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## **An assessment of Emotion-based Communication in Hoteling Sector**

**Mohammad Hosein Imani<sup>1</sup>**

**Mohammad Ali Shafiee<sup>2</sup>**

**Taimoor Marjani<sup>3</sup>**

**Extended abstract**

**Abstract**

The main goal of the present research is to measure cultural empathic skills of front-line employees of five 4 and 5 star hotels from Parsian hotel group. This will identify weaknesses and strengths of such skills and consequently, will pave the way for formulating appropriate strategies so as to improve the weak points. Data were gathered using self-reported questionnaires based on Ethnocultural Empathic Scale (Wang et al., 2003). The primary findings indicate that the minimum averaged score of this scale's items (4.11) was well above the middle score of a seven-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire (3.5). So, it could be argued that the ethnocultural empathic skills/inclinations of this hotel group' employees are not poor. Methodologically, the discrepancy between the current research and other research related to Wang et al.'s scale or other empathic scale lies in the fact that the former takes into account prioritization of various dimensions of empathy scale applying one of the multiple criteria decision making methods. This was done considering empathic skills and inclinations of the

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Head of the university of science and culture, Tehran  
(imanikhoshkhoo@usc.ac.ir)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of tourism sciences, University of Science and Culture

<sup>3</sup> Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism Sciences, University of Science and Culture

samples and an entropy-based TOPSIS to analyze the data. The final results show that the subjects are strong in empathic perspective taking, empathic feeling and expression, acceptance of cultural differences, and empathic awareness, respectively. This draws the attention of this hotel group's managers to empower their front-line employees with two dimensions of acceptance of cultural differences and empathic awareness.

### **Introduction**

One of the factors affecting interpersonal relationships under the influence of culture is emotions. Different cultures make individuals express their emotions towards same subjects by different ways and extents (Mahjoob, Ranjbarian, and Zahedi, 2015; Hosany, 2012). In this respect, the concept of cultural empathy is propounded, which takes into account individuals' skills to understand values, feelings, thoughts, and behavioral states of others belonging to different cultures (Wilson, 2004). The role of front-line employees is of importance since they should possess appropriate cultural empathic skills to communicate with various customers belonging to different cultural backgrounds. The primary goal of the present study is to measure cultural empathic skills of front-line employees in 4 and 5 star hotels from Parsian Hotel Group in order to identify the respective strengths and weaknesses, and further to provide necessary strategies for improving the weaknesses. Also, the secondary goal of this research is to rank various dimensions of cultural empathic skills of front-line employees in order to benchmark and compare such skills in the hotels mentioned above.

### **Materials and methods**

The statistical population of the research consists of front-line employees in Azadi (5-Star), Esteghlal (5-Star), Evin (4-Star), Kowsar (4-Star), and Enghelab (4-star) Hotels. Out of these hotels, 29, 45, 12, 34, and 42 completed self-reported questionnaires were returned totally accounting for 162 questionnaires, respectively in a span of 10 days in August and September, 2017. The questionnaire consists of a modified version of the Wang et al.'s empathy scale and demographic characteristics. The original Wang et al.'s scale includes four dimensions (described in the literature review section) and 31 items through which individuals' levels of empathy are measured. However, in the current research, the modified version of this scale comprising 23 items was applied.

Based on the method used in this research, before sampling from the population of employees, the Wang et al.'s empathy scale was discussed in individual semi-structured interviews with ten academics and practitioners specializing in hoteling. To analyze the data, TOPSIS multi-criteria decision-making method with Shannon entropy weighting scheme were used.

### **Discussion and Results**

An exploratory factor analysis was carried out on 19 items of the empathy scale using SPSS software and a Varimax rotation and principal components method (eight and four items were removed at the stages of the semi-structured interviews and reliability verification, respectively). Based on the coefficients of rotated factor loadings, four dimensions with an eigenvalue of greater than one were created. The results of the factor loadings showed that there was only one item, out of “empathic Feeling and expression” with a factor loading less than 0.5. Therefore, it was discarded from the further analysis. In the end, all the remaining 15 items were loaded significantly on their primary respective dimensions (four primary dimensions of the Wang’s empathy scale).

The next stage of the present research is to determine weights of each four dimensions of the empathy scale through the entropy scheme. Based on the results, “empathic feeling and expression” (0.4640), “empathic perspective taking” (0.3228), “acceptance of cultural differences” (0.1101), and “empathic awareness” (0.1031) dimensions, accounted for the highest weights, respectively. Taking into account these weights, the final outcome of the TOPSIS method showed that front-line employees of the hotels under study possess more skills in “empathic perspective taking”, “empathic feeling and expression”, “acceptance of cultural differences”, and “empathic awareness” dimensions, respectively.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this research are to some extent consistent with the results of a study by Albiero and Matricardi (2013). In their study on the statistical population of Italian students, it was shown that the highest scores obtained from the dimensions of the Wang’s empathy scale belonged to “empathic feeling and expression” “empathic feeling and expression”, “empathic perspective taking”, “acceptance of cultural differences”, and “empathic awareness”, respectively. In fact, in both studies, the third and fourth dimensions rank similarly third and fourth places. Nonetheless, the dimensions were not intended to be ranked in the study conducted by Albiero and Matricardi, and the above-mentioned findings were presented merely based on the mean scores of the dimensions.

Feasibility of developing empathy skills led us in the present research to make an emphasis on the objective measurement of such skills among front-line employees of the hotels. Through identifying weaknesses of these skills, we can determine their educational needs, and take actions to develop and strengthen them accordingly. Hence, this study suggests that Parsian Hotel Group’s managers to take into consideration the two dimensions of acceptance of cultural differences and empathic awareness, empowering their front-line employees’ capabilities relevant to these two dimensions. For instance, awareness of ethnic and religious discriminations in societies at national and international levels, acceptance of guests’ cultural traditions, and consideration of guests’ food

preferences are among the issues propounded in these dimensions. **Keywords:** hoteling, prioritizing empathic skills, TOPSIS.

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