

# Research Horizons

*Highlights of Recent Research by the SHTM*

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## Staff Attitudes Crucial to Attracting Mainland Visitors

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Frontline hotel staff must always remain aware of their subjective judgments about mainland visitors claims SHTM Assistant Professor **Sylvester Yeung** in a recently published study. Given the shift in visitor demographics and the emergence of mainland Chinese as the largest single group of tourists in Hong Kong, the hotel industry must guard against unwarranted perceptions that will influence service quality.

### **Significance of the Mainland Market**

In recent years, the Hong Kong tourism market has shifted away from welcoming mainly Western and Japanese visitors to a focus on the increasing numbers of mainland tourists. Dr Yeung notes that this is part of a concomitant shift towards a more important role for the industry overall, with all tourist arrivals increasing by 45.6% between 2002 and 2005.

Since the introduction of the 'Individual Visit Scheme' in 2003, residents of large cities in the Pearl River Delta have been swelling visitor numbers in Hong Kong, outstripping the rapid overall growth to register an 80% increase between 2004 and 2005. This has an impact

that extends past the tourism industry alone, with Dr Yeung pointing to benefits for the retail and catering industries, amongst other areas of economic activity. The 'golden week' holiday in October is a particularly busy time, with mainland tourists buying "everything from jewellery to luxury flats".

Clearly this is an important market sector, but it has encountered difficulties.

### **Customer Satisfaction and Staff Perceptions**

A major survey conducted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board in 2003 suggested that mainland tourists had relatively low levels of satisfaction with hotel services in Hong Kong. In the following year, another survey indicated that mainland Chinese were most concerned about the care and patience that customer-service staff displayed while they were in Hong Kong. This, notes Dr Yeung, is not an isolated problem, but part of a broader situation in which Hong Kongers tend to regard mainland visitors as "outdated, discourteous and ill-mannered". He thus focuses on frontline staff perceptions of and

attitudes towards mainland visitors to determine exactly how the problem manifests itself.

The main concern is to establish whether there is a significant difference between perceptions of tourists from mainland China and those from other countries.

Crucially for hotel operators, perceptions are defined as how individual customer-contact staff understand and organise their impressions of guests in a way that shapes their satisfaction with the work environment. This is important because “what one perceives can be substantially different from objective reality”.

Attitudes are more nuanced, with cognitive, affective and behavioural varieties considered. Cognitive attitudes are the way in which staff members thought about mainland visitors, affective attitudes are expressed through the emotional reactions those visitors provoked, and behavioural attitudes encompass the sort of presumptions and inclinations that might have led staff members to behave in different ways towards different visitors. Identifying situational factors that could hamper consistency in service delivery is the major aim.

## The Study

The study solicited information from 200 guest-contact employees in five Hong Kong hotels to measure existing attitudes and perceptions, and a further 50 undergraduate students at the SHTM to gauge the same in potential employees. Of the 228 respondents, the largest groups were those aged between 25 and 40, and those with secondary education or higher. Front desk staff made up just over a third of respondents, and more than half of the total earned less than HK\$12,000 a month.

Overall, the study found that customer-contact staff, including those in training to manage such staff, had internally polarised perceptions of mainland Chinese tourists. On the one hand they were aware of the importance of mainland tourists and their spending

power, but the other hand they less aware of any social benefits that those visitors could bring to Hong Kong.

Attitudes showed a similar division, with respondents aware that mainland tourists brought economic benefits to Hong Kong, but mainly preferring to serve tourists from other countries.

## Implications for Practice

The study notes that the more positive aspect of perceptions was “possibly shaped from the seeming increase in the total number of tourist arrivals and receipts from mainland China”, given that mainland tourists now form the majority of arrivals in Hong Kong. Yet it seems that perceptions of mainland Chinese as being discourteous and displaying no concern for the environment affected how frontline staff appreciated both their work environments and their overall social environment. This, in turn, could affect the attitudes of frontline staff when serving hotel guests.

Although the study found only minor differences in perceptions and attitudes between those who claimed to treat mainland tourists differently than other visitors and those who did not, Dr Yeung concludes that it is still necessary to provide “hotel employees with reinforcement training” and alert them that personal prejudice and preference are barriers to the provision of quality service. Socio-economic differences between Hong Kong and mainland China can easily lead to misunderstanding, and hotels could provide cultural sensitivity assessment, training and briefings.

The Hong Kong Hotels Association could also have a role to play by tightening its rules and regulations to ensure high service standards are maintained in all situations. Dr Yeung indicates that some criticism of mainland Chinese behaviour might be warranted, but nevertheless insists that future research should focus more heavily on service employee perceptions, and how they are affected by factors such as “gender, income and educational level” or extent of work experience.

Given the rise of outbound Chinese tourists and their interest in Hong Kong, knowing more about the way in which they are treated in Hong Kong will be vital in the years ahead.

**Points to Note:**

- Mainland Chinese visitors are dissatisfied with service levels in Hong Kong
- Guest-contact employees have contradictory perceptions of and attitudes toward mainland visitors.
- The differences may not be enough to harm service performance.
- However, cultural sensitivity training and tightened service-quality regulation are warranted to preserve service standards.

Yeung, S. and Leung, C. (2007). Perception and Attitude of Hong Kong Hotel Guest-Contact Employees Towards Tourists from Mainland China. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 9, 395-407