

Impact of Hotel Frontline Employee Attributes on Consumer Impression: A Conjoint Analysis

Nutchana Perkleang¹, Wuttinan Nantawong², Supawan Saebao³, Sanit Srichookiat⁴,
Apinan Aue-aungkul⁵, Wannaporn Boripan⁶

Abstract

The importance of frontline employee service in hotels is considered crucial for creating a strong first impression on customers. This research aims to explore the service characteristics of frontline employees in hotels that influence customers' impressions using Conjoint Analysis. The Conjoint technique is effectively used to understand consumers' complex decision-making by simulating different products or services using combinations of key attributes and assessing them based on consumers' preferences. It is a good technique for eliciting the relative importance of attributes. The study investigates various attributes, including smiling, voice tone, outward appearance, service enthusiasm, and greetings. These variables were combined to create eight different scenarios using Orthogonal Design, which were presented in video clips. Respondents were asked to rate their impression of each scenario on a scale of 1 to 8. Therefore, the survey was conducted on an online platform to incorporate video clips into the questionnaires. The research applied a convenience sampling method to collect data from 400 respondents, with the majority being females aged between 21-30 years, single, and with monthly incomes ranging between 10,001-20,000 baht. The results of the analysis, ranked from highest to lowest influence, showed that the smiling of the front desk staff had the most significant impact on customer satisfaction. Following that were the greetings before and after service, voice tone, outward appearance, and service enthusiasm. However, these characteristics revealed slightly varying relative importance, indicating that each characteristic played a crucial role in creating an overall positive impression. This study has some limitations. For example, while Conjoint Analysis provides valuable insights into the relative importance of factors, it does not determine their

¹ Undergraduate in Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University. E-mail: nuchanasukai@gmail.com

² Undergraduate in Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University. E-mail: wuttinan2185@gmail.com

³ Undergraduate in Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University. E-mail: supawan.saebao9745@gmail.com

⁴ Dr. In CESI Research Center, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University. E-mail: sanit@tsu.ac.th

⁵ Dr. In CESI Research Center, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University.

E-mail: apinan.a@tsu.ac.th

⁶ Dr. in Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University. E-mail: bwannaporn@tsu.ac.th

absolute importance. This research contributes to previous studies in terms of research methodology and the independent variables considered.

Keywords: Hotel; Frontline Employee; Service Attribute; Conjoint Analysis

Corresponding Author: Sanit Srichookiat

E-mail: sanit@tsu.ac.th

(Received: November 21, 2023; Revised: March 27, 2024; Accepted: April 1, 2024)

คุณลักษณะพนักงานบริการส่วนหน้าในโรงแรมที่ส่งผลต่อความประทับใจของผู้บริโภค: การวิเคราะห์คอนจอยท์

นุชฌา เกอเกลี้ยง¹, วุฒินันท์ นันทวงษ์², สุภาวรรณ แซ่เป้า³, สานิตย์ ศรีชูเกียรติ⁴, อภินันท์ เอื้ออังกูร⁵,
วรรณภรณ์ บริพันธ์⁶

บทคัดย่อ

การบริการของพนักงานส่วนหน้าในโรงแรม ถือว่ามีความสำคัญมากในการสร้างความประทับใจแรกให้กับลูกค้า การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาคุณลักษณะของพนักงานบริการส่วนหน้าในโรงแรม ที่ส่งผลต่อความประทับใจของผู้บริโภคด้วยเทคนิคคอนจอยท์ การวิเคราะห์ดังกล่าวถูกใช้ในการทำความเข้าใจกระบวนการตัดสินใจที่ซับซ้อนของผู้บริโภค โดยการจำลองสินค้าหรือบริการตามคุณลักษณะย่อย และประเมินความชอบในแต่ละแบบจำลองดังกล่าว เป็นเทคนิคช่วยค้นหาความสำคัญของคุณลักษณะที่ซ่อนอยู่ในสินค้าหรือบริการได้ดี โดยตัวแปรคุณลักษณะของพนักงานส่วนหน้า ประกอบด้วย รอยยิ้ม น้ำเสียง ความเรียบร้อยของการแต่งกายและบุคลิกภาพภายนอก การกระตือรือร้นในการให้บริการ และการกล่าวทักทาย ข้อคำถามสร้างจากการผสมตัวแปรคุณลักษณะการให้บริการ ออกมาเป็น 8 รูปแบบ ด้วยวิธี Orthogonal Design นำเสนอในรูปแบบคลิปวิดีโอ เมื่อผู้ตอบเห็นตัวแบบ จะต้องให้คะแนนความประทับใจในตัวแบบดังกล่าว จนครบ 8 ตัวแบบ ดังนั้น แบบสอบถามจึงอยู่ในรูปแบบ Online เพื่อให้สามารถบรรจุคลิปวิดีโอ และตอบคำถามได้ งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีการเลือกตัวอย่างตามสะดวก มีจำนวนผู้ตอบแบบสอบถาม 400 คน ส่วนใหญ่เป็นเพศหญิง มีอายุระหว่าง 21-30 ปี สภาพสภาพ โสด รายได้เฉลี่ยต่อเดือนอยู่ระหว่าง 10,001-20,000 บาท ผลการวิเคราะห์หิอทธิพลเรียงลำดับจากมากไปน้อย พบว่า รอยยิ้มของพนักงานส่วนหน้ามีอิทธิพลต่อความประทับใจในการให้บริการมากที่สุด รองลงมา คือ การกล่าวทักทายลูกค้าก่อนและหลังบริการ น้ำเสียง การแต่งกาย และความกระตือรือร้นในการให้บริการ อย่างไรก็ตาม คุณลักษณะดังกล่าวมีความสำคัญเชิงสัมพัทธ์ในระดับที่ใกล้เคียงกัน กล่าวคือ แต่ละคุณลักษณะล้วนมีความสำคัญที่จะสร้างความประทับใจทั้งสิ้น การนำผลการวิจัยไปใช้อาจมีข้อจำกัดบางประการ อาทิ เทคนิคคอนจอยท์สามารถหาตอบความสำคัญเชิงเปรียบเทียบระหว่างตัวแปรที่อยู่ในการศึกษาได้ดี แต่ไม่สามารถให้คำตอบความสำคัญเชิงสมบูรณ์ งานวิจัยนี้แตกต่างจากงานวิจัยในอดีตในเชิงวิธีการวิจัยซึ่งให้ความเหมือนจริงกับผู้ตอบ รวมถึงตัวแปรต้นที่มีความแตกต่างจากงานวิจัยในอดีต

คำสำคัญ: โรงแรม; พนักงานส่วนหน้า; คุณลักษณะการบริการ; การวิเคราะห์คอนจอยท์

ชื่อผู้ติดต่อบทความ: สานิตย์ ศรีชูเกียรติ

E-mail: sanit@tsu.ac.th

¹ นิสิต คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ E-mail: nuchanasukai@gmail.com

² นิสิต คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ E-mail: wuttinan.2185@gmail.com

³ นิสิต คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ E-mail: supawan.saebao9745@gmail.com

⁴ ดร. ศูนย์วิจัย CESI คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ sanit@tsu.ac.th

⁵ ดร. ศูนย์วิจัย CESI คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ apinan.a@tsu.ac.th

⁶ ดร. คณะเศรษฐศาสตร์และบริหารธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยทักษิณ bwannaporn@tsu.ac.th

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is an important sector for Thailand's economic growth. According to the 5A's elements of tourist destinations, accommodation is one of the key elements that serves tourists during their stay throughout the trip. In 2020, the accommodation and food service sector contributed 1.03 trillion Baht to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), accounting for 6.1% of the total GDP (Sirijanusorn, 2021). By 2024, the industry had shown signs of improvement, with international tourists returning to the country. The Thai Hotels Association (2024) reported that hotels' occupancy rate in 2023 varied from 45.5 to 65.6%, signifying consecutive improvement since 2021. However, it is expected that the industry will experience accelerated growth in 2023 and 2024, with an estimated occupancy rate of approximately 65%-70% (Lunkam, 2022).

Hotel front desk staff can be considered one of the integral components in the hotel accommodation service process (Rhee & Yang, 2015). They are the first point of interaction for guests during the check-in process and hold a crucial role in shaping guests' initial service experience (Högnäs, 2015). Service attributes provided by front desk staff involve their efficiency in check-in and check-out processes and overall helpfulness and friendliness (Rhee & Yang, 2015). Within service encounters, customers may encounter a variety of service styles among front desk staff. For instance, some staff may provide service while smiling but maintaining a stern tone of voice, or they may dress professionally and speak politely without offering any greetings. These characteristics may vary depending on different service providers. Prior research consistently highlights several elements that positively influence consumers. These include a welcoming smile (Otterbring, 2017; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018), tone of voice (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001; Mattila et al., 2003), physical appearance (Nickson et al., 2005; Easterling et al., 1992; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018), verbal greetings (Baker et al., 1992; Högnäs, 2015; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018), and enthusiasm (Itani et al., 2020; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018). These factors consistently yield positive effects on consumers.

While it is acknowledged that the mentioned attributes may impact consumer impressions, previous research has often treated them as minor components within key attributes. For instance, Mattila et al. (2003) examined "Positive Display" characteristics, such as smiling and tone of voice, while Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018) explored "Agency" attributes, which include attire and enthusiasm. In practice, these attributes can operate independently, as seen when some front desk staff may smile but use a harsh tone of voice when providing service. Notably, there is limited previous research that addresses the relative importance among these service characteristics, referred to as 'Relative Importance.' Few studies have assessed the degree to which each service attribute holds greater or

lesser significance relative to others. This clarification is crucial, especially since the industry must prioritize the first impression created by frontline employees.

Expanding beyond the existing knowledge boundaries, this research, therefore, focuses on examining the impact and relative importance of characteristics exhibited by hotel front desk staff on consumer impressions. The study evaluates attributes such as smiling, tone of voice, appearance, enthusiasm, and greetings. Conjoint analysis is employed to gain valuable insights, particularly with regard to the relative significance of these factors, and to unveil the part-worth utility values of service providers (Rao, 2014).

2. Objectives

To investigate the influence and the relative importance of the service characteristics of hotel front desk staff that impact consumer impression.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 Consumer Impression in the Context of Hotel Services

Customers' first impressions can potentially be their lasting impressions. In other words, there is no second chance to recover from a first-time service failure. The more a service can make a significant positive impression during the first encounter, the more likely customers are to leave the hotel with an improved overall perception (Högnäs, 2015). Emphasizing the importance of delivering services that create positive impressions is crucial, as they have the potential to exceed customer expectations and lead to greater satisfaction (Knutson, 1988). Conversely, services that leave negative impressions may escalate into crises (Högnäs, 2015).

In the context of the hotel industry, creating a positive first impression involves several factors. When considering the Servicescape framework by Bitner (1992), it becomes evident that the first impression can be influenced by various elements, such as the ambient background, design, and decor in the lobby (Countryman & Jang, 2006). However, previous research, as demonstrated by Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018), indicates that the social aspect of the environment, particularly the service personnel, influences customers more positively when compared to other environmental factors. Hence, in the hotel industry, front desk employees, as frontline staff, play a pivotal role in shaping the initial customer impression, as they interact significantly with guests during the early stages of using the

hotel's services (Högnäs, 2015). Högnäs's (2015) research empirically highlights the high importance of creating a positive first impression during the check-in process, which, in turn, impacts the overall service quality of the hotel.

3.1.2 Service Attributes of Frontline Hotel Employees and Consumer Impression

Numerous service attributes characterize the interactions between front desk staff and customers. The Thai Hotels Association (2011) has provided standards for the assessment of the Thai hotel industry. Within the staff and services category, certain key attributes warrant attention during the check-in process. These include warmly greeting guests with friendliness, maintaining appropriate attire, and efficiently providing hotel information and assistance. This study focuses on service attributes readily observable by guests, such as smiling, tone of voice, physical appearance, enthusiasm, and greetings.

3.1.2.1 Service with Smiling

A smile is a symbol used to represent feelings of happiness and enjoyment. It can clearly indicate friendliness, help build relationships, and improve the mood of those around us (Boonhaow, 2020). A smile is considered one of the key components of visual communication (Högnäs, 2015). For service providers, a smile is important because a genuine smile can make customers feel welcomed, relaxed, and may even diffuse tense situations or alleviate customer anger. Smiling for service providers can also boost their own self-confidence (Nanthapaiboon, 2008). Past research has shown that smiling has a positive impact on service provision. For instance, Otterbring (2017) found that a smile, which is a facial expression, directly has a positive effect on creating a good emotional atmosphere and contributes to leaving a positive impression. Therefore, in the context of service provision, organizations often encourage their employees to smile (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

H1: The presence of smiling in service provision is hypothesized to result in a more favorable customer impression compared to service without smiling.

3.1.2.2 Intonation during Service Interaction

Intonation is one of the four major components of non-verbal communication (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001). It is a component that occurs during interactions between service providers and recipients with the same content. Different intonations can convey different meanings to recipients (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001). However, there has been relatively limited previous research in the past that focused on studying the specific influence of intonation on consumer perceptions. Intonation is often used as one of the distinguishing features in various research studies, such as Mattila et al. (2003), who examined the Positive Display variables of hotel service employees, which include smiling and greeting

with dynamic intonation. Another example is the research by Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018), which used soft intonation as a component of the Communion Trait of service providers. The research findings revealed that the main characteristic of intonation, whether it is soft or rhythmic (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018), has a consistently positive impact on consumers. From the literature synthesis, it is evident that a soft tone (Gabbott & Hogg, 2001; Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018) and a rhythmic tone (Mattila et al., 2003) are likely to leave a more positive impression of the service provided than a harsh tone.

H2: The use of a soft tone of voice in service interactions is postulated to influence customer impressions when contrasted with the use of a harsh tone of voice.

3.1.2.3 Physical Appearance

Establishing a strong first impression when encountering customers is, in part, rooted in maintaining an attractive appearance, particularly within the context of the service industry (Nanthapaiboon, 2008). Personal appearance reflects the organization's image, and organizations worldwide emphasize the external image of their employees. Easterling et al. (1992) found that 81% of organizations place significant importance on employee attire, to the extent of formulating internal dress code regulations. Nickson et al. (2005) discovered that maintaining a neat and tidy appearance is a crucial characteristic emphasized by 98% of organizations within their dress code regulations. Past research has shown that the attire of service industry employees positively influences consumers. Dressing well is one of the components of creating a favorable social environment within the establishment. This, in turn, affects the perception of service quality (Baker et al., 1994) and customer return (Srichookiat & Jindabot, 2018). Therefore, it can be inferred that a well-groomed appearance is likely to create a positive impression in service delivery.

H3: A well-groomed and neat appearance in service roles exerts a substantial influence on customer impression, as contrasted with a disheveled or untidy appearance.

3.1.2.4 Service Enthusiasm

Service enthusiasm refers to the keen desire and dedication to providing services (Sawaengsrithara, 2019). It can be demonstrated through prompt and responsive service delivery to consumers, such as being accessible at all times, providing efficient service, addressing customer concerns promptly, and finding immediate solutions (Itani et al., 2020; Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). Previous research has extensively explored the concept of service enthusiasm. For example, Högnäs (2015) discovered that unresponsive service provision without enthusiasm has a negative impact on

customers. Itani et al. (2020) revealed that providing services with enthusiasm positively influences customer satisfaction. Expanding the perspective to organizational outcomes, employee service enthusiasm is considered a pivotal factor for business success (Decharin, 2021).

H4: Responsive and attentive service is hypothesized to have a significant impact on customer impression when compared to service characterized by unresponsiveness.

3.1.2.5 Greeting

The act of greeting is considered a crucial starting point in the service delivery process for front-line employees. It can create a favorable impression by demonstrating the willingness to serve on the part of the employees (Högnäs, 2015). Greeting is a symbol of the positive attribute of friendliness, which arises between service providers and recipients (Baker et al., 1992). Previous research on the impact of greeting is somewhat limited. Högnäs (2015), for instance, revealed that not greeting customers can have a negative impact on service impression. Conversely, in most past research, greeting is often included as a subcomponent of the main research variables. For example, Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018) used greeting as one component of the Communion Trait of service providers, while Baker et al. (1992) used greeting that signifies friendliness as a part of the High Social Condition variable in retail. These attributes all have a positive influence on consumers. In the context of service delivery in Thailand, greeting with words like 'Sawasdee ka/krub' accompanied by a slight bow is considered a fundamental form of greeting that shows respect to customers and indicates politeness towards them (Nanthapaiboon, 2008). Based on the above, it is expected that greeting is a factor that can create a favorable impression in service delivery.

H5: A cordial greeting during service interactions has a significant influence on customer impression in contrast to situations where no greeting is extended.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

Based on the preceding discussion, we establish the research framework elucidating the impact of front-line hotel employees' attributes on service impression, as depicted in Figure 1.

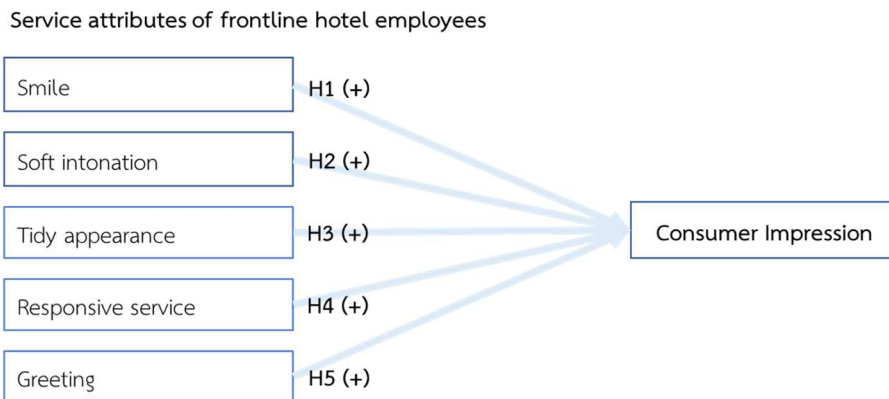


Figure 1 Research Framework

Source: Literature Synthesis

4. Research Methods

4.1 Details of the population and sample size

The research population for this study comprises consumers who have experienced hotel accommodation services within the nation of Thailand. Regarding sample size determination, it is notable that the guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2014) and Orme (2010) underscore an optimal sample size of approximately 200 for the purposes of Conjoint Analysis, particularly when group comparisons are envisaged. Nevertheless, Orme (2010) advises a minimum sample size of 300 when the research demands robust quantitative analysis and involves no inter-group comparisons. Considering these recommendations, this study has chosen to employ a sample size of 400, thereby surpassing the prescribed minimum threshold.

4.2 Research instrumental design

4.2.1 Treatment design

The research conducted in this study employs Conjoint Analysis, a form of experimental research that necessitates the creation of experimental groups, also known as model profiles. In each of these groups, it is imperative to control the independent variables under investigation. In this research, the experimental groups are designed using the Orthogonal Main-effect Plan, a highly efficient method for generating the minimum number of experimental groups while efficiently estimating the primary effects. This study encompasses five service attributes (independent variables), each of which

consists of two levels (as presented in Table 1). The utilization of the Orthogonal Main-effect Plan results in a total of eight distinct model profiles, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 1 Attribute levels within service attributes

| Service Attributes | Level 1 | Level 2 |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Smile | Smile | No smile |
| 2. Intonation | Soft tone of voice | Harsh tone of voice |
| 3. Physical appearance | Tidy appearance | Untidy appearance |
| 4. Enthusiasm | Responsive | Unresponsive |
| 5. Greeting | Greeting | No greeting |

Table 2 Scenario profile designed by orthogonal main-effect plan

| Profile (Treatment) | Service attributes of frontline hotel employees | | | | |
|------------------------|---|------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|
| | Smile | Intonation | Physical appearance | Enthusiasm | Greeting |
| 1 | No smile | Harsh tone | Tidy | Responsive | No greeting |
| 2 | Smile | Harsh tone | Untidy | Responsive | No greeting |
| 3 | Smile | Soft tone | Tidy | Responsive | Greeting |
| 4 | Smile | Soft tone | Untidy | Unresponsive | No greeting |
| 5 | Smile | Harsh tone | Tidy | Unresponsive | Greeting |
| 6 | No smile | Soft tone | Untidy | Responsive | Greeting |
| 7 | No smile | Harsh tone | Untidy | Unresponsive | Greeting |
| 8 | No smile | Soft tone | Tidy | Unresponsive | No greeting |

4.2.2 Profile presentation

Various formats can be employed for presenting survey scenarios to respondents, there are various formats that can be employed, including text, 3D images, video, or real-life model representations. In this the context of this research, video clips are used for presentation because they provide a lifelike experience of receiving services (see figure 2). Consequently, each prototype must align with the planned model. This is achieved by presenting different scenarios in accordance with the specified variables and following a narrative approach, with the details as follows:

The service provider presented in the videos is predominantly female, reflecting the common gender composition of front-line hotel staff. The context of service provision is set within the check-in process for customers arriving at the hotel for the first time. The storyline unfolds as follows:

Impact of Hotel Frontline Employee Attributes on Consumer Impression

1. The customer enters for service.
2. The employee, while engaged in other tasks, observes the customer and tailors their response to the specific scenario in each profile.
3. The employee provides service to the customer by requesting the customer's identification card and arranging accommodation for them. The nature of this service provision varies based on the scenario in each profile.
4. The customer requests assistance by inquiring about information related to dining options, with the response contingent on the scenario within each profile.
5. After the service is completed, the degree of post-service reaction, which varies depending on each scenario, is conveyed.

Based on the above discussion, all scenarios present the same storyline but the varied responses of staff in each of the 8 scenarios are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Presentation of service interaction in 8 scenarios

| Profile | An order of presentation in simulated video clips | | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| | The staff sees the customers. | The staff service for room reservations. | The customer asks for food store information. | Service completed |
| 1. No smile Harsh tone | No smiling, using a harsh tone of voice, wearing a formal dress, and a tidy hairstyle | | | |
| Tidy Responsive* | *Responding promptly | *Actively fast service | *The employee finds information immediately. | **Not saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| No greeting** | **No greeting | | | |
| 2. Smile Harsh tone | Smiling, using a harsh tone of voice, wearing an informal dress, and an untidy hairstyle | | | |
| Untidy Responsive* | *Responding promptly | *Actively fast service | *The employee finds information immediately. | **Not saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| No greeting** | **No greeting | | | |

Table 3 Presentation of service interaction in 8 scenarios (Continued)

| Profile | An order of presentation in simulated video clips | | | |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| | The staff sees the customers. | The staff service for room reservations. | The customer asks for food store information. | Service completed |
| 3. Smile Soft tone Tidy Responsive* Greeting** | Smiling, using a soft tone of voice, wearing a formal dress, and a tidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Responding promptly **Greeting with 'Swassdee Ka' and 'Wai' for respect. | *Actively fast service | *The employee finds information immediately. | **Saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| 4. Smile Soft tone Untidy Unresponsive* No greeting** | Smiling, using a soft tone of voice, wearing an informal dress, and an untidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Ignoring a customer **No greeting | *Passively slow service | *The employee reports back later. | **Not saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| 5. Smile Harsh tone Tidy Unresponsive* Greeting** | Smiling, using a harsh tone of voice, wearing a formal dress, and a tidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Ignoring a customer **Greeting with 'Swassdee Ka' and 'Wai' for respect. | *Passively slow service | *The employee reports back later. | **Saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| 6. No smile Soft tone Untidy Responsive* Greeting** | No smiling, using a soft tone of voice, wearing an informal dress, and an untidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Responding promptly **Greeting with 'Swassdee Ka' and 'Wai' for respect. | *Actively fast service | *The employee finds information immediately. | **Saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |

Table 3 Presentation of service interaction in 8 scenarios (Continued)

| Profile | An order of presentation in simulated video clips | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| | The staff sees the customers. | The staff service for room reservations. | The customer asks for food store information. | Service completed |
| 7. No smile Harsh tone Untidy Unresponsive* Greeting** | No smiling, using a harsh tone of voice, wearing an informal dress, and an untidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Ignoring a customer **Greeting with 'Swassdee Ka' and 'Wai' for respect. | *Passively slow service | *The employee reports back later. | **Saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |
| 8. No smile Soft tone Tidy Unresponsive* No greeting** | No smiling, using a soft tone of voice, wearing a formal dress, and a tidy hairstyle | | | |
| | *Ignoring a customer **No greeting | *Passively slow service | *The employee reports back later. | **Not saying thank you and 'Wai' for respect |

In this research, the dependent variable is customer impression. After consumers have watched video clips in various scenarios, they are asked to answer the question: "How impressed are you with the service provided by the employees after viewing the video clips?" Consumers respond on a scale as follows: (1) Not very impressed at all (2) Not impressed (3) Somewhat unimpressed (4) Neutral (5) Somewhat impressed (6) Impressed (7) Very impressed



Profile 1: No smile Harsh tone Tidy Responsive

No greeting



Profile 4: Smile Soft tone Untidy Unresponsive

No greeting

Figure 2 Examples of video clip scenarios for Profile 1 and Profile 4**Source:** Researcher

4.2.3 Instrumental assessment

The process involves developing videos and sending them to three qualified experts for assessment to determine if the presentations align with and reflect the specified variables in each scenario. After making adjustments based on the experts' recommendations, the researcher assessed reliability using the Test-Retest method. The questionnaires were administered to the identified respondents, and after a one-week interval, the same group of respondents were requested to recomplete the questionnaires to assess the comparability of responses between the initial and subsequent rounds. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to analyze the reliability, with the researcher applying the reliability testing criterion of 0.7 (Mayers, 2013). After collecting data from 30 sets, it was found that the average correlation coefficient between the before and after responses was 0.75.

4.3 Sampling Techniques and Data Collection

The researcher created a questionnaire using Google Forms, which allowed for the inclusion of video clips in the questions. Convenience sampling was employed by sharing the questionnaire link through online platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. The researcher collected questionnaire samples by creating stories on Facebook and Instagram to make them visible to people and encourage them to respond to the survey. The frequency of posting stories was approximately 22 times over a duration of two months.

4.4 Data Analysis

Statistical analysis consists of frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation to describe the sociodemographic characteristics of the surveyed consumers who have previously utilized hotel accommodation services in Thailand.

Statistical inference employs Conjoint Analysis to determine the influence of service attribute variables on the level of satisfaction in service reception. This analysis reveals the relative importance of these influences. Furthermore, it provides insight into the path-worth utility of sub-variable values within each attribute level.

5. Research results and discussion

5.1 Research results

5.1.1 Demographics of the respondents

The primary demographic characteristics of the respondents show a female majority, representing 51.25% of the sample. A significant proportion, specifically 83.25%, belongs to the 21-30 age bracket. Furthermore, the majority of respondents are single individuals, accounting for 69.25% of the surveyed population. In terms of occupation, approximately 37.75% of the respondents are engaged in corporate positions. Notably, a substantial 51.75% of the sample reported a monthly income within the range of 10,001 to 20,000 Baht. These demographic attributes have been derived from an analysis of the data collected from all 400 survey participants, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Demographic characteristics of respondents (n=400)

| Demographic Characteristics | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 195 | 48.75 |
| Female | 205 | 51.25 |
| Age | | |
| 21-30 years old | 333 | 83.25 |
| 31-40 years old | 55 | 13.75 |
| > 40 years old | 12 | 3.00 |

Table 4 Demographic characteristics of respondents (n=400) (Continued)

| Demographic Characteristics | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Marital Status | | |
| Single | 277 | 69.25 |
| Married | 106 | 26.50 |
| Divorced | 14 | 3.50 |
| Separated | 3 | 0.75 |
| Career | | |
| Student | 96 | 24.00 |
| Private sector employees | 151 | 37.75 |
| Government/Public sector employees | 76 | 19.00 |
| Self-employed | 70 | 17.50 |
| Unemployed | 7 | 1.75 |
| Monthly income | | |
| No income | 4 | 1.00 |
| < 10,001 baht | 75 | 18.75 |
| 10,001-20,000 baht | 207 | 51.75 |
| 20,001-30,000 baht | 80 | 20.00 |
| > 30,001 baht | 34 | 8.50 |

5.1.2 The Influence of Frontline Hotel Staff Attributes on Customer Impression

From the evaluation of customer impression values in various service scenarios, the top three service situations that elicit the highest levels of impression are as follows: Scenario 3: Characterized by a combination of a smile, a soft tone of voice, neat appearance, enthusiasm, and greetings. Scenario 5: Comprising a smile, a firm tone of voice, neat appearance, a lack of enthusiasm, and greetings. Scenario 4: Encompassing a smile, a soft tone of voice, untidy appearance, a lack of enthusiasm, and no greetings. Conversely, the scenario that yields the lowest level of customer impression is Scenario 8: Lacking a smile, featuring a soft tone of voice, neat appearance, no enthusiasm, and no greetings, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5 The mean and standard deviation of customer satisfaction in each scenario (n=400)

| Scenarios | Descriptions | Mean | SD. |
|-----------|--|------|------|
| 1 | No smile, Harsh voice, Tidy appearance, Responsive, No greeting | 2.45 | 1.13 |
| 2 | Smile, Harsh voice, Untidy appearance, Responsive, No greeting | 2.43 | 1.12 |
| 3 | Smile, Soft voice, Tidy appearance, Responsive, Greeting | 6.69 | 0.75 |
| 4 | Smile, Soft voice, Untidy appearance, Unresponsive, No greeting | 2.81 | 1.21 |
| 5 | Smile, Harsh voice, Tidy appearance, Unresponsive, Greeting | 3.12 | 1.39 |
| 6 | No smile, Soft voice, Untidy appearance, Responsive, Greeting | 2.67 | 1.21 |
| 7 | No smile, Harsh voice, Untidy appearance, Unresponsive, Greeting | 2.39 | 1.13 |
| 8 | No smile, Soft voice, Tidy appearance, Unresponsive, No greeting | 2.29 | 1.19 |

Table 6 illustrates the statistical test evaluating the impact of the service attributes on customer impression in service delivery. Effect coding was applied for dummy variables. The findings present that all five attributes significantly influence customer impression, including, service with smile ($\beta=0.66$, $t=28.68$, $p<0.001$), soft tone of voice ($\beta=0.51$, $t=22.18$, $p<0.001$), tidy appearance ($\beta=0.53$, $t=23.19$, $p<0.001$), responsive service ($\beta=0.45$, $t=19.81$, $p<0.001$), and greeting ($\beta=0.61$, $t=26.63$, $p<0.001$). These attributes explain 48% of the variation in customer impression. However, it is important to acknowledge that there may be additional unexplored factors that contribute to customer impression.

Table 6 The analysis of frontline hotel service attributes impacting customer impression

| Attributes | Estimate | Standard Error | Std Estimate | t-value | p-value |
|--------------------|----------|----------------|--------------|---------|---------|
| Intercept | 3.11 | 0.02 | | 135.70 | <0.001 |
| Smile | 0.66 | 0.02 | 0.37 | 28.68 | <0.001 |
| Soft tone of voice | 0.51 | 0.02 | 0.28 | 22.18 | <0.001 |
| Tidy appearance | 0.53 | 0.02 | 0.30 | 23.19 | <0.001 |
| Responsive service | 0.45 | 0.02 | 0.25 | 19.81 | <0.001 |
| Greeting | 0.61 | 0.02 | 0.34 | 26.63 | <0.001 |

Note: Multiple R-squared: 0.480, Adjusted R-squared: 0.480

5.1.3 Part-worth utility and relative importance of the service attributes

The findings reveal positive values for part-worth utility at the following attribute levels: smiling, a soft tone of voice, a tidy appearance, service enthusiasm, and greetings (See Figure 3).

In contrast, such as not smiling, harsh tone of voice, untidy appearance, lack of service enthusiasm, and not greeting customers exhibit negative utility values. These negative values imply that they diminish the value of the service impression. When considering the order of importance of these influences, it is evident that smiling is the most crucial factor in service provision (See Table 7). It is followed by greetings, the tone of voice in service delivery, physical appearance, and service enthusiasm, in that order. However, it is noteworthy that the relative importance of these attributes is closely aligned, meaning that all five variables have a similar impact on creating a close-to-equal impression. It is also observed that a deficiency in any single attribute has an immediate impact on the service impression.

Table 7 Part-Worth utility and relative importance of the service attributes

| Attribute | Attribute Level | Part-Worth Utility | Relative Importance |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Smile | No smile | - 0.66 | 23.28% |
| | Smile | 0.66 | |
| Tonality | Harsh tone of voice | - 0.51 | 18.71% |
| | Soft tone of voice | 0.51 | |
| Physical appearance | Untidy appearance | - 0.53 | 18.65% |
| | Tidy appearance | 0.53 | |
| enthusiasm in service | Unresponsive service | - 0.45 | 17.59% |
| | Responsive service | 0.45 | |
| Greeting | No greeting | - 0.61 | 21.77% |
| | Greeting | 0.61 | |

Impact of Hotel Frontline Employee Attributes on Consumer Impression



Figure 3 Parth-worth utility of the service attributes

Source: Researcher

5.2 Discussion

Based on the findings, it is evident that the five distinct attributes under scrutiny collectively exert a discernible influence on the cultivation of a favorable service impression. These influences can be delineated in the following sequence:

First and foremost, the act of smiling emerges as the paramount component, profoundly shaping the service impression, a finding congruent with the research conducted by Otterbring (2017) and Högnäs (2015). A smile, being both a facial expression and a facet of visual communication, serves as a potent instrument for evoking positive emotions within the service delivery process. Second, the significance of greeting, both before and after the service encounter, becomes apparent as the incipient point for service interaction, signaling the initiation of fundamental friendliness preceding the actual service interaction. This observation aligns with the research contributions of Högnäs (2015), Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018), and Baker et al. (1992). Third, the tone of voice in service delivery is subsequently recognized as an influential determinant of the service impression, which concurs with the findings of Mattila et al. (2003) and Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018). The tonal quality of speech serves as a pivotal aspect of non-verbal communication within service encounters. Fourth, meticulous appearance assumes significance as it contributes to the service impression. This phenomenon is corroborated by

studies by Baker et al. (1994) and Srichookiat and Jindabot (2018), in which the tidy and professional look of service providers, forming part of the broader social environmental factor, exerts a positive sway on consumers. Lastly, promptness in service delivery emerges as an essential element in shaping the service impression, substantiated by research undertaken by Högnäs (2015) and Itani et al. (2020). Enthusiastic staff can be identified by their prompt and responsive interactions with customers, as well as their ability to promptly resolve issues (Itani et al., 2020; Nwulu & Ateke, 2018)

In terms of relative importance, it is evident that all five aspects carry nearly equal significance, akin to essential pillars where no single attribute can be compromised. Therefore, service provision should encompass a complete package, including wholehearted smiles, a gentle and warm-toned verbal greeting, a well-groomed physical appearance, and enthusiastic efforts to address customer concerns promptly.

6. Conclusion

This research focused on studying the influence of the service attributes of front-line hotel employees on customer service impression using Conjoint Analysis. These attributes included smile, tone of voice, physical appearance, greeting, and enthusiasm in services. This research contributes to existing research by examining the relative importance of employees' attributes during service interaction. The findings of the study show that all these aspects significantly influence the service impression, and when considering their relative importance, they can be ranked as follows: (1) the influence of smiling is 23.28%, (2) the influence of greeting is 21.77%, (3) the influence of tone of voice is 18.71%, (4) the influence of attire is 18.65%, and (5) the influence of enthusiasm is 17.59%. An important observation from the analysis of relative importance is that the significance of these characteristics is quite balanced, meaning that each of them holds considerable importance. Therefore, front-line hotel employees should uphold all these attributes during service, as a deficiency in any one aspect immediately reduces the service impression.

7. Suggestions

7.1 Suggestions from research

Front-line hotel employees hold a pivotal role as the initial point of contact for consumers, significantly shaping their first impressions. This research indicates that it is imperative for hotel front-line staff to prioritize the following factors in order of significance during service interactions: smiles,

greetings, tone of voice, physical appearance, and enthusiasm. These elements collectively exert a strong influence on shaping customer impressions. Notably, the act of smiling, representing a form of visual communication, emerges as the most crucial factor (Högnäs, 2015). Nevertheless, upon examining the relative importance values assigned to these variables, it is apparent that all five dimensions bear substantial significance. Therefore, it is advisable in practical terms that front-line hotel employees should exhibit completeness in their service delivery, encompassing the act of smiling, greeting before and after service interactions, utilizing a soft tone of voice, maintaining a professional appearance, and conducting service with enthusiasm.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

Conducting research using conjoint analysis is a method within experimental research, which entails a considerable number of variables. In this research, there are five variables, each consisting of two sub-variable values. If designed through the full factorial design method, it would result in a total of 32 prototypes, which may impose a burden on respondents. Therefore, this study employs a design technique known as Orthogonal Main-Effect Design, which allows the creation of only 8 prototypes. However, it is important to note that this design method has its limitations, as it can only analyze main effects and does not facilitate the analysis of interaction effects. Therefore, future research in this field may explore the interaction effects among variables by employing experimental research methods with full factorial design.

Another consideration is that the study can be further investigated in terms of different traveler groups, as demonstrated by Rhee and Yang (2015). They classified travelers into business, families, friends, couples, and solo travelers, with each group having different preferences and priorities regarding hotel attributes. Similarly, it is anticipated that different groups may favor distinct service attributes provided by the front desk staff. Moreover, the qualitative approach can be utilized to delve deeper into consumers' impressions of service attributes, enhancing more comprehensive understanding.

7.3 Policy recommendations

The findings of this analysis emphasize the need of following national standard practice in frontstaff services. The performance evaluation checklist is used to certify the endorsement of hotel standard achievement. The Thai Hotels Association, for example, provides standard practice and checklist evaluation for hotels to achieve high standards. Thus, the findings can be used in terms of a checklist revision or weighted evaluation scores. In accordance with the study's revelations, frontstaff

personnel are mandated to manifest a baseline proficiency in a predefined array of service attributes executed in a timely fashion, such as smiling, greeting, using a pleasant tone of voice, maintaining a professional appearance, and providing service with enthusiasm. Notably, these characteristics exhibit a near parity in their significance, thereby necessitating an equitable consideration of each within the evaluative framework.

8. References

- Baker, J., Grewal, D., & Parasuraman, A. (1994). The influence of store environment on quality inferences and store image. *Journal of the academy of marketing science*, 22(4), 328-339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070394224002>.
- Baker, J., Levy, M., & Grewal, D. (1992). An experimental approach to making retail store environmental decisions. *Journal of retailing*, 68(4), 445-460.
- Bitner, M.J. (1992), "Servicescapes: the impact of the physical environment surround customers and employees", *Journal of Marketing*, 56(2), 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299205600205>.
- Boonhaow, P. (2020, November 25). *The benefits of smiling. Health scientist, Faculty of Thai Traditional Medicine, Prince of Songkla University*. https://www.ttmed.psu.ac.th/th/blog/268?fbclid=IwAR1MOhoJkucSWay0_oArwhvg20jhpiDezUfu76qvnU_HinZ-wLr2RHOZEI.
- Countryman, C. C., & Jang, S. (2006). The effects of atmospheric elements on customer impression: the case of hotel lobbies. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 18(7), 534-545. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596110610702968>.
- Decharin, P. (2021, July 17). *How can enthusiastic employees bring success to the organization?. Slow Strategy*. <https://url.in.th/JobdH>.
- Easterling, C. R., Leslie, J. E., & Jones, M. A. (1992). Perceived importance and usage of dress codes among organizations that market professional services. *Public Personnel Management*, 21(2), 211-219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009102609202100208>.
- Gabbott, M., & Hogg, G. (2001). The role of non-verbal communication in service encounters: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 17(1-2), 5-26. <https://doi.org/10.1362/0267257012571401>.
- Grandey, A.A. & Gabriel, A.S. (2015), "Emotional labor at a crossroads: where do we go from here?", *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2(1), 23-349. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032414-111400>.

- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., Anderson, R. E., & Tatham, R. L. (2014). *Multivariate data analysis* (7th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Högnäs, S. (2015). *The importance of the first impression in hotel customer service*. Vaasa University of Applied Sciences.
- Itani, O. S., Jaramillo, F., & Paesbrughe, B. (2020). Between a rock and a hard place: Seizing the opportunity of demanding customers by means of frontline service behaviors. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101978.
- Knutson, B.J. (1988), "Ten laws of customer satisfaction", *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 29(3), 14-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001088048802900309>
- Lunkam, P. (2022, November 28). *The outlook for the hotel industry in Thailand 2022-2024*. <https://www.krungsri.com/en/research/industry/industry-outlook/services/hotels/io/hotel-2022-2024>.
- Mattila, A. S., Grandey, A. A., & Fisk, G. M. (2003). The interplay of gender and affective tone in service encounter satisfaction. *Journal of Service Research*, 6(2), 136-143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670503257043>.
- Mayers, A. (2013). *Introduction to Statistics and SPSS in Psychology*. Pearson Education.
- Nanthapaiboon, J. (2008). *Service psychology*. Se-ed education.
- Nickson, D., Warhurst, C., & Dutton, E. (2005). The importance of attitude and appearance in the service encounter in retail and hospitality. *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*, 15(2), 195-208. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520510585370>.
- Nwulu, C. S., & Ateke, B. W. (2018). Frontline employee competence development and responsiveness of quick service restaurants. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 2(10). 1-18.
- Orme, B. K. (2010). *Getting started with conjoint analysis: strategies for product design and pricing research* (2nd ed.). Research Publisher LLC.
- Otterbring, T. (2017). Smile for a while: the effect of employee-displayed smiling on customer affect and satisfaction. *Journal of Service Management*, 28(2), 284-304. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-11-2015-0372>.
- Rao, V. R. (2014). *Applied Conjoint Analysis*. Springer-Verlag.
- Rhee, H. T., & Yang, S.-B. (2015). How does hotel attribute importance vary among different travelers? An exploratory case study based on a conjoint analysis. *Electronic Markets*, 25(3), 211–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-014-0161-y>.

- Sawaengsrithara, P. (2019, July 28). *Theory of 3 factors to create motivation and enthusiasm at work. 3-Factor Theory [Sirota]*. https://drpiyanan.com/2019/07/28/3-factor-theory-sirota/?fbclid=IwAR2j_bzy-pywJqiuCHC3s-ut_NU02zS-wTHSD_vfl30Rh7SN0-jcThQLvfc
- Sirijanusorn, A. (2021, November 21). *The outlook for hotel industry in Thailand 2022-2024*. <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/business/972631>.
- Srichookiat, S., & Jindabot, T. (2018). Salient environmental attributes and their value for small independent grocers. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 35(5), 465-479. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-03-2017-2135>.
- Thai Hotels Association. (2011). *Thailand Hotel Standard Foundation*. <https://www.thaihotels.org/16679475/thailand-hotel-standard-foundation>.
- Thai Hotels Association. (2024). *Hotel Business Operator Sentiment Index*. Thai Hotels Association and Bank of Thailand.

Author's Profile



Name and Surname: Nutchana Perkleang

Highest Education: Undergraduate

University or Agency: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University

Field of Expertise: -

Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000

E-mail: nutchanasukai@gmail.com



Name and Surname: Wuttinan nantawong
Highest Education: Undergraduate
University or Agency: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University
Field of Expertise: -
Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000
E-mail: wuttinan2185@gmail.com



Name and Surname: Supawan Saebao
Highest Education: Undergraduate
University or Agency: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University
Field of Expertise: -
Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000
E-mail: supawan.saebao9745@gmail.com



Name and Surname: Dr.Sanit Srichookiat
Highest Education: Ph.D.
University or Agency: Creative Economy and Social Innovation Research Center,
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University
Field of Expertise: Consumer Behavior
Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000
E-mail: sanit@tsu.ac.th



Name and Surname: Dr.Apinan Aueaungkul
Highest Education: Ph.D.
University or Agency: Creative Economy and Social Innovation Research Center,
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University
Field of Expertise: Management, Supply Chain
Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000
E-mail: apinan.a@tsu.ac.th



Name and Surname: Dr.Wannaporn Boripan
Highest Education: Ph.D.
University or Agency: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Thaksin University
Field of Expertise: Electronic Commerce, Management
Address: 140, Moo 4, Tambon Khoa-Roob-Chang, Muang Songkhla 90000
E-mail: bwannaporn@tsu.ac.th

