

PhD research proposal – CHME 2018

Problem statement/definition

The research aims to explore how hotel employees practice EI during interactions with customers and colleagues in Vietnam. It is driven by three main issues. First, studies on EI are heavily Western Centric because of the selection of sample and place of the research. A majority of them are conducted in the USA (Cichy et al. 2007; Lee and Ok 2012), Australia (Whitelaw and Morda 2003; Prentice and King 2011) or the UK (Lindebaum and Cassell 2012). Cultural differences between the East and the West have been empirically proven to impact emotion experience and display (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Eid and Diener 2001). To be specific, individual achievement and feelings are valued in Western countries whereas the interdependence of the self and community is more valued in Eastern countries (Scott-Halsell et al. 2013). This distinction will to some extent determine individual's thinking and action of each culture. In order to make suggestions for training programmes for hotel staff, this distinction should lie at the heart of the research for adequate consideration.

Second, Vietnam is experiencing rapid growth in tourism and hospitality which is proven by the substantial economic benefits it has brought to the country in terms of direct contribution to FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and the number of jobs generated. As a result of the open-door policy in 1986, travel and tourism industry in Vietnam has achieved a significant growth which is partly proved by the dramatic proliferation of FDI from USD 7.4 million (2% of total FDI) in 1988 to USD 1.9 billion (30.7% of total FDI) in 1995, boosting approximately 100% year-on-year (Suntikul et al. 2010). This change reveals the increase in investors' confidence in the development of the sector in Vietnam. Also, tourism industry has gained its importance in the national economy with its stable contribution to GDP of approximately 5.5% during 2006-2010 (UNWTO 2012). It is anticipated to go up to 6.5-7% in 2020 (ibid.). Accordingly, in 2013, travel and tourism sector generated 1,899,000 direct jobs and totally 4,071,500 jobs which include direct, indirect and induced jobs, constituting for 3.7% and 7.9% of total employment respectively. Both of these figures are expected to grow to 3.9% and 8.0% in 2014 (WTTC 2014). Nevertheless, no research has been done regarding EI and hospitality sector in Vietnam. It is of great importance that more studies be conducted in this potential tourist destination to improve the resources and meet the needs of tourism development.

Last but not least, the intense debate surrounding EI is whether it is based on ability or personality or both and which measure is best suited for it (Smollan and Parry 2011). The literature on EI lacks a contextual understanding of EI because much research is about the importance of EI in organisational behaviour rather than understanding it by answering the questions of 'when', 'why' and 'how' EI is used in the workplace. Therefore, empirical qualitative research on EI has provided confusing findings and outnumbered qualitative studies (ibid.). By using a qualitative approach, the researcher believes it will be the best tool for understanding EI in the context of Vietnamese culture in interactions between employees and customers as well as colleagues. In doing so, the proposed research can contribute to the depth and diversity of EI in hospitality by uncovering the rich and profound insights about participants' practice of EI, through which hoteliers would be able to assess how well staff are prepared for it and what training and support they need.

Brief literature review

Emotional Intelligence is the *'ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions'* (Salovey and Mayer 1990, p.189). It emphasises *'the recognition and use of one's own and others' emotional states to solve problems and regulate behavior'* (ibid.)

It is widely agreed that in service industry, emotional labour (EL) – known as *'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display'* (Hochschild 1983, p.7) cannot be neglected. Whereas *'EL is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value'* (ibid.), EI covers a wider range of skills in controlling one's and others' emotions. EI is of great importance to hospitality staff because they are required to regulate their emotions effectively during face-to-face interactions with customers (Karatepe 2011) which forms a crucial part of the experience, or as (Langhorn 2004, p.229) called *'part of the product itself'* (Gjerald and Øgaard 2010a; Gjerald and Øgaard 2010b; Prentice and King 2011; Nazlan and Zainal 2012). With a high degree of contact with customers, hotel staff are prone to stress and job burnout (Kim et al. 2007). More importantly, customers' impression of the company depends on employees' attitudes and emotions during service encounter (Lee and Ok 2012). In order to successfully cope with stress from contact with customers, hotel staff tend to seek support from a community with their colleagues who turn out to have direct impact on their working environment and employee attitudes (Limpanitgul et al. 2014). Thus, the proposed research will look closely at hotel workers' EI in interactions with both customers and colleagues.

The increasing significance of emotion in relation to hospitality workers is indicated by the proliferation of recent studies conducted on Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Labour (EL) over the last few years (Cichy et al. 2007; Kafetsios and Zampetakis 2008; Cha et al. 2009; Kusluvan et al. 2010; Kim and Agrusa 2011; Kim et al. 2012; Prentice 2013; Prentice et al. 2013; Wolfe and Kim 2013; Haver et al. 2014). Despite this proliferation of studies, most of the recent studies focus on the role of EI in managerial positions (Cichy et al. 2007; Scott-Halsell et al. 2008a; Scott-Halsell et al. 2008b; Haver et al. 2014). As a consequence, little is known about the behaviour and attitude of frontline staff towards the application of EI. It can be argued that it is important to look at how EI influences frontline employees because they are the point of contact with customers and mainly responsible for the service whereas they also work in a community with fellow co-workers under managers' guidance and supervision.

In hospitality, EI has been researched in a number of different ways; for example, the role of EI in managerial positions (Langhorn 2004; Cichy et al. 2007; Scott-Halsell et al. 2008b; Wolfe and Kim 2013); the relationship between EI and other work-related factors such as social skills and stress management skills (Cha et al. 2009), counterproductive work behaviours and organisational citizen behaviours (Jung and Yoon 2012) or work effectiveness (Othman et al. 2008). Some studies focus exclusively on customer-contact roles (Cavelzani et al. 2003; Kim and Agrusa 2011; Prentice and King 2011). However, most studies take the quantitative approach with the aim of examining the relationship between EI and other work-related factors. Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) suggest a construct of Hospitality Intelligence consisting of Emotional Intelligence (including Interpersonal Intelligence and Intrapersonal Intelligence), Cultural Intelligence and Hospitality Experiential Intelligence dimensions. This construct is likely to serve the hospitality industry well because in an international context, both service provider and customer bring their cultural characteristics to

service encounters and emotional display, which creates an experience as a crucial part of the service. This is to say that culture should be taken into consideration in hospitality context.

Proposed methodology

With the aim of exploring EI among hotel staff in Vietnam, this study will take the qualitative approach to explore Vietnamese hotel workers' practice of EI. The research will be conducted in two stages. The first stage will be in-depth interviews with 4 focus groups of 6-8 participants, through which the questions raised from the secondary research will be developed and modified. Focus groups are used to generate a broad understanding of EI including relationship between employees with colleagues and customers, some major incidents and training programmes which reflect both positive and negative sides of EI. Participants are employees working in hotel chains and family-owned hotels to enhance the diversity of working environments. To prevent conflicts in expressing personal opinion, the discussion on interactions with colleagues will be conducted among employees from different hotels.

Themes emerging from these discussions will be further explored through semi-structured interviews which is the second stage of the research. These interviews are intended to investigate individual's profile such as education background, work experience and personality traits in order to contribute to the debate among quantitative studies on EI – whether EI is ability-based or trait-based. 34 one-to-one interviews will be conducted to collect detailed insights into the themes and patterns revealed from the focus groups. Focus groups and interviews are the most suitable methods for such an exploratory study where the researcher is interested in 'what', 'why' and 'how' people say things (Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012).

In addition, Critical Incidents Technique (CIT) is also used for collecting data with a strong focus on critical service encounters, or critical incidents, which can be used synonymously (Lundberg 2011). The biggest advantage of CIT is for participants to describe the situation in their own words, thus the researcher has the opportunity to get closer to the phenomenon (Edvardsson 1992). CIT will be used in the form of work diaries which hotel employees are encouraged to write down things happening during a day at the end of their shift. This technique will demonstrate how EI happens in the workplace and how staff members deal with it. In order to make it achievable and avoid the overloaded data, the researcher will inform them of substantial benefits for the hotel and themselves and limit the number of days up to 3 days for each participant.

Data will be transcribed, coded and themed right after the collection. The computer-assisted software NVivo 10 (2012) will be used together with thematic analysis to enhance a rigorous analysis. In order to fully understand the data, the researcher will use a recorder and transcribe all her focus groups and interviews.

Outcome/Anticipated results

The data revealed that participants have built up a profile of visitors' emotional expression based on their country of origin. This knowledge was obtained from their own experiences or those of their colleagues and managers, which serves as a guideline for them to approach and understand visitors coming from different countries. The largest group of visitors to Nhatrang come from China, Russia, and Japan. Vietnamese visitors account for a significant proportion

of the market. In addition, there are visitors from western countries such as the UK, the US, Australia, Germany, and France. Nhatrang is also a favourite destination for South Korean and Hong Kong Chinese. Table 1 presents participants' descriptions of visitors regarding their emotional expressions.

Table 1 – The emotional expression of visitors based on their country of origin

Country of origin	Emotional expression
China	shout when angry, aggressive, express their emotions more often
Russia	they say they like it and express it, can't calm down their emotions, get angry easily and mad at staff, easy-going, easy to please, bad-tempered, show it on their faces when angry, straightforward, look unfriendly with their facial expressions
Japan	hesitate to show if they are genuinely satisfied, hard to guest their emotions because they're calm and polite
Vietnam	shout and swear when angry, reserved, straightforward, do not get frustrated right away
UK	control their emotions and do not express them, only show their emotions when satisfied
The US	speak gently and be happy
Australia	friendly and civilised, decorous
Germany	control their emotions and do not express them, quiet
France	show emotions obviously, easy to recognise on French faces, raise their eyebrows if they don't like something
South Korea	reserved, look happy and smile but they don't actually like us
Hong Kong	the most dangerous, straightforward, hard to get close to them and change their emotions

Furthermore, the data shows participants perceptions of visitors determine their service attitudes. The data show participants preferred international visitors to resident Vietnamese. This buttressed Yeung and Leung's (2007) study that hotel employees in Hong Kong prefer to serve international guests other than Mainland Chinese visitors. However, subtle differences were found in participants proffered reasons for preferring to serve international visitors unlike those reported in the Hong Kong study. Most participants for the study said they prefer serving international visitors because it widens their knowledge about the guest home culture which in turn enhances service delivered to future patrons from the same country. This finding provided an important step into understanding how Vietnamese hotel workers recognise customers' emotions, through which various strategies to regulate their emotions were employed.

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