



Is beauty a premium? A study of the physical attractiveness effect in service encounters



Yaoqi Li^{a,*}, Chun Zhang^b, Michel Laroche^c

^a School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen University, 135 Xianggang W Rd, Guangdong, China

^b Department of Management and Marketing, University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH, 45402, USA

^c Royal Bank Distinguished Professor at John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, QC, H3G 1M8, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Physical attractiveness
Attractiveness-ability belief
Social distance perception
Service encounter
Consumer response

ABSTRACT

Physical attractiveness is an essential factor in consumers' evaluation processes during a service encounter. Using both experimental and field study designs, we demonstrate that a service representative's physical attractiveness affects consumer response (i.e., customer satisfaction, service quality perception, and likability of the service representative). Also, we find that a consumer's social distance perception between themselves and a service representative mediates the physical attractiveness effect on consumer response. Thus, this article is the first to demonstrate that social distance perception is an underlining mechanism of the physical attractiveness effect. Furthermore, findings from Studies 2 and 3 show that consumers' physical attractiveness and their attractiveness-ability belief moderate the physical attractiveness effect. Although contentious to some, our findings indicate that the recruitment of attractive representatives may be an effective business practice in service settings. However, managers should not regard consumers as a homogeneous group; self-perceived unattractive consumers may respond negatively to their service representative's physical attractiveness.

1. Introduction

The service marketing literature has investigated various factors that could influence service encounters. The physical environment of the service encounter, for instance physical surroundings, are able to alter consumers' evaluations of the service (Bitner, 1990). Interpersonal factors, especially frontline employees, are receiving great attention from researchers (Luoh and Tsauro, 2011; Quach et al., 2017; Söderlund and Julander, 2009). The service employee's age, non-verbal communication, and physical appearance have been found to impact customer satisfaction and service quality perception (Luoh and Tsauro, 2011; Söderlund, 2017; Söderlund and Julander, 2009). While it is encouraging to observe a change in the trends of systematic discrimination in recruitment practices in certain industries, physical appearance nonetheless affects consumers' judgments of consumption experiences.

The *beauty premium* refers to the notion that the more physically attractive workers have better earning advantages (Rosenblat, 2008). Also called the physical attractiveness stereotype, it is still an important factor not to be neglected. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch applies this principle when staffing its stores, although many have criticized it for its discriminating recruitment practices. Nonetheless, human beings are naturally inclined toward beautiful things (Langlois et al., 1991). As

a visible attribute, appearance can alter consumer attitudes. Being good-looking brings benefits to both the service employees and the company employing them. Attractive individuals receive higher performance evaluations, make more money, and are more likable than the unattractive ones (Dion et al., 1972; Khantimirov and Karande, 2018; Langlois et al., 2000; Leinsle et al., 2018; Wan and Wyer, 2015). Companies that have attractive CEOs have better stock returns than those with less attractive ones (Halford and Hsu, 2014). The encounters that occur between consumers and the frontline employees are fundamental to the service delivery process (Albrecht et al., 2016; Orth and Wirtz, 2014; Otterbring, 2017). Thus, although ethically questionable, it might explain why Abercrombie & Fitch emphasizes the importance of their staff's physical appearances during the recruitment process.

Although the beauty premium has been extensively examined, it is possible that beauty can be beastly (Heilman and Saruwatari, 1979), being good-looking can also backfire. Agthe et al. (2010) found that physical attractiveness can lead to interpersonal derogation. Individuals may avoid interacting with others who are physically attractive because of self-presentation concerns (Agthe et al., 2014; Wan and Wyer, 2015). In service interactions, this 'beastly beauty' can cause lower purchase intentions and consequently lower business performance (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Thus, it is of great importance to study under what

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: liyaoqi3@mail.sysu.edu.cn (Y. Li), c Zhang4@udayton.edu (C. Zhang), michel.laroche@concordia.ca (M. Laroche).

conditions the beauty premium does not hold.

Conflicting findings from the literature on the beauty premium are silent as to when it does and does not hold. Specifically, the reasons for the conflicting results have not been studied in the service-marketing domain. One possible explanation is that researchers study the beauty premium without considering the comparison activities between two important parties, the service provider and the consumer. By the nature of comparison, the perceived social distance may be the underlying reason for the inconsistent impacts of physical attractiveness. Social distance originated from the construal level theory focuses on the social distance between a self and others (Mantovani et al., 2017; Trope et al., 2007). The similarities/differences between a self and other define in-group and out-group members, representing a proximal versus a distal social distance, and a concrete/lower versus abstract/higher level of relationships (Zhao and Xie, 2011). The study of social distance has been undertaken in marketing domains. Scholars found that social distance perceptions can alter product-related comparisons and recommendations from others (Kim et al., 2008; Zhao and Xie, 2011). Yet surprisingly, the perceived social distance as a possible underlying mechanism of the physical attractiveness effect has not been fully examined. In answering the call from Lemay Jr. et al. (2010), we examine the role of perceived social distance in explaining the physical attractiveness stereotype. Furthermore, we consider a consumer's own attractiveness and the attractiveness-ability belief and test their moderating effects, to further our understanding of the physical attractiveness stereotype. The service interaction is incomplete without the consumer. Yet the consumer embodies a preconceived notion of the physical attractiveness stereotype. As a result, this article contributes to our understanding of the physical attractiveness effect by examining the mediating role of social distance perceptions and considering consumer attributes.

Basically, the current research seeks to examine the influence of service employees' physical attractiveness on consumer responses. Given that customer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and the likability of the service representative are the core elements in service encounters, and in the service marketing literature, we capture the consumer response through customer satisfaction, service quality, and the likability of the service representative (Wan and Wyer, 2015). The remainder of this article presents the literature review and three empirical studies. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and providing new research avenues.

2. Literature review

2.1. Physical attractiveness stereotype

The physical attractiveness effect is regarded as a key factor influencing interpersonal interactions (Ahearne et al., 2010; Andreoni and Petrie, 2008; Judge et al., 2009; Patzer, 2012; Tews et al., 2009; Wan and Wyer, 2015). This effect, sometimes referred to as *what is beautiful is good* (Dion et al., 1972), is also well known as the *beauty premium effect* or the *physical attractiveness stereotype*. Morrow (1990) defines physical attractiveness as “the degree to which one's facial image elicits favorable reactions from others” (p. 47). Later, Ahearne et al. (2010) extend the definition from facial image to the general physical appearance.

Both personality theory and expectancy theory provide implicit explanations for the physical attractiveness stereotype (Darley and Fazio, 1980; Eagly et al., 1991; Schneider, 1973). Individuals have different perceptions of what makes a person attractive, and judge others based on their physical attractiveness. Individuals, who are judged, otherwise referred to as target individuals, often behave according to expectations from others (Cao et al., 2013; Langlois et al., 2000). Often, the physical attractiveness level, on which the physical attractiveness stereotype is based, is captured using a holistic measure favored by scholars for its ease of use and its thorough assessment of the

evaluation process (Feingold, 1992; Raza and Carpenter, 1987; Wan and Wyer, 2015). Simply put: the measure asks about an individual's favoritism level toward a target.

The physical attractiveness stereotype is first discussed in the psychology and sociology literature. During the interpersonal interactions, the perception of an individual can be altered depending on whether this person is deemed attractive or not. Attractive individuals are perceived as more favorable and competent than their unattractive counterparts (Morrow, 1990; Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015). They are believed to have appealing personal traits and better social skills (Dion et al., 1972; Tews et al., 2009), and to have a higher locus of control and better mental health (Judge et al., 2009; Patzer, 2012; Feingold, 1992). The physical attractiveness effect can smooth an interpersonal interaction and increase a person's persuasion ability, making an attractive person more persuasive than an unattractive one (Ahearne et al., 2010; Feingold, 1992; Patzer, 1983). Indeed, by testing infants' reactions, scholars examine the evolutionary foundations of the beauty premium and observe that it is in the nature of human beings to love beautiful things (Langlois et al., 1991).

Inferred from the psychology and sociology literature, the physical attractiveness stereotype holds true in marketing. Marketing researchers have already tested the beauty premium with marketing-related variables such as purchase intentions, patronization behavior, and even tips received. Consumers are more willing to purchase a product from an attractive salesperson, and are more willing to share information with an attractive service provider (Ahearne et al., 2010; Wan and Wyer, 2015). They are also more likely to tip more generously when helped by an attractive service representative. While one may easily understand the positive repercussions of the physical attractiveness stereotype in service settings involving low service skills (Tews et al., 2009), similar effects are observed in service encounters involving professionally-trained skills (Wan and Wyer, 2015). For example, Wan and Wyer (2015) demonstrate that participants favor attractive clinical service providers more than unattractive ones. Being good-looking is also important to sales (Ahearne et al., 2010; Wan and Wyer, 2015). A physically attractive salesperson is more likable and perceived as more capable in providing the service than an unattractive one (Wan and Wyer, 2015). More importantly, physical attractiveness plays an influential role in service interactions. Buyers feel more comfortable being served by a good-looking salesperson, and believe their interactions to be more effective and favorable (Wan and Wyer, 2015).

In sum, the physical attractiveness stereotype does occur in service encounters. It can alter consumers' responses to the service provider and the service interaction. Because an attractive individual is more likable, we believe that being physical attractive can increase consumers' likability of the service representative (Morrow, 1990; Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015). The evidence in the service marketing literature also indicates that consumers tend to have higher satisfaction and higher service quality perceptions when exposed to an attractive service provider. In our article, we examine the physical attractiveness on consumer responses, which are customer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and the likability of the service representative. The three facets of the consumer response ascertain that we capture the consumers' responses to both the service provider and the service interaction process. Thus, we are able to examine the consumer response more holistically.

2.2. The role of social distance perceptions

Physical attractiveness is a visible attribute for judgment and evaluation. Subsequently, people use this attribute to compare themselves to others. For example, individuals frequently compare themselves to their same-sex attractive peers (Jones and Buckingham, 2005; Mussweiler, 2003). The act of comparison is a prevalent human behavior rooted in human evolution. According to the selective accessibility process model (Mussweiler, 2003), people unconsciously compare the

objects with targets and generate evaluations. Thus, almost all the evaluations and judgements are based on these comparisons (Festinger, 1954). Two comparisons are included in the process: assimilation comparison and contrast comparison. In the assimilation comparison, people tend to consider the similar features between two objects, whereas in the contrast comparison, people tend to focus on the differences (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler and Bodenhausen, 2002; Strack and Mussweiler, 1997).

In service encounters, social comparison can also occur. When exposed to an attractive service representative, a consumer might make comparisons between themselves and the physical attractive service representative, probably based on physical appearances. According to the selective accessibility process model (Mussweiler, 2003), the results of social comparison in the service encounters need not be negative: physical attractiveness can stimulate assimilation or contrast comparisons. A similar level of physical attractiveness between two individuals likely makes them feel closer to one another (Mussweiler, 2003), in that physical attractiveness creates a sense of belonging for individuals. During similarity testing, individuals examine the similarity level of physical attractiveness between themselves and the service representative. They evaluate themselves toward the service representative, which stimulates a simulated move-toward process and consequently creates a closer social distance. Conversely, during contrast testing, individuals evaluate a target away from a standard, which stimulates a detaching process and consequently creates a further social distance (Mussweiler, 2003; Strack and Mussweiler, 1997). With the support of the beauty premium theory, we consider the assimilation comparison to dominate in the service encounter comparison, thus to generate a closer distance between a consumer and the service representative. Thus, we propose.

H1. An attractive representative decreases the social distance between a service representative and a consumer.

The assimilation and contrast comparisons in the selective accessibility process model can be supported by the construal-level theory (Trope et al., 2007) which asserts that the social distance between a self and similar others is closer than the social distance between a self and dissimilar others. The similar others and dissimilar others can be seen as in-group versus out-group members. In-group members often share similar characteristics and work for the common goals, which generates positive attitudes and responses among in-group members (Brewer, 1999). Per the distinctive model of social identity (Brewer, 1991), the likability of a target is positively related to the level of similarity between a self and the target (Kahneman and Tversky, 1973; Kwon et al., 2016; Morrow, 1990). Therefore, we propose that the proximal (versus distal) social distance generated by the assimilation comparison (versus contrast comparison) generates higher likability of the target. In the service encounter scenario, the assimilation comparison (i.e., finding the similarities) between a consumer and a service representative generates a proximal social distance between the two parties, and consequently increases a consumer's likability of a service representative. Per this logic, we also propose a positive relationship between the close social distance and the higher customer satisfaction and higher perceived service quality. Based on these arguments, we have the second hypothesis:

H2. The relationship between a representative's physical attractiveness and a consumer's response (customer satisfaction, service quality perception, and likability of the service representative) is mediated by the consumer's social distance perceptions.

2.3. The role of consumers' own physical attractiveness

Three steps make up a comparative evaluation (Mussweiler, 2003): target selection, self-target comparison, and evaluation. A target is essential in the self-target evaluating process. However, as stated, the

process fails to account for the characteristics of the self. An individual cannot make a self-target comparison without assessing his or her own physical attractiveness (Mussweiler and Bodenhausen, 2002). Similar to the beauty premium, which describes the perception of others, self-concept physical attractiveness is associated with positive affect, cognitive, and social measures (Feingold, 1992). An individual's behavior is aligned with how they perceive themselves, as attractive or not: they use their own physical attractiveness level as a benchmark in their self-target comparison (Lee et al., 2008).

An attractive target may trigger lower, normal, or higher self-perceptions, depending on whether self-presentation concern is activated (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Accordingly, if an individual has a low self-presentation concern and is confident of one's own physical attractiveness, this individual is more likely to perceive the self as equally attractive as the target, consequently creating a closer distance between the self and the target. The individual then considers the self and target as 'in-group' and other unattractive people as 'out-group'.

The in-group and out-group theory claims that in-group members share similar attributes and hold more positive attitudes toward one another than toward out-group members (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008; Major et al., 1993). When comparing one's self with an in-group member, the individual retrieves information to assess the consistency of similarities and uses assimilation testing (Blanton et al., 2000; Major et al., 1993). When a low physically attractive self compares oneself with an attractive target, an out-group relationship is observed. The low physically attractive individual does not have a sense of belonging to the target's attractive group, and thus categorizes the target as an outsider. Due to the low similarity between the target and self, a high social distance is observed, and contrast testing is adopted by the self (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler and Bodenhausen, 2002; Strack and Mussweiler, 1997).

Based on this reasoning, we anticipate that individuals' own physical attractiveness alters their perception of a target, leading to different perceptions of social distance between the self and target. We hypothesize:

H3. A consumer's physical attractiveness moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on the consumer's social distance perception. Physically attractive consumers have a lower social distance perception towards an attractive service representative, whereas they have a higher social distance perception towards an unattractive one.

2.4. The role of physical-ability beliefs

The literature supports the positive effects of the beauty premium in different areas (Morrow, 1990; Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015). For example, being good-looking is related to perceived higher intelligence levels and academic performance. Physically attractive employees are believed to be better at their jobs (Feingold, 1992; Patzer, 2012; Raza and Carpenter, 1987). Inspired by the idea of proposing and testing the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and a company's ability to make quality products (i.e., CSR-CA beliefs) from Sen and Bhattacharya's classic paper published in the *Journal of Marketing Research* in 2001, we define the attractiveness-ability belief as the consumers' beliefs about a correlation between an individual's physical attractiveness and his/her ability to provide a service.

When we accept the attractiveness-ability connection, we may expect a strong correlation between physical attractiveness and a higher level of ability. This may be because attractive people are more encouraged and motivated by others than their unattractive counterparts (Langlois et al., 2000). The strong attractiveness-ability connection is evidenced in Felson and Bohrnstedt's (1979) study where they demonstrate that individuals' intelligence level and their physical appearances are correlated. Teachers attribute higher ability levels to attractive students (Felson and Bohrnstedt, 1979). On the contrary, a

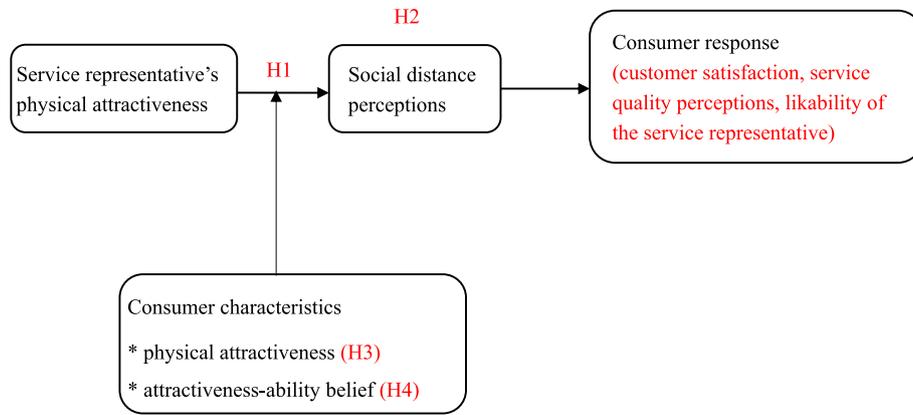


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

low attractiveness-ability belief denotes a weak correlation between physical attractiveness and a higher level of ability. Such a statement belies the belief that beauty and ability do not co-exist, a perspective adopted by some (Patzner, 2012).

For those subscribing to the attractiveness-ability connection, their attitudes toward this belief demonstrate their approval of the physical attractiveness of a target. This approval creates a lower psychological distance between the individual and the target. Conversely, a low physical-ability belief level leads to greater social distance. Thus, we put forward:

H4. A consumer's attractiveness-ability belief moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on the consumer's social distance perception. A consumer has a lower social distance perception with a high level of attractiveness-ability belief. A consumer has a greater social distance perception with a low level of attractiveness-ability belief.

Fig. 1 illustrates our conceptual model. To test these hypotheses, we combined both experiment and survey to enhance the reliability and validity. Experiments are employed for testing the causal relationship (internal validity) and the survey is used to increase the generalizability (external validity). Specifically, in Study 1, we used a laboratory experiment to examine the main effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on a consumer's social distance perception (H1), and the mediating role of a consumer's social distance perception (H2). In Study 2, we queried individuals traveling through an airport to conduct

an experiment testing the moderating role of a consumer's physical attractiveness (H3), and the attractiveness-ability belief (H4). In Study 3, as a means to improve external validity, we replicated the findings in real consumption experiences.

3. Study 1: main effect of physical attractiveness

3.1. Study design and procedure

Study 1 tests the main effect of physical attractiveness on consumer's social distance perception (H1), and the mediating role of a consumer's social distance perception on the relationship between physical attractiveness and customer response (H2). A between-subject design was carried out. The only criterion for recruiting participants in our studies was their consumption experiences. Given that we can almost assume that all the individuals who were enrolled in a college and were interviewed by our recruiters had consumption experiences, we can conclude that the recruiting criteria were met as long as the individuals agreed to participate voluntarily. Three hundred and nine participants were randomly assigned to the high versus low physical attractiveness conditions. The detailed information of respondents' demographic profiles of the 3 studies are shown in Table 1.

The participants completed the study anonymously. The scenario provided was that of having dinner at a restaurant. Having read the description, the participants then viewed a picture of a service representative, the waiter who would serve their meals. To manipulate

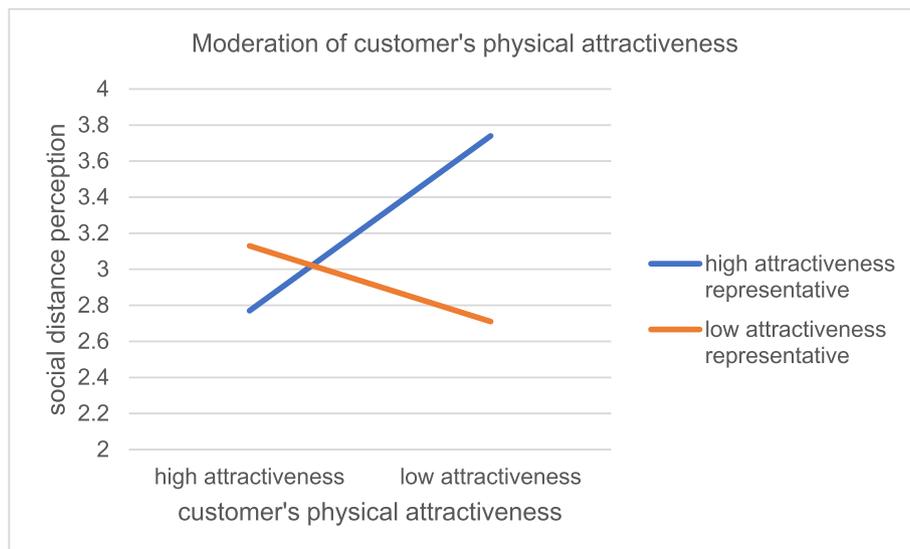


Fig. 2. Moderation of customer's physical attractiveness.

Table 1
Respondents' demographic profiles of the 3 studies (unit: percentage).

		Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Sample Size		309	237	550
Responses		Students in an university in southeastern China	Passengers of airline in Baiyun International airport	consumers in ten shopping malls of three metropolitan Chinese cities
Gender	Male	48.5	50.8	37.1
	Female	51.5	49.2	62.9
Age	Below 21	40.8	14.3	24.2
	21–30	57	49.4	40.1
	31–40	1.9	21.9	23.8
	41–50	0.3	9.7	9.2
	Above 50	/	4.6	2.6
Education	Middle school or below	/	20.7	32.7
	Junior College	/	29.5	25.5
	Undergraduate	69.8	43.5	37.5
	Postgraduate or above	30.2	6.3	4.4
Income	Below 2001	/	16	31.7
	2001–5000	/	27	30.3
	5001–10000	/	38.4	21.2
	Above 1000	/	18.6	16.8

the physical attractiveness of the target, we altered the service representative's image using photo editing, and thus differentiated between high versus low levels of attractiveness. The images were created following Fisher and Ma's (2014) study. To simulate the study's waiters, we recruited two graduate students—one male, one female—who appeared mature and moderately attractive. We then invited a professional technician to create the corresponding images of high and low attractiveness. We created high and low attractiveness versions of a single image using photo-editing software based on the models' original pictures. In the low attractiveness condition, we added subtle asymmetries to the nose and eyes. Facial asymmetry is found to be negatively correlated with human attractiveness because of its association with health and fitness (Gangestad and Thornhill, 1994). This procedure ensures that the images are as similar as possible in all aspects other than attractiveness. We assessed consumer responses from three aspects: customer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and likability of the service representative (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86), such as 'please score your satisfaction of the service provided by the service representative', and 'please score the service quality provided by the service representative', and 'please score your liking for the service representative' (Wan and Wyer, 2015). We adopted a three-item measurement scale from Kim et al. (2008) to measure the participant's social distance perception, and we reversed the coding in the data analysis so that the higher score means a higher social distance (Cronbach's alpha = 0.74). One of the item questions asked: 'Please evaluate your psychologically close/similar to self/typical in-group member to the service representative'. To measure the service representative's physical attractiveness, we adopted the overall physical attractiveness measure from Meltzer et al. (2014) with a single item indicator with 7-point Likert scale, 'please rate the facial physical attractiveness of service representative'. We also collected the demographic characteristics of each participant at the end of the questionnaire. The original design and questionnaire were formulated in English, then back-translated into Chinese using two professional translators (Bhalla and Lin, 1987).

3.2. Pretest and manipulation check

We conducted a pretest to ensure the validity of the manipulation. A total of 85 participants were randomly assigned into four groups, and a

series of independent sample *t*-tests were completed. Findings showed that participants perceived the service representative to be more attractive in the high-attractiveness condition than in the low-attractiveness condition both for the male ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.79$, $M_{\text{low}} = 2.88$, $t = 5.084$, $df = 34$, $p < 0.000$) and the female ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.27$, $M_{\text{low}} = 3.46$, $t = 6.138$, $df = 48$, $p < 0.000$) service representatives. We assessed the manipulation as successful.

3.3. Findings

We used the Bayesian estimates with Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains to test the main effect of physical attractiveness on consumer's social distance perceptions with SPSS v25. The outcome of Bayes Independent *t*-test analysis indicated that the estimated posterior mean of customer social distance perception is 3.06 for the low physical attractiveness condition, and 3.40 for the high physical attractiveness condition, respectively. The credible interval is between 0.09 and 0.59 with a 95% Bayesian coverage, and the Bayes Factor is 0.318 and the *p*-value is 0.007. Thus, H1 was supported.

Next, we ran the SPSS PROCESS analysis and hierarchical regression to test the mediating effect of social distance perception (Hayes, 2013). The SPSS macro syntax PROCESS allows for the estimation of both indirect and direct interaction effects using bootstrapping procedures. An increasingly popular tool, the PROCESS macro tests a model's predictive validity with no normality assumption and provides higher accuracy in confidence intervals (Hayes, 2009). We applied a conditional process analysis to understand the mediating nature of social distance perceptions (Hayes, 2009). Using PROCESS (version 2.16.3), we generated 5000 bootstraps based on the 309 observations with a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrapping results indicated that the mediating effect of a consumer's social distance perception is significant ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI, LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.27). In addition, the direct effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on a consumer's response is also significant ($\beta = 0.42$, 95% CI, LLCI = 0.16, ULCI = 0.68). Thus, a service representative's physical attractiveness has significant direct and indirect effects on a consumer's response through social distance perceptions, thus supporting H1 and H2.

3.4. Discussion

Findings from Study 1 revealed that physical attractiveness predicts a consumer's social distance perceptions. More importantly, they further supported the findings from previous studies that consumers react more positively toward attractive service representatives than toward less attractive ones (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000; Morrow, 1990; Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015). In addition, we found that a consumer's social distance perception mediates the effect of physical attractiveness on their responses, which helps better understand the underlining mechanism of the physical attractiveness effect.

4. Study 2: moderating effects of consumers' physical attractiveness and attractiveness-ability beliefs

While Study 1 tested the main effect of physical attractiveness on a consumer's response and the mediating role of social distance perceptions, we purposefully ignored consumer characteristics, an important factor underscored in the literature review. Study 2, then, examines the moderating roles of consumers' physical attractiveness (H3) and attractiveness-ability beliefs (H4) on the physical attractiveness effects.

4.1. Study design and procedure

Study 2 was designed to test the moderation of consumer's physical attractiveness and consumer's attractiveness-ability beliefs with one manipulation treatment (service representative's physical attractiveness: high vs. low) and two self-evaluating factors: consumer's physical

attractiveness (high vs. low) and consumer's attractiveness-ability beliefs (positive vs. negative vs. no relationship). In order to improve the external validity of the study, we recruited actual passengers at the Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport, the third largest airport in China. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that their answers would only be used for academic research. In Study 2, 237 participants were randomly assigned to two conditions, high physical attractiveness or low physical attractiveness of the service representative.

Participants read a scenario about receiving a service from a flight attendant, with the photo of the flight attendant attached. Following the general instructions, participants rated the physical attractiveness of the flight attendant and themselves. We manipulated the service representative's physical attractiveness as in Study 1. We adopted the scale from Meltzer et al. (2014) to measure physical attractiveness of both the self and the service representative. A single item was used to assess the attractiveness-ability belief: "Do you think the service employee's physical attractiveness relates to their service abilities?" (1 = no relationship, 2 = positive relationship and 3 = negative relationship). Social distance perceptions were captured with a three-item scale adopted from Kim et al. (2008) as in Study 1. Finally, we recorded the demographic characteristics of the participants.

4.2. Findings

We first ran the manipulation check. The independent sample *t*-test results show that participants perceived the flight attendant to be more attractive in the high-attractiveness condition than in the low-attractiveness condition ($M_{high} = 5.13$, $M_{low} = 4.43$, $t = 4.92$, $df = 235$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the physical attractiveness manipulation was successful.

4.2.1. The moderating role of consumers' physical attractiveness

To examine the moderating effect of a consumer's physical attractiveness, we ran a 2-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bayes Independent *t*-test against social distance perceptions. In order to check the assumptions of ANOVA, we did the following steps: First, we ensured that the cases were independent given that all the participants were recruited separately, and all the responses were interviewed and recorded separately. Second, we checked for normality. The residuals were normally distributed, and the skewness and kurtosis of the dependent variable are less than 1. We also checked the equality of variances. The *p*-value Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was greater than 0.1, the variances were homogenous between groups. Thus, the assumptions of ANOVA were all supported. The findings of Bayes Independent *t*-test confirmed the main effect of the service representative's physical attractiveness on social distance perception (the credible interval is between 0.28 and 0.78 with a 95% Bayesian coverage, and the Bayes Factor is 0.003 and the *p*-value is < 0.001). More importantly, the 2-way ANOVA showed a significant interaction between the service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's physical attractiveness ($F(1, 233) = 31.99$, $p < 0.01$). Table 2 presents the means of social distance perceptions for different groups.

As proposed by H3, when encountering a more attractive service representative, the attractive participants perceived a shorter social

Table 2
Means of social distance perceptions by consumer's physical attractiveness.

Service representative's physical attractiveness	Consumer's physical attractiveness	Sample size	Social distance perceptions	Mean difference
High	High	45	2.77	0.97 (**)
	Low	82	3.74	
Low	High	42	3.13	0.42 (**)
	Low	68	2.71	

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3
Means of social distance perceptions by attractiveness-ability belief.

Service representative's physical attractiveness	Consumer's attractiveness-ability belief	Sample size	Social distance perceptions
High	No relationship	93	3.51
	Positive relationship	11	3.03
	Negative relationship	7	3.33
Low	No relationship	78	3.42
	Positive relationship	26	3.46
	Negative relationship	1	4.00

Note: 1 = no relationship, 2 = positive relationship and 3 = negative relationship.

distance than when encountering a less attractive one ($M_{high} = 2.77$, $M_{low} = 3.74$, the credible interval is between 0.597 and 1.350, Bayes Factor < 0.001 and $p < 0.001$). When encountering a low attractive service representative, attractive participants perceived a greater social distance than the low attractive participants ($M_{high} = 3.13$, $M_{low} = 2.71$, the credible interval is between -0.746 and -0.086 , Bayes Factor = 0.385 and $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H3 was supported (see Fig. 2).

4.2.2. The moderating role of a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief

Results showed that most participants (80%) believed there was no relationship between the service representative's physical attractiveness and their service abilities. In addition, a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief had no significant impact on the relationship between a service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's social distance perception ($F(1, 228) = 1.66$, $p = 0.19$). The means of social distance perceptions of different groups are shown in Table 3. Thus, the findings do not support H4.

4.3. Discussion

Study 2 provided initial evidence that a consumer's physical attractiveness is a meaningful moderator for the physical attractiveness stereotype. It confirmed our hypothesis that the service representative-self comparison is not complete without considering the self's physical attractiveness. However, the study also demonstrated that the attractiveness-ability belief does not play a moderating role. In the in-flight service context, most of the participants stated that a service representative's physical attractiveness had no relationship with their service ability. The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM; Petty et al., 1981) helps shed further light on this relationship. On one hand, when an individual has a lower motivation or ability in evaluating arguments, they are more likely to be swayed by simple, issue-irrelevant cues such as appearance. On the other hand, when individuals have high motivation and ability to evaluate arguments, they focus more on the true merits of the information presented in support of a proposal (Li et al., 2017). Among many important factors that contribute to the service quality evaluation of an airline company, flight safety and professional training of flight attendants rank as the top factors (Chang and Chang, 2000; Liou et al., 2008). Given the

importance of safety in the in-flight service and its relevance to consumers, consumers have high motivation and ability in evaluating the service quality: they are well-positioned to understand that the professional flight service skills are necessary to provide the service and their evaluations of the service quality are less likely to be influenced by a service representative's physical attractiveness. Accordingly, we propose that a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief will only moderate the physical attractiveness effect in non-professional service contexts.

Overall, Study 2 presented findings in support of the moderating role of a consumer's physical attractiveness. It contributes to a better understanding of the physical attractiveness stereotype by suggesting that the study of the physical attractiveness effect is more complete by considering the essential role of consumer characteristics. Still, our understanding remains incomplete: findings pertaining to the physical attractiveness-ability belief motivate us to explore further the effect of service type (i.e., professional skills required versus none) as a boundary condition. To assess the findings pertaining to the service type uncovered in Study 2 and overcome certain limitations associated with an experimental design, we conducted an additional study in a real consumption setting.

5. Study 3: field study

Using experimental designs, Studies 1 and 2 examined the physical attractiveness effect as well as the moderating roles of a consumer's physical attractiveness and their attractiveness-ability beliefs. In Study 3, we carried out a field study to generalize the findings by surveying real consumption experiences.

5.1. Sample and procedure

Data collectors were instructed to randomly intercept consumers in ten shopping malls in three metropolitan Chinese cities: Guangzhou, Zhuhai, and Xi'an. Trained research assistants were sent to different shopping malls in the three cities. Data was collected in the rest area of the shopping malls to ensure that the participants had enough time and felt comfortable to finish the study. We screened the participants by asking whether they had just received a face-to-face service from a service representative. After the screening process, the participants were asked to read the instructions of the study. Participants recalled and evaluated the service, and rated the service representative's physical attractiveness. We also collected the consumer's personality and demographic information. Participants were assured that the survey was anonymous and that all information they gave would only be used for academic research purposes. Finally, we collected 550 complete questionnaires. The ANOVA results showed no significant differences among respondents from the three shopping centers.

5.2. Measurement

We used seven-point Likert scales to capture all measures (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Adopting the scale from Wan and Wyer (2015), consumer response was assessed on three dimensions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). We adopted a 3-item scale from Kim et al. (2008) to assess the participant's social distance perception toward the service representative (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86). We used the same overall physical attractiveness measurement (Meltzer et al., 2014) and the attractiveness-ability belief measurement as in Study 2.

All items had factor loadings above 0.5. All constructs had a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.80. The standardized loadings and the average variance extracted (AVE) were also above the 0.5 threshold for each construct. Thus, convergent validity was well supported (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The composite reliability indices ranged from 0.85 to 0.86. Discriminant validity was supported as AVEs were greater than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlations (Claes and Larcker, 1981). Table 4 presents the correlations and the

descriptive statistics for the study constructs. The correlation matrix reports no highly correlated variables suggesting that common method bias is not a major concern.

5.3. Findings

5.3.1. The mediating role of social distance perception

We used SPSS PROCESS and hierarchical regression to run the mediation analysis. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested with a simple mediation model (Model 4) controlling for networking effects following the PROCESS syntax (Hayes, 2013). The direct effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on a consumer's response is significant (direct effect: $\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI, LLCI = 0.02, ULCI = 0.16). The bootstrapping results indicated that a consumer's social distance perception mediates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on consumer response ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI, LLCI = 0.09, ULCI = 0.18). The direct effect of physical attractiveness and the mediating effect of a consumer's social distance perception are thus confirmed. In line with the findings in Study 1, we concluded that H1 and H2 were supported in both laboratory and real consumption settings. The beauty premium is operating in service interactions: a consumer's social distance perception is an underlining mechanism to the physical attractiveness effect.

5.3.2. The moderating role of a consumer's physical attractiveness

We performed a moderation analysis (model 4) according to the procedures described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Zhao et al. (2010). The analysis was based on 5000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals. The bootstrapping results indicated that a consumer's physical attractiveness moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on the consumer's response (95% CI, LLCI = 0.002, ULCI = 0.018). To examine the direction of the moderation, we conducted hierarchical moderated regression analyses. We first entered the control variables (i.e., service type, familiarity with the employee, service representative and consumer gender, education, and age). In the second step, we added the service representative's physical attractiveness as well as the consumer's physical attractiveness. In the third step, we added the two-way interaction between the service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's physical attractiveness.

As shown in Table 5, a service representative's physical attractiveness is negatively (Step 2, $\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$) related to a consumer's social distance perception. The interaction between a service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's physical attractiveness is significant (Step 3, $\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.05$).

Simple slope analyses and slope difference tests revealed that compared to the low physically attractive consumers, the high physically attractive consumers perceive a shorter social distance towards highly attractive service representatives and a greater social distance towards low attractive service representatives. Thus, H3 was supported: a consumer's physical attractiveness moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on the consumer's social distance perception.

5.3.3. The moderating role of attractiveness-ability belief

Again, we used the SPSS PROCESS and hierarchical moderated regression analyses (model 4) to test the moderating role of attractiveness-ability belief. Similar to the procedures used in the previous test, we first entered the control variables. We then added the service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's attractiveness-ability belief. Finally, we added the interaction of the service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's attractiveness-ability belief.

As shown in Table 6, a service representative's physical attractiveness is negatively (Step 2, $\beta = -0.30$, $p < 0.01$) related to a consumer's social distance perception. The two-way interaction of a service

Table 4
Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Service representative's physical attractiveness	4.29	1.20	1				
2. Consumer's attractiveness-ability belief	1.37	0.65	−0.01	1			
3. Consumer's social distance perceptions	3.28	1.33	0.29**	0.11*	1		
4. Consumer's physical attractiveness	4.35	1.23	0.24**	0.08*	0.16**	1	
5. Consumer response	4.73	1.11	0.24**	−0.07	0.53**	0.04	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. The mean of consumer's attractiveness-ability belief is calculated from nominal scale (1 = no relationship, 2 = positive relationship and 3 = negative relationship).

representative's physical attractiveness and a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief is significant (Step 3, $\beta = -0.53$, $p < 0.01$). We also examined this moderating effect using PROCESS based on 5000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals. The bootstrapping results indicated that a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on a consumer's social distance perception (95% CI, LLCI = -0.372 , ULCI = -0.096).

We used simple slope analyses and slope difference tests to reveal how a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief affects the relationship between a service representative's physical attractiveness and the consumer's social distance perception. As shown in Table 7, when a consumer considers there is a positive relationship or no relationship between physical attractiveness and service ability, the service representative's physical attractiveness decreases the consumer's social distance perception. However, when a consumer believes that the physical attractiveness is negatively related to service ability, they perceive a greater social distance towards the service representative. Thus, we found support for H4: A consumer's attractiveness-ability belief moderates the effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness on the consumer's social distance perception.

5.4. Discussion

In Study 3, we confirmed the stereotype effect of a service representative's physical attractiveness and the moderating role of a consumer's physical attractiveness and attractiveness-ability belief. This confirms our earlier proposition that the effect of attractiveness-ability belief may not hold in the context of jobs requiring professional skills.

Table 5
The moderating effect of consumer's physical attractiveness.

Variables	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Constant	−3.67	0.38		−2.02	0.43		−3.44	0.79	
Service Type	−0.08	0.05	−0.07	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00
Familiarity	−0.17	0.08	−0.09*	−0.18	0.08	−0.09*	−0.18	0.08	−0.09*
Employee Gender	−0.11	0.13	−0.06	−0.18	0.12	−0.06	−0.20	0.12	−0.07
Customer Gender	−0.21	0.13	−0.07 ⁺	−0.18	0.12	−0.06	−0.17	0.12	−0.06
Education	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00
Age	−0.08	0.06	0.00	−0.12	0.06	−0.08*	−0.12	0.06	−0.08*
EPA				−0.31	0.05	−0.28**	−0.02	0.16	−0.02
CPA				−0.11	0.05	−0.10*	−0.20	0.15	−0.19
EPA × CPA							−0.07	0.03	−0.46*
F	2.17*			9.04**			8.31**		
R ²	0.023			0.118			0.125		
Adjusted R ²	0.013			0.105			0.111		
ΔR ²				0.095**			0.007*		

Note. N = 550; EPA = service representative's physical attractiveness, CPA = consumer's physical attractiveness; ⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

6. Discussions and implications

6.1. Summary

This study presents four main findings to extend our understanding of the physical attractiveness stereotype in the service encounters. First, Studies 1, 2 and 3 demonstrated that attractive service representatives do have positive impacts on consumer responses, namely the customer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and the likability of the service representatives; the beauty premium is operating in service marketing.

Second, a consumer's social distance perception (Studies 1 and 3) mediates the physical attractiveness stereotype. This finding is supported by laboratory and real consumption setting data. In line with our proposition supported by the selective accessibility process model (Mussweiler, 2003) and the construal-level theory (Trope et al., 2007), the impact of physical attractiveness on consumer responses works through social distance perceptions. Physical attractiveness stereotype generates different degrees of social distance through the comparison between a consumer and a service representative, consequently affects the customer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and the likability of the service representative.

Third, we furthered our contribution by considering the role of consumers. Previous research has been focusing on the employee and company side of a service encounter. Recent research has started to switch the focus from company and employee to a more consumer-centered view, for instance by considering the consumers' self-presentation concerns (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Our study move this practice further along by considering consumers' own physical attractiveness. The moderating role of a consumer's own physical attractiveness is significant in both laboratory and real consumption settings.

Finally, our findings showed that a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief acts as a moderator of the physical attractiveness effect, although this finding could not be replicated in a specialized service setting (e.g., flight attendant service setting). This opens a new future research

Table 6
The moderating effect of consumer's attractiveness-ability belief.

Variables	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Constant	-3.67	0.38		-2.02	0.43		-0.58	0.61	
Service Type	-0.08	0.05	0.07	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	-0.03	0.05	-0.03
Familiarity	-0.17	0.08	-0.09*	-0.19	0.08	-0.10*	-0.18	0.08	-0.09*
Employee Gender	-0.11	0.13	-0.06	-0.16	0.12	-0.06	-0.15	0.12	-0.05
Customer Gender	-0.21	0.13	-0.07 ⁺	-0.17	0.12	-0.06	-0.17	0.12	-0.06
Education	0.00	0.06	0.00	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	-0.01	0.05	-0.01
Age	-0.08	0.06	0.00	-0.10	0.06	-0.07 ⁺	-0.10	0.06	-0.07 ⁺
EPA				-0.33	0.05	-0.30**	-0.66	0.11	-0.59**
AAB				-0.22	0.08	-0.11*	-1.18	0.30	-0.58**
EPA × AAB							-0.23	0.07	-0.53**
F	2.17*			9.12**			9.47**		
R ²	0.023			0.119			0.136		
Adjusted R ²	0.013			0.106			0.122		
ΔR^2				0.096**			0.017*		

Note. N = 550; EPA = service representative's physical attractiveness, AAB = consumer's attractiveness-ability belief; ⁺p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

avenue to examine the moderating effect of service specialization.

6.2. Theoretical implications

Consumers often react more favorably to physically attractive service representatives than to unattractive ones; their higher satisfaction and intentions to purchase a product when interacting with an attractive service representative are evidence of this effect (Ahearn et al., 2010; Argo et al., 2008; Wan and Wyer, 2015). However, prior to this study, the mediating and moderating factors influencing this relationship were far from fully studied in the literature. Our research not only identifies these conditions, but it provides evidence of the mechanisms that underlie these effects. Our findings support the statement that social distance perceptions, a result of social comparison, are able to explain the physical attractiveness stereotype.

We offer multiple theoretical contributions. First, this paper advances our understanding of the physical attractiveness stereotype by examining the mediating role of social distance perceptions. Due to the interactive characteristic of services, the interaction between a consumer and a frontline service representative is necessary, and thus, the perceived social distance between a self and the service representative is highly influential on how a consumer is affected by the beauty premium. To the best of our knowledge, we are among the first empirical researchers to examine the mediating effect of social distance in the physical attractiveness context, which provides preliminary evidence for future conceptual model development among the focal variables.

Second, this study provides insights into the attractiveness

stereotype by examining the moderating effect of a consumer's physical attractiveness. This article presents the conditions under which the beauty premium holds and when it does not. This well explains the conflicted findings of physical attractiveness in the extant literature (i.e., beauty premium versus beauty is beast). While the beauty premium is widely accepted in different fields, we specify the boundary effect in which consumers' own physical attractiveness interacts with the service representative physical attractiveness level to alter the physical attractiveness stereotype. That is to say, beauty is a double-edged sword, where it could be a premium for some consumers, whereas as an inferior one to others. Furthermore, this enriches our understanding of the possible different consumer responses toward the beauty premium.

Third, a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief acts as a moderator to the relationship, a new finding that enriches our understanding of the physical attractiveness effect. When a participant relates a service representative's physical attractiveness negatively to their ability to provide a service, they perceive a greater social distance toward the service representative and report a negative response to the service encounter. Conversely, when a consumer believes there is a positive relationship or no relationship between a service representative's physical attractiveness and their service abilities, they perceive a shorter social distance toward the service representative and report a positive response to the service encounter. The findings from Study 3 suggest that the physical attractiveness effect can be altered by a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief.

Finally, the results from three studies present a group of preliminary

Table 7
Differences among different attractiveness-ability beliefs.

Variables	Consumers' attractiveness-ability belief								
	No relationship			Positive relationship			Negative relationship		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Constant	-1.88	0.46		-2.11	0.95		-4.49	1.38	
Service Type	-0.08	0.05	-0.07	-0.04	0.14	-0.03	-0.98	0.26	-0.50**
Familiarity	-0.18	0.08	-0.10*	-0.05	0.24	-0.02	-0.34	0.32	-0.13
Employee Gender	-0.21	0.14	-0.07	-0.26	0.31	-0.09	-0.54	0.38	-0.18
Customer Gender	-0.15	0.14	-0.05	-0.15	0.29	-0.05	-0.12	0.40	-0.04
Education	-0.02	0.06	-0.01	-0.02	0.15	-0.02	-0.14	0.20	-0.09
Age	-0.08	0.06	-0.06	-0.30	0.17	-0.19 ⁺	-0.22	0.22	-0.13
EPA	-0.40	0.05	-0.35**	-0.35	0.11	-0.36**	-0.12	0.19	-0.09
F	10.24*			1.95 ⁺			3.76*		
R ²	0.154			0.134			0.37		
Adjusted R ²	0.139			0.07			0.27		

Note. N = 550; EPA = service representative's physical attractiveness, AAB = consumer's attractiveness-ability belief; ⁺p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

important findings of the physical attractiveness effect and provide possible explanations: a consumer's attractiveness-ability belief is a significant moderator only in instances of unspecialized services: this effect does not hold for highly-specialized services. Findings from Studies 2 and 3 reveal that the characteristics particular to the service may, too, moderate the physical attractiveness stereotype. As a service increases in specialization, the less appearances become important. The evidence of the consumers' role in service encounter needs to be further tested in future research.

6.3. Managerial implications

The attractiveness bias is troublesome to organizations because recruitment decisions based on criteria unrelated to job abilities or service skills can lead to inefficient or unsatisfactory outcomes (Holtom et al., 2006). The findings of this study have significant implications for marketing and service managers.

First, attractive service representatives receive better customer evaluations in service encounters: they are generally more favorable and produce a higher level of customer satisfaction. Therefore, in general, it is good for service companies to recruit individuals whose physical appearances subscribe to the beauty premium.

Despite this first finding, by taking a closer look at the 'beautiful is good' stereotype, consumers do not always respond positively to attractive service representatives, which is also known as 'beauty is beast'. Therefore, managers need to use the beauty premium strategy very cautiously. When the service representative is highly attractive, a consumer may have a stronger desire to make a good impression, yet may have very distinct reactions to the service representative (Dong and Wyer Jr, 2014): If consumers see themselves as good-looking, they feel relatively confident and perceive a shorter social distance toward the service representative. However, if they see themselves as less attractive, they may feel anxious about making a good impression and perceive a greater social distance. In a service management context, while managers may want to pay attention to the appearance of their employees, they should be sensitive to and aware of their consumers' characteristics. Segmentation of consumers' physical attractiveness and personality characteristics is then of greater importance when implementing service management strategies. For example, low attractive service representatives may be better positioned to serve consumers who do not perceive themselves as attractive or are low in confidence, as to avoid creating instances of greater social distance perceptions.

Finally, this research has practical implications for a society working on reducing lookism or appearance discrimination. The 'beautiful is good' stereotype is pervasive. Although people generally believe that attractive individuals are more sociable, persuasive, and likable (Eagly et al., 1991; Sigall and Aronson, 1969; Wan and Wyer, 2015), this article attests to the notion that consumers do not always care for physically attractive service representatives. Individuals who perceive themselves as unattractive may instead prefer to interact with service representatives who are not characterized as attractive. Thus, good-looking employees are not always beneficial to a service company. While many reasons are perpetuating the current beauty revolution, findings from this study further support nuancing the beauty premium, as how consumers perceive themselves regarding their appearance will affect how they will judge the quality of the service provided to them. As a result, managers should give more attention to low attractive individuals and fight against appearance discrimination in recruitment.

6.4. Limitations and future research

This research has limitations. The results obtained from the restaurant, airline, and shopping mall scenarios may not apply to other specific service industries such as beauty salons and fitness centers where consumers attribute greater importance to a service representative's physical appearance. Although the results from Study 3

are generalizable, we are aware of the different results captured in Studies 2 and 3 regarding the moderating effect of attractiveness-ability belief. Future research should explore the potential moderating role of service characteristics. Given that a linear relationship may not appropriately capture a consumer's response to an attractive service representative, a bell-shaped response curve may be examined in the future (Imamoglu, 2000). Although our three studies fail to find evidence for a nonlinear relationship, an inverted U shape may emerge if extreme levels of attractiveness are tested. While we propose a new concept, the consumer's attractiveness-ability belief, without a rigorous scale development process, we hope that other researchers will pick up where this study ends, and develop a multi-item scale to strengthen the conclusions of our paper. In addition, we measured the consumer responses holistically. It is possible that we missed capturing the effect of physical attractiveness on certain aspects of customer response, for instance, the service quality. Finally, although we checked the four way interaction among a service representative's and a customer's gender and physical attractiveness, the paper did not make a thorough analysis of this interaction. Further study could examine the role of a service representative's and a customer's gender in a more thorough manner.

Acknowledgements

This project is funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 71602073) and Natural Science Foundation of Guangdong Province, China (No. 2017A030313407).

References

- Agthe, M., Spoerle, M., Maner, J.K., 2010. Don't hate me because I'm beautiful: anti-attractiveness bias in organizational evaluation and decision making. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 46 (6), 1151–1154.
- Argo, J.J., Dahl, D.W., Morales, A.C., 2008. Positive consumer contagion: responses to attractive others in a retail context. *J. Mark. Res.* 45 (6), 690–701.
- Agthe, M., Spoerle, M., Frey, D., Maner, J.K., 2014. Looking up versus looking down: attractiveness-based organizational biases are moderated by social comparison direction. *J. Appl. Soc. Psychol.* 44 (1), 40–45.
- Ahearne, M., Gruen, T.W., Jarvis, C.B., 2010. If looks could sell: moderation and mediation of the attractiveness effect on salesperson performance. *Soc. Sci. Electron. Publish.* 16 (4), 269–284.
- Albrecht, C.M., Hattula, S., Bornemann, T., Hoyer, W.D., 2016. Customer response to interactional service experience: the role of interaction environment. *J. Serv. Manag.* 27 (5), 704–729.
- Anderson, J.C., Gerbing, D.W., 1988. Structural equation modeling in practice: a review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychol. Bull.* 103 (3), 411–423.
- Andreoni, J., Petrie, R., 2008. Beauty, gender and stereotypes: evidence from laboratory experiments. *J. Econ. Psychol.* 29 (1), 73–93.
- Brewer, M.B., 1991. The social self: on being the same and different at the same time. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 17 (5), 475–482.
- Brewer, M.B., 1999. The psychology of prejudice: ingroup love and outgroup hate? *J. Soc. Issues* 55 (3), 429–444.
- Bhalla, G., Lin, L., 1987. Cross-cultural marketing research: a discussion of equivalence issues and measurement strategies. *Psychol. Market.* 4 (4), 275–285.
- Bitner, M.J., 1990. Evaluating service encounters: the effects of physical surroundings and employee responses. *J. Mark.* 54 (2), 69–82.
- Blanton, H., Crocker, J., Miller, D.T., 2000. The effects of in-group versus out-group social comparison on self-esteem in the context of a negative stereotype. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 36 (5), 519–530.
- Cao, H., Jiang, J., Oh, L.B., Li, H., Liao, X., Chen, Z., 2013. A Maslow's hierarchy of needs analysis of social networking services continuance. *J. Serv. Manag.* 24 (2), 170–190.
- Chang, Y.H., Chang, Y.W., 2000. Study on the service quality estimations of airline companies. *Q. J. Transp. Plan.* 29 (2), 295–318.
- Claes, F., Larcker, D.F., 1981. Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *J. Mark. Res.* 18 (1), 39–50.
- Darley, J.M., Fazio, R.H., 1980. Expectancy confirmation processes arising in the social interaction sequence. *Am. Psychol.* 35 (35), 867–881.
- Dion, K., Berscheid, E., Walster, E., 1972. What is beautiful is good. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 24 (3), 285–290.
- Dong, P., Wyer Jr, R.S., 2014. How time flies: the effects of conversation characteristics and partner attractiveness on duration judgments in a social interaction. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 50 (1), 1–14.
- Eagly, A.H., Ashmore, R.D., Makhijani, M.G., Lingo, L.C., 1991. What is beautiful is good, but...: a meta-analytic review of research on the physical attractiveness stereotype. *Psychol. Bull.* 110 (1), 109–128.
- Feingold, A., 1992. Good-looking people are not what we think. *Psychol. Bull.* 111 (2), 304–341.
- Felson, R.B., Bohrnstedt, G.W., 1979. Are the good beautiful or the beautiful good? *The*

- relationship between children's perceptions of ability and perceptions of physical attractiveness. *Soc. Psychol. Q.* 42 (4), 386–392.
- Festinger, L., 1954. A theory of social comparison processes. *Hum. Relat.* 7 (2), 117–140.
- Fisher, R.J., Ma, Y., 2014. The price of being beautiful: negative effects of attractiveness on empathy for children in need. *J. Consum. Res.* 41 (2), 436–450.
- Gangestad, K., Thornhill, R., 1994. Human (*homo sapiens*) facial attractiveness and sexual selection: the role of symmetry and averageness. *J. Comp. Psychol.* 108 (3), 233–242.
- Halford, J.T., Hsu, S.H.C., 2014. **Beauty Is Wealth: CEO Appearance and Shareholder Value.** Working paper. Available at SSRN: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2357756>.
- Hayes, A.F., 2009. Beyond Baron and Kenny: statistical mediation analysis in the new millennium. *Commun. Monogr.* 76 (4), 408–420.
- Hayes, A.F., 2013. Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis. A Regression-Based Approach. Guilford, New York.
- Heilman, M.E., Saruwatari, L.R., 1979. When beauty is beastly: the effects of appearance and sex on evaluations of job applicants for managerial and nonmanagerial jobs. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Perform.* 23 (3), 360–372.
- Holtom, B.C., Mitchell, T.R., Lee, T.W., 2006. Increasing human and social capital by applying job embeddedness theory. *Organ. Dynam.* 35 (4), 316–331.
- Imamoglu, Ç., 2000. Complexity, liking and familiarity: architecture and non-architecture Turkish students' assessments of traditional and modern house facades. *J. Environ. Psychol.* 20 (1), 5–16.
- Jones, A.M., Buckingham, J.T., 2005. Self-esteem as a moderator of the effect of social comparison on women's body image. *J. Soc. Clin. Psychol.* 24 (8), 1164–1187.
- Judge, T.A., Hurst, C., Simon, L.S., 2009. Does it pay to be smart, attractive, or confident (or all three)? Relationships among general mental ability, physical attractiveness, core self-evaluations, and income. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 94 (3), 742–755.
- Kahneman, D., Tversky, A., 1973. On the psychology of prediction. *Psychol. Rev.* 80 (4), 237–251.
- Khantimirov, D., Karande, K., 2018. Complaint as a persuasion attempt: front line employees' perceptions of complaint legitimacy. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 43 (July), 68–76.
- Kim, K., Zhang, M., Li, X., 2008. Effects of temporal and social distance on consumer evaluations. *J. Consum. Res.* 35 (4), 706–713.
- Kwon, H., Ha, S., Im, H., 2016. The impact of perceived similarity to other customers on shopping mall satisfaction. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 28 (January), 304–309.
- Langlois, J.H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A.J., Larson, A., Hallam, M., Smoot, M., 2000. Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychol. Bull.* 126 (3), 390–423.
- Langlois, J.H., Ritter, J.M., Roggman, L.A., Vaughn, L.S., 1991. Facial diversity and infant preferences for attractive faces. *Dev. Psychol.* 27 (1), 79–84.
- Lee, L., Loewenstein, G., Dan, A., Hong, J., Young, J., 2008. If I'm not hot, are you hot or not? Physical-attractiveness evaluations and dating preferences as a function of one's own attractiveness. *Soc. Sci. Electron. Publish.* 19 (7), 669–677.
- Leinsle, P., Totzek, D., Schumann, J.H., 2018. How price fairness and fit affect customer tariff evaluations. *J. Serv. Manag.* 29 (4), 735–764.
- Lemay Jr., L.E., Clark, M.S., Greenberg, A., 2010. What is beautiful is good because what is beautiful is desired: physical attractiveness stereotyping as projection of interpersonal goals. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 36 (3), 339–353.
- Li, J.J., Chen, X.P., Kotha, S., Fisher, G., 2017. Catching fire and spreading it: a glimpse into displayed entrepreneurial passion in crowdfunding campaigns. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 102 (7), 1075–1090.
- Liou, J.J.H., Yen, L., Tzeng, G.H., 2008. Building an effective safety management system for airlines. *J. Air Transp. Manag.* 14, 20–26.
- Luoh, H.F., Tsaur, S.H., 2011. Customers' perceptions of service quality: do servers' age stereotypes matter? *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 30 (2), 283–289.
- Major, B., Sciacchitano, A.M., Crocker, J., 1993. In-group versus out-group comparisons and self-esteem. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 19 (6), 711–721.
- Mantovani, D., Andrade, L.M.D., Negrão, A., 2017. How motivations for csr and consumer-brand social distance influence consumers to adopt pro-social behavior. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 36 (May), 156–163.
- Meltzer, A.L., McNulty, J.K., Jackson, G.L., Karney, B.R., 2014. Sex differences in the implications of partner physical attractiveness for the trajectory of marital satisfaction. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 106 (3), 418–428.
- Morrow, P.C., 1990. Physical attractiveness and selection decision making. *J. Manag* 16 (1), 45–60.
- Mussweiler, T., 2003. Comparison processes in social judgment: mechanisms and consequences. *Psychol. Rev.* 110 (3), 472–489.
- Mussweiler, T., Bodenhausen, G.V., 2002. I know you are, but what am I? Self-evaluative consequences of judging in-group and out-group members. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 82 (1), 19–32.
- Orth, U.R., Wirtz, J., 2014. Consumer processing of interior service environments: the interplay among visual complexity, processing fluency, and attractiveness. *J. Serv. Res.* 17 (3), 296–309.
- Otterbring, T., 2017. Smile for a while: the effect of employee-displayed smiling on customer affect and satisfaction. *J. Serv. Manag.* 28 (2), 284–304.
- Patzner, G.L., 1983. Source credibility as a function of communicator physical attractiveness. *J. Bus. Res.* 11 (2), 229–241.
- Patzner, G.L., 2012. *The Physical Attractiveness Phenomena.* Springer Science and Business Media.
- Petty, R.E., Cacioppo, J.T., Goldman, R., 1981. Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 41 (5), 847–855.
- Preacher, K.J., Hayes, A.F., 2008. Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behav. Res. Methods* 40 (3), 879–891.
- Quach, S., Jebarajakirthy, C., Thaichon, P., 2017. Aesthetic labor and visible diversity: the role in retailing service encounters. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 38 (September), 34–43.
- Raza, S.M., Carpenter, B.N., 1987. A model of hiring decisions in real employment interviews. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 72 (4), 596–603.
- Rosenblat, T.S., 2008. The beauty premium: physical attractiveness and gender in dictator games. *Negot. J.* 24 (4), 465–481.
- Schneider, D.J., 1973. Implicit personality theory: a review. *Psychol. Bull.* 79 (5), 294–309.
- Sigall, H., Aronson, E., 1969. Liking for an evaluator as a function of her physical attractiveness and nature of the evaluations. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 5 (1), 93–100.
- Söderlund, M., 2017. Employee display of burnout in the service encounter and its impact on customer satisfaction. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 37 (7), 168–176.
- Söderlund, M., Julander, C.R., 2009. Physical attractiveness of the service worker in the moment of truth and its effects on customer satisfaction. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* 16 (3), 216–226.
- Strack, F., Mussweiler, T., 1997. Explaining the enigmatic anchoring effect: mechanisms of selective accessibility. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 73 (3), 437–446.
- Tews, M.J., Stafford, K., Zhu, J., 2009. Beauty revisited: the impact of attractiveness, ability, and personality in the assessment of employment suitability. *Int. J. Sel. Assess.* 17 (1), 92–100.
- Trope, Y., Liberman, N., Wakslak, C., 2007. Construal levels and psychological distance: effects on representation, prediction, evaluation, and behavior. *J. Consum. Psychol.* 17 (2), 83–95.
- Wan, L., Wyer, R., 2015. Consumer reactions to attractive service providers: approach or avoid? *J. Consum. Res.* 42 (4), 578–595.
- Zhao, M., Xie, J., 2011. Effects of social and temporal distance on consumers' responses to peer recommendations. *J. Mark. Res.* 48 (3), 486–496.
- Zhao, X., Lynch, J.G., Chen, Q., 2010. Reconsidering baron and kenny: myths and truths about mediation analysis. *J. Consum. Res.* 37 (2), 197–206.