

An analysis of customer service quality to college students as influenced by customer appearance through dress during the in-store shopping process

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Abstract

The premise that customer appearance through dress influences customer service quality in retail stores is explored. Research subjects completed instruments designed to measure customer service expectations at a specific retail store of their choice. Then they visited that store three separate times posing as shoppers for the purpose of evaluating customer service quality. Appearances through dress of the research subject (customer) and store type were the independent variables. The dependent variable, quality of customer service, was compared to the previously rated expected customer service level and among customer dress styles. Significant differences were observed between customer expectations of service and service received overall. Furthermore, the level of customer service received by customers differed significantly based on their appearance through dress. Store type also affected the level of customer service offered to customers. Recommendations are provided for retailers who want to offer consistent and positive customer service.

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1. Introduction

Customer service is a key factor towards generating loyal retail customers, and ultimately, successful retail businesses (Morey, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Defined as “an activity that supplements or facilitates store sales,” (Beisel, 1993, p. 501) customer service includes such items as free parking, gift wrapping, and delivery. Additionally, sales personnel offer customer service through their interactions and relationships with customers. The customer service offered by salespeople, coined “sales service” by Gagliano and Hathcote (1994), is perhaps the most highly visible customer service attribute, but it is also among the most difficult to measure and for the store to control.

Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) have determined that customer expectations regarding the level of service offered are related to their level of satisfaction with the shopping experience. The higher the expectation, the higher the service level must be for customers to feel satisfied with the service. When expectations are low, customers tend to be satisfied with low levels of service. Previous researchers have investigated the relationships between store type and service expectations (Dotson and Patton, 1992; Lee and Johnson, 1997), customer expectations and retail salesperson service (Stanforth and Lennon, 1997), and service level and retail sales (Morey, 1980). Lee and Johnson (1997) used focus groups to learn more about relationships between store type and customer expectations for apparel customers. They found that there were different expectations for different store types. Furthermore, they identified evidence that indicates customers believe service quality depends on their dress. Lennon and Kim (1998)

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investigated this relationship and found that customer appearance was significantly related to the friendliness of salespeople in retail stores, with well-dressed customers receiving more friendly service. Lee and Johnson's (1997) study was limited to customer focus groups. They explored customer expectations, but did not collect data from an in-store experience. Lennon and Kim (1998) used observational data, with researchers categorizing the dress and appearance of customers. The purpose of this study is to further explore the relationship between a customer attribute—appearance through dress—and customer service quality offered by store sales personnel during the in-store shopping process. Because of the wide range of store types that are available to consumers, and because previous research has identified store type as a potential differentiating variable in both expectations and delivery of customer service (Dotson and Patton, 1992; Lee and Johnson, 1997), a variety of store types are explored. This research process emphasizes an evaluation of service quality as perceived by the customer.

2. Literature review

Roach and Eicher (1965) used the term 'dress' to refer to the act of covering the body. Dress has further been defined as any sensual modification of the human body and includes all kinds of body ornamentation and covering, including artificial extensions of the body such as clothing (Buckley, 1984–85; Horn and Gurel, 1981). Eicher (1995, p. 8) states, "dressing the body is a coded, sensory system of non-verbal communication of body supplements and body modifications enhancing human interaction as human beings move in time and space." Eicher (1995) includes manipulation of body shape, color, texture, scent, sound, and taste as well as supplementation through clothing, accessories, and /or jewelry in the act of dressing. Using these definitions, hairstyles, general hygiene, makeup as well as clothing and accessories all combine to form an individual's dress.

Social identity theory, which is rooted in symbolic interactions, posits that people interpret and classify the world according to shared meanings and shared expectations (Stryker, 1977). Based on symbols such as dress, impressions of others are formed. Stryker (1977, p. 150) notes that "one learns, in interaction with others, both how to classify objects with which one comes into contact and how one is expected to behave towards these objects." In the process of social interaction, people label one another and themselves as they recognize and assume roles. Behavioral expectations are then assigned based on interpretations of the identified roles. Individuals each have various roles to play (spouse, parent, employee, supervisor, customer,

etc.), each of which may affect his or her current behavior. Likewise, observers who are strangers are faced with the complex task of forming impressions and responding to social interactions. Typically, strangers have only visible symbols, such as appearance through dress, to serve as role cues and then situations are contested and negotiated as interactions ensue.

Previous research has determined that dress cues do produce meanings in social interactions (Albright et al., 1988; Damhorst, 1984–85; Hutton, 1984; O'Neal and Lapitsky, 1991) and result in traits being assigned to the wearer (Asch, 1946; Solomon, 1986). Furthermore, impressions are formed of others based on the clothing and appearance that has been observed (Douty, 1963; Johnson and Roach-Higgins, 1987). Behaviors of observers are influenced by their perceptions of what they observe (Blumer, 1969). For example, Wilson (1978) documented that the physical attractiveness of females making a request for assistance affected the behaviors of men toward helping them with a simple task. Johnson et al. (2002) explored the relationship between dress cues planned by wearers and the perceptions of those who observe them. They found that people use a variety of cues including body appearance and dress when forming impressions of others. Personal preferences of the observers influenced the way impressions were formed. Both wearers and observers were aware that impressions were formed of themselves and others based on appearance and dress, and in both cases, most people believed that the impressions they formed and those formed about them were accurate. Johnson et al. (2002) did not determine whether the impressions formed of others were accurate.

Retailers routinely categorize customers to better organize their selling strategies so that sales—and ultimately profits—will be maximized (Leong et al., 1989; Dunne et al., 1995; Sharma and Levy, 1995). Therefore, it is essential for strategies such as categorization to result in superior levels of customer services for the right customers. Several methods of customer categorization all initiated by salespeople and used for the purposes of refining selling strategies, have been identified previously. Dunne et al. (1995) categorized customers according to six "types" including defensive, interrupter, decisive, indecisive, sociable, and impulsive. These categories are based on customer behaviors, and interestingly, most of these categorizations are negative reflections of customers. Eight groups of customers were generated by Sharma and Levy (1995) after they surveyed retail salespeople from a major department store chain: price/promotion conscious, need/product based, gift buyer, browser, needs and seeks sales help, negative labels (a category containing negative customer descriptions), knowledgeable customer, and decision style/method of decision making. While these employees seemed to recognize needs of customers in a predominantly positive light, surveys of both managers

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