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**Title:**

**Exploring Vietnamese hotel workers' reading of guests' emotional expressions**

**Abstract:** [Your extended abstract should be no longer than 1500 words following a research paper structure (e.g., introduction, theoretical foundation/literature review, research methodology, research findings, and conclusions and implications). The reference style for the conference is that of the American Psychological Association (APA). The box will 'expand' over pages as you add text/diagrams into it.]

*Quynh Nguyen*  
*Faculty of Management*  
*Bournemouth University, the UK*  
*Email: [qnguyen@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:qnguyen@bournemouth.ac.uk)*

**Introduction**

In an international hospitality context, both service providers and customers bring their cultural characteristics to the service encounter. There is an established body of work that recognizes that accurate understanding of cross-cultural emotional expressions enhances workplace performance (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). However, emotional expression accepted in one culture may be considered inappropriate in another culture. Especially in the hospitality context with a high cross-group contact the stakes are high for accurate understanding of emotional expressions across cultural groups. However, few qualitative empirical research exists in the hospitality sub-sector concerning workers' cross-cultural judgment of guests' emotional expressions. This paper aims to fill that gap by explore how Vietnamese hotel workers perceive visitors' emotional expression based on their country of origin and how their perceptions influence their attitudes towards these visitors.

**Literature review**

***The influence of culture on the perception and expression of emotions***

Previous research shows social interactions may fail due to cultural differences between Asian and Western countries in terms of cultural values, rules of behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, relationship patterns, and verbal and nonverbal communication (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2012). Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest individual achievement and feelings are valued by Westerners as opposed to their Eastern counterparts valuing the interdependence of the self and the intragroup harmony. Whereas Caucasians view emotional displays as appropriate, Asians have the totally opposite opinion, apart from the expression of happiness (Matsumoto, 1993). There is a dearth of knowledge on emotional expression across cultures (Matsumoto, Franklin, Choi, Rogers, & Tatani, 2003) but little has been done to reflect the perceptions of Vietnamese hotel workers towards visitors from other countries and the cultural discrepancy within the Asian or the Caucasian group needs further investigation.

***Vietnamese culture in social interactions***

The unification of Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism is one of the most distinctive features of Vietnamese culture, which forms the culture on the ground of obedience and over-emphasis on one's duty towards others and the society (Van Hoang, 2012). Van Hoang (2012) also highlights the differences between Western children who learn independence and equality and traditional Vietnamese children growing up with dependence, nurturance, hierarchy and rewards for submission to seniors in terms of education, social status or age. Respect for seniors is also shown in the way Vietnamese people avoid eye contact when talking to those seniors (Stauffer, 1995). Debate and confrontation are also opposed in Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, which prevents people from talking about conflicts to save 'face' and maintain group harmony (Dinh, Kemp, & Rasbridge, 2000; Huong, 2008). These cultural values may create the unique characteristics of hospitality workers for Vietnam; however, the country is experiencing the shortage of skilled labour in the service industry (Montague, 2013) and brain drain (Nguyen, 2014). It is therefore important that more studies be conducted in this potential tourist destination to improve the resources and meet the needs of tourism development and its associated human resources.

**Research methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative approach with two methods – Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and semi-structured interviews. 34 hotel workers in front-line, supervisory and managerial positions were asked to

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describe both extremely favourable and unfavourable interactions with customers. After the CIT forms were completed, participants were contacted for one-to-one semi-structured interviews to further explore their understanding and management of emotions at the workplace. The interviews were conducted at the participants’ workplace or house and each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours.

The researcher purposively sampling was employed; potential participants were approached via personal contacts or the human resource department of hotels in Nhatrang – the researcher’s hometown. The sample included hotel staff working in Front Office, Food and Beverage, Housekeeping and Sales departments because of the intense degree of customer contact. There were 192 incidents generated from the CIT questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 34 participants. Data analysis was performed using NVivo 11 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Research findings**

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

<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Emotional expression</b>
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 (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.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The current study shed new light on Vietnamese hotel workers reading of guests’ emotional expressions

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during the service encounter. The results suggest that cross-cultural training programs are needed to provide diagnostic feedback to hotel workers about how to make judgment of international guest behaviour during the service encounter devoid of stereotypes. This is important given the resurgence of research interests in emotional intelligence (Walsh, Chang, & Tse, 2015). The main limitation of this study was the inherent cultural differences between hotel workers' and international guests.

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