

Fate and 'face': Cultural differences lead to different consumer approaches

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If an airline flight is delayed, Asian consumers might take it in stride. But those same passengers might be unhappy if the flight attendants are rude or inattentive. And Western consumers might react differently, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Haksin Chan (The Chinese University of Hong Kong), Lisa C. Wan (Lingnan University), and Leo Y. M. Sin (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) believe these generalizations stem from different cultural approaches to the concepts of "fate" and "face."

"As compared to Western consumers, Asian consumers have a stronger belief in fate (an impersonal power that is thought to bring about different events and outcomes) and are more concerned with face (a positive image of the self that is affirmed through interpersonal interactions)" write the authors.

By paying more attention to their perceived fatalism, some literature characterizes Asian consumers as less demanding or more easily satisfied than Westerners. But the authors believe that's only half the picture. "In many Asian cultures, face is a major concern in social interactions, as evidenced by the traditional emphasis on etiquette and manners. We hypothesize that Asian consumers have a higher tolerance only for nonsocial failures," the authors explain.

The researchers created three cross-cultural studies that involved a restaurant, a movie theater, and a computer repair service. They chose

these examples because both social and nonsocial failures occur at high frequencies in these service contexts. In all the studies, they found that Asian consumers were more tolerant of nonsocial failures and Americans were more tolerant of social failures. Interestingly, the researchers found that fate-suggestive brands (such as Lucky Star) increased the Asian consumers' tolerance for fate and increased their tolerance for social failures.

The research offers general guidelines for designing services to please consumers in different cultures. "In particular, hospitality managers should heed Asian consumers' concern for face when designing new services and promotional campaigns," the authors write.

More information: Haksin Chan, Lisa C. Wan, and Leo Y. M. Sin. "The Contrasting Effects of Culture on Consumer Tolerance: Interpersonal Face and Impersonal Fate." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.

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