Abstract

It is proposed that passenger-responsive Positive Surface Acting reduces on-plane make for a small interaction. It is hypothesised that national culture that is inclined to deference on power distance would be moderating variables. In this paper we outline the role of national culture, social and individual psychological factors, as keys to facilitating cross cultural service interaction in this Thai specific case study. It is suggested that a preeminent representation of hospitality moderates the relationship of personality traits in relation to cross cultural research of particular emphasis in this study is the connection between culture and gender. This study aims to inform our understanding of service interface in the cross cultural airline environment.

Keywords: Thai culture, national culture, airlines

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Introduction

"Smooth as silk means many things when you fly Thai. It means a smile that comes from the heart not from the handbook, a fresh orchid for every lady passenger…" So starts the voiceover of a 1976 video advertisement for Thai Airways. The first shots include those of a female cabin attendant who performs a traditional *wai* to the camera and then smiles. She is seen in the next shot carefully pinning an orchid to the blouse of a small girl; her movements are graceful as she kneels to do this; there is a gentle smile on her face.

The advertisements for Thai Airways change little over in the past in the last 35 years. They tend to share these emblematic features: female Thai cabin attendants are attired in traditional silk clothes (Thailand is famed for its silk industry), the hands are pressed together in a welcoming gesture that may develop into a *wai*, the head is inclined downwards slightly signifying respect, the face is smiling warmly (the national tourism authority dubbed Thailand 'the land of smiles' (Cooper, 2005).

It can be seen from this brief semiotic analysis that the advertising used by Thai Airways makes prominent use of its female cabin attendants, dressing and adorning them with things Thai (silk and orchids), and engaging them in behaviour that demonstrates recognizably 'Thai' cultural artefacts. This is a positive branding marketing strategy employed in similar ways by other Asian airlines (e.g. Cathay Pacific, Singapore, Malaysia)(Chan, 2000). These national airlines seek to promote themselves through drawing on supposedly 'unique' cultural characteristics blended with 'Asian charm' (Whitelegg, 2002). In airline advertisements, these qualities are embodied in the behaviour of female cabin attendants.

The messages transmitted by these advertisements, about customer service that denotes a personal touch, attention to detail and care, may well be effective. According to large-scale survey research conducted annually with both male and female passengers of all nationalities travelling on numerous routes worldwide (Skytrax 2008, 2009, 2010), Thai Airways and other airlines from Asian countries are amongst the highest rated for passenger service in the world. Research suggests that the quality of in-flight passenger service is linked to repurchase behaviour; i.e. if passengers are happy with the service they are more likely to fly with that airline again (Nyer, 2000; Heracleous, Wirtz & Pangarkar, 2006).

The question we wish to explore here is whether customer service of cabin aircrew in Thai Airways is related to Thai cultural values, as Thai Airways aims to portray that. Is it indeed "A smile from the heart" as their public relations publicity maintains? We will attempt to answer this question by using a qualitative methodology that will focus on exploring the cognitions and behaviour of female cabin attendants at Thai Airways. The paper is structured in the following way. We first review the literature on Thailand and its culture. We then describe our research methodology and then present and discuss our findings.

Thailand and its culture

Popular perceptions of Thai culture sometimes seen through rose-tinted spectacles (Peleggi, 1996) are shaped by an official narrative of the past that is the product of mid to late twentieth century nation-building (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009).

Thailand is a Buddhist country (about 95% of the population is Buddhist) and relatively homogenous, with approximately 84% of the population ethnically Thai. Buddhism deeply permeates Thai culture. The four noble truths underpinning Buddhism are as follows: existence is suffering; suffering is caused by desire; desire needs to be eliminated for suffering to cease. A path to enlightenment based on gained through understanding, appropriate speech, bodily conduct, attentiveness and concentration needs to be followed (Cummings, 1987). Reflection is thus regarded as crucial to truth-seeking amongst Thai Buddhists.

Thailand is a monarchy, and King Bhumipol, who has ruled since 1947, is an enormously respected constitutional head of state, even though his conduct has been criticised recently. Thailand has had a number of deeply loved kings and according to Atmiyanandana & Lawyer (2003), those who have been most revered throughout history have generally been so for their paternalistic benevolence and apparently selfless duty to the country.

When we speak of Thai national culture, it is primarily the culture of the dominant central Thais, actively promoted as a unifying force since the 1950s and supported and sustained by the position of the king as figure head of all Thais. This culture developed in small village communities, where the majority of the population, focused on agriculture, still live (Tapp&Hirch, 2010). In terms of organisation, these village communities are characterized by a patron-client structure, in which the patron protects clients, who reciprocate through showing loyalty and obedience. These structures tend to be male-centred, so that the role of women is relatively subservient, largely confined to fulfilling nurturing roles (Vichit-Vadakan, 2008).

A final facet of Thai culture we wish to draw attention to is that Thailand is proud of its independence; Thailand has managed to remain relatively free of external influence throughout long periods of its history. Perhaps mass tourism of the late 20th century and 21st century lifestyles represent the first real threats to traditional cultural values. Thai cultural values, of which we say more below, include those that directly affect the relationships of Thais with others, including foreigners, as well as those that relate to regulating their own feelings and behaviour. In practice, these two sets of values are intertwined.

A key tenet of the central Thai culture that developed in village communities characterized by a patron-client organizational structure is that it is deeply hierarchical, with age seniority dominating. When they meet for the first time in neutral settings, Thais quickly establish who is older, which influences their subsequent greeting behaviour (Cooper, 2005). Relative hierarchy, establish also by other factors such as wealth and land ownership in rural communities as well as age, also influences language choice. For example, the pronoun "you"

can be expressed in 19 different ways, depending on relative hierarchical position (Chompookum & Derr, 2004).

Showing respect is deeply engrained in Thai culture and there are six core concepts in the Thai language that represent. Firstly, *Krengjai*, experienced by a social inferior expressed behaviour, such as a 'client' in a village community, suggests consideration for others' feelings, obedience, humility and politeness (Cooper, 2005; Nimanandh & Andrews, 2009). *Bunkhun,* in contrast, is a form of gratitude expressed by someone in a higher social position, a 'patron' in the same community. *Hai Kiad* is a way of treating people gently and respectfully by avoiding confrontation and criticism (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997), *Nam Jai* is about showing love and kindness to others without expecting anything in return, while *Hen Jai* involves being sympathetic and demonstrating a willingness to listen. Lastly, *Sam Ruam* relates to self-control, similar to the British stiff upper lip (Toews and McGregor, 1998).

In terms of managing the self, key concepts include *Jai Yen*, keeping a cool heart, as opposed to the opposite, *Jai Rawn*, showing ill-temper, which is disapproved of, as it breaks the rules of respect outlined above. Getting angry is one way of losing face, *Naa Khaai,* a situation that is avoided where possible, as it disturbs the social harmony that is aspired to. In Thai culture, happiness, as embodied in the carefree feeling of *sanuk,* is important; excessive seriousness is frowned upon. The ability to 'let go' is regarded as important too: this is expressed in the phrase *Mai Pen Rai,* which literally means 'it doesn't matter' (Atmiyanandana & Lawyer, 2003). While these traditional values are rooted in Thai rural life; they are also embedded in Thai corporate culture, as we now explain.

Research suggests that Thai corporate culture largely reflects traditional cultural values. "We are born with *Kreng Jai* and *Bunkhun.* They are inside our heart", declares an executive in Hoecklin & Payne (1995), cited by Atmiyanandana & Lawyer (2003, p. 237). However, it should be noted that, there is also a Chinese element to Thai corporate life, one which is largely absent from rural life: "The Chinese play a critical role in the Thai economy, one that far exceeds their numbers" (Atmiyanandana & Lawyer, 2003, p. 230). A consequence of this is that Chinese cultural values are deeply intertwined with the Thai in the corporate world. While many of these are similar, for example the social networks that also feature in Thai rural life and a shared religion (many of the ethnic Chinese are Buddhist), there are some differences. *Sanuk*, for example, is less tolerated in the business world. Furthermore, according to Atmiyanandana & Lawyer (2003), there is a relative 'softness' about their own culture in the perceptions of many Thais; this "mandates benevolence and caring on the part of employers towards their subordinates" (p. 245).

The position of women in the corporate world is similar in some ways to that of their position in village life, though some researchers, e.g. Yukongdi (2006), have suggested that progress has been made in recent decades. As Yukongdi acknowledges, however, while nearly two-thirds of women work now, a proportion that is higher than in many countries, and, indeed, while Thai women enjoy equal rights under the 1997 constitution, in practice gender stereotyping in the workplace is still prevalent. A glass ceiling prevents women from reaching higher level posts (Iwanaga, 2008), though women are more likely to advance if they are middle rather than working class and have had a good education (Yukongdi, 2006).

Vichit-Vadakan (2008) concludes, however, that "since traditional Thai society has socialized women to serve and care for family members, service, care and nurturing have become ingrained characteristics of Thai women" (p. 31). We will explore this issue now in relation to one particular corporation, Thai Airways, and the work of its cabin attendants.

Research Methodology

To address our main research question, we adopted the following approach: To explore the cognitions of female cabin attendants on Thai Airways, semi-structured interviews were used. To explore their behaviour, non-participant observations were conducted. These two research methods used together allowed for a certain degree of triangulation (Stake, 1995), although a limitation of the research was that the sample of cabin attendants who were interviewed did not include those who were observed.

To collect observational data, the first-named researcher, who has experience of working in the airline industry, kept an open narrative record while flying as a passenger on long-distance Thai Airways flights; there were ten observational flights in total. The interviews were conducted with 16 cabin attendants identified through a snowball method; an initial contact (a friend of the first-named researcher) suggested colleagues who might agree to take part in the research, who then suggested others. These interviews were conducted subject to the conventional ethical code, thus participants were promised anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. The interviews were held in quiet, relaxed surroundings while cabin attendants were off-duty. the first-named researcher, who shares with the participants a similar background and ethnicity and is also a woman, was able to establish rapport. Questions focused on cabin attendants' perceptions of their work, their role and their experiences.

Research methods considered and rejected included inviting cabin attendants to engage in think-aloud protocols while engaged in their work (this may have added to their stress); holding debriefing interviews following observations was also considered impractical: at the end of a long flight, cabin attendants need to relax, may feel disoriented and often have set routines before their next journey. In addition, observations from the perspective of an airline passenger can only focus to a slight extent on any particular cabin attendant's work. focus group interviews with the whole crew would have been an option, but again one difficult to arrange. So, to address practicalities, the research methods used represent an inevitable compromise.

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