

By All Appearances the Customer was Satisfied: A Study of the Effects of Employee Features on Expected Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract

The concept of customer satisfaction has been very popular in recent years resulting in many studies examining factors influencing this important construct. While non-verbal communication, helpfulness and displayed emotion may provide many of the tangible cues during the service encounter, they are not available prior to the interaction. Since the service employee is likely to be one of the aspects that will affect satisfaction with the service encounter, a number of researchers are beginning to include employee factors in their studies as social variables, namely, various aspects of employee appearance that can be witnessed and evaluated even before the service employee and the customer speak. This study focuses on three aspects of employee physical appearance that can be assessed by the consumer before the actual service encounter – gender, attractiveness, and level of smile – and examines their effects on customer satisfaction. It considers the effects of physical attractiveness, gender, and smiling on a global satisfaction rating of a hypothetical service encounter. The research was conducted as an experiment in which respondents viewed pictures of persons and rated their level of satisfaction for an imagined service interaction with the pictured “employee.” Multiple regression results showed that there was a significant relationship between the three physical appearance factors tested (gender, attractiveness and magnitude of smile) and a global rating of satisfaction. Managerial implications for these findings are provided.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Service Encounter, Smile, Appearance, Gender

1. Introduction

Marketing scholars have long recognized the importance of customer satisfaction for business. Much of this is due to the positive relationship of satisfaction with a number of determinants of business success, including behavioral intention and repurchase intention (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Ryu & Han, 2011), customer retention and loyalty (Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005; Ryu & Han, 2010), positive word-of-mouth (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Ryu et al., 2010), and ultimately to profit (Bernhardt, Donthu, & Kennett, 2000). In a service setting, employees who provide the service in many ways are the service. They are the firm providing the service and become the brand to those receiving that service (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2013; Sousa & Coelho 2013). As such, the employee becomes a major factor in a consumer’s evaluation of the service that he/she has received and in his/her judgements of satisfaction with that service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Since services are intangible, customers look to the tangible physical evidence, which accompanies a given service encounter.

This includes such things as the environment in which the service takes place, but it also includes the appearance of the personnel (Bitner, 1990). Because of this, some organizations, air travel companies for instance, hire employees that have a certain “look” (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2013). The purpose of this study is to examine the effect that employee appearance may have on customer satisfaction with an employee in a service encounter. In particular, as depicted in Figure 1 below, this study examines the effects on customer satisfaction of three aspects of employee physical appearance that can be assessed by the consumer before the actual service encounter: gender, attractiveness, and level of smile.

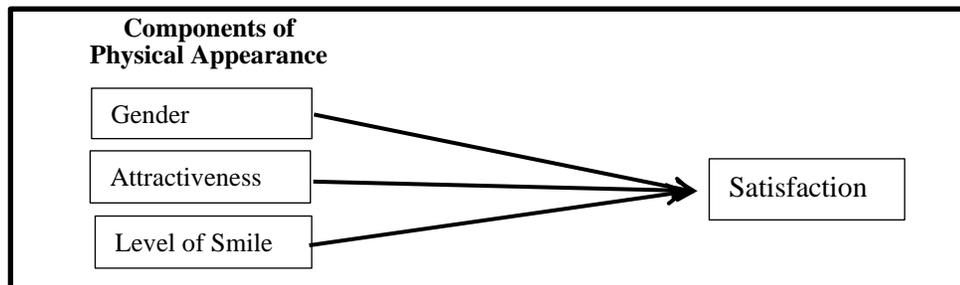


Figure 1: Conceptual Model Source (Created by Author)

2. Literature Review

- Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has long been conceptualized as a disconfirmation from an expectation. Building on Helson's (1948) adaptation-level theory, the disconfirmation theory states that the expectation that the consumer brings to a consumption situation is an adaptation level that has resulted from prior experience with the product and brand, context (including employee communications and social referents), and the individual characteristics of that person. It is only against this adaptation level that future service encounters can be perceived. Positive and negative deviations from this standard result in judgements of satisfaction and dissatisfaction respectively (Oliver, 1980; LaBarbera & Mazursky, 1983; Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). In the context of a service, this would mean that a consumer's expectation or adaptation level would be based upon that individual's prior experience with that type of service and brand where in the case of services the service provider is often viewed as the brand (Ye, & Liang, 2010; Zeithaml, et. al, 2013; Sousa & Coelho 2013). The service provider is the one who provides the employee communication and serves as the social referent. Therefore, it follows that for various services, consumers bring with them an expectation or adaption level for the service provider that would serve as the standard against which other service providers would be judged in determining the level of satisfaction.

Since the service employee is likely to be one of the aspects that will affect satisfaction with the service encounter, a number of researchers are beginning to include employee factors in their studies as social variables. These factors include employee appearance, professional appearance or good grooming (Ryu, et al., 2011; Bernhardt et al., 2000; Kuo, 2009; Ryu, et al., 2010; Lee & Choi, 2020) smiling expressions (Soderlund & Rosengren, 2008; Kuo, 2009) employee gender (Luoh & Tsaarb, 2009; Ryu, et al., 2010) and service worker attractiveness (Soderlund & Julander 2009; Luoh & Tsaarb, 2009). Some employee factors have also been explored in combination such

as physical attractiveness, helpfulness and displayed emotion (Keh, Ren, Hill, & Li, 2013) or physical appearance and various forms of non-verbal communication (Jung & Yoon, 2011). Because services are intangible, consumers look for what Shostack (1977) terms tangible cues; evidence so as to judge that service before buying it. While non-verbal communication, helpfulness and displayed emotion may provide many of these cues during the service encounter, they are not available prior to the interaction. Physical features, on the other hand, are in evidence well before the service encounter and if linked to customer satisfaction, may provide the consumer with advance knowledge of what they can expect and may begin building satisfaction even before the encounter begins. Physical attractiveness, gender and smiling can be witnessed and evaluated even before the service employee and the customer speak. As suggested by Kim and Baker (2019) studies need to take more than a piecemeal approach to examining employee attributes and explore these attributes simultaneously. While groupings of employee attributes are beginning to be examined for a relationship to customer satisfaction, to this researcher's knowledge no study has examined these three physical features in combination. This study seeks to fill that void.

- Physical Features

Employers are continually faced with the need to transform employee potential into actual performance in the workplace. Since the current economy is predominantly service based, much of the workforce is engaged in face-to-face interactions and discussions with consumers. This gave rise to a need for service employees to engage in what Hochschild (1983) referred to as emotional labor. Service employees were encouraged by their employers to possess the right attitude and be courteous, friendly, and helpful to their customers in order to achieve the desired service encounter. More recently employers have concentrated on physical features of potential employees in their hiring of service workers based upon what Warhurst, Nickson, Witza, and Cullen (2000) have termed aesthetic labor, having attributes intended to appeal to the senses of customers, and are only later providing training for these workers.

Employers are looking for the right look or appearance in employees which may manifest itself as either good looks or the right look for the specific organization. This can be due to certain branding strategies or may be that the companies believe that a particular look is attractive to that company's customers. While many types of physical features can be viewed and evaluated at a distance (height, weight, color and length of hair for example), this study has chosen to examine three. The first is gender, because of research indicating that gender and job congruency resulted in greater levels of customer satisfaction (Mohr & Henson, 1996). Attractiveness was chosen because of its relation to customer satisfaction (Keh et al. 2013). The third physical feature, smile, was also chosen because it is discussed in the literature on emotional labor and may serve as an indicator of someone who would be friendly (Warhurst et al. 2000). The following sections discuss each of these three physical features and propose hypotheses for testing.

- Gender

Human gender is an important physical factor which can influence social face-to-face interaction. A number of studies indicate that men generally have more influence and power in social interactions than women (Carli, 2001; Grant, Button, Hannah, & Ross, 2002). Historically, there are a lot of stereotypes about the differences between female and male roles in society and, therefore, the difference in their nature and impact on others. Studies that examined the influence of gender on social interaction and perceptions of female and male faces received mixed results. Some studies found that female faces tend to be evaluated as more attractive (e.g. Andreoni, & Petrie, 2008). However, other studies (e.g. Grant et al, 2002) found no difference in perceptions of

attractiveness between female and male faces. Hochschild (1983) suggests that women are better at understanding the skills required to manage feelings and are therefore better equipped to provide a better service encounter in terms of sociability and communication, thereby making customers feel good. Therefore it is suggested that service encounters are naturally feminine work even though Warhurst et al. (2000) suggest that more research is needed in this analysis. Could it be that for this reason customers may choose women over men because these consumers approach the situation with the expectation that the woman service provider will better meet their emotional needs?

Still others suggest that congruency between gender and job type may be a significant predictor of consumer satisfaction (Mohr & Henson, 1996; Stuhlmacher & Poitras, 2010). Consumers may arrive at a service encounter with the expectation that a person of a specific gender may better possess the attributes required to deliver a more satisfying service and make the choice based upon this expectation. The population for this current study involves air travelers. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2013) report states that a higher proportion of women are employed in the travel and tourism sector than in the workforce as a whole. Women make up over 60 percent of the persons employed in this sector. Due to this suggested congruency and women being perceived as providing greater levels of emotional labor it is likely that this study's population will have an expectation that includes congruence of women in travel industry roles. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: *Gender will have a significant association with expected customer satisfaction with women producing the highest levels of expected satisfaction.*

- Attractiveness

In a service setting, physical attractiveness is the extent to which the service provider possesses an appealing and pleasing physical appearance in the eyes of the consumer (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). A number of studies indicate the facial attractiveness as a significant factor which plays a major role in the social interaction. Attractive people earn more money, they are more successful in social and private life and they are more socially desirable (Foos & Clark, 2011). Facial attractiveness has been shown to be related to increased credibility, professionalism, attentiveness and to responsiveness (Lee & Choi, 2020). Fudman (2010) reported that physical attractiveness and facial attractiveness as well, gives attractive people a wide range of social, political, academic and even legal benefits and advantages. The research showed that people who have been evaluated as attractive were perceived to have other positive characteristics including thoughtfulness, intelligence, friendliness, or interestingness.

Employee physical attractiveness has been shown to have significant positive effects on consumer satisfaction (Keh et al., 2013; Lee & Choi, 2020). The use of employee looks is a strategy employed by business firms to obtain competitive advantage as more outlets for similar services become available. Employee appearance is also being used as a tool to increase sales (Warhurst et al., 2011). Physical attractiveness was found to be related to consumers' evaluation of server tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Luoh & Tsaurb, 2009). All of these evaluations were made based upon physical features that could be viewed and evaluated by consumers prior to actual employee-customer interaction. Not only may the physical attractiveness of a service employee impact customer satisfaction judgements toward that employee, employee attractiveness may also affect consumer judgements about such things as the firm for which the employee works. Based upon this discussion, the following hypothesis is offered:

H₂: *Increased levels of employee attractiveness will have significant positive effects on ratings of expected consumer satisfaction*

- Smile

While “service with a smile” seems a bit of a cliché, studies have found that smiling tends to result in larger tips and a desire for further interaction (Tidd & Lockard, 1978; Husvar, 2006), expressed intentions to return to the store (Tsai, 2001) increased trustworthiness and a signal of intention to cooperate (Scharlemann, Eckel, Kacelnik, & Wilson, 2001). Smiles also serve as clues for differences such as assessing the level of friendliness that signals a unique and outstanding service environment and even potential consumer satisfaction. (Brown & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006; Truong, Dang-Pham, McClelland, & Nkhoma, 2020). Since smiles have been related to such things as advice-taking, social rapport and overall satisfaction, research during the current COVID time is even beginning to examine the need to smile sincerely under surgical masks to continue to promote these effects (Hofmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Wanisch, & Hebborn, 2021).

The literature suggests reasons for why a smile passed between individuals may have these effects. First, studies suggest that in the absence of additional information, individuals tend to form perceptions based upon available data such as personal appearances and pre-established expectations. These perceptions then tend to be used in making judgements, forming impressions and beliefs, determining the intentions of the other party and formulating subsequent actions though they may only be based on elements of physical attractiveness (Scharlemann et al., 2001; Luoh & Tsaur, 2007). Therefore, in the face of sparse evidence offered by an intangible service encounter, consumers are likely to use cues such as a smile to indicate the nature of the encounter to come. Since actors do draw meaning from facial expression, the smile may provide that basis for an inference about the intentions of a stranger in a bargaining setting such as a service encounter (Scharlemann et al., 2001) and, since smiling is one aspect of an expression of friendliness, consumers may be forming expectations that the encounter will be a good one.

Another explanation that may tie increased smiling to satisfaction that is offered by the literature is called emotional contagion. Studies have shown that persons tend to unconsciously adopt or mimic the emotions of the persons around them (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992; Barger, & Grandey, 2006; Barsade, 2002; Pugh, 2001; Hatfield, Bensman, Thornton, & Rapson, 2014). Studies have shown that in mimicking the facial expressions that they “catch” from people around them, they also tend to “catch” the emotions associated with these facial expressions (Scanlon & Polage, 2011; Hatfield et al., 2014). Since smiles tend to be associated with emotions such as friendliness (Tsai, 2001), a consumer seeing a smile on a service provider’s face is likely to also smile and experience emotions consistent with smiling such as acceptance, approval and bonding (Barsade, 2002). In beginning to evaluate the consumption experience, consumers are likely to ask themselves how they feel about it and rely on their current emotional state as an indicator (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). This is likely why famous restaurants look for such things as enthusiasm, smile, friendliness and good looks when they hire (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009). Based upon the above discussion, a hypothesis regarding smiling is offered:

H₃: *Increased magnitude of employee smiling will have significant positive effects on ratings of consumer satisfaction*

3. Methodology

In order to test the hypothesized relationships suggested above between physical attributes and expected customer satisfaction in a service encounter, an experiment was designed. In this experiment participants were view photographs that varied by gender, level of attractiveness, and magnitude of smile. The following describes that experiment.

- *Participants*

The experiment was designed to have participants rate their expected customer satisfaction in a travel scenario set in Thailand. To add a measure of authenticity, respondents were selected from passengers arriving in Bangkok at Suvarnabhumi Airport. A total of 100 persons were selected to participate using a quota sampling technique. Quotas were set by gender with an approximate 50-50% mix of women and men. The minimum age to be selected was set at 18 to better ensure that respondents would have prior travel experience.

- *Materials*

In reviewing articles for this study, it was found that many of the studies examining the effects of physical features on consumer behavior or evaluations used pictures that varied these features (e.g. Kim & Baker, 2019; Scharlemann et al., 2001; Husvar, 2006; Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Scanlon & Polage, 2011). For this study, since the independent variables of interest included gender, level of attractiveness, and magnitude of smile, photos were taken of eight women and nine men that ranged in age from 20 to 30. Those photographed were all Asian and wore no jewelry or glasses. Of these seventeen persons photographed each had three pictures taken: one with no smile, one with a small smile and one with a big smile. All women had makeup that was similarly applied so that each looked natural. The individuals involved differed in attractiveness.

The pictures were then put through a rating process in which 30 university students rated each picture for attractiveness from 1 (not attractive) 2 (average attractiveness) to 3 (very attractive) and for smiling from 1 (a neutral face), 2 (a small smile) to 3 (a large smile). The photos of the nine men and then the eight women with a neutral smile were then placed in order of attractiveness from the lowest level of attractiveness to the highest level of attractiveness by each of the 30 students while not in view of the other students. From this rating exercise, pictures rated 1-3 were considered not attractive, 4-6 were considered average attractiveness and those rated above 6 were considered attractive. Quality assurance was achieved on the measurement tool used in this study through a photo rating process employed by similar published studies (e.g. Kim & Baker, 2019; Scharlemann et al., 2001; Husvar, 2006; Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Scanlon & Polage, 2011).

Photos that were rated as not reliably falling into one of the three categories of attractiveness were removed. Reliability of the ratings of the remaining 10 photos (5 men and 5 women) indicated a 73.3% (22 of 30) agreement for the “attractive” male pictures and a 76.6% (23 of 30) agreement for the “attractive” female. For the “average” attractiveness, the agreement was 70% for both genders (21 of 30). As for the “not attractive” rating, the male photo was agreed upon 73.3% of the time (22 of 30) and the female photo was agreed upon 83.3% (25 of 30). George and Mallery (2003) suggest that reliability measures above .7 are acceptable while .8 is considered good. A similar rating task for the magnitude of smile resulted in 100% agreement for each smile level for both males and females. These reliability ratings indicate that the materials created represented the levels of the variables that they were designed to represent and that this was done with an acceptable level of reliability.

- Procedure

Travelers at the airport were approached and requested to participate in the experiment. They were given a scenario that had been created for this study in which they were to imagine being customers of a travel company and they were to interact with one of the travel company's employees. Participants were then shown pictures of individual males and individual females that had varying levels of smiles (no smile, small smile and big smile) and varying levels of attractiveness from not attractive to average to attractive. Participants were then instructed to imagine themselves interacting with the employees depicted in the photos. After each picture was viewed, the respondents were to rate what they expected their level of satisfaction would be in such an interaction with the employee in the picture they just viewed. Ratings were conducted using a 1-5 Likert scale (with 1 indicating lowest and 5 indicating highest level of) to rate their expected level of satisfaction. Similar procedures have been employed in other studies to measure the influence of such things as physical features on expected satisfaction levels for imagined interactions (e.g. Husvar, 2006; Parlade et al., 2008).

4. Research Findings

The sample of travelers selected for the rating task included 100 participants; 48 men and 52 women. Of these, 46 (46%) were ages 18-29, 45 (45%) were ages 30-49 and only 9 (9%) were over 50. As an indicator of travel experience, it was found that 27 participants flew an average of once a year, 40 participants flew 2-3 times per year, 16 flew 4-5 times a year and 17 persons flew more than 5 times per year. All were experienced travelers. Multiple regression was selected to analyze the data obtained. The ten photographs depicting gender, varying levels of attractiveness and smile were rated by 100 persons producing a total of 1000 ratings. As reported in Table 1, satisfaction across all ratings had a mean of 3.361 (out of 5 as highest) with a standard deviation of 1.057. Gender was dummy coded with 0 = men and 1 = women for the regression. Since the numbers of male and female pictures were the same, the mean for this variable was .50 with a standard deviation of .500. Attractiveness of the persons in the pictures indicated a mean of 2.20 (out of 3 as highest) and a standard deviation of .749. Magnitude of smile had a mean of 1.60 (out of 3 as highest) and a standard deviation of .800.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Satisfaction	1000	3.361	1.057
Gender	1000	.50	.500
Attractiveness	1000	2.20	.749
Smile	1000	1.60	.800

Source: Created by the Author for this Study.

The ANOVA for the model is significant at $F(3, 139.3)$, $p < .001$ indicating that the adjusted $R^2 = .293$ is significantly greater than zero. Therefore the predictor variables in this model account for a significant percentage of the variance in ratings of expected satisfaction for the scenario service encounter. In this case, that percentage is 29.3%.

Hypothesis 1 suggested a significant association between gender and expected customer satisfaction with women producing the highest levels of satisfaction. As shown in Table 2 below, gender did have a significant association with expected satisfaction ($t = 3.587$, $p < .001$). Since men were coded as 0 and women were coded as 1, the positive standardized beta of .099 indicates support that women were more strongly associated with expected satisfaction than men. These two findings suggest support for Hypothesis 1. Additionally, the unstandardized beta for gender indicates that a service encounter with a woman will bring about a .210 higher level of expected satisfaction (out of a possible 5) than would such an encounter with a man.

Table 2: Regression of Gender, Attractiveness and Magnitude of Smile on Expected Satisfaction

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.	95.0 CI	
	β	Std. Error	Beta	t		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Constant	1.965	.094		20.967	<.001	1.781	2.149
Gender	.210	.059	.099	3.587	<.001	.095	.325
Attractiveness	.230	.041	.163	5.610	<.001	.150	.311
Smile	.622	.037	.471	16.817	<.001	1.781	.694

Adjusted $R^2 = .293$

Source: Created by the Author for this Study.

The second hypothesis suggested that increased levels of employee attractiveness will have significant positive effects on ratings of expected consumer satisfaction. As shown in Table 2, attractiveness has a significant positive relationship with expected satisfaction ratings ($t = 5.610$, $p < .001$). This finding supports the relationship suggested in Hypothesis 2. The unstandardized beta indicates that for a 1 point increase in rated attractiveness, ratings of expected satisfaction increase by .230 out of a possible 5.

The final hypothesis suggests that increased magnitudes of employee smiling will have significant positive effects on ratings of expected consumer satisfaction. As indicated in Table 2, the magnitude of smile does have a significant positive influence on ratings of expected satisfaction ($t = 16.817$, $p < .001$). The unstandardized beta for this variable indicates that as the magnitude of smile increases by 1, there will be an associated .662 (out of 5) increase in the ratings of expected satisfaction. Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study indicate support for the idea that in a service encounter, various physical characteristics, in this case gender, level of attractiveness, and magnitude of smile may influence expectations of satisfaction with the encounter before such encounter even starts. These findings are in agreement with various studies that examined these variables and their relationship to satisfaction in service exchanges (e.g. Soderlund & Rosengren, 2008; Kuo, 2009; Soderlund & Julander 2009; Luoh & Tsaurb, 2009; Luoh & Tsaurb, 2009; Ryu et al., 2010; Ryu et al., 2011; Lee & Choi, 2020). From this, there are immediately applicable managerial implications in three areas: hiring, training and evaluation.

First, since women were rated more likely to produce a satisfying service exchange encounter, it would seem reasonable that employers lean toward hiring women in service provider roles. However, the literature suggests that another factor, congruence between the gender and the specific job may be more important (Mohr & Henson, 1996). The scenario in this study was related

to travel and, as suggested, it is possible that women are viewed as more congruent to fulfil such a job. Further research is needed to identify gender congruent roles as viewed from the consumers' point of view.

Attractiveness can quite often be improved by the application of make-up, body and skin care products, selection of clothing and even through exercise. This has implications for selection, training and evaluation. In hiring customer contact providers, recruiters and interviewers should work with management and possibly even customers develop standards for physical attractiveness practices and for appropriateness of what is worn. Studies have shown that the wearing of appropriate and expected clothing does affect customer satisfaction (Shao, Baker, & Wagner, 2004). Service encounter employees should not only be taught these standards, but should be trained in how to best achieve these standards on a daily basis. Merit evaluations of employees should contain items examining attractiveness in terms of make-up, dress, smiling, based upon the standards that have been communicated and the training that the employees have received.

Of the three independent variables examined in this study, smiling had the largest effect on expected satisfaction. It therefore seems obvious that the magnitude and possibly the frequency of smiling should be considered for employee selection, training and evaluation. However, there is a caveat that should go with that. Studies have shown that having employees walking around with a smile “pasted” on their face is often not very effective (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2006; Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). The current study employed pictures to obtain satisfaction ratings. Still photos are not the best for exhibiting what these writers refer to as “emotional labor.” Employees should be taught to provide sincere emotional response with their features (eyes, mouth, cheeks) and should be rewarded for their emotional efforts.

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