

Customers' stereotypes may make work emotionally harder for Asian waitstaff

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Across the hospitality industry, improperly delivered goods or services—known as a service failure—are part of doing business. A hotel reservation with no room, a flight cancelation and inattentive

service at a restaurant are all examples of this phenomenon that most customers eventually encounter.

Since service failures are inevitable, the ability to recover trust and retain customers after a service failure is a critical skill for waitstaff and other workers in the hospitality industry. Sometimes, waitstaff can simply present their honest emotional reaction to a situation, but other times, waitstaff must do the emotional work of amplifying their [emotional response](#) to the situation in order to repair the relationship.

Stereotypes about people of Asian descent may mean that minoritized workers must do more emotional work in these situations, according to a new article in the [International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management](#) authored by Heyao "Chandler" Yu and Phillip Jolly of the Penn State College of Health and Human Development and their colleague, Lindsey Lee of Temple University.

The persistent need for additional emotional work may lead to exhaustion, burn out and, potentially, departure from the hospitality industry altogether, the researchers said.

Relative to other industries, the hospitality industry has a great deal of racial and [ethnic diversity](#), but most of that diversity is concentrated in the front-line employees, according to [prior research](#). Managers and corporate leaders, on the other hand, tend to be more homogeneously white.

To understand this lack of leadership diversity in a field where front-line workers represent a broad cross-section of the public, the researchers examined how much emotional burden is placed on waitstaff with Asian appearances. [Prior research](#) on stereotypes revealed that, in a majority [white population](#), white waitstaff were commonly regarded as warm and competent, while waitstaff of Asian descent were regarded as competent

but not warm.

"Results from previous stereotype research suggested that restaurant patrons might be more forgiving of service failures when their waiter is white and judge a waiter more harshly when he appears to be Asian," said Jolly, associate professor of hospitality management. "So, the first step in our investigation was to study whether that was true."

The researchers recruited 200 adults in the United States using Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online marketplace where people complete tasks in exchange for a fee. Participants were presented with scenarios about dining out where a restaurant failed to provide adequate service. They were then shown images of a waiter who appeared to be either white or Asian.

In scenarios that involved an improperly cooked meal, people responded similarly to all waitstaff, regardless of their race. In scenarios that involved poor service, customers were less likely to be satisfied with apologies from the waitstaff of Asian descent.

"This is exactly the result we would expect because of [racial stereotypes](#) about warmth," said Yu, the Elizabeth M. King Early Career Professor of hospitality management.

"When the problem is with a product, it does not feel personal. As long as the restaurant provides a replacement, most customers will be satisfied. But when there is a failure in the way the customer is treated, this feels more personal. Recovering from that requires more warmth, and this is challenging if the waitstaff is already seen as cold based on their race."

Next, the researchers wanted to understand how stereotypes about warmth impacted waitstaff of Asian descent. The researchers recruited

200 white and Asian service-industry workers using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Some of these participants were presented with a scenario where they were waiting tables during a service failure—specifically, a table runner had been rude to their customers—and the participant needed to apologize to the diners.

Participants of Asian descent reported higher levels of 'expressive regulation'—the need to project a specific emotion rather than simply present their natural emotional state. This type of extra emotional work may be exhausting and eventually lead to burnout, according to the researchers.

For the final experiment, the researchers wanted to test whether expressive regulation actually leads to burnout. They recruited another cohort of 240 white and Asian service industry workers using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants completed a series of questions, including how much expressive regulation they perform at work and how emotionally drained their work makes them feel. Results indicated that service workers of Asian descent engage in more expressive regulation and experience more emotional exhaustion from work.

"We believe this may be a death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts scenario," Jolly said. "If you must do a little extra emotional work every single time there is a service failure, the cumulative impact of those experiences may really take a toll over the days, weeks and years."

The researchers said that some of this research is generalizable to people everywhere. Most people experience circumstances at some point where they are not part of the dominant or preferred group. When that happens, minoritized individuals have to perform additional emotional labor to elicit responses equivalent to those elicited by members of the dominant group. Each situation places different amounts of emotional burden on individuals depending on the circumstances and the people

involved.

The researchers were primarily interested, however, in how this phenomenon affects workers in the service industry and how to retain talent of Asian descent.

"We know that many Asians begin their careers in the hospitality industry, but few progress into executive jobs in the field," Yu said. "Understanding the burdens placed on waitstaff of Asian descent may be the first step toward learning how to retain a more diverse talent pool across all levels of the industry."

Yu also noted that similar studies are needed to understand the specific problems faced by other minoritized groups.

"Hopefully these findings are one step on a journey towards a more inclusive and diverse hospitality industry," Yu said.

More information: Lindsey Lee et al, Keeping warm: racial disparities of warmth judgments in the service industry, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1108/IJCHM-12-2022-1510](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-12-2022-1510)

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