

The Effect of Changes in Service Employee Characteristics on Customer Satisfaction According to COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of changes in service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction in the hospitality and tourism-related sectors according to COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand. Previously, it was found that four dimensions of service employee characteristics: personal presentation, product knowledge, service mind, and willingness to help had an impact on customer satisfaction. However, the outcomes had been changed due to the use of PPE during the COVID-19 era. This research applied a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experts in the hospitality and tourism-related field and five customers via Skype, Zoom, and Facetime from July 3rd, 2020, to July 31st, 2020. A convenience sampling technique was used to select samples for data collection. Direct content analysis was utilized for analyzing data. The results showed that since the pandemic, customers are more concerned about their well-being and safety, while service staff had to follow COVID-19 rules and regulations at all costs, thus the perceptions of customers had changed. Service businesses should train their staff to ensure that they have adequate product knowledge and a service-oriented attitude when providing services to maintain customer satisfaction. Moreover, technology-savvy skills, healthcare handling skills, communication skills, and adaptation to changes were needed for service businesses to further proceed in the post-pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Customer Satisfaction, Employee Characteristics, Hospitality and Tourism Industry, New Normal

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Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the world of retail customer service, possibly for good and service industry. In Thailand, tight restrictions on retail and hospitality service began on March 28th, 2020, with the declaration of a state of emergency. The most stringent restrictions lasted only one month, with a staged re-opening beginning in early May (Techakitteranun, 2020). During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, the Thai government must implement restrictions to prevent the spread of the deadly virus, which included the limitation of some aspects of service delivered in hotels, airlines, and restaurants, namely, limited capacity and service approaches (Rajatanavin et al., 2021). This meant that customer service staff now routinely wear personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks and gloves while providing service and maintaining social distancing at all costs for the sake of customers' safety and well-being. Although the lockdown restrictions are generally expected to be lifted by July 1st, 2020, it is expected that the use of PPE and social distancing, will continue for the foreseeable future (Alexander, 2020).

Employee characteristics like dress and grooming, product knowledge, service mind, and willingness to help have been found to influence customer satisfaction with a service encounter. However, the results might be changed due to COVID-19. For example, the adoption of PPE by both service staff and customers will affect perceptions of dress and grooming in unknown ways. Additionally, dress and grooming potentially become less relevant compared to substantive characteristics such as product knowledge, or customers' experience with busier and less knowledgeable service staff may have influenced the perceived value of these characteristics. The purpose of this research is to investigate how the effect of employee characteristics on customer satisfaction has changed following COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand, especially customers in the hospitality and tourism-related sectors such as hotels, airlines, and restaurants. In this regard, it is pivotal for service businesses to keep an eye on the alternation because customers probably perceive service employee characteristics amidst the COVID-19 outbreak differently. Thus, their satisfaction with service employee characteristics can be shifted, which is branded as one of the turning points for service businesses to bounce back in the post-pandemic.

Research Objective

To investigate the effect of changes in service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction in the hospitality and tourism sectors according to COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Literature Review

Several aspects have been shown to influence customer satisfaction, both generally and for Thai customers. Four of the most supported aspects include personal presentation and dress, product knowledge, service mind, and willingness to help.

Personal Presentation

Personal presentation, for example, grooming and dress, is acknowledged to be one of the factors that influence the customer's perception of a customer service provider (Hopkins et al., 2015). Aspects of personal presentation and dress include functional presentation and aesthetic presentation. Functional presentation, according to Hopkins et al. (2015), includes the appropriateness of presentation aspects required to perform a specific role, while aesthetic presentation refers to the visual appearance and attractiveness of dress. Both functional and aesthetic dress and presentation can influence perceptions of competence and ultimately customer satisfaction (Hopkins et al., 2015). Part of this research investigates the extent to which PPE, including masks and gloves, is now considered appropriate dress for retail service staff members. While this would not have been considered appropriate in earlier periods, the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed expectations in this regard. Previous studies have shown that personal appearance does influence customer satisfaction as well. For example, the neatness and hygiene of staff's personal appearance influenced customer satisfaction (Alhelalat et al., 2017). A study in Thai spas also showed that both functional and aesthetic presentation and dress influenced customer satisfaction (Chieochankitkan and Sukpatch, 2014). This included use of PPE as appropriate for a spa environment.

Product Knowledge

The product knowledge of sales and service staff members is a key factor in customer satisfaction with the sales experience in some retail environments, especially those that are high-involvement, complex or unfamiliar (Darian et al., 2005). While customers in high-end retail environments and those making complex product decisions may have a higher expectation for product knowledge from salespeople, Darian et al. (2005) argued that customers at all levels also expect that sales and service staff will have basic knowledge about the products they sell. Development of service or sales staff knowledge is dependent on the learning climate and learning activities within the firm, which trains staff members both on the product or service attributes and on adaptive selling techniques, which are used to fit the sales approach to the customer's knowledge requirements (Wang, 2012). Wang (2012) stated that sales staff knowledge and the use of adaptive selling strategies (facilitated by internal training) influenced customer perceptions of staff knowledge and their satisfaction with the service encounter. However, this effect is culturally contingent. A study on South African consumers showed that staff knowledge was the strongest

factor in the purchase decision, but Americans were more concerned with salesperson respect (Van Scheers, 2015).

Service Mind

Service mind (also called the service mindset) is a set of cognitive beliefs and perspectives held by customer service staff, which combines product or service knowledge with a desire to be of assistance to customers (Bowen, 2009). As Bowen (2009) explained, the service mind is the difference between service staff members who perform their roles adequately and those that perform exceptionally, by going above and beyond what is expected by customers to meet their needs. This could include, for example, taking extraordinary steps to recover from a service failure, or providing for unusual customer needs. These unusual needs are likely to become more common in the post-COVID-19 retail environment, as customers may need adaptations such as touch-free payment or curbside service to avoid exposure. In Thailand, as shown by a study in the hotel industry, the service mind, including friendliness, prompt service and detailed knowledge and confidence, is one of the most frequently expected attributes of service quality (Boon-itt and Rompho, 2012). Furthermore, the development of a service mind is one factor that Thai human resources staff focus on in training (Ngaochay, 2015). Although tests of service mind as a factor in customer satisfaction are relatively rare, the importance of service mind to customers in Thailand suggests that it will have an effect, especially in a disrupted service environment such as the post-COVID-19 retail environment.

Willingness to Help

The final factor considered here is the staff's willingness to help customers. Willingness to help customers is part of the responsiveness dimension of the standard SERVQUAL service quality model, along with going above and beyond to meet customer needs (Zeithaml et al., 1990). In a study of customer service quality and service satisfaction in an Indonesian café showed that responsiveness, including willingness to help, was one of the most important factors in service quality, which had a strong effect on customer satisfaction with the café's service (Zena and Hadisumarto, 2013). A study of Thai Airways also showed that responsiveness and willingness to help influence customer satisfaction and their willingness to recommend the service to others (Ahmadi, 2019). This research proposes that willingness to help is an aspect that may be significantly changed in the post-pandemic retail environment, as the requirements of social distancing and PPE mean that perceptions of willingness to help may be reduced. This could be for several reasons, including less time to serve individual customers and the physical distancing and lack of facial expression due to masking. This research investigates the perception of willingness to help as an aspect of customer satisfaction, following previous research.

Research Framework

The conceptual or research framework (Figure 1) shows the four expected aspects derived from the preliminary research, including one additional aspect that potentially influences customer satisfaction.

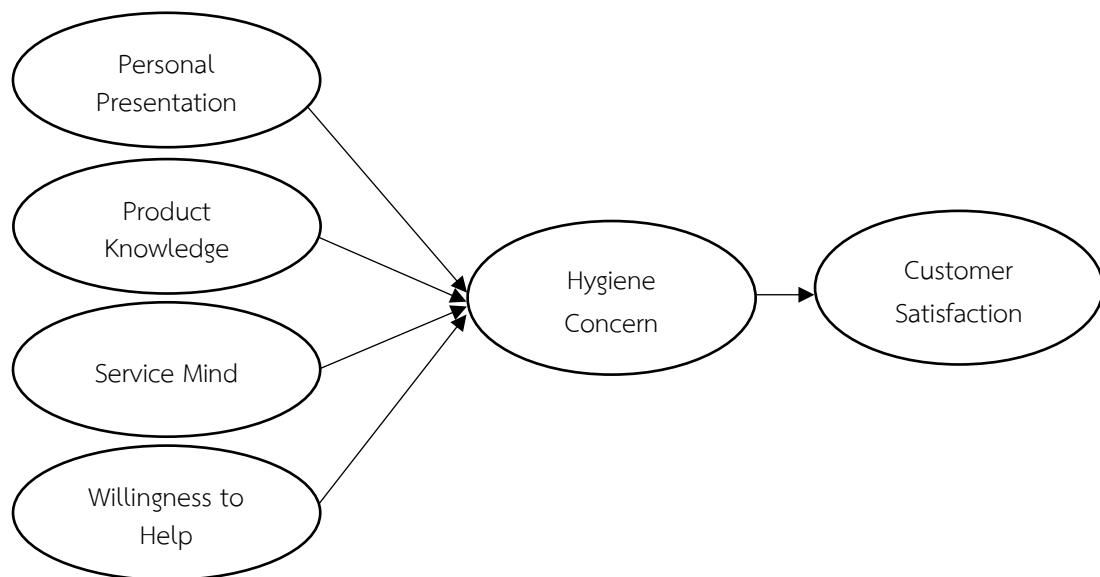


Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Research

Research Design

Qualitative Research Design was applied to investigate the effect of changes in service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction in the hospitality and tourism sectors according to COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Population and Sample

This in-depth study on the issue of the effect of changes in service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction in Bangkok, Thailand utilized a qualitative approach and in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect data from two groups: experts in hospitality and tourism-related fields ($n = 3$) and customers ($n = 5$) because the researcher aimed to investigate the effect of service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction according to the COVID-19 in Bangkok, Thailand, which mainly focused on customers in hospitality and tourism sectors, such as hotels, airlines, and restaurants. Hennink et al. (2016) pointed out that the number of informants usually relies on the research objectives, which meant that the appropriate number of informants for the qualitative method can be small if data is sufficient to cover broad ideas of research topics. In other words, data saturation can be achieved when the researcher cannot gather new ideas from informants.

Research Instrument

The researcher used an in-depth semi-structured interview comprising seven open-ended questions to gather information from experts in hospitality and tourism-related fields, including customers. During the interview process, the researcher wrote down notes, while interviewing informants at their leisure, thus the researcher interviewed experts and customers individually. This shall ensure that this research is an in-depth study from samples.

Table 1 Interview Guide

1. How do you think the service industry has changed since COVID-19?
2. What are you (the customers) looking for from service staff right now?
3. What are your (the customers') expectations for...
a. Staff knowledge?
b. Service mind?
c. Willingness to help?
d. Personal presentation?
4. What other expectations do you (the customers) have for customer service staff right now?
5. How have your (the customers') expectations changed?
6. How do you (the customers) view personal protective wear? (e.g., masks, gloves) How does it affect the service experience?
7. What do you think about the future of the service industry?

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected for the data collection process because they allowed the researcher to balance flexibility and collection of the same data from all informants (Galletta, 2013). This in-depth study from samples utilized convenience sampling techniques to select informants because it was recognized as a non-probability method that can aid the researcher in randomly selecting informants who are available to provide necessary information regarding the research topic. The researcher collected data from hotel guests, passengers, and restaurant customers by coordinating with hotels and restaurants to grant permission for data collection in designed areas, namely, the hotel lobby or restaurant waiting area. However, the researcher conformed to the COVID-19 regulations and made an appointment with informants to conduct interviews online instead, which is relevant to experts who are recruited via telephone contact to conduct interviews online.

Interviews were conducted via Skype, Zoom, and Facetime from July 3rd, 2020, to July 31st, 2020. This occurs because of restrictions on interpersonal contact in Thailand. The interviews began

with the questions within the interview guide (Table 1). Following the completion of the main interview, the customers were asked to describe a service encounter that they recently had and what factors had a positive or negative effect on their customer satisfaction. Experts were asked to review the proposed model and identify any gaps they identified.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using directed content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which was used to identify the consistency of the proposed model and its gaps.

The researcher read the interview transcript and analyzed the passage of text to find out the most frequently used keywords. Then, the researcher selected keywords and coded them to quantify qualitative data by recording the frequency of keywords utilized by informants.

Findings

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth information from three experts in hospitality and tourism-related field and five customers. The main finding of this in-depth study from samples was presented as follows:

1. The change in the service industry since the COVID-19 pandemic

Through the findings, all informants agreed that the emergence of COVID-19 has changed the service industry in several dimensions. Table 2 shows the informants' opinions on which aspects have changed in the service industry since the COVID-19 pandemic. Most informants acknowledged that service businesses must adapt the way to provide services for customers by encouraging staff to wear personal protective equipment such as masks, gloves, or face shields. Staff is also required to ensure social distancing and conform to COVID-19 restrictions implemented by the government. In addition, staff preparation is a crucial step for service businesses to make sure staff possess suitable characteristics to welcome customers in the post-pandemic. Secondly, informants pointed out that service businesses will rely more on innovative technology in the operation, namely, contactless payment, robots, and online platforms to reduce customer waiting time, eliminate unnecessary interaction between staff and customers, and improve operational efficiency. Thirdly, customers prioritized their hygiene and safety during the pandemic because they shift their expectations towards operational efficiency and a prominent level of reliable hygiene and cleanliness protocols, thus service businesses bear a huge responsibility to create trust and confidence among customers by installing and utilizing required hygiene equipment in the operation, such as body temperature checkers and sanitizers.

Table 2 The aspects of the change in the service industry since the COVID-19 pandemic

Changes in the service industry since the COVID-19 pandemic	Frequency
Adaptation (Staff's working style and staff preparation)	6
Technological advancement	4
Hygiene and safety concerns	3

2. Expected service employee characteristics and skills in the post-pandemic

According to the finding, soft skills play a vital role in the service industry and influence customer satisfaction significantly because most informants stated that they expect staff to possess several soft skills in this fast-paced era, as well as hard skills required by staff to perform tasks in the service delivery process.

Table 3 demonstrates informants' perspectives on which aspects of hard and soft skills were important ranging from the most important to the least important. For soft skills, communication skills are the most important skills for customers because they expect staff to be capable of providing the necessary information about the new normal practices and COVID-19 restrictions. Service mind is another soft skill required by customers because the staff must change their working style and conform to COVID-19 restrictions strictly. As a result, they fail to put themselves into customers' shoes in some scenarios, which can cause customer dissatisfaction. The third important soft skill expected by customers is personal presentation skills because customers still expect to seek services from staff who have a good appearance and grooming, make use of a friendly tone of voice, utilize eye contact, and express facial expressions, including body language and gestures to illustrate their willingness to provide service to customers. The capability to use positive language is the fourth soft skill required by customers because the staff is less likely to use the right and appropriate words when dealing with customers in this pandemic. For hard skills, product and job knowledge are the most important skills for customers because they expect to seek services from staff who know how to approach and deliver service to them effectively. Then, it is followed by COVID-19 knowledge, as customers expect staff to be up-to-date and know the necessary details about the COVID-19 disease and methods to avoid exposure. Lastly, healthcare handling skills are an emerging hard skill required by all service businesses to maintain high safety and hygiene standards because customers expect to be safe while using services at hotels, airlines, and restaurants.

Table 3 The level of importance of two dimensions of expected service employee characteristics and skills in the post-pandemic

Dimension	The level of importance (from most important to least important)	Frequency
Hard skills	Product and job knowledge	4
	Up to date (COVID-19 knowledge)	3
	Healthcare handling skills	2
Soft skills	Communication skills	5
	Service mind	5
	Personal presentation skills	3
	Positive language	2

3. Customers' expectations towards staff knowledge, service mind, willingness to help, and personal presentation

The existence of COVID-19 has changed customers' expectations of service employee characteristics. Table 4 illustrates informants' perspectives on which aspects of service employee characteristics were important and influenced customer satisfaction.

Staff Knowledge

According to the COVID-19 outbreak, customers become more health conscious and pay special attention to their hygiene and well-being. Therefore, most informants clarify their expectations of staff knowledge in terms of COVID-19. Staff must have basic knowledge about COVID-19, its symptoms, and restrictions implemented by the government. Moreover, customers expect staff to possess healthcare handling skills and be capable of taking care of healthcare issues if necessary. The staff is also required to inform customers about the new operating procedures and methods to avoid exposure. Thus, COVID-19 knowledge plays a vital role and influences customer satisfaction significantly because customers feel delighted and secure while interacting with knowledgeable staff.

Customers still expect staff to have adequate product knowledge because it is a must for staff to know and be able to answer customers' questions about organizational products and services, including other inquiries. A growth mindset is regarded as another important aspect for experts because staff should be keen to develop their skills simultaneously. Thus, service businesses can adapt to changes and deal with new challenges.

Service Mind

It is a fact that customers perceive their safety and well-being as a priority in the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, it influences customers' perceptions of the service mind because the

perception towards a service mindset is reduced; however, customers still expect staff to perform the service above and beyond their expectations in a new normal way. For instance, service businesses must figure out how to deliver services above and beyond customers' expectations, while concomitantly ensuring customers' well-being. Flexibility is another important aspect because staff lacks a service-oriented attitude during this pandemic because they try to conform to the COVID-19 restrictions without comprehensively analyzing the circumstances. Hence, staff should be flexible and put themselves in customers' shoes to amplify customer satisfaction.

Willingness to Help

Customers strongly understand circumstances and the application of restrictions and new normal practices within service businesses; thus, they reduced their expectations and perception towards staff's willingness to help. However, customers still demand staff to assist them with a condition that staff must wear personal protective equipment and eliminate unnecessary service approaches while interacting with them. Moreover, the staff is expected to continue conforming to new normal practices in the service encounter. In some instances, customers expect staff to display appropriate body language and gestures representing their willingness to help because customers cannot easily notice staff's facial expressions due to masking.

Personal Presentation

The emergence of COVID-19 has influenced customers' perceptions of staff's personal presentation because the staff must wear personal protective equipment (PPE) by covering their faces with masks and face shields in the service delivery process. In this regard, customers perceive personal protective equipment as a functional presentation for staff to perform their tasks because customers would prefer staff to wear PPE while engaging in the service delivery process even if personal protective equipment slightly influences customer experiences because customers would prefer to see staff's facial expressions. On the other hand, aesthetic presentations still play a paramount role in this circumstance because customers still expect to seek services from staff who have pleasant personalities and wear proper uniforms. In addition, the staff should perform appropriate body language and gestures, while interacting with customers to present outstanding grooming and etiquette.

Table 4 The level of importance of four dimensions of service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction

Dimension	The level of importance (from most important to least important)	Frequency
Staff knowledge	Up to date (COVID-19 knowledge)	5
	Product and job knowledge	5
	Be able to answer customers' questions	2
	Growth mindset	2
Service mind	Expressive service	4
	Hygiene and safety concerns	3
	Flexibility	1
Willingness to help	Hygiene and safety concerns	3
	Body language and gestures	1
Personal presentation	Hygiene and safety concerns	2
	Body language and gestures	2
	Pleasant personality	2

Discussion

The main findings of this in-depth study from samples revealed that all four dimensions of service employee characteristics (personal presentation, product knowledge, service mind, and willingness to help) contributed to customer satisfaction following COVID-19 in Thailand. First and foremost, personal protective equipment, including facemask, has been considered appropriate dress from the customers' perspectives because facemask is branded as a symbol of safety and cleanliness during the pandemic, and in doing so, enhances customers' perceptions of employee and company trustworthiness, as well as service quality. The current finding is consistent with Liang and Wu (2022) who declared in their study that facemask has become a pivotal part of hotel front-line employees' appearance to build trust and reliability among customers, which in turn improve customers' perceptions of service quality and lead to customer satisfaction in a foreseeable future. The well-presented and appropriateness of employee dress can also illustrate a magnificent image in the sight of customers, which influences customer satisfaction along with the proper use of body language and gestures in a service encounter (Wang and Lang, 2019).

Secondly, product knowledge, including COVID-19 knowledge and protocols, plays a vital role in a service encounter because customers always expect staff to be knowledgeable in their tasks and possess all necessary information regarding organizational products and services to facilitate customer journeys even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with

Idrus et al. (2021) who acknowledged in their research that staff's product knowledge is a vital employee characteristic that can magnify customer satisfaction in Indonesian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The COVID-19 knowledge and protocols, namely, social distancing, new operating procedures, and healthcare handling techniques, positively influenced customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants due to the greater concern for customers' safety and well-being (Ong et al., 2022).

Thirdly, a service-oriented attitude or service mindset is strongly required to embed with service staff even during the COVID-19 pandemic because a service mindset remains linked to customer satisfaction, as service staff shall understand customer needs and devote themselves to fulfilling those needs by providing attentive service above and beyond customers' expectations. This demonstrates that customers have a high demand to be treated as unique individuals in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, a service-oriented attitude will play a major role in upcoming events. The finding is relevant to Ong et al. (2022), and Kim and Kim (2022) who reported in their respective study that a service mindset is an essential service employee characteristic enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction in hotels and restaurants during the COVID-19 crisis.

Fourthly, willingness to help customers, one of the parts of the responsiveness dimension in the SERVQUAL service quality model, is perceived as a marginal aspect contributing to service quality during the COVID-19 outbreak (Lau et al., 2019; Ong et al., 2022), which is consistent with the current finding because customers minimized their perceptions towards willingness to help aspects due to the hygiene concerns; however, the willingness to help customers still play a role in creating customer satisfaction even if it becomes less relevant when compared to other service employee characteristics, such as personal presentation, product knowledge or a service mindset.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Research Utilization

The results of this in-depth study on the issue of the effect of changes in service employee characteristics on customer satisfaction in Bangkok, Thailand indicated that customer perceptions of service employee characteristics have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, hospitality and tourism practitioners, namely, owners and managers of hotels, airlines, and restaurants can benefit from this study by understanding how to use the model in accessing customer satisfaction after the COVID-19 crisis.

They should establish a protocol to further encourage employees to wear facemasks because hygiene and cleanliness are the top priority from customers' point of view. Furthermore, facemasks should be designed in accordance with the company's uniform to build up a magnificent image in the sight of customers. By contrast, they should provide staff training to train their staff and

assure that they have adequate product knowledge and a service-oriented attitude when providing services to customers. This includes upskilling training to imbue staff with imperative skills to welcome customers in the post-pandemic, for example, technology-savvy skills, healthcare handling skills, communication skills, and adaptation to changes.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

The future study is strongly recommended to draw on quantitative research method utilizing a questionnaire, including numerical value and statistical techniques, namely, descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to bring out different and broader ideas from a substantial number of respondents, which potentially establish a different outlook on this topic.

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