



Does a server's attentiveness matter? Understanding intercultural service encounters in restaurants

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ABSTRACT

Interaction between customers and servers from different cultures provides an interesting case of intercultural communication. Although a server's attentive service on customers is common in full service dining restaurants, especially in the United States, this may not be preferable to customers from different cultures. Two studies examined cultural differences between Americans and Japanese customers on their preferences regarding U.S. restaurant servers' attentiveness and a moderating effect of culture on the relationship of server attentiveness with customer orientation, customer satisfaction and tip. A survey study ($N=975$) and an experimental study ($N=145$) found that server attentiveness had a positive effect on customer orientation, customer satisfaction and the amount of tip for Americans, but not Japanese customers. Implications and future directions were discussed.

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1. Introduction

One of the important attributes for restaurant success is interaction quality between customers and servers (Lockyer and Tsai, 2004). The U.S. ranks second in the world after France in terms of international visitors received (Office of Travel & Tourism Industries, U.S. Department of Commerce: OTTI, 2012). Although only 4 percent of total travelers in the U.S. are international visitors, they account for 15 percent of all food and beverage output (OTTI, 2012). Therefore, effective intercultural communication between servers and customers is an important factor for the success of U.S. restaurants.

While restaurants focus on improving tangible materials, such as food and facility quality and providing regional specialties (cf., Becker et al., 1999; Brumback, 1999), most restaurant servers offer standardized service interaction irrespective of their customers. Contrary to the typical one time check-in and check-out interaction in a hotel, a medium to high degree of customer contact occurs with servers in restaurants (Stauss and Mang, 1999). Frequently and explicitly checking back on customers is common in both casual and upscale dining restaurants in the U.S. because Americans prefer personalized and friendly service from servers (Winsted, 1997) and more contact from servers (Becker et al., 1999). Yet, this may not be preferable to people from different cultures (cf., Kong and

Jogarathnam, 2007; Liu et al., 2001). For example, the Japanese value formal and unobtrusive service (Becker et al., 1999; Winsted, 1997).

These differences in service preferences can be explained by their dissimilar preferences in communication styles (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Kim, 2002). Japan ranks fourth in the number of visitors it sends to the U.S., but their spending ranked second behind Canada (OTTI, 2012). Accordingly, understanding cultural differences between Americans and the Japanese in service preferences would lead to more culturally competent service interaction in U.S. restaurants. Further, a positive relationship between service quality and tip has been found in the U.S. (Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert, 2003), but it is questionable that the Japanese would display the same behavior, considering their lack of tip culture and dissimilar criteria for good service. Therefore, the second purpose of the current study is to examine the moderating effect of culture (i.e., American and Japanese culture) on the relationship between restaurant servers' check-back style and perceived customer orientation, customer satisfaction and tipping behaviors. For these goals, cultural differences in evaluation of service interaction will be discussed first.

1.1. Cultural differences in evaluation of service interaction

Similar service can be evaluated differently depending on customers' various cultural norms and values. For example, while Wal-Mart's front-door greeters are largely appreciated in the U.S., German customers considered them artificially friendly, which partly accounts for Wal-Mart's failure in Germany (Witkowski and

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Wolfenbarger, 2002). Reimann et al. (2008) found that German and Swedish customers of a global industrial gas company were more satisfied than their Spanish counterparts when the same level of service quality was provided. They attributed this to different tolerance for uncertainty among German, Swedish and Spanish customers. Even Americans and the British have different service preferences despite language similarities (Voss et al., 2004).

Customers from different cultures often experience the same restaurant differently. In particular, Asian customers place different importance and emphasis on personalization. Winsted's (1997) study showed that civility, personalization, and conversation were significant factors for Americans' satisfaction, whereas civility and conversation were not significant for Japanese satisfaction. When service quality was examined in casual, full-service restaurants in the U.S. and Hong Kong, Hong Kong customers placed more value on a respectful and unobtrusive service style compared with American customers. Kong and Jogaratnam (2007) compared customers of casual-themed restaurants in the U.S. and Korea regarding their reactions to different types of wait staff behaviors. Civility, courtesy, and personalization behaviors were commonly valued by both American and Korean customers, but concern was named only by Korean customers. Finally, Liu et al. (2001) found that customers from cultures with lower individualism or higher uncertainty avoidance have a higher intention to compliment positive service than customers from higher individualism or lower uncertainty avoidance, who tend to complain about poor service. These studies demonstrate that customers from dissimilar cultures evaluate the same level of service differently.

1.2. Attentive service and its cross-cultural differences

The core principles of restaurant operations include delicious food, an appropriate cost, cheerful greeting and attentive service (Gupta et al., 2007). In particular, attentive service is evaluated by whether or not customers were pleased with the level of the service, the food was served in a timely manner, the server was attentive to the customer needs, the server checked back with the customers often, the server was friendly, and the server's appearance was neat and clean. Frequent check-back, meaning the server checked back with the customers often, is a critical aspect of attentive service in the U.S.

Parasuraman et al. (1988) identified five dimensions of service quality in restaurants: assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangibles. Empathy refers to the servers' caring, individualized attention provided to customers. Responsiveness represents the servers' willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. American customers prefer frequent check-backs because it increases empathy and responsiveness.

Servers performing frequent check-backs in the U.S. go up to the table and ask explicitly with direct eye contact whether the diners like the food, need beverage refills, or need other service before being called on by their guests. In doing so, servers are able to be friendlier, more personal and prompt, which are valued by American diners (Becker et al., 1999; Winsted, 1997). This is different from Japanese diners' expectations and preferences in restaurant service interactions. Asians – including the Japanese – value respect and unobtrusive helpfulness (Becker et al., 1999; Winsted, 1997). An unobtrusive check-back style means that a server watches his or her tables carefully after serving the food to check, for example, if beverages are running low or if guests need new plates, instead of directly asking the guests.

Customers and servers from different cultures make intercultural service encounters (Strauss and Mang, 1999). Since customers from different cultures have varied expectations from servers, intercultural service encounters are categorized as intercultural communication, which is defined as “interaction between

people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event” (Samovar et al., 2009, p. 12).

As Triandis (1994) suggested, people have a tendency to view the behavioral norms of their own culture as appropriate. Hence, intercultural service encounters create a sense of discomfort due to perceived differences in behavioral norms and expectations (Sherma et al., 2009). Server's attentive service via frequent and explicit check-back that is common in both casual and upscale dining restaurants in the U.S. may result in greater interaction discomfort and dissatisfaction to people from different cultures. Particularly Japanese customers, who have much different expectations about serving styles, might feel more discomfort and dissatisfaction.

The power distance norm can be used to explain dissimilar preferences in attentive service. Power distance refers to the degree of inequality people consider normal in a society (Hofstede, 2001). Americans, who are characterized by their low power distance, discourage formalities in the interactions between customers and servers and consider servers and customers equal. Accordingly, server-initiated communication such as explicit check-back and small talk are common, and Americans prefer more contact from servers (cf., Becker et al., 1999). In contrast, high-power distance in Japanese culture stresses status and formalities. Customers see themselves in a superior position compared to servers. They perceive a server's initiation to communicate as an effort to be equal to them and, therefore, evaluate it negatively (cf., Stauss and Mang, 1999). Indeed, most Japanese people perceive talking loudly and nonverbal behaviors such as putting hands in one's pocket while talking to them as disrespectful (Kowner, 2002).

In addition, Hall's (1976) high and low text communication is able to address intercultural differences regarding preferences for attentive service via frequent, explicit check backs. America's low-context communication (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988) involves the use of direct and explicit messages in which meanings are contained mainly in the transmitted messages (Hall, 1976). In contrast, the Japanese are known for their high-context communication. This represents the use of indirect and implicit messages in which meanings are embedded in the situation or context (Hall, 1976). High context communication also focuses on nonverbal cues more and information is provided through inference, gestures, and even silence.

In the U.S., silence is perceived as being awkward and needs to be filled up with speech. In contrast, the Japanese value silence because it is an indicator of credibility (Kim, 2002). Self-assertion, informality and talkativeness are encouraged in the U.S., whereas reservedness, formality and silence are the desired qualities for personal interaction and communication in Japan (Barnlund, 1975).

Due to these different preferences in communication styles between Americans and the Japanese, a server's attentiveness via a frequent, explicit check-back should be positively related to customer orientation, customer satisfaction and further tipping amount among Americans, whereas the Japanese would prefer an unobtrusive check-back.

1.3. Customer orientation

Customer orientation is defined as service workers' disposition to satisfy customer needs by putting forth time and effort (Donavan and Hocutt, 2002; Kelley, 1992). Customer orientation represents a server's level of commitment to customers (Susskind et al., 2003). That is, servers who routinely modify their service to anticipate and meet the needs of their customers are described as customer oriented.

Donavan et al. (2004) identified four dimensions of customer orientation: the servers need to pamper, read, deliver and have a

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