



Physical attractiveness of the service worker in the moment of truth and its effects on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses if the service worker's physical attractiveness has an impact on customer satisfaction in the moment of truth. An experimental approach, involving two different service settings (visiting a bookstore and traveling with an airline), was used to manipulate the level of the service worker's physical attractiveness. The results, for both experiments, show that a high level as opposed to a low level of physical attractiveness of the service worker produced a higher level of customer satisfaction. In addition, the results indicate that exposure to an attractive service worker set in motion a process in which an attractiveness appraisal affected the attitude toward the service worker, which in turn had a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

There is a long tradition in service research to acknowledge the service encounter (i.e., the person-to-person encounter between a customer and a firm's representative) as important for the overall success of the service firm (Solomon et al., 1985). Hence, this encounter is sometimes referred to as the moment of truth (Normann, 2000). The current status of the literature is that it comprises an impressive list of discrete service worker behaviors affecting the customer's overall evaluation of the firm in which the service worker is employed (Bitner et al., 1990; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Smith et al., 1999; Winsted, 2000).

In the present paper, we make an attempt to contribute to this list with respect to (a) customer satisfaction as the main evaluation of the service firm, because of its many fruitful effects on customer behavior (cf. Luo and Homburg, 2007), and (b) one particular independent variable which we believe has been neglected in existing research on the service encounter: the physical attractiveness of the service worker. However, it has not been totally neglected. Sundaram and Webster (2000) discussed it in conceptual terms and proposed that it would affect the customer's perceptions of service worker characteristics such as credibility, friendliness and competence. Moreover, Gabbott and Hogg (2000), who used an experimental design in which several service worker characteristics were manipulated at the same time (but they provided little information about the attractiveness manipulation itself), concluded that the service worker's physical

attractiveness had a significant association with service satisfaction. Yet we have only found one empirical study in which the explicit focus was the service worker's physical attractiveness (Koernig and Page, 2002), and it resulted in a non-significant impact of the service worker's physical attractiveness on customer satisfaction. Koernig and Page (2002), however, did find that the physical attractiveness of the service worker had a significant impact on various evaluations of *the service worker* (e.g., liking, trust, and perceived expertise). With respect to the latter part of the results, Koernig and Page's (2002) results are consonant with research on social perception in general (cf. Berscheid and Walster, 1974; Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992), salesperson performance (Ahearne et al., 1999; Reingen and Kernan, 1993), organizational behavior (Cash et al., 1977; Frieze et al., 1991; Heilman and Stopek, 1985; Morrow et al., 1990), and teacher performance (Riniolo et al., 2006). That is to say, copious studies indicate that the physical attractiveness of a stimulus person positively affects the perceiver's judgments of *the stimulus person*.

In the light of the service literature, however, in which it is stressed that the customer uses encounter-generated evaluations of the service person for overall evaluations of the firm in which this person is employed, Koernig and Page's (2002) results raise one particular question: why was the service person's physical attractiveness not able to rub off also on the satisfaction assessment, when so many other aspects of the service worker has been shown to do so? Moreover, Koernig and Page's (2002) results are not consonant with marketing-related studies showing that the evaluations of one object can color evaluations of other objects related to the first object. For example, in an advertising context, many studies show that the physical attractiveness of a human ad model is able to influence the evaluations of objects

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related to the ad model, such as the ad and the advertised product (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Chestnut et al., 1977; Julander and Söderlund, 2005; Loken and Howard-Pitney, 1988; Petrosius and Crocker, 1989; Smith and Engel, 1968; Till and Busler, 2000). Even attractive avatars on websites appear to be capable of producing similar effects (Holzwarth et al., 2007). In other words, given that the physical attractiveness of a person in an advertising setting produces effects not only on the perceptions and evaluations of this person, but also on *related* objects, why have mixed results been obtained in a service encounter setting?

This contradiction calls for a re-examination of the potential for a link between the service person's physical attractiveness and customer satisfaction. An examination of this type, we believe, may offer several contributions. First, given that customer satisfaction is an important performance variable in many service firms, service research needs to be constantly mindful of variables that could add to the customer's satisfaction and thus affect the firm's performance. In relation to existing service research, our study is an attempt to expand the growing list of determinants of customer satisfaction by moving beyond the traditional focus on factors dealing with the service worker's *behavior* (cf. Solomon et al., 1985) by including physical attractiveness, which we view as a relatively more permanent characteristic of a service person. Examinations of this particular variable should also be seen in the light of a growing concern among employers in service industries that employees should possess "aesthetic skills" such as good looks (Nickson et al., 2005). Second, it has been argued that service research would benefit from examining factors affecting customers' non-conscious processing of social information during brief encounters (Peracchio and Luna, 2006), and we believe that physical attractiveness is one of those factors. Third, service research needs to pay attention to factors affecting empirical results in theory building efforts; given that much research has already been carried out on the effects of customers' perceptions of service workers, but without explicitly taking into account the level of physical attractiveness of stimuli persons, it is possible that physical attractiveness has confounded some results.

In addition, many individuals are concerned with physical appearance and attractiveness in contemporary society (Netemeyer et al., 1995; Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005), at least in individualistic Euro-American cultures (cf. Swami and Furnham, 2008). At the same time, given the social nature of many services, and given also the pervasiveness of service encounters in society, we expect that services represent a main arena in which physical attractiveness effects are likely to occur. An explicit account of physical attractiveness aspects in service research would therefore not only contribute to model-building efforts within service research; it would also broaden our knowledge of the context in which physical attractiveness effects occur. That is to say, service research including physical attractiveness effects is likely to make service research an attractive area and source of knowledge for those involved in physical attractiveness research.

The perhaps most important implication for service research dealing with physical attractiveness, however, is related to the highly controversial nature of this topic. If the physical attractiveness of the service worker produces more of highly valued outcomes such as customer satisfaction, it is likely that physical attractiveness would influence managers' decisions regarding one particular employee in terms of recruitment, promotion, and compensation. Research suggests that this is indeed already the case (Biddle and Hamermesh, 1998; Cash et al., 1977; Frieze et al., 1991; Heilman and Stopek, 1985; Morrow et al., 1990; Nickson et al., 2005; Raza and Carpenter, 1987). Physical attractiveness, however, is not equally distributed; therefore, many concerns can be raised regarding decisions favoring attractive employees, particularly in a context in which unemployment and inequality

in the workplace are serious issues. Indeed, "lookism" (discrimination based on physical attractiveness) has already begun to gain attention in courts of law and in the court of public opinion (Ahearne et al., 1999). Given the long established focus on social interactions in service research, and given that it is in these interactions physical attractiveness effects occur, we believe that service research comprising physical attractiveness aspects has a potential of contributing to our understanding of a consequential issue that seems to become increasingly important in Western societies obsessed with appearance and looks.

With these aspects as the point of departure, then, the purpose of this study is to examine if the physical attractiveness of the service worker would have an impact on customer satisfaction following a service encounter.

2. Theoretical framework

Given interaction between the customer and the service worker in a service encounter, our thesis is that the service worker's level of physical attractiveness is likely to have an impact on customer satisfaction. We view this impact as mediated by two variables: the customer's appraisal of the service worker's attractiveness and the customer's attitude toward the service worker. More specifically, we propose that the customer makes (1) a physical attractiveness appraisal of the service worker, and that this appraisal affects (2) the attitude toward the service worker, which in turn has an impact on (3) customer satisfaction (see Table 2 for an overview). In the sections below, we discuss these variables and how we believe that they are interlinked.

2.1. The physical attractiveness appraisal

Our point of departure is that individuals make several immediate and well-nigh automatic appraisals when faced with a stimulus (cf. Arnold and Landry, 1999; Lazarus, 1982; Nyer, 1997). And when the stimulus comprises a person, particularly when the person's face is visible, we assume that one important appraisal dimension is the physical attractiveness of the person (Bar-Tal and Saxe, 1976; Berry and McArthur, 1986; Hirschberg et al., 1978). Indeed, Gulas and McKeage (2000) argue that there is a nearly automatic tendency to categorize a person as attractive or unattractive. Recent research with neuroimaging devices also confirms that a high level of physical attractiveness of a stimulus face elicits different brain activity than a low level of physical attractiveness of a stimulus face (O'Doherty et al., 2003).

Some authors claim that this particular appraisal dimension serves mating-selection purposes and is the heritage of millions of years of evolution (Saad, 2004). But it is also possible to argue that its function is to aid information processing by providing a shortcut to a range of inferences (other than those related to mating) about the stimulus person (Hirschberg et al., 1978). In any case, an attractiveness appraisal can be seen as providing a window into many attributes of the stimulus person, and therefore we expect that customers who interact with service workers make such appraisals. We also expect that such appraisals comprise a continuum ranging from low attractiveness to high attractiveness and thus that they contain more information than a simple dichotomy with categories such as unattractive and attractive.

2.2. Attractiveness appraisals of a person and the attitude toward the person

When the physical attractiveness has been formed in relation to one particular person, and when the outcome is that the person

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