



Aesthetic labor and visible diversity: The role in retailing service encounters



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ABSTRACT

This study endeavors to investigate the role of the appearance of customer service staff in forming customer perceptions. It also aims to fill the gap in existing knowledge by exploring the notion of visible diversity, for example, ethnicity, age, gender and perceived sexual orientation of store staff in service encounter from the customers' perspective. The study adopted a qualitative, inductive approach in data collection using a sample of 30 customers from leading Australian fashion retailers. This study identifies three themes explaining customer perceptions of staffs aesthetic labor, namely mirroring appearance, matching appearance, and charming appearance, which can be explained by the social identity theory, role theory and aesthetic capital. It is found that staff appearance might affect customers' intention to revisit but does not guarantee sales. In addition, based on signaling theory, the results show that age, ethnicity, gender and perceived sexual orientation of the retail store staff are meaningful factors in determining customers' attitudes and behavior. This study is one of the first that takes aspects of visible diversity into account along with aesthetic labor and customer experience in a retail setting.

1. Introduction

Retailing is one of the most influential sectors in the economy with \$164.6 billion revenue in Australia (Carré and Tilly, 2008). The Australian retail industry employs approximately 1.2 million workers, with an estimated 50% of the population having retailing experience at some point during their career (Farfan, 2016; SDA, 2017). Clothing, footwear, and personal accessories industries are among the largest retail employers (Misra, and Walters, 2016) and represent approximately 23.3% of subdivision revenue (IBISWorld, 2017). Service providers need to compete on various aspects of service performance and delivery in order to satisfy customers and to retain them. One of the key successful factors for retailers lies in front-line employees (Thaichon et al., 2014). It is believed that good customer service can make customers become more delighted with their purchase and willing to return in the near future (Thaichon et al., 2014). Recent studies in service research confirm that service encounter (i.e. the interpersonal encounter between a customer and a company's employee) is critical for the overall success of the company (Söderlund and Julander, 2009). Lovelock and Yip (1996) considered service as a type of theater in which service staff is the performers and customers are the

audiences. In fact, employees represent the specific characters of the organizations, communicating the brand image and behaving as a kind of "living signboard" (Tsaour et al., 2015). Furthermore, customers tend to rely on their evaluations of the service employee during interpersonal interactions to judge the firm's overall performance (Koernig and Page, 2002). In line with this thinking, Kim (2014) asserts that frontline staff interact with customers through face-to-face contact, and play an important part in the customers' evaluation of service quality (Tsaour et al., 2015). In addition, previous research has indicated that physical appearance, attractiveness, and a professional manner of front-line staff influence customers' emotions, feelings, and attitudes, and hence, their behavioral intentions (Liu and Jang, 2009). Given the nature and characteristics of its services, retailing remains one of the main areas in which the effects of physical attractiveness are likely to exist (Söderlund and Julander, 2009).

Furthermore, research has confirmed the important role of visible characteristics of staff in the service encounter. In fact, signaling theory indicates that unobservable qualities can be conveyed by observable characteristics, for example, age, gender, and ethnicity, hence diminishing information asymmetry between the interacting individuals (Spence, 2002). On this basis, provided that gender patterns occur in

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retail employment (Johansson, 2016). Chang et al. (2015) propose that the observable characteristic of being male or female can be an unconscious and authentic sign for unobservable qualities in retailing settings. Fischer et al. (1997) indicate that gender stereotypes, or in-group partiality, may happen and impact perceived service quality. In other words, in a certain service context, female customers expect to be better served by females, and males by males (Chang et al., 2015). Moreover, the effects of age on salesperson–customer relationships have been a significant topic in the marketing and sales literature (Homburg and Giering, 2001; Gerlach et al., 2016). It is found that salespersons' age act as an antecedent or moderator of salesperson–customer encounters (Landau and Werbel, 1995; Gerlach et al., 2016).

Extant research has predominantly focused on age and gender differences among consumers (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2013), with a paucity of studies on visible characteristic among service staff in retailing (Chang et al., 2015; Luoh and Tsaor, 2009; Nickson et al., 2005). Moreover, the impact of aesthetic labor on customers' emotions and behavioral intentions has been little investigated (Tsaor et al., 2015). Hence, this paper seeks to contribute to knowledge by exploring the increasing importance of having employees with not only the “right” attitudes but also “right look” and “sound right” in the retail service encounter. This study is also one of the first that take broad categories of observable characteristics along with aesthetic labor and customer experience in the retail setting into account. This study aims to answer the following question: Are aesthetic characteristics and visible diversity of staff important to customers in retail service encounter and in what ways? The objectives of this study are: first, to evaluate the role of the aesthetic labor in service encounter and customer retention; and second, to investigate customer perceptions of visible diversity, particularly age and gender, of the front line staff. The paper begins by reviewing the service encounter and aesthetic labor literature. This includes how a service worker's appearance and visible characteristics may influence a customer's perception of the retail service encounter and customer retention. Next, the research design is explained followed by a discussion of the findings which have emerged from interviews with retail customers in Australia. The paper concludes with implications of the research as well as limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. The retail service encounter

Service encounter involves dyadic interactions between service providers' personnel and customers (Asaari and Karia, 2003). In the retail sector, customer service begins once a customer arrives outside a shop, and continues after the transaction is completed, in the form of after-sales service (Carragher et al., 2010). The communication between a service employee and a customer is interactive and reciprocal (Solomon et al., 1985). This is a sophisticated process in which consumers assess the level of service provided by the companies, service staff, and even the communications with other customers (Jo Bitner et al., 1997). On this basis, customers form perceptions of a service provider (Keng et al., 2007), which have an impact on their satisfaction, loyalty, repurchase intentions, and positive word-of-mouth (Bitner et al., 2000).

While customer service staff can directly generate revenue for a retailer by closing a sale, the way a company addresses and handles customer requests, questions, and complaints can be a strong point of differentiation (Kyj, 1987). Although a retail offering typically consists of both service activities and tangible goods (Gummesson, 1994), customer service interactions still “exert a major influence upon patronage decisions and retail image” (McGoldrick, 1990, p. 322). The nature of these interactions combined with other retail components such as physical facilities, merchandise, post-transaction satisfaction, and store atmosphere affect customer purchase decision and differenti-

ate the retailer from its competitors (Naylor and Frank, 2000). In general, superior service experience is the result of the unique interaction between the customer and the service worker (Solomon et al., 1985), being a fundamental driver of competitive advantage in the retail industry (Brohman et al., 2009). For this reason, customer service has become an integral strategic objective for many businesses (Oloruntoba and Gray, 2009). Retailers who effectively distinguish themselves on customer service as one of the key strategic dimensions have a better chance of survival and a better opportunity to be profitable in the long run (Erevelles et al., 2003).

Besides, service workers provide non-verbal cues to customers regarding the nature of the service (Zeithaml et al., 2010). Such cues include their dress, personal appearance, attitudes, and behavior, all of which can influence customers' perceptions of the service (Zeithaml et al., 2010). Service workers are expected to have pleasant voices, polite manners, and pay attention to customers' needs and concerns (Carragher et al., 2010). For example, good customer service can be achieved by employing extrovert and courteous front-line staff who have agreeable personalities, and a high level of empathy with customers (Di Mascio, 2010; Hurlley, 1998). Therefore, the belief that service work ‘requires a unique set of competencies’ is prevalent in the literature (Varca, 2004, p. 458). This view is also supported by Leelakulthani and Hongcharu (2011) and Abdolvand et al. (2006) who suggest that businesses should not only focus on product quality but also pay attention to customer service and customer support to enhance overall quality perceptions. As such, service providers need to proactively invest in improving the quality of customer service, in order to gain an advantage over their competitors (Asaari and Karia, 2003).

2.2. Service worker appearance and its role in the retail service encounter

In the retail environment, service staff is considered to perform “aesthetic labor”, defined as “a supply of ‘embodied capacities and attributes’ possessed by workers” (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 4). More specifically, the term ‘aesthetic labor’ refers to the “recruitment, selection, development, and deployment of physical and presentational attributes geared towards looking good and sounding right” (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007, p. 104). Pettinger (2004) highlights that “aesthetic” implies beauty and attractiveness. Nickson et al. (2005) state that ‘aesthetic labor’ also includes the dress style, voice, accent, and physical looks of the customer service officers. Aesthetic labor is part of employees' soft skills defined as ‘non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular social contexts (Hurrell et al., 2013). The recently significant growth of interactive services firms has prompted more research efforts in the ‘embodied’ nature of aesthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Witz et al., 2003; Timming, 2016).

Witz et al. (2003) assert that the concept of aesthetic labor opens up an opportunity of assessing how physical appearance of front-line staff in service interactions is valued and can be turned into economic capital. In front-stage performance with customer presence (Goffman, 1959), these qualities of employees help to enhance the service encounter process and reflect a particular form of social and cultural capital called aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010). In fact, there is evidence of bias and partiality on the basis of ‘physical capital’ or ‘aesthetic capital’ (Timming, 2016). Anderson et al. (2010) refer to aesthetic capital as traits of beauty that are considered as resources bringing advantage, opportunity, and prosperity. They could be a face, body, clothes and fashion. Aesthetic capital is a relational construct, similar to other capital constructs such as cultural capital, and is best examined within a group of people such as between customers and service staff. It is found that being beautiful and attractive is usually associated with a higher social value, which can be traded for material and immaterial things at all social hierarchies (Callan et al., 2007). In particular, beauty and attractiveness can help to secure more friend-

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