The Beautiful, the Cheerful, and the Helpful: The Effects of Service Employee Attributes on Customer Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to prior studies examining only piecemeal aspects of employee attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed emotion, or helpfulness), the present research adopts an encompassing approach and considers these attributes simultaneously. These three attributes were selected as they represent the physical, emotional, and motivational aspects of the employee, respectively. This holistic approach provides an understanding of how these three dimensions of employee attributes exert differential effects and interact with one another on customer satisfaction. In order to validate the proposed framework and hypotheses, the authors conducted an experiment as well as a survey in an actual retail setting. Results show that even though all three employee attributes lead to customer satisfaction, employee helpfulness has the strongest impact. In addition, employees' displayed emotion interacts with their physical attractiveness and helpfulness, respectively, to influence customer satisfaction. These findings not only contribute to the literature, but also have managerial implications for high-contact services. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

One of the most critical aspects of the customer's service experience occurs during the "moment of truth" when the customer interacts with the organization (Grönroos, 1990). According to Jan Carlzon, the former CEO of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), the 50 million "moments of truth" (when each of the 10 million customers came in contact with approximately five SAS employees) were "the moments that ultimately determine whether SAS will succeed or fail as a company" (Carlzon, 1987, p. 3). With perhaps the exception of self-service technologies, most service interactions are enabled and facilitated by frontline or contact employees. Indeed, where technology falls short, frontline employees with the right skills and competencies often succeed (Beaujean, Davidson, & Madge, 2006). Consequently, the role of frontline employees in ensuring satisfactory service encounters should not be underestimated (Bettencourt & Brown 1997; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985).

The importance of frontline employees in service encounters is recognized not only among practitioners, but also by marketing scholars (e.g., Bearden, Malhotra, & Uscátegui, 1998; Kennedy, Lassk, & Goolsby, 2002; Yi & Gong, 2008). Distinct from the stream of research examining firm-level and work-related factors (e.g., service culture, supervisor–employee relationships, and employee empowerment) that could influence employee performance (e.g., Anderson & Huang, 2006; Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2009), the present research investigates the effects of employees' attributes on customer satisfaction during "moments of truth." Such employee attributes include physical attractiveness (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999; Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Sundaram & Webster,

2000), displayed emotions (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988), and helpfulness or courteousness (e.g., Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

Although prior studies have investigated the effects of employee attributes, they focused on only one attribute at a time, in isolation of the other attributes. In reality, however, all these attributes co-exist within each frontline employee and it would thus be more meaningful to examine them together, in particular their relative strengths and interactive effects. Thus, the univariable approach in the existing literature means that there is little understanding of how these attributes complement or compare against one another. For example, do customers respond differently to a physically attractive but unhelpful employee versus one who displays good cheer but is plain looking? The extant literature does not provide a clear answer to this question. In addition, previous studies on employee attributes were mainly conducted in the Western markets. In view of the rapid growth of the service sector in emerging markets such as China, it would be useful to see if past findings can be replicated in this research.

In addressing this void in the literature, the present research seeks to investigate the simultaneous and interactional effects of the three employee attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed emotion, and helpfulness), which are readily perceived by customers during service encounters, on customer satisfaction. These three attributes were selected based on the following considerations. First, physical attractiveness, displayed emotion, and helpfulness, respectively, represent the physical, emotional, and motivational aspects of the employee. Examining the simultaneous and interactional effects of these employee attributes can yield a more insightful understanding of customer perceptions of service encounters, compared to the univariable approach employed in past research. Second, these three attributes map onto the five dimensions that make up service quality, more commonly known as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Specifically, physical attractiveness reflects *tangibles*, displayed emotion reflects *empathy* and *assurance*, and helpfulness reflects *responsiveness* and *reliability* of the SERVQUAL model. Notwithstanding the overlaps with the SERVQUAL model, as the unit of the analysis in the present study is the individual employee rather than the firm (e.g., *tangibles* may also reflect nonemployee attributes such as ambience and décor), it would be more relevant to examine the three employee attributes instead of the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. These three attributes are readily apparent during the service encounter and the present research examines their effects on customer satisfaction, which is a strong predictor of a firm's future profit (Kotler, 1991). These findings are new to the literature and have important implications for managerial practice.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The relevant literature was first reviewed and hypothe-ses developed. The authors then conducted an experiment to test these hypotheses (Study 1). In order to enhance the external validity of the findings, the authors carried out a survey in an actual retail setting (Study 2). The paper then concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

This section reviews prior research on the three different attributes of frontline employees (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed emotions, and helpfulness) that are readily perceived by customers during service encounters. Further, a holistic approach was taken to investigate the differential effects of these attributes on customer satisfaction with the employee.

Employee Physical Attractiveness

Decades of research in social psychology suggest that first impressions have a significant influence on the interaction between two individuals (e.g., Neuberg, 1989). One of the most critical determinants of the initial impression is a person's overt stimulus characteristics such as appearance or physical attractiveness (Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1968). In the marketing literature, an employee's physical attractiveness is defined as the extent to which the service personnel is perceived by the customer as possessing an appealing and pleasing physical appearance (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). Marketing applications of physical attractiveness can be found in the areas of advertising, personal selling, retailing, and market research. Prior research indicates that physically attractive people are more generally more persuasive than their less attractive counterparts. For example, customers show higher purchase intentions toward the advertised product/service when the spokespersons are perceived to be highly attractive rather than unattractive (Caballero & Pride, 1984; Kahle & Homer, 1985). Similarly, customers perceive attractive salespersons more favorably, respond to their sales pitches more readily, and exhibit higher purchase intentions than they do to unattractive salespersons (DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 1996). The effect of physical attractiveness also occurs in a consumer-to-consumer context. Product evaluations are higher when consumers perceive a product as having been physically touched by a highly attractive other through the positive contagion effect (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2008). A recent study in the retail context finds that consumers consider physical attractiveness as social information, especially when the consumption and identity of consumers and referents are aligned (Dahl, Argo, & Morales, 2012).

As high-contact services tend to be more labor intensive, an ensuing implication is that the quality

of the service is often tied to its provider (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Customers often use physical attractiveness to evaluate frontline employees as it helps to form an impression on which further judgments are made (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Sundaram & Webster, 2000). People tend to assume that a person who is attractive also has many other positive attributes, otherwise known as the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon (cf. Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992). For instance, attractive people tend to be perceived as friendlier, warmer, and more poised than less attractive people (Chaiken, 1979). Attractiveness is associated with the perceived ability to perform certain tasks. These positive attributes serve as nonverbal communication and are closely tied with the tangibility aspect of service quality, which ultimately influences service evaluation (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000). Thus, it is expected that in a service context, an attractive service employee will have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Söderlund & Julander, 2009). That is, customers who perceive the service employee to be attractive are more likely to assess the employee positively. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that

H1: Employee physical attractiveness is positively related to customer satisfaction with the employee.

Employee Displayed Emotion

It has been widely acknowledged that having a friendly service employee who serves with a smile can result in positive customer reactions (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler, 2006; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Although there is often an inconsistency between employees' experienced and displayed emotions (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), displayed emotion is explicitly visible to customers, and thus has direct implications on employee–customer interactions. The present research examines only employee displayed positive emotion. This is because, unlike the other two attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness/unattractiveness and helpfulness/unhelpfulness), which represent the two ends of their respective dimensions, positive and negative emotions are two different constructs, and should be treated separately (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Tellegen, Watson, & Clark, 1999). Moreover, if significant differences between high and low displayed positive emotions can be found, the results would be more persuasive than if positive and negative emotions were compared.

The display of employee emotions and the resultant customer emotions and mood can influence customers' assessments of both the service provider and the overall service experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Evidence from past research indicates that positive emotional display in service interactions, such as smiling and conveying friendliness, can lead to purchase inten-

tion and/or willingness to return (Oliver, 1993; Tsai, 2001), intention to recommend a store to others (Tsai, 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002), perception of overall service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), higher customer satisfaction (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2010), and also facilitate sales transactions (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988). In addition, the employee's display of positive emotions is often contagious, which leads to positive evaluation of the employee via affect infusion (Forgas & George, 2001). Thus, it is proposed that employee displayed positive emotion can lead to customer satisfaction with the employee. More formally

H2: Employee displayed positive emotion is positively related to customer satisfaction with the employee.

Employee Helpfulness

Employee helpfulness refers to the extent to which the service employee either provides help to the customer or gives the impression of interest in the customer and shows a willingness to serve (Johnston, 1995). An employee's helpfulness is linked to his/her intrinsic motivation (Thomas, Batson, & Coke, 1981), and is one of the key dimensions of interaction quality during service encounters (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987; Yi & Gong, 2008). An efficient and available employee who is able to actually deliver the service meets customers' minimum expectation while the absence of competent service often contributes to customers' negative feelings about the service encounter (Price, Arnould, & Deibler, 1995).

While helpfulness may appear to overlap with the notion of "responsiveness" in service quality research (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), nonetheless they are not quite the same. Specifically, responsiveness refers to the willingness or readiness of employees to provide service in a timely manner, while helpfulness pertains to a service employee's competency—the extent to which they can complete the service task with confidence and efficiency (Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996). Prior research reveals that successful retail interactions often involve employee behaviors that inspire confidence and are courteous and helpful. Specifically, while employee courtesy helps a retailer form a quick "bond" with the customer and builds the necessary rapport for a positive service encounter, helpfulness of the employee forms the basis on which the service employee's performance is assessed (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996). Thus, helpful employees will directly influence customer satisfaction with the employee (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that

H3: Employee helpfulness is positively related to customer satisfaction with the employee.

Taken together, it is proposed that the physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness of an employee during the service encounter all contribute to the quality of the delivered service and subsequently influence service evaluation. Individually, these three attributes have been examined in previous research. Nonetheless, it is good science to see if the findings can be replicated in both a controlled experiment as well as in a field survey (Hunter, 2001). Following that, a simultaneous investigation of the three attributes helps to discern the differential and interactive effects of each attribute on customer satisfaction. These findings make original contributions to the literature. While employee physical attractiveness and displayed emotions may enhance service encounters, they may not substitute for organized, efficient, capable, and thorough service. After all, customer expectations of service employees are mostly linked to functional consequences, such as outcome and process of service delivery (Pieters, Bottschen, & Thelen, 1998). When purchasing services, customers are fundamentally concerned about successful task completion and efficacy that are enabled by employee helpfulness, while employees' physical attractiveness and displayed emotions serve as "icing on the cake," things that can enhance the service experience, but are not fundamental to core service delivery. Conversely, even if the employee is good looking and has a pleasant demeanor, but fails to perform the service, the customer is not likely to be satisfied. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that

H4: Employee helpfulness has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction with the employee than either employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion.

Interactions among the Three Employee Attributes

In most high-contact service settings, employee physical attractiveness, employee displayed emotion, and employee helpfulness do not exist in isolation. Rather, customers are exposed to all three employee attributes simultaneously. Therefore, it is meaningful to go beyond a basic understanding of the main effects of each employee attribute, and investigate possible interactions among them. These interaction effects are new to the literature.

The need for service employees to express positive emotions toward the customer has been well acknowledged (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988). The reason is that emotions carry information about people's thoughts and feelings, and can coordinate social interactions (Keltner & Haidt, 2001). Although some researchers suggest that the favorable attribution of positive emotion to positive traits is independent of physical attractiveness (Reis et al., 1990), other scholars indicate that positive emotion displays (e.g., a smiling face) can enhance a person's overall attractiveness as well as other positive characteristics (Lau, 1982; Mueser, Grau, Sussman, & Rosen, 1984). This is consistent with the notion that overall attractiveness extends beyond the physical qualities to include dynamic and emotional aspects of the person (Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988).

Along this line, it is proposed that for employees who are physically attractive, the display of positive emotion will serve to enhance customer satisfaction with the employee, albeit at a moderate level. Only a *moderate* effect is emphasized because a highly attractive individual who also exudes positive emotions may be regarded as being "too much of a good thing" (Forgas, 1987, p. 487). Dermer and Thiel (1975) showed that targets who were very highly attractive were perceived to be very egocentric. Similarly, Gallucci and Meyer (1984) found that targets who were moderately attractive were the overwhelming favorites for interaction, as they were perceived to be no more egocentric than unattractive targets. In his investigation of how people interpreted a person's physical attractiveness and facial expression together when forming their initial impressions about this person, Forgas (1987) found that the smile by the attractive target was perceived to indicate aggressive self-confidence and was judged to be more responsible for transgressions, compared with a smile by an unattractive target. Thus, it is reasonable to propose that having too many positive traits may result in diminished marginal positive perceptions of the target (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966). Consequently, the positive emotional display by a physically attractive employee may be viewed as overconfidence or aggressiveness by the customer, which runs counter to the notion that service employees should be humble (Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

In contrast, for a service employee who is physically less attractive, the display of positive emotions such as a genuine smile is often associated with favorable attributes such as being warm and pleasant. That is, the display of positive emotions can make up for low physical attractiveness, and their interaction may result in higher customer satisfaction with the employee, relative to when the same employee does not display positive emotion. Displayed positive emotion works better with a moderately attractive employee than one who is very attractive. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that

H5: Employee displayed positive emotion has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction when employee physical attractiveness is low than when it is high.

Although employee displayed positive emotion has a strong and direct effect on customer satisfaction with the employee, it is proposed that this effect will also be contingent on the level of helpfulness shown by the employee. Specifically, when employee displayed positive emotion is accompanied by a high level of employee helpfulness, the joint effect will exert a much stronger

influence on customer satisfaction. The reasoning is as follows. In general, customers tend to perceive the service employee with positive emotions to be more trustworthy, honest, friendly, and likeable (Harker & Keltner, 2001). This likability and approachability facilitates building rapport with the customer, who perceives the employee as sincerely trying to be helpful. However, the mere display of positive emotion may be ineffective if it is not accompanied by a high level of helpfulness. As the customer's most pressing need is the fulfillment of the core service brought about by employee helpfulness, the lack of helpfulness may serve to negate the display of positive emotion. Taken together, it is proposed that the coupling of employee displayed positive emotion and employee helpfulness will lead to high customer satisfaction with the employee. More formally

> **H6:** Employee displayed positive emotion has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction when employee helpfulness is high than when it is low.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to investigate the main and interaction effects of the three employee attributes on customer satisfaction with the employee. Following previous research (e.g., Keh & Pang, 2010), a scenario-based experiment is used to compare customer reactions to the different service employee attributes. In addition to the three employee attributes, employee gender was included in the factorial design of Study 1 to control for gender bias.

Method

Experimental Design. Study 1 used a 2 (physical attractiveness: attractive vs. unattractive) × 2 (displayed positive emotion: high vs. low) × 2 (helpfulness: helpful vs. unhelpful) × 2 (employee gender: male vs. female) between-subjects design. Specifically, a scenario in which the participant took the role of a customer shopping for a jacket was presented to the participants: *"Imagine that you are at a big shopping mall to buy a jacket for yourself. You see a jacket on the mannequin displayed in the window that fits what you are looking for. So you enter the store and try to find the right sized jacket, but are unsuccessful. At this time you see a salesperson nearby taking stock of other items. You walk over and ask, 'Excuse me, could you help me find my size of the jacket on that mannequin in the window?'"*

The frontline employee's physical appearance and displayed emotions were manipulated by showing photographs of models' faces that were prepared by a professional studio (see the Appendix). As it was important to control for gender bias, two male and two female

models were used; for each gender, the two models were selected based on their physical (un)attractiveness, respectively. Each model posed with a smiling face or an unsmiling face to reflect high or low positive emotions. The eight photographs were selected based on a separate pretest. Service employee's helpfulness was manipulated by providing written descriptions of a service encounter.

In the helpful condition, the salesperson says, "I'm sorry. They are being unpacked at the back. Let me get one for you right now." Then the salesperson asks your size, runs to the back, and returns shortly with a jacket of your size.

In the unhelpful condition, the salesperson says, "I'm sorry. But I'm new here and I don't know where they are kept. The other salespeople are at lunch. Please come back again." Then the salesperson continues taking stock. Overall, there were 16 different experimental conditions.

Sample and Experimental Procedure. The experiment was conducted at a large public university in Beijing, China. Participants were recruited using an online advertisement on the bulletin board system of the university, and were each compensated the equivalent of $3 for their participation. The final sample consisted of 300 subjects, of whom 32.0% were male and 60.2% were undergraduates. In terms of age, 21.4% were below 21 years old, 76.9% were between 21 and 30 years old, and 1.7% were over 30 years old. Participants completed the online experiment in the computer lab using the Qualtrics software. During the experiment, they were randomly assigned to one of the 16 experimental conditions, which had 17–20 participants each.

Each participant read the experiment instructions and a service scenario. Then they responded to manipulation check items for the three employee attributes and questions on customer satisfaction before providing some demographic information. The experiment was conducted in Chinese. Items from the literature were translated into Chinese by two bilingual doctoral students and then back translated into English by another bilingual student to ensure semantic equivalence (Brislin, 1970). All the items were rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Measures. Customer satisfaction with the employee was measured by four items adopted from the literature (Seiders, Voss, Grewal, & Godfrey, 2005; Voss, Parasuraman, & Grewal, 1998). A sample item was, "I am pleased with the overall service provided by the employee" ($\alpha = 0.98$; see Table 1).

Control Variables. As employee gender was not a variable of interest in the current study, it was treated as a control variable, which was dummy coded (1 = male, 0 = female). In addition, participants' gender and age were controlled for. Participants' gender was

Table 1. Constructs and Items with Factor Loadings and Reliabilities in Studies 1 and 2

Constructs and Items	Study 1	Study 2
Employee physical attractiveness (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999)	**0.80**	**0.85**
The employee I met is very good looking.	0.57	0.84
The employee I met has an attractive appearance	0.96	0.84
The employee I met would generally be thought of as beautiful/handsome.	0.79	0.76
Employee displayed positive emotion (The first four items were from Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988, and the last item was self-composed)	**0.93**	**0.83**
The employee said "Hello," "how are you today," or other greetings to me.	–	0.56
The employee said "Thank you" to me.	–	0.65
The employee made eye contact with me.	–	0.60
The employee smiled at me.	0.91	0.65
The employee was pleasant.	0.85	0.83
Employee helpfulness (The first three items were from Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996, and the last item was self-composed).	**0.93**	**0.84**
The employee I met gave prompt service to me.	0.95	0.79
The employee I met told me exactly when services will be performed.	0.96	0.88
The employee I met was never too busy to respond to my requests.	0.84	0.73
The employee I met showed a sincere interest in solving it when I had a problem.	0.73	0.68
Customer emotion (Plutchik, 1980)	**–**	**0.66**
Joy	–	0.51
Acceptance	–	0.71
Expectancy	–	0.69
Customer satisfaction (The first three items were from Seiders et al., 2005, and the last item was adapted from Voss, Parasuraman, & Grewal, 1998)	**0.98**	**0.90**
I am pleased with the overall service provided by the employee.	0.98	0.92
I feel delighted with the overall service provided by the employee.	0.98	0.90
I am completely satisfied with the experience by the employee.	0.97	0.72
I am happy with the overall service provided by the employee.	0.95	0.70

dummy coded (1 = male, 0 = female) and their age was measured in years.

Manipulation Checks. Measurement scales on employee physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness were adopted from the literature and served as manipulation checks. Three items adapted from Ahearne, Gruen, and Jarvis (1999) were used as manipulation check for employee physical attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.80$). One item was adapted from Sutton and Rafaeli (1988) and another item was self-composed to measure employee displayed emotion ($\alpha = 0.93$). Three items from Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996) and one self-composed item were used to measure employee helpfulness ($\alpha = 0.93$; details in Table 1).

Results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was first conducted to determine if manipulations of employee physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness were successful. Results showed that for physical attractiveness, participants rated the attractive employees ($n = 150$, $M = 3.32$, SD = 1.36) significantly higher than the unattractive employees ($n = 150$, $M = 2.39$, SD = 1.22), $F(1, 298) = 38.52$, $p < 0.001$. For employee displayed positive emotion, participants were able to distinguish between the employees displaying high positive emotion ($n = 149$, $M = 4.70$, SD = 1.55) from the

ones with low positive emotion ($n = 151$, $M = 2.20$, SD = 1.13), $F(1, 298) = 254.06$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, for employee helpfulness, participants found significant differences between the helpful employees ($n = 149$, $M = 5.65$, SD = 0.87) and the unhelpful employees ($n = 151$, $M = 2.55$, SD = 1.01), $F(1, 298) = 807.51$, $p < 0.001$. These results indicated that the manipulations of employee physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness were all successful.

Recall that H1–H3 proposed the main positive effects of the three employee attributes on customer satisfaction, respectively, while H4 suggested the relatively stronger effect of employee helpfulness than employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion. H5 and H6 proposed the interaction between employee displayed positive emotion and physical attractiveness, and between employee displayed positive emotion and helpfulness, respectively, on customer satisfaction. Table 2 shows the means on customer satisfaction across experimental conditions. To test the hypotheses, ANOVA was conducted on customer satisfaction with the employee, while controlling for employee gender as well as participant age and gender. As shown in Table 3, participants' age ($F(1, 290) = 0.25$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$) and gender ($F(1, 290) = 0.59$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$), and employee gender ($F(1, 290) = 1.02$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$) did not have significant effects on customer satisfaction; but employee physical attractiveness ($F(1, 290) = 9.29$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), displayed positive emotion ($F(1, 290) = 13.49$, $p < 0.001$,

Table 2. Means on Customer Satisfaction across Employee Attributes in Study 1

| | | Physical Attractiveness | | | |
| | | Low (0) Displayed Positive Emotion | | High (1) Displayed Positive Emotion | |
		Low (0)	High (1)	Low (0)	High (1)
Helpfulness	**Low (0)**	1.51	1.92	2.17	2.40
	High (1)	4.77	5.39	5.05	5.73

$N = 300$.

Table 3. Univariate Results for Customer Satisfaction in Study 1

| | Customer Satisfaction | |
Variables	F	η^2
Participant age	0.25	0.00
Participant gender	0.59	0.00
Employee gender	1.02	0.00
Employee physical attractiveness	9.29**	0.03
Employee displayed positive emotion	13.49**	0.04
Employee helpfulness	609.81***	0.68
Employee displayed positive emotion × employee physical attractiveness	0.00 (NS)	0.00
Employee displayed positive emotion × employee helpfulness	2.11 (NS)	0.01

Note: **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

$\eta^2 = 0.04$), and helpfulness ($F(1, 290) = 609.81$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.68$) all had significant effects on customer satisfaction with the employee.

Further examination of the means showed that participants were more satisfied with the service employee who was attractive ($n = 150$, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.99$) than with the employee who was unattractive ($n = 150$, $M = 3.37$, $SD = 2.01$). Participants were also more satisfied with the service employee whose displayed positive emotion was high ($n = 149$, $M = 3.87$, $SD = 2.00$) rather than low ($n = 151$, $M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.99$). Not surprisingly, participants were more satisfied with the service employee who was helpful ($n = 149$, $M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.22$) rather than unhelpful ($n = 151$, $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.15$). Therefore, H1–H3 were all supported. However, Table 3 also showed that the interaction between employee displayed positive emotion and physical attractiveness ($F(1, 290) = 0.00$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$), and the interaction between employee displayed positive emotion and helpfulness ($F(1, 290) = 2.11$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$) did not have significant effects on customer satisfaction. Thus, H5 and H6 were not supported.

H4 proposed that the effect of employee helpfulness on customer satisfaction with the service employee would be stronger than that of either employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion. Results from ANOVA indicated that the effect size of employee helpfulness (0.68, 95% CI = (0.614, 0.715)) was much stronger than that of employee physical attractiveness

Table 4. ANIMP of the Three Employee Attributes on Customer Satisfaction in Study 1

Ordering	Physical Attractiveness (P)	Displayed Positive Emotion (E)	Helpfulness (H)	Jointly
O1 = P E H	0.66	0.23	3.33	4.22
O2 = P H E	0.66	0.68	2.88	4.22
O3 = E P H	0.48	0.41	3.33	4.22
O4 = E H P	0.34	0.41	3.47	4.22
O5 = H P E	0.27	0.68	3.26	4.22
O6 = H E P	0.34	0.62	3.26	4.22
Each attribute's contribution across orderings	0.46	0.50	3.25	4.22

(0.03, 95% CI = (0.004, 0.079)) or displayed positive emotion (0.04, 95% CI = (0.010, 0.096)). However, using statistical significance (e.g., regression weights or effect sizes in ANOVA) as an indicator of the relative importance of predictors to the dependent variable has been criticized as being inappropriate due to the lack of significance tests between two regression weights or effect sizes and the lack of indications of each predictor's relative contribution (Kruskal & Majors, 1989; Soofi, Retzer, & Yasai-Ardekani, 2000). In this regard, the analysis of importance (ANIMP) methodology proposed by Soofi and colleagues (2000) has two desirable properties—additive separability (i.e., sum to a joint importance measure) and order independence (i.e., independent of the position of the variables in an arrangement). That is, ANIMP is an appropriate methodology to identify the average contribution of each predictor across all possible orderings of the predictors, which is not possible from examining statistical significance.

Accordingly, the ANIMP for ANOVA was used to measure the relative importance of the three employee attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness) on customer satisfaction with the employee. As shown in Table 2, the presence of all three attributes contributed a net mean response of 4.22 on customer satisfaction across the different conditions (i.e., the difference between customer satisfaction when all attributes were high (5.73) and customer satisfaction when all attributes were low (1.51)). Table 4 shows the ANIMP measures for the three attributes. The first column displays all six possible orderings of the three attributes. Within each ordering, the corresponding row shows different additive decompositions of the joint contribution of 4.22 on customer satisfaction. Each row gives a set of partial importance measures for the three attributes. The last row displays the overall share of each attribute in its joint contribution, by averaging the partial importance measures over all six possible orderings. The last row in Table 4 shows that the ratio of the overall importance of employee helpfulness to employee physical attractiveness was 7.10 (3.25/0.46), and the ratio of employee helpfulness to employee displayed positive emotion

was 6.45 (3.25/0.50). Therefore, the ANIMP results further supported H4, in that employee helpfulness has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction than either employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion.

Discussion

Taken together, results in Study 1 indicated that service employees' physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness all positively influenced customer satisfaction, consistent with the literature. The importance of helpfulness of a service employee implies that competent service delivery may override the effects of employees' physical attractiveness and displayed positive emotions. Potentially, employee helpfulness has a stronger effect on customer satisfaction, rather than employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion. Service firms should thus prioritize employee training to serve the core needs of the customer, along with employees' personal grooming and positive emotional display. Surprisingly, however, results in Study 1 did not find significant interactions between employee displayed positive emotion and employee physical attractiveness or helpfulness. One possible reason could be that a laboratory experiment was used in Study 1, which involved participants reading the scenario on the service employee's attributes but did not engage in an actual interaction with the employee.

In addition, while the manipulation of employee physical attractiveness was successful and customers could distinguish between attractive and unattractive employees, the mean difference (3.32 vs. 2.39) was not as significant as for the other two manipulations (4.70 vs. 2.20 for displayed positive emotion, and 5.65 vs. 2.55 for helpfulness). As part of the laboratory experiment in Study 1, employee displayed positive emotion was manipulated by showing pictures of a smiling or a non-smiling face. Previous research examining employee emotion has included both frequency and duration of smiling (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006), which could not be replicated using pictures. Further, the sample size for Study 1 was relatively small (17–20 participants in each condition), which could have contributed to the lack of support for H5 and H6. Given the limitations of the experimental manipulations in Study 1, Study 2 used a survey design and directly measured employee attributes.

STUDY 2

While Study 1 revealed that all three service employee attributes influenced customer satisfaction, and that employee helpfulness exhibited the strongest effect, it left several issues unaddressed. First, the interactions among the three employee attributes were not supported in Study 1, which may be due to the experimental manipulations. Second, Study 1 relied on a scenario-based experiment conducted on student samples, and the external validity of the findings required substantiation. Study 2 was designed to address these issues.

Sample and Data Collection

The retail context was chosen for the survey setting as it involved frequent employee–customer interactions (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Specifically, the survey was conducted at three supermarkets in Beijing and Tianjin, two major cities in China. The three supermarkets were similar in terms of size and product assortments. Data from the three stores did not differ significantly on store characteristics, customer demographics, and the focal variables. As such, the respondents from the three stores were pooled together for subsequent analysis. A total of 264 supermarket customers completed the questionnaire, and after deleting incomplete responses, the final sample size was 223. Among the respondents, 66.8% were female, and 73.1% aged between 20 and 50. They included 53.4% fully employed people, 29.6% students, and 13.0% retirees or unemployed people. The sample was well educated, with 82.1% having a Bachelor or Master's degree. In terms of average shopping duration at the store, 47.1% spent 20–60 minutes and 31.8% spent one to two hours. As for customer–store relationship, 62.3% began shopping at the target store at least one year ago, and 36.8% had been customers for at least three years. In terms of shopping frequency, 57.4% patronized the target store two to three times per month and 20.2% patronized 4–10 times per month.

Procedure and Questionnaire Design

Customers who had just left the checkout counters at the supermarkets were intercepted. The advantage of having measurements taken immediately after the service experience was that the encounter and associated emotions were still fresh in memory and could be accurately recalled before they had changed or were forgotten (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

The survey began with a filter question that was used to identify qualified respondents who had an encounter with a service employee while shopping in the store. In other words, the customer must have encountered a service employee other than the cashier before he or she could answer the survey. Qualified respondents were asked to recall and describe details of that encounter, including the service employee's physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness. They were also asked to describe their own emotional state and evaluate their satisfaction with the employee. All the items were captured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Finally, the respondents provided some demographic information.

Table 5. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Variables in Study 2

	Chi square	df	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Five-factor model	796.02	160	0.93	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.13
Four-factor model	926.37	164	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.15
Three-factor model	1,030.21	167	0.91	0.93	0.91	0.93	0.15
Two-factor model	1,087.17	169	0.91	0.92	0.90	0.92	0.16
One-factor model	1,309.75	170	0.89	0.90	0.88	0.90	0.17

Note: In the five-factor model, the measurement items loaded onto their five corresponding variables; in the four-factor model, employee physical attractiveness and employee displayed positive emotion were combined; in the three-factor model, the three employee attribute variables were combined; in the two-factor model, the three employee attribute variables and the two customer variables (customer emotion and customer satisfaction with the employee) were combined, respectively; and in the one-factor model, all variables were combined into one factor.

Measures

The same scales in Study 1 were used to measure employee physical attractiveness ($\alpha = 0.85$), helpfulness ($\alpha = 0.84$), and customer satisfaction with the employee ($\alpha = 0.90$). For employee displayed positive emotion, besides the four items used in Study 1, two more items were added from Sutton and Rafaeli (1988), namely, "The employee said 'Hello,' 'How are you today,' or other greetings to me," and "The employee said 'Thank you' to me" ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Control Variables. Customer demographics and some other characteristics were controlled for. Customer demographics included gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age,[1] and education.[2] Employment status,[3] monthly income,[4] length of shopping time,[5] and shopping frequency at the store,[6] perceived crowdedness (measured by an 8-item scale from Machleit, Kellaris, & Eroglu, 1994, $\alpha = 0.61$), store dependence (measured by a 5-item scale from Ganesan, 1994, $\alpha = 0.84$), and customer emotion were also controlled for. Three positive emotion items from Plutchik (1980) were retained, including joy, acceptance, and expectancy to measure customer emotion ($\alpha = 0.66$). For measures new to Study 2, the same translation and back-translation procedures as in Study 1 (Brislin, 1970) were used, and all items were measured on 7-point Likert scales.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted using AMOS 5.0 to test the measurement model (i.e., employee physical attractiveness, employee displayed positive emotion, employee helpfulness, customer emotion,[7] and customer satisfaction with the employee). As can be seen from Table 5, the five-factor model resulted in a better model fit compared to the alternative models, with model fit indices within the acceptable ranges (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998): $\chi^2 = 796.02$, df = 160, Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.93, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.95, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.95, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.93, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.13. With the exception of RMSEA, which is slightly larger than the commonly regarded cutoff value of 0.10, the other fit indices are rather reassuring. In addition, compared to the four-factor model in which employee physical attractiveness was combined with employee displayed positive emotion ($\chi^2 = 926.37$, df = 164, NFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.15), $\Delta\chi^2 = 130.35$, df = 4, $p < 0.01$, the five-factor model also suggested a better fit. Overall, the five constructs under study showed reasonable discriminant validity. All factor loadings exceeded 0.50, suggesting that the indicators of the constructs were acceptable (Table 1).

Table 6 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables. Table 7 shows the results from the hierarchical linear regression analyses. In order to avoid multicollinearity, mean-centered variables were used in the moderation analyses. Specifically, employee physical attractiveness ($\beta = 0.15$, $t = 2.26$, $p < 0.05$), displayed positive emotion ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 3.80$, $p < 0.001$), and helpfulness ($\beta = 0.30$, $t = 4.43$, $p < 0.001$) all had a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction with the employee (Model 2 in Table 7), and provided further support for H1–H3. In order to test H4, the relative importance of various predictors in linear regression, "the proportionate contribution each predictor makes to R^2 after correcting for the effects of the intercorrelations among predictors" was calculated (Lorenzo-Seva, Ferrando, & Chico, 2010, p. 30).

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[1] Age had six categories: 1 = less than 20 years old, 2 = 21–30 years old, 3 = 31–40 years old, 4 = 41–50 years old, 5 = 51–60 years old, 6 = more than 60 years old.

[2] Education had four categories: 1 = high school or below, 2 = bachelor, 3 = master, 4 = doctorate.

[3] Employment status had four categories: 1 = full time, 2 = part time, 3 = student, 4 = retired/unemployed.

[4] Monthly income had six categories: 1 = less than RMB 2,000, 2 = RMB 2,000–3,999, 3 = RMB 4,000–5,999, 4 = RMB 6,000–7,999, 5 = RMB 8,000–9,999, 6 = more than RMB 10,000.

[5] Length of shopping time had five categories: 1 = less than 15 minutes, 2 = 15–30 minutes, 3 = 30–60 minutes, 4 = 1–2 hours, 5 = more than 2 hours.

[6] Shopping frequency was measured by how many times the customer shopped at this store each month and had four categories: 1 = once, 2 = 2–3 times, 3 = 4–10 times, 4 = more than 10 times.

[7] Customer emotion was included in the CFA as it showed a strong correlation with customer satisfaction with the employee ($r = 0.40$).

Table 6. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Variables in Study 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender	0.33	0.47													
2. Age	2.67	1.21	−0.02												
3. Education	2.26	0.74	0.30**	−0.40**											
4. Employment status	2.02	1.17	−0.13*	0.35**	−0.26**										
5. Income	2.01	1.10	0.30**	0.02	0.39**	−0.38**									
6. Length of shopping	3.32	0.88	−0.16*	−0.20**	−0.06	−0.05	−0.07								
7. Shopping frequency	2.17	0.76	0.15*	0.10	−0.01	0.02	0.09	−0.25**							
8. PC	4.68	1.17	0.07	0.11	−0.09	−0.03	−0.00	−0.01	−0.07						
9. Store dependency	3.18	1.41	−0.15*	0.04	−0.12***	0.00	−0.06	0.03	0.12***	0.12***					
10. Customer emotion	3.95	1.04	−0.10	0.16*	−0.14*	0.06	0.01	−0.02	0.02	0.27**	0.17*				
11. EPA	3.30	1.15	−0.06	0.12***	−0.10	0.08	−0.09	−.001	0.00	0.24**	0.19**	0.32**			
12. EDPE	3.80	1.26	0.00	0.10	−0.17*	0.05	−0.06	0.05	−0.02	0.29**	0.15*	0.35**	0.57**		
13. EH	3.68	1.30	−0.05	0.07	−0.13***	0.01	−0.06	0.06	−0.03	0.22**	0.12***	0.30**	0.60**	0.59**	
14. CS	3.84	1.24	−0.11	0.16*	−0.17*	0.07	−0.16*	0.02	0.06	0.10	0.15*	0.40**	0.52**	0.55**	0.58**

$N = 223$, $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.10$.
PC = perceived crowdedness; EPA = employee physical attractiveness; EDPE = employee displayed positive emotion; EH = employee helpfulness; CS = customer satisfaction.

Table 7. Testing the Moderating Effects of Employee Displayed Emotion Using Hierarchical Linear Regression in Study 2

	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Control variables			
Gender	−0.01	−0.03	−0.04
Age	0.13†	0.12†	0.14*
Education	0.01	0.05	0.06
Employment status	−0.07	−0.07	−0.09
Income	−0.19*	−0.16*	−0.17*
Length of shopping	0.05	0.02	0.02
Shopping frequency	0.05	0.07	0.05
Perceived crowdedness	−0.03	−0.14*	−0.12*
Store dependency	0.06	0.01	0.00
Customer emotion	0.39**	0.21**	0.20**
Independent variables			
Employee physical attractiveness[a]		0.15*	0.15*
Employee displayed positive emotion[a]		0.25***	0.24***
Employee helpfulness[a]		0.30***	0.29***
Interactions			
Employee physical attractiveness × employee displayed positive emotion			−0.16**
Employee helpfulness × employee displayed positive emotion			0.21**
R^2	0.21	0.50	0.52
R^2 change	0.21	0.29	0.02
F	5.56**	15.72**	14.68**
F change	5.56**	39.39***	4.45**

$N = 223$, $^†p < 0.10$; $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.
[a]The variable is mean centered.

Following the procedure by Lorenzo-Seva, Ferrando, and Chico (2010), the MIMR-Corr.sps function within SPSS was used to analyze the data (Einspruch, 2003).[8] Results show that after controlling for the control variables and correcting for measurement error (i.e., scale reliability), employee physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness accounted for 19.3%, 24.7%, and 30.2% of R^2, respectively.[9] This shows that the effect of employee helpfulness was stronger than that of either employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion. These results were consistent with the findings in Study 1.

Further, employee displayed positive emotion interacted with employee physical attractiveness to influence customer satisfaction with the employee ($\beta = -0.16$, $t = -2.33$, $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 depicts the interaction based on the procedure by Aiken and West (1991). Simple slope analyses revealed that when employee

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[8] MIMR-Corr.sps uses a correlation matrix as input. Relative importance of predictors are reported as percentages (i.e., how much they contribute to R^2).

[9] All the control variables accounted for 25.8% of R^2.
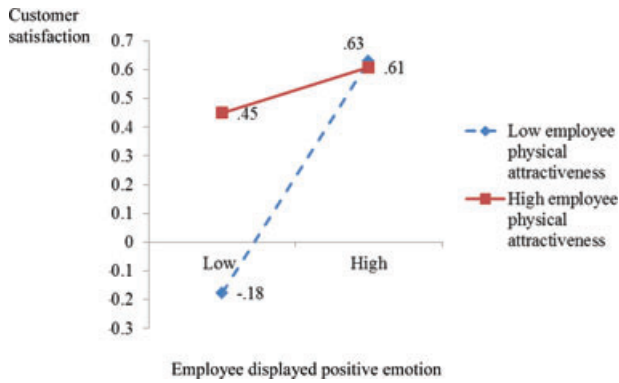
Figure 1. The interaction between employee physical attractiveness and employee displayed positive emotion on customer satisfaction in Study 2.[a]

[a]Employee physical attractiveness and employee displayed positive emotion were mean-centered.

physical attractiveness was high, employee displayed positive emotion did not have a significant impact on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.10$, $t = 1.11$, $p > 0.10$); but when employee physical attractiveness was low, employee displayed positive emotion showed a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.44$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H5 was supported, implying that employee displayed positive emotion had a stronger positive effect on customer satisfaction when the employee's physical attractiveness was low rather than high.

In addition, the results showed that employee displayed positive emotion interacted with helpfulness to impact customer satisfaction with the employee ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 2.94$, $p < 0.01$). As indicated by the simple slope analyses in Figure 2, when employee helpfulness was high, employee displayed positive emotion had a significant and positive impact on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.43$, $t = 4.82$, $p < 0.001$); but when employee helpfulness was low, employee displayed positive emotion did not have a significant effect on customer satisfaction
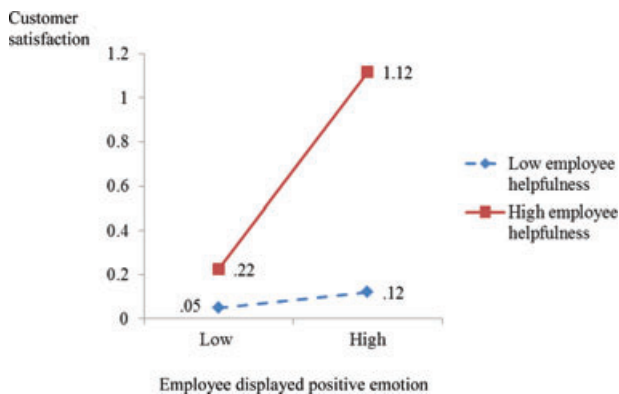

Figure 2. The interaction between employee helpfulness and employee displayed positive emotion on customer satisfaction in Study 2.[a]

[a]Employee helpfulness and employee displayed positive emotion were mean-centered.

($\beta = 0.06$, $t = 0.59$, $p > 0.10$). Thus, H6 was supported, implying that employee displayed positive emotion had a positive impact on customer satisfaction only when the employee was helpful as well. This result reaffirmed employee helpfulness as the most important attribute influencing customer satisfaction with the employee.

Discussion

Study 2 was conducted in a field setting in order to provide external validation for the findings in Study 1. The results are consistent with the findings in Study 1 in that employee physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness all have significant positive impacts on customer satisfaction with the employee. Among the three employee attributes, employee helpfulness is the strongest predictor of customer satisfaction.

More important, Study 2 examined and found significant interactions between the three employee attributes. As hypothesized, employee displayed positive emotion interacted positively with low physical attractiveness, but this interaction effect was not significant when employee physical attractiveness was high. In other words, the display of positive emotions by the employee can compensate for low physical attractiveness in the service encounter. Nonetheless, Figure 1 suggests that, consistent with the main effect of physical attractiveness, customers generally show a higher level of satisfaction with employees who are more attractive than with those who are less attractive.

In addition, employee displayed positive emotion had a significant impact on customer satisfaction only when the level of employee helpfulness was high, but not when it was low. This suggests that although displayed positive emotion is generally an asset, it does not compensate for unhelpfulness. In an actual retail setting, customers place more weight on employee helpfulness than on displayed positive emotion; indeed, the lack of helpfulness can negate the effect of displayed positive emotion. In other words, customers need to perceive the employee as genuinely wanting to help versus just offering lip service.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research provides insights into the role of service employee attributes in driving customer satisfaction. Building on the existing literature, the authors proposed a conceptual framework and conducted two quantitative studies to investigate the differential and interactive effects of three employee attributes (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, and helpfulness) on customer satisfaction. Specifically, through an experiment, Study 1 shows that all three service employee attributes are important drivers of customer satisfaction, with employee helpfulness exerting greater influence than either physical

attractiveness or displayed positive emotion. In order to ascertain the robustness of Study 1, Study 2 was conducted in a field setting and obtained consistent findings. Moreover, the results show interactions among the three employee attributes. Specifically, employee displayed positive emotion had a significant effect on customer satisfaction when the employee was physically less, rather than more, attractive. Furthermore, employee displayed positive emotion had a significant impact on customer satisfaction when the level of employee helpfulness was high, but not when it was low.

Theoretical Contributions

A review of the literature indicates that previous works examining the effects of employee attributes on customer reactions tend to study only one attribute (i.e., physical attractiveness, displayed positive emotion, or helpfulness) at a time (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990). While these studies yield useful findings, the univariable approach means that they provide only a partial understanding of the effects of employee attributes. By taking an encompassing approach, the present research investigates the physical (i.e., physical attractiveness), emotional (i.e., displayed positive emotion), and motivational (i.e., helpfulness) aspects of employee attributes and their relative weighting and effects on customer satisfaction simultaneously.

In a well-known study, Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) investigate service encounters between customers and service employees using the critical incident technique. One aspect of their study focuses on unprompted and unsolicited employee actions, including helpfulness. However, they do not consider employee physical attractiveness or employee displayed emotion. In addition, while the critical incident technique is valuable in identifying issues not previously considered, the conclusions drawn tend to be exploratory in nature (Gremler, 2004). In contrast, Study 1 in the current research is experiment based, from which conclusions on causality can be drawn. The findings in Study 1 are supplemented and validated by a field survey in Study 2. Thus, findings from the present research provide more conclusive evidence on the differential and interactive effects of the three employee attributes on customer satisfaction. Beyond showing that employee helpfulness has a stronger effect than either physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion, the results also reveal that the three employee attributes interact with each other to jointly influence customer satisfaction. These findings are new to the literature, and make a useful contribution to the employee–customer interaction literature by providing a more complete understanding of how these employee attributes both individually and collectively drive customer satisfaction.

Managerial Implications

Beyond the theoretical contributions, the findings of this research also have several managerial implications, particularly for high-contact services. In day-to-day operations, frontline employees are the ones who interact with customers the most. Thus, customer acquisition and retention strategies are reliant on the effectiveness of frontline employees, whose performance is critical for improving customer satisfaction. Consequently, instituting the appropriate interaction orientation and effective management of service interactions can become a competitive advantage for service firms.

Based on the results, there are several areas that marketing managers should emphasize in managing frontline employees. The findings indicate that employee helpfulness weighs more than employee physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion in creating customer satisfaction. This implies that the most fundamental attribute to inculcate in employees is the competency or ability to successfully provide the service to the customer. When the delivery of the core service fails, having employees who are merely polite or good looking would not be sufficient and may even raise the ire of customers. Accordingly, managers need to train their frontline employees to be competent and helpful to customers, as this ultimately will lead to a high level of satisfaction. With hindsight this implication may appear intuitive, but without the empirical evidence presented here, one could easily argue in favor of physical attractiveness or displayed positive emotion as the dominant employee attribute, rather than employee helpfulness.

While the importance of employee helpfulness is emphasized, the role of employee displayed positive emotion cannot be discounted. All else remaining the same, a cheerful and positive disposition has a significant influence on customer satisfaction. Indeed, employee helpfulness is often augmented by the display of positive emotion. More important, the display of positive emotion can compensate for plain looks. (While it would be illegal in many countries to select employees based on physical attractiveness, employment law does not usually pertain to the display of positive emotions!) Consequently, service organizations should consider using emotional intelligence as a selection criterion in recruiting frontline employees (Goleman, 1995). This implies that managers should train frontline employees to display positive emotions when dealing with customers as this can influence customer emotion and their subsequent satisfaction. To this end, service organizations need to create meaning and clarity of purpose for employees, improve their capabilities, put reward systems and processes in place, enlist supervisors to serve as role models, and teach emotionally intelligent behavior (Beaujean, Davidson, & Madge, 2006). At the same time, managers should train employees on emotional labor, which is to be resilient and use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although most hypotheses are supported, there are limitations in the present research that merit further attention. First, although Study 1 controlled for gender bias, it did not directly examine employee gender effects. While it could be argued that the contexts of this study (i.e., clothing store and supermarkets) do not entail strong employee gender and job nature congruence, the results may not be generalizable to other service sectors (e.g., it is less common to have female plumbers and male manicurists). Future research should thereby broaden the scope of service contexts (e.g., health services, Wang, Keh, & Bolton, 2010) and examine if gender and job congruence moderate the effects of these three employee attributes. It would also be useful to replicate the present study in non-Chinese cultures, as the gender-role stereotype may be culturally defined (Gilly, 1988). In particular, prior research suggests that culture could influence customer perceptions of risk and satisfaction (Keh & Sun, 2008), and by extension it is possible that culture could also influence customer perceptions of employee attributes.

Second, while Study 2 was a survey conducted in the field, variables such as time each customer spent with the employee are not controlled for. Such variables may moderate the effects of the three attributes on customer satisfaction.

Third, hedonic customers who patronize the service provider because they enjoy the service environment may experience more positive emotional states than utilitarian shoppers whose intentions are to buy a specific item (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). It would thus be relevant to ascertain the effects of employee attributes on customers with varying shopping motivations, which will contribute toward a better understanding of consumer behavior. Along this line, certain store characteristics (e.g., busyness, Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990) may also moderate the relationship between employee attributes and customer satisfaction.

Finally, only positive emotional display was examined in this paper. Negative emotional displays may have stronger and wider reaching consequences. For example, a rude and unhelpful employee may lead to customer rage and its attendant verbal and physical expressions (McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith, & Brady, 2009). Thus, it would be relevant to examine a wider range of employee and customer emotions, and additional forms of customer responses beyond satisfaction, including fairness perceptions (Bolton, Keh, & Alba, 2010).

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