

# Acculturation Determines Consumer Responses to Service Failures

Chinese American consumers react differently to service failures depending on the extent to which they have integrated into American culture, suggest Dr Karin Weber and Professor Cathy Hsu of the SHTM and a co-author. In a recently published research paper, they report the results of a study that considered the reactions of Chinese Americans with different levels of acculturation to customer service failure. As measured by the need to maintain “face”, the extent of customer satisfaction with the service experience and repeat purchase intention, the respondents’ “acculturation status influenced their reaction to the service failure”, the researchers note.

## Multi-Ethnic Societies and Acculturation

In increasingly multi-ethnic societies, it is particularly important for hospitality marketers and service providers to understand the perceptions and behaviours of people from different cultures. Consider the situation in the United States. Chinese Americans, the researchers note, are the largest ethnic group among Asian Americans, and their higher than average salaries “make them an attractive target segment for marketers”.

Yet presuming the homogeneity of any ethnic group can be problematic. The researchers suggest that the perceptions and behaviours of ethnic consumers who migrate to other countries may differ depending on the extent to which they maintain their original cultural identities or assimilate with the new cultures. They were thus interested in determining the “impact of different acculturation strategies” – integration, assimilation and maintenance of separation – on the reactions of Chinese Americans to service failure, which they describe as “an unfortunately common situation”.

## Service Failure Scenario

The researchers conducted a survey among Chinese Americans who had lived in the United States for at least five years. The participants were asked to imagine themselves “as an aggrieved customer” at a luxury hotel who experiences “subtle discrimination” while European guests are given “preferential treatment”. The scenario described a situation in which a member of staff failed to make an important dinner reservation for the guest,

who then had to make alternative arrangements, with the hotel employee making no attempt to resolve the situation. The researchers presented four variants of the scenario based on differences in the ethnicity of the staff member involved – Western or Chinese – and “the hotel brand’s country of origin” – whether an Asian country or the United States.

Once they had read the scenario, the participants rated how satisfied they were with the hotel and how likely they were to return. They also answered questions designed to assess “loss of face”, which occurs, the researchers explain, when “service providers fail to recognise guests’ importance and do not accord them due respect”. They emphasise that the concept of face is particularly important in Chinese culture, and is linked to “a person’s status and position in society”.

To give an indication of the survey’s representativeness, those who completed the questionnaire were equally divided in terms of gender, and almost 60% were aged 26 to 55. Their level of education was relatively high – more than half had Bachelor degrees and a quarter had postgraduate degrees. Around 60% were born in the United States, 40% had arrived there in the 1990s and 30% had arrived since 2000.

## Acculturation Influences Satisfaction

To explore how the participants reacted to the customer service scenario, the researchers first grouped them into three categories according to their degree of acculturation – the extent to which they retained their “identification with their culture of origin” and attempted to “conform to the host culture”. The assimilated participants did not seek to maintain their original Chinese culture and sought daily interactions with the local American culture. Their integrated counterparts attempted to maintain their Chinese culture but also sought daily interactions with American culture. The separated participants, in contrast, held onto their Chinese culture and did not attempt to interact with the local culture.

Considering differences in responses to the scenario, the researchers found that the culturally separated participants were most satisfied with the service described and were most likely to return to the hotel. At the same time, they were also more concerned than the other two

groups about the need to maintain “face”, which should have been detrimental to their perceptions of customer service. The researchers explain this seeming incongruity by noting that the culturally separated participants had little contact with mainstream American culture. They were thus less familiar with the service environment and perhaps less aware of discrimination. Furthermore, the high value placed on “modesty and conservatism” in Chinese culture may have made them reluctant to express “extreme opinions”.

In contrast, the assimilated and integrated participants, more in tune with the mainstream culture, had low levels of satisfaction with the service and did not intend to return to the hotel. The researchers speculate that those who make greater efforts to assimilate into a host culture “are not focused on maintaining their original identity” and consequently may respond more negatively when they “feel discriminated against by a service provider”. Furthermore, their expression of dissatisfaction could be an indication of their “learned ‘freedom of speech’ American value”.

### **Ethnicity of Staff and Origin of Hotel**

Degrees of acculturation also influenced the way the participants reacted to the ethnicity of the hotel staff member portrayed in the scenario. The culturally integrated participants were much more likely to indicate that they would visit again if the employee was Chinese rather than American. Perhaps those who try hard to “fit into mainstream society” have greater empathy for other Chinese trying to do the same, suggest the researchers. Alternatively, they may feel more discriminated against by Western staff because such treatment highlights that they “continue to be treated differently”.

The assimilated participants, in contrast, were more likely to indicate they would return if they were served by an American. Assimilators, the researchers suggest, may find it easier to forgive a failure by an American than by a Chinese employee because they want to be accepted into the new culture, while distancing themselves from the old one.

Interestingly, whether the hotel was part of an American or Asian hotel chain brand made little difference to any of the participants, but this may not be as inconsistent as it might seem. The researchers explain that the expansion of Asian brands into the United States means that consumers now “hold similar expectations for these brands as they do for any other Western brands”.

### **Chinese Americans Not a Homogeneous Market**

Given that the level of acculturation is so important in responses to hospitality service failures, the researchers suggest “marketers should realize that Chinese Americans do not represent a homogeneous market”. Taking this logic a step further, they conclude that hotels should provide “not only culture-specific training but intra-culture-specific training”. This will ensure awareness of the “nuanced differences” among Chinese American consumers, and by extension their mainland Chinese counterparts visiting the United States.

#### **Points to Note**

- Chinese in the United States integrate with the mainstream culture to varying degrees.
- Differences in acculturation influence Chinese American responses to hospitality service failures.
- Culturally separated consumers are less likely to respond negatively to service failures than their culturally integrated and assimilated counterparts.
- Hotel staff training can improve awareness of intra-cultural differences.

Weber, Karin, Hsu, Cathy and Sparks, Beverley (2014). “Consumer Responses to Service Failure: The Influence of Acculturation”. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 300-313.