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UNDERSTANDING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PORTUGUESE LUXURY HOTELS ATTRIBUTES FROM JAPANESE AND CHINESE CUSTOMERS

Paula Tavares de Carvalho and Elizabeth Reis

ABSTRACT

Purpose –This study examines the service quality of luxury hotels operating in Lisbon, identifying the factors behind Japanese and Chinese customers' satisfaction.

Theoretical framework – Expectations of hotel hospitality are influenced by personal factors (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012). Compared with Western, Asian tourists prefer the basic and practical aspects of service (Tsang and Ap, 2007). In Portugal, the Asian market has been seen as predominantly Chinese, but Chinese and Japanese customers are pleased by different attributes (Liu et al., 2017).

Methodology – Reviews of 1.354 hotel guests (538 Japanese; 816 Chinese) from "booking.com" for Lisbon luxury hotels. Content analysis was applied to identify keywords classified according to the Balanced Scorecard dimensions.

Findings – The study reveals common categories for hotels (positive and negative), falling into six dimensions: location, facilities, room, breakfast, staff-service, finance. Chinese consider more important location, room features, facilities, and price or value for money. Japanese put more emphasis on staff-service, properly functioning equipment with clear instructions, bathtub, and privacy.

Implications – Hotel managers and frontline employees must be aware of the influence culture differences have on tourists' perceptions and behaviour. Cross-cultural training is needed to identify specific attributes of service and relational service to answer guests' needs and expectations and minimize dissatisfaction.

Originality – This study contributes to the understanding of differences in satisfaction and dissatisfaction with hotel attributes between Japanese and Chinese customers, demonstrating that hotels strategy should account for the customer country of origin and specific culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourists from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of quality. Asian tourists prefer the basic and practical aspects of service, giving higher ratings for variables such as "staff understanding your problems and needs," and "responding effectively." Western tourists prefer proactive aspects of service such as "made to feel welcome" and "willingness to help," which suggests that Western tourists seek more intangible aspects of service that are over and above basic service provision (Tsang and Ap, 2007). Expectations of hotel hospitality are influenced by personal factors such as gender, purpose of stay, nationality, and private domain of hospitality. The hotel's star rating is the only hotel factor that might have a strong association with hotel hospitality, in so far as the higher the star rating, the higher the service expectation regarding hotel hospitality. Compared with the Chinese, the Japanese seem less comfortable when they are not shown politeness in situations where they would expect it (Tao, 2013). Asian tourism can be an opportunity for Portugal but there are differences among Asian tourists to be considered, more specifically differences between Chinese and Japanese.

In this study, the main research problem resides in evaluating the mismatch between Japanese and Chinese tourists' expectations and the actual attributes of luxury hotels (tangible and intangible) available in Portugal. This mismatch can contribute towards the dissatisfaction of Japanese and Chinese tourists and, consequently, to their not returning or recommending that others come to Portugal, thus compromising sustainable growth in the Japanese and Chinese markets, which are known to be very profitable.

This study uses the online hotel reservations channel, booking.com, to source customer reviews of the luxury hotel chains operating in Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Analysis of online reviews has become an indispensable marketing tool for managers because their content provides key information to help them allocate resources more appropriately to enhance service and thus increase profits. Customer generated media can be used in several different ways, to suit whatever purpose hoteliers and scholars might have (Oliveira et al., 2020). While

positive reviews have been shown to improve hotel revenue (Phillips et al., 2017), negative reviews can lead to a reduction in hotel bookings. There are significant regional differences among Europeans and Japanese tourists routinely express less satisfaction with their visit (Wang and Kirilenko, 2021).

Several studies have already been based on text analysis of on-line reviews: (Magnini et al.,2011; Ekiz et al., 2012; Berezina et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2017; Gunasekar and Sudhakar, 2019; Hu et al., 2019; Xu, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Wang and Kirilenko, 2021). These studies covered satisfaction with hotel products and services and their overall impact on customer satisfaction. Guests of luxury hotels rate the hotels significantly higher than guests of midrange and budget hotels.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer satisfaction has a significant direct positive effect on customer loyalty. Crotts and Erdmann (2000, p.410) points out that "the role of customer satisfaction in influencing repeat patronage and positive word of mouth is well-documented".

Quantitative studies have shown that service quality is a predictor of customer satisfaction (Lu et al., 2015),. Perceived service quality is part of a broader concept of customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions incorporating customer loyalty and WOM communication (Prasad et al., 2014 cited in Berezina et al., 2016). The importance of customer satisfaction to the hospitality sector is mainly based on the following aspects: Physical attributes, commodities of the hotel room and performance of hotel employees (Berezina et al., 2016; Ekiz et al., 2012). Service quality is determined by customer perception of the level of service delivery (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Service quality is the degree of difference between the customers' expectations for service and their actual perceptions of performance (Parasuraman et al., 1985). However, it goes beyond just efficiently satisfying needs. Technical service is moderately significant, but the importance of expressive service in memorable guest experiences has been emphasized (Sipe and Testa, 2018). Managers need to understand the importance not only of customer satisfaction but also need to take delight in directly driving customer loyalty. Managers need to understand customers' emotions (Kim et al., 2014). Marketers can best directly influence Asian tourist satisfaction through issues associated with cultural values (intellectualism,

security, self-control) and rules of behaviour (proper terms of address, respect, and avoidance of public criticism) (Reisinger and Turner, 1998).

Characteristics of national cultures should be taken into consideration when planning the tourist offers and marketing (Ozdemir and Yolal, 2017). Understanding travellers' preferences and satisfaction is essential to better adapting the offer of products and services, as well as to developing different marketing strategies for each segment (Ahani et al., 2019; Xu, 2019).

Differences in cultural values and rules of behaviour determine satisfaction, and the differences in perceptions of service determine interaction. Tourism marketers cannot rely on perceptions of service quality alone (anticipating and understanding needs, and being attentive), to generate Asian tourist satisfaction in inter- personal contact with western hosts. Ultimately, to ensure overall holiday satisfaction it is important for tourism marketers to use their knowledge of cultural differences in values and rules of behaviour to create service quality that satisfies perceptions.

Depending on a country's stage of development the travel priorities are different. For less developed nations (which includes Portugal) the priorities are (from 1=the most important to 3=the least important): 1-service 2-food 3-location, and for more-developed nations (which includes Japan): 1-location 2- service 3-food. Among the different services, cleanliness is the most important for all (Magnini et al., 2011). Complaints about Hospitality fall mainly under the following categories: "rooms", "arrogant and/or clueless staff" and "failure to respond" (Ekiz et al., 2012).

To better meet the needs of their global customers, some hospitality firms already tailor their service offer and approach to communication to suit their customers' cultural background. For example, Hilton Hotels and Resorts over the world launched their "Huan Ying" program in 2011. Chinese customers can complete their check-in using their native language and enjoy room amenities and breakfast items commonly found at home. There was also their approach to the Japanese market, using colours and pictures to create a unique and tailor-made website in Japanese. In 2014, Hilton Worldwide launched a new website which has an intuitive, visually rich design, full screen images, simplifying the processes for ease of understanding and enriched Japanese's experience.

Customers' culture plays a main role concerning customers hotels´ expectations influencing their needs and desires. Recommendations of family and friends (word-to-mouth effect) and past experiences are also important concerning expectations related to hotels attributes (location, facilities, room, breakfast, staff and price) and dimensions (based on balanced scorecard): Features, Processes, Procedures and Finance. According with the perception of these hotel´s dimensions the customers will recommend it to friends and relatives, and afterwards they will make the decision of return or not return to the hotel. It is important to evaluate the gap between hotel customers' expectations and perceptions about actual hotel service delivery and attributes, with the purpose to delight, conquest and retain the hotel´s customers. Afterwards this gap can be fulfilled, and an improvement plan can be proposed. The gap between Luxury Hotels Attributes versus Customer Expectations/Perceptions Gap is summarized in figure 1.
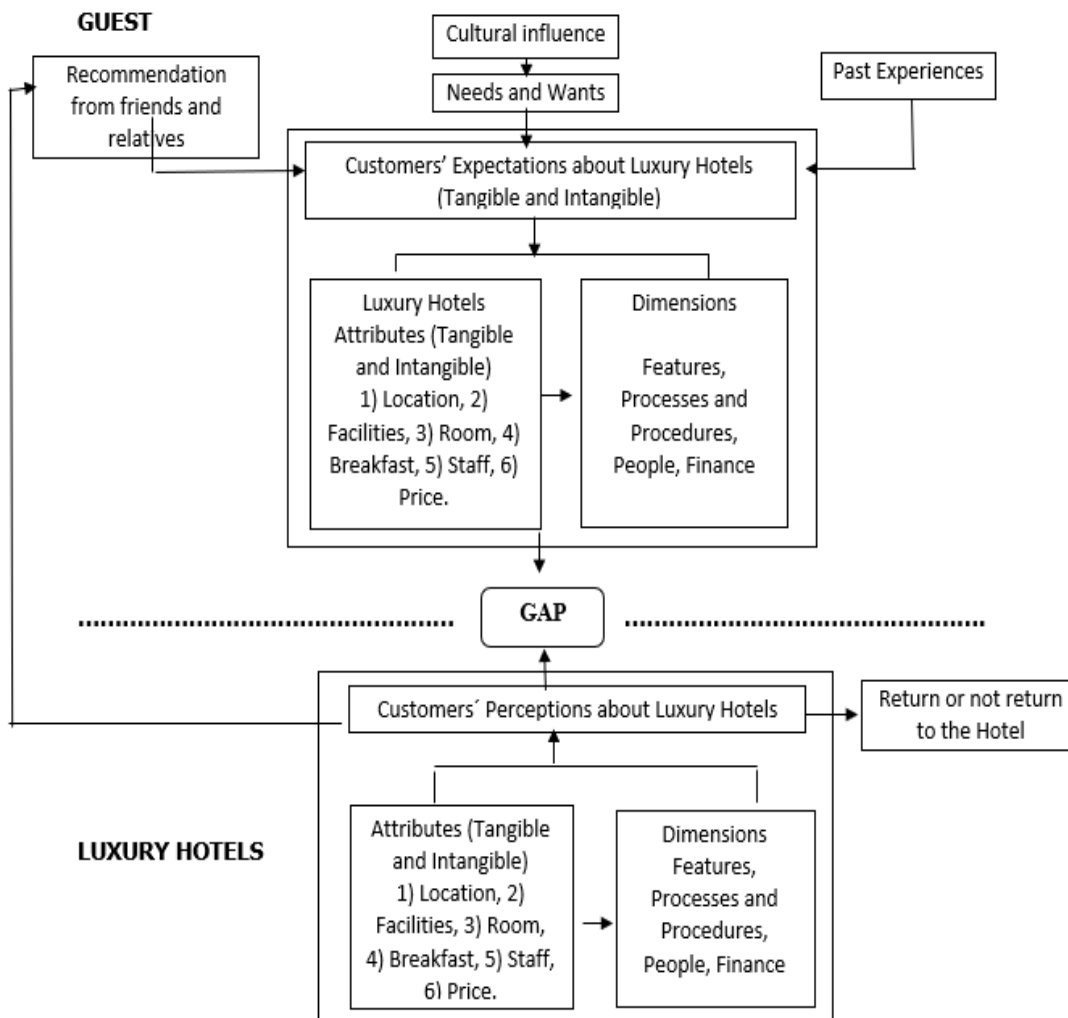
Figure 1: Luxury Hotels Attributes versus Customer Expectations/Perceptions Gap

3.   RESEARCH METHOD

Relevant information concerning hotel attributes (tangible and intangible) preferences of Japanese and Chinese hospitality customers, type of trip (business or leisure), travel type (couple, group, individual), average days stayed, and room type preferences were collected.

Positive and negative keywords were grouped into relevant hotel´s attributes to allow concluding which are the differences and similarities between the two groups.

Lisbon was selected as the primary location of this study, with focus in luxury hotels (5 and 4 stars), as 144.007 Japanese visited Portugal, 59% (85.032) of whom visited Lisbon in 2019. 378.561 Chinese visited Portugal, with 66% (250.567) visiting Lisbon (Travel BI, 2019). The type of accommodation that 78% of all Japanese tourists and 81% of all Chinese tourists preferred was 5 stars and 4 stars hotels (named as luxury hotels). In 2019 were announced at booking.com: 152 hotels (5 stars and 4 stars) out of a total of 166 located in the Lisbon Metropolitan area (hotels over 10 km from Lisbon city centre registered few or zero Japanese hotels reviews, for this reason, they were excluded from the sample analysis). The sample analyses, 46 hotels: 30 from the top 10 hotel chains in Atlas da Hotelaria (Deloitte, 2019) and 11 from other groups or independent hotels chains, representing more than 50% of total Lisbon´s total Hotel's accommodation, representing more than 50% of Japanese comments (538 comments of a total of 1.068) and 43% of Chinese comments (816 comments of a total of 1.919). It had been reached a stage where an additional comment analyse was not adding value to the research. The reviews have positive and negative comments and an overall rating of the stay in the hotel which are presented on a scale from 1 to 10: 1 is bad, below 6 is no satisfactory, 6+ = pleasant, 7+ = good, 8+ = very good, 9+= wonderful.

Booking.com Customer Reviews Analysis and Collection had been made using the qualitative data analysis software "NVivo" and manually. Every single review was content analysed and counted for all hotels considered in the sample. Manual analyses confirmed wording contextualization. Word content analysis included open coding, axial coding and selective coding, the steps of the grounded theory method to analyse qualitative data. A total of 1.354 reviews (538 Japanese and 816 Chinese) were assessed. This study was undertaken between 2018, January 1st and 2021, January 31st.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the case of Japanese and Chinese customers, 78% and 77% were travelling for leisure, with only 15% and 16% of trips related to business.

Both, the Japanese and Chinese prefer to travel with others, either in a Couple, as a Family or in a Group, representing 74% and 87% of the total respectively. Somewhat surprisingly, the percentage of Japanese travelling alone is higher than for the Chinese, representing 26% of total. The Chinese in the sample prefer to travel as a group (28%) much more than the Japanese do (15%). Travelling as a family (or in a couple) is the first preference for both groups, with almost 50% of both the Japanese and Chinese chose the Double/Twin room.

More than 90% of Japanese and Chinese stayed 4 nights or fewer. More than 30% stayed only one night in one of Lisbon's Luxury Hotels in the sample (46 hotels). On average, the Japanese stayed 2.55 nights and the Chinese stayed 2.37 nights.

On average, the Japanese scored the luxury hotels lower than the Chinese did, with 5-star hotels being rated higher than 4-star hotels, by both Japanese (8.5 and 8.3) and Chinese (8.7 and 8.4) customers. For both, however, reviews for 4-star hotels represent over 70% of the 46 hotels in the sample.

For content analysis, first, words repeated in the Japanese and Chinese comments on booking.com were collected and classified in the Open Coding Dimensions. Second, the Open Coding hotel attributes with similar characteristics were gathered in six groups (Axial Coding): 1. Location, 2. Facilities, 3. Room (Bedroom, Bathroom and Room), 4. Breakfast, 5. Staff/Service, 6. Price. Third, some connections between these categories that capture the sense of the study were found (Selective Coding) and were then classified according to the four Balanced Scorecard Dimensions (Market/Customer, Processes and Procedures, People and Finance) (Figure 2).

Open Code Dimensions	Axial Code Dimensions	Select Code Dimensions
Transport Shops, Restaurants, Supermarket Tourist Attractions Conference Quiet, Safe	Location	Features
View Elevator, Hardware, Software Design, Decoration, Building Cleaning Hotel Restaurant, bar, Lounge Lobby Free Drinks Swimming-pool, Gym, Spa Parking	Facilities	
Cleaning Comfort Size Relax, Calm, quite Kettle, Fridge, Amenities Design, Bright Free drinks, food Soundproofing Equipment working, how to use	Bedroom	Processes and Procedures
Comfort Mattress Clothes	Bed	
Design Size Cleaning Bathtub Hot Water, Water Flow Towels Equipment working, how to use	Bathroom	
Tasty Diverse Vegetables Availability Cleaning Calm	Breakfast	
Nice, Kind, Friendly Helpful, Pro-Active Enthusiastic, Smiling Attitude Front-office	Staff/Service	People
Price Value for Money Additional payment Payment/invoicing	Price	Finance

Figure 2. Data Collection and wording categorization

While the Chinese consider location, room features, facilities, price, or value for money more important than the Japanese do, the Japanese are more concerned about service items. Room relates to clear processes, the efficiency of room equipment and its ease of use, whether there

is a bathtub, hot water, and bathroom privacy more than pure room´s features. The Japanese focus more on service than the Chinese do and, in line with what Liu et al. (2017) found, the Chinese focus is on features. The differences found between the Japanese and Chinese concerning the most important Hotel Attributes are summarized in Figure 3.

Japanese

Location
Near Shops, Restaurants and Transports.

Facilities
Hotel Historical Design appreciated. Also, New and Renovated.

Room
Bathroom with privacy. Existence of Bathtub, kettle and amenities. Quite, Peaceful and soundproof. Cleaning. Hot water. Room equipment working well and easy to use.

Breakfast
Vegetables. Diverse, not Monotonous. Early Availability . Peaceful.

Staff
Kind, Friendly and Helpful, proactive, solving problems. Good information about restaurants, transports,… Excuse if there is a mistake and correct quickly. Receive what they requested in advance.

Price
Clear Procedures about invoicing.

Chinese

Location
Near Transports and Touristic Points..

Facilities
Hotel Historical Design seen as old and outdated. Modern and New Facilities appreciated.

Room
Comfort, Size and Bed. Existence of kettle and amenities. Quite and soundproof. Cleaning.

Breakfast
Chinese Food. . Diverse, not Monotonous. Early Availability

Staff
Kind, Friendly, Helpful. Enthusiastic and smiling.

Price
Pricing itself and connection with service expected for a 4 or 5 starts hotels.

Figure 3. Most Important Luxury Hotel Attributes for Japanese and Chinese

The location or design of a hotel or room are hard to change, so these items were classified as features and this dimension was added to the other four dimensions of the balanced scorecard. The cross-reference dimension of Market/Customer is present in all these dimensions.

This research is in line with some other research such as that of Tsang and Ap (2007), which reports that Asians prefer the basic and practical aspects of service, giving high ratings for variables such as, "staff understanding your problems and needs", "dependable service" and responding effectively". The research of Resinger and Turner (1998), despite being more than a decade older, also reported that respect for others is paramount in service and seen as good manners. Also found to be of extreme importance are punctuality; giving prompt feedback; fast resolution of problems; and reduced waiting time or making up for time waited with a gift

or entertainment. Japanese customers focus more on service than Chinese customers do. In accordance with the findings of Liu et al. (2017) and Magnini et al. (2011), the focus of the Chinese is on room features and facilities. Peace-of-mind also plays a large role in customer satisfaction and has a significant impact on loyalty and word-of- mouth recommendation, which means that providing hotel customers with a pleasurable, trouble-free experience not only satisfies them but also generates positive-word-mouth for the organization (Ko, 2020).

Scholars stress politeness as a critical dimension when Westerner's deal with the Japanese (Reisinger & Turner, 1998), and have pointed out two major Japanese cultural attributes: one is a behavioural characteristic referred to as "polite inexplicitness," and the other is trust. To promise a service and not fulfil this promise is a big trust issue for the Japanese. In comparison with the Chinese, the Japanese give more importance to a helpful employee attitude (apology for lacks or failure), cleanliness, the existence of bathtub, clear instructions on how to work equipment in the room. The Chinese are more concerned with décor. They like modernity, with dated decor being considered negative and, in some cases, even if in historic areas and renovated.

The Chinese also like smiling and enthusiastic employees (as this means, they are performing their job with happiness and joy) and give more importance to price/value for money. This is in line with the findings of Mohsin and Lockyer (2010), where the most important hotel attributes are the first contact with the hotel staff (front-office), helpful, friendly staff, room furnishings and value for money. Hospitality complaints mainly appear in the following categories: "rooms", "arrogant and/or clueless staff" and "failure to respond" (Ekiz at al, 2012). Room (such as room size), cleanliness, location (such as close to attractions and accessibility to public transport) and value (such as room price) are reasons for customer dissatisfaction with luxury 4- and 5-star hotels (Li et al., 2020). Hotel frontline employees play a key role in customer satisfaction and prompt customers to write positive online reviews. The two major categories of consumer complaints are room improvement and hotel staff attitudes (Berezina, 2015).

5.   CONCLUSIONS

Aligned with other studies, our research concludes that it is crucial for tourism and hospitality managers and employees to be aware of the influence that cultural differences have on

tourists' perceptions and behaviour. Hence the importance of designing cross-cultural training programs to minimize and avoid dissatisfaction arising among tourists. While these programs should focus on the specific preferences of major cultural groups, human resources managers and trainers will also need to identify which attributes of service and relational service are universal in nature in order to develop a better understanding of different guests' needs and expectations. (Tsang and Ap, 2007). Personal characteristics need to be considered when staging experiences for potential guests. Additionally, frontline employees should be trained and guided on how personal characteristics influence guests' expectations and behaviour in the consumer experience process. Human interactions are a crucial part of their luxury hotel experiences. Four themes emerged as important factors affecting their hotel stay experience when human interactions with employees are considered, attitude, professional behaviour, proactive service, and appearance (Walls et al., 2011).

While the Japanese focus on people (service) and processes, the Chinese focus on features (hotel and room facilities) and price.

In Portugal, the Asian Market has been seen as predominantly Chinese, but what pleases Chinese customers differs from what pleases Japanese customers.

6.   RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Several improvements in processes and procedures could be made, for example, by introducing vegetables and Asian food at breakfast; providing clearer explanations of how to use the room equipment and verifying whether they are working properly before check-in; and clearly explained invoicing procedures and pricing. Staff could be trained to develop a better understanding of Asian culture and could learn, for instance, the importance of not only attributing a room with a bathtub to the Japanese, but one with bathroom privacy. Staff could be taught to be more aware of the elderly Asian's need for a kettle in which to boil water for tea, and the importance the Japanese attach to a hot bath. For the Japanese, the timely resolution of problems and clear, quick feedback are also important. Price, however, is not a big issue for the Japanese and they usually do not bargain for discounts, but it must be stressed that price and invoicing processes should be crystal clear.

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