Stereotyping - predispositions, activations and applications in cross-cultural service interactions: views from services providers in Malaysia

Abstract

This research was set within the context of luxury hotel in Malaysia where most of the service providers are non-western. The aim of the paper was to explore for stereotyping patterns in cross-cultural service interactions. In-depth interviews and written diaries were used to develop deep narratives for the patterns of stereotyping adopted by the service providers. Predispositions, activations and applications of stereotype were examined considering implicit theory and power-distance. Associations between the service providers' culture and position and their tendency to activate and apply stereotypes were found. The findings highlight the increasing complexity in cross-cultural service interactions within the Southeast Asian region. This study provides management with insights into service interactions in the contemporary context of Asia where socio/economic and cultural boundaries are blurring. Practical and theoretical recommendations are made for both management and further academic research on this issue, which has potential to influence guest satisfaction and ultimately business viability.

Key words

Cross-cultural interactions, implicit theories, stereotype activation, stereotype application, service providers

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Introduction

Stereotypes, first described as the 'pictures in our heads' of others, simplify how people think about human groups (Lippmann, 1922). As widespread beliefs which are applied to judge others, stereotypes enable humans to justify the categorisation of people into social groups (Operario and Fiske, 2008; Jost and Banaji, 1994). However, stereotypes are often based on limited and, at times, inaccurate information (Rothbart and Taylor, 1992). Within the context of tourism, Ward and Berno (2011) suggest that stereotypes greatly impact both service providers' attitudes towards guests and guest satisfaction. Furthermore, in a study on stigmatism (which is an ensemble of stereotypes) in the Netherlands, Moufakir (2015) identified that the quality of Arab-Muslim tourism experiences '…is both undermined and reduced, if not by direct stigma, it is through stigma by association' (p.27). Similarly, in their study of Jewish tourists who had visited Holocaust sites in Poland, Podoshen, Hunt and Andrzejewski (2015) concluded that exchanges that are predicated on stereotypes and shared with fellow tourists have potential to create negativity among the members of tour groups and activate more widespread stereotyping.

A number of scholars have highlighted that analysis of stereotyping in tourism settings is underexplored (Wu and Pearce, 2012; Huang and Lee, 2010). For example, although Moufakir (2015) and Podoshen, Hunt and Andrzejewski's (2015) recent research explores stereotyping from the non-Westerner's, much of the extant literature on stereotyping appears to put forward a Western tourists' view of stereotyping. In addition, there appears to be a void with regard to presenting the view that service providers have of stereotyping. Further, Wu and Pearce (2012) point out that little is known about stereoptyping in a Asian context. Cross-cultural interactions between Asians are on the rise (Guo et al., 2001) attributed to an increase in Asians undertaking travel in Asia (Xiao-Lu and Pras, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2007). Indeed, McKercher (2008) suggests that negative stereotyping has increased as a result of the influx of tourists to Asia from countries such as China and India in particular. Thus, gaining additional information about stereotyping in tourism settings in Asia appears to be a worthy line of inquiry.

The aim of our study is to explore, from the service provider's view, for stereotyping patterns in cross-cultural service interactions within the context of tourism. As such, we focussed on service interactions in the five-star hotel context where affluent guests are evident (Presbury et al., 2005) and income gaps between service providers and guests prevail (Sommer and Carrier, 2010). Our fieldwork was undertaken in Malaysia which has a unique population structure consisting mainly of three ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians (Henderson, 2003). We further focused on Malaysia because it has the highest power distance index score in the world, even in comparison to other Asian countries, such as India, Japan and Hong Kong (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Johnson et al., 2005). Finally, in Malaysian five-star hotels, in recent years the number of Asian guests has also increased (Tourism Malaysia, 2013). Hence, it was thought that this context would be appropraite to explore stereotyping in service interactions.

Our study is exploratory and qualitative in design with the intent being that it will provide a platform for further research. The paper now continues with a review of the relevant literature on stereotyping and specifically focuses on the stereotyping process that involves predispositions, activation and application (Devine, 2001; Fiske et al., 2002). Propositions are put forward to synthesise the literature and guide the research design and analysis. The details of our methodological approach and data collection methods are provided, followed by the findings and our conclusions. Recognising the limitations of our research, recommendations are then made for further research on this topic.

Stereotyping: predispositions, application and activation

Stereotyping is associated with negative attributions such as rudeness, unfriendliness and control, as well as positive attributes such as politeness, intelligence and shyness (Bastian and Haslam, 2006; Jarvis and Petty, 1996; Pratto et al., 1994). Stereotypes may be positive in the sense that they help to guide brief encounters by injecting a degree of predictability into interactions with each person attempting to meet the expected needs of others (Čivre et al., 2013). Nevertheless, in service interactions, stereotyping and its outcomes are prone to being negative (Reisinger, 2009). Tourists who feel judged by a service provider, for example, may retaliate, complain, not return to the destination or spread negative word of mouth. Further, service providers might stereotype their guests and depending on the valence of the stereotype, may lead to adverse interactions that impede service expectations (Price and Arnould, 1999) and affect

customer satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2007). As such, it is important to understand how stereotypes come into play and how they influence behaviour in this setting.

Stereotypes often emerge for service providers as soon as they are thinking about tourists from other parts of the world (Moufakkir, 2011). Stories or events that have been stored in their memories may be retrieved (Operario and Fiske, 2008), providing the 'triggers' for stereotype applications. That is, the act of applying stereotypes is preceded by predispositions and activation. This process has been perceived as 'thinking categorically about others', referring to activation and application of social categories stored in a person's memory (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). Thus, the stereotyping process involves the following sequence: stereotype predisposition > stereotype activation > stereotype application (Devine, 2001; Fiske et al., 2002), as presented in Figure 1.
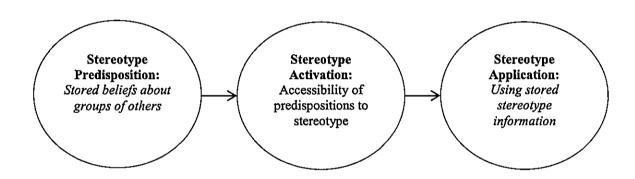
Stereotype Predisposition: *Stored beliefs about groups of others* → **Stereotype Activation:** Accessibility of predispositions to stereotype → **Stereotype Application:** *Using stored stereotype information*

Figure 1: The sequence of stereotype activation to application

While most people have predispositions to stereotype and the information they have stored about a group is retrievable, there is little evidence to suggest that predispositions come to mind when they interact with a member of the stereotyped group (Kunda et al., 1997; Kunda and Spencer, 2003). Rather, their behaviour relies on *stereotype activation* (Gilbert and Hixon, 1991; Kunda and Sinclair, 1999). Stereotyope activation deals with the accessibility of predispositions to stereotype in one's mind (Kunda and Spencer, 2003). While predispositions may remain in a dormant condition, they can be readily surfaced upon activation during an interaction with a member of a stereotyped group (Kunda and Spencer, 2003).

Some scholars argue that sterotype activation can be knowlingly surpressed (Lepore and Brown, 1997; Blair and Banaji, 1996). However, most agree that stereotype activation is a spontancous occurance (Devine, 1989; Macrae et al., 1994). Stereotype activation may, therefore, be related to perceptions of the dynamism of human attributes (Levy et al., 1998). Thus, the way people view humans, or their implict theories about humans, is relavant to stereotype application (Levy et al., 1998; Levy et al., 2006).

Stereotyping and implicit theories

Implicit theories suggest that one's beliefs help to accept or reject available knowledge and influence social judgements and actions (Levy, 1999). For example, one's beliefs can influence whether an individual believes human attributes are fixed or malleable which then shapes perceptions and social experiences (Hong et al., 2001). One's view about human attributes is thought to place them in either an entity-theoriest or an incremental-theoriest category (Chiu et al., 1997; Levy et al., 1998). Those in the entity-theorist category assume that the personal attributes of individuals are fixed and predictable (Dweck et al., 1995; Levy et al., 1998). Entity-theorists make extreme judgements about others (Dweck et al., 1995) and are prone to engage in stereotyping (Levy et al., 1998). As such, with an entity-theorists' way of thinking, strong attributes are inferred from sparse knowledge which are actively and confidently used to predict an individual's behaviour (Levy et al., 1998). Thus, in situations of cross-cultural service interactions, entity-theorists service providers' predispostions to stereotype will be quickly recalled and activated. That is, service providers will attribute stereotypes to the service interactions they can recall. As opposed to recal events individually, they recall cross-cultural interactins in terms of how groups of people from a particual location behave as well as how they would respond.

Thus, we propose the following:

P1: In the case of service providers who have an entity-theorist's style of thinking, stereotype activation will occur frequently.

In contrast, those with an incremental-theorist's way of thinking hold the assumption that the personal attributes of individuals are not fixed but are malleable (Dweck et al., 1995). That is, incremental-theorists believe human attributes are dynamic and less predictable subscribing to the view that an individual's behaviour can change over time and across situations (Levy et al., 1998). Studies show that incremental-theorists make fewer inferences on the attributes of others and are less likely to stereotype (Chiu et al.,

1997). In addition, their inferences about others are likely to be positive (Erdley and Dweck, 1993). In this case, predispositions to stereotype may not be recalled by service providers in cross-cultural interactions. Rather, service providers with a incremental-theorists' style of thinking will approach each service interaction uniquely without neccesarily applying stereotpyical beliefs.

Thus, we propose the following:

> P2: In the case of service providers who have an incremental-theorist's style of thinking, stereotype activation will occur infrequently.

Application of stereotypes in cross-cultural interactions

While predispositions to stereotype relate to stereopype recall, activation may not result in application. For example, while a service provider may recall a stereotype (e.g. about how Chinese tourists behave), this does not mean that they will use this information while interacting with Chinese tourists. Thus, it is important to examine how stereotypes are applied in addition to how they are activated. Activated predispositions to stereotype may or may not result, in the application of that stereotype (Sassenberg and Moskowitz, 2005). Stereotype application is, therefore, thought to be controllable (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986; Banaji and Hardin, 1996; Devine, 2001; Moskowitz and Li, 2011). A number of factors may inhibit stereotype application (Kunda and Spencer, 2003) such as one's level of education (Dambrun et al., 2002) or anti-discrimination legislation (Brown, 2011).

Culture is said to influence social interaction through stereotyping under in-group (i.e. those with cultural-similarity) or out-group (i.e. those with cultural-dissimilarity) conditions (Fiske et al., 2002). Generally, cultural similarity implies congruency and affinity (Hartel and Fujimaoto, 2000; Yoo and Sohn, 2003) and hints towards positive interactions, whereas, cultural dissimilarity implies non-congruency, strangeness and hints towards negative interactions (Neuliep and Ryan, 1998). For example, when people meet new people or when they face new situations under cultural dissimilarity, they may stereotype, leading to the discouragement of social interactions (Reisinger, 2009).

Within a Southeast Asian context, a number of similar cultures can be found between, as well as within, national borders. Within a country, people may have different identities and feelings of belonging to one

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group or another. For example, the Taiwanese hold different identities and feelings of belonging to China (Chen et al., 2014). Further, Malaysian Muslim tourists perceive China as a more familiar destination than Korea or Japan, but they still hold more favourable images of Korea and Japan (Kim et al., 2015). The perception of familiarity towards China may be a result of the large minority of Chinese Malaysians (Mura and Tavakoli, 2014). However, Mura and Tavakoli (2014) point out that there is a certain level of tension between the three ethnic groups within Malaysia (Chinese, Malay and Indians). Thus, familiarity of a culture is not necessarily related to favourable images or positive stereotyping. In cross-cultural service interactions, service providers may apply positive or negative stereotypes based on their own ethnic identity as well as the (perceived) identity of the guest. For example, Malays may apply stereotypes of Chinese tourists that Chinese- or Indian-Malaysians may not apply.

To explain the influence of culture on social interactions, scholars refer to a number of dimensions, one being the notion of power distance (Triandis et al., 1988; Hofstede, 2001). The level of power distance represents the "inequality" in societies (Hofstede and Bond, 1988) and helps to explain how people of different levels of social status interact in society (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to Hofstede, Asia, and Malaysia in particular, is known as a high power distance society (Hofstede, 1983), where inequality is more readily accepted and people have their 'rightful place' in society (Hofstede, 1983).

In a tourism context, Magnini, Kara, Crotts and Zehrer (2012) found that travellers from high power distance cultures were less likely to write about positive experiences of service interactions in their travel blogs than their low power distance counterparts. This does not mean that high power distance tourists do not have positive service experiences, however, it suggests that in service interactions between Asians, the often lower status of the front-line service providers necessitates a higher level of service as Asian guests are sensitive to status (Mattila, 1999). Thus, the disparity and assertion of power distance between front-line service providers and guests may leave front-line staff applying negative stereotypes on their Asian guests. Indeed, it is understood that stereotyping is intensified when hosts and guests are unequal in socio-economic status (Sommer and Carrier, 2010).

The high level of power distance in Asia suggests that negative interactions could prevail with people from similar cultures. In our context, Asian service providers of lower rank may be motivated to differentiate

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themselves from other Asian guests because of a perceived gap in social status. Thus, negative stereotyping could take place as a result of status sensitivity and, feelings of being looked down upon. Unlike implicit theories, which we propose will influence predisposition activations, we expect that power distance, as dimension of culture, will likely affect stereotype application. This is because culture is related to how people are expected to act within society, as opposed to what they have experienced for themselves or their personal thinking patterns.

Thus, we propose the following:

P3: When Asian service providers interact with guests from similar cultures, stereotype applications will likely relate to:

a. negative service interactions when the power distance is high; and

b. positive service interactions when the power distance is low.

In the following, we outline the method we applied to address these shortcomings in light of our research propositions.

Method

Given the exploratory nature of our research aim, we adopted a qualitative approach to our study (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). We used narrative inquiry to explore the Asian service providers' predispositions, activations and applications of stereotypes, as stereotyping may be evaluated through stereotype narratives (Kawakami et al., 2002; Kunda and Spencer, 2003). Narrative inquiry is 'a research orientation that directs attention to narratives as a way to study an aspect of society.... and is a means of finding meaning in the stories people use, tell, and even live' (Ospina and Dodge, 2005: 145). Thus, it provides the research participant's perspective of their lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1998). Narrative inquiry has been used to explain complex tourism phenomena such as personal growth and interaction between hosts and diverse landscapes (Caton and Santos, 2007; Moscardo, 2010).

Research participants

We used purposive sampling and a snowballing technique (Bryman and Bell, 2007) to recruit service providers in various roles in a five-star hotel in Malaysia. All participants had at least three years of work experience in the hospitality industry in Asia, were from a high power distance cultural heritage (Chinese,

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Indian and Malay) and held a range of service roles namely concierge attendant, front-desk attendant, supervisor and assistant manager. We looked at different job-roles because the entity-theorist and incremental-theorist style of thinking may be related to volume of guests the individual participant has to deal with. Participants in supervisory/managerial roles may deal with fewer guests and more complex and longer lasting guest-host communication. As such, they may recall on their prior interactions with guests from certain countries and lean towards an incremental-throrists way of thinking because they had longer interactions. Front-line service providers on the other hand, may lean towards an entity-theorists way of thinking because they deal with larger numbers of guests for a shorter period of time on a day-to-day basis. This may result in front-line staff being more prone to activate a predisposition to stereotype as a means of helping them to serve a large amount of guests more efficiently.

We recruited six service providers which meets Guest, Bunce and Johnson's (2006) recommendation to achieve saturation and variability in qualitative research. Other studies that have aimed for richness in narrative, such as Reitmanova and Gustafson (2008) and Safe, Joosten and Molineux (2012), have also reported findings with saturation and variability with this number of research participants. Hence, we commenced with this number as an initial target and if saturation was not met, we planned to recruit additional participants.

Data collection

Participants were asked to keep a diary for four weeks prior to a scheduled face-to-face in-depth interview. Through unlimited responses (Gabbott and Hogg, 1999) in their own language (Stauss and Weinlich, 1997), it was thought that the diary approach would assist the research participants to recall and retell memorable accounts of their lived experiences (Douglas et al., 2009). We asked participants to frame their diary entries around their memorable cross-cultural service interactions. Thus, we applied the principles of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954), which is a qualitative technique designed to collect, content analyse and classify data relating to human behaviour (Flanagan, 1954). CIT has been widely used in service research since Bitner et al. (1990)' seminal work in this area. The diaries were reviewed by the researchers prior to the interviews to provide insights into the range of cross-cultural service interactions. Interviews were semi-structured, commencing with demographic questions, followed by discovery-oriented open-ended questions (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interviews were conducted with

individual participates and on average were 50 minutes in duration. To additionally prepare for the in-depth interviews, participant observations of service interactions were undertaken *in situ* to understand the context in which the research was undertaken.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Close reading of the transcripts enabled us to develop narratives for each participant. We then reviewed the narratives for evidence of stereotype activation and application by analysing the narratives for: 1) stereotyping attributions, such as rudeness, politeness, and shyness, as put forward by Bastian and Haslam (2006), Jarvis and Petty (1996), Pratto et al., (1994); and 2) for stereotype activations based on the two comparative implicit theories that participants could potentially exhibit. We totalled the number of activations for each narrative and using the medians for each, we then categorised the narratives as being entity-theorist and incremental-theorists (Hong et al., 2001; Dweck et al., 1995).

Findings and discussion

Table 1 presents a summary of the analysis of the activations and application of stereotyping. The participants are represented equally by gender, are diverse in ethnicity, and hold various job positions.

Table 1: Summary of activations and application of stereotyping

Entity theorists	Meng, Mid 30s	Male	Chinese	Concierge	47	39
	Rani, Early 30s	Female	Indian	Front-desk	39	29
	Ellen, Early 40s	Female	Chinese	Front-desk	36	28
Incremental theorists	Shila, Mid 40s	Female	Malay	Supervisor	13	23
	Steven, Early 30s	Male	Indian	Supervisor	19	18
	Ricky, Early 40s	Male	Chinese	Ass. Man.	26	10

Stereotype activation

We found that during stereotype activation, participants were careful to retrieve predisposition information on specific cultural groups. In this respect, our findings subscribe to the view that sterotype activation is not spontaneous but eventuates while participants are consciously aware of their predsipostions (Lepore and Brown, 1997). For example, Ellen who holds a front-desk role and has a Chinese ethnic background said:

> *...my colleagues told me that guests from India usually travel in large numbers and they love to shop - ending up having excess baggage - to me they also have poor time management that often results in late check-in and check-out.*

Rani, another service provider with an Indian ethnic background elaborated on how she has formed her views of guests from the Middle East:

> *...we learn from others* [colleagues] *that have faced the same situation in dealing with visitors from the Middle East...Usually they had misplaced the items in their room or their family have them but they thought was stolen.*

Further, the activation of stereotypes was seen as being related to the participant's view of human traits. That is, whether they held an entity-theorist or an incremental-theorist style of thinking. In the former, the view assumes that human traits are fixed, which we attributed to frequent activation of stereotypes (P1). In the latter, the view assumes that human traits are dynamic, which we attributed to infrequent stereotype activation (P2). Amongst our participants, Meng from concierge dealt with a large number of guests on a regular basis. Meng would frequently activate predispositions to stereotype and he reflected an entity-

theorist style of thinking asserting that human traits are fixed based on culture. For example, Meng rationalised why Chinese act as they do in public areas:

> ... *The Chinese guests in tour groups speak very loudly in the hotel lobby during hotel*
> *check-in. I think it's part of their culture.*

In contrast, we found service providers, who showed attributes of an incremental-theorist, less frequently recalling stereotypes. This leads us to suggest that these service providers may be reluctant to activate a predisposition to stereotype. Our analysis supports the view that not everyone succumbs to stereotype activation. In the small number of incidences when this group of service providers did apply stereotypes, their stereotyping was mainly positive. For example, Ricky, an assistant manager with Chinese ethnic background, was not dealing with a large number of guests during the course of his working day. Ricky activated fewer stereotypes than Meng in his diary as well as interview. When he activated stereotypes it was often in a positive light, he even suggested that people from the same culture have different traits. For example, Ricky spoke about the dynamic traits of Japanese guests followed by positive stereotyping:

> ...*I have encountered different types of Japanese guests...not all behave the same way... Most*
> *Japanese are known to be fast and efficient...but they are also well mannered and politely*
> *request for things to be done.*

This suggests that job roles may have an influence on stereotypes beliefs and behaviours. It also suggests that the likelihood of activating a stereotype is higher in a situation of cross-cultural interaction when the distance of power is not as great. This leads us to the last part of the analysis about the influence of power distance on how stereotypes are applied.

Stereotype application

Based on the perception of distance in power and cultural distinctiveness, we analysed how stereotypes were applied. P3 above suggests that when Asian service providers interact with guests from similar cultures their stereotype applications will likely be frequent when the power distance is high and infrequent when the power distance is low. Our analysis of the service providers' narratives revealed an association

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between stereotyping patterns and power distance and the need to distinguish oneself from other groups in society. Further, the perceived distance in power between the service provider and the guest seemed to influence how stereotypes were applied and the outcome of the cross-cultural service interactions.

Our analysis revealed patterns in the narratives. Firstly, front-line staff would apply stereotypes more frequently than those in managerial roles. We found that negative stereotyping under cultural-similarity only occurred in the case of the front-line service providers and not in the case of the service providers in managerial positions. As for stereotyping under cultural-dissimilarity, front-line service providers had a mix of positive/negative stereotyping but for service providers in managerial positions, stereotyping was typically positive even under conditions of cultural-dissimilarity. Specifically, we saw negative stereotyping occur between Malaysian Chinese front-line service providers and Chinese guests from Singapore and China, as well between Malaysian Indian service providers and guests from India. Meng who has a Chinese ethnic background who works in concierge, commented on his negative interactions with guests from China:

> *I felt we are different. Due to their new wealth the Chinese are big spenders and they like to be lavish. They like to 'show-off' and are very demanding...they think that all Chinese should be able to speak Mandarin...but they themselves cannot even speak English...*

Meng seemed to have developed an indifferent attitude towards the Chinese guests. Not able to converse in Mandarin himself, his understanding of the Chinese not being able to speak or understand English had further prompted him to *"not be bothered with taking time to explain things"* to the Chinese guests. A similar view was echoed in Ellen's narrative (front-desk, Chinse Malaysian), who also had negative interactions with this group of guests. For example, she said: *"Chinese [guests] are loud and rude and like to show they have branded things...like clothes and bags..."* Later, she spoke negatively about Chinese guests from Singapore:

> *...Singaporeans Chinese are most demanding...hoping to get things their way...they usually like to start with "I demand to speak to your manager..."*

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Ellen seemed unenthusiastic and reticent about what she perceived as ill-mannered Chinese guests' who were also ostentatious. Her interactions with them were superficial and she seemed to want to avoid them as much as she could. Regarding the Chinese Singaporean guests, Ellen appeared guarded and unforthcoming when dealing with them. She further acted cautiously in case of a possible complaint to the manager.

In another example of stereotyping resulting to negative interaction under cultural-similarity, Rani of Indian ethnic background who works in front-desk, commented about guests from India:

> *I think Indians still emphasise status, even when they travel.... they do not like to be served by a fellow Indian. I don't know, somehow they feel like it's an insult.*

Rani's position indicates her self-consciousness as a Malaysian of Indian descent. This, in turn, would likely promote negative service interactions when she deals with Indian guests. To avoid the embarrassment of rejection from Indian guests, she tries to avoid serving them because she was cognisant of how these service interactions with culturally similar guests would likely lean towards being negative.

The *distinctiveness principle* (Brewer and Harasty, 1996; Brewer and Gardner, 1996) assists to explain this behaviour. The *distinctiveness principle* suggests that that under conditions of cultural-similarity there is a tendency for people to aim to differentiate themselves from the larger common collective identity. In our study, it seems that differentiation was more evident when there was a difference in socio-economic status between guests and service providers. While some hotel guests appear to distance themselves from the service providers with the same ethnic backgrounds, the service providers were attuned to this. Indeed, they themselves applied a stereotype to these guests as they expected them to behave in this manner. Hence, under these conditions a virtuous cycle of stereotyping appears to emerge.

We found that negative stereotyping occurs less often between Asian service providers and guests who were culturally dissimilar. Further, when stereotyping did occur it was more varied in terms of its valance. For example, in the case of front-line service providers, stereotyping was both positive and negative. For

example, Meng, in concierge and of Chinese ethnic background, commented negatively on the culturally dissimilar Middle-Eastern guests:

> *Language is an issue with them* [Middle-Eastern guests]. *They don't understand English very well and get upset easily. During check-in, we often need a translator to come and explain to them in order to verify things and calm them down.*

In contrast, Rani, who also works in front-desk and is of Indian ethnic background, had favourable stereotypes of Western guests when she said that they *"are more understanding... they don't expect you to speak English well. If you do, they are impressed."*

Meng's position would likely be associated with negative service interactions as the stereotyping has given him an excuse to avoid having a proper conversation with the Middle-Eastern guests and to skip the formal information normally provided. In contrast, Rani's view of Westerners would more likely promote positive service interactions since she is usually candid and open when interacting with Western guests. English-speaking Western cultures are generally less focused on power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010), which may be related to why Rani did not feel the 'emphasis on status' as she did with guests from India.

When we examined the managers' narratives, we found that whether their interactions were under conditions of cultural-similarity or cultural-dissimilarity, they did not apply stereotyping often and when they did, they were mostly positive. For example, Ricky, an Assistant Manager of Chinese background commented on Korean guests saying that they *"...are shy...maybe due to language [proficiency]. They seldom demand or bother us to do things..."* and Steven who is a supervisor of Indian ethnic background commented on Western guests:

> *...Westerners, and particularly the Americans, are very friendly. They are curious about your culture and usually take the time to talk to you to get to know more about the place and culture...*

Ricky and Steven, as well as Sheila, who were all in managerial roles, seemed to be reluctant to activate stereotypes of the guests. However, when they did it was often in a positive light – reflecting positive

service interactions. Ricky seemed sympathetic towards Korean guests and their language barriers and as such would go to extra lengths to provide assistance to them. Further, Steven appeared to be inhibited and open during his interactions with Western guests and, particularly with American guests. Thus, it seems staff in managerial positions perceives that there is less of a distance between them and the guests and as such reported more positive cross-cultural service interactions.

Conclusion and implications

Our first research proposition proposed that an entity-theorist's style of thinking would be related to frequent activation of stereotypes as a result of perceiving human traits as fixed. Our findings suggest that service providers who are in the entity-theorists group assume that certain guests, such as the Chinese, are all alike, do not speak English and are demanding. This impacts their approach to serving them in that they do not take the time to explain things to them. Although stereotyping seem to assist our participants to manage their cross-cultural service interactions, their approach may create less than optimum service experiences for their guests. This could have long-term negative effects on the tourism industry as the literature reminds us that stereotyping affects tourists' experience and satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2007).

We found that service providers in the entity-theorists group also have high levels of stereotype activations. This suggests that this group readily acts on their predisposition to stereotype. Frequent application of stereotypes was most prominent for staff in front-line positions, which also deal with a number of guests each day. These staff members are also in lower paid roles in the hotel meaning that there is a greater difference in social status between them and the guests. Thus, the need for distinction emerges. This situation may further complicate the situation of perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Our second proposition was related to an incremental-theorist style of thinking - we proposed that stereotypes would be activated less frequently because this group perceives human traits as malleable. The findings highlight that incremental-theorists service providers stereotype less frequently. Also, if they did apply stereotypes, they were more often positive than negative. Noticeably, the service providers in this group were in managerial/supervisor roles. Thus, the power distance between them and the guests might be less than is the case of other employees. However, it may also be the case that they were reluctant to share negative stereotypes with their colleagues because of their positions.

The final proposition suggested that when Asian service providers interact with guests from similar cultures, stereotype applications are frequent when the power distance is high and infrequent when the power distance is low. Thus, our findings support that view that culture influences stereotype patterns (Norenzayan et al., 2002). However, our findings contradict earlier suggestions that positive interactions are more likely to occur in instances of cultural-similarity (Adler and Graham, 1989). In contrast to Ho (1993), positive service interactions were more frequent towards non-Asians than Asians. This finding may be attributed to the relatively rapid growth in wealth amongst many Asian tourists (Pinches, 2005). The demonstrable behaviour of Asian guests, who have newly acquired wealth, may lead culturally similar service providers to feel that the 'established' hierarchies of power are threatened. This leads us to conclude that perceptions of social class, power distance and access to resources play a large part in the activation of negative stereotypes, and that they can over-ride cultural closeness.

Managerial implications

Tourists' satisfaction, evaluated partly based on service interactions, determines tourism revenue loss (Shonk and Chelladurai, 2008). Since stereotyping affects both the guests' and the service provider's interactions and satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2007; Čivre et al., 2013), it deserves managerial attention. Our exploration of Malaysian service provider's predispositions to stereotype their guests through stereotype activation and application demonstrates the existence of negative stereotyping of specific cultural groups (particularly towards Chinese and India guests) taking place in regional tourism in Southeast Asia.

Service providers in the entity-theorists groups should receive specific education on the subject of stereotypying. Tourism businesses, particualrly in Asia where the typcial guest profile is changing, need to raise the awareness of implications of negative stereotyping on tourist satisfaction. For example, positive stereotypes about guests could be shared to combat the negative stereotypes. As such, activation of these positive stereotypes may replace some of the negative and dysfunctional stereotypes that have potential to adversely influence service interactions.

Further, reduction of negative stereotypying by entity-theorists service providers could also be encouraged to emphasise 'the individual' rather than 'the group'. The relation between the entity-theorists group to

lower job positions; and incremental-theorists to higher job positions seem to suggest that job roles can also influence and shape beliefs. Therefore, management can strategize to assist entity-theorists to become more like incremental-theorists through promotion based on positive cross-cultural service interactions. In addition, management can encourage service providers to identify positive cross-cultural service interactions that are the outcome of positive stereotyping.

Limitations and future research

Our exploration is limited to the particular context of a luxury-hotel in Malaysia and is exploratory in nature. While our findings rely on the input of six participants, we concentrated on the richness of their service encounters in relation to stereotyping and considered the issue of saturation. Additional participants could have been sought but our analysis suggested that findings were converging and that little variation would be achieved with additional data. In addition, we followed Flint et al., (2002) criteria to evaluate the trustworthiness of the study and its findings.

This research provides the kernel for further research. Further research could be undertaken in different contexts, including a wider variety of hotels and accommodation options (for example backpackers), tourism and hospitality establishments, such as restaurants, retail and the entertainment sector. Future research opportunities may consider different cultural contexts and scenarios to explore this important aspect of service delivery in tourism. Since this research of the service provider's perspective was exploratory in nature, the research findings can be extended and refined, for example, using the perspective of hotel guests in a similar context.

This study provides a foundation for how stereotypes are activated and applied in cross-cultural service interactions. Although we suggest here that people have incremental or entity theorists' patterns of thinking, it is difficult to categorically identify a person's style of thinking without the use of psychometric tests. Thus, future research could employ a quantitative approach to empirically investigate the relationships we have pointed out in this study. Nevertheless, our findings here strongly indicate that a person's pattern of thinking has a direct impact on how stereotypes are activated and applied.

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