



The physical appearance of hotel guests: The impact on service providers' communication and quality of service

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this experimental study was to establish whether there is any correlation between guests' physical appearance and the quality of service provided to them by front desk hotel staff. The two experimental groups used in this study consisted of hotel receptionists in Portorož, which is the largest hotel industry sector in the Slovenian part of the Adriatic Sea, and a comparative group made up of social workers from Slovenia's social work centres. The research results suggest that there is a positive correlation between the physical appearance of hotel guests and their satisfaction with the quality of service received. In contrast, within the group of social workers and their clients, there was no correlation between the physical appearance of clients and customer service satisfaction. In the study, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for testing the normality of the distribution, *t*-test for independent samples, Pearson's correlation test and descriptive statistics were used.

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1. Introduction

Slovenia, located in the south of central Europe, is one of Europe's smallest countries. The tourism industry is a very important segment of Slovenia's economy. In 2012, slightly more than 2 million inhabitants generated almost US\$ 3.0 billion of income from tourism. Tourism represents more than 12% of the national GDP, with almost 3.3 million arrivals and more than nine million overnight stays (STURS, 2013). The total number of beds in the hotel and lodging industry is 122,000 (STURS, 2013). Some data (Sirše et al., 2004) estimate the workforce in the tourism sector at 40,000 employees.

Within the tourism industry, as a whole, the hotel sector has contributed its share to the economy. Therefore, the need for hotel employees to provide hotel guests with an excellent experience is essential. Numerous studies, including Akbaba (2006), Albacete-Sáez et al. (2007), Briggs et al. (2007), Johnson and Vanetti

(2005) and Papageorgiou (2008) have emphasized the importance of human resources in the hotel industry and in tourism in general.

When a guest and the receptionist first meet, the first thing they both perceive is each other's physical appearance (Leung and Law, 2010, 439). From the guests' point of view, the physical appearance of the hotel staff is one of the factors that undoubtedly affects their satisfaction with the accommodation. Furthermore, as Briggs et al. (2007) state, hotel customers expect helpful, friendly and caring service. Such expectations include not only the knowledge of tourism workers, but also the very personal relationships the workers develop with tourists. The quality of these relationships can be seen in the efforts of professionals to adapt their appearance to the expectations of their guests. In order to encourage these relationships, many companies in the field of tourism instil very clear standards of physical appearance that they expect their employees adhere to.

As such, jobs in the hospitality and tourism industry, which require direct contact with customers, can become very demanding in terms of the emotional load and requirements for aesthetic labour. The concept of aesthetic labour includes physical appearance and engaging in pleasant speech. Hotel and travel managers have become very aware of this and, therefore, educating staff on aesthetic labour has become a vital part of human resource management. Moreover, the employees' pleasant appearance and their

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ability to maintain and improve their appearance is an important commercial advantage for the hospitality and tourism industry (Nickson et al., 2003).

One cannot speak of this as a new concept, as there are historically plenty of examples where physical appearance has been deemed an important aspect of communication. Probably one of the oldest examples of appearance and behaviour determining the social group one belonged to was the Jesuit Order in the 16th century. In order to belong to the order, candidates had to speak in a pleasant way and have a good appearance (Nickson et al., 2003). It was clear, even then, that physical appearance on the part of the communicators was important for successful communication. It is no wonder that this knowledge stemmed from the bosom of the Catholic Church, which for centuries consciously developed the communication skills of its clergy.

But only recently have authors, such as Warhurst et al. (2000), developed this concept into a theory, called *aesthetic labour*, and formally entered it into academic literature. By aesthetic labour, it is understood that a company requires that an employee is skilled and cares about maintaining an attractive physical appearance and engaging in pleasant speech (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Tsaor and Tang, 2013). Some authors point out that employees in the hospitality industry in fact act as “walking billboards” for their companies and, therefore, the importance of an aesthetically pleasing physical appearance is essential to the industry (Tsaor and Tang, 2013, 19). Studies in the field of aesthetic labour strongly suggest that employees in the hotel industry should receive training in personal aesthetic skills, as well as technical and social skills training (Nickson et al., 2003). To that end, to enhance the physical appearance of their staff, many organizations organize different forms of education for their personnel aimed at boosting the physical appearance of their employees.

But the role that physical appearance plays in the hotel industry is not just a one-way stream to be analysed in terms of the guest-employee experience. Hotel guests' physical appearance also affects employees in certain ways and, by extension, the service the employees render to their guests. However, an extensive literature research in the field of service quality conceptualization and operationalization in tourism, and especially in the hospitality industry, indicates that there have been no studies done on the influence of the physical appearance of guests on perceived service quality. This is surprising since hotel employees' perceptions of a guest's physical appearance may be considered a part of the service delivery process as a whole. Researchers have developed several applicable service quality dimensions, such as communication (Coyle and Dale, 1993; Knutson et al., 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1985), assurance (Parasuraman et al., 1988), professionalism and skills (Gronroos, 1988) and personnel response (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007). Certainly, physical appearance should be taken into consideration as a valid sub-dimension.

2. Physical appearance

There has been continuous research in the field of personality, behaviour, human relationships and interracial relationships, to name a few areas, with a focus on the influence of human physical appearance on human perceptions and attitudes. What has been discovered is that social representations of attractiveness are heavily influenced by appearance, facial appearance in particular, which may affect the beholder's opinion of other individuals (Welsh and Guy, 2009, 194). While Perrett et al. (1999) and Zaidel et al. (1995a,b) have researched the correlation of asymmetric human faces with attractiveness, other authors, for instance Baudouin and Tiberghien (2004), Jones et al. (2004) and Pound et al. (2007), have been involved in the research of face symmetry and its influence on facial attractiveness. As such, attractiveness has been found to be

an attribute that may shape human affiliative behaviour (Winston et al., 2007).

Welsh and Guy (2009) have explored the influence of hair loss or baldness on possible social and psychological implications of appearance disturbance, while van Leeuwen et al. (2009) have examined the influence of attractiveness on imitation intentions. Moreover, Little et al. (2007) and Todorov et al. (2005) have shown that inferences of competence are based solely on facial appearance and, in the case of politics, can often predict election outcomes. According to Todorov et al. (2008), we reliably and automatically make personality inferences from facial appearance, despite little evidence of accuracy. Furthermore, visual adaptation to masculine and feminine faces may influence preferences and perceptions of trustworthiness (Buckingham et al., 2006). Important facial social cues might factor into assessing how to interact with a partner in strategic decision making (van't Wout and Sanfey, 2008).

Wade et al. (2004) have explored how racial characteristics and individual differences in women's evaluations of men's facial attractiveness and personality affect their behaviour, while Hume and Montgomerie (2001) have researched the relationship between facial attractiveness and several variables thought to be related to genotypic and phenotypic quality in humans, for instance, body mass index, health and age. Research into the correlation between masculinity and femininity and attractiveness of faces related to socio-sexual orientation has been conducted by Boothroyd et al. (2008). The question of whether facial attractiveness may predict longevity has been explored by Henderson and Anglin (2003). If it is possible to assume longevity, then it may also be possible to predict physical health, according to the limited empirical evidence provided by Shackelford and Larsen (1999).

The appearance of hotel guests and the impact of their appearance on quality of service is a neglected topic in the field of hospitality literature, although such research in terms of development is very important. Research of this kind has been more often undertaken in other business areas. Yip et al. (2011) found that self-concept and self-image of customers have a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Customers' orientation towards their own physical appearance is strongly associated with expectations of quality service. What presents a particularly difficult situation is an obese tourist. Some research has shown that tourism is an activity for ideal or normal bodies (Veijola and Valtonen, 2007, 16). Small and Harris (2012) performed a qualitative study using the technique of Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate the airline experiences of obese and non-obese passengers. They concluded that obese tourists are openly discriminated on in airline travel, pointing out that the “fat” stigma is clearly apparent (Small and Harris, 2012, 686). Kök and Kibar (2015, 24) have shown that typically the way in which service personnel address their guests is directly affected by their guests' appearance. Service personnel change their verbal communication in accordance to their perception of the guests' physical appearance.

All these dimensions of physical appearance or personal attractiveness in relationships between people are part of everyday communication between professionals in the tourism industry and their customers and employees in the hospitality industry and the users of their services.

3. Aims of the study

According to researchers, communication in its broader sense is the basic content of tourism as a human activity (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Jafari, 2000). In that context, our proposition is that the physical appearance of a hotel guest has an influence on the communication process between the guest and, for instance, the hotel receptionist. In other words, the personal appearance of a guest affects the way a receptionist does his/her job, which in

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