

Transnational Hospitality as Soft Power: How Thai Massage Therapists Negotiate Cultural Identity in Budapest, Hungary

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Abstract

Thai massage is now a well-known image of health treatment around the world. It is also a way for Thai massage therapists to show their cultural influence. However, there is little information about how Thai masseurs change the ways they work in other countries. This paper looks at the Thai-style hospitality given by Thai massage practitioners in Budapest. It also looks at how they changed their services to meet the Hungarians' expectations. Based on a phenomenological approach, the twenty interview participants (who were interviewed in Thai) were translated and written down. Applied to the framework developed by Braun and Clarke, it resulted in four themes, i.e., cultural embodiment of hospitality, perception of customer expectations, and strategies of adaptation; and a trade-off between authenticity and feasibility. The results show that the practitioners changed their technique and language to fit Hungarian preferences. However, they used cultural norms like *greng jai* (consideration) and *nam jai* (kindness) to perform a Thai-style service. These results correlate with both Intercultural Adaptation Model and Social Judgment Theory, in which soft power is used at the micro-level in embodied service. The study also ends with a consideration of how transnational wellness professionals can be termed as an irregular cultural diplomat and also indicates that further studies should consider a comparative client-based approach; thus, making the study shed more light into the transnational soft power created by wellness tourism.

Keywords: Thai Massage; Soft Power; Intercultural Adaptation; Hospitality; Wellness Tourism; Hungary

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Background and Significance of the Research Problem

The popularity of spreading the Thai massage and its established place in the economy of discourse of global wellness have made this specific modality an eminent representative of the holistic medicine. Unlike other common forms of massage, Thai massage combines various techniques of acupuncture, Ayurvedas, and assisted yoga, thus creating a therapeutically driven treatment (Chang, 2025; Chompoopan et al., 2024). The increase of wellness tourism has activated Thai government to take a proactive approach to establishing Thai massage as a part of national agenda by working on improving the quality of services offered as well as image building Thailand as a leading hotspot of wellness tourism (Phuthong et al., 2023). Nonetheless, despite such global recognition, there persist cultural misunderstandings, including the stereotype that Thai massage is associated with the sex industry. Such myths undermine its reputation in other countries and raise the question of why Thai massage, in particular requires stringent institutional control to preserve its cultural and professional integrity (Horadala & Kaew-nate, 2025a). Thailand's Ministry of Tourism's vision is to transform Thailand into a high value medical and wellness hub, focusing on quality, sustainability, and local identity to attract high-spending tourist. Strategic plans include developing and certifying wellness centres and herbal medicine standards promoting traditional Thai practices like Nuad Thai (Thai Massage) as cultural heritage, leveraging technology and data for targeted marketing, and creating diverse, authentic experiences that ensure long-term value for both tourists and the local community (TAT Newsroom, 2025).

Even though Thai massage has gained enough popularity that it can now be exported to other urban centres like Budapest, there has been a paucity of scholarly investigation of how those offering such a service keep their service cultures alive back home. Hungary, with its long-standing spa traditions and its emerging role as a European wellness tourism hotspot, creates a particularly significant context for this study (Susanna, 2022a; Helmeczi & Pataki, 2023). Given Hungary's spa tradition and growing role in wellness tourism, it presents a unique context to study how Thai massage practitioners adapt their culturally rooted services to the expectation of European consumers

However, the available literature covers the Thai massage issue in national or market terms without casting light on how its practitioners handle the professional identity and rules or norms of hospitality and preservation of culture in foreign lands. The study at hand will fill in this gap by providing a qualitative report of the adaptation of Thai massage therapists in Budapest as they perceive and perform Thai-style hospitality in an unknown service environment. The finding will offer original insights

into how Thai massage therapists navigate intercultural adaptation in host countries, a subject largely overlooked in wellness and migration studies. BY focusing on lived practitioner experiences through IPA (Interpretive phenomenological approach) (Rinihapsari et al., 2022), this study addresses a critical gap in literature dominated. By macro-level analyses., thereby enriching understandings of soft power and embodied hospitality.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how Thai massage therapists interpret and deliver Thai-style hospitality in Budapest
2. To examine the challenges in aligning service delivery with local customer expectations in Hungary's wellness context.
3. To investigate the strategies for maintaining Thai cultural authenticity while adapting to a foreign service environment.

Scope of Research

This research examines the transnational adaptations of Thai massage entrepreneurs and practitioners in Budapest, Hungary through the Facebook page of “ชุมชนชาวไทยในฮังการี Thai Község Magyarországon” and how they envision, maintain and mould Thai-style hospitality within the context of the European wellness world. The research bridges the gap in knowledge in cultural adaptation in wellness tourism by using a qualitative approach with a sample size of 20 responses, i.e., 5 owners and 15 Thai therapists, aged 25–45 who have lived in Budapest for more than 5 years. With in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, three months of data were gathered. Variables of interest in the study include cultural values, including service adaptation strategies, customer expectations, and identity negotiation. Analysis combines Social Judgment Theory, Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM), and Soft Power Theory to analyse service interaction and cultural expression within a globalised wellness environment.

Literature Review

Thai Hospitality and the Concept of ‘Thainess’ in Service

In the current discussion, the cultural mandate of listening, niceness, humility and attention has been contextualised into Thai hospitality-a construct that most observers hail as the foundation of the phenomenon that is popularly referred to as Thainess in provision of services. The previous mentioned qualities are placed by the author as the major differentiating factor of Thai hotels and spas in the international market (Dabphet, 2020). As a result, the guiding paradigm is outlined

to be a warm guest-centred model which highlights spiritual touch as well as emotional care which is expressed by sincere smiling, respect-ful entrance and empathetic listening. The standards are particularly relevant in small facilities and wellness settings that aim at designing experiences based on cultural immersion (Koh et al., 2020; Insuwanno, 2025). Structural efforts, however, are prerequisites to such protection, to guard this unique identity: there is a need to overcome service gaps and accusations of unacceptable behaviour at the workplace (Ruamsup, 2023). The scale of Thai hospitality in any inter-border set-up will then be determined by the extent of preparation of the service staff in the relevant cultural information and also by the availability of institutional framework that can take the risk to provide high quality services as well as production of reliable deliverables.

Beyond hospitality, Thai massage itself has been increasingly positioned as a cultural export and wellness brand (Sunanta, 2020). Studies highlight its economic contributions to wellness tourism (Meeprom & Chancharat, 2022), its role in branding strategies for Thailand's image (Moriuchi et al., 2024), and its value as a soft power tool alongside Thai cruising and Maui Thai (Rodloytuk, 2025a). At the same time, misconceptions linking Thai massage to the sex industry persist internationally, undermining its reputation and complicating its professional image (Horadala & Kaew-nate, 2025b). This dual identity; prestigious wellness brand yet vulnerable to stereotyping; frames the challenge for Thai practitioners abroad and underscores why their adaptation strategies deserve closer study.

Cross-Cultural Hospitality and Service Expectations

The spa culture is one of the Hungarian wellness tourism historical pillars that emerged in the Roman and Ottoman times and celebrates its clients focused on respectful attitude, personalised and targeted service, and the efficiency of communication (Nanasi et al., 2021). Hungary has a top-notched name in the European health tourism industry due to its thermal baths and incorporation of a medical-spa idea, which provides the country with a competitive advantage over its rivals (Martos & Kopp, 2023; Kovari-Toth et al., 2024). This notwithstanding, the evidence of growing popularity of environmentally-friendly and hi-tech wellness services among the younger generations (Juhasz & Habil Fritz, 2023) rarely leaves foreign wellness providers (including Thai therapists) in the situation of compromise between tradition and local interests in efficiency and orderliness. The theory of Service Adaptation as the balance between familiarity and conformity to the expectations of the hosting environment and protecting perceived authenticity is described by the theoretical models,

among that, the Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (Tariq et al., 2023) or the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM) (Li, 2024). However. The bulk of Scholarship on Thai massage and wellness adaptation has concentrated either on the Thai domestic context or Western markets such as United States and Western Europe (Myllyla, 2024a). By contrast, wellness markets in Central and Eastern Europe; particularly as receivers from Asian Wellness services; remain underexplored. This gap reinforces the novelty of Budapest as a case study, given it's a long-standing spa tradition and its position as emerging Wellness hub in Europe (Susanna, 2022b).

Transnational Labour and Service Migration

Transnational service work is a growing field of both migration and exploitation of labourers that offer their labour services in the form of hospitality and other labour-intensive services. Working experience in the hospitality business sector also gives foreigners the chance to gain international expertise, interact with people of different cultures, and pick up an extra language (Lugosi & Ndiuini, 2022; Brzozowska, 2022). The profession also makes it possible that mainly Thai massage therapists, but also other migrants working in professional fields, become acquainted with the culture of the host nation, absorb it, and assimilate with the community since the nature of the work is anthropomorphic and communicative (Grabowska & Jastrzebowska, 2023). At the same time, the precariousness of work, underemployment, and hazards of cultural stereotyping are also common in the industry; they are only increased when host countries do not appreciate the value of the workers (Drydakis, 2021; Glnther, 2022). Despite scholarly work that has grown in exposure on labour migration and wellness tourism, minimal research has addressed the agency of wellness practitioners, especially their strategies to negotiate identity, authenticity, and professionalism while functioning as cultural representative abroad.

The Role of Soft Power in Tourism and Wellness

The Thai massage has served as an excellent example of cultural soft power, an idea conceptualised by Kaewanant and Sirisunhirun (2024a) in the view that the leverage of attraction rather than coercion is the best influence. Just like Muay Thai or Thai food, massage is the method through which cultural diplomacy, economic growth, and image-building, at the international level, take place. Effectiveness of this soft power is however limited in maintaining cultural authenticity and integrity particularly in cases where practices are exported to other countries beyond the borders. According to modern research, too commercial or distorted wellness experiences may lead to loss of its cultural value (Myllyla, 2024; Peloi, 2024).

Tourism and hospitality services thus operate as tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy. As frontline practitioners, Thai massage therapists act as informal cultural ambassadors whose daily choices, such as retaining rituals, modifying services, or responding to client perceptions, directly influence Thailand's national image abroad (Jorge et al., 2022; Rodloytuk, 2025b). By situating their practice within Kaewanant and Sirisunhirun (2024b) theory, this study connects cultural authenticity with national branding, showing how embodied hospitality functions as a subtle yet powerful instrument of diplomacy.

Research Methodology

The research undertaken embraced an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the personal experiences of female Buddhist massage practitioners and Thai business entrepreneurs in the city of Budapest. A decision to use the IPA design allowed the researchers to clarify how the participants managed the conflict between hospitality and the desires of the Hungarian customers. IPA was particularly suited to the research objectives: It enabled a deep exploration of how Thai practitioners interpret and deliver hospitality (objective 1), how they perceive and respond to challenges in aligning with local customer preferences (objective 2), and how they balance cultural authenticity with adaptation in service strategies (objective 3). This methodological option provided a more detailed reflection of the personal meanings related to everyday contacts, professional activities, and identity formation of therapists in a situation of cross-cultural service delivery (Smith & Nizza, 2022a; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

The empirical investigation focused on Thai massage establishments in Budapest and prioritised the places where the owners or a massage therapist had Thai roots. The reason for concentrating on such settings was explained by the fact that settings represented specifically Thai cultural practices in the context of health. Data collection took place between February – May 2025, ensuring the timeliness and relevance of participant's testimonies. The sample was done in a purposive form by getting 20 participants of the Thai massage profession through Facebook page “ชุมชนชาวไทยในฮังการี Thai Közösség Magyarországon” (e.g., 5 owners & 15 therapists) who were chosen based on how many years they had as part of the profession, what they did in the working environment in terms of functions and how they interacted with the customers. The samples size of 20 is consistent with IPA guidelines, which emphasise smaller, information-rich samples that enable in-depth exploration of lived experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022b). Diversity within the group was ensured by including participants with different lengths of professional experience (ranging from 3-10 years),

varied establishments (small, medium and large massage providers), and clientele bases (local Hungarian, expatriate, and tourist customers). The sample was selected by using criteria that made the persons culturally local to live in a foreign country and offer the services in the Hungarian environment (Hossain et al., 2024).

The current study was conducted by inviting the participants to share their personal testimonies within the context of a semi-structured interview where the research questions were used to maintain the flow of the discussion but, at the same time, allowed interviewees a free space to provide a detailed description of their experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Since the researchers were far away, immediately after the research was approved, the collection of data began mainly through the online environment, including email, social-media sites and Zoom, with each of the interviews taking place in Thai (Olliffe et al., 2021; Wakelin et al., 2024). To achieve greater reflexivity, researchers kept both current field notes and a cultural reflexivity research journal that tracked what they recorded on both data gathering and analysis, and their emotional response to the newly discovered information (Lustick, 2021).

The analysis of data followed the thematic framework prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2023), according to which scholars narrowed down the material, extracted the most significant ideas, and formulated the general themes based on these ideas, after which the developed themes were refined with the help of the repeated review. Examples of initial codes included “hospitality as kindness”, “customer expectation for efficiency,” and “ritual as authenticity marker.” These codes were later organised into broader themes such as “cultural embodiment of hospitality”, “navigating client expectations,” and balancing authenticity and feasibility.” These themes directly align with the research objectives, thereby demonstrating how data-driven insights informed the study’s conceptual focus.

Along the way researchers met the ethical considerations in the most responsible manner: they negotiated informed-consent statements with research participants, all data were maintained anonymously, specific concern was given to reporting identities, acculturation and discrimination-related questions.

Results

Defining Thai Hospitality in the Therapist's Voice

The participant, mainly Thai masseuses aged 25 – 45, who had lived in Budapest for over five years, migrated for reasons such as economic stability and improved quality of life. Most had been trained either under Thai mystery of Labour facilities or independent academics. Many also gained Intercultural competence from experience in other Asian and European countries enhancing the credibility in transmitting Thai wellness cultural internationally (Figure 1).

Participants emphasised “greng jai” (consideration: A feeling of considerate deference, respect and a reluctance to impose on or inconvenience others.) and “nam jai” (generosity: The spirit of helping others selflessly) as core values of Thai-style hospitality. These values were enacted in therapeutic relationships through polite greetings, empathic listening and a “mai pen rai” (letting go: Brush off a thank you, forgive a minor mistake or indicate that anything is acceptable) attitude when the clients are frustrated. Rituals such as offering tea, lighting incense and greeting with a “wai” further highlighted the spiritual and cultural dimension of their service (P3, P11, P15). While such rituals occasionally clashed with European expectations, they positioned Therapists as informal cultural ambassadors who transmit Thailand’s image abroad consistent with soft power theory (Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of Research Results by Objectives and Themes

Research Objective	Themes	Illustrative Codes/Examples	Participant Quotes	Theories
1. Explore Thai-style hospitality	Defining Thai Hospitality	<i>Greng jai, nam jai, mai pen rai, rituals (tea, wai, incense)</i>	“Hospitality is always showing generosity and kindness” (P7)	Soft Power Theory
2. Examine challenges with Hungarian expectations	Perceived Differences	<i>Direct vs subtle, misinterpretations, boundary setting</i>	“Hungarian clients want clear rules, we prefer subtlety” (P4)	SJT, IAM
3. Investigate strategies for authenticity & adaptation	Adaptation Strategies; Balancing Authenticity	<i>Service modifications, hybridisation, feedback loops, ritual preservation</i>	“We adjust pressure but keep Thai rituals” (P8)	IAM, Soft Power

Source: Researchers’ Contribution

Perceived Differences in Hungarian Customer Expectations

Therapists consistently noted cultural differences in communication styles, boundary management and service expectations (Figure 1). Hungarian clients preferred direct communication, efficiency and clearly defined boundaries, whereas Thai therapists valued subtlety, warmth and relational engagement. Misinterpretations arose: Thai non-verbal cues (smiles, soft ton, light touch) were sometimes perceived as disinterest or intrusiveness (P4, P9).

However, as trust developed, clients began appreciating the emotive depth of Thai service gradually recalibrating their expectations (Table 1). These patterns align with Social Judgment Theory (SJT), as clients expanded their “latitude of acceptance” through repeated positive encounters. The findings also support the Intercultural Adaptation Model (IAM), as both therapists and clients adjusted behaviours through continuous intercultural exposure (P6, P13).

Adaptation Strategies Employed by Therapists

To balance Thai traditions with Hungarian demands, therapist adopted several strategies; 1) adjusting pressure, duration, and style of massages (P2, P14); 2) incorporating oil-based techniques and Free organising treatments schedules (P10); and 3) using non-verbal communication (smiling, nodding, gestures) to overcome limited Hungarian language skills (P8, P12), and creating feedback loops via informal conversations and online reviews, leading to ongoing refinement of services (Table 1).

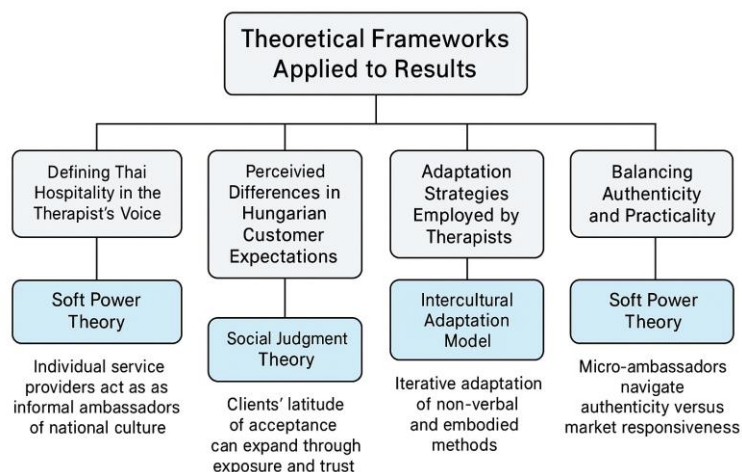


Figure 1 Cultural Adaptation and Soft Power in Wellness Tourism: A Conceptual Mapping

Source: Researchers' Contribution

This process illustrates hybridisation, where Thai cultural values are preserved while selectively adapting practices to suit Hungarian expectations. The findings highlight that intercultural adaptation is interactive, feedback-driven and embodied.

Balancing Authenticity and Practicality

Participants also described the ongoing tension between preserving cultural authenticity and meeting commercial demands (Figure 1). Rituals like incense, tea ceremonies and Thai décor reinforced cultural identity, but other practices (Greetings, music, gestures) were simplified to align with Hungarian norms (P5, 17). This balance demonstrates how authenticity is not fixed, but strategically negotiated, extending the scope of soft power theory in wellness diplomacy.

Reflections on Transnational Professionalism

Therapists also reflected on broader professional challenges, including navigating legal requirements, language barriers and stereotypes (Figure 1). Despite these pressures, most reaffirmed Thai values of “greng jai” and “nam jai” as central to their professional identity (P1, P16). Many suggested that training programmes in Thailand should integrate intercultural communication and legal literacy to prepare future workers for global markets.

Therefore, the three main findings correspond directly to the research objectives: 1) therapists interpret Thai-style hospitality through core cultural values and rituals; 2) they face challenges when aligning their practices with Hungarian customer expectations; and 3) they adopt adaptive strategies that balance authenticity and practicality. Together, these results illustrate how Thai massage practitioners act as both service providers and informal cultural ambassadors, contributing to transnational wellness diplomacy.

Discussion

This study demonstrates how Thai massage therapists in Budapest embody “greng jai” (consideration) and “nam jai” (generosity) in their daily practices. These values are expressed through empathic listening, respectful greetings, and ritualised gestures such as serving tea or performing the “wai”. Such practices Highlight how therapist become informal cultural ambassadors transmitting Thailand’s image abroad. By doing so, they extend the scope of soft power theory, showing that non-state actors can contribute to cultural diplomacy in everyday service encounters. The findings also reveal the challenges of aligning Thai-style hospitality with Hungarian client expectations. Hungarian customers valued directness, efficiency and clearly defined boundaries. While Thai therapist emphasised subtlety and relational warmth. Over time, positive experiences allowed clients

to recalibrate their expectations, reflecting the dynamics of social judgment theories (SJT) and the intercultural adaptation models (IAM). Therapist's reliance on non-vocal communication like smiles, nods, gestures. Emerges as a key adaptation strategy that has received title attention in intercultural hospitality research.

Adaptation, however required constant negotiation between cultural authenticity and market demands. Rituals, such as incense and Thai deco reinforced identity, but other practices were simplified to meet Hungarian preferences this supports arguments by Peloi (2024) and Myllyla (2024) on the commodification of tradition, but the results also suggest that authenticity is not lost; rather it is tactically reinterpreted. This reframing expands soft power theory by showing how authenticity can be a strategy resource in wellness diplomacy. At the same time, some countre-perspectives must be considered while. Therapists emphasised rituals as enhancing authenticity, scholars caution that excessive ritualisation may alienate international clients seek efficiency. Moreover, without incorporating Hungarian customers perspective the study risk overemphasising that positive perception of Thai values. The exclusive reliance on therapists' voices may introduce self-reporting bias, as participants could downplay challenges or accentuate cultural pride.

The study also faces contextual and methodological limitations. The focus on 20 participants in Budapest. Restricts generalisability. A larger comparative study across the European and non-European markets would provide broader insights. Additionally, longitudinal research could capture how adaptation strategies evolve overtime. Including clients prospective would also allow triangulation and a more balanced understanding of intercultural dyanmics. Therefore, time massage therapies in Budapest exemplify how soft power is enacted at the macro-level. They combine emotional intelligence, intercultural competence and selective adaptation to maintain both professional creditability and cultural authenticity. Their practices confirm that transnational wellness work is not only about service delivery but also about sustaining Thailand's cultural image abroad.

Suggestions

This study makes several contributions to academic knowledge in the fields of intercultural communication, wellness tourism and soft power. First, it extends soft power theory by demonstrating how wellness practitioners operate as micro-level cultural diplomats. Rather than state-led initiatives, everyday service interactions carried out by Thai massage therapist abroad illustrate how cultural influence is built through hospitality values, rituals and embodied practices. Second, the study adapts the intercultural adaptation model (IAM) and social Judgment theory (SJT) to the context of wellness services,

showing how tactile and ritual-based practices shape intercultural encounters. These frameworks traditionally applied in communication and social psychology, gain new explanatory power when connected to service settings where bodily interaction and ritualised gestures are central. Finally, the research highlights nonverbal communication such as smiles, gestures, and symbolic rituals as an underexplored yet essential dimension of intercultural hospitality. This contribution adds nuance to existing scholarship by positioning non-verbal practices as a primary medium through which cultural authenticity and adaptation are negotiated.

The findings also provide several important policy and practical recommendations. First, the Thai government and wellness institutions should design pre-departure training programmes that focus on cultural orientation and legal literacy, equipping therapists with the tools to navigate foreign regulatory and cultural environments. Second, the establishment of across cultural competence certification, developed in collaboration with international hospitality schools would formalise the skills required for service adaptation enhanced professional recognition abroad. Third, therapists should receive basic language preparation particularly hospitality specific for vocabulary in languages such as Hungarian and German, to facilitate smoother communication with clients. Fourth, this study recommends the implementation of continuous feedback systems, including online platforms and client surveys to help therapists refine their service delivery and build cultural responsiveness over time. Finally, Thai massage should be more explicitly positioned as a form of wellness diplomacy within Thailand's broader tourism and cultural strategy. By representing massage therapists as cultural ambassadors, the Thai state and industry stakeholders can simultaneously strengthen economic opportunities, preserve cultural identity and promote Thailand's global image.

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