



A qualitative exploration of day spa therapists' work motivations and job satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

The spa industry has been growing rapidly in Thailand since the 1990s (Hirankitti, Mechinda, & Manjing, 2009). Being that employee productivity is a primary factor driving the success of a business, it is important to understand how employees are motivated, engaged, and retained at the work place. Therefore, the goal of this research study is to explore attitudes and levels of job satisfaction among Thai spa therapists working at day spas. An in-depth interview process was used as the primary qualitative research method for this study. Fifteen interviews were given and from a thematic analysis of the data, five themes emerged. These themes included *strong open relationships in the workplace*, *tangible benefits*, *deeply rewarding career beyond financial benefits*, *involvement in day spa development process*, and *job perception conflict*. Spa therapists' internal fulfillment was generated through good relationships with spa operators, co-workers, and customers as well as through involvement in the decision making process. Expectancy theory provides a model that helps explain the results of this study. Through a continuous motivation-effort-reward cycle, employees develop feelings of being satisfied with their jobs. Therefore, it is important for spa employers to be aware of the needs of their employees and to create opportunities for employees to successfully meet those needs in order to increase job satisfaction and work performance.

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1. Introduction

Studies conducted by the International Spa Association show that the spa industry is growing rapidly (International Spa Association, 2014). The spa industry in Thailand has been on the rise since the 1990s as it was ranked second in the world behind Australia for spa destinations in 2009 (Hirankitti et al., 2009). The spa industry has played an important role in generating revenue for Thailand since the 1970s (Apivantanaporn & Walsh, 2012). Khamanarong, Khamanarong, and Khamanarong (2009) categorized the spa business as a service industry which aims to generate profit. Thus, it is necessary to explore elements of the spa industry to gain further insight into ways that promote successful operations. While customers provide the source of income, spa

therapists, with their unique set of skills, are vital to the value of any spa business. As such, it is important for spa businesses to remain competitive not only by gaining customers, but also by retaining and supporting employees.

To retain valuable employees, spa operators need to have a sense of what drives them beyond a mere paycheck and what factors contribute to their perceptions of satisfaction with their jobs. Bowen (1997) emphasizes the importance of internal marketing, a process by which a company seeks to enhance its internal operations, often in the form of motivating employees. He states that if customers are to become enthusiastic, employees themselves must be enthusiastic about the product as well as the company they represent (Bowen, 1997). A report on award winning businesses showed a consistent implementation of certain practices with regard to creating a supportive workplace culture (Blackburn & Rosen, 1993). These practices include empowering the employees through inclusion in the decision making process, advocating a climate of positive employee relations and teamwork, acknowledging employee contribution, and utilizing a system of rewards to

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reinforce a commitment to quality (Blackburn & Rosen, 1993). In this study, spa therapists from five different locations in North-eastern Thailand participated. Both male and female spa therapists of varying ages were interviewed in order to share their work experiences regarding what contributes to job satisfaction and what motivates them to continue at their present location.

Numerous studies have examined employee job satisfaction and motivation in the context of the service industry (Costen & Salazar, 2011; Joung, Goh, Huffman, Yuan, & Surlles, 2015; Pelit, Öztürk, & Arslantürk, 2011). However, there was a gap in the literature when considering job satisfaction and motivation from a more qualitative perspective of the lived experiences of spa therapists in Thailand. Addressing this gap derives importance from the sheer growth of the industry and the increasing demand to find and retain quality spa therapists. Additionally, the findings from previous research examining these variables in other areas of the service industry do not directly translate to the experiences of spa therapists.

There are fundamental differences between the services provided by spa therapists and those provided by other service industry employees. These differences stem from the highly personal nature of the spa service and a difference in the lead time from product creation to consumption (Cohen & Bodeker, 2008). For example, the experience of a pleasurable stay in a hotel is created by a team of employees though with minimal direct interaction with the customer relative to the overall stay. The same is true at a restaurant. Not only is there likely no interaction between the chef preparing the food and the customer enjoying it, there is a lead time differential as well. By the time the customer is enjoying their food, the chef is certainly busy preparing another order. The spa therapist, on the other hand, is fully engaged and invested in the well-being of the customer from the beginning to the end of the service period without separations in time or distance. The service provided is thus the direct and continued presence of the spa therapist and their skills. Recognizing the differences between the experiences of spa therapists and other service industry employees calls attention to the gap in the literature focusing on job satisfaction and motivation. This study aims to build on previous research by exploring spa therapists' perceptions of what contributes to job satisfaction and what motivates them to continue to provide high quality services.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research study is to explore employees' motivations and their levels of job satisfaction. Because a large portion of what a spa offers is the skill of its employees, it is important for spas to retain their employees by supporting them (Wetprasit, 2006). For this reason, there is a need to understand how the spa industry may better support employees through an evaluation of the experience of spa therapists working in day spas. Therefore, the objective of this study aims to elicit ways in which spa owners or managers could improve working environments for their employees by understanding work motivations and sources of job satisfaction among Thai spa therapists working at day spas in Thailand. Results from this study can be used to inform spa business owners and operators about the needs of their employees as well as ways to create a more cohesive and thriving workplace environment.

3. Literature review

3.1. Spa industries

Most of the spa research mentions that customers usually visit

the following seven types of spas: hotel or resort spas, day spas, club spas, medical spas, cruise spas, mineral spring spas, and destination spas (Boonyarit & Phetvaroon, 2011; Frost, 2004; Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2009; Loureiro, Almeida, & Rita, 2013; Monteson & Singer, 2004). Each type of spa provides unique services and various results for customers who choose a category of spa to suit their needs. Previous studies have provided the definitions of different types of spas as follows (Healing Holidays, 2013; Joppe, 2010; Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2009):

- (1) *Hotel or Resort Spas*: This type of spa provides a variety of services for customers such as facial massage and body treatment. Some places may include fitness facilities and healthy food for customers.
- (2) *Day Spas*: Day spas provide similar products and services compared with hotel spas such as facial treatment, body massages/scrubs, and skin care.
- (3) *Club Spas*: A primary purpose of a health club is to prepare professional fitness equipment, amenities, and spa products and services to serve members within one day.
- (4) *Medical Spas*: Medical spas aim to prepare wellness care and spa services for customers.
- (5) *Cruise Spas*: This type of spa prepares spa services and exercise facilities for traveling customers such as a variety of spa packages and fitness amenities. Choices of healthy food may also be offered on a cruise.
- (6) *Mineral Spring Spas*: This type of spa location offers customers natural mineral springs and using hydrotherapy treatments.
- (7) *Destination Spas*: A destination spa is a location helping customers to improve their lifestyle such as providing education about healthy food, fitness, and spa services.

Despite the spa industry's rapid growth, as well as the day spa making up the largest percentage of spa types compared to other spas (Eisner, 2013), there is limited research on day spas. Previous studies have focused on hotel or resort spas (Langviniene & Sekliuckiene, 2009; Madanoglu & Brezina, 2008; Mandelbaum & Lerner, 2008; Monteson & Singer, 2004; Tsai, Suh, & Fong, 2012). This lack of day spa research invites further investigation, especially that which considers employees' job perceptions because employees in the service industry play such an important role in generating income by providing quality service to customers. Understanding employees' job perceptions would help day spa business operators find solutions to increase employees' job satisfaction, which may also reduce employee turnover rates for spa businesses.

3.2. Thai spa industry and culture

Coinciding with the rapid growth of tourism in Thailand is the meteoric rise of its spa industry. The ten-year period from 1995 to 2005 showed a trajectory that brought Thailand to its status of being the region's spa industry epicenter (Loh, 2008). Since then, the revenue of the Thai spa industry rapidly increased from \$675 million in 2013 (Andrews, 2015) to \$1.01 billion in 2015 (Spa Business, 2017). This phenomenon has continued to support the economic security of Thailand by providing numerous jobs and opportunities throughout the country. Around 43.87% of the total workforce are employed in the service industry in Thailand, which is an increase of about 6.32% since 2013 (The World Bank, 2017). The Thai spa industry employed 11,240 people in 2007 (Spa industry benchmarks go global, 2008) and 70,897 people in 2015 (Spa Business, 2017), a 530.76% increase between 2007 and 2015. Even though the travel and tourism industry is a large segment

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