US and Chinese perceptions of simulated US courtesy

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Abstract:

Purpose The purpose of this study was to identify similarities and differences in US and Chinese subjects' emotional responses to and perceptions of courtesy of simulated English-language communication prompts.

Design/methodology/approach Data were collected through a web-based stimulus administered on US and Chinese students. Subject responses to eye contact and smile images and a set of verbal expressions were measured on ratings of emotion and courtesy.

Findings Smiling with direct eye contact and warmed-up verbal expressions were found to elicit a higher level of emotional response and were perceived as viable server politeness cues. US and Chinese participants had similar responses to facial and verbal prompts.

Originality/value This paper contributes to understanding about service employee cues, such as courtesy, that can influence service quality in a cross-cultural tourism setting.

Keywords: culture | perception | service quality | politeness | service encounters | courtesy

Article:

Introduction

Assessment of service quality in tourism fosters business competitiveness and service firm recognition (Giannakos et al., 2014; Yang and Yang, 2011; Yildiz and Kara, 2012). Frontline service encounters are a critical success factor in tourism enterprises because encounter outcomes affect customers' evaluations of service quality (Hui and Toffoli, 2002; Kandampully et al., 2001; Stauss and Mang, 1999; Zeithaml et al., 2006). Moreover, intangible cues, such as courtesy, influence customer assessments of the quality of service encounters (Berry et al., 2006) as well as satisfaction (Chebat and Slusarczyk, 2005; Sachdev and Verma, 2002; Winsted, 1997). Enhancing employee skills and knowledge about courtesy is critical for branding and for repeat business and, therefore, increased profitability (Baum and Devine, 2007).

Courtesy is defined as employee expressions marked by respect for and consideration of the consumer (Levy et al., 2004) and is generally synonymous with politeness (Watts, 2003). Due to its grounding in observable behaviors, politeness theory provides the most favorable theoretical base for our present study (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Ruhi, 2007). Ford (1998) emphasizes three psycholinguistic markers of politeness to ground demonstrations of courtesy in the service encounter; these are phatic speech (using sociable rather than information-driven speech), nonverbal immediacy (such as eye contact and smiling) and verbal immediacy (reaching out to others through word choices).

Ford's (1998) politeness markers derive from studies that are framed in the Western context. However, studies regarding the impact of culture on service quality evaluations have been well-documented (Furrer et al., 2000; Mattila, 1999; Tsang and Ap, 2007; Tsaur et al., 2005; Winsted, 1997; Zhu et al., 2007). Although culture may be a variable in formulating definitions of courtesy, the present study is limited to the analysis of responses of subjects to English-only politeness simulations. Generally, servers in English-speaking countries seldom adopt non-English courtesy phrases or mannerisms when serving people from other cultures. Thus, the degree of acceptability of US politeness markers to other cultures is a question of interest.

Visitation of Asian travelers to the USA is up, adding to US international tourist receipts and arrivals. China alone is becoming the biggest consumer market worldwide, spending $128.6 billion and representing nearly 11.1 per cent of global international tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2014). Therefore, the aims of this study were to investigate subject emotional responses to and courtesy ratings of facial images and phatic expressions and, furthermore, to examine differences between the US and Chinese responses to these politeness cues. Ultimately, the study will support understanding of the continued appropriateness of existing service standards in an evolving marketplace with growing numbers of affluent Asian consumers. As a critical service quality factor, courtesy is one that can benefit from keener insights into how specific service behaviors and standards for courtesy are being perceived by different cultural consumer groups.

Literature Review

Tourism has experienced continued expansion and diversification in recent decades and has become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world (Walker and Walker, 2011). Predictions estimate that Asians will be among the top tourists in importing and exporting regions by 2020 (UNWTO, 2014) therefore warranting special consideration and hospitality. Such attention is particularly important in the hotel sector, which has seen major globalization and franchising trends (Go and Pine, 1995; Guerrier and Deery, 1998). In catering to the Asian market, positive customer-provider interactions can stimulate higher customer satisfaction and foster emotional bonding between customers and service providers (Davidson, 2003; Gustafsson et al., 2005; Hanif et al., 2010).

Successful encounters require normative guidelines (Brotheridge and Lee, 2003; Johnson and Spector, 2007; Zapf and Holz, 2006) to encourage service providers to display courteous service. Courtesy fosters an immediate bond between businesses and customers by developing emotional connectivity between guests and employees (Ford, 1998). Levy et al. (2004) define courtesy as employee expressions that are marked by respect for and consideration of the consumer. In their work, Parasuraman et al. (1985) suggest that courteous service is manifested through multiple forms of employee behaviors, such as politeness, respect, consideration and friendliness of contact personnel.

Courtesy and politeness appear to be interchangeable concepts in the field of linguistics where this study is theoretically grounded in politeness research. Brown and Levinson (1987) construe politeness as a universal language and a fundamental aspect of human socio-communicative interaction. Linguistic expressions, i.e. speech acts, syntactic constructions, lexical items, prosodic contours and pragmatic features, can infer politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Ruhi (2007) adds an additional factor: the importance of facial expressions in showing respect and friendliness. Service employees' facial displays can inspire an emotional contagion, which suggests that people's expression of emotions facilitates a resultant emotional state in others (Hatfield et al., 1994). Therefore, our study uses three politeness markers as variables: phatic speech, nonverbal immediacy and verbal immediacy (Ford, 1998).

Phatic speech markers

Phatic speech is the use of recognizable words or phrases that service providers use to be sociable; examples in service interaction are "good morning, please, thank you, or excuse me." Greetings have been portrayed as polite rituals and have been conceptually linked to courtesy, sincerity and acknowledgment (Jaszczolt, 2002; Valencia, 2002). Ford (1998) notes that greetings contribute to effective first impressions; in a similar way, thanking and farewells may be the last influential acts in a service transaction.

Nonverbal immediacy markers

Nonverbal immediacy conveys emotional messages using body language, facial movements and vocalizations (Bryant and Barrett, 2008). Nonverbal immediacy markers, such as smiling and eye contact, reduce the emotional distance between customers and employees (Ford, 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Smiling impacts customer attitudes and behaviors and forms the foundations of excellent customer service, thus affecting customer satisfaction (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hunter, 2010; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Tsai, 2001). Smiles and eye contact can convey politeness, contributing to positive receptions of messages and building customer loyalty and repeat business (Ekman and Rosenberg, 1997; Hunter, 2010; Watts, 2003).

Verbal immediacy markers

Leech (1983) proposes that certain types of verbal expressions or added words are construed as forms of politeness. Examples include recognizing individual needs of customers or offering help; sharing a provider's own empathetic feelings during a service encounter; and using language generally reserved for personal relationships such as humor and direct praise of customer attributes or behaviors (Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

While this study does not investigate Chinese politeness markers per se, it is important to note that general cognitive schema for the constructs of courtesy and politeness do exist within the Chinese culture. Previous cross-cultural research on politeness (Blum-Kulka, 2005; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Gu, 1990; Yu, 2002, 2005) has shown politeness as an abstract notion can be articulated in both English and Chinese. Moreover, Song (2012) suggests that persons exposed regularly to second languages recognize foreign language politeness markers when in new cultural situations. Also, the human processes used to display and recognize facial markers (i.e. smiling

and eye contact) are similar across cultures, even though cultural judgments differ regarding the use of these behaviors in public settings (Nagashima and Schellenberg, 1997).

Research method

This study used simulated expressions commonly used by hotel frontline employees. Due to the expense involved in accessing actual social environments, simulated environments (e.g. verbal descriptions, photo/slides, scale models and videos) have been used in data collection (Bitner, 1992). Web-based prompts can eliminate difficulties associated with natural field observations and can be tailored to evaluate specific politeness attributes (Levy et al., 2004; Smith et al., 1999). Eliciting immediate post-stimulus responses also reduces biases from memory lapses, rationalization tendencies and consistency factors (Bitner, 1992).

Independent variables

The independent variables included four facial expressions and eight verbal prompts commonly used at hotels. For facial expressions, four head shots were selected representing the conditions of smiling with direct eye contact, smiling with indirect eye contact, not-smiling with direct eye contact and not-smiling with indirect eye contact. A student hotel worker was employed to create the facial expressions that she would normally assume (or not) as a front desk worker and photographed. A focus group of Chinese and US students majoring in hospitality and tourism was used to select four images that produced the intended four facial variations. The four facial photographs appeared on the survey screen at 4.83 inch (12.28 cm) wide and 3.22 inch (8.18 cm) tall, with a resolution of 72 pixels per inch (28.35 pixels per cm).

Table I. Verbal prompts (presented as written statements)

Verbal 1	
Neutral good morning	Good morning
Warmed-up good morning	Good morning, I hope you are having a fantastic day in our beautiful resort
Verbal 2	
Neutral welcome	Welcome to our hotel
Warmed-up welcome	Welcome to your home far away from home
Verbal 3	
Neutral offer	Let us know if you need anything
Warmed-up offer	Let us know you need anything. Our guests are important to us, and we try hard to please
Verbal 4	
Neutral farewell	Goodbye and thanks for choosing our hotel
Warmed-up farewell	Goodbye and thanks for choosing our hotel, I hope you had a great time at our hotel and will come again

The eight verbal statement prompts simulated those commonly used by hotel frontline employees in four situations: greetings, welcomes, inquiries/offers and farewells. Table I presents the eight written prompts used for this study. These prompts were also derived from focus group participants, at the same time confirming the recognized differences between neutral and warmed-

up versions. A neutral verbal statement and a warmed-up statement featuring verbal immediacy were elicited from students for each of the four situations.

Dependent variables

Each of the two dependent variables, emotion and courtesy, was measured with four five-point Likert-type scale items. For emotional response, participants ranked the level of comfort, relaxation, feeling good/bad and happiness on a five-point scale. The final emotion score (ranging from 4 to 20) is calculated by summing the four items. Respondents were asked to rank the level of courtesy in terms of "rude" to "polite", "discourteous" to "courteous", "unfriendly" to "friendly" and "inappropriate" to "appropriate" based on a five-point scale. A final courtesy score (ranging from 4 to 20) was obtained by summing the four items. A higher score reflected a more positive rating of the stimulus. Cronbach's alpha averaged 0.929 for the emotional scale and 0.939 for the courtesy scale across the 12 stimuli, indicating strong internal consistency.

Sampling

The use of student samples in research designs is well accepted for examining service systems, as students are frequently consumers of various kinds of services (Furrer et al., 2000; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). A convenience sample of 21 US and 23 Chinese undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled in a US university participated in this web-based simulation study. All students voluntarily participated in this experiment and were provided with a written consent email informing them about the purpose, process and voluntary nature of this study. To ensure English reading ability, only full-time Chinese students who had met the TOEFL® requirements were accepted. For this initial study, only females were selected to minimize cross-gender observation bias (Crawford, 1995).

All the Chinese participants were selected with screening criteria. Subjects were invited to self-identify as either a Chinese national born in mainland China or American national born in North Carolina. Further ethnicity data were not elicited. Using convenience sampling, participants were either selected by the researcher or referred by initial participants. Through signing a consent form, all Chinese participants attested that they were mainland-born Chinese and were studying in the USA (at the time the study was conducted).

Procedure and data analysis

Four facial images and eight written statements were presented sequentially to subjects for review and response via an emailed Qualtrics survey link. Participants rated the perceived courtesy of the stimuli and their emotional responses right after seeing each image or statement. A forced choice response was set for the web-based survey to ensure the collection of participants' responses. Descriptive analysis and comparisons were used to analyze data.

Findings

Respondent profile

Subjects were composed of 100 per cent female, with comparable numbers of Chinese (n = 23, 52.3 per cent) and US (n = 21, 47.7 per cent) college students. The majority of the respondents (n = 25, 56.8 per cent) were currently enrolled in a graduate program, followed by undergraduate students (n = 19, 43.2 per cent). The dominant age group was 21 to 25 years (56.8 per cent), followed by 26 to 30 years (27.3 per cent), whereas 18 to 20 years made up the smallest group, representing 15.9 per cent of the respondents. With regard to customer service work experience, 50 per cent had prior experience working in a customer service position.

More Chinese students were graduate students (n = 18, 78.3 per cent) compared to US respondents (n = 7, 33.3 per cent). With regard to work experience, only 2 per cent (n = 6) of Chinese students had worked in a customer service position, while 76.2 per cent (n = 16) US students had working experience in customer service. Among respondents who had worked in customer service positions (M = 5.0), the highest frequency was five years or more (40.9 per cent of total sample), followed by two to four years (31.8 per cent) and less than two years (27.3 per cent). Table II presents the profile of the participants.

Table II. Participant Profile

Profile characteristic	*n*	(%)
Gender (n = 44)		
Female	44	100
Age (n = 44)		
18-20 years old	7	15.9
21-25 years old	25	56.8
26-30 years old	12	27.3
Education level (n= 44)		
Undergraduate program	19	43.2
Graduate program	25	56.8
Country of origin (n = 44)		
Mainland China	23	52.3
USA	21	47.7
Customer Service experience (n = 44)		
Had a previous experience as a service provider	22	50
Never had an experience as service provider	22	50
Years of working experience (n = 22, M = 5.0)		
Less than 2 years	6	27.3
2-4 years	7	31.8
5 years or above	9	40.9

Participants' responses to facial image prompts

A one-way ANOVA test (Table III) comparing four facial prompts (F (3, 43) = 91.363, p < 0.001) showed that smiling with direct eye contact (S-DEC) triggered the highest level of emotional response (x̄ = 17.57), followed by a smile with indirect eye contact (S-IEC) (x̄ = 13.11). Non-

smiling with direct eye contact (NS-DEC) had the lowest level of emotional response ($\bar{x} = 7.73$), followed by non-smiling with direct eye contact (NS-DEC) ($\bar{x} = 9.93$). These results imply that smiling can contribute to subjects' positive emotion. In the absence of a smile, a direct eye contact poses a tension between a sender and receiver, thus eliciting a less positive emotional response from the receiver.

Independent t-tests were conducted to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the responses of US and Chinese students to facial images. No significant differences between nationality subgroup responses to these prompts were found, indicating that US and Chinese students had similar emotional and courtesy scores (Table IV).

Participants' responses to verbal prompts

With respect to phatic expressions, t-test comparisons of mean sum scores yielded statistically significant differences in subject responses to neutral versus warmed-up versions of greetings and farewells (Table V). A warmed-up greeting, such as "Good morning, I hope you are having a fantastic day in our beautiful resort", was associated with a higher level of emotional response than the neutral statement "Good morning" ($t = -4.338$; $p < 0.01$). The warmed-up greeting was also scored higher on courtesy ($t = -5.409$; $p < 0.01$). The warmed-up farewell "Goodbye and thanks for choosing our hotel, I hope you had a great time at our hotel and will come again" elicited a higher level of emotion ($t = -4.102$; $p < 0.01$) and was perceived as more polite ($t = -3.034$; $p < 0.01$) than using the neutral verbal expression, "Goodbye and thanks for choosing our hotel". Neither the welcome nor the help offered were found to elicit response differences between the neutral and warmed-up versions.

Table III. Total subject responses to face images reflecting smile/no-smile and direct/indirect eye-contact

Response Scales	S-DEC	NS-DEC	NS-IEC	S-IEC	*n*	*F*	df	*p*
Emotion scale[a]	17.57	7.73	9.93	13.11	44	91.363	3, 43	<0.001[b]
Courtesy scale[a]	17.41	7.09	8.41	12.61	44	101.232	3, 43	<0.001[b]

Notes: [a] Mean sum scores ranging from 1 to 20 based on summing four items measured on a five-point scale, with "1" indicating the lowest score/negative pole and "5" the highest score/positive pole; [b]Post-hoc Bonferroni test showed significant differences (p = <0.001) between all pairs except for NS-DEC/NS-IEC)

Table IV. Comparison of Chinese (n = 23) and US (n = 21) responses to face images

Subject Responses	CN	US	*t*	CN	US	*t*
		S-DEC[a]			*NS-DEC[a]*	
Emotion[b]	17.13	18.05	-1.095	7.83	7.62	0.212
Courtesy[b]	17.09	17.76	-0.867	8.00	6.10	1.848
		N-SIEC[a]			*S-IEC[a]*	
Emotion[b]	9.87	10.0	-0.150	10.0	9.87	-1.546
Courtesy[b]	9.04	7.71	1.250	7.71	9.04	-1.511

Notes: [a]Independent t-tests showed no significant differences between nationality subgroup responses to these prompts; [b] Sum scores ranging from 4 to 20 based on summing four items measured on a five-point scale with "1" indicating the lowest score/negative pole and "5" the highest score/positive pole

Independent t-tests were used to see if there were any variations between Chinese and US subjects' responses. There were no significant differences between Chinese and US subjects' responses to neutral versus warmed-up phatic expressions, barring the one case of greeting courtesy ($\bar{x}$ = 4 vs $\bar{x}$ = 1.57; t = 2.439; p < 0.05). More Chinese subjects scored a warmed-up good morning, i.e. "Good morning, I hope you are having a fantastic day in our beautiful resort" as better than the neutral "Good morning" than did their US counterparts (Table VI). Except for the greeting prompt, US and Chinese students were not dissimilar in their responses to the neutral and warmed-up phatic expressions.

Conclusion and implications

Smiling is confirmed as an important politeness cue that conveys attitudinal warmth and caring and is enhanced when combined with direct eye contact. It is important to understand the implication of this study for addressing the changing consumer marketplace, particularly in terms of the wave of affluent Asian consumers spending their wealth in the service sector. Findings show that firms should continue to ask professional service staff to implement smiling behavior as a service standard in hospitality encounters; smiling is a reasonably safe strategy within both of the studied cultures without concern that a smile would be viewed as inappropriate in either setting. The study confirms that supporting and incentivizing smile campaigns (Kober, 2008) is a useful strategy for tourism businesses in cross-cultural markets and ideally will add to profitability of service businesses in general.

Table V. Comparison of subject responses to neutral versus warmed-up versions of phatic expressions

Response scales	Neutral prompt[a]	Warmed-up prompt[a]	n	t	df	p
Greeting emotion scale	16.59	18.43	44	-4.338*	43	0.000
Greeting courtesy scale	15.09	17.93	44	-5.409*	43	0.000
Welcome emotion scale	13.43	12.36	44	1.135	43	0.263
Welcome courtesy scale	14.75	14.09	44	0.815	43	0.419
Help offer emotion scale	16.82	15.23	44	1.898	43	0.064
Help offer courtesy scale	16.16	15.75	44	0.590	43	0.558
Farewell emotion scale	14.30	16.57	44	-4.102*	43	0.000
Farewell courtesy scale	16.82	18.36	44	-3.034*	43	0.004

Notes: [a]Mean sum scores reported ranging from 4 to 20; sum scores of four items measured on a five point scale with "1" indicating the lowest score and "5" the highest score; *Results significant at p < 0.01

Also, warmth of expression influences perceptions of courtesy and concomitant emotional responses without evident cultural variation as seen in the responses to typical verbal expressions. This study sheds light on cultural perceptions of courtesy by suggesting that Chinese guests can appreciate host courtesy cues even if couched in the language and behavior of the host culture. Thus, to differentiate politeness strategies based on culture unnecessarily will be a waste of effort and resources. Study findings can be useful to businesses formulating training strategies to maintain and enhance guest communications. This finding is noteworthy, as the ability to perceive host culture courtesy may be particularly advantageous in situations where Asian consumers are newly rich and unused to buying luxury goods or otherwise intimidated by buying services in foreign settings.

Table VI. Chinese (n = 23) and US (n = 21) responses to neutral versus warmed-up phatic expressions

Courtesy indicators	CN	US	*t*	CN	US	*t*
	Greeting[a]			Welcome[a]		
Emotion	2.39	1.29	1.296	-0.22	-2.00	0.945
Courtesy	4.00	1.57	2.439*	0.17	-1.57	1.081
	Help offer[a]			Farewell[a]		
Emotion	-2.26	-0.86	-0.834	-0.86	-2.26	0.795
Courtesy	-1.17	0.43	-1.160	0.43	-1.17	0.394

Notes: [a]Compared measures were within subject difference scores (response to warmed-up prompt minus response to neutral prompt) ranging from 4 to 20, based on summing four items measured on a five-point scale with "1" indicating the lowest score and "5" the highest score; $*p < 0.05$

Limitations and future research

The current exploratory study looked at service perceptions within a single service quality dimension, that of courtesy, and provided a general picture of US and Chinese responses with respect to evaluating a set of politeness markers. The sample, which comprised university students from North Carolina and China, presented challenges due to limited information gathered on participant background and small sample size. Although our use of nationality is a common way to distinguish among cultures in business studies, it is also conceivable that other ethnicity measures, e.g. level of Chineseness, might be useful to assess cultural differences. Studies including more participants with additional ways of measuring cultural backgrounds would help in further exploring perceptions of courtesy.

Additional limitations were the survey length (reduced to avoid fatiguing the respondents) and the narrow project timeframe for the collection of data. Measuring attitudinal warmth is another worthy endeavor for future research. Given some of the indications in this study, measuring warmth by message length (e.g. by counting the number of words in a sentence) or controlling for pronoun use in politeness markers, might be intriguing techniques for future. To this point, greetings and farewells used the personal pronoun "I" when warming up the phrase, which may have given more caring, personalized expressions of warmth.

In terms of designing the prompts, other methods, such as eliciting acceptable politeness markers from subjects themselves, might be of value. The current set of English-language bound politeness markers elicited only slight evidence of US and Chinese rating differences; future research could investigate other types of politeness markers not studied in this project to further clarify cultural issues. Also, through participant observation, further inroads can be made in determining how politeness markers arise in the field and how they influence customers' perceptions of service quality in natural service settings.

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