

Service employee dress: Effects on employee-customer interactions and customer-brand relationship at full-service restaurants

Yao-Chin Wang^a, Chunmin Lang^{b,*}

^a School of Human Environmental Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, United States

^b Department of Textiles, Apparel Design, and Merchandising, 143 Human Ecology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803, United States

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ABSTRACT

Using social comparison theory, the purpose of this study is to examine how service employees' dress shapes employee-customer interactions and customer-brand relationship in full-service restaurants. An analysis of 437 useable customer responses collected via an online survey indicated that appropriateness of employee dress improves employee-brand congruence, which then enhances both employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction. Both employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction also improve the customer-employee connection. Furthermore, gratification motivation and social motivation each mediates the effects of customer-employee connection on customers' affective commitment toward the full-service restaurant brand.

1. Introduction

Dress refers to modifications (e.g., changes to nails, hair, and muscular structure) and supplements (e.g., enclosures, body attachments, and hand-held objects) to an individual's body (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). In service encounters, dress is a form of nonverbal communication (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Choi and Mattila, 2016), and the dress of a service employee directly influences customers' expectations of a service experience (Kim and Baker, 2017; Pounders et al., 2015). Former studies have shown that not only does employee dress impact employees' work performance and social identity (Yeh et al., 2013), but it also influences customers' perceived value of and relationship with a service brand (Shao et al., 2004). In general, customers' interactions with service employees provide a foundation for their evaluations of service encounters, and employees' nonverbal communications have been shown to play a crucial role in enhancing the perceived quality of service (Sundaram and Webster, 2000).

To date, however, few studies have examined the importance of employee dress in the service industry, especially as it relates to the formation of employee-customer interactions and how it influences customers' relationship with a service brand. Most studies have looked at customers' short-term responses to employee dress such as how it affects tipping (Jacob and Guéguen, 2014) and customer satisfaction ratings (Magnini et al., 2013). An investigation of long-term outcomes driven by employee dress, though, have not been explored in prior studies. According to service-profit chain (Homburg et al., 2009;

Lariviere, 2008), employee-customer interactions during service experiences may help customers develop social identity with the service company, resulting in the formation of long-term customer loyalty behavior and increasing firms' financial performance. Applying the service-profit chain model, examining how the customer-brand relationship is formed by employee dress is important because it potentially demonstrates an impact on a service brand's long-term financial success. Thus, there is a real need for investigating the role that employee dress plays in developing customers' commitment to the service brand.

In an effort to address knowledge gaps in the literature and to contribute practical implications for the service industry, this study investigates the effects of service employee dress in service encounters in full service restaurants. Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), our research model looks at three sections of this study: (1) service employee dress as the driver, (2) employee-customer interactions, and (3) customer-brand relationship. First, former studies on social comparison have shown that physical appearance is a key element for initiating and bringing about social comparison (Patrick et al., 2004), indicating a potential for service employee dress in triggering employee-customer interactions and customer-brand relationship. Second, employee-brand congruence, or the degree to which employee image and brand image match (Dolich, 1969), may be perceived by customers as a favorable result of social comparison when the congruence is high (Patrick et al., 2004). Based on former studies about congruence in branding (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012) and literature about appearance-driven social interaction (Albada et al., 2002; Wang

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ycwang@uark.edu (Y.-C. Wang), cmlang@lsu.edu (C. Lang).

et al., 2010), this study proposes that customers who recognize employee-brand congruence will be aware of high employee aesthetic traits and deem the interaction enjoyable. Third, this study proposes that satisfying customers' needs for gratification motivation and social motivation through employee-customer interactions (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Park and Jang, 2014) could establish customers' affective commitment to the service brand.

Aesthetic labor, commonly used in the hospitality industry (Tsaour et al., 2015), refers to the use of premeditated brand directives to control service employees' physical looks (Witz et al., 2003). Employee dress is a key factors that customers judge during a dining experience (Ryu and Jang, 2008). Former literature on employee dress mostly focused on brand experience in restaurant settings (Choi and Mattila, 2016; Jacob and Guéguen, 2014; Magnini et al., 2013) where concerns for service employee dress are strong, especially at full-service restaurants (Jani and Han, 2011; Tsaour et al., 2015). Because of the higher costs at full-service restaurants compared to lower-tier restaurants, customers expect better brand experience at full-service restaurants, including better service employee dress (Jani and Han, 2011; Tsaour et al., 2015). Jani and Han (2011) found that at full-service restaurant settings, customers' perceived service encounter performance could enhance their positive affect, which could later improve their satisfaction toward the restaurant. Tsaour et al. (2015) further found that customer's perceived employee aesthetic labor, of which employee aesthetic trait is one of several components, could significantly improve customers' loyal behavioral intentions toward a full-service restaurant. Therefore, using full-service restaurants as the research setting, this study will examine the effects of service employee dress on forming employee-customer interactions and customer-brand relationships. We expect the findings of this study to generate valuable theoretical and practical contributions that are potentially beneficial to service encounters in the hospitality industry as well as in other service sectors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social comparison theory

Festinger (1954) proposed social comparison theory and argued that people are naturally driven to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing them to others' opinions and abilities. A social comparison's importance and frequency rely on the significance of the compared ability or opinion (Festinger, 1954). A popular and ongoing issue of concern is personal appearance, which has prompted a series of related studies about

appearance-related social comparisons (Halliwel, 2012) which support the significance of establishing service employee dress in this study as a key driver to triggering interactions and forming customer relationships.

Based on an assumption of social comparison that people normally correlate with others who are similar in ability or opinion (Festinger, 1954), it is plausible that restaurant customers compare service employee image with restaurant brand image (Baker et al., 2014), or they compare psychological connections they make with service employees through service interactions (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Jamal and Adelowore, 2008). Festinger (1954) explained that social comparison forms groups of people with similar opinions and/or abilities, while social structure is classified by the differences in opinions and/or abilities. Based on the function of group formation in social comparison (Festinger, 1954), this study proposes that the development of the customer-brand relationship is an outcome of the mechanism of employee-customer interactions. To be more specific, restaurant customers make a customer-employee connection (people with similar opinions and/or abilities) by interacting with restaurant employees and, as a result, gain affective commitment (group formation) with the restaurant brand based on social comparisons established in accumulated visits.

On the other hand, social comparison theory also supports the potential existence of moderators that strengthen outcomes. First, Festinger (1954) noted that individuals' intentions for and frequency of social comparison may be strengthened or weakened by their personality and their subjective evaluation about the importance of the compared ability/opinion. Therefore, in studying appearance-related social comparisons in the service industry, customers' fashion-related personality (i.e., fashion lifestyle personality) or knowledge about fashion trends (i.e., fashion involvement) might strengthen outcomes driven by service employee dress. Second, information collected through social interactions enables individuals to conduct social comparison (Festinger, 1954). The more pleasant the social engagements with a specific group are, the higher likelihood an individual affiliates with the group and aligns his or her abilities and opinions to the group (Festinger, 1954). Hence, in service encounters, customers' length of service interaction and frequency of visit may also enhance outcomes driven by service employee dress.

2.2. The research framework and hypotheses

Based on social comparison theory, this study proposes the effects of service employee dress on service encounters falls within three sections (Fig. 1): (1) service employee dress as the driver, (2) employee-customer interactions, and (3) customer-brand relationship. Justifications

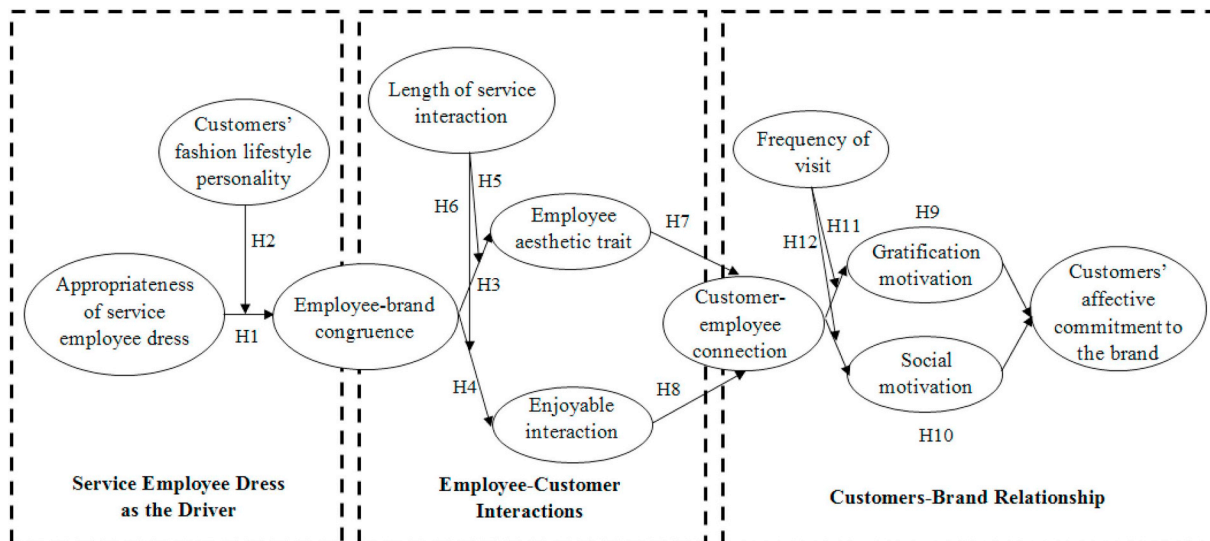


Fig. 1. The research framework of this study.

for the proposed hypotheses are explained in following sections.

2.2.1. Service employee dress as the driver

Appropriateness of employee dress is defined by [Fiore and DeLong \(1990\)](#) as “displaying particular modes of dress within the professional context” (p. 219). While most restaurant brands require employees to wear uniforms ([Jacob and Guéguen, 2014](#)), some also set guidelines for appearance (e.g., hair and beard) ([Magnini et al., 2013](#)), and some allow employees to wear their own clothes following a specific type of style. Based on [Roach-Higgins and Eicher \(1992\)](#) and [Fiore and DeLong \(1990\)](#) research, the concept of service employee dress for this study includes both body modification (e.g., changes to hair and beard) and body supplements (e.g., uniform). Due to individuals' natural concern for physical attractiveness and appearance ([Halliwell, 2012](#)), customers normally take service employee dress as a major point of reference for social comparison in a service context ([McFerran et al., 2010](#)). According to internal branding literature, service sectors utilize their employees' appearance, attitude, and behavior to represent brand image so that customers perceive a consistent service brand experiences ([Liu et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, when customers see service employees' dress appropriately, they distinguish consistency between the look of the service employee and the image of service brand. This perceived consistency can be evaluated as employee-brand congruence ([Pounders et al., 2015](#)), which refers to the agreement between employee image and brand image.

On the other hand, [Myzelev \(2013\)](#) found that those who show a tendency to pursue fashion and lifestyle care more about dress within social settings. Fashion lifestyle personality refers to individuals' fashion-oriented attitudes, opinions, interests, and behaviors in everyday life ([Ko et al., 2006](#); [Li et al., 2012](#)). Following social comparison theory regarding the effects of personality on influencing the outcomes from social comparison ([Festinger, 1954](#)), this study proposes that customers' fashion lifestyle personality strengthens the effect of service employee dress appropriateness on employee-brand congruence. Customers with a higher level of fashion lifestyle personality are more sensitive to dress-related issues and elements in their daily environments ([Ko et al., 2006](#)); hence, this study argues that these customers identify a stronger positive relationship between appropriateness of service employee dress and employee-brand congruence than those who have a lower level of fashion lifestyle personality. Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Appropriateness of service employee dress is positively related to employee-brand congruence.

H2. Customers' fashion lifestyle personality moderates the positive relationship between appropriateness of employee dress and employee-brand congruence. Specifically, the positive relationship between appropriateness of employee dress and employee-brand congruence is stronger when customers' fashion lifestyle personality is high than when it is low.

2.2.2. Employee-customer interactions

Results of social comparison may guide individuals to form groups, to start interactions within a group, and to praise group members' abilities and/or opinions ([Festinger, 1954](#)). This study proposes two outcomes of customers' perceived employee-brand congruence: employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction. First, employee aesthetic trait refers to the appealing features in an employee's professional appearance ([Tsaor et al., 2015](#)). Through perceived employee-brand congruence, customers gather information about appearance-related social comparisons ([Halliwell, 2012](#)). The match between employee image and brand image serves as a cue for customers that employees are “in the same group” when presenting the service brand to the customers. Therefore, using [Festinger's \(1954\)](#) concept, customers' perceived employee-brand congruence may further lead them to

appreciate the aesthetic trait of service employees. One example of this function of social comparison is workers with “the A&F look” at [Abercrombie and Fitch \(A&F\)](#) mentioned by [Pounders et al. \(2015\)](#). These “A&F look” service employees provide customers with strong employee-brand congruence, thus leading customers to notice and appreciate the details of employee aesthetic trait.

Second, enjoyable interaction refers to pleasant communication experiences between service employees and customers ([Gremler and Gwinner, 2000](#)). According to social comparison ([Festinger, 1954](#)), customers' perceived employee-brand congruence helps them determine if employees are within the same group, making them comfortable and free to interact with these employees. Additionally, it should be noted that this study proposes that appropriateness of service employee dress is an antecedent of perceived employee-brand congruence. Prior research has established the significance of individuals' dress and appearance on elevating attractiveness and facilitating social interactions, ([Albada et al., 2002](#); [Patrick et al., 2004](#)). In line with this concept, [Gustafsson et al. \(2005\)](#) further argued that, due to the significance of employee appearance on improving employee-customer interactions, hospitality managers should emphasize employees' aesthetic skills. Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3. Employee-brand congruence is positively related to employee aesthetic trait.

H4. Employee-brand congruence is positively related to enjoyable interaction.

Individuals conduct social comparisons by collecting information in social settings ([Festinger, 1954](#)). In employee-customer interactions, a piece of key information that customers need to judge a service experience is length of service interaction ([Gremler and Gwinner, 2000](#)). A longer period of interaction in a relationship may deepen mutual understanding ([Biesanz et al., 2007](#)), giving customers a chance to collect information by observing service employees' dress, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, this study argues that the length of service interaction moderates the effects of employee-brand congruence on employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction:

H5. Length of service interaction moderates the positive relationship between employee-brand congruence and employee aesthetic trait. Specifically, a positive relationship between employee-brand congruence and employee aesthetic trait is stronger when the length of service interaction is long instead of when it is short.

H6. Length of service interaction moderates the positive relationship between employee-brand congruence and enjoyable interaction. Specifically, a positive relationship between employee-brand congruence and enjoyable interaction is stronger when the length of service interaction is long instead of when it is short.

Customer-employee connection refers to the existence of a positive relationship between a customer and a service employee ([Gremler and Gwinner, 2000](#)). This study argues the formation of positive relationships can be established through two approaches. First, based on the natural tendency of people to befriend someone with an attractive appearance ([Eastwick et al., 2011](#)), customers who perceive higher employee aesthetic traits may show a stronger intention for forming a customer-employee connection. Second, a study by [Albada et al. \(2002\)](#) indicates a key role of social interaction functions as a catalyst in forming romantic relationships. [Albada et al. \(2002\)](#) explained that social interaction provides different characteristics for a potential partner, and one's attitude toward a potential partner differs significantly after a positive interaction versus a negative one. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H7. Employee aesthetic trait is positively related to customer-employee connection.

H8. Enjoyable interaction is positively related to customer-employee connection.

2.2.3. Customers-brand relationship

The purpose of implementing an aesthetic labor in the service industry is to establish a positive customer-brand relationship by branding service employees' aesthetic appearance (Harvey et al., 2014; Tsaor et al., 2015). A successfully branded service encounter features service employees who are capable of presenting a branded appearance, along with consistent attitudes and behaviors, who build customers' brand loyalty through a consistent branded experience (Sirianni et al., 2013). Palmatier et al. (2007) found that customers develop stronger loyalty to a salesperson than to a firm through relationship-enhancing activities offered by that salesperson; if the salesperson then goes to work for another sales firm, customers often follow the salesperson, moving their business to the new firm that results in long-term financial loss to the original firm. Palmatier et al. (2007) argue that the development of customers' relationship during service encounters that the potential to cause financial risks to a firm if the customer's loyalty is to the service provider and not to the firm. For this reason, it is crucial to understand how customers establish relationships with a service brand.

A group formed by way of social comparison allows an individual to decide with whom to establish a relationship, and relationships with others in the group are sustained by satisfying psychological needs and social motives (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992). Using Locke's (1997) motivation process, this study proposes that gratification motivation and social motivation both mediate the relationship between customer-employee connection and customers' affective commitment to a brand. Gratification motivation refers to the reduction of stress and tension, the lessening of a negative mood, or the bestowing of a special treat to oneself by ways of consumption (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Social motivation, on the other hand, is a more socially oriented need for consumption, such as enjoying time with friends and family, socializing, and bonding with others (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Through customer-employee connections, customers may develop affective commitment to a brand via relaxation and reduction of negative emotions (gratification motivation) and/or through the enjoyment of social interactions (social motivation). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H9. Gratification motivation mediates the relationship between customer-employee connection and customers' affective commitment to the brand.

H10. Social motivation mediates the relationship between customer-employee connection and customers' affective commitment to the brand.

Following the findings of Ha and Jang (2010) and Park and Jang (2014) regarding the functions of repeated visits and familiarity in enhancing customers' relationships with restaurants, frequency of visits moderates the strength of customer-employee connection for the purpose of this research framework. Because the information gathered from social interactions is an important source for individuals' comparisons in social comparison (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992), frequent visits to a favorite service provider allow customers to gain more service experience, thereby increasing the likelihood of satisfying their gratification and social motivations. Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses:

H11. Frequency of visit moderates the relationship between customer-employee connection and gratification motivation. Specifically, the positive relationship between customer-employee connection and gratification motivation is stronger when the frequency of visit is higher than when it is low.

H12. Frequency of visit moderates the relationship between customer-employee connection and social motivation. Specifically, the positive

relationship between customer-employee connection and social motivation is stronger when the frequency of visit is higher than when it is low.

3. Method

3.1. Research procedure

In order to identify restaurant chains familiar to customers, 25 of the most popular restaurant chains were selected from a list in the FSR (Full-Service Restaurants) Magazine, a well-known industry magazine. Full service restaurants "provide food services to patrons who order and are served while seated and pay after eating" (Canziani et al., 2016, p. 1478). A pilot study was then conducted with college students in a merchandising class at a Southeastern public university. Five extra points were given as an incentive. Students were asked to select the top ten restaurants that they and their families had visited together or that they were familiar with. While students were used for the pilot study, this request ensured that the list of restaurants selected for the pilot study represented options that apply to a wider age range. In total, 76 students participated in the study, and 15 restaurant chains were identified as most popular for formal data collection. During the formal data collection, a filter question was first asked to confirm that participants had indeed dined in at least one of the 15 restaurant chains within the past six months. Only participants who had done so were then given access to the formal questionnaire.

3.2. Sample and data collection

Data was collected using an online, purposive sampling survey. A consumer panel containing the target population was purchased from a well-known online research company to achieve a good representative sample. The research company sent an invitation email with the survey link to the target population. Incentives were provided by the research company to individuals who completed the survey. Since former hospitality studies have found generational differences in restaurant customers' perceptions, attitudes, and intentions (Harrington et al., 2012; Hoffrichter et al., 1999; Paxson, 2009), in order to control the potential biases of generational differences, this study tried to collect data equally from Gen Y (18–35), Gen X (36–55), and Baby Boomers (56–69). These three age groups represent the major populations from three generations. Data cleaning generated 437 valid samples from a total of 713 returned responses (see Table 1). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 69 with the average age being 46 (Gen Y: 34.6%, Gen X: 31.4%, Baby Boomers: 34.1%). Fifty-one percent of participants were females with more than 50% of them being Caucasian, followed by Hispanic and African American. About 56.8% of participants stated having at least a college education.

3.3. Measures

All the variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Appropriateness of employee dress was measured using six items in the form of semantic differential adjectives adapted from Shao et al. (2004). Six groups of semantic differential adjectives were provided following two incomplete statements regarding employee dress. After reading the statements, participants were asked to select an adjective from each group that most accurately completed the statements. Employee-brand congruence was measured using four items revised from Pounders et al. (2015). Three items, modified from Evanschitzky et al. (2011), measured customers' affective commitment to the brand. A six-item scale suggested by Gremler and Gwinner (2000) was used to measure customer enjoyable interaction, and customer-employee connection was measured using five items borrowed from Gremler and Gwinner (2000).

Table 1
Demographic summary of participants (n = 437).

Consumer Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	214	49.0
Female	223	51.0
Age		
18–35	151	34.6
36–55	137	31.4
56–69	149	34.1
Highest education		
High school graduate or lower	57	13.1
Associate degree	132	30.2
College graduate	179	41.0
Master/MBA or higher	69	15.8
Annual household income		
Less than US \$ 19,999	41	9.4
US \$20,000–US \$ 39,999	76	17.4
US \$ 40,000–US \$ 59,999	77	17.6
US \$60,000–US\$ 79,999	87	19.9
US \$80,000–US\$ 99,999	60	13.7
More than US\$100,000	96	22.0
Ethnicity		
African American	81	18.5
Hispanic	83	19.0
Asian	26	5.9
Caucasian/White	231	52.9
Other	16	3.7

Both employee aesthetic trait and customers' fashion style personality were measured with three items modified from Tsaour et al. (2015) and Li et al. (2012) respectively. In addition, two items for gratification motivation and three items for social motivation were adapted from Arnold and Reynolds (2003). Since items of gratification and social motivations were formerly used for general shopping values (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003), these items were modified in this study for full-service restaurant settings. We developed four multiple choices questions to determine which restaurant responders has visited most recently, as well as their frequency of dining at the restaurant, the length of time of interacting with the service employee at the restaurant, and the length of time they spent in the restaurant overall. Table 2 shows the breakdown of frequency of visits. According to Table 2, 15.1% selected Olive Garden, 11.7% selected IHOP, 10.1% selected Buffalo Wild Wings, 9.4% selected Chili's Grill & Bar, and 9.2% selected Red Lobster.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model

Mplus 7.0 was used for data analysis. 437 valid samples were

Table 2
Participants' selected most recently visited full-service restaurant brands.

Full-Service Restaurant Brands	Frequency	Percentage (%)
California Pizza Kitchen	13	3.0
Olive Garden	66	15.1
P.F. Chang's China Bistro	9	2.0
The Cheesecake Factory	35	8.0
Chili's Grill & Bar	41	9.4
Buffalo Wild Wings	44	10.1
Outback Steakhouse	36	8.2
BJ's Restaurants	13	3.0
IHOP	51	11.7
Carraba's Italian Grill	17	3.9
Cracker Barrel	25	5.7
Texas Roadhouse	33	7.6
Waffle House	14	3.1
Red Lobster	40	9.2
Total	437	100

divided into two groups. 218 samples were used for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and the other 219 samples were used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The factor structure was first examined utilizing EFA with a varimax rotation. To be expected, nine factors with a total of 35 items were established according to the screen plot examination, with all EFA factor loading ranging from 0.583 to 0.968. CFA was then employed to test the measurement model. The analysis result demonstrated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=524)} = 1439.736, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.75; RMSEA = 0.063; CFI = 0.914; TLI = 0.902; SRMR = 0.055$) (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2010). Furthermore, all CFA loadings exceeded 0.5, suggesting convergent validity (Kline, 2010). Similarly, all AVEs for each measurement were greater than 0.5, indicating that indicators were able to represent each construct respectively (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Additionally, discriminant validity was achieved as all AVEs that ranged from 0.573 to 0.861 were greater than squared correlations between the constructs ranging from 0.004 to 0.393 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Moreover, Cronbach's alpha estimates were all greater than 0.7, which confirmed the reliability of each construct (Cortina, 1993; see Table 3 and Table 4).

4.2. Hypotheses test

Each of the proposed hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) utilizing Mplus 7.0. The statistical results exposed a good model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=541)} = 1461.073, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.701; RMSEA = 0.062; CFI = 0.913; TLI = 0.905; SRMR = 0.077$). Coefficients reported as follow are unstandardized coefficients. Fig. 2 shows standardized coefficients with standardized errors. The outputs demonstrate that appropriateness of employee dress was positively associated with employee-brand congruence ($B = 0.319, p < .001$) and that employee-brand congruence was positively related to employee aesthetic trait ($B = 0.574, p < .001$) and enjoyable interaction ($B = 0.510, p < .001$). Therefore, H1, H3, and H4 were all supported. Furthermore, the positive influence of employee aesthetic trait ($B = 0.377, p < .001$) and enjoyable interaction ($B = 0.538, p < .001$) on employee connection were both confirmed, supporting H7 and H8.

Customer-employee connection was found to relate positively to both gratification motivation ($B = 0.521, p < .001$) and social motivation ($B = 0.178, p < .001$). Customers' affective commitment to a service brand was also found to be significantly impacted by gratification motivation ($B = 0.060, p < .05$) and social motivation ($B = 0.120, p < .05$). Additionally, statistical results in regard to the indirect relationships between customer-employee connection and customers' affective commitment indicate the direct influence of customer-employee connection on customers' affective commitment to a service brand was not significant ($B = 0.084, p < .170$), but this relationship was significantly mediated by both gratification motivation ($B = .033, p < .05$) and social motivation ($B = 0.021, p < .05$). Therefore, H9 and H10 were supported.

In order to test the moderating roles of customers' fashion lifestyle personality, length of service interaction, and frequency of visit, three multi-group Chi-square difference tests were conducted. The statistical results illustrate that fashion lifestyle personality ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.378, \Delta df = 1, p < .05$) moderated the relationship between appropriateness of personnel dress and personnel-brand congruence, supporting H2. The relationships between employee-brand congruence and aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction were both moderated by the length of service interaction ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8.311, \Delta df = 2, p < .01$), supporting H5 and H6. Furthermore, frequency of visit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 19.198, \Delta df = 2, p < .001$) was found to have a significant moderating effect on both relationships, supporting H11 and H12. Fig. 2 illustrates the SEM results.

5. Discussion and implications

Focusing on service employees' dress at full-service restaurants, this

Table 3
Measurement model results.

Constructs/Indicators	Std. loading	t-value	AVE	Cronbach's α
Appropriateness of Personnel Dress (APD)	.727	29.63***	.699	.918
To me, what the employee is wearing looks:	.818	45.10***		
Wrinkled—Pressed	.873	62.20***		
Inappropriate—Appropriate	.828	47.51***		
Dirty—Clean	.880	65.17***		
Nonprofessional—Professional	.728	29.66***		
Sloppy—Neat				
The employee dresses (very unsuitably—very suitably) for his/her job				
Personnel-Brand Congruence (PBC)	.711	25.18***	.654	.843
The restaurant and employee are very much alike.	.826	38.53***		
The employee can identify with the restaurant.	.724	25.98***		
I feel there is a personal connection between the employee the restaurant.	.791	33.97***		
The restaurant is consistent with the employee.				
Affective Commitment (AC)	.828	41.01***	.750	.857
I take pleasure in being a customer of this restaurant	.845	44.65***		
I have feelings of trust toward this restaurant	.787	34.23***		
This restaurant is the operator that takes the best care of their customers				
Enjoyable Interaction (EI)	.774	35.84***	.573	.902
In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoy interacting with this employee	.843	51.29***		
This employee creates a feeling of “warmth” in our relationship	.833	48.33***		
This employee relates well to me	.777	36.39***		
In thinking about my relationship, I have a harmonious relationship with this person	.682	24.47***		
This employee has a good sense of humor	.755	32.83***		
I am comfortable interacting with this employee				
Personal Connection (PC)	.818	45.26***	.721	.922
I feel like there is a “bond” between this employee and myself	.831	48.12***		
I look forward to seeing this person when I visit the restaurant	.895	73.29***		
I strongly care about this employee	.842	51.08***		
This person has taken a personal interest in me	.816	44.13***		
I have a close relationship with this person				
Aesthetic Trait (AT)	.842	44.13***	.615	.857
The employee's uniform is sophisticated	.867	48.93***		
The employee's uniform is stylish	.744	29.42***		
The employee's uniform make them look professional				
Fashion Lifestyle Personality (FLP)	.908	70.94***	.850	.916
I have good taste in coordinating colors and clothing designs	.927	78.07***		
I have a good eye for selecting clothes	.825	46.45***		
I tend to consider overall clothing coordination				
Gratification Motivation (GM)	.933	21.29***	.681	.832
When I am in down mood, I dine at this restaurant to make me feel better	.764	18.76***		
To me, dining at this restaurant is a way to relieve stress				
Social Motivation (SM)	.794	31.01***	.694	.816
I dine at this restaurant with my friends or family to socialize	.837	34.40***		
I enjoy socializing with others when I dine at this restaurant	.698	22.60***		
Dining at this restaurant with others is a bonding experience				

Note: *** = $p < .001$.

study proposed and examined a research model to demonstrate how service employees' dress can facilitate employee-customer interactions and customers' affective commitment for a brand. Results of this study reconfirmed the importance of managing employee appearance in the service industry (Jani and Han, 2011; Ryu and Jang, 2008; Ryu and Jang, 2007; Tsaor et al., 2015), and clarified the role that employee dress plays in employee-customer interactions and the development of customers' relationship with a service brand. From customers'

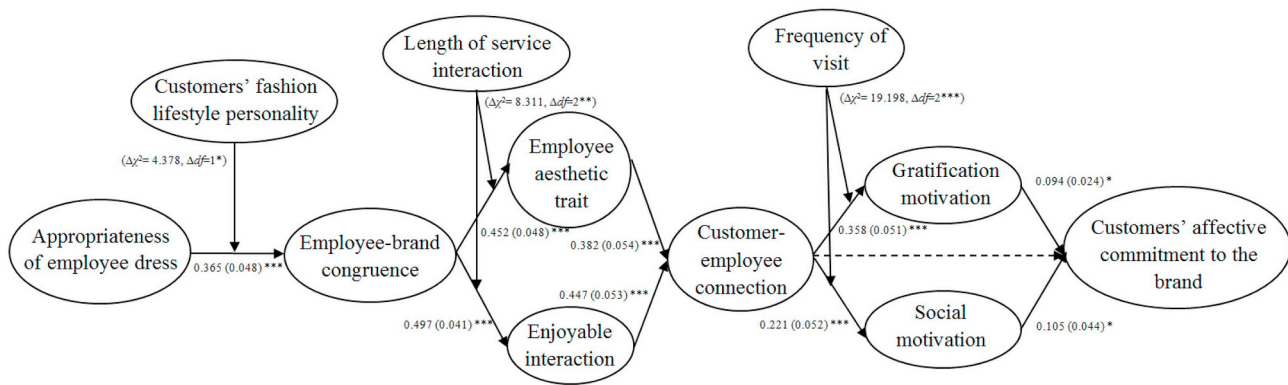
perspectives, results of this study confirmed the positive effect of appropriateness of service employee dress on employee-brand congruence; moreover, this positive effect is stronger for those customers with a higher level of fashion lifestyle personality. Specifically, for customers with more fashion-oriented attitude in their daily life, the influence of appropriate service employee dress on employee-brand congruence becomes more salient.

Regarding the domain of employee-customer interactions,

Table 4
Correlation table.

Constructs	\sqrt{AVE}	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. APD	.836	4.36	.71	1.00								
2.PBC	.809	3.71	.68	.293**	1.00							
3. AC	.866	3.84	.76	.381**	.569***	1.00						
4. EI	.757	3.66	.67	.389**	.582***	.636***	1.00					
5. PC	.849	2.83	.84	.210**	.349**	.511***	.607***	1.00				
6. AT	.784	3.37	.81	.423**	.370**	.538***	.586**	.594***	1.00			
7. FLP	.922	3.75	.83	.108*	.187**	.203**	.204**	.170**	.160**	1.00		
8. GM	.928	2.94	1.02	.017	.178**	.262**	.181**	.321**	.260**	.235**	1.00	
9. SM	.833	3.96	.66	.185**	.289**	.353**	.358**	.159**	.232**	.304**	.283**	1.00

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$.



Note: 1. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

2. The dotted line represents an insignificant path

3. Standardized estimates with standard errors in parentheses

Fig. 2. The SEM results.

employee-brand congruence significantly and positively relates to both employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction, and these two positive relationships are strengthened by the moderating effect of length of service interaction. In general, when customers interact with service employees for a longer period of time, the importance of employee-brand congruence becomes more crucial to customers' perception of employees' aesthetic traits as well as their feeling of enjoyment toward the interaction. In addition, the results confirmed that both employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction significantly enhance the customer-employee connection, indicating that when customers recognize the aesthetic traits of service employees and enjoy the process of interacting with them, it is more likely that a deeper connection is developed between the customer and the employee.

As predicted, customer-employee connection is found to be associated with both gratification motivation and social motivation. Moreover, the frequency of visit is found to be a significant moderator to strengthening the effects of customer-employee connection on both gratification motivation and social motivation. With regard to establishing customers' affective commitment to a service brand, this study confirmed the positive effects of both gratification motivation and social motivation. It also verified that satisfying customers' needs for both gratification and social motivation has mediating effects on the relationship between customer-employee connection and customers' affective commitment to a service brand. This result indicates that customers' gratification and social motivations build a bridge for the relationship between customer-employee connection and customer's commitment to a service brand. Theoretical implications and practical implication of these study results are addressed in the following sections.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Results of this study contribute several theoretical implications to the current literature. First, this study expands the understanding of the role of service employee dress in service encounters. The lack of knowledge about the effects of dress in the service industry has been pointed out in several recent studies (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Choi and Mattila, 2016; Kim and Baker, 2017). While Bonaccio et al. (2016) summarized various nonverbal behaviors worth exploring in the workplace, this study further identifies service employee dress as a key driver to improve both employee-customer interaction and the customer-brand relationship by using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and empirical findings from appearance-related social comparisons (Halliwell, 2012; Patrick et al., 2004) as a foundation. Different

from recent findings about how employees' appearance influences "customer-employee" rapport (Kim and Baker, 2017), this research model systematically demonstrates that the effects of service employee dress may shift from employee-to-brand (employee-brand congruence) and customer-to-employee (customer-employee connection) to customer-to-brand (customers' affective commitment to the brand).

Second, this study highlights the importance of customers' fashion lifestyle personality on enhancing the effect of perceived employee dress. Although social comparison theory relates to potential individual differences in personality as it influences social comparison (Festinger, 1954), former studies on body image based on this theory do not closely examine individuals' appearance-related or fashion-related personalities (Halliwell, 2012). In researching the impact of employee dress on the customer-brand relationship, this study is one of the first to our knowledge to apply the findings and concepts from the fashion academy into service research. The measurement of customers' fashion lifestyle personality could serve as a model for future research on issues related to aesthetic labor and employee dress.

Third, based on social comparison theory within the full-service restaurant setting, testing the proposed moderating effects of (1) length of service interaction and (2) frequency of visit provides insightful implications. The moderating role of length of service interaction explains how to strengthen customers' perceived employee aesthetic trait and enjoyable interaction which provides insight about employees-customer interactions. The moderating effects of frequency of visit further explains how the key two paths (i.e. satisfying customers' gratification motivation and social motivation) create affective commitment to a service brand. Expanding the findings of former studies about employee dress which have seldom examined the moderating effects of these situational factors (Harvey et al., 2014; Kim and Baker, 2017; Pounders et al., 2015; Tsaour et al., 2015), this study addresses the mechanisms of these key variables.

5.2. Practical implications

This study also contributes practical implications about the management of service encounters. First, restaurant managers and managers in other service sectors will need to understand that employee dress is not limited to employee uniform and hairstyle. Findings of this study demonstrate that an emphasis on aesthetic labor should focus on the appropriateness of employee dress, especially that dress should increase customers' sense of employee-brand congruence. That is, employee dress guidelines should be based on core values and positioning of the service brand. For example, a restaurant brand that does not have

employees' uniform can still develop customers' perceive employee-brand congruence using appropriateness of employee dress by setting employee appearance guidelines to establish a brand-specific style.

On the other hand, service interactions can be designed to strengthen customers' perceived employee aesthetic traits and enjoyable interaction. Service managers will need to analyze their service delivery procedures and how their customers experience the service brand from beginning to end in order to discern how to bring more pleasure to the service interaction. Special attention should be paid to the aesthetic traits of employee dress. In addition to uniforms, service managers will need to consider other aspects of employee dress in order to enhance the employee aesthetic trait and create opportunities for employees to interact with customers. Based on the real service contexts of employee-customer interactions, service managers should consider improving body supplements of employee dress. For example, full-service restaurants positioning for high-tech experience could add LED lights, digital screens, or other high-tech elements to service employees' body supplements. Through such design, service employees could engage in technological interactions with the customers at the dining tables, where such interactive systems may be installed as well. Another example is that special watches could be designed for service employees. Every time a service employee enters a loyalty membership number of a customer, the watch automatically reports the customers' preferences and interests from previous dining records.

Moreover, this study shows that after building the customer-employee connection, restaurant managers should design plans that satisfy customers' gratification motivation (e.g., making customers happy or helping them release emotional stress) and social motivation (e.g., providing chances for socialization or offering a bonding experience), in order to win customers' affective comments to the restaurant brand. Following the former implication regarding adding high-tech elements to service employees' body supplements, restaurant owners may also consider developing apps to gamify their customers' dining experience. An app could be developed to let customers interact with either other customers in the same restaurant or the restaurant employees. Through such an app, it could encourage customers to interact with other customers with similar fashion lifestyle personality at the same restaurant, offering a joyful bonding experience.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Limitations exist in this study that should be addressed in future research. First, data collection for this study was conducted in the U.S., and case brands (all full-service restaurants) are mostly American restaurant brands; therefore, findings of this study may not be applicable to cross-cultural service encounters, such as restaurants located at international airports or in a different country. Cultural issues should be included in future studies to examine the outcomes of service employee dress on different cultural values as people from different cultures may judge and respond to the appearance of service employees differently. In cross-cultural service encounters, potential service failures and mistakes can occur because of misunderstanding among cultures. Second, this study used cross-sectional data for analysis. Causal relationships among variables in this research framework should be determined through further longitudinal studies that will complement the results of this study. Third, in terms of service research at restaurants, there is a lack of analysis on how customers would behave differently based on their dining purposes. Individuals' in-home dining, restaurant visits within local communities, and dining during travel provide different mechanisms of situational factors (e.g., knowledge of food, menu selection, expectations for dining) and interpersonal factors (e.g., types of service interactions, communication with service employees, contacts with other customers). Future studies focusing on restaurant services should further explore the differences among dining settings, and test whether or not customers' attitudes and behaviors differ in different dining contexts.

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