings of safety and the intention to visit an establishment are shaped by the presence of robot baristas, as well as the influence of vaccination status and mask-wearing.

New Safety Priorities

Before 2020, the hospitality industry prided itself on providing a warm welcome through close interpersonal contact between guests and service staff. After the outbreak of COVID-19, safety became the critical box to tick for hospitality managers, inevitably overriding the more "human" experiences of the past. Confronted with infection risk, customers need more reassurance than before. Contactless services, self-check-in devices and service robots have become staples of the post-COVID-19 service landscape. "Managers of numerous establishments have focused on enhancing safety, hygiene and cleanliness and alleviating public concerns", explain the authors.

As a result, customers' pre-pandemic preferences for human staff over robots have been flipped on their head. Driven more than ever by fear of infection, travellers and guests preferred contactless AI technology during the pandemic period. Research at that time found that robots were more positively viewed than human staff during COVID-19 infection rate peaks. "This suggests that the unprecedented global pandemic and long-lasting concerns about safety have substantially influenced consumer perceptions of service robots", say the researchers.

Robots could be of great value in a post-COVID-19 world, as concern about the virus remains rife among travellers. However, given the recency of both the pandemic and related technological advances, it remains unclear which features of service robots drive a preference over humans. It is critical to understand this, say the researchers, because service robots can, by decreasing health risks, increase the feeling of security and inspire "increased visiting intentions and a willingness to use and pay more". Moving forward, it will be crucial to create human–computer interactions that can offer as much as – if not more than – person-to-person service interactions.

An Infection-Free Solution

Person-to-person contact could soon begin to be replaced by "robot baristas, receptionists and concierges, together with facial scan check-ins, voice-activated guest control and other contactless services", say the researchers. Already, service robots are an emerging trend in restaurants and cafés worldwide, from San Francisco's Café X to the robot mixologist of Switzerland's F&P Robotics and Hong Kong's one-of-a-kind milk-tea silk stocking-straining robot. The continued emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness means that integrating service robots into the service environment seems the way forward.

However, there is still no thorough understanding of how human–robot interactions shape leisure experiences, or which safety-related attributes are most valued by customers. "To successfully adopt service robots in service delivery environments", explain the researchers, "it is important to understand what makes customers feel safer and how the perception of safety influences their behaviour". For this reason, they investigated whether customers would feel safer with a robot or human barista, and how this affected their intention to return.

More human-like robots reportedly drive more satisfying guest experiences. This could be particularly important given the post-pandemic norm of mask-wearing, which provides a sense of reassurance. "No empirical study has been conducted on whether the use of masks moderates how human and robot staff are perceived during the COVID-19 pandemic", say the authors. While mask-wearing by human employees could increase perceived safety, robots wearing masks might cause anxiety.

Finally, the investigators examined how customers' vaccination status fed into their assessments of safety. "There may be differences in consumers' perceived safety of masked robot baristas depending on the customer's COVID-19 vaccination status", say the authors, "because unvaccinated consumers may have a lower perception of safety regarding masked robot staff compared with fully vaccinated consumers". Customers who are not fully vaccinated were expected to feel less safe when confronted with unmasked human staff.

Three Innovative Studies

Three successive studies investigated the preference for robots over humans and the moderating roles of mask-

wearing and vaccination status. In the first study, 135 participants were presented with a theoretical scenario involving trying out a new coffee house. They were then shown one of two sets of photos. In the first set, a robot was shown preparing and serving a cup of coffee. In the second set, a human barista was shown preparing and serving an identical cup of coffee. The participants then completed a questionnaire to assess their intention to visit the coffee shop and perceived safety.

In study 2,300 participants were shown photos of either masked or unmasked robot/human baristas, and completed the same questionnaire. An additional 300 participants were recruited to complete Study 3, which measured the additional effect of the participants' vaccination status, for which the participants indicated whether they were fully vaccinated or not.

Safety Signals or Warning Signs?

Overall, robot baristas were consistently perceived as safer than human baristas. Moreover, perceived safety was identified as a key factor explaining the preference for robot baristas over human baristas. The participants also reported being more likely to visit the café when perceived safety was highest. "When customers' attention to safety is heightened", report the researchers, "the adoption of service robots could be a strategic way to increase customers' visit intention to restaurants".

The studies also delved into the psychological response to masks, and how this alters perceived safety in human–computer interactions. Thus, this work uniquely elucidates how human-like behaviour by robots is interpreted, and how it affects subsequent customer behaviour. "Interestingly, mask-wearing produced seemingly opposite types of heuristics (e.g. safety and risk) for human baristas and robot baristas", report the researchers. In other words, the same visual cue of a mask resulted in contradictory perceptions of safety for robot and human baristas. According to the authors, this is because masks are practical and protective when worn by humans, but a symbolic warning sign when worn by robots.

The vaccination status of customers also influenced how mask-wearing was perceived. For human baristas, vaccination status had no effect on perceived safety. For robot baristas, fully vaccinated customers tended to rely more on visual cues, and non-fully vaccinated customers tended towards interpreting the "symbolic" meaning of the mask. "Vaccinated consumers experience higher levels of perceived safety when interacting with masked robot staff than with unmasked robot staff", state the researchers. Given the increasing numbers of vaccinated customers, the use of robot staff wearing face masks could be an effective management strategy.

A Future for Service Robots

This pioneering study places itself within the context of modern-day trepidation surrounding COVID-19. The results deepen our understanding of human–computer interaction and show that robots could well have a place in the recovering hospitality sector. With a new spotlight on safety in the hospitality industry, the use of AI, such as contactless services, is proving more popular than ever before. By deciphering the impact of vaccination status and feelings about mask-wearing on preference for service robots, the findings are ultimately expected to help businesses recover following the pandemic period, and to propel the industry into a more technologically driven future.

Points to Note

- During a pandemic, robot baristas are perceived as safer than humans and boost visit intention.
- Mask-wearing by human hospitality staff increases perceived safety.
- Mask-wearing by service robots increases perceived safety for vaccinated but not unvaccinated customers.
- Hospitality firms need to understand perceptions of high-tech services in the post-pandemic period.

Choi, Miju, Choi, Youngjoon, Kim, Seongseop (Sam), and Badu-Baiden, Frank (2023). Human vs Robot Baristas during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Effects of Masks and Vaccines on Perceived Safety and Visit Intention. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management,* Vol. 35, Issue 2, 469-491.

Fight or Flight? Coping with Stress in the Airline Sector

During the COVID-19 pandemic, airline employees experienced unprecedented levels of work-related stress and job uncertainty. However, their coping strategies and cultural differences in their responses to work-related stress remain understudied. In a timely recent study, the SHTM's Seongseop (Sam) Kim and co-authors explored the relationships between job stressors, psychological stress and coping strategies amongst airline employees in Hong Kong and South Korea during the pandemic. Their work provides fruitful insights that could help airlines minimise employees' psychological stress and provide resources to support coping strategies. Crucially, their results also show that national culture should be considered when adopting such measures.

Airline Job Stressors

COVID-19 crippled business operations in a multitude of sectors, and air travel was amongst the hardest hit. Airlines are no stranger to economic or health and safety challenges, but the international travel restrictions imposed in 2020 dealt the sector an unprecedented blow. With mass lay-offs, rescheduling and furloughs, airline employees faced severe job insecurity and ambiguity. "Consequently", say the researchers, "it makes sense to predict that work-related conditions caused by the pandemic may increase stress and anxiety among airline employees in a way that is different from work-induced stress prior to the pandemic".

To date, however, studies have done little to elucidate the specific psychological and behavioural repercussions of industry-level events like COVID-19 for workers in this sector. "How airline employees perceive work-related stress is not fully understood", say the authors. Furthermore, scant attention has been paid to their coping strategies in response to such stress.

Context is another important factor. As employees' reactions to work-related stress may differ between countries and cultures, the findings of Western studies of job stress may not be generalisable to other contexts, such as Asia. Although the pandemic affected airline employees worldwide, East Asian settings such as South Korea and Hong Kong may differ in their job stress predictors and outcomes relative to Western countries, and even relative to each other. "Airline employees from these two nationalities may experience and manage work-related stress differently", say the authors.

With these considerations in mind, the researchers set out to provide "a systematic understanding of coping strategies in relation to work-related stress for airline employees during the tourism crisis".

Theoretical Model of Stress and Coping

Generally, we experience psychological stress when we feel that too much is being demanded of us. Common job stressors include excessive work demands, role conflict and job insecurity. According to "conservation of resources" theory, stress poses a threat to our resources, and we respond by seeking to conserve our existing resources and obtain new ones. "Exemplifying this point", say the researchers, "studies have shown that service-oriented employees adopt appropriate coping strategies to conserve their resources (e.g. well-being, self-esteem) and alleviate stress".

Accordingly, the authors note, "coping styles play a crucial role in understanding how employees adapt to stressful work events". This raises the question of what airline employees can do to counteract resource loss during an industry-wide crisis like COVID-19. However, we still know little about which coping strategies airline employees use to deal with work-related stress. The researchers' first step in tackling this question was to establish a theoretical model linking job stressors to psychological stress and coping strategies. "In the model", the authors say, "multiple job stressors are anticipated to increase the psychological stress levels of airline employees. Psychological stress, in turn, determines their coping strategies".

Various possible coping strategies are available to employees. Task-oriented coping attempts to find a solution to the root cause of stress, such as devising a plan to solve the problem. Emotion-oriented coping aims to regulate the emotional distress caused by the stressor, such as through self-revelation or self-blame. Avoidance-oriented coping involves a deliberate attempt to disengage from the stressful situation. If we feel that we have control over a stressful situation and possess the resources to deal with it, we are likely to adopt task-oriented coping. "Emotion-oriented coping and avoidance-oriented coping are more dominant when both control and coping resources are perceived to be low", say the researchers.

During COVID-19, airline employees had no control over the stressors they faced, such as international travel restrictions, the slow progress of virus containment and economic slowdown. Therefore, the authors hypothesised that airline employees experiencing job-related stress during the pandemic engaged primarily in emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping. They also hypothesised that as national culture affects people's responses to stress, airline employees from different cultural settings experienced and managed work-related stress differently during the pandemic.

Cross-Cultural Empirical Data

To test their theoretical model, the authors empirically examined the relationships between job stressors, job strain and coping strategies amongst airline employees in two Asian cultural contexts during the global tourism crisis caused by COVID-19. A cross-sectional survey was completed online by 366 airline employees in South Korea and Hong Kong in summer 2020.

Psychological stress was measured by the participants' self-reports of difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal and being easily upset, irritable and impatient. The survey also measured the airline employees' perceptions of job stressors such as "forced labour policies", "concern about layoffs", "forced unpaid leave" and "lack of appropriate training and knowledge about the prevention of virus transmission". Coping strategies were assessed using a battery of scales measuring task-oriented, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping.

Impact of Culture on Stress and Coping

Rigorous statistical analysis of the questionnaire responses identified three major work-related stressors associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the airline industry. First, psychological stress was related to work schedules and demands – reflecting the major operational changes that airlines had to impose during the pandemic. Companies can mitigate this source of stress through timely and transparent communication with employees, say the researchers.

Second, job insecurity and financial concerns were found to be a major source of stress. Although cost-saving measures are unavoidable during crises like COVID-19, airline companies should be transparent about their decisions concerning lay-offs, salary cuts and forced unpaid leave. "It is important for the airline industry to emphasize its efforts to ride out the hardship together with its employees", argue the researchers.

Third, stress was caused by role conflict. "Employees may suffer job strain when performing multiple roles and responsibilities other than those normally anticipated", note the researchers. "Therefore, airline management should consider the willingness of airline employees and provide alternatives instead of implementing forced policies".

For both the Hong Kong airline employees and the South Korean airline employees, psychological stress was linked to heightened emotion-oriented coping. However, job stressors and coping strategies differed between the two cultures. Hong Kong airline employees – whose perceived stressors related to work schedules and demands, job security and financial concerns, and role conflict – were more drawn to emotion- and avoidance-oriented coping strategies. South Korean airline employees reported only work schedules and demands as contributing significantly to their psychological stress, and this elicited primarily emotion-oriented coping strategies.

"This delivers an important message to the global airline industry", say the authors. As employees from different countries/cultural settings may respond differently to the same work-related stressors, airline management should implement culturally appropriate measures to regulate employees' work-related stress during industry-wide crises. Based on this study's findings, for example, airlines in Hong Kong should promote both emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping strategies, whilst South Korean airlines should focus on the former.

Supporting Airline Employees

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique setting for examination of job-related stress in the airline sector. Airlines can learn from this crisis and better protect their invaluable human resources by communicating more transparently with employees, mitigating sources of job-related stress, and equipping employees with culturally specific coping skills. Emotion-oriented coping strategies could be reinforced by organising workshops or employing on-site psychological therapists, and avoidance-oriented strategies could be fostered by subsidising recreational activities and hosting social gatherings.

Points to Note

- During COVID-19, South Korean and Hong Kong airline workers faced various job stressors.

- Job insecurity and financial concerns were the biggest causes of psychological stress, along with work schedules/demands and role conflict.

- Stress led to emotion-based coping strategies in South Korea and both emotion-based and avoidance-based strategies in Hong Kong.

- As national culture affects responses to stress, airlines should promote culturally specific coping strategies amongst employees.

Chua, Bee-Lia, Al-Ansi, Amr, Kim, Seongseop (Sam), Wong, Antony King Fung, and Han, Heesup (2022). Examining Airline Employees' Work-Related Stress and Coping Strategies During the Global Tourism Crisis. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management,* Vol. 34, Issue 10, 3715-3742.

Tourist-Triggered Emotions

How do tourists in your town make you feel? A study co-authored by the SHTM's Nan Chen, Shiqin Zhang and Cathy H. C. Hsu shows that Hong Kong natives have complex emotional responses to visitors from the mainland. The paper may help improve host–visitor relations in Hong Kong and abroad as tourist numbers pick up in the post-pandemic era. The study setting is particularly relevant as mainland Chinese tourists become more adventurous travellers.

Making Sense of Feelings

The importance of emotions in tourism cannot be overstated. Improving our subjective state of mind, whether through joy, excitement or relaxation, is the essential goal of leisure travel. Notably, local populations in tourist areas play a key role in shaping visitors' environment and in turn the emotional experiences of visitors. However, this is a two-way relationship that also depends on locals' own disposition towards tourists.

Currently, research on hosts' emotional responses to tourists lags behind the study of tourists' emotions. To address this, tourism researchers need to not only broaden their scope but also learn from psychologists. "Emotion research in tourism as a whole", say the researchers, "is still in its infancy compared to that in psychology". They propose that hosts' multi-layered emotional reactions arise from the interplay between desires and stereotypes.

As discussed in detail by the authors, we may not know our own emotions as well as we think. Befitting their role in both regulating behaviour and signalling thoughts, emotional responses are highly complex. For one thing, emotions consist of both mental components, such as cognitive appraisal, and physical components, such as physiological arousal. Thus, the researchers tell us, "combinations of various psychophysiological measures (e.g., EEG, EDA and facial expressions) and self-reports are strongly encouraged".

Furthermore, some emotional reactions happen so quickly that they can evade conscious notice. This complicates the attempts to measure emotional reactions to tourist behaviour. As "a complex state that can be expressed through various channels", the researchers note, emotion requires objective measurement techniques in addition to the subjective methods that are used in conventional tourism research.

Another way to classify emotions is based on explicit vs. implicit expression. As the researchers argue, "explicitly expressed emotions are more like cognitive or conscious responses toward triggers". Such emotions, also described as "conscious", "deliberate" or "reflective", can be easily noticed and described by the subject, making them accessible to researchers using questionnaire or interview techniques.

In contrast, when we feel an implicit – or "automatic", "spontaneous" or "raw" – emotion, we cannot control it and may even fail to observe it. Implicit responses can only be measured using real-time experimental methods such as pulse monitoring. This makes it problematic that "emotion research in tourism, even in marketing and psychology, has a long tradition of relying on self-report methods", in the authors' words.

How to Measure Emotions

Many psychologists recognise at least six basic emotions: anger, happiness, surprise, disgust, sadness and fear. Nonetheless, tourism researchers have often overlooked this diversity, instead measuring emotional responses on a simple two-dimensional scale of valence (positive/negative) and arousal (activated/non-activated). "While this approach is useful", the authors write, "it hides the various roles of discrete emotions in tourism encounters".

Social encounters, such as those between tourists and locals, may give rise to a rich set of emotions. These are likely to be deeply rooted in the cultural context of the host community and the socialisation of individual people. Given the rich social nature of host–tourist interactions, the SHTM team realised that "more efforts with full considerations of basic emotions combining implicit measures in a tourism context are needed".

Hence, to objectively measure locals' reactions to tourists, the researchers used facial expressions as cues. The study of faces to read emotional states is not only intuitive but has a scientific basis stretching back to Darwin. However, despite the variety of the human emotional palette, "the limited number of tourism studies that examined discrete emotions, unfortunately, only measured one or a few specific emotions", the researchers tell us.

Facial expression analysis also avoids the social and psychological biases that bedevil self-reports. "Self-reported methods could have cognitive and social desirability bias and thus limit the understanding of emotions to those explicitly expressed", the authors write. This is because we can simply deny feeling socially undesirable emotions, to others and even to ourselves.

However, we cannot fully suppress our facial micro-expressions, which give away information on how we react to our surroundings. Hence, if we conceal our feelings for the sake of social harmony, the implicit emotions showing on our faces may be more reliable than the explicit emotions we choose to report. Thus, due to the discrepancies caused by biases, research has validated implicit measures as "effective and necessary to complement self-reports".

What If This Happened to Me?

To get to the truth, the researchers recruited 14 Hong Kong residents who all identified fully or partly as "Hongkongese". These participants were shown short (1–2 minute) video clips, presenting interactions between locals and mainland tourists, based on real anecdotes from a different set of Hongkongers. Three scenarios portrayed the tourists in a positive light, while the rest depicted various forms of unsocial behaviour, such as queue-jumping, loudness and a young child urinating in public.

As the participants watched the scenes (no more than three per person), their facial expressions were video-recorded to capture their implicit emotions. Using specialised software, the researchers analysed the subjects' faces to determine their dominant emotion at each time point throughout the viewing. Afterwards, the viewers answered a survey on the intensity of their explicit emotional responses, and the researchers interviewed them to dig deeper into how they felt about the scenarios and why.

Words versus Faces

The results showed that the self-report method and facial analysis revealed different information. The self-report surveys and interviews were heavily outperformed by the software in measuring the participants' happiness, sadness and anger. However, the self-report methods encountered no such difficulties with disgust, surprise and fear, "implying a higher consistency between the two approaches when identifying these three emotions compared with the others".

These differences sometimes led to contrary outcomes. One older woman, watching tourists in a shop trying on cosmetics in a selfish and unhygienic way, showed a low intensity of all facial emotions. Afterwards, however, she reported having strongly felt sadness and disgust. If even specialist AI failed to register her displeasure from visual clues, one can imagine that real-life tourists would fail to realise how she felt. In the researchers' words, "when tourists encounter this resident, they may not find her unfriendly or being offended".

The study identified happiness, sadness and anger – revealed by facial expressions – as "desires-driven" emotions rooted in the unconscious mind. They are founded on an implicit expectation of good social outcomes. In contrast, disgust and surprise, which the participants revealed verbally after watching the clips, arise from the confirmation or violation of stereotypes about mainlanders. Negative emotions were amplified in the self-reports, such as when the older woman described the cosmetics shoppers as "selfish, self-centred, and arrogant".

Tackling Negative Stereotypes

Hong Kong residents hold ambivalent views of mainland tourists, as revealed by verbal reports and face tracking. In the authors' words, "facial expressions and words can tell different stories". Given that emotions can drive behaviours, the authors suggest that the tourist board and media promote positive stereotypes of mainland Chinese to influence the explicit emotional reactions of locals during host–guest interactions. This study, the first of its kind, pushes forward tourism research towards a richer understanding of ways to boost harmonious relations.

Turning Website Views into Restaurant Visits

If you've visited a new city lately, you may have searched online for places to eat. Maybe you read some reviews, then clicked through to the restaurants' own sites. New research by an SHTM team shows that in the hospitality sector, turning user clicks into dining visits depends on consistently positive messaging. By testing two competing theories of the effect of customer reviews, the study by Seunghun Shin, Hyejo Hailey Shin and Jaehee Gim will help local restaurants optimise their marketing strategy through homepage testimonials.

What Makes an Effective Testimonial?

In a crowded market like Hong Kong, restaurants have to be smart to stand out. Today, this means having an effective online presence to gain the trust of short-term visitors searching for nearby restaurants. While there are many third-party review platforms in the hospitality sector, such as TripAdvisor, restaurants often add positive testimonials to their own homepages, hoping to "seal the deal" for those whose interest is piqued by reading such reviews. "About 70% of hospitality businesses display testimonial reviews on their websites", say the researchers, "and about 80% of diners check a restaurant's website before choosing to visit".

Which write-ups should a restaurant select for its testimonials? Naturally they should be positive, but there are degrees of positivity. Overly glowing reviews might be seen as biased, perhaps written by people who have a close relationship with the business and are thus not objective. This is in line with attribution theory. "When reading a review", the authors explain, "customers are less likely to adopt it in their decision-making if they perceive its evaluation is based on the reviewer's personal reasons". It might then seem more trustworthy for the restaurant to quote moderately positive reviews. Indeed, the authors mention a study showing that 5-star-rated products sell less well than 4.2–4.5-star products.

However, it could be argued that extremely positive testimonials have a better chance of providing the final push for prospective customers viewing the homepage. This fits with regulatory focus theory, which sees customers as focusing on their ideal goals, such as a satisfying experience. Indeed, there is evidence that some customers perceive unambiguously positive reviews as more credible than moderately positive reviews that also mention negative information. Where does this leave restaurants? "These two conflicting views make it difficult for hospitality businesses to determine how positive reviews need to be leveraged as testimonials", the authors point out.

Advertising versus Word-of-Mouth

This uncertainty arises because most research has focused on the effects of reviews from third-party sites: online review communities, social networks, media-sharing platforms and search engines. The assumption is that the reviewers are independent of the firms they rate. However, testimonial reviews may not be perceived as fully independent, despite being written by customers, because firms choose to place them on their websites. This calls into question the generalisability of earlier studies. "It remains unclear how effective positive reviews are when communicated through a business official website as testimonials", the authors say.

Another way to think about testimonials is in terms of how consumers classify them. The researchers note that "testimonial reviews have characteristics of both electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and advertisements". On the one hand, they are like unbiased opinions, because real customers write them without any thought of making a profit; on the other, they resemble a form of online advertising, because businesses propagate them independently of the original writers. Whether they are ultimately judged as eWOM or advertisements affects how they should be phrased: word-of-mouth relies on authenticity, implying that any negative aspects ought to be mentioned, whereas advertising is expected to focus solely on the positive.

This lack of understanding of how testimonial positivity affects customers' decision-making was the motivation for Shin, Shin and Gim's study. Contrasting attribution theory and regulatory focus theory, they realised that "these two conflicting views make it difficult for hospitality businesses to determine how positive reviews need to be leveraged as testimonials to get the expected outcomes". They therefore set out to determine how review positivity affects customers' reactions to online testimonial reviews of restaurants, and how this contrasts with the effect of reviews hosted on other types of online platform.

Finding a Restaurant Near You

The team started their study by scraping write-ups of Hong Kong restaurants from TripAdvisor. By analysing the answers to the optional question "was this review helpful?", they found that 4-star reviews were perceived as more helpful than 5-star reviews. This set the stage for a detailed investigation of how ratings actually affect users' visit intention. Three hundred participants were

asked to search for a nearby Italian restaurant using their smartphones and confirm their choice after checking the restaurant's website. Half of them saw fully positive 5-star testimonials on the homepages, while the others saw 4-star reviews that were mostly positive but noted caveats such as "a bit crowded".

Considering that real-life restaurant websites might contain a mix of extremely and moderately positive testimonials, the researchers then studied the effects of such a mixture. Another 200 participants were recruited and tasked with settling on a local Italian eatery. This time, however, when they landed on a restaurant's homepage, they saw either three 5-star reviews and one 4-star review, or vice versa. As in the above-mentioned experiment, the participants were subsequently asked about their intention to visit the restaurants that they had investigated using their phones, and their overall feelings about them.

The Power of Positivity

Extremely positive testimonials were found to improve both the participants' view of the restaurants and their actual visit intention. When the restaurants' homepages carried unambiguously positive reviews, with nothing but praise for the food, prices and service, potential diners were more likely to rate their attitude towards the establishments as favourable and state that they would be likely to visit them. "A hospitality business should make potential customers who visit its website feel confident about their pre-decision by displaying glowing testimonial reviews", the researchers infer.

When the participants saw mixed positive reviews (some including minor criticisms and others not), the results were consistent with the first experiment. Those who saw mostly the extremely positive reviews had more favourable attitudes and higher visit intention than those who read mostly the tempered positive write-ups. Evidently, according to the researchers, "it is more strategic for a hospitality business to display extremely positive reviews on their websites as testimonials".

The strategic advantage of extremely positive reviews also indicates that the readers of testimonials tend to think of them as advertisements rather than eWOM. Consumers expect eWOM to be mixed, and there is evidence that they are more strongly influenced by moderately positive than extremely positive reviews on sites like TripAdvisor. However, they react less well when businesses mention criticisms on their own websites. Rather, when reading homepage testimonials, "customers want to be certain about their pre-choice when following up on the product of interest", the authors conclude.

Tips for the Trade

The next time you search for a restaurant online, your reaction to positive reviews may depend on whether you read review communities or the establishments' own sites. If the restaurants have their strategy right, they will carefully choose their homepage testimonials and include only the most positive reviews to give interested diners the final push. The study's authors suggest that restaurants could boost their visit rates by prioritising advert-like content over general information on the pages that users see when clicking through from a search app. In summary, this research fills an important gap in our understanding of testimonial review strategy and should aid hospitality businesses going forward.

Points to Note

- Researchers are uncertain about how hospitality firms should use online testimonial reviews.
- Diners are more likely to choose restaurants with extremely positive than moderately positive homepage testimonials.
- Extremely positive reviews are more valuable in testimonials than on review community sites.
- Restaurants could convert Web visits to real visits by highlighting positive testimonials on their homepages.

Shin, Seunghun, Shin, Hyejo Hailey, and Gim, Jaehee (2023). How Positive Do Testimonials on a Restaurant Website Need to Be? Impact of Positivity of Testimonial Reviews on Customers' Decision-making. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 108, 103382.

Holidaying in the Metaverse

In the future, it may be more expensive, time-consuming, and risky to travel halfway around the world for a holiday getaway. What if we could experience a convincing virtual version of the real thing? The Metaverse – a parallel digital realm blending real and fantasy worlds – has been tipped as the next disruptive technology, on track to completely alter reality as we know it, and tourism and hospitality businesses should be preparing for the switch. The SHTM's Michael Lin and Daniel Leung and their co-author's new paper describe the Metaverse's potential to transform the hospitality customer experience and management.

Defining the Metaverse

The Metaverse is seen by some as our virtual future, the alternate reality where humans can work, communicate, and play. Today's virtual and augmented reality innovations will, in time, be considered as merely the tools by which to access and experience the Metaverse. There, users will be able to interact with avatars, virtual environments, objects, and other users in a way that transcends "simple" virtual reality experiences. Users will be free to discover countless new environments and astounding near-realistic sensorial experiences that could one day become indistinguishable from the real thing. "Metaverse will have considerable impacts on hospitality and tourism", state the authors, "bringing major opportunities and challenges for all stakeholders in the ecosystem".

The feasibility of inhabiting such a space has become ever more obvious since the COVID-19 pandemic. The imposed lockdowns meant more video conferencing, tele-working, tele-studying, and online communication with loved ones. These activities have since become entrenched in our everyday lives as part of the "social norm". The move towards increasingly immersive experiences comes with huge benefits, including savings on resources, time, and travel cost. "Increasingly, people expect to be interoperable in both physical and virtual environments", say the authors.

The Metaverse is the next stage in our digital evolution. In the Metaverse's 3D space, users will co-create virtual experiences that overlap with the physical world, and organisations will be able to engage with customers and stakeholders both virtually and physically. This will enable them "to provide a range of immersive experiences using multisensory content as well as to scale their operations in terms of location, space, time zone, and expert capabilities", explain the researchers. In their remarkable publication, the authors explore these untapped possibilities in full.

Virtual and Physical Worlds Colliding

The Metaverse may be in its infancy, but it already has clear potential in hospitality and tourism. It will enable customised and co-created experiences that will offer the same – if not a greater – selection of restaurant, events, and recreation options. In place of exhausting international travel to attend meetings, conferences, cultural events, and destinations, and tours, users will be able to slip on a virtual reality headset. Using virtual experiences before, during, and after trips, the Metaverse will transform the hospitality ecosystem and completely re-invent business processes and management. "Hospitality and tourism stakeholders need to gain a better understanding of how Metaverse can help co-create transformational experiences", explain the researchers.

The most attractive selling point of the Metaverse is the "seamless connections between physical and virtual worlds in the experience enhancement", say the authors. This is key, because hospitality provides both tangible and non-tangible elements. For example, guests must of course sleep in a real bed and eat real food, but atmosphere, ambience, feelings, service, connections, kindness, and emotional engagement can be provided virtually. This capacity to offer engaging experiences could prove particularly relevant in the context of social upheavals or restrictive personal circumstances.

Another huge advantage of integrating real travel experiences with virtual ones is space. In real life, investors need to buy land and build physical hotels, ideally with a good geographic positioning. "With the support of the Metaverse, people can stay at home or in other places but experience some of the intangible elements of hospitality virtually", say the authors. This means that hospitality investors, designers, builders, and managers can instead invest more effort in developing their digital presence to offer far cheaper simulations of the "real thing" in an unlimited geographical virtual space that is completely customisable.

Stepping into the Future

This ground-breaking paper outlines a roadmap to Metaverse use that leads us from reality to complete illusion via an increasing reliance on technology. This path includes conventional real-world experience, technology-assisted experience, technology-enhanced experience, technology-empowered experience, and, most crucially, technology-illusive experience that "empowers users to

step from the physical world to virtuality and vice versa", explain the authors. For instance, couples could choose a "global wedding" theme that allows them to experience their special day in multiple locations from the convenience of their headsets.

According to the researchers, integrating the real and digital worlds will require multiple layers of innovation. Virtual world hospitality managers will need to design digital hotel facilities, aesthetics, and atmosphere. Designers and builders will be tasked with mapping out the virtual territory and conceptualising design concepts. Managers will need to find new ways to operate the hotel property, combine tangible and intangible experiences, and develop brand new marketing strategies. "Designing intuitive user experiences should also ensure functionality, findability, trust, value, accessibility and ultimately delight", underline the authors.

A Taste of the Metaverse

In their vivid account of things to come, the researchers describe some of the transformative virtual experiences already out there. These have successfully blended the physical and virtual worlds to create unique experiences. For instance, prospective travellers to Nova Scotia in Canada can already experience 360° online virtual reality videos before their visit. "These enable prospective travellers to immerse themselves in Nova Scotia attractions", conclude the researchers, "such as a ride on the tides of the Bay of Fundy for exploring Nova Scotia's wine country".

For nearly 10 years, Marriott Hotels have also been experimenting with "teleportation", whereby destinations and hotel facilities can be experienced via virtual reality headsets. In 2014, the hotel chain set up a "Get Teleported" booth outside New York's City Hall to offer newlyweds a virtual experience of hospitality properties in Maui (Hawaii) and London. Moreover, Inamo restaurants in London use interactive table projections that allow customers to select dishes, order through a virtual menu, and watch chefs cooking in real-time. "They also allow users to set different moods and table cloths, discover the local neighbourhood, play games, and interact with others", say the researchers.

Best Practices

In preparation for this incredible future, the authors put forward some best-practice suggestions. First, firms will need to have an active Metaverse presence. "Hospitality businesses can promote their business to consumers in a more immersive way, while facilitating co-creation to enhance experience formation", state the authors. This means that consumers will be able to try out products and services before actually visiting, co-create with co-

travellers, and share experiences with other users, similarly to "Destinations Experts" on TripAdvisor forums.

We may only be at the dawn of the Metaverse, but hotels, restaurants, and event planners will soon need to re-evaluate their relationship and engagement with consumers. To create this hybrid world, hospitality businesses must also collaborate with technology companies, and could learn much from the gaming industry in this regard. "Different types of hospitality businesses", add the authors, "should tailor specific business strategies to their strategic needs and requirements and plan accordingly". A Metaverse future will also need to be fully supported by the government, which means that ethical and legal issues must be thoroughly probed and discussed.

Next-Generation Tourism

This impressive work offers a first-ever glimpse into how the Metaverse will transform the human experience. While the Metaverse will not replace in-person travel, it has golden potential to fuse physical and virtual environments. Successful introduction of the Metaverse into hospitality and tourism experiences will require businesses to consider a range of brand new organisational, regulatory, and creative possibilities. "Metaverse is an innovative concept," conclude the authors, "and the characteristics may therefore need a long time to adjust to the needs of different stakeholders".

Points to Note

- The Metaverse will revolutionise hospitality and tourism as much as the Internet has done.

- Early adopters are already providing virtual experiences and these will become more immersive.

- The Metaverse will increase our reliance on immersive technology and reduce the need for physical space.

- Hospitality and tourism firms must prepare for a future of co-creating value via the Metaverse.

Buhalis, Dimitrios, Lin, Michael S., and Leung, Daniel (2023). Metaverse as a Driver for Customer Experience and Value Co-creation: Implications for Hospitality and Tourism Management and Marketing. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 35, Issue 2, 701-716.

Visiting Loved Ones May Drive Tourism Recovery

Whilst many tourists travel to experience new places, cultures and activities, others are visiting friends and relatives (VFR). VFR travel showed remarkable resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many expats and immigrants returning to their countries of origin to weather the storm with loved ones. However, little is known about how pandemic-associated travel constraints were experienced by VFR tourists. Dr Pearl Lin from the SHTM, working with co-researchers from Macao, have constructed an impressive new framework to pinpoint the travel constraints experienced by VFR travellers during the pandemic. This framework could help tourism practitioners alleviate such travel constraints and, in doing so, breathe fresh life into the industry.

Driven by Emotion

VFR has been dubbed the "sleeping giant" of the tourism industry; it is a grossly overlooked motive for travelling. "Up to 48% of tourists worldwide travel for VFR purposes despite considering these trips leisure vacations, instead of self-identifying as VFR tourists", report the researchers. VFR travel comes in three broad flavours – "pure" VFR tourists travel expressly to see friends and relatives, and lodge with them; "commercial" VFR tourists also come to see friends and relatives, but stay in hotels; while "exploitative" VFR tourists, although they stay with friends or family, do not state VFR as their trip purpose.

Given the ongoing neglect of VFR tourism in the literature, there is a clear need to better understand what makes VFR travellers tick and how VFR tourism benefits the industry as a whole. We already know that personal relationships are pivotal to VFR travel. "This market segment is primarily motivated by family/friend bonds", say the researchers, "instead of destination attributes". The specific benefits of VFR, in contrast with business or leisure travel, include revitalising local communities and increasing residents' quality of life. Connections with local communities and strong personal ties could also explain why VFR travellers often visit their places of origin after natural disasters or other crises.

VFR travel seems more robust to tourism crises and economic downturns than other market segments, perhaps due to its emotional driving force. Crises might even spur VFR travel, as was reported after Australia's Katherine region suffered a major flood in 1997. "VFR travellers are connected to communities that need emotional support rather than simply functional support", explain the authors. "Relatedly, research conducted in 2017 recommended this

tourist segment as a marketing focus to help destination management organisations revitalise the tourism industry during and after disasters". The researchers were therefore eager to examine the needs of VFR travellers to understand the particularities of this market segment and cater better to their needs in the future.

Pandemic-Related Travel Constraints

The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented constraints on international movement, stifling global tourism. Along with wide-ranging restrictions on their inbound and outbound travel, travellers faced health-related risks and various psychological, economic and social challenges. "COVID-19 complicated travel- and leisure-related decisions more than ever", report the authors. During that trying time, strict border controls and other travel restrictions made leisure and business travel infeasible, sparking a tsunami of travel cancellations.

Marching bravely on, however, was VFR travel. Despite the difficulties and risks associated with travelling during the pandemic, many VFR tourists chose to batten down the hatches with loved ones in their overseas countries of origin. Meanwhile, many companies, such as Google, encouraged their international expat employees to work from home, further encouraging home-bound travel. "VFR trips thus potentially reflect the only form of travel that continues to support the tourism industry", say the authors. These trips might not seem equivalent to a joyful reuniting of friends and family, but staying with loved ones while engaging with the host-country community mimics "exploitative" VFR travel, as these travellers do not use hotels but do contribute to local life and economy.

If VFR travel is indeed propping up an industry in crisis, then all efforts must be made to support this crucial branch of tourism in the wake of the pandemic. "Despite the prominence of VFR travel and its strong resilience in the face of global crises, it has been one of the most underexplored tourism contexts in the literature", say the researchers. "We therefore examined the travel constraints of VFR travellers during the pandemic to enrich this tourism context". The COVID-19 context offered a unique opportunity to examine VFR travel constraints in more depth and use these findings to lessen barriers to travel and help the industry get back on its feet.

Quantifying Constraints

The researchers set out to discover which travel constraints were experienced by VFR travellers during the pandemic period. They focused on expat workers who were originally from Taiwan (the "tourist-receiving country"). An estimated 2 million Taiwanese people were living abroad in 2019, making it an ideal context in which to study VFR travel. Armed with 167 online posts and 8,403 online comments from a private Facebook group for overseas Taiwanese, the authors conducted a thematic analysis to understand the lived experiences of these VFR travellers from "tourist-generating countries".

Based on their analysis, the researchers classified the constraints faced by VFR travellers during the pandemic. Rather than considering these travel constraints in terms of their "nature", the researchers categorised them according to their "root cause". From this unique and fresh outlook emerged a framework with two distinct domains: an individual–family–community continuum and a tourist-generating country–tourist-receiving country continuum. Fourteen travel constraints were identified along these two continuums. For example, a fear of disturbing other house occupants while staying with friends or relatives in Taiwan is a family-level constraint in the tourist-receiving country.

What Worries Prospective VFR Tourists Most?

Each intersection along the two continuums was associated with specific travel constraints. For example, individuals who made travel decisions based on their personal needs in the tourist-generating country were concerned about job requirements, high travel costs and the extent of pandemic control in their country of residence. In terms of the tourist-receiving country (Taiwan), inconvenient travel policies, high infection risk and misgivings about local circumstances were the major individual-level barriers to travel. "Destination management organisations should passively ease travel constraints for VFR travellers", propose the researchers. "Such marketing strategies are likely to be effective because VFR travellers tend to be more willing to support these destinations' economic recovery".

In terms of the tourist-receiving country, disturbing others and feeling unwelcome were the major family-level constraints on VFR travel; in terms of tourist-generating countries, the family-level constraints most commonly experienced were the need for a stable living situation and homelike feeling. That is, VFR travellers during the pandemic were motivated by the idea of their home country as a safe haven, especially if their living circumstances as expats were unstable. "Travel agents could invite VFR

hosts to write blogs about the tourist-receiving country's pandemic status and express willingness to welcome VFR tourists", recommend the authors. "Doing so can link VFR travel with social cohesion and happiness while maintaining communication with prospective visitors".

Finally, community-related barriers to VFR travel included a sense of responsibility to the tourist-generating country, the possible decision to settle there permanently and a sense of responsibility to protect the world as a whole from the global pandemic. Tourism businesses could find great value in these results, especially as VFR tourism constraints relate to both tourist-generating and -receiving countries. "Our framework allows for a clearer understanding of how each travel constraint can be overcome", say the authors.

Post-COVID-19 Revival

Innovative ideas for promoting and rejuvenating tourism are much needed following the difficult COVID-19 period. By unearthing new insights from the pandemic period, destination managers and businesses can make proactive efforts to reduce VFR travel constraints in the post-pandemic landscape of tourism. In turn, this will help boost VFR travel. "Clearly identified VFR travel constraints can help destination management organisations promote VFR tourism by reducing these barriers in the post-pandemic tourism industry", conclude the researchers.

Points to Note

- Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is an understudied motivation for tourism that remained strong under COVID-19 restrictions.

- Expats returning home for VFR give social and economic support to their native country following crises there.

- Prospective VFR tourists weigh up individual, family and community concerns when deciding whether to travel home.

- Host families can boost VFR travel to their country by providing stable and home-like environments.

Lin, Pearl M.C., Peng, Kang-Lin and Au, Wai-Ching (2022). To Return or Not to Return? Identifying VFR Travel Constraints during the Pandemic. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, 18-30.

A New Flavour for Hotels

A priority of hotels worldwide is, quite naturally, attracting and catering to the needs of guests. Seldom do hotels invest heavily in strategies to cater to non-guests. However, according to the SHTM's Dr Sung Gyun Mun, Dr Linda Woo and a co-author, hotels' food and beverage (F&B) departments can bring in big money by attracting customers from local communities – not just tourists. With important implications for businesses in the post-COVID-19 era of tourism recovery, the authors suggest that hotels may be able to use their F&B offerings to reach new customers and create competitive advantages.

More than Just a Place to Sleep

Discovering a destination's unique culinary profile helps us to form a memorable connection with the local culture. "An exceptional gastronomic experience has a powerful impact on the overall image of a destination and tends to remain in tourists' memories for long periods", write the researchers. While hotels are already aware that quality dining and catering services can drive a certain degree of business success, the potential to use F&B to reach a brand-new crowd of customers remains relatively unexplored.

To maintain a competitive advantage, hotels must find original ways to reach prospective customers. "Diversification" involves creating new products or services and breaking through to untapped markets. Hotel diversification strategies have generally been centred on rooms, the "core" resources of all hotels. For instance, providing rooms with different levels of quality and price allows hotels to cater to guests with distinct needs and budgets. Another strategy is expanding a hotel chain to other locations, using the same room quality, to diversify internationally. "These types of diversification allow hotels to achieve economies of scale that reduce uncertainties and accelerate business growth", say the authors. Yet the focus on rooms means that target F&B customers are limited to in-house guests.

Hotel restaurants and bars are generally regarded as "supplementary" services; their potential as a significant diversification strategy has only recently started to pique interest. Unlike rooms, for which hotels must follow strict procedures, hotels' F&B offering is comparatively flexible and open to alterations in services and products. This means that hotels can stand out from the rest by offering more creative, more diverse and better-quality F&B services. "Hotel F&B should be regarded as a critical diversification strategy that can create competitive advantages", underline the researchers. In particular, adapting hotel F&B can broaden target customer groups to outside-hotel customers – guests of a hotel's restaurant or bar who are not actually staying at the hotel.

Targeting Outside-Hotel Customers

Revitalising hotel F&B services not only attracts more outside-hotel customers but has also been found to generate substantial revenues for hotels. This is welcome news, given reports of decreasing F&B revenue from minibars and in-room dining, which are only accessible to in-hotel guests. F&B services that are accessible to outside-hotel customers, such as lounges and catering, are bringing in increasing revenue. "Catering and banquet services have become a major source of revenue", say the authors, "accounting for approximately 60% of F&B revenue at full-service hotel operations, such as luxury, upper-upscale, and upscale hotels". This means that targeting in-hotel guests is no longer sufficient to increase F&B revenue and overall hotel profitability.

Successfully appealing to new outside-hotel clientele through hotel F&B means offering something that local restaurants cannot, such as "exceptional food with experiential and hedonic value, personalised service, and premium physical environments", say the researchers. Also important is surpassing traditional hotel F&B staples in terms of quality and diversity, which can help to broaden the customer clientele. Several of the world's biggest hotel groups are already seeking to transform their F&B services to offer one-of-a-kind, holistic experiences to appeal to outside-hotel customers. Examples include Marriott's "Grab & Go" meals, AccorHotels' mission to open their F&B venues to both locals and travellers and many hotels' renovation of their dining spaces.

To attract locals and make a mark on the local culinary scene, hotels have also started to partner with local businesses. Engaging with the community in this way can "influence overall hotel brand reputation for the company's long-term profitability", say the authors. For example, outside-hotel guests who have a memorable dining experience might, for their next trip, decide to book with that same hotel brand in foreign destinations. Despite the great potential of targeting outside-hotel customers, there is currently no way to measure the contribution of outside-hotel customers to F&B revenue. The researchers therefore developed a pioneering measurement strategy to estimate F&B revenue from outside-hotel customers, which could help to develop better strategies for hotel F&B.

Three Mathematical Models

Using a wealth of data collected over a decade, the researchers examined the relationship between F&B revenue from outside-hotel customers and overall hotel performance in 464 full-service luxury, upper-upscale and upscale hotels in the five most popular tourist destinations in the US. While accounting for variability in hotel occupancy, revenue and profit, the researchers calculated the F&B revenue from outside-hotel customers using a new measure that they customised for the purpose. Controlling for hotel location, age, size, number of rooms, state revenue and average monthly employment in their analysis, the researchers compared the outcomes of three distinct mathematical models and reached robust conclusions about the effects of hotel F&B services.

Investing in F&B Services

The major finding was that through F&B services, hotels can transcend their original roles and attract outside-hotel customers. In addition, attracting outside-hotel clients enhanced hotels' resource efficiency, known as "operating performance", most notably in luxury hotels. "The findings represent the effectiveness of hotel F&B services as diversification strategies", explain the authors. F&B revenue had a greater positive effect on luxury hotels' performance than on the performance of upper-upscale and upscale hotels. This suggests that luxury hotels can benefit most from making innovative F&B plans to attract local customers. Hotels need not concern themselves too much with pricing strategies, given that lowering or increasing the price of F&B offerings had no significant effect on hotel revenue or profitability.

Another consistent finding was that F&B revenue from outside-hotel customers was positively associated with "operating profitability", which is the profit left after paying off all operating expenses. "This finding supports the importance of attracting outside-hotel customers to increase the hotel's overall operating profitability", explain the researchers. This could also buffer seasonal fluctuations in hotel revenue. Moreover, this diversification strategy and easier accessibility of hotel F&B services would be beneficial for locals. The authors also highlight that simply investing more money in F&B services is not a fool-proof way to spontaneously attract more outside-hotel customers; instead, decisive and innovative moves should be made to reach outside-hotel customers to reap the rewards of diversification.

Engaging with the Local Community

This work provides meaningful practical suggestions for hotels in the post-pandemic era of tourism recovery. Importantly, the work accentuates the value of more deeply embedding a hotel into its local surroundings and creating strategic F&B offerings for outside-hotel customers. For instance, hotel F&B departments could engage with local communities by hosting conferences, charity events and holiday parties, as well as with local F&B vendors. The enhanced brand image from improved hotel F&B reputation among residents and communities could allow hotels to increase their room prices, and thus overall profitability, without losing customer demand. "Considering the effects of outside-hotel customers on hotel performance", say the researchers, "hotel firms should treat outside-hotel guests as their main target and develop management practices related to them". These could include a system to track outside-hotel customer purchases and record details of hotel F&B activities.

Points to Note

- Patrons of hotel restaurants and bars who are not staying at the hotel are a major revenue stream.

- Hotels should diversify their food and beverage services, e.g. offer different price brackets and takeaway options, to attract outside-hotel customers.

- High-quality restaurants and bars are an effective investment in brand strengthening.

- Hotels can connect with communities via outside-hotel customers, e.g. offering wedding services or partnering with local businesses.

Mun, Sung Gyun, Park, Eunhye Olivia and Woo, Linda (2022). Strategic Target Customers of Food and Beverage Offerings in Full-Service Hotels: Outside-hotel Customers. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 102, 103159.

The Cost of Faking a Smile

Perhaps surprisingly, the smiles that greet you upon arrival at a hotel might not be genuine. A positive, welcoming demeanour is part of the job description for housekeeping, front desk, and restaurant workers, whose smiles, moods, and emotions are distinguishing features of the hospitality sector. But when frontline employees have to fake it, what strategies do they use? Eye-opening new work from SHTM researchers Dr Deniz Kucukusta and Ms Yoo Jin Lim has revealed more about the emotional labour strategies adopted by frontline workers to counter the emotional dissonance experienced when their expressed and felt emotions do not match. Their novel findings show that suppressing or hiding internal feelings can be detrimental to employees and reduce their intention to remain their role, which has clear managerial and practical implications.

Emotional Labour

Frontline employees who interact directly with customers are also delivering a "product". To be sure, customer interaction, satisfaction, and loyalty, hinge on frontline employees' ability to display organisationally accepted positive emotions, which is a form of "emotional labour". "Emotional labour takes the form of displaying fake or genuine feelings toward customers", explain the authors. These emotional "products" are designed to enhance customers' emotions and moods during service encounters. Yet for employees, excessive emotional labour can lead to burnout, poor job performance, low job satisfaction, and a strong intention to leave one's job.

Putting on a positive, welcoming demeanour becomes far more taxing – and the emotional labour more intense – when employees' authentic feelings do not match the emotions they display. This is known as "emotional dissonance", which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout further down the line. It is therefore a major priority to understand the strategies used to cope with emotional dissonance. Namely, the researchers investigated the adoption of "surface acting", "deep acting" and "genuine acting" strategies by frontline hotel workers in Hong Kong.

Surface acting involves simply hiding internal feelings and displaying fake emotions during customer interactions, which means that felt emotional dissonance remains. Deep acting occurs when employees actually suppress and modify their internal feelings to align with the moods required of them. This reduces emotional dissonance but might require more emotional labour. Finally, the emotional strategy of genuine acting refers to the display of sincere and actual feelings. "Because it does not involve fake emotions, employees tend not to experience emotive dissonance in their work role when engaged in genuine acting", explain the researchers.

Generational and Demographic Differences

The modern generational groups are known as Baby Boomers (1946–1961), Generation X (1965–1981), and Generation Y, or "Millennials" (from 1981). The personalities, values, beliefs and even work habits of each generation have been shaped by environmental, political and economic realities, which means that their adoption of emotional labour strategies might also differ. Given that most of the working world comprises members of Generation X and Generation Y, the researchers focused on these two groups. They made specific predictions regarding preferred emotional labour styles based on the documented characteristics of each generation. "By understanding how employees of different generations with different values react to and cope with emotive dissonance", say the researchers, "managers will be able to offer the right mitigation solutions to the right employees".

Whilst Generation X and Generation Y have been found to share work values and to similarly relish personal growth opportunities, Generation Y members have been characterised as having comparatively high self-esteem and low work engagement. For this reason, the authors hypothesised that "Generation Y members have a higher tendency to practice surface acting and deep acting", and that "Generation X employees are experienced workers, so are more likely to practice deep acting and genuine acting". If so, they expected emotional dissonance and its effects to be stronger among members of Generation Y than Generation X.

The decision to engage in surface acting, deep acting or genuine acting may also depend on a variety of demographic characteristics. For example, women have been found to more successfully communicate happiness and suppress anger in the workplace than men, which corresponds to deep acting. "Older employees are more likely to control their emotions and display them appropriately, using genuine acting rather than surface acting", add the authors. Therefore, the researchers also considered how frontline workers' gender, years of work experience, monthly salary and the hotel service standards they are expected to uphold affect their use of surface acting, deep acting and genuine acting.

Frontline Worker Questionnaire

Adopting a data-driven approach, the authors asked frontline employees from seven hotels in Hong Kong to complete a two-part questionnaire. Of the 192 participants, 58.3% belonged to Generation Y and 41.7% to Generation X. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information, such as age, gender, and monthly salary. The second part of the questionnaire collected information on the respondents' use of surface acting, genuine acting and deep acting, as well as their sense of emotional dissonance. Using these data, the researchers were able to study the preferred or default emotional labour states adopted by two different generational groups working in three-, four-, and five- star hotels.

Unfeigned Feeling

For both generations, frontline employees who adopted surface acting had a lower intention to stay in their job. This suggests that surface acting is more labour-intensive and leads to more emotional dissonance and internal conflict. In contrast, genuine acting (expressing sincere feelings about one's role) increased employees' intention to remain with the organisation. The authors therefore recommend that employees adopt genuine acting over surface and deep acting to reduce emotional burnout and turnover rate. "The most effective acting state", they say, "is to act with heartfelt and sincere emotions".

As predicted, Generation X employees tended to express genuine emotions more than did Generation Y employees, who more often engaged in surface acting and deep acting. This suggests "that Generation Y members may experience higher levels of emotional burnout and intention to leave their job", say the researchers. However, Generation X members still reported feeling emotional dissonance. In addition, the use of genuine acting versus surface acting was affected by years of work experience – perhaps corresponding to age – and gender.

To minimise the effects of emotional labour, the researchers suggest that managers should help employees to understand the concept of emotional intelligence and encourage them to discuss their feelings. They recommend providing employees with tailored emotional intelligence training according to generational differences in the use of emotional labour states. This might increase involvement at work, reduce emotional burnout and enhance job satisfaction.

Right for the Job?

This innovative research acknowledges the burden commonly felt by frontline hotel employees, whose warm, positive manner during customer interactions can come at the expense of their own mental and physical resources. Most strikingly, this research offers hotel managers generation-based information that could be used to improve working conditions, turnover and human resource policies. "By understanding how employees of different generations with different values react to and cope with emotive dissonance, managers will be able to offer the right mitigation solutions to the right employees", conclude the authors.

Whilst steps can be taken by managers to reduce the negative impacts of internal conflicts in their employees and care for their existing workforce, the most effective way to increase employees' intention to stay is that they express their own, authentic feelings. "This underlines the importance of selecting the right employees for the hospitality industry", say the researchers. These results could therefore also prove extremely useful for hotel management in the process of recruiting new frontline hotel staff.

Points to Note

- Frontline hotel staff may engage in "deep" or "surface" acting to display appropriate emotions.
- Surface acting is especially common among millennials and men but can lead to burnout as suppressing emotions is taxing.
- Deep acting and emotional genuineness are healthy signs of sincere, competent engagement with work challenges.
- Employers should encourage emotional authenticity and respect their experienced employees.

Kucukusta, Deniz and Lim, Yoo Jin (2022). Emotional Labor of Frontline Employees: Generational Differences and Intention to Stay. *Journal of China Tourism Research,* Vol. 18, Issue 3, 472-494.

Nostalgia-Motivated Tourism

Virtual trips are destination "teasers" and a valuable way to attract new tourists. But what about returning tourists? Timely new research by the SHTM's Dr Hyejo Hailey Shin and a co-author offers an in-depth look at which elements of virtual trips are the most essential, and how these can be used to encourage returning tourists' behavioural intentions via immersion and nostalgia. Intriguingly, stirring the emotions and nostalgia of returning tourists can boost their intention to revisit a destination, visit a similar destination and speak positively about travel experiences with others. These illuminating findings could prove vital for destination management organisations as the industry regains its footing in the wake of COVID-19.

Virtual Trip Immersion

Virtual reality is widely considered one of the most exciting advances in the technological world, with a vast array of anticipated applications in various domains. This immersive technology allows users to vividly interact with computer-generated features in a simulated virtual environment, and so has attracted keen interest in the tourism sector. "Many tourism organisations have launched virtual trips, a combination of virtual reality and tourism contents, to promote themselves as a travel destination choice during the post-pandemic era", say the researchers.

Virtual "previews" of destinations are often used to showcase previously unimagined travel possibilities and surprising locations to new tourists, while simultaneously assuaging their travel doubts. Nonetheless, despite these advantages for attracting first-time visitors, many tourism destinations' primary targets are returning visitors who have already been to the destination in question. As the researchers note, "It would be ideal if tourism destinations could promote travellers' positive feelings about their past memories in the destination in order to increase their revisit intentions". This is where virtual reality could get a chance to shine.

For virtual trips to appeal to returning travellers, they need to evoke fond recollections of past travel adventures. For this, returning travellers need to feel fully immersed and involved. Building on previous work, the researchers hypothesised that better-quality interactivity, usability and sensorial appeal would increase immersion. They also predicted that more realistic representations of a destination would heighten immersion. This "authenticity" is all the more critical for returning travellers, who are bound to notice if a virtual trip does not match up with their actual experiences. Most crucially, true immersion in a virtual trip elicits an emotional response. "When travellers are deeply immersed, their emotional responses become stronger", report the researchers.

Three Kinds of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a person's intense positive feelings about their own memories. Considering that travel is all about providing tangible experiences through which new memories are born, nostalgia naturally holds a special place in tourism research. Three types of tourist nostalgia are recognised in the literature: destination nostalgia; nostalgia for past lives and the desire to relive days gone by; and nostalgia for social activities, or the emotion surrounding travel memories of moments shared with others. The researchers predicted that all three types of nostalgia would be positively influenced by travellers' immersion in a virtual trip. Moreover, "although these three types of nostalgia are directed towards different objects, they might occur simultaneously", they say.

When considering the potential effects of nostalgia, a key concept is the well-known "stimulus–organism–response paradigm". This posits that emotions compel a person to behave in a certain way, such that strong feelings sway responses to the environment. If so, a virtual trip should also have behavioural knock-on effects for travellers. "As an affective response, nostalgia has been considered an important antecedent of travellers' behavioural intentions", report the authors. For this reason, they tested whether nostalgia increased a tourist's intention to revisit a destination, intention to visit a similar destination, and intention to share their memories of the destination with others. These are three critical indicators of travellers' favourable attitudes towards a destination.

To address a final point of curiosity, the authors looked at whether tourists' personalities played a role in the relationships between nostalgia and behavioural intentions. More self-confident and daring "allocentric" tourists might rather discover unchartered destinations than revisit a previous one, despite a strong sense of nostalgia. Less adventurous "psychocentric" tourists, who tend to prefer comfort and convenience, might be more inclined to revisit a familiar place, even if they do not feel particularly nostalgic on looking back. "Therefore, we investigated the moderating effect of travel personality in the relationship between nostalgia and future behavioural intention", report the researchers.

Quizzing Orlando Visitors

What better study site than the theme park capital of the world? Sifting through travel records made available by the Orlando Destination Management Organisation, the researchers identified and contacted 303 individuals who had visited Orlando, Florida since 2015. These participants were invited to take a virtual trip via an Internet link and then complete a comprehensive survey compiled from previous publications. In this survey, the participants were asked to assess the interactivity, usability, sensorial appeal and authenticity of the virtual trip; their immersion in the trip; their felt nostalgia for the destination, past life and social activities; and their behavioural intentions. The authors also measured the participants' travel "personality", using an existing scale.

Moved by Destination Nostalgia

Immersion in the virtual trip was found to hinge on authenticity and sensorial appeal, which demonstrates the importance of including high-quality, representative content in virtual trips to intensify engagement and involvement. To get the most from revisiting tourists, tourism destinations should therefore devote energy to accurately portraying a destination's atmosphere and including rich sensorial appeals. "By increasing travellers' immersion in virtual trips", explain the researchers, "[destination marketing organisations] will be able to arouse nostalgia for the destination, generating travellers' intention to revisit the destination". Indeed, immersion in the virtual experience significantly increased all three forms of nostalgia.

Destination nostalgia increased the intention to revisit the destination and to visit a similar destination, which indicates that virtual trips could be used to attract both returning and new tourists. For this reason, the researchers recommend that marketing strategies incorporate "coopetition" to create a win–win situation for destinations. "It would be beneficial to form a strategic alliance with destinations which share similar destination characteristics so that they can offer virtual trips to the destination and partner destinations to attract potential visitors", they suggest. Destination nostalgia also increased the intention to spread positive word-of-mouth, which is a sure-fire way to attract potential visitors in the tourism industry.

Travellers' behavioural intentions were not affected by the two other types of nostalgia, however. According to the authors, the nonsignificant effect of nostalgia for past lives/social activities is not necessarily unsurprising – tourists may not actually need to return to the same destination to re-experience their past lives or social activities. Finally, whilst destination nostalgia had a much stronger effect on revisit intention in psychocentric travellers, "even allocentric travellers were willing to revisit the destination after their virtual trip because of their nostalgia for the destination", report the researchers. This is welcome news for destination marketing organisations.

Tools to Inspire

These insights could inspire new ideas for channelling the skyrocketing significance of technology in the tourism sector. Virtual trips can invoke sweet, pleasant memories and thereby arouse nostalgia, which results in behavioural intentions that are ultimately beneficial for the tourism industry. However, the participants' travel intentions were almost certainly affected by the COVID-19 travel restrictions imposed at the time of data collection. "As the travel restriction has continued, travellers' intention to travel might be strengthened due to their reduced self-control", acknowledge the researchers. "The findings could be different if there were no travel restrictions". Certainly, never before have innovative tools to reboot the tourism industry been so urgently called for, further highlighting the important guidance provided by this research for destination marketing organisations.

Points to Note

- Virtual reality "previews" of a destination can tempt returning as well as first-time visitors.
- Immersion is key to stoking tourists' desire to visit the same or similar locations and recommend it to others.
- Virtual trips must be authentic and sensorial to trigger destination nostalgia in returners.
- Travellers who prioritise comfort and convenience are especially receptive to virtual trip promotion.

Shin, Hyejo Hailey and Jeong, Miyoung (2022). Does a Virtual Trip Evoke Travelers' Nostalgia and Derive Intentions to Visit the Destination, a Similar Destination, and Share? Nostalgia-motivated Tourism. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing,* Vol. 39, Issue 1, 1-17.

To Refund or Not to Refund?

2020 saw unprecedented swathes of holiday cancellations. The year COVID-19 hit was a tough one for hospitality and tourism firms, who were forced to make swift decisions about changes to their refund policies. However, no one could clearly envisage how those crisis-induced changes would impact customer loyalty and trust. In the first study of its kind, Dr Daniel Leung and Ms Christine Seah from the SHTM looked at customer reactions to generous or self-serving refund policy changes, and whether these are shaped further by the magnitude of changes and the format in which refunds are offered. This inspiring work will help industry practitioners to optimise refund policy strategies in the future.

The Refund Rush

Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic was a brutal shock to the hotel industry. Confronted with unimaginable numbers of cancellation requests and refund claims, for the main part the industry reacted sympathetically to customers. Some hotels, such as Hilton and Premier Inn, started allowing refunds on previously non-refundable purchases during the crisis, and Expedia and Travelodge offered customers cash or vouchers to be used on future bookings. "Helping consumers in need during crises is considered to be an altruistic behaviour, even though the changes may result in financial losses", say the researchers.

However, a few companies took a more selfish path. EasyJet and British Airways, for instance, breached cancellation promises and denied their customers any refunds during the pandemic period. Negatively changing refund policies from fully refundable to partially or non-refundable might go some way to limit a firm's financial losses in the short term, but it is a rude violation of the initial promises made to customers. According to the researchers, these actions are "likely to reduce consumers' trust of the company and even their intention to repurchase products from that same company in the future".

How did these two strategically distinct crisis-induced reactions affect customer behaviours and attitudes? Until now, the effect of the "polarity" of change, that is, whether refund policy changes are positive or negative for consumers, has been left unmapped. The researchers reasoned that "if one hotel behaves egoistically and changes a policy to benefit themselves only, consumers would perceive that policy change as an unfair business practice". They predicted that this "opportunistic" behaviour would decrease consumers' trust and lower their intention to repurchase products from that company. Conversely, positive changes should increase trust and repurchase intentions.

Big and Small, Cash and Credit

Imagine your feelings on learning that you are to receive a refund, only to then find out that the refund is small, or that it comes in the format of a voucher that can only be used within the next two months. Would that token gesture be satisfactory? Previous work has considered refund policy as a "one-off" or "static" event, without fully considering the detailed characteristics of changes. "Another objective of this study was to examine the effects of the interplay of the polarity of change in refund policy, the magnitude of change in refund policy, and refund format on consumers' trust of the company and repurchase intention", explain the researchers.

Larger price reductions can boost consumers' purchase intention. After all, who wouldn't prefer a 30% over a 15% discount? Indeed, larger magnitude changes can be exponentially beneficial for companies. "One study shows that consumer spending in a store with a larger magnitude of change increases by 12%, while the corresponding figure in a store with a smaller magnitude of change increases by just 1%", report the researchers. This magnitude-of-change effect might also translate to a refund policy context. Meanwhile, refund format can also affect customer responses, whereby cash refunds are generally preferred over credit refunds. "This research complements existing literature by demonstrating how consumers react differently when a company changes its refund policy in various forms", say the researchers.

Clues from past work indicate that a large magnitude of change causes a strong "contrast effect" that drives the intensity of customer responses, be it in a positive or negative direction, whilst a small magnitude of change results in an "assimilation effect" that dampens customer responses. For companies that implement a negative change in refund policy, the researchers hypothesised that a large magnitude of change would decrease consumer trust and intention to repurchase products more than a small change. "If a company changes its refund policy positively", specify the authors, "and the magnitude of change is high (low), consumers' trust in that company and intention to repurchase products from the same company will be significantly higher (lower)".

Two Scenario Studies

In two elegant studies, participants were asked to imagine that they had made holiday plans to visit New York but were obliged to cancel their hotel reservation due to a health crisis. In study 1, the researchers looked at the effect of the polarity and magnitude of changes in refund policy. For this, 144 participants read a set of emails that were carefully constructed to reflect either a positive or negative policy change, and either a large (100%) or small (50%) magnitude of change. For example, a negative change of large magnitude was reflected by an initial booking email explaining that a refund would be possible, followed by a cancellation email stating that no refund was offered due to the crisis. In study 2, 319 participants were shown emails that reflected either a positive or negative change, as well as whether the 50% refund that was offered would be in the form of cash or credit. In both studies, trust in the company and repurchase intention were assessed using a questionnaire.

Trust and Loyalty

As expected, positive changes to refund policies resulted in higher levels of consumer trust and repurchase intentions, whilst negative changes decreased trust and loyalty. "The execution of self-beneficial actions during crises reduces consumers' trust of a company and their intention to repurchase products from that same company in the future", report the researchers. This means that hospitality practitioners should expect consumers' brand evaluation and future behaviour to deteriorate when they change their refund policies negatively in response to a health crisis.

For companies that made a negative policy change that was large in magnitude, the detrimental impacts of negative change in refund policy on consumers' trust and loyalty were magnified. This means that companies who enact negative changes should be careful to do so gently, at modest levels. "In contrast, when a refund policy is changed positively and mildly, the degree of gain becomes less evident", say the researchers. In other words, if companies are prepared to bear financial losses to favour consumers during crises, they should make sure that those positive changes are large in magnitude.

Finally, refund format impacted the influence of polarity of change in refund policy. For both negative and positive policy changes, cash refunds amplified the impact of the polarity of change in refund policy. Namely, when companies that negatively changed their policy offered cash refunds, trust and repurchase intention were lower than when credit was offered. When companies that positively changed their policy offered cash refunds, trust and repurchase intentions were higher than when credit was offered. Hence, to mitigate losses, companies that negatively change their refund policy should offer credit refunds, whereas companies that make positive changes should offer cash rather than credit refunds. "This will further enhance consumers' trust, as well as customers' intention to repurchase products from the same company in the future", explain the researchers.

Mitigating Losses

Whilst refund policies are widely embraced by hospitality and tourism business, research in this area has been lacking. This long-awaited investigation casts light on what practitioners can expect to see when they make strategic changes to refund policies. As well as keeping their heads above water, companies must strive to retain customer trust and loyalty in times of crisis. This fascinating work shows how consumers process and react to policy change, and could therefore prove to be immeasurably useful in strategic decision making about refund policy. "This research generates insights into how to adequately change refund policies in order to mitigate additional losses in the future", conclude the authors.

Points to Note

- Changes to refund policy during a large-scale crisis significantly impact consumer trust.
- Changes that are positive for consumers, e.g. allowing refunds in a crisis, only have an effect when large in magnitude.
- Negative changes should be small to avoid reputational damage and customer loss.
- The impacts of refund policy changes on consumer trust are smaller when credit rather than cash is involved.

Leung, Daniel and Seah, Christine (2022). The Impact of Crisis-induced Changes in Refund Policy on Consumers' Brand Trust and Repurchase Intention. *International Journal of Hospitality Management,* Vol. 105, 103272.

Singleton Employees in the Hotel Industry

Many organisations take pride in their ability to offer a rich variety of supportive programmes for employees with families. However, the growing number of single childless people in the workforce, especially members of Generations Y and Z, rarely benefit from equivalent perks or policies. Does the hospitality industry care about single childless employees? Curious as to whether organisational support can benefit hotels and their employees, the SHTM's Dr Xiaolin (Crystal) Shi and her co-author quizzed hotel employees in China about their experiences. The fruits of their comprehensive analysis will help organisations to create more supportive environments for employees, whilst also boosting hotel outcomes.

Organisational Support

Now more than ever, single employees without children dominate the labour-intensive hotel industry. Perhaps thanks to the false assumption that they have more free time and fewer responsibilities, "members of this group are often expected to shoulder heavier workloads, work longer hours, and travel more for work to support the family demands of their married colleagues", say the researchers. They have also been found to engage in more emotional labour, to have less decision-making latitude, and to face more negative work–nonwork spillover than employees who are in a couple and/or have children. This highlights the emerging need to ascertain the workplace challenges faced by single childless employees in the hotel industry.

Common to all employees is the challenge of achieving a "work–life balance", which is the harmony between a individual's different roles, responsibilities and personal values. Whilst the concept of a work–family balance has been examined in great depth, it is not necessarily relevant to single childless people, whose "personal" roles are less likely to be family-related. "The commonly used terms 'work–family conflict' and 'family-supportive organisational culture' do not apply to all", explain the researchers.

They therefore inspected the experiences of "personal-to-work conflict", which occurs when personal activities infringe on professional ones, and "work-to-personal conflict", which occurs when job demands require a sacrifice of personal time and energy. A potential way to minimise these kinds of conflicts and strike a healthy work–life balance is through the provision of "organisational support".

Family-supportive work cultures can increase job satisfaction and performance—similar benefits might reasonably be expected by providing organisational support to single people without children. A singles-friendly organisational culture is one that nurtures a work-life balance equally among employees, and not just in those who are married or with children. For this, it is crucial to acknowledge that family life and personal life are not one and the same. "Previous work has suggested that the work domain, family domain, and personal domain should be treated separately", explain the authors.

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is a key dimension of a singles-friendly work culture, and especially relevant to single childless employees, who are known to suffer more from social isolation and loneliness. "A high level of organisational support is typically linked with positive organisational outcomes", say the authors, "and social inclusion has been associated with both affective organisational commitment and perceived organisational support." The researchers therefore predicted that a strong socially inclusive organisational culture would reduce personal-to-work and work-to-personal conflicts.

Dissatisfaction and apathy can ensue when there is a discrepancy between desired and actual work-life balance. In addition, employees who feel that the available support is simply not enough to overcome work-life conflicts have heightened stress levels. "For single childless employees, the incongruence between their perceptions of work–personal conflicts and relevant support from their organisations may result in negative consequences, such as lower job performance", say the researchers. Accordingly, they predicted that an organisational-level social inclusion of a singles-friendly culture would yield better job performance.

Social inclusion of a singles-friendly culture might also have the power to boost the enjoyment got from leisure activities. Leisure activities contribute to psychological well-being and life satisfaction, and the loss of the freedom to engage in them can sour attitudes towards one's own personal life. "Hospitality employees in particular may have less time and energy for leisure activities after work, preventing them from satisfying their need for relaxation or resulting in lower levels of leisure satisfaction", say the researchers. An organisational culture geared towards improving employees' work-life balance could therefore boost leisure satisfaction.

Multiple-Source Surveys

The researchers gathered rich data from total of 639 full-time employees, who were recruited from 29 full-service hotels in China. Participants completed a pre-developed questionnaires that measured personal-to-work and work-to-personal conflicts, leisure satisfaction, and their perception of the degree of social inclusion of a singles-friendly culture. Job performance was assessed using a survey completed by participants' direct supervisors, who rated items such as "this employee performs tasks that are expected of him/her." Hierarchical linear modelling was then applied to examine the relationships between variables, whilst controlling for potential confounding variables, such as whether participants were men or women.

All-Round Benefits

The results were unambiguous. Single childless employees who worked in hotels with a socially inclusive culture had notably less conflict between their work and personal domains, a more impressive job performance, and more satisfaction from leisure activities. "These findings highlight the significance of the social inclusion of a singles-friendly culture for both employees and organisations", say the researchers. As a second intriguing finding, the effect of an inclusive organisational culture on employees' job performance and leisure satisfaction were shaped by their degree of work-to-personal conflict. This, clarify the authors, could be explained by the important role of personal domain variables in influencing employees' perceptions.

Such clear-cut findings should easily persuade managers to embrace a singles-friendly culture to enable a balance between the work and personal roles of single childless employees. Hotels could establish programs and policies to eliminate negative stereotyping, and should not solely focus on the needs of married and parent employees. "Although single childless employees do not require support for family responsibilities, they do require support for personal and social matters", reiterate the authors. Hotels could also facilitate an enhanced mutual understanding between single and married employees through team-building activities, which would inspire more harmonious and productive relationships in the workplace.

The nature of social inclusion of a singles-friendly culture varied from hotel to hotel. "As such", explain the researchers, "hotels should take their unique organisational cultures and characteristics into consideration when developing socially inclusive programs." Hotel chains could, for instance infuse their mission and core values into inclusive policies and programs, and make sure that the same support is provided across all of their hotels. This would mean that employees who are transferred from one hotel to another of the same chain can more rapidly assimilate into their new working environment and immediately feel a sense of belonging.

Beyond Family-Friendly

With fewer people than ever in their 30s and 40s choosing to get married or have children, the hospitality workforce is increasingly home to single childless workers. This pioneering new work shows that the time has come to address their needs. "The study can assist hotel industry managers in recognising single childless employees as an important, distinct, and growing segment of the labour force", conclude the authors. As well as several managerial implications, this investigation also paves the way for more exciting research. For example, future work could additionally consider how a supportive culture affects other workers who also have a "non-traditional" family structure, such as those in a same-sex relationship.

Points to Note

- Hotel employees who are single and childless often get fewer perks and less policy support.
- Single childless workers have a unique set of personal needs and are vulnerable to work–life imbalance.
- This growing segment of hospitality staff can benefit from singles-friendly workplaces.
- Establishing a uniform singles-friendly culture is good for employee retention in hotel chains.

Shi, Xiaolin (Crystal), and Shi, Jieyu (Jade) (2022). Who Cares about Single Childless Employees in the Hotel Industry? Creating a Workplace Culture Beyond Family-Friendly. *Tourism Management,* Vol. 90, 104477.

Getting Back on Track: Service Recovery in a Networked World

In today's travel and events industries, multiple service providers work together to shape unique, complex and multidimensional customer experiences. However, such connectedness can come at a cost. Within a network or ecosystem of service providers, a single service failure can have cascading effects on all stakeholders. Yet we still know little about the optimal strategies for service recovery in such networked contexts. Filling this gap in the literature, Dr Karin Weber and Professor Cathy Hsu of the SHTM shed light on how customers perceive and react to service failure and recovery measures in today's complexly interlinked business environments. Their findings offer crucial guidance for travel and events practitioners on ensuring that customers are as satisfied as possible following service failure.

Ever More Connected

Whilst the customer–firm dyad was central to service scenarios in the early 2000s, the situation today is very different, with increasingly interconnected service providers, environments and dynamics. Service quality now depends on complex networks and ecosystems of interacting partners that share resources, tools and goals and whose failures can have far-reaching effects. Surprisingly, however, research has thus far failed to consider service failure (SF) and recovery measures in networked contexts. As a result, strategies for optimising service encounters in the modern world remain suboptimal. "The time has come to expand service research", say the researchers, "to understand the development of service systems, networks, and ecosystems".

Travel experiences are a good example of networked service provision, as they involve a range of stakeholders – such as airlines, hotels and destinations – that collaboratively create value for travellers. Similarly, customer experiences in the rapidly growing events industry are shaped by multiple "loosely connected" entities, such as event organisers, venues, sponsors and destinations. SF is fairly common in the events industry. "Music festivals in particular are prone to failure," say the authors, "with wide-ranging implications for the various stakeholders". To date, however, no consensus has been reached on how to respond to SF in the networked environments of today's travel and events industries.

Imagine the following scenario. A theatre company partners with a nearby restaurant and taxi firm in return for meal discounts and reliable transportation after performances. However, their collaboration is disrupted by an SF caused by the taxi firm. When a service experience is coordinated in this way, how do network members determine which party or parties should undertake SF recovery and how to protect their respective reputations?

Dealing Fairly with Service Failure

Customers care about the source of SF recovery. They may even expect non-responsible entities to implement recovery, the authors tell us, "despite their potentially limited ability to do so". Research has shown that firms can benefit from implementing external recovery efforts, but only when they are unaffiliated with the party responsible for the SF. "An SF by one firm actually creates an opportunity to enhance customer evaluations of a different firm in a contiguous service experience", the authors deduce. To explore this issue in more depth, they compared customers' responses to SF recovery implemented by different parties: the firm responsible for the SF, a firm affiliated with the responsible firm, a firm unaffiliated with the responsible firm, and multiple affiliated firms.

Customers' responses to SF recovery may also hinge on their assessment of how fairly the SF has been dealt with. In general, customers who have experienced failure are looking for justice. This, say the researchers, "relates to customers' perceptions of the fairness of actual outcomes or consequences", such as the provision of monetary or non-monetary compensation. The researchers compared the effectiveness of compensation versus a sincere apology in limiting customer dissatisfaction following SF. They also filled a gap in research by exploring whether and how customer responses to recovery efforts were affected by the severity of the SF.

Novel Service Scenarios and Surveys

To empirically examine customer responses to SF and recovery measures, the researchers carefully designed and administered two online script-based surveys. In Study 1, 207 participants were asked to imagine that they had arranged to attend an international music festival but subsequently encountered an SF in the form of an airline overbooking, a delayed flight or a missed flight connection. They were then presented with one of four external recovery scenarios, in which the recovery was implemented by either an airline alliance partner (affiliated recovery firm) or a hotel (unaffiliated recovery firm) and the recovery outcome was either compensation, in the form of an upgrade, or an apology. The participants rated their satisfaction with, intention to recommend via word of mouth and repeat purchase intention regarding the recovery firm.

Study 2 extended this consecutive two-firm context to an event experience created by several service providers. Seasoned festival-goers were asked to imagine that they had purchased tickets for a music festival, along with transportation to and accommodation at the festival site, before encountering an SF. Splitting the participants into six groups, the authors measured the effect of SF severity (minor problems encountered at the festival versus a cancelled flight) on the participants' evaluation of the event organiser, venue, sponsor and destination.

In Study 2, the researchers also compared the participants' responses to recovery implemented by the responsible party, namely the event organiser (which provided compensation in the form of a partial ticket refund/donation to a national charity), versus recovery implemented jointly by all four entities (which provided either compensation, i.e., a free concert ticket, or an apology). Again, the participants' satisfaction, word of mouth recommendation intention and repeat purchase intention were recorded.

Compensation for Customers

As expected, Study 1 revealed higher customer ratings for satisfaction, word of mouth intention and repeat purchase intention for the recovery firm that was unaffiliated (versus affiliated) with the firm responsible for the SF. In general, customers preferred to be compensated than to receive an apology, but affiliated firms had the most to gain from offering compensation. "A tangible goodwill gesture is more effective than a simple apology if a firm wants to take advantage of an SF by another service provider", add the researchers. For example, hotels could extend checkout times for guests with delayed flights to minimise negative customer responses.

Study 2 confirmed that SF severity also impacted consumer evaluations. In the high-severity scenario, the event organiser (responsible for the SF) received particularly low ratings relative to the other three entities involved in the experience creation. Surprisingly, however, consumer evaluations and behaviours were not more positive following external recovery by affiliated entities than following internal recovery by the entity to blame for the SF, the event organiser. According to the researchers, this suggests that costly efforts made by affiliated firms to appease frustrated customers may not result in "more favourable consumer evaluations of and behaviour toward the entities implementing such external recovery measures".

The results also showed that the kind of compensation offered should be carefully considered. Study 2 revealed that offering a free ticket to a concert in the future actually increased the frustration of non-local festival-goers, who had already made travel and accommodation arrangements. In contrast, Study 1 showcased the advantages of immediate and/or flexible compensation offered by airlines and hotels. "In a festival context," conclude the authors, "any external recovery offered by affiliated stakeholders should not only be of similar value but also be immediate and flexible in nature".

Spearheading Service Recovery

Moving beyond the dyadic business–consumer interactions of the past, this study breaks new ground by examining SF and recovery measures in a networked world. Its results provide much-needed guidance for modern travel and events practitioners seeking to limit customer dissatisfaction following SFs caused by various stakeholders. To optimise their recovery strategies, network members should carefully consider SF severity, choose the right party or parties to implement recovery and determine the most appropriate type of compensation. As the researchers note, these insights may be particularly relevant in "extraordinarily challenging business environments" such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Points to Note

- In today's connected world, service failure can have far-reaching effects when firms jointly offer unique event experiences, such as music festivals.

- Recovery from service failures is crucial to maintain goodwill and positive customer evaluation in complex networked environments.

- Compensation is more effective when provided by a firm not directly linked to the one responsible for service failure.

- Firms that step in to respond to service failures should offer tangible compensation that is flexible and of immediate use.

Weber, Karin, and Hsu, Cathy H. C. (2022). Beyond a Single Firm and Internal Focus Service Failure/Recovery: Multiple Providers and External Service Recoveries. *Journal of Travel Research,* Vol. 61, Issue 1, pp. 50-63.

A Breath of Fresh Air for Luxury Hotels

Trees, potted plants and "green walls" may not be conventional forms of interior design, but with growing demand for sustainable, eco-friendly hospitality, hotels are upping their efforts to incorporate "green atmospherics" into their indoor spaces. Whilst people's behaviour is known to be shaped by their physical surroundings, the specific effects of living plants, scent, air quality, natural light and green spaces are not yet known. Focusing on the luxury hotel sector, the SHTM's Professor Jin-Soo Lee and colleagues explored the influence of various dimensions of green atmospherics on the well-being and behavioural intentions of hotel guests and employees. Their findings could help luxury hotel managers deliver a more enjoyable experience for guests and take better care of their employees while also reducing their environmental impact.

Connecting with Spaces

The hotel sector is a major contributor to pollution, waste and environmental damage. Hotels not only generate large volumes of greenhouse gases, grey water and food waste but also consume substantial natural resources. As the tourism industry continues to grow, so does the need to provide more eco-friendly lodging for travellers. Rising to this challenge, many hotels are making moves to minimise their environmental impact by implementing green initiatives, which simultaneously meet the growing customer demand for sustainable hospitality. Increasingly, the researchers note, "individuals embrace sustainability as not only a design preference, but also a moral code".

"Green atmospherics" describes a healthy, eco-friendly physical environment. Hotels keen to foster green atmospherics might furnish their indoor spaces with living trees, potted plants, green rest areas, fresh air, natural light and good ventilation. "Visitors and employees in a hotel are therefore interacting with various elements of its green indoor atmospherics", say the researchers. According to previous studies, interacting with green and healthy atmospherics can boost guests' positive experiences of hotels. Indoor atmospherics may influence cognitive, emotional and physical responses as well as behaviours such as retention, loyalty and word-of-mouth intention.

According to the researchers, the beneficial effects of green atmospherics can be explained by the "stimulus organism response theory", which formed the backdrop of this research. This theory holds that environmental attributes act as stimuli that influence a person's mental state, which in turn affects their behaviour. "In particular,"

say the authors, "environmental psychologists argue that positive behaviours derive from individuals' well-being and happiness through positive experiences". Accordingly, green indoor atmospherics are likely to foster positive responses and behaviours in hotel guests.

Green Atmospherics and Well-being

In modern society, the chance to connect with nature is usually joyfully welcomed, with intuitive links to mental well-being. In hotels, green atmospherics are conducive to a positive state of mind that results in a greater sense of well-being. Mental well-being is "a crucial concept for both patrons and workers", emphasise the authors. For instance, employees are more willing to work in places that promote their well-being. The authors hypothesised that green atmospherics in hotels enhance the mental well-being of both hotel guests and employees.

In turn, mental well-being is known to affect decision making and behaviour. Research has found that mental well-being significantly predicts hotel employees' green behaviour. "Mental well-being brings diverse outcomes that are beneficial to the company", say the authors. These outcomes can include an enhanced sense of belonging, loyalty and purchase/recommendation intentions and behaviours. Building on these findings, the researchers aimed to determine how mental well-being affects the behavioural intentions of hotel guests and employees.

Finally, the researchers considered the role of "place dependence", defined as a sense of deep connection with spaces that meet one's functional and emotional needs. "Travellers who feel comfortable and familiar with a place are likely to have strong place dependence or attachment and to revisit the place", explain the authors. Mental well-being has been found to determine place dependence, which can in turn affect customers' purchase intentions, loyalty, and other behaviours. To explore these connections in greater depth, the researchers investigated the influence of mental well-being on place dependence and how place dependence can in turn affect behavioural intentions in the context of green atmospherics in hotels.

Quizzing Guests and Employees

In an elegant two-phase experiment, the researchers explored the nuanced relationships between elements of green atmospherics and the well-being, place dependence and behavioural intentions of hotel employees and guests.

In Phase 1, focus group discussions with five hotel guests, five hotel employees and three hospitality management professors revealed seven important attributes of green indoor atmospherics, which were assigned to three major categories: green ambient conditions (air quality, scent, natural light), green items (e.g. living plants) and green spaces/areas (e.g. green rest areas).

Phase 2 was a field survey conducted at luxury hotels in South Korean cities. Over 10 days, 253 hotel guests with a mean age of 35 were recruited from different indoor spaces in their hotels to complete a questionnaire. Data from 247 employees, aged 32.5 on average, were also collected on site from the same luxury hotels. All of the participants completed a questionnaire that measured their mental well-being, place dependence and behavioural intentions.

Getting the Most from Green Atmospherics

A key novel contribution of this study lies in its categorisation of the attributes of green indoor atmospherics in luxury hotels into green ambient conditions, green items and green spaces/areas. The researchers found that these constructs influenced the formation of mental well-being, place dependence and behavioural intentions among hotel guests and hotel employees. Supporting stimulus organism response theory, this finding highlights "the role of green indoor atmospherics in inducing guests' and employees' mental well-being perception", say the researchers, "which leads to increased place dependence and behavioural intentions".

Mental well-being and place dependence not only directly triggered behavioural intentions but also indirectly influenced behavioural intentions by maximising the influence of green indoor atmospherics. Through targeted efforts to enhance mental well-being and place dependence, say the authors, hotels could optimise their use of green ambient conditions, green items and green spaces/areas. "This will fortify the effect of these concepts in building guest and employee intentions to remain with the hotel, say positive things about the hotel, and have loyalty to the hotel."

The power of green atmospherics to make guests feel healthy and happy, and the pivotal role of mental well-being, highlights a unique opportunity for hotels. "Offering mental well-being to hotel guests and hotel employees is a vital step for the increased intentions to remain with the hotel, say positive things about the hotel, and be loyal to the hotel", clarify the authors. Managers could diversify their efforts to enhance guests' and employees' well-being by, for example, improving social interactions for guests through leisure facility discounts and strengthening social relationships between colleagues through team building activities.

The final noteworthy finding is that of the three dimensions of green atmospherics, green ambient conditions most strongly influenced guests' well-being, whereas these three dimensions had more or less equal effects on the mental well-being of employees. "It is thus essential for luxury hotel proprietors to focus more on fortifying the ambient conditions within the hotel and its performance in order to attain a stronger level of mental well-being among their guests", note the researchers. Additionally, at a similar level of mental well-being, guests more actively built behavioural intentions than employees did.

Green Hotels and Beyond

This insightful study identifies mental well-being as a key driver of the influence of green atmospherics in hotels on behavioural intentions, particularly those of guests. The findings also indicate a clear need to tailor strategies for promoting green atmospherics to different groups. "To effectively enhance mental well-being and behavioural intentions", conclude the authors, "luxury hotel proprietors should develop and use tactics that are different for guests and for employees". The insights afforded by this study also have exciting implications for creating green atmospherics in other indoor service settings, such as restaurants and cruise ships.

Points to Note

- Hotels are increasingly incorporating "green atmospherics" into their indoor spaces to meet demand for sustainable hospitality.

- Different attributes of green indoor atmospherics can enhance the mental well-being, place dependence and behavioural intentions of hotel guests and employees.

- Green ambient conditions such as air quality, scent and natural light had the greatest positive impact on guests' mental well-being.

- Hotels should carefully tailor their use of green indoor elements to target groups (e.g. guests and customers).

Han, Heesup, Lee, Jin-Soo, and Koo, Bonhak (2021). Impact of Green Atmospherics on Guest and Employee Well-Being Response, Place Dependence, and Behavior in the Luxury Hotel Sector. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 29, Issue 10, pp. 1613-1634.

Welcome to the Touch-Free Hotel

Contactless technology is transforming hospitality in China and beyond. Research by Dr Fei Hao and Professor Kaye Chon of the SHTM shows that travellers have varying levels of readiness for contactless hotels. Hospitality firms are advised to be mindful of this variation when designing strategies to boost customer equity. For guests who are still sceptical about contactless technology, services that evoke delight may be the best way to retain their custom. Those with concerns around COVID-19 may be particularly reassured by positive experiences in a contactless hotel.

Boosting Customer Equity?

The pandemic has spurred a contactless trend that was already underway, with services like smartphone payment and Hong Kong's Octopus travel card firmly established. The hotel sector is introducing a suite of high-tech contactless systems to protect guests and workers against infection. As the researchers note, "hospitality firms around the world have widely adopted voice control (e.g., smart speaker TVs), motion sensing (e.g., touchless elevators), and mobile control (e.g., mobile check-in and check-out)." In mainland China, many hotels offer technologies once considered futuristic, such as robotic room services and facial recognition at check-in.

Although they are still far from universal, these features add to the hotel experience in several ways. Touch-free systems not only provided peace of mind during the pandemic but also improve the convenience and perhaps even sensory experience of a stay. Guests who feel safer and more comfortable feel more satisfied and are more likely to share their positive experiences via word-of-mouth. For hotels, these benefits directly increase "customer equity", which the researchers define as "the sum of the discounted stream of cash flows generated from a company's pool of customers."

However, from a business view, going contactless is not without risks. A hotel is a place that guests call home for days or even weeks. Are such visitors happy with a new mode of customer service that minimises touch? "Traditionally," say the researchers, "the hospitality industry is based on the warmth of 'human contact', and misgivings have thus been raised about the efficacy of contactless service". Customer equity may thus be damaged rather than increased by the contactless transformation, as guests who miss the traditional, tactile, personalised ways of hotel service may be on balance less satisfied with their stay, even if they appreciate the efforts to fight infection.

An Uncertain Investment

Contactless technology is expensive, especially when implemented at every step of a guest's stay. A pandemic is no time for hotels to take reckless risks; the decision to make such a costly investment can only be justified if it gives a healthy return. However, the return on investment (ROI) of contactless hospitality has been neglected in the tourism marketing literature. Also understudied is the relationship between contactless service and customer experience, which has a major influence on the key metric of customer equity. To fill these gaps, the researchers decided to "explore the ROI of contactless hospitality from the perspective of customer equity" – that is, to pay attention to the factors promoting and threatening customer equity in contactless hotels.

Hotel guests are a diverse slice of humanity; they cannot all be expected to all react in the same way to the contactless trend. The researchers identified technology readiness as a key personal characteristic that influences consumer experience of contactless service. A person's technology readiness is a persistent psychological disposition to feel a particular emotion – such as excitement, curiosity or unease – when interacting with new technology. Given its importance, the authors note that "the hospitality industry should integrate customers' technology readiness into service design and marketing programs".

In 2000, the Technology Readiness Index (TRI) was developed to gauge people's optimism, innovativeness, discomfort and insecurity around new technology and thus measure their willingness to embrace technological change. The authors remind us that contactless technology "requires customers to engage more with the technology-based service ecosystem". As people with higher technology readiness should be more comfortable in such an ecosystem, the researchers looked at whether TRI scores affected the relationship between customer experience and equity in contactless hotels.

Customer Survey on Contactless Systems

Customer equity has three key components: "value", "brand" and "relationship". The researchers surveyed around 1,500 mainland Chinese residents who had stayed in contactless hotels to test how their personal characteristics and experiences influenced their customer equity. Innovatively, the researchers singled out customer delight – a guest's unexpectedly high levels of joy and excitement – as an emotional reaction that may be just as decisive as a satisfaction rating when it comes to securing customer equity.

In addition to the survey on their contactless hotel experience, the participants took the TRI test to find out their level of technology readiness. Dividing the respondents into high and low TRI groups, the researchers hypothesised that technology readiness influences the relationship between customer experience, delight and equity. They also tested whether customer equity determined another crucial marketing outcome – brand trust. Did higher-equity customers place more trust in hotel brands, and was this affected by their level of concern around health issues in the pandemic?

What Matters to Guests in the Contactless Age

The survey results showed that, as predicted, both customer experience and customer delight were strongly associated with customer equity. This serves as a reminder for hotel managers in the pandemic era not to forget the basics – satisfying and pleasing guests – when installing contactless systems to protect customers and staff. Indeed, the researchers recommend that "managers should form an organizational culture that engenders customer equity by creating a more satisfactory and delightful experience". The findings confirmed the importance of customer equity not just for the financial bottom line but also for lasting customer relationships, as it was shown to greatly influence brand trust.

With particular relevance in the emerging post-pandemic era, the results also confirmed the role of health concerns. The trust-building effect of customer equity was strongest for contactless hotel guests who paid the most attention to COVID-19 issues. The hospitality and tourism industry face an uncertain future, and this finding underscores the need for hotels to ensure the happiness and safety of guests with health concerns as we adjust to the "new normal". As the researcher points out, "the current situation in China may present a future scenario for many parts of the world in the coming years".

What about guests' readiness for contactless systems? It turned out that delightful experiences had a particularly great positive effect on equity for the low TRI group – the very guests who were most sceptical about new technology. This suggests that it is crucial to offer surprise treats to those who might be wary of even staying in a contactless hotel. With today's technology, a whole menu of joyful surprises can be imagined. The researchers suggest a few themselves: "the moment customers enter their room, the smart room could have already set their favorite temperature, lighting, and even music".

Adjusting to a New Era

Hotels have responded to the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing contactless technology wherever possible. This has increased safety, but potentially at the cost of warmth in customer service. To retain guests, hotel managers need to think creatively about how to optimise their experience in a contactless era. Guests with the lowest technology readiness actually respond best to the unexpected delights that a contactless hotel can offer. Touch-free services are also a promising way to reassure those with strong concerns around infection.

Points to Note

- Hotels are going contactless in numerous ways to protect against pandemics, marking a break from traditional customer service.
- Customer experience is still crucial for customer equity in the contactless era.
- Guests who are wary of new technology respond particularly well to delightful experiences.
- Contactless services can reassure and satisfy hotel guests with pandemic-related fears.

Hao, Fei and Chon, Kaye (2021). Are You Ready for a Contactless Future? A Multi-group Analysis of Experience, Delight, Customer Equity, and Trust Based on the Technology Readiness Index 2.0. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 38, Issue 9, pp. 900-916.

Staycationers Behaving Badly

COVID-19 has changed how we holiday: out with crowding into airports to fly to distant resorts; in with staying close to home. Although this might seem an effective way to support local tourism while containing the virus, research by Mr Wai Ching Wilson Au, Dr Nelson K. F. Tsang and Dr Clare Fung of the SHTM reveals a downside of "staycationing". In Hong Kong, many holidaymakers confined to local hotels during the pandemic have begun to behave badly, taking a toll on staff's mental health. This timely study highlights the need for hotels to remove incentives for staycationers to cause trouble and create an environment that brings out the best in guests.

Holidaying Close to Home

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, staycationing was a growing trend. "Since the early 1900s," the authors note, "many Americans have taken short trips to enjoy summer vacations within their usual place of residence". Once ignored by tourism researchers, staycationing is now recognised as an important market segment. Framing a short-distance trip as a special kind of vacation can help people see familiar places in a new light. Moreover, in uncertain times, holidaying in your hometown is less vulnerable to disruption and more environmentally sustainable than travelling abroad.

As in the West, staycationing has surged in Hong Kong since 2020 because of pandemic-related restrictions on travel and leisure. However, the researchers warn of a dark side to the tourism industry's home-grown pandemic solution. Focusing on the Hong Kong hotel sector, they explored the interaction between the recent staycation boom and an old problem in hospitality: "jaycustomer" behaviour.

"The term 'jaycustomer' is a customer-specific form of 'jaywalker'", the researchers explain. It refers to customers who act antisocially in service settings such as hotels, bars, and airports, making life difficult for staff. Jaycustomer behaviour ranges from the boorish to the criminal, encompassing everything from breaking rules, rudeness to staff, and refusing to settle the bill to theft and even vandalism. Hotels are especially vulnerable to jaycustomer behaviour, say the researchers, because they are "characterised by a close but short-term service provider–customer relationship".

Problem Staycationers

Combine a jaycustomer and a staycationer and you get a toxic visitor whom the researchers dub a "jaystaycationer". While staying at hotels in their own cities, jaystaycationers abuse the hospitality of their hosts and cause physical and/or emotional damage. The SHTM team was inspired by a local example of disorderly guests in 2020. "One large group of staycationers held what was described as 'a wild birthday party' at the Peninsula Hong Kong," report the researchers, "with stains on every electric device in the room".

Jaycustomer issues have intensified during the pandemic, partly because travel restrictions have put businesses in a perilous position. Those who continue to patronise local establishments may feel like saviours, giving them the sense of a licence to misbehave. "With such strong perceived bargaining power in the marketplace," say the researchers, "individuals are less likely to comply with organisational regulations and social norms, which stimulates their jaycustomer behaviors". Recognising the harm that such hotel guests can cause to other customers, staff and business operations, the researchers set out to classify jaystaycationer problems and identify their causes and how staff react.

Hearing from Hotel Staff

The authors conducted individual telephone interviews with 10 staff members from four- and five-star hotels in Hong Kong. Had they experienced trouble with staycationers? Under COVID-19 restrictions, the city's luxury hotels have seen a surge in bookings from Hong Kongers unable or unwilling to travel abroad. However, whilst a foreign guest in normal times would spend most of their time roaming the city, pandemic staycationers are confined to their hotels almost 24/7. Had staff noticed anything unusually demanding about these guests, the researchers asked, and if so, what did they think of it?

Staff responses to guest behaviours are subjective and dependent on the individual. Hence, the authors were concerned with capturing both their interviewees' unique personal experiences and the broader context of social disruption in which these events occurred. Their approach needed to be objective and rooted in established theory. To meet these demands, they settled on constructivist grounded theory, a popular framework for obtaining qualitative insights in tourism studies. This approach enabled them to "highlight the existence of multiple realities and elicit the views of each participant's 'subjective world'".

Types of Jaystaycationer Behaviour

Analysis of the interviews revealed four types of jaystaycationer. "Attention seekers" and "benefit seekers" were defined by their underlying need to get something from hotel staff. Attention seekers attempted to meet intangible emotional needs by, for example, emphasising how virtuous it was for them to support local hotels despite the risk of catching COVID-19. Benefit seekers, taking things further, sought tangible rewards by exploiting hotels' weak position during the pandemic to demand free upgrades and special services. A similar distinction between tangible and intangible separated "rule breakers", who transgressed when the opportunity arose, e.g. by holding large parties, and "property abusers", who progressed to physically damaging property by, for example, cooking in their rooms and setting off the sprinkler system.

Predictably, the spread of COVID-19 was a recurring theme of the interviews. Hotel guests found ways to belittle staff through both under- and over-compliance with safety rules. One interviewee – a housekeeper at a five-star hotel – was made to fear for their safety by the carelessness of jaystaycationers around face masks: "Staycationers refused to follow our hotel's policies. They did not wear masks and argued with me without their masks on." In contrast, a front desk officer at another hotel felt dehumanised by the hygiene obsessions of guests checking in: "Jaystaycationers kept using disinfectant spray to clean everything on my desk, such as my pen. It's so disrespectful; I am not the virus."

The staff responded to these unpleasant guests in several ways, which the researchers categorised as practical and psychological. In practical terms, they could either stand up to the jaystaycationers or acquiesce, while their emotional reactions ranged from trying to thoughtfully understand their guests' positions to simply giving up hope or avoiding contact. These findings offer novel insights into the psychological effects of dealing with jaystaycationers. "Three emotional responses (i.e. sense of thoughtfulness, sense of powerlessness, and self-isolation)", the researchers report, "may bridge the relationship between jaycustomer behaviors and hotel workers' negative responses".

Finally, the interviews revealed two types of causes of jaystaycationer behaviour: personal and environmental. Jaystaycationers could be motivated by a triad of negative emotions: fear of COVID-19, arrogance and greed. Conflict could also arise from three environmental causes: the nature of staycationing (confinement in a hotel almost 24/7), the rules around infection safety (which were new to both guests and staff), and the ambiguity and complexity of the holiday packages offered to staycationers, which jaystaycationers tried to take advantage of.

This last point suggests a possible way to combat the problem. "Instead of just recording staycationers' dining credits internally," the researchers suggest, "hotel operators could consider making them transparent for staycationers to monitor on the hotel's website".

Dealing with Jaycustomers

Although irresponsible customers are nothing new, this is the first study to analyse the jaycustomer problem in the specific context of staycationing. The findings offer actionable insights for hotels into avoiding environmental triggers of jaystaycationer behaviour. By paying attention, for the first time, to the psychological as well as practical strategies that beleaguered staff use to cope with this problem, the study may also help hotel owners take better care of their employees during stressful periods such as pandemics. This preliminary study points the way to a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of a crucial emerging problem in hospitality.

Points to Note

- Staycationing is on the increase in the pandemic era, but not all hotels are fully prepared.

- When staycationers are confined to a hotel, personal and environmental triggers can lead to rudeness, rule breaking and property damage.

- Intangible "jaystaycationer" behaviours precede tangible ones and are the best target of preventive measures.

- Hotels should provide frontline staff with training in practical and emotional responses to jaystaycationers.

Au, Wai Ching Wilson, Tsang, Nelson K. F., and Fung, Clare (2021). Exploring Jaystaycationer Behaviors: Cause, Typology, and Hotel Workers' Responses. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 26, Issue 11, pp. 1207-1224.

Airline Industry in Crisis

Cancelled flights and complicated travel protocols have become all too common amidst the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, whose outbreak all but grounded the global airline industry. However, we still know little about how these new job stressors actually affect airline workers. Shedding light on this important issue, Professor Sam Kim of the SHTM and colleagues identified the major pandemic-related stressors that have emerged for airline workers and explored their effects on workers' mental health and job-related outcomes such as satisfaction, motivation and performance. The authors' findings offer invaluable practical guidance for alleviating the worrying knock-on effects of the pandemic on the well-being of airline employees and the growth of the airline industry as a whole.

New Stressors, New Stress

Irregular schedules, night shifts, physical exertion and time zone changes are part of life for airline workers. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, however, employees have faced a horde of fresh difficulties. With planes grounded across the world, mass redundancies and restructuring have profoundly increased job insecurity. Safety-related stressors such as sanitisation and mask wearing requirements, along with strict and time-consuming immigration procedures, hotel quarantine and fear of contracting the virus, are now also part of employees' new routine. "The new types of stressors resulting from the pandemic, as well as traditional stressors, will have many job-related consequences", warn the researchers.

More exposure to stressors means more job-related stress. Studies have found that such stress explains the high prevalence of physical and mental health problems in flight attendants and triggers emotional exhaustion, burnout, depersonalisation and depression in hotel employees. Protecting employees' mental health – which has been damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic – is not only a major public health issue but also critical to business success. Yet "studies that scrutinise the antecedents of mental health problems and their consequences in the hospitality and tourism industry are still limited", say the authors. Recognising this, they set out to pinpoint what the major new stressors are for airline workers and how and to what extent they impact mental health and job outcomes.

Knock-On Effects for Job Outcomes?

The effects of mental health on job outcomes – such as job satisfaction and job performance – in the hospitality and tourism industry are understudied. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research in other contexts has shown that an unhealthy working environment and work stress decrease job satisfaction. Poor mental health may also worsen job performance. This may in turn generate significant costs for employers, state the researchers, "such as increases in work-related injuries, reduced productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, and employee compensation claims". Mental health could also influence employees' perception of company image, which reflects workplace morale, pride and motivation. People with poor mental health also tend to have "a reduced responsiveness to others' needs", which creates obvious problems in the service sector.

The researchers also examined the possibility that job satisfaction in turn influences job performance, company images and prosocial behaviour. Job satisfaction has been found to enhance job performance in flight attendants, and to predict more positive perceptions of company image in airline employees. More generally, job satisfaction is thought to increase an individual's willingness to contribute to the community in the form of pro-social behaviours. But how has job satisfaction affected these work outcomes in airline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Also of interest was whether sociodemographic and job-related characteristics alter the relationships between job-related stress, mental health, and job outcomes. For example, during crises like the pandemic, "age may determine contract renewal, layoff, or fringe benefit provision", say the researchers.

Airline Employee Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was developed in several careful stages, the first being in-depth interviews with 15 airline employees to better glimpse working conditions before and during the crisis. Insights were used for subsequent creation of the questionnaire. Its 40 items assessed job stressors—including traditional and new stressors—job satisfaction, organisational commitment, perceived company image, job performance and pro-social behaviour. As a final preparatory step, the questionnaire was piloted with 100 Hong Kong airline employees to doublecheck its validity and reliability.

After tweaking, the questionnaire was distributed to 374 Hong Kong airline employees between 15 July and 30 December 2020. Over half of the participants were men (63%), and most were in their 20s or 30s. The vast majority worked for full-service carriers in Hong Kong. More than 75% worked in flight operation departments and 20.9% worked in ground operation departments. Almost half had worked in the airline industry for 10 years or more. With regard to their positions in the airline industry, 46% were at supervisory level, followed by entry-level (43.8%) and managerial level or above (10.2%). The questionnaire responses were analysed to examine the structural relationships between the variables.

Reducing Safety Concerns is Key

Passenger arrivals at Hong Kong International airport decreased by 98.5% between October 2019 and October 2020. This simple fact could account for the study's first finding – that traditional job-related stressors did not affect airline employees' mental health after the COVID-19 outbreak. "When airline employees can perform few of their normal duties, physical exhaustion, schedule conflicts and demanding workloads cannot affect mental health status", explain the authors. Nevertheless, the pandemic brought with it three significant new stressors: hygiene requirements, safety concerns, and job instability. Of these, safety concerns and job instability significantly impacted mental health.

The researchers found that more intense safety concerns were detrimental to mental health. As the researchers note, airline employees' mental health "is important to enable them to consistently provide high quality service to passengers". Therefore, overcoming safety concerns could be a decisive strategy. Airlines could follow the example set by Emirates Airline, which has distributed "hygiene kits", organised individual hotel rooms in outport destinations, and enforced a 14-day quarantine for its employees. More transparency about confirmed cases on specific flights and providing information about safety measures in risky destinations could also reduce concerns.

Quite unexpectedly, job instability was associated with better mental health. On the face of it, this is mystifying, at odds with pre-pandemic reports that job uncertainty worsens mental health. "Airline crew seemed to feel grateful to retain their jobs in an economic crisis", infer the authors. Cost-saving measures implemented by an airline could also signal its efforts to ride out hardship "together with its employees", thus generating positive mental health effects.

This important study shed light not only on the factors shaping mental health but also on its consequences: good mental health was found to enhance job satisfaction, job performance, perceived company image, and prosocial behaviours. Job satisfaction also improved job performance, perceived company image and prosocial behaviours. These findings underscore the potentially far-reaching benefits of fostering a healthy working environment and promoting employee satisfaction.

Airlines wishing to support their employees' mental health should also note that perceived stressors and their effects differ according to age, sex, job position, and working experience. "Mental health programmes are required to be differently applied according to employees' career or demographic characteristics", conclude the authors.

Creating Stable Working Conditions

Shedding new light on mental health in airline workers, this work suggests that airlines should eradicate safety concerns as much as possible. Surprisingly, job instability was found to improve workers' mental health. However, airlines and governments should by no means use this finding as an excuse to overlook the issue, not least because job instability and unemployment are serious problems in Hong Kong. "Cabin crew who have worked for their airline for a long time should be helped to upgrade their skills and know-how to dissipate job stressors during the present unstable business environment in the airline industry", conclude the researchers.

Points to Note

- For airline workers, mental health is sensitive to job stress and in turn influences job satisfaction and performance.

- Traditional job stressors have barely affected airline workers during the pandemic, with flights grounded, but safety and job instability concerns have risen.

- Airlines should proactively assuage workers' safety concerns by providing practical help and information transparency.

- Job instability concerns are positively associated with mental health in the airline industry, perhaps due to company solidarity.

Kim, Seongseop (Sam), Wong, Antony King Fung, Han, Heesup, and Yeung, Man Wah (Vanessa) (2022). How Does the COVID-19 Pandemic Influence Travel Industry Employees in Hong Kong? Structural Relationships Among Airline Crew's Job-Related Stressors, Mental Health and Other Consequences. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research,* Vol. 27, Issue 1, pp. 69-85.

Drone Food Delivery is Taking Off

Food delivery sales are expected to reach a remarkable US$365 billion worldwide by 2030. The growth of food delivery services has been accelerated by technological advances, including the emergence of drone technology. A major potential advantage of drone-based food delivery is that drones are eco-friendly, in line with calls to promote sustainability in the food service industry. To commercialise drone food delivery, companies first need to know who is most likely to use these services, and why. Rising to this challenge, Professor Jin-Soo Lee of the SHTM and colleagues investigated the influence of environmental responsibility and emotions on consumers' intention to use drone food delivery services. Their novel findings offer guidance for the design of drone delivery marketing strategies to target four major groups: green consumers, activists, advocates and recyclers.

Buying into Drone Delivery

As drone food delivery services have yet to be widely commercialised, strategies for marketing these services currently rely on what we already know about consumer preferences. For example, the business-to-business drone delivery company Manna emphasises zero carbon emissions, a well-established customer preference, as a selling point for its electrically powered drones. As well as reducing the time, effort and cost of food delivery (reportedly halving the unit cost of traditional food delivery services), drone food delivery is indeed eco-friendly. "Drones could play an initiating and central role in the advancement of sustainability in the context of food delivery services", say the authors. Focusing on sustainability may help companies to target consumers who are most likely to use drone food delivery services.

A potential predictor of whether a consumer will use an eco-friendly service is the degree to which they believe that their individual behaviour directly affects the environment, or their perceived control over environmental outcomes. This is known as the "internal environmental locus of control" (INELOC). Research has shown that people with higher levels of INELOC tend to exhibit more environmentally responsible behaviour, making INELOC a salient indicator of customers' pro-environmental behavioural intentions. However, this relationship is underexplored – especially for emerging eco-friendly technologies such as drones. "Understanding how INELOC is linked to customer responses in an eco-friendly manner in drone food delivery services is a worthy undertaking", say the researchers.

An Emotional Business

Emotions are a major driver of consumer behaviours. The intention to engage in eco-friendly behaviours, for instance, is shaped by one's emotional state. A key role is played by "anticipated emotions" – the emotions that we expect upcoming decisions to evoke. "People generally predict the emotional consequences of their future decisions prior to making decisions", say the authors. In general, they make decisions that are likely to make them feel good and avoid decisions that will make them feel bad.

We already know that anticipated emotions influence eco-friendly behaviours and behavioural intentions, such as consumer adoption of pro-environmental products, technology adoption and the intention to work with robots. However, the factors driving anticipated emotions remain unclear. The researchers explored the possibility that consumers' perceived control over environmental outcomes, captured by INELOC, shapes their positive anticipated emotions (such as delight, happiness and pride) and negative anticipated emotions (such as disappointment, guilt and discomfort).

To more thoroughly explore the relationship between anticipated emotions and decision making, the researchers also examined the influence of anticipated emotions on "intention to use", which is a strong predictor of actual behaviour in the context of sustainability and technology adoption. They built on previous research demonstrating "that anticipated regret affected customer adoption of innovative technology" and that positive and negative anticipated emotions affected consumers' behavioural intention regarding green hotels. The researchers hypothesised that anticipated emotions influence consumers' intention to use eco-friendly drone food delivery services.

A Comprehensive Consumer Survey

The researchers designed and administered an innovative survey to explore the relationships between INELOC, anticipated emotions and intention to use eco-friendly drone food delivery services. They collected survey data from 405 restaurant customers in South Korea who had used food delivery services within the last 6 months. Before completing the online survey, the participants read a short newspaper article explaining the environmental advantages of drone-based food delivery services compared with currently available services.

The survey was composed of three multiple-item scales. The first distinguished between four groups of consumers: green consumers, activists, advocates and recyclers. The second measured anticipated negative and positive emotions in relation to drone food delivery services. The third scale assessed intention to use drone food delivery services. The participants indicated the level of their agreement with each item on a sliding 7-point scale. After the survey had been completed, the authors conducted a series of rigorous statistical analyses to examine the relationships between the three constructs.

The Power of Feeling Good

As predicted, both positive and negative anticipated emotions shaped the participants' intention to use drone food delivery services. When the participants expected to experience positive emotions, such as excitement and delight, when using drone food delivery services, they expressed a greater intention to use these services. Anticipated negative emotions, in contrast, reduced their intention to use these services. The authors suggest that drone food service companies could capitalise on these insights by developing strategies to promote customers' positive anticipated emotions in relation to drone delivery, such as "acquiring certifications to formalise the environmental roles of drones in food delivery services".

The effects of anticipated emotions on intention to use drone delivery services were also influenced by the INELOC profile of the participants. Among the participants classified as green consumers, the prospect of using drone-based food delivery services increased positive anticipated emotions and decreased negative anticipated emotions. "Using an eco-friendly delivery method, namely drone food delivery services, should be the norm among green consumers", say the researchers. This offers important insights for marketers. For instance, mobile applications could be designed with a default drone delivery option, with additional charges for using less eco-friendly delivery modes.

The same influence of anticipated emotions on intention to use was found for advocates. To cater to advocates' desire to inspire environmentally responsible behaviours in others, practitioners could implement "a reward program for advocates who post influential stories or videos on their social networking sites", propose the researchers.

Activist consumers reported only anticipated positive emotions regarding drone food delivery services; they did not anticipate experiencing negative emotions. This could be because activists are committed to influencing people at large, making them "insensitive to the direct negative consequences of relatively small actions", speculate the authors. Organising campaigns likely to appeal to activists, such as raising awareness of the environmental advantages of drones as a food delivery service, could be an effective way to increase activists' intention to use such services.

Similarly, recyclers reported only anticipated positive emotions regarding the use of drone food delivery services, perhaps because such services are not directly linked to recycling behaviours. Nonetheless, drone delivery companies could try to maximise recyclers' anticipated positive emotions regarding and thus intention to use drone services by informing them that their "routine participation in drone food delivery services is part of the effort to protect the environment", suggest the authors.

Tailor-made Marketing

Food delivery services have already changed the landscape of food consumption, and drones may represent the future of food delivery, especially given their potential to reduce CO_2 emissions and ultimately alleviate global warming. Based on rigorous theoretical and empirical analysis, this forward-thinking study provides nuanced insights for drone delivery companies into creating strategies to engage consumers with different environment-related beliefs and values, especially by fostering their anticipated positive emotions. "Food service companies should understand the different propensities of consumers", say the authors, "and establish differentiated marketing strategies depending on various segments". These findings will help researchers and practitioners to take the next step towards a greener future through the widespread commercialisation of drone food delivery services.

Points to Note

- Drones are emerging as an eco-friendly logistics option for the growing food delivery market.

- Commercialising drone food delivery will depend on reaching consumers who believe that their choices make a difference.

- Environmentally aware consumers and advocates are influenced by both positive and negative anticipated emotions associated with drone food delivery use.

- Segmented marketing strategies are needed to encourage different categories of consumer to use drone food delivery services.

Hwang, Jinsoo, Lee, Jin-Soo, Kim, Jinkyung Jenny, and Sial, Muhammad Safdar (2021). Application of Internal Environmental Locus of Control to the Context of Eco-Friendly Drone Food Delivery Services. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 29, Issue 7, pp. 1098-1116.

Saving the Planet, One Hotel at a Time

Despite the urgent need to reduce global carbon emissions, the hotel industry faces numerous barriers to implementing carbon reduction programmes. Why is it so difficult for hotels to reduce their carbon footprint, and why do so many hotel managers remain bystanders in the fight against global warming? To help answer these questions, the SHTM's Dr Eric Chan conducted in-depth interviews with senior hotel executives in Hong Kong. The findings provide novel insights into barriers to carbon reduction by hotels and – perhaps most importantly – strategies to overcome them.

A Global Problem

Every industry worldwide needs to contribute to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to build a more sustainable planet. Tourism is responsible for around 8% of global GHG emissions, and hotels play a big part in this problem, notes Dr Chan. Every day, they consume "large amounts of energy, water and non-recyclable products" to provide high-quality services for hotel guests "around the clock".

There are many types of GHGs, but carbon dioxide emissions are "the main factor leading to global warming", explains the author. Although hotels are making efforts to reduce their carbon emissions, progress so far has been limited. Most hotels aiming to shrink their carbon footprint focus on reducing the energy consumed by heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. However, this may not be enough. Dr Chan points out that carbon reduction should also target other hotel services, such as laundry services, production processes and transport, which are rarely considered.

"Not many hotels emphasise comprehensive carbon footprint reduction in their environmental programmes", adds Dr Chan. Given the sheer variety of hotel services and amenities, assessing carbon emissions in the hotel context can be a lengthy process. Hotel managers may be reluctant to introduce such initiatives because of a lack of environmental knowledge or the need to involve multiple stakeholders. "Anecdotal evidence indicates that hotel managers have begun to discuss their carbon footprint", says the researcher, "but very few know how to implement a comprehensive programme that optimises reduction".

Clearly, as Dr Chan notes, "many hotels are still standing at the crossroads" in terms of carbon footprint reduction. Yet few studies have attempted to "investigate what prevents hotels from implementing various carbon footprint reduction programmes". Without such knowledge, there is little chance of persuading hotels to join other sectors in the fight to reduce carbon emissions.

Hotel Managers' Perspective

To help fill this gap in the literature, Dr Chan conducted a qualitative study to find out exactly "what prevents hotel managers from focusing on carbon footprint reduction in the hotel context". He interviewed 22 hotel managers, executives and other experienced employees who were "highly involved in hotel environmental policy planning and implementation". The majority of the respondents worked in four- or five-star hotels in Hong Kong, ranging from independent hotels to local and international chains.

The interviews were designed to get a better understanding of the hotel managers' personal views and perceptions of the barriers that prevented them from implementing reduction programmes and to identify "possible remedial actions". Drawing on the literature, the researcher rigorously coded and analysed the interview transcripts. He identified seven main barriers – four industry barriers and three organisational barriers – to implementing a comprehensive carbon footprint reduction programme.

Industry Barriers

The difficulty of measuring a hotel's carbon footprint was mentioned by "almost all" of the informants, reports Dr Chan. This problem is certainly not unique to the hotel industry. Many organisations struggle to reduce emissions due to the "absence of relevant systems and standardised approaches to carbon auditing". However, there are so many items and areas to consider in a hotel's operations that "many hotels do not know how and where to start".

It is clear that a formal method of measuring hotels' carbon footprints needs to be developed to enable hotels to "track the GHG emissions and carbon footprint of different operations and service delivery processes". Dr Chan suggests that industry representatives such as the Hong Kong Hotels Association could help to set up "carbon footprint certificates" and lead the development of methods to "quantify carbon footprint inputs and outputs".

Another important industry barrier was the lack of a strong mediator in the hotel industry to "help drive and promote carbon footprint reduction". This barrier could be reduced by identifying a strong mediator, such as an association of hotel owners, to promote carbon reduction and provide appropriate training.

Changes to hotel amenities and services to reduce carbon emissions may affect guests' hotel experiences. Therefore, balancing the interests of different stakeholders is also important for the successful implementation of a reduction programme. "Hotel managers need to promote the advantages of reducing the carbon footprint to their target stakeholders", says Dr Chan, "perhaps by developing a green hotel marketing programme". It is important to communicate "reliable and user-friendly" information on the benefits of carbon reduction to encourage both internal and external stakeholders to participate in the implementation process.

The hotel managers interviewed generally agreed that a carbon reduction programme represents a risky investment because it is unlikely to lead to cost savings. Hotel managers must consider the return on investment for the business, which can make them reluctant to invest in a programme with no immediate return. Given the costs of retrofitting existing hotels, Dr Chan proposes that more effort should be put into designing "green hotels" with all of the "necessary facilities and technologies" from the outset.

Organisational Barriers

Some informants identified a lack of understanding about carbon emissions and carbon reduction as a significant organisational barrier to implementing reduction programmes. One informant noted, "If the concept was simplified and more people learnt about it, I think it would then be widely applied". According to Dr Chan, more education may be needed to help industry professionals understand the various ways they can reduce their carbon footprint. One informant suggested that international hotel brands could take the lead by developing a "model and carbon footprint manual or audit". Hotels associations should also be encouraged to "organise more relevant activities" such as workshops and sharing activities.

The lack of initiative from hotel owners due to the extra resources and investment needed to implement a reduction programme represents a further barrier. Although guests might appreciate such a programme, it is unlikely to be their main concern, so investing in new equipment and technology is not seen as a priority. The informants also expressed the view that more government support is needed to help owners implement new initiatives.

The third organisational barrier to be identified through the interviews was the lack of stakeholder coordination and support, which is necessary for the implementation of carbon reduction programmes involving "many different areas, items and delivery processes". Dr Chan suggests that managers need to consider the characteristics of external stakeholders such as suppliers and hotel guests to develop engagement programmes. They should also consider promoting shared responsibility for carbon reduction among hotel staff. Furthermore, notes Dr Chan, senior executives "could demonstrate their commitment by actively participating in the programme to model the behaviour required and influence their subordinates".

A Step towards Sustainability

Reducing the hotel industry's carbon footprint is no easy task: the issues are complex and numerous barriers need to be overcome. Nevertheless, Dr Chan's study is an important step towards understanding the specific challenges facing hotels and identifying ways to overcome them. The recommendations of the study will hopefully encourage hotel executives to consider how they can develop and implement more comprehensive carbon footprint reduction programmes by "improving their understanding of the main barriers and possible strategies to reduce them".

Points to Note

- The hotel sector needs to make more effort to reduce its carbon footprint.
- To do so, the industry must overcome numerous challenges at both the industry and organisational levels.
- Internal and external stakeholders need to be engaged to support and implement carbon reduction programmes.
- Hotel managers and staff need more education about how to assess and reduce hotels' carbon footprint.

Chan, Eric, S.W. (2021). Why Do Hotels Find Reducing their Carbon Footprint Difficult? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management,* Vol. 33 No. 5, pp. 1646-1667.

Building an Older, Wiser Workforce

Sad to say, hotel managers – unwittingly or not – often hold negative perceptions of older workers. People older than 50 make up less than a fifth of all hotel employees. Where does this apparent aversion to employing older people come from? As a vital first step in addressing the low employment rate of older people in this sector, the SHTM's BSc graduate Sau Yin Cheung and Assistant Professor Linda Woo explored age stereotypes and job suitability assessments among hotel managers in Hong Kong. As well as putting age-related discrimination under the microscope, this pivotal advance towards age-inclusive recruitment could help to offset the negative economic impact of Hong Kong's rapidly aging population.

Age Stereotypes in Hotel Firms

The number of hotels that employ an older workforce is decidedly small, with only 3.1% recruiting people aged 65 years or over. However, "promoting the employment of older workers is an important way to reduce the negative economic impact of population aging and labour shortage problems of hotels", say the researchers. If the industry is to increase these shockingly low figures, barriers to the employment of older people must first be identified.

One possibility is that some hotel managers hold negative perceptions of older workers and so prefer to hire younger people. A common "age stereotype" paints older workers as having poorer "hard" skills, such as physical and mental competence and willingness to adapt to technological changes.

That said, age stereotypes can also be positive. For example, older employees are often considered to outperform younger workers in terms of "soft" qualities, say the authors, "such as reliability, commitment to the organization, social and customer-oriented skills, accuracy, and emotional stability".

Given the mixed bag of positive and negative age stereotypes, managers' perceptions alone seem not to be able to fully explain the low employment rate of older workers. Drawing on existing models of decision making, the researchers attempted to delineate how age stereotypes are used by managers to staff their hotels.

Age and Job Suitability

In an ideal world, a candidate is suitable for a job when their experience matches the job requirements. Inevitably, however, job suitability assessments are also swayed by subjective perceptions of a candidate, including age stereotypes. "For instance, older applicants may be considered unsuited to the position of front desk agent", explain the authors, "because this position is usually held by young people". In other cases, "managers may expect older workers to be unable to meet the requirements of physically demanding jobs," say the authors, "on the grounds that their physical condition is generally weaker."

However, managers' perceptions of older workers' unsuitability for front-of-house positions and assigning older workers to physically challenging roles such as housekeeping are not well understood. To complicate matters further, the researchers tell us, "managers have been found to give socially desirable responses". This may lead to inaccurate findings.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with hotel managers in Hong Kong to explore how age stereotypes might affect job suitability assessments in the hospitality industry and how to achieve a more age-inclusive industry.

In-Depth Interviews with Hotel Managers

In face-to-face interviews conducted from February to August 2018, the researchers quizzed hotel managers about their perceptions of older workers and how age impacted their job suitability assessments. The managers worked at 20 hotels in Hong Kong, where the hotel industry faces serious labour shortages. They were aged between 28 and 75 and had at least three years' experience of managing 3- to 5-star independent or chain hotels. By including such a diverse profile of managers, the researchers were able to gain insights across experience levels, ages, and working environments.

During the semi-structured interviews, which each lasted for 30 to 60 minutes, the managers responded to five questions about their perceptions of employees aged over 50. The first three questions prompted managers to share their positive and negative perceptions of older workers. The final two questions encouraged the managers to express views about job suitability, such as which jobs they considered to be more appropriate for older candidates, and why. Transcripts of the interviews were examined in detail and content analysis was applied to unearth core themes and shared opinions.

A Fairer Deal for Older Workers

The managers described both positive and negative stereotypes of older employees. On the positive side, older workers were believed to have a lower turnover rate and better work attitudes. The managers also valued the savings made in training costs from employing older workers. Unfortunately, the hotel industry tends to be less invested in developing the skills of older workers, who are unfairly thought of as less "trainable". To address some of these issues, the researchers recommend that employees of all ages be given access to on-the-job training, which "should be designed to facilitate cooperation between younger and older employees".

The managers also reported skewed negative perceptions of older workers, whom they believed to have more health problems, longer recovery times, and higher insurance and medical costs. In fact, such age-related differences in health insurance costs are negligible for hotels. They may even be offset by the savings brought by the lower turnover rate of older workers. "This stereotype may deter managers from employing a greater proportion of older workers in the future", warn the authors.

Job suitability assessments were commonly influenced by the perceived appropriate age for a job. The roles of laundry attendant, kitchen porter, and security guard were considered best suited to older workers. In the hotel sector, a large proportion of back-of-house roles are already held by those aged over 50. Some of the managers claimed that older employees feel more comfortable with and communicate better with colleagues of a similar age. However, as stressed by the researchers, opportunities for older workers should not be limited in this way; they should be fairly considered for "every position, including guest contact positions, if their qualifications match the job requirements".

Many of the interviewees regarded older workers as better suited to low-skilled jobs and younger workers as better suited to highly skilled and front-of-house jobs. They severely underestimated the competence and experience of older workers. Indeed, although older workers were perceived as having strong customer service skills, resulting from their rich experience, managers rarely regarded them as suitable for front desk positions, potentially due to their "less youthful physical appearance".

This reveals a need for much more fairness in the recruitment process. "Hotel managers should reduce their age stereotyping and focus more on a person's abilities, knowledge, and previous work experiences when making hiring decisions", recommend the researchers.

Towards a More Inclusive Industry

Facing the economic burden of population ageing, it is becoming increasingly important for Hong Kong and other ageing societies to boost the employment rate of older people. The hospitality industry is no exception. Employing older workers would not only reduce turnover but also help hotels to respond to the needs of senior customers, a rapidly growing market segment. To offset managers' skewed perceptions and suitability judgments, diversity training programmes should be provided for all employees. "This would increase employees' understanding of and improve their attitudes toward age diversity," the researchers conclude.

Points to Note

- People aged over 50 make up a very small proportion of hotel employees.
- Hotel managers report negative stereotypes of older people that damage their appraisal of the job suitability of older applicants.
- Employing older workers would reduce turnover and help hotels meet the needs of senior guests, a rapidly growing segment.
- Hotels should focus on eliminating age stereotyping in the application process and provide diversity training for all employees.

Cheung, Sau Yin and Woo, Linda (2021). Age Stereotypes and the Job Suitability of Older Workers from Hotel Managers' Perspectives. *International Journal of Hospitality Management,* Vol. 92, 102932.

The Healing Power of Trust

In today's globalised world, more and more hotel firms are expanding their business overseas. Yet success in the international arena may not translate into success at home, warn the SHTM's Dr Alice H. Y. Hon and Mr Emmanuel Gamor. With skilled managers from overseas paid 10 times more than local employees, frontline and service-oriented hotel workers are feeling increasingly disillusioned. With service standards falling, how can multinational hotel corporations build harmony between their local and overseas employees? The answer lies in trust, say the researchers, whose study offers timely and important insights for the Chinese hospitality industry.

A Widening Pay Gap

The last four decades of globalisation have seen radical changes in the organisational management and human resource composition of hotel firms in China. To compete in the international service market, firms are increasingly filling key strategic positions with skilled workers from abroad. "In the modern hospitality industry, multinational hotel corporations rely on expatriate managers to succeed", say the researchers.

To attract, motivate and retain these valuable employees from overseas, it is standard practice to set their wages to the market conditions in their home country. Their salaries can be an astounding 10 times higher than those of local workers, whose pay is calculated according to local labour market conditions. Unsurprisingly, note the authors, this can lead to "perceived injustice among employees," especially given that compensation goes beyond money—it can represent an employee's worth, status and power.

The problem of disgruntled local employees is not trivial, and multinational hospitality corporations should not underestimate the extent to which this might threaten their own survival. Local employees who resent their expatriate superiors and the organisation are less satisfied, motivated and committed. They may engage in "deviant behaviours, service sabotage, or antisocial behaviours affecting service quality", report the researchers. Faced with this problem, multinational hotel companies must find ways to mitigate the negative effects of the compensation gap on local employees' work-related outcomes.

The Importance of Trust

In multicultural environments with a vast chasm in pay grades between local and overseas employees, it can be challenging to develop and maintain local employees' trust in their expatriate superiors – and even in the organisation as a whole. Companies must satisfy the salary expectations of highly skilled expatriate managers while addressing any potential bitterness felt by local employees. Successfully fostering trust can reduce the negative outcomes associated with a sense of inequity. High levels of trust "can positively influence several work outcomes, such as job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, and productiveness", say the authors.

Referring to well-established theories of the different forms of trust, the researchers surmised that trust in expatriate supervisors and the organisation can be knowledge-driven or emotion-driven. Knowledge-driven "cognitive trust" is based on a track record of competence, reliability and fair treatment, and might allow local employees to see beyond the pay gap. The researchers reasoned that instilling cognitive trust "gives the impression that expatriate managers have the competency, key knowledge, and ability to work at a high level, and so it is right that they receive more compensation than local employees".

Emotion-driven "affective trust" is born from an interpersonal connectedness, through which local employees feel cared for by their expatriate managers. Affective trust in expatriate managers can be formed via friendly interactions and expressions of personal concern in local employees' well-being, which "weakens uncertainty and increases psychological safety among employees", explain the authors. Recognising the potential for these two dimensions of trust to curtail the negative effects resulting from compensation gaps, the researchers set out to define their influence on various work-related outcomes.

Hotel Employees Quizzed

To capture real-world experiences and attitudes, the authors approached team members of multinational hotel corporations in Xian, China. They included 286 front-line or low-level local employees and 32 of their expatriate supervisors, who were middle- or upper-level managers. Most of the local employees interviewed had been supervised by an expatriate manager for 1 to 5 years. The expatriate supervisors were primarily from Hong Kong or Taiwan, Europe, and North America, and 68.1% of them had lived in China for at least 6 years.

The local employees completed a comprehensive questionnaire that measured their perceptions of the compensation gap between local and expatriate employees, as well as their cognitive and affective trust in their expatriate superiors, their satisfaction with their expatriate supervisors, general work satisfaction, and commitment to their organisation.

As well as collecting these valuable data from local employees, the authors asked the expatriate supervisors to give scores for the local employees' altruism, by reporting their willingness to offer help in the workplace. A sample item was "This individual is inclined to help me find solutions to work-related problems".

The next step was to conduct a thorough statistical analysis of the interview data to measure the precise connections between compensation, work attitudes and trust among local and expatriate employees.

Promoting a Sense of Fairness

As expected, when the local employees perceived the compensation gap to be larger, they were more dissatisfied with their expatriate supervisors and less willing to help them. They were also less satisfied with their jobs and – most strikingly – less committed to their organisations. This, report the researchers, confirms the previous finding that "the compensation gap is one of the main contributors to counterproductive work outcomes among employees in the hospitality industry". Interestingly, however, local employees' resentment was mostly directed towards the organisation, rather than towards their expatriate managers.

"This may cause local employees to leave organizations with a greater perceived unjust compensation gap", warn the authors, "contributing to high labour turnover in the hospitality industry". This finding underlines the urgent need for multinational hospitality corporations to generate a sense of fairness that counteracts the negative effects of substantial pay gaps. One possibility is the introduction of non-financial perks for local employees, such as additional training and insurance.

The researchers also found that stronger cognitive trust weakened the negative effect of a wide compensation gap on the local employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Clearly, multinational hotel corporations need to develop strategies to boost local employees' faith in the abilities of expatriate managers. "Management must ensure that expatriates maintain high levels of competence, reliability, skills, professionalism, and honesty", say the authors, "by enforcing checks and balances through staff feedback and evaluation".

Affective trust also moderated the negative effects of a compensation gap. Local employees who felt more cared for by their expatriate managers reported greater satisfaction and showed more altruistic behaviour. "The management of multinational hotel corporations should encourage expatriates to show a genuinely welcoming, kind, and caring attitude towards the local employees they supervise", suggest the researchers. "Expatriates should remind subordinates of their roles, celebrate their achievements, and show how much they care about them". This will help to foster affective trust and mitigate local employees' sense of injustice.

Lessons for Chinese Multinationals

In the modern hospitality industry, multinational hotel firms rely on expatriate managers to succeed. The findings of this novel study offer profound insights for Chinese hotel firms operating overseas, which must find effective ways to legitimise the pay gap between local workers and their expatriate superiors. This could come in the form of trust-building policies, especially those that capitalise on the distinct effects of cognitive and affective trust. Strategies for instilling cognitive trust can enhance task-related work outcomes, while promoting affective trust can improve personal work outcomes. "Trust should be considered carefully in strategic planning and academic inquiry," conclude the researchers. This will become ever more important as China's hospitality firms continue to expand overseas.

Points to Note

- Multinational hotel firms rely on expatriate managers to thrive, but managers from overseas tend to have poor relationships with their local subordinates.

- Highly skilled expatriate managers usually earn much more than local frontline workers, creating resentment and reducing service quality.

- Hotels should seek to legitimise the compensation gap by building local employees' trust in their expatriate supervisors and organisations.

- Promoting cognitive trust can improve task-related work outcomes; promoting affective trust can improve personal work outcomes.

Hon, Alice H.Y. and Gamor, Emmanuel (2021). When My Pay is Lower than My Expatriate Colleagues: Where Do the Hospitality Managers Go from Here? *International Journal of Hospitality Management,* Vol. 95, 102953.

The Next Frontier in Hotel Service

Self-service technologies (SSTs) have simplified many aspects of everyday life. However, their relatively recent introduction means that the pros and cons of SST adoption in the hotel industry are still being explored. The potential advantages of SSTs notwithstanding, hotels in China seem to have some reservations, say the SHTM's Professor Kam Hung and her co-researcher. Without a clear understanding of how preferences for SSTs over human staff are formed, hoteliers are perhaps right to be wary. Moving beyond previous work, this ambitious study integrates individual-level and organisational-level data on the construction of SST preferences. The researchers' comprehensive findings offer a starting point for hoteliers wishing to effectively introduce SSTs.

Self-service Technologies

SSTs allow customers to enjoy services completely free of interaction with service providers. They are "high-tech and 'low-touch' interfaces", explain the researchers, "in contrast with traditional interpersonal encounters, which are generally high-touch and low-tech". Self-check-in systems, robots, smart speakers and self-ordering gadgets are becoming increasingly common in hotels. Some are even testing AI-based SSTs such as facial recognition check-in kiosks. In China (and beyond), the pandemic has undoubtedly also accelerated hotels' SST adoption in attempts to limit customer–employee contact. "As of October 2020, more than 3000 hotels in China were equipped with robots from Yunji Technology, a service robot provider", report the authors.

SST interfaces allow hoteliers to provide services in the physical absence of service employees, with the clear benefits of reducing operating costs and increasing profits. Whilst some have predicted a continuing boom in these technological trends, SST adoption in hotels has remained surprisingly low, perhaps because it all but eliminates customer–employee interaction. "As a people-oriented service industry, hotels face difficult decisions regarding whether to introduce SSTs," say the researchers. For hotels to make more informed decisions, it is crucial to discover what influences SST preferences. This new knowledge could in turn help ease the technological transition to SSTs for both hoteliers and guests.

Most research on SST adoption has focused on the individual-level factors that underpin technology acceptance, such as a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. However, this completely overlooks the possible consequences of external or managerial actions. "Most technology adoption situations involve phenomena at multiple levels, including individuals, organisations, industries, and societies", stress the authors. Yet theories based on individual-level data have often been applied to organisational contexts. To tackle this problem, the researchers built a hierarchical framework to better reflect the multi-level situation of SST adoption and bridge the micro–macro divide.

Hoteliers and Guests

The researchers conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 hoteliers who had implemented innovative SSTs in their hotels and 29 customers who had used hotel SSTs. The SSTs discussed included robots, check-in and check-out kiosks, mobile tablets, and smartphones. The majority of the 59 face-to-face interviews were conducted in Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Hong Kong. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, allowing the researchers to conduct a thorough content analysis to identify and categorise major themes contained within the interviews.

The four major themes that influenced customers' and hoteliers' SST preferences were environmental factors, the organisational context, service task attributes, and customer experiences. Environmental factors included public familiarity with SSTs, government regulations, and concerns about environmental protection. The organisational context included the relationships between hotels, technology companies, and other hotel stakeholders. The theme of service task attributes reflected how customers co-produced services with the service channel, be that SSTs or service employees. Finally, customer experiences during service encounters included aesthetic, affective, cognitive, actional, and social experiences.

Self-service Preferences

As an initial finding, the interviews revealed that for both hoteliers and guests, the preference for SSTs was swayed by the belief that SSTs are environmentally friendly. However, another environmental factor posed a problem for hoteliers. "The Chinese government mandates that hotels upload guests' identifying information in real time", the researchers explain, "making self-check-in impossible without government approval". Both the hoteliers and the customers were sceptical about introducing technologies to the service industry. "Many commented that hotel service is a human-oriented business", say the researchers. "The use of emotionless technologies may result in indifference".

Within the theme of organisational context, both hoteliers and customers spoke of the economic benefits of SSTs for hotels, such as decreased workload and enhanced efficiency. They considered SSTs to be better suited to new, business-focused and non-luxury hotels with more rooms, especially in the case of check-in and check-out kiosks. "Moreover, SSTs were seen as conducive to brand marketing," report the researchers. For example, both hoteliers and customers agreed that innovative SSTs such as robots can be a selling point to attract guests.

Concerning service task attributes, both hoteliers and customers criticised SSTs for their lack of customisation and personalisation. Both groups also noted instances in which SSTs fell short of human-delivered services, largely owing to the lack of any two-way communication. That said, both groups regarded SSTs as reliable, punctual, available 24/7, and less likely to make mistakes than service employees. "Hoteliers stated that SSTs do not need rest, cannot fall ill, and cannot resign; rather, they are always on call, enabling hotel guests to receive service at any time", add the researchers.

Within the theme of customer experiences, the preferences of both hoteliers and customers were influenced by whether the SST experience was superior to that of human services. Customers' preferences were also guided by the device's appearance and voice, its usefulness, convenience, and cleanliness, as well as its ability to evoke pleasure, surprise, and relaxation. Respect, trust, safety, and privacy were also major contributors to SST preferences in both groups, although customers' opinions on these were more divergent. "In some cases, they felt relieved and safer when tackling problems on their own rather than depending on service employees", the researchers explain. "Others, however, worried about their personal safety or the privacy of their information".

Insights For Hotels

In pinpointing differences between customers and hoteliers, the researchers were able to provide critical observations that might be instrumental for efficient SST introduction. In some cases, hoteliers placed importance on factors not even mentioned by customers. Moreover, hoteliers paid more attention to environmental and organisational factors, such as incompatibility with existing features and technology company contributions. Guests tended to focus on customer differences and the importance of consistency far more than hoteliers did. Hoteliers wishing to deliver desirable consumer experiences should pay more attention to guests' opinions, the authors conclude.

Armed with this formidable body of data, the researchers then developed a hierarchical framework that integrated both individual- and organisational-level variables to explain the development of SST preference. This framework reflected the interplay between the external environment, the organisational context, internal service encounters, and core customer experiences in the development of preferences for SSTs over human staff.

"The findings can help hotel practitioners make more rational SST adoption decisions", conclude the authors, such as collaborating with technology companies, involving other hotel stakeholders in SST promotion, thoroughly testing SSTs before procuring them, and giving consideration to the time needed to introduce SSTs.

Future Customer Acceptance

This innovative study could support the introduction and implementation of SSTs in the hospitality industry in China. Its findings call for hoteliers to promote SST features that are desirable and important to their guests. The novel framework presented by the authors provides a springboard for hotel managers to better market SST-infused hospitality services and promote customer acceptance. Certainly, if service management can successfully consider customers' SST-based experiences, this will "contribute to organisational profitability and success in a competitive marketplace", note the authors. Beyond that, the proposed hierarchical framework is the first attempt to explain the multi-level determinants of technology adoption, and could potentially be adapted to specific innovations and individual or organisational situations.

Points to Note

- The adoption of self-service technologies (SSTs) by hotels is surprisingly low.

- Individual, organisational and social factors affect the preferences of hoteliers and hotel customers regarding SSTs in hotels.

- Hoteliers should consider guests' experiences and preferences more fully when implementing SSTs.

- To capitalise on SST adoption, hoteliers could also collaborate with technology companies and thoroughly test SSTs before procuring them.

Liu, Chun and Hung, Kam (2021). A Multilevel Study on Preferences for Self-service Technology versus Human Staff: Insights from Hotels in China. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 94, 102870.

Acknowledgement