

Uncovering Elements of Hotel Thainess: Case study from Five-Star hotel

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Abstract

Throughout the decades, Thailand relies on its national identity as part of distinctive selling points. Thainess has been regarded as marketing campaigns to foster Thai tourism and enhance guest experience. The purposes of this study were 1) to examine the components of Thainess from the perspectives of Five-Star hotel guests, and 2) to investigate the uniqueness of Thainess in Five-star hotels. Data were obtained from a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with five hoteliers and utilizing netnography for collecting ninety-five (guest) reviews from the three chosen hotels that have Thainess-related awards or incorporated Thainess in their properties. Results of the study revealed that all four dimensions of Thainess: Mannerism, Atmosphere, Cuisine, and Culture are crucial parts of the compositional patterns of Thainess in Five-Star hotels. The mannerism of service providers, from both guests' and hoteliers' perspectives, is the most powerful factor in conveying Thainess and strongly influences guests' impressions.

Keywords: Thainess, Five-Star hotel, Guest Perception, Service Quality

บทคัดย่อ

หลายทศวรรษที่ผ่านมาประเทศไทยได้ใช้อัตลักษณ์ความเป็นไทยเป็นจุดขายและใช้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของแคมเปญทางการตลาดเพื่อส่งเสริมการท่องเที่ยวและเพิ่มประสบการณ์ที่ดีให้กับผู้รับบริการ งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ 1) เพื่อศึกษาองค์ประกอบของความเป็นไทยในมุมมองของผู้รับบริการในโรงแรมระดับ 5 ดาว และ 2) เพื่อศึกษาเอกลักษณ์และความโดดเด่นด้านความเป็นไทยในโรงแรมระดับ 5 ดาว งานวิจัยนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยมีการเก็บข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์จากพนักงานโรงแรมระดับ 5 ดาว จำนวน 5 ท่าน และเก็บข้อมูลจากรีวิวของผู้รับบริการที่ใช้บริการในโรงแรมที่ได้รับรางวัลที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเป็นไทย หรือเป็นโรงแรมที่มีองค์ประกอบความเป็นไทยอย่างชัดเจน จำนวน 95 รีวิว โดยใช้วิธีวิจัยชาติพันธุ์วรรณาทางอินเทอร์เน็ต (Netnography) ผลจากการศึกษาพบว่าความเป็นไทยมีองค์ประกอบหลัก 4 ด้านซึ่งประกอบด้วย มารยาท บรรยากาศ อาหารไทย และ วัฒนธรรมไทย ล้วนเป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญของความเป็นไทยที่สำคัญที่ถูกนำมาใช้ในอุตสาหกรรมโรงแรม นอกจากนี้ผลการวิจัยพบว่าในมุมมองของผู้รับบริการและผู้ให้บริการ กิริยาและมารยาทของพนักงานเป็นสิ่งที่สำคัญที่สุด เพราะเป็นสิ่งที่บ่งชี้ความเป็นไทยได้ชัดเจนที่สุด

คำสำคัญ: ความเป็นไทย, โรงแรมระดับห้าดาว, การรับรู้ของลูกค้า, คุณภาพการให้บริการ

Introduction

Tourists travel to experience the authenticity, cultural differences, and uniqueness of destinations; hence, many countries, including Thailand, utilize their national identity as part of their distinctive selling points. Thailand relies on its national identity, Thainess, to entice visitors in addition to its natural landscape (Kongpolphrom, 2018). Throughout the decades, tourism has long been regarded as a major economic contributor in Thailand, and several strategies with various marketing campaigns have incorporated Thainess to foster Thai tourism and enhance guest experience. The Thai have an unrivaled service-minded nature, and their hospitality has been regarded as a world-class and personalized service that contributes to better experience and contentment (Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn, 2022). Likewise, providing exceptional service experience for guests is the prime objective of the hospitality industry (Järvi et al., 2020), especially in a fast-changing scene of tourism. Visa Global Travel Intentions Study ranked Thailand as the fourth most chosen post-pandemic destination, seeing over thirty-five million tourists per year (TAT Newsroom, 2022; Thailand Tourism Statistics, n.d.).

The definition of Thainess has been regarded as an ambiguous concept and is a society-driven perception based on any values, making it difficult to conceptualize (Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn, 2022). The strong emphasis on behavior, especially personalities reflecting Thainess, is remarked as Thainess-defining characteristics such as attentiveness, sincerity, and friendliness (Fakfare et al., 2019; Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn, 2022; Tan et al., 2014). While Najpinij (2012) and Nangklaphivat (2017) pointed out other elements of Thainess including Thai art atmosphere, architecture, and culinary practice. From previous research, Thainess has been adopted in the hotel operation both tangible and intangible services thus applying Thainess in Hotel can create significant brand image to the consumers' valuations and can even empower consumers to discern between establishments within the same star rating (Sürücü et al., 2019). However, on the hospitality side, studies have shown that Thainess is generally a matter of several dimensions combined. Existing studies have mainly focused on the service providers' aspect of how Thainess is portrayed, without considering how it is viewed by guests. To fill in the gap, this research aims to identify the components of hotel Thainess from both parties, specifically from five-star hotels that had Thainess-related awards or incorporated Thainess in their

properties. To accomplish these objectives, the study utilizes a qualitative research method to collect data by conducting semi-structure interviews and netnography for in-depth understanding about Thainess from the perspectives of hotel guests and hoteliers. The findings can validate the potential of utilized elements of Thainess as a selling point strategy and marketing tool in the national and global hospitality industry.

Objectives

1. To examine the components of Thainess from views of hotel guests
2. To investigate the uniqueness of Thainess in Five-star hotels

Literature Review

Brand Identity

Brand identity comes from within a company, and how consumers see it is determined by what their products and services are, how they are offered, and if they have any special features (Nandan, 2005). To support, Alnawas and Altarifi (2015) mentioned that brand identity appeases consumers' symbolic needs rather than their functional ones. They also stated that in the hotel industry, distinctive and unique identities can aid companies when it comes to strengthening guests' identification with the hotel brand itself and allows for sustainable differentiation from their competitors' products and services. Brands with distinctive identities are superior in creating consumer engagement. It can serve as a social status indicator, and when a brand is known for its high reputation, consumer self-enhancement can be formed and that can further lead to intense guest identification with the brand. Additionally, if a hotel brand supports the guests' lifestyles, beliefs, and aspirations, it can intensify the guests' identification with the brand.

Guest Perception

Guest perception is powerfully influenced by service clues, comprising of three main categories: technical, mechanic, and humanic clues. While mechanic clues influence guest expectations, humanic clues impact the whole service experience evaluation (Berry et al., 2006; Wall and Berry, 2007). In the context of hotels, Jang et al. (2018) found that hotel staff are the most important attribute of the hotel; their behaviors powerfully impact guest perception, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. However, all clues are counted as crucial components in building customer perception. As mentioned by Berry et al. (2006)

firms compete best when they combine both functional and emotional benefits in their service offers.

Service Quality

Service quality was defined as the result of the guest's overall evaluation of the service delivery by comparing the expected service with the actual service performance (Narangajavana and Hu, 2008; DAM and DAM, 2021). Under the SERVQUAL scale, service comprises of five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Stefano et al., 2015). Mouzaek et al. (2021) found that all dimensions can enhance guest satisfaction, however, empathy was found to have the strongest relationship with the satisfaction of guests. In addition to empathy, Fida et al. (2020) demonstrated that responsiveness is another priority that firms should rely on to obtain guest satisfaction. Nevertheless, tangibles, assurance, and reliability cannot be forgotten since they are still the crucial components of service provisions (Fida et al., 2020). Service quality initiates brand image, guest satisfaction, and loyalty. Consequently, as service quality improves, there are more chances to increase guest satisfaction and loyalty, the key components of a business firm's success (DAM and DAM, 2021). According to Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn (2022), Thainess has been adopted in the hotel operation both tangible and intangible services. Many studies had pointed out some elements of Thainess throughout the hotelier perspective including attentiveness, sincerity, friendliness, politeness, atmosphere, architecture, and culinary practice (Najpinij, 2012; Fakfare et al., 2019; Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn, 2022; Tan et al., 2014). Researcher construct research framework based upon the review of the Thainess variables as shown in Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

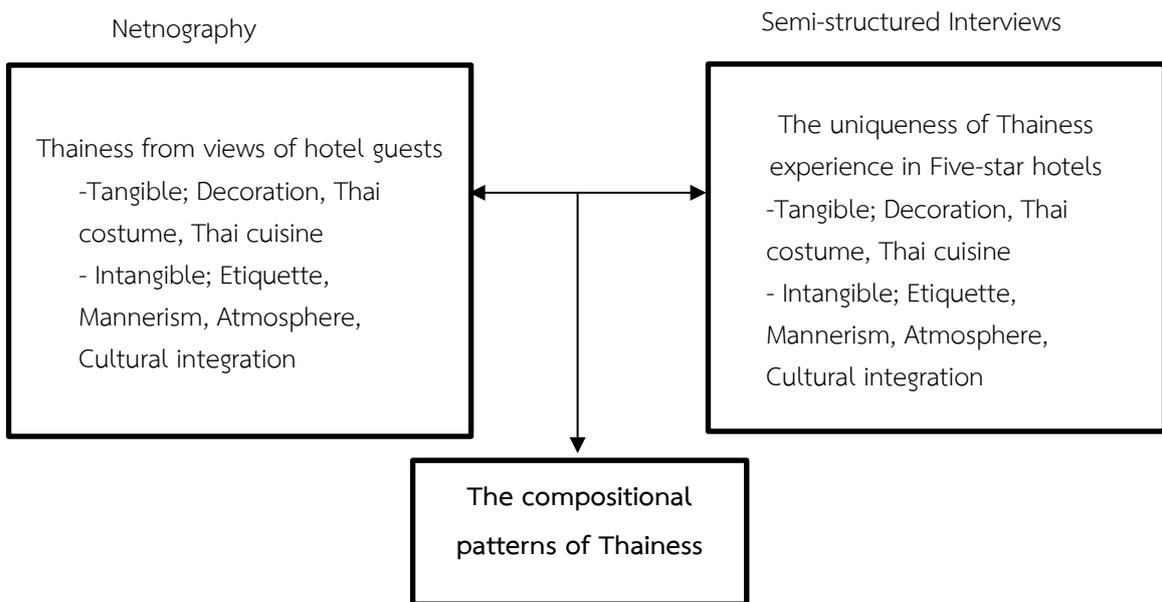


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to provide in-depth understanding about Thainess from the perspectives of hotel guests and hoteliers. Firstly, to obtain information on the guest's perception, Netnography was utilized to gather customer insights from online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Online reviews on Tripadvisor were collected; this platform was chosen due to its reliability and trust users have in it (Fileri et al., 2015). Three hotels were selected based on the criteria of having Thainess-related awards or incorporated Thainess in their properties. The reviews of each hotel on Tripadvisor during December 2021 – May 2022 were explored with a total of a hundred and forty-one comments. Ninety-five of them mentioned Thainess and are included in this research.

To investigate the research objective no. 2, a semi-structured interview technique was employed to gather information, follow up, and expand on the ideas of integrated the uniqueness of Thainess experience in the Five-Star hotels based upon the hoteliers' perspectives. Five key informants were chosen based on several criteria including 1) work in five-star hotel property that incorporated Thainess into their designs/services, 2) work as permanent employee with at least five years tenor, and 3) have role and

responsibility related to Thainess experience in the property. The researchers conducted interviews from July to August 2022. Interview guidelines were formulated and referenced from previous studies and results from online reviews. The name of the hotels and key informants are concealed to ensure privacy and replaced with the abbreviations A through E. Key informants' demographics are summarized in Table 1. The interviews were transcribed to provide text for content analysis.

Thematic analysis was applied with the data drawn from Tripadvisor reviews and transcripts of five key informants. Qualitative data were subject to open coding, interpretation, and classification into different codes (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022), that were subsequently compared, reviewed, adjusted, and merged into main themes and sub-themes. Identification of themes, sub-themes, and their relationships were triangulated by the approval of four researchers to increase the consistency and reliability of the data analysis.

Table 1: Key Informant Demographics

Key Informants	Gender	Age Range	Position	Type of Hotel
A	M	25-35	Sales Manager	Luxury, 5 Stars
B	F	25-35	Assistant HR Manager	Luxury, 5 Stars
C	M	25-35	Owner	Premium Homestay, 5 Stars
D	M	25-35	Banquet Server	Executive Apartment, 5 Stars
E	F	25-35	Executive housekeeper	Luxury, 5 Stars

Research Findings

This research attempted to examine the components of Thainess and the compositional patterns of Thainess of Five-Star hotel in which focusing on both guest and hotelier perspectives. Thus, two analyses were conducted: one from the guest side and another from the hotelier side.

Components of Thainess from the perspective of hotel guests

Data were collected through an analysis of online comments (reviews) on Tripadvisor from three Five-Star hotels with Thainess-related awards or incorporated

Thainess in their properties, from December 2021 to May 2022. During this period, ninety-five out of a hundred and forty-one comments with identifiable Thainess were selected. Themes and sub-themes were identified as shown in Table 2. Mannerism is the important main theme with the most perceivable aspect for the guests toward their Thainess experiences. In term of the definition of Mannerism, the result indicated as hotel employees' self-conscious use of a distinctive Thai manner for remarkable services including attentiveness, caring, respectfulness, invitation to return and friendliness. Attentiveness and caring were the most important sub-theme with 97 online comments and considering as distinctive. The findings reveal attentiveness as a personality trait that enables hoteliers to be observant, helpful, and considerate of others. While caring is manner of employees that pay attention to guests including warmness, kindness, sincerity, softness, and gentleness. The hotel guests believed that kindness and concern for others was very important and embraced the sense of uniqueness in Thailand. Some examples were presented as following.

“The attention to detail is incredible. Loved how the staff knew our names and they really made us feel like family (Attentiveness, Guest from Hotel 3).”

“The passionate, caring, super kind and friendly staff who love to please and spoil their guests. That goes from the GM to the butler to the housekeeper and the pool attendant. Everyone, without exception (Caring, Guest from Hotel 1).”

Respectfulness was the third sub-theme of Mannerism which is comprised of Wai, Politeness, and Courtesy. A unique form of Thai culture that can be a sign of good manners, the Wai, represents the Thai gesture of thanks, apologies, or greetings. There were fifty-nine reviews that mentioned respectfulness. As the service providers' manners are highly noticeable, they strongly encourage guests to visit the hotels again. The term 'Invitation to return' refers to the fulfilled feeling of guests who were impressed by the hotel's attributes, especially the employees that they wish to visit again in the future. It was pointed out thirty-eight times. The last sub-theme of Mannerism that is noticeably mentioned by guests is the "Friendliness" of service providers. Friendliness, which comprises Friendliness and Smile, was mentioned twenty-eight times. Some examples of Mannerism were presented:

“The waiters in the hotel are amiable and polite, with smiles and a feeling of coming home (Respectfulness, Guest from Hotel 1).”

“The six nights came and gone, and we can only look forward to our next trip and it will definitely still be this hotel. Looking forward to seeing all the warm and friendly faces [again] (Invitation to return, Guest from Hotel 2).”

In addition to Mannerism, other elements of Thainess were noticed in the eyes of customers. Cuisine, in terms of local dishes and ingredients, is the second most noticeable theme. Thai cuisine is well-known for its distinctive combination of the five tastes and the intense aroma of spices. Different ingredients and cooking styles can be remarkably reflected in local dishes, providing a strong sense of regional differences. Thai cuisine was stated twenty times in the reviews including Thai herbs, Thai cooking class, Thai fruits, Thai dishes that representing as a product and service in the hotel. One of the guest comment in Hotel 3 stated that *“On arrival you are greeted with a handwritten note, wine, fruit and local appetizers. Delicious! Every day a new Thai fruit is delivered for you to enjoy after your room is cleaned...”* Moreover, the themes of Atmosphere and Culture were also perceived by guests; however, they have low frequencies in comparison to the other themes. Regarding Atmosphere, mentioned twelve times, guests mostly identified Thai-styled decorations, artifacts, and the use of the color gold. Culture, on the other hand, was mentioned twice. The only component mentioned in this theme is about Thai massage service in the property, the traditional practice offering many health benefits and a touch of relaxation. Results in Table 2 indicate that Mannerism can represent Thainess the best, from hotels to guests. Although Cuisine, Atmosphere, and Culture can enhance the presence of Thainess in the perspectives of guests, Mannerism is the most effective theme that guests perceive. Table 2 shows the frequency of Thainess identified from these comments.

Table 2: Frequency of Thainess identified from online comments on Tripadvisor

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Total
Atmosphere	Thai architecture	12	12
Mannerism	Attentiveness	97	319
	Caring	97	
	Respectfulness	59	
	Invitation to return	38	
	Friendliness	28	
Cuisine	Local dishes and ingredients	20	20
Culture	Thai heritage	2	2

The uniqueness of Thainess experience in Five-star hotels

Data were collected from semi-structured interview with five professionals who worked in five-star hotel property that incorporated Thainess into their designs/services (see Table 1). The results indicated that the most significant dimension of Thainess perceived by hoteliers is Mannerism, followed by Atmosphere, Cuisine, and Culture. In terms of Mannerism, hoteliers emphasize Attentiveness is represented as the most important sub-theme of Mannerism which is a particular behavior of service providers such as remember guests' personal details, and preferences, and being proactive to help guests without waiting for them to ask. As mentioned by Key informant E that *"We pay a lot of attention to our guests. Our staff are always communicating with each other about what guests like and dislike. When [our] guests are sick, we prepare flowers and cards for them from every department in the hotel and give them to the guests. And they're happy."*

Another sub-theme of Mannerism is Caring, includes caring, smile, warmth, friendliness, kindness, and understanding. Hoteliers show great care for their guests by treating them like family. They approach guests with friendly manners and always smile during encounters. Hoteliers attempt to provide guests with the warm feeling of "coming back home." Respectfulness is the third sub-theme of Mannerism, consisting of Respectfulness, Wai, Politeness, and Humbleness. Greeting guests with a Wai every time we see them and using local honorifics make them feel content. The last sub-theme of

Mannerism is Flexibility. By virtue of the notable habit of compromise, alternatives are constantly available for guests rather than straight refusals. Flexibility is an important characteristic even though it was mentioned only once. A habitual attribute of the Thai is how flexible and adjustable they are regarding anything, especially if it concerns guests. By virtue of the notable habit of compromise (of Thai service providers), alternatives are constantly available for guests rather than straight refusals. Flexibility is counted as one of the important characteristics of Thai service providers. Some examples from key informants are as follows.

“We remembered the name of this guest who came four years ago; his name and all his details. He told us that he felt so impressed and touched that we remembered everything (Caring, Key Informant A).”

“When guests arrive, we greet them with a smile and wai all the time. Our employees are very respectful and have great service minds (Respectfulness, Key Informant B).”

“The flexibility of Thai people really benefits the hospitality service. In case guests request or ask for something that we don’t have, we will provide them with options or suggestions instead of refusing them directly (Flexibility, Key Informant A).”

The second Thainess theme perceived by hotelier is about hotel atmosphere. Hoteliers emphasize Thai architecture (mentioned twenty-two times) including guest rooms and other areas. Frequently mentioned architectural designs include hand carved pillars, archways, and lobby walls all decorated with intricate traditional designs that can be linked to Thai arts and culture. As mentioned by Key informant B *“We decorated pillars with long lamps, inspired by the nails of Nang Ram or Thai folk dancers. Our lobby also has details of elephants, and the fountain has carvings of Thai patterns”*

Cuisine is also remarked as a significant aspect of Thainess theme. It is an element that is moderately mentioned by hoteliers compared to the previously mentioned themes. Local dishes and ingredients, the sub-dimension of Cuisine, includes Thai cuisine, Thai local ingredients, Thai taste, Thai food knowledge, and Thai cooking class. The last theme is Heritage, under Culture and Traditions. Thai culture and traditions are visibly manifested through hotel decorations during various Thai festivals as well as in local communities

nearby where guests can interact with locals and explore their way of life. These themes were perceived by hoteliers seven times and was discussed in several views such as:

“... Thai foods such as Khao Kha Moo (pork leg on rice), noodles, Pad Thai, and fried rice are very popular among guests. They’re like recommended dishes, like if you come to Thailand you have to try these menus. We also have a Michelin star restaurant called Sra Bua (lotus pond).... (Cuisine, Key Informant B)”

Table 3 indicates that all themes related to Thainess are essential to hoteliers, however, Mannerism has the highest frequency. This shows that hoteliers emphasize on the manners of employees rather than other physical dimensions. It can be implied that Mannerism possesses the highest ability in conveying Thainess to guests when it comes to the hotel services.

Table 3: Frequency of Thainess identified by key informants

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Total
Atmosphere	Thai architecture	22	22
Mannerism	Attentiveness	15	36
	Caring	12	
	Respectfulness	8	
	Flexibility	1	
Cuisine	Local dishes and ingredients	13	13
Culture	Thai heritage	7	7

Conclusion

Findings reveal that the most significant theme of Thainess for guests is Mannerism, and the sub-themes Attentiveness and Caring were most mentioned by both parties. Other aspects of manners that consumers identified are Respectfulness, Invitation to return, and Friendliness. Additional physical dimensions such as Atmosphere, Cuisine, and Culture were also recognized by guests, however, the results show that they are not as outstanding. Likewise, in the perspectives of hoteliers, Mannerism is the theme with most

importance. In terms of Mannerism, Attentiveness was mentioned most frequently, followed by Caring, Respectfulness, and Flexibility. Regarding the previously mentioned physical dimensions, hoteliers perceived them as significant elements of Thainess, although the findings pointed out that they prove to be less effective.

The results suggest that Mannerism is the most remarkable theme of Thainess in the perspectives of both guests and hoteliers. Both parties pay high attention to the behaviors of hotel employees rather than other physical dimensions. This indicates that the employees are the most effective element in representing Thainess during service delivery. Even so, the tangible offerings significantly mentioned by both parties infer that they, along with the intangible offerings, can intensify Thainess during service delivery as well, ultimately resulting in high levels of satisfaction for both consumers and service providers.

Discussion

This study regarding elements of Thainess in the Five-Star hotel has explored both guest and hotelier perspectives. It was found that both guests and hoteliers put heavy significance on the hotel staff's mannerisms, which strongly influence their perceptions of Thainess. The findings prove to align with Jang et. al (2018); hotel staff are mentioned as the most significant attribute contributing to the effective perception of guests. In accordance with the findings, Attentiveness, under the Mannerism theme, is perceived to be the most important manner. This is supported by Mouzaek et al. (2021)'s studies on service quality; Empathy is the most influential theme dominating guests' satisfaction.

In addition to Mannerism—Atmosphere, Cuisine, and Culture are three other themes that both parties agreed upon the importance of. Thai architecture (Atmosphere theme), Local dishes and ingredients (Cuisine theme), and Thai heritage (Culture theme) are tangible offerings that can convey a sense of Thainess from hotels to guests, even if they are not as powerful as the Mannerism theme. The results correspond with Thanaphatteenanan (2019)'s findings; Thainess was greatly represented to (international) guests through various physical elements of the hotels including Thai architecture and interior design, Thai cuisine and desserts, and Thai cultural activities and festivals.

Results of the study have indicated that even though physical dimensions can emit Thainess, the hotel staff's mannerism is still the strongest contributor in conveying

Thainess. Therefore, no matter how beautifully decorated a hotel is, if the staff's nature has no perceptible Thainess embodied in the services carried out, guests will then be unable to experience the authenticity that comes with Thainess, resulting in low or no satisfaction. This is consistent with Berry et al. (2006) and Wall and Berry (2007)'s findings; humanic contributions during service encounters create more impact on the guest's perception of service quality and positive humanic clues can subdue negative mechanic clues, whereas positive mechanic clues cannot overcome negative humanic ones.

An analysis of Thainess elements based on the perspectives of consumers and service providers has led to comparative results which reveal that all four themes of Thainess are perceived as important by both guests and hoteliers. The compositional patterns of Thainess are made up of both tangible and intangible elements, consisting of Mannerism, Atmosphere, Cuisine, and Culture, which complied with previous studies (Fakfare et al., 2019; Najpinij, 2012; Nangklaphivat, 2017; Suksutdhi and Boonyanmethaporn, 2022; Tan et al., 2014). A Macc Model can be presents as a compositional patterns of Thainess for further implications (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Macc Model displaying the compositional patterns of Thainess in Five-Star Hotel

M	A	C	C
Mannerism	Atmosphere	Cuisine	Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentiveness • Caring • Respectfulness • Invitation to return • Friendliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thai architecture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local dishes and ingredient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thai heritage

Recommendations for the Study

1. This study shows that Thainess distinctively reflects through the manners of service providers from the perspectives of guests. Being said, hotel managers should emphasize employee training, by monitoring and assessing employees regularly to ensure that they deliver Thainess efficiently.

2. In addition to employees' manners, hotel owners can represent Thainess through other physical elements such as architecture, room decorations, and local Thai cuisines. These elements can enhance the value of Thainess and intensify its delivery to guests.

Recommendations to Further the Study

1. Further study on the components of Thainess in the Thai hotel industry should explore more guest reviews from other hotels with Thainess in their properties to yield even more valid results regarding guests' perspectives towards the utilization of Thainess in hotels.

2. The comparison between different hotel criterion may: extend more in-depth understanding about Thainess from multiple views, discover additional compositional patterns, and create new substantial data regarding hoteliers' perspectives of Thainess in the Thai hotel industry.

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