

Service quality implications of cross-cultural differences in tourism and hospitality

Implicaciones en la calidad del servicio de las diferencias interculturales en el turismo y la hotelería

Ahu Yazici Ayyildiz^a

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■ Abstract

This conceptual review explores and explains the influence of culture on tourism and hospitality activities from a service quality perspective. The study takes a dyadic perspective, i.e., by taking both marketing and management perspectives into account, particularly in investigating the influence of culture on tourism and hospitality activities on SERVQUAL dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The study shows that culture influences the design and implementation of service quality dimensions and the knowledge of cultural variables may have a significant influence on the efficient and effective management of service quality systems.

Keywords: Service quality, cultural characteristics, cross-cultural, tourism, hospitality, intercultural.

■ Resumen

Este artículo explora y explica la influencia de la cultura en las actividades turísticas y hoteleras desde una perspectiva de calidad del servicio. El estudio adopta una perspectiva diádica, es decir, teniendo en cuenta las perspectivas de marketing y gestión, investiga en particular la influencia de la cultura en las actividades turísticas y hoteleras en las dimensiones de SERVQUAL de bienes tangibles, confiabilidad, capacidad de respuesta, seguridad y empatía. El estudio muestra que la cultura influye en el diseño e implementación de las dimensiones de la calidad del servicio y el conocimiento de las variables culturales puede tener una influencia significativa en la gestión eficiente y efectiva de los sistemas de calidad del servicio.

Palabras clave: calidad del servicio, características culturales, transcultural, turismo, hotelería, intercultural.

^aAydin Adnan Menderes University, Department of Tourism Management, Aydin, Turkey. Email: ayazici@adu.edu.tr. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1301-2428

■ Introduction and Rationale for the Study

Tourism and hospitality customers' perceptions of service interactions play an important role in their overall evaluations of service, service quality, and satisfaction (Ayyildiz et al., 2023; Wang & Mattila, 2010). Cultural characteristics of tourists, and service providers, influence not only the design of marketing mix elements (Koc & Cheung, 2022; Koc & Yazici-Ayyildiz, 2021). Culture is important because a lack of awareness of cultural differences may have major negative implications for tourism and hospitality businesses. According to research, failures tend to be common in tourism and hospitality. As much as 30% of new businesses tend to be out of business in their first year of operation (Fields, 2014; Parsa et al., 2005). For instance, a failure to understand cross-cultural differences between the French, European, and customers from the United States by the management of Disney in their Euro Disney (Disneyland Paris) project resulted in losses amounting to \$4 billion (Matusitz, 2010). The losses were incurred mainly due to the service quality gaps outlined below (Parasuraman et al., 1991):

1. Knowledge Gap: The gap or the difference between the customer's expectations of the service and the tourism and hospitality business's provision of that service.
2. The Policy Gap: The gap between the understanding by management of customer needs and the translation of that understanding into service delivery policies and standards.
3. The Delivery Gap: The difference between the policies and standards that have been established and the actual service delivered.
4. The Communication Gap: This is the difference between what has been promised to the customer through all modes of communication and the actual service delivered.
5. The Customer Gap: The gap between customer expectations and perceptions of the actual service delivered.

It can be seen that a lack of understanding of the cross-cultural characteristics of customers

may cause the first gap, the knowledge gap, i.e., a lack of understanding of what customers expect and want. When there is a knowledge gap, gaps 2, 3, and 4 are bound to follow suit, culminating in gap 5, the customer gap, i.e., being unable to meet customer expectations.

Litvin and Kar (2003) showed that tourists' attitudes and behaviours are very much shaped by their cultural characteristics as they tend to think and behave in parallel with their mental programme, largely moulded by their specific culture (Crotts & Erdman, 2000). Litvin et al. (2004) showed that tourists' choices, expectations, and evaluations regarding the service they received tend to be in line with their self-images and their mental programming, again largely formed by their cultural characteristics.

Due to the inseparability nature of tourism and hospitality service encounters, tourism and hospitality services tend to involve frequent and intense social interactions and contact between the customers and the service providers (Guchait, 2023; Kim et al., 2010; Koc, 2017). Moreover, tourism and hospitality service encounters involve social interactions and contacts that are usually intercultural (Cooper et al., 2021; Koc, 2021), as tourism hospitality activities increasingly involve the participation of tourists and service providers from different countries and cultures (De-La-Cruz-Diaz et al., 2023; Mihalič & Fennell, 2015). Hence, an awareness of intercultural differences is becoming more and more necessary due to the rapid internationalisation of tourism activities with the participation of increasing numbers of customers and suppliers from all over the world (Koc, 2020; Mihalič & Fennell, 2015).

Due to the intense and frequent social interactions tourism and hospitality businesses are usually referred to as *people businesses*, and the frequent and intense social exchange that takes place between service providers and tourists tends to be significantly important in forming their overall service quality evaluations about the service they received (Koc, 2021; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Rauch et al., 2015). Based on this background, this study explains and discusses the findings of cross-cultural studies to explain

how cross-cultural characteristics and differences may influence the design, implementation, and perception of service quality systems and applications in tourism and hospitality. The study takes a dyadic perspective and analyses findings of studies relating to service quality both from the demand side, i.e., the marketing or customers' perspective, and the supply side, i.e., the management or the service providers' perspective. The findings are explained and discussed under the SERVQUAL service quality dimensions, i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1991). SERVQUAL is the most commonly used scale to measure customer expectations, satisfaction, and service quality in service businesses (Demir et al., 2020; Koc, 2019). For a better understanding of the implications of cross-cultural variables, first, a basic level understanding of the cross-cultural variables or dimensions is provided below.

■ Cross-Cultural Variables

The objective of basing the study on these two paradigms is due to the fact that a significant proportion of cross-cultural research studies (about 75% of them) use these two paradigms (Ferreira et al., 2014).

■ Power Distance

Power distance is the extent to which members of a society, especially the less powerful ones, expect and accept the unequal distribution of power and privileges (Hofstede et al., 2010). High-power distance cultures tend to be stratified, hierarchical, and bureaucratic (Javidan et al., 2005). In high-power distance cultures, such as Russia, Romania, Malaysia, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, China, Egypt, Brazil, France, Poland, Turkey, and India power tends to be centralised and the society tends to value things such as tradition and stability (Koc, 2020). On the other hand, in low-power distance cultures, such as Austria, Israel, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States, power tends to be decentralised, the society tends to be much flatter and they tend to value things like innova-

tion and novelty, rather than tradition (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2020).

■ Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism is about the degree to which people in society demonstrate strong concern for their personal and individual goals (Hofstede et al., 2010), while collectivism is about the degree to which people in society demonstrate strong concern for the well-being of the group they belong to, the identification of themselves with the group, adhering to group rules and norms and the achievement of group goals rather than individual ones (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2020). Individualistic cultures, such as the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands, New Zealand, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Finland tend to be "I" conscious and tend to use "I" more than "we" as opposed to collectivistic cultures, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, Bangladesh, China, Nigeria, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, China, and Kenya, that are more "we" conscious.

■ Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which people in a culture tolerate uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk (Hofstede et al., 2010). In countries where there is a high level of uncertainty avoidance, such as Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Russia, Japan, Romania, Turkey, and Mexico people tend to be not so comfortable in ambiguous, uncertain, and unfamiliar environments and contexts. People tend to attach more value to credibility, stability, safety, and security. On the other hand, people in low-uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Singapore, Sweden, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, and New Zealand tend to be more comfortable in ambiguous, uncertain, and unfamiliar environments and contexts (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2020).

■ Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity is the extent to which people in a society value achievement, heroism, assertive-

ness, competitiveness, toughness, dominance, and material gains for success (Hofstede et al., 2010). In masculine societies, such as Japan, Hungary, Austria, Venezuela, Switzerland, Italy, Mexico, United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and Australia, the gender roles between men and women are more likely to be distinct, i.e., unequal. On the other hand, in feminine societies, such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Finland, Chile, Portugal, Russia, Thailand, South Korea, Bulgaria, and Spain, gender roles tend to overlap and are more egalitarian. In feminine societies, there tends to be a more communal orientation, and trying to be better than others is not socially or materially rewarded (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2020). The name of the masculinity and femininity dimension was changed to Motivation towards Achievement and Success in 2023.

■ Indulgence and Restraint

Indulgence is about the degree to which a society demonstrates a tendency to allow the gratification of basic and natural desires and enjoyment of life, whereas restraint has to do with the belief that basic and natural desires and enjoyment in life should be controlled (Hofstede et al., 2010). In indulgence cultures, such as Venezuela, Mexico, Sweden, New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, United States, Argentina, Brazil, Belgium, and Luxembourg the society overall is comfortable with allowing hedonistic behaviour and pleasure, enjoyment, spending, consumption, sexual gratification, and being happy in the society are encouraged (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2020) as opposed to cultures where there is a lack of indulgence, i.e., restraint, such as Egypt, Bulgaria, Estonia, Iraq, Ukraine, Romania, Russia, China, Serbia, Slovakia, Poland, and Italy. In restraint cultures, a lower percentage of people in the society consider themselves healthy and happy (Hofstede et al., 2010).

■ Long-Term Orientation

The long-term orientation is about the importance attached to pragmatic virtues oriented towards future rewards rather than immediate

ones, together with perseverance, thrift, and adapting to changing circumstances (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Long-term oriented societies, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, China, Germany, Belgium, Russia, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, France, and Italy, tend to focus on long-term results, value thrift, patience, tolerance, and demonstrate a slow acceptance of change (Hofstede et al., 2010) as opposed to short-term oriented cultures, such as Nigeria, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Australia, Mexico, Ireland, United States, and Portugal. According to Ayyildiz and Koc (2023), people from long-term-oriented cultures are more likely to participate in health and well-being tourism activities.

■ High and Low-Context Cultures

The concept of high and low context was created by Hall (1977). While countries in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand can be classified as low context, the rest of the world can be classified as high context. Tung (1985) proposed that about 70% of the world can be classified as high-context with varying degrees. Communication in low-context cultures can be characterised as verbal and explicit, while communication in high-context cultures can be characterised as non-verbal and implicit. The explicit communication in low-context cultures depends on “what”, while the implicit communication in high-context cultures depends on “how, why, when, where to whom, and how,” in addition to non-verbal cues (Manrai et al., 2019).

■ Cross-Cultural Implications of SERVQUAL Dimensions

As stated above SERVQUAL is a service quality model to measure customer expectations and satisfaction through five service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Findings from cross-cultural research studies in tourism and hospitality are explained and discussed relating to the SERVQUAL dimensions. According to research, product quality

(i.e., the tangible aspects of goods/service products) failures are likely to constitute 14% of all service switching behaviours and dissatisfaction, the failure in the quality of social interaction in the delivery of a product or service may constitute as much as 67% of all customer switching behaviour (Doyle, 2008). This is probably why there is only one service quality dimension relating to the tangible aspects of the product, while there are four dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) that relate to the interaction between the customers and the service providers.

■ Tangibles

Tangibles constitute not only an important dimension of service quality determining customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, but as physical evidence, they also constitute an important marketing mix element (Koc & Yazici-Ayyildiz, 2021), and encompass a wide range of physical aspects of tourism and hospitality ranging from buildings, furniture, decoration, equipment to the appearance of service personnel (Koc, 2020) (See Table 1). Table 1 shows examples of research findings relating to tangibles and their implications for managers.

Research shows that tourists from individualistic cultures (mostly European countries, the United States, and Australia) tend to rely more on tangible cues in the physical environment to evaluate service quality (Tsaour et al., 2005) (i.e., technical quality – a more objective, concrete and direct way of evaluating the service), compared with tourists from collectivistic cultures (e.g., China, Indonesia, Romania, Mexico, and to some extent Turkey and Japan). Reisinger (2009) showed that while tourists from individualistic societies are more likely to expect more efficient, prompt, and error-free service, tourists from collectivistic cultures tend to attach more importance to interaction with the service providers, such as the sincerity of service staff. It may be stated that while tourists from individualistic cultures attach more importance to outcomes, tourists from collectivistic cultures tend to attach more importance to processes (Kim et al., 2014; Mariani & Predvoditeleva, 2019).

Tourism and hospitality customers from high-power distance cultures, tend to place greater importance on the tangible elements of their holiday experiences such as the buildings, indoor and outdoor spaces, furniture, decorations, and the uniforms of service personnel, etc. due to the fact that they represent higher status, luxury exclusivity, and elitism (Crotts & Erd-

Table 1. Cross-cultural research findings and recommendations relating to tangibles

SERVQUAL dimension	Sample findings	Researchers	Recommendations
Tangibles (Quality perceptions derived from the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials)	Tourists from individualistic cultures are more interested in novelty than tourists from collectivistic cultures.	Kim & Lee (2000).	By emphasising tangibles, tourism managers may prevent service failure gaps that may arise due to the unmet expectations of tourists. Also, by providing realistic information, an unnecessary rise in expectations among customers may be prevented.
	Tourism and hospitality customers from high-power distance cultures, tend to place greater importance on the tangible elements of their holiday experiences such as the buildings, indoor and outdoor spaces, furniture, decorations, and uniforms of service personnel, etc.) due to the fact that they represent higher status, luxury exclusivity, and elitism.	Crotts & Erdmann 2000; Weiermair, 2000; Nath et al., 2016.	Tourism and hospitality businesses serving customers from high-power distance cultures may make sure that their tangible elements represent a feeling of luxury, exclusivity, and elitism.

mann, 2000; Nath et al., 2016; Weiermair, 2000). Hence, tourism and hospitality managers catering to tourists from high-power distance cultures may emphasise the grandeur and luxury of their buildings, furniture, and decorations so that they convey messages of status, luxury, exclusivity, and elitism.

Future research may explore further to ascertain the link between the power distance score and the value attached to tangibles as a SERVQUAL dimension. In line with the increasing use of service robots by tourism and hospitality businesses (Ayyildiz et al., 2022), tourists' attitudes towards various types of service robots, as tangible objects in the servicescape, may be investigated in high- and low-power distance cultures. Based on the above, service robots may be designed differently for high- and low-power distance cultures. For instance, it may be interesting to identify whether tourists from high-power distance cultures expect characteristics such as higher status, luxury exclusivity, and elitism from the service robots that attend them in a hotel or a restaurant.

■ Reliability

Due to their heterogeneity and inseparability nature, the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately is significantly more important for tourism and hospitality services (Koc, 2019). Mattila (1999) showed that tourism and hospitality customers from high-context cultures tend to attach more importance to interpersonal relationships, i.e.,

the functional quality when they evaluate the service. However, tourists from low-context cultures are more likely to attach more importance to efficiency and time savings, i.e., technical quality. Technical quality has more to do with the reliability dimension of service quality, while functional quality has more to do with responsiveness and empathy. A further aspect relating to the context is proxemics, i.e., personal space or social and physical distancing (Sorokowska et al. 2017). Due to their sensitivity to physical and social distancing (proxemics) tourists from low-context cultures may be more comfortable interacting with service robots. Social and physical distancing has become significantly more important in tourism and hospitality especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ayyildiz et al., 2022). People from low-context cultures tend to prefer a much longer social and physical distance. Ayyildiz et al. (2022) put forward that service robots may be used to ensure physical and social distancing requirements of tourists from low-context cultures (See Table 2). Table 2 shows examples of the research findings relating to reliability and their implications for managers.

Future research may investigate whether people from low-context cultures are more satisfied with service robots as they prefer a much longer physical and social distance. Likewise, future research may explore whether the social and physical distance preferences of tourists from high-context cultures changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, whether

Table 2. Cross-cultural research findings and recommendations relating to reliability

SERVQUAL dimension	Sample findings	Researchers	Recommendations
Reliability (The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately)	Due to their sensitivity to physical and social distancing (proxemics) tourists from low-context cultures may be more comfortable interacting with service robots.	Ayyildiz et al. (2022).	Service robots may be used to ensure physical and social distancing requirements of tourists from low-context cultures.
	A study of the communication needs of medical and health tourists showed that people from low-context cultures preferred direct and explicit information.	Ngamvichaikit & Beise-Zee (2014).	For medical or health tourism customers from low-context cultures tourism and hospitality managers may ensure that all direct communications with the customers and all marketing communications are direct and explicit.

the COVID-19 pandemic has had a permanent effect on the physical and social distancing of tourists from high-context cultures and has shortened these distances.

In another study by Mattila (2000), it was shown that tourists from low-context cultures are more likely to base their service quality evaluations on the efficient completion of the task, and efficient delivery of the service. On the other hand, tourists from high-context cultures (most Asians, Latins, Middle Easterners, Southern Europeans, etc.) place more emphasis on the interactional quality, between themselves and the service providers (Mattila, 2000). Likewise, tourists from masculine cultures tend to place more importance on objective service measures such as the implementation of the customer request, and rapid and accurate delivery of the service (Choi et al., 2020). In the event of service failures, it was seen that tourists from cultures with a long-term orientation, such as Singapore, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, have a higher tendency to accept short-lived service failures (Koc, 2020). They are more likely to accept that services may not be perfect all the time, and may be more likely to give the service business or the service staff a second or a third chance to improve the service (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). Also, research shows that tourists from individualistic cultures tend to prefer financial compensation in response to the service failures they encountered, while tourists from collectivistic cultures tend to prefer a good apology, the opportunity to be able to express their dissatisfaction (Gi Park et al., 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 1990; Rodríguez-López et al., 2023).

Hsieh and Tsai (2009) found that Taiwanese tourism and hospitality customers, who may have a relatively high-power distance orientation, tended to have higher expectations regarding service quality than tourism and hospitality customers from the United States who may have a relatively low-power distance orientation. Furrer et al. (2000) further explained that tourists from a high-power distance culture expected the service providers to have less power compared with themselves as the customers. As a

result of this, tourists from a high-power distance culture tend to have higher expectations, and they tend to be difficult to please.

Reliability and service quality problems are more likely to occur in high-power distance organisations due to the fact that conformity and loyalty to superiors are more important than efficiency and effectiveness (Nam, 2018; Seleim & Bontis, 2009). Conformity and loyalty to superiors may result in increased levels of corruption and nepotism (Nam, 2018; Seleim & Bontis, 2009). Managers operating in high-power distance cultures are recommended to establish management systems that favour efficiency and effectiveness rather than conformity and loyalty.

■ Responsiveness

Responsiveness is about the willingness of the service staff in tourism and hospitality businesses to help customers and provide services promptly and within time. Responsiveness of service personnel requires that an efficient and effective system of empowerment be in place in a service business. Magnini et al. (2013) showed that staff from collectivistic countries (e.g., Turkey, China, Russia, etc.) tend to be uncomfortable with empowerment.

Empowerment tends to be important for almost all dimensions of service quality. Empowerment is also important in terms of the recovery of service failures (Koc, 2020). As explained above, hospitality employees from Turkey, a high-power distance culture, were less empowered compared with hospitality employees from the United Kingdom (UK), a low-power distance culture (Koc, 2013). This study showed hospitality employees from the UK responded to the same service failure scenarios more rapidly and directly than the hospitality service providers in Turkey. Hence, in Turkey responsiveness of staff to service failures tends to be relatively poor due to the high level of power-distance. Tourism and hospitality managers in high-power-distance cultures are recommended to establish direct communication channels and systems so that they can directly communicate with their

superiors so that they can be more responsive towards customers.

In another study by Lee et al. (2015), it was found that frequent check-backs by restaurants increased low-context restaurant customers' (customs from Western Europe, North America, and Australia) positive emotional response, and their intention to revisit. Lee et al.'s (2015) study showed that restaurant customers (low-context) from the United States perceived frequent check-backs by staff more positively, while the frequent check-backs did not have any effect on high-context Japanese customers (See Table 3). This means that it would be better for managers to make sure that when their service providers serve tourists they make frequent check-backs to increase their service quality and satisfaction levels. Table 3 shows examples of research findings relating to the responsiveness dimension and their implications for managers.

Additionally, tourists from low-power distance cultures, such as the United States, prefer not to have formalities in their communication with the service providers, as they view those people as equal to them and do not perceive communication started by service providers negatively (Lee, 2015). On the other, tourists from high-power distance cultures, such as Japan, tend to perceive attempts made by service providers to start a conversation as negatively, as they view themselves as superior to the service providers (Lee, 2015). Managers may be

recommended to ensure that when serving tourists from high-power distance cultures service providers do not initiate a conversation with the customers unless it is necessary.

Regarding communication with customers and the provision of information, research shows that tourists from high-context cultures are more likely to be impatient and annoyed when service employees provide them with too much information, verbal or written (Becker, 2000). This has also to do with the fact that people from high-context cultures are more comfortable with learning by observing, i.e., through social learning (Koc, 2020). On the other hand, tourists from low context cultures may be more interested in detailed information, as their learning is more based on reading and listening (cognitive learning) (Koc, 2020). Therefore, tourism and hospitality managers may be recommended to provide more detailed formal information to tourists from low-context cultures and only basic information for tourists from high-context cultures and let them observe and learn in the tourism and hospitality establishment.

As a recommendation for future research, researchers may investigate the influence of frequent check-backs on low-context culture tourists who are also from a high-power distance culture. Whilst their low-context characteristics may influence them positively towards frequent check-backs, their high-power distance characteristic may cause them to perceive frequent

Table 3. Cross-cultural research findings and recommendations relating to responsiveness

SERVQUAL dimension	Sample findings	Researchers	Recommendations
Responsiveness (the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service)	Frequent check-backs by restaurants increased low-context restaurant customers' (customs from Western Europe, North America, and Australia) positive emotional response, and their intention to revisit. Frequent check-backs did not have any effect on high-context Japanese customers.	Lee et al. (2015).	When serving customers from low-context cultures the staff may be asked to make more frequent check-backs. Also, service robots may be designed in such a way to make more frequent check-backs.
	Hospitality employees from a high-power distance culture use indirect communication when communicating service failures to their superiors, whilst hospitality employees from a low-power distance culture tend to use more direct communication when communicating service failures to their superiors.	Koc (2013).	Hospitality staff from high-power distance cultures may be encouraged and trained to use more direct communication when communicating with their superiors.

check-backs as socially lower-ranking individuals (employees) attempting to initiate interaction (Lee, 2015).

■ Assurance

Assurance is about the desire and ability of the service staff to establish trust and confidence when serving customers and serving the customers with courtesy (Parasuraman et al., 1991). As service staff from restraint cultures may not be able internalise the service and the fact that in general, they may be pessimistic and relatively unhappy (Hofstede et al., 2010), they may have difficulty in establishing trust and confidence and serving customers with courtesy (Koc, 2020). Managers in restraint cultures may be recommended to establish training programmes for their staff to develop their skills in building trust and confidence together with delivering service in a courteous manner. This is especially important when serving customers from individualistic cultures. Tsaour et al. (2005) found that tourists from individualistic cultures tend to attach more weight to the assurance dimension of service quality and expect the service staff to instill more confidence in them.

According to research, mimicry and mirroring of the person one interacts with tends to increase her/his ability to establish rapport and affiliation, and create feelings of closeness, helpfulness, and trust (Friedman, 2016; Tanner et al., 2007). Empathy and trust (assurance) appear to be influenced significantly by the helpfulness of the other person (Oswald, 2002; Stel et al., 2008). Hence, recruiting tourism and hospitality staff with intercultural abilities and developing their intercultural abilities have paramount importance (Koc, 2021).

Mattila (1999) showed that tourism and hospitality customers from high-context cultures are more likely to be critical in their service quality evaluations and assign lower scores in their ratings of quality. In other words, high-context tourists require more effort to earn their confidence and trust. Regarding the assurance dimension, Tsang and Ap (2007) and Manrai and Manrai (2011) found that when the level of power

distance increases, the tourists' reliance on relational service quality attributes such as courtesy, empathy, and responsiveness also increases (See Table 4). In other words, courtesy as an element of assurance dimension is more needed in high-power distance cultures. In a similar vein, Kong and Jogaratnam (2007) discovered that while collectivistic customers expect higher levels of courtesy, civility, and concern, individualistic customers tend to place more emphasis on customisation and individual recognition. Hence, assurance, confidence, and trust may be built differently for two different sets of tourist groups. Table 4 shows examples of research findings relating to the responsiveness dimension and their implications for managers.

Research shows hospitality employees from Turkey, a high-power distance culture, were less empowered compared with hospitality employees from the United Kingdom (UK), a low-power distance culture (Koc, 2013). This study showed hospitality employees from the UK responded to the same service failure scenarios more quickly and directly than the hospitality service providers in Turkey. While the Turkish employees used mitigated speech when informing their superiors about the service failure, the service employees in the UK used a more direct approach when they informed their superiors about the service failure. This caused more delays in service recovery action in Turkey. This means that since quick action may not be taken in Turkish tourism and hospitality establishments, it may be difficult for the service staff to build confidence and trust in customers.

Tourists from high-uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as China, Turkey, Greece, Japan, and South Korea, etc., prefer personal information sources, e.g., travel agencies, because they can build trust and confidence through personal relationships. However, with the increasing number of dishonest travel agencies in China over the past decade, tourists now have begun to trust and have confidence in impersonal information sources and online travel agencies (Hsu & Huang, 2016). Tourists from restraint cultures, such as Russia, Italy, Portugal, France, Turkey, Romania, Germany, Poland, and Spain tend to be

more cynical, have lower levels of trust for others, and tend to be more pessimistic (Hofstede et al., 2010; Koc, 2019). The above findings show that service providers need to put in additional effort and resort to different approaches in order to earn the confidence and trust of tourists from restraint cultures.

Finally, service recovery processes, following service failures, are important occasions to earn the trust and confidence of customers. Research shows that tourists from individualistic cultures tend to prefer financial compensation, while tourists from collectivistic cultures tend to prefer a good apology, the opportunity to be able to express their dissatisfaction (Gi Park et al., 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 1990; Rodríguez-López et al., 2023).

As high-power distance increases reliance on relational service quality attributes such as courtesy, empathy, and responsiveness, future research may investigate the courtesy, empathy, and responsiveness abilities and tendencies of hotel staff serving tourists from high-power distance cultures. Also, as subordinates from high-power distance cultures are more likely to use indirect communication when communicating about service failures and crises (Koc, 2013), managers' abilities to decode and understand the implications of these messages may be investigated in both high- and low-power distance cultures.

■ Empathy

Empathy is about treating each customer individually and treating them with care, and understanding each customer's unique needs, situations, preferences, feelings, and wants (Koc, 2019; Parasuraman et al., 1991). Employees with intercultural competence and intelligence are more likely to be more empathetic and tend to provide better service to international customers (Khan et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2015; Sizoo, et al., 2005; Sizoo, 2008; Stauss et al., 2016). Sharma et al. (2018) also found that in addition to empathy, intercultural abilities increased overall service quality perceptions of customers and their level of satisfaction. On the other hand, tourists with a high-level intercultural ability, intercultural competence, and intercultural intelligence appeared to be more empathetic and forgiving towards the service employees in situations of service failures (Ye et al., 2013).

Several researchers (Furrer et al., 2000; Koc, 2021; Mattila, 1999; Tsaur et al., 2005) found that tourists from individualistic cultures in Europe, (most of the West European countries), in the United States, Canada, and Australia expect service providers to be highly efficient and expect a higher level of service quality, as they tend to have a higher level of self-responsibility ethic, a feeling of self-reliance, competition, and achievement. Also, individualism results in

Table 4. Cross-cultural research findings and recommendations relating to assurance

SERVQUAL dimension	Sample findings	Researchers	Recommendations
Assurance <i>(The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence)</i>	High-power distance increases reliance on relational service quality attributes such as courtesy, empathy, and responsiveness.	Tsang & Ap (2007); Manrai & Manrai (2011).	Staff may be given structured training on being courteous, empathetic, and responsive when dealing with customers from high power-distance cultures. When dealing with customers from collectivistic customers the staff may be asked to pay additional attention to the courtesy element in the delivery of service.
	While collectivistic customers expect higher levels of courtesy, civility, and concern, individualistic customers tend to put more emphasis on customisation and individual recognition.	Kong & Jogaratnam (2007).	For customers from individualistic cultures tourism and hospitality services may be customised according to the specific personal needs and wants of the customers.

loose ties with others, causing tourists to place greater emphasis on their self-interest, leading to an unwillingness to accept poor quality (Ayyildiz et al., 2023; Furrer et al., 2000; Sigala & Sakellariadis, 2004). As the empathy dimension refers to the quality of individualised attention given to the customers, tourists from individualistic countries may have higher levels of expectations from the hospitality businesses and the staff members.

Research shows that tourists from high-power distance cultures expect the senior members of the service organisation with higher status to make an apology (i.e., the hotel manager or the restaurant manager) rather than the lower-ranking service employees (Mueller et al. 2003; Patterson et al., 2006). Hence, managers working in tourism and hospitality businesses serving tourists from high-power distance cultures may need to be prepared to deal with the service failures directly and make apologies to the tourists personally.

Radojevic et al. (2019) showed that hospitality employees from cultures with a high level of individualism and indulgence were particularly gifted in delivering high-quality service (See Table 4). Although this result may encompass all service quality dimensions, it is particularly relevant for the empathy dimension since staff from individualistic and indulgence cultures tend to be more empathetic. Hence, tourism and hospitality businesses may try to recruit more people from individualistic and indulgence cultures. Table 5 shows examples of research find-

ings relating to the empathy dimension and their implications for managers.

Also, it must be kept in mind that people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as China, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, Australia, and the Netherlands tend to be more comfortable when interacting with people from different cultures (Hofstede, 2010). On the other hand, people from high-uncertainty avoidance cultures may tend to be more xenophobic. This means that service staff from high-uncertainty avoidance cultures may have a lower level of cultural intelligence which in turn may result in non-empathetic behaviour towards tourists (Koc, 2020).

As intercultural competence is significantly important for tourism and hospitality employees and managers (Koc, 2021), future research may investigate the intercultural competence levels of tourism and hospitality students at various universities and countries. Based on the outcomes of this study, tourism, and hospitality programmes may be advised to include intercultural competence courses in their curriculum or guidelines to improve their current courses.

■ Discussion and Conclusions

This study explained and discussed how cultural differences might influence the design and implementation of a service quality system through the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Table 5. Cross-cultural research findings and recommendations relating to empathy

SERVQUAL Dimension	Sample Findings	Researchers	Recommendations
Empathy (The caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers)	Employees with intercultural competence and intelligence are more likely to be more empathetic and tend to provide better service to international customers.	Sizoo, et al., 2005; Sizoo, 2008; Sharma et al., 2015; Khan et al., 2015; Stauss et al., 2016; Sharma, 2018.	Tourism and hospitality businesses may recruit staff with higher levels of intercultural competence and train their staff continuously to improve their intercultural abilities.
	As people from indulgence cultures may place higher importance on leisure and fun and internalise hedonism, they may be more able to provide a better service.	Radojevic et al., (2019)	Tourism and hospitality businesses may try to recruit more of their staff members from indulgence cultures.

Also, the study showed the importance of intercultural competence and abilities not only in terms of SERVQUAL dimensions but also in terms of a wide variety of operations in tourism and hospitality businesses. For instance, a tourism and hospitality manager from a low-power distance culture may find indirect messages from subordinates regarding a service failure and crisis difficult to decode. Based on the indirect messages the manager has been provided, s/he may find it difficult to evaluate the severity of a service failure or a crisis. The study also showed that the staff and managers from a restraint culture may find it difficult to internalise and understand the specific requirements of tourists from indulgence cultures. The staff and managers from a restraint culture may find the specific requirements peculiar or too extreme.

The research findings showed that the design of service quality systems and the management of the service quality system in general, require a good understanding of cross-cultural differences. The explanations and discussion presented above are thought to provide a framework for academics as well as practitioners operating in tourism and hospitality businesses. As explained above, based on the fact that tourism and hospitality activities are increasingly becoming internationalised, the need for intercultural knowledge and skills are of paramount importance for tourism and hospitality staff and managers.

An overall evaluation of Tables 1 to 5 shows that the service quality system in tourism and hospitality businesses should be designed around the cross-cultural characteristics of the large market segments the tourism and hospitality business serves. Overall, the study shows the need to develop intercultural competence and abilities in tourism and hospitality businesses. All human resource management functions, such as human resource planning, recruitment and selection, training, motivation, and pay and reward may be geared towards acquiring and maintaining a staff with a high level of intercultural abilities. Starting with the managers down to the service providers all the staff member's intercultural abilities may be continuously checked and monitored. Based on the defi-

ciencies, corrective action may be taken through recruitment, training, and motivation.

As this study mainly aims to establish the relationship between the service quality dimensions and the cross-cultural characteristics, it is not comprehensive. Future studies may be carried out in the manner of bibliometric studies in order to provide a broad picture of the phenomenon. Also, future studies may investigate various other aspects of service quality in relation to cross-cultural differences. For instance, how people react to various service recovery attempts, which type of justice is more important for tourists from a specific culture, etc.

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