The effect of flight attendants' physical attractiveness on satisfaction, positive emotion, perceived value, and behavioral intention

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1. Introduction

In the 1960s, most U.S. airlines required flight attendants to be female, younger than age 32 and single (Newsweek, 2018). A classified ad for flight attendants published in the *New York Times* in 1966 read, "A high school graduate, single (widows and divorcees with no children were considered), 20 years of age (girls 19 1/2 may apply for future consideration), 5′2" but no more than 5′9," weight 105–135 lb. in proportion to height and have at least 20/40 vision without glasses." Eastern Airlines ran a magazine advertisement that many people would now find objectionable if not offensive (Frauenfelder, 2014): "Sure, we want her to be pretty … don't you? That's why we look at her face, her make-up, her complexion, her figure, her weight, her legs, her grooming, her nails, and her hair." However, this changed in the late 1960s when demand for women's equality, equal opportunity, and the civil rights movement made these hiring standards illegal in the U.S.

In contrast, many countries in Asia do not have such anti-discrimination laws. Asian carriers continue to recruit flight attendants who are young, attractive, and who maintain a certain height-to-weight ratio (Leff, 2018). It seems that they hold strongly to the belief that physical attractiveness of flight attendants plays an important role in service provision. According to Skytrax World Airline Awards (*New York Daily News*, 2013), eight of the top 10 airlines boasting the best cabin crews were from Asia. In addition, they recognized flight attendants for Asian airlines as the friendliest, most helpful, and most efficient in the world (*New York Daily News*, 2013). Thus, we wondered

whether their beauty was a factor.

Numerous scholars have explored the role of physical attractiveness in the hospitality context, yet there is no precise definition of the term. In this paper, we define "physical attractiveness" as an overall predisposition towards a person which is primarily influenced by the first impression that someone makes. The literature has demonstrated that physical attractiveness has a significant impact on customers' evaluation of service, including salespersons' performance (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999), organizational behavior (Frieze, Olson, & Russell, 1991; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985), advertisement effectiveness with human ad models (Julander & Söderlund, 2005), as an avatar on websites (Holzwarth, Janiszewski, & Neumann, 2006), teacher performance (Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006), positive emotion (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988), and customer satisfaction (Söderlund & Julander, 2009). Till and Busler (2000) argue that physical attractiveness is likely to have a significant impact on customers' emotions, perceived value, and satisfaction, which might then lead to positive behavioral intention.

Research on the effect of the physical attractiveness of service workers on aspects of service evaluations has not been neglected. Söderlund and Julander (2009) demonstrated that in a scenario-based experiment, the most attractive flight attendants produced the most customer satisfaction. Other studies in the service context, however, have not empirically examined the effect of attractiveness of flight attendants on airline customers' perceived value and satisfaction, both of which have been considered critical determinants of behavioral
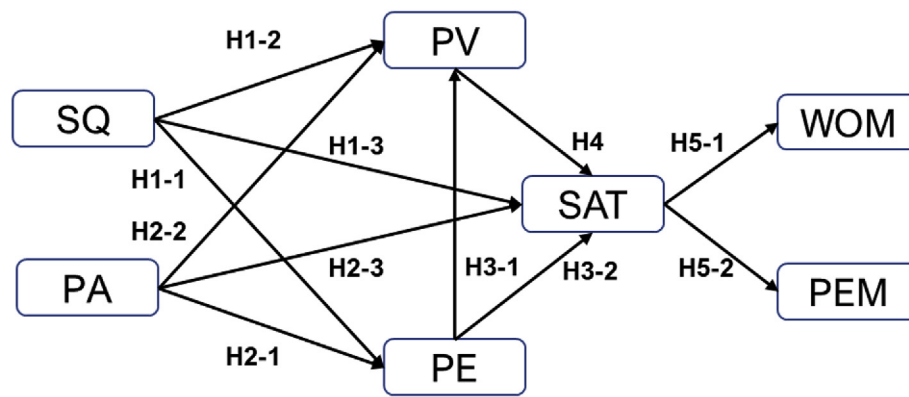
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Note: SQ= service quality; PA=physical attractiveness; PE=positive emotion; PV=perceived value; SAT=satisfaction;
WOM=word-of-mouth; REP=repurchase intention

Fig. 1. The proposed model.
Note: SQ = service quality; PA = physical attractiveness; PE = positive emotion; PV = perceived value; SAT = satisfaction; WOM = word-of-mouth; REP = repurchase intention.

intention (Petrick & Backman, 2002; Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012; Tam, 2000). Besides, even though hospitality studies (e.g., Ali, Amin, & Cobanoglu, 2016; Ali, Amin, & Ryu, 2016; Hyun & Kang, 2014; Lin, 2010) have shown that customers' emotional states and behaviors are significantly influenced by environmental stimuli, the impact of front-line employees' physical attractiveness on customers' emotional states has not yet been fully explored.

To fill this research gap, we modified and extended the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) in the following ways. We added both environmental (i.e., physical attractiveness) and non-environmental stimuli (i.e., service quality); then we incorporated the potential links (i.e., perceived value and customer satisfaction) between customer emotional states and behavioral intentions. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of two stimuli (i.e., physical attractiveness and service quality) on key output variables of customer service evaluation through the mediation of positive emotions using the physical attractiveness of flight attendants for Asian carriers (Fig. 1). This proposed model contributes to the literature of the SOR model, service management, and customer experience.

Central to this study is the effect of physical attractiveness in inducing customers' emotional states and behaviors, because appearance has been an important factor in the recruitment of flight attendants by Asian carriers. Admittedly, not all individuals are physically attractive, and managerial decisions based solely on an applicant's appearance can be controversial. We contribute to the understanding of this issue by revealing the mechanism through which physical attractiveness exerts its impact in order to describe the managerial implications of manipulating service workers' professional appearance and attractiveness.

There is an abundance of research on how physical environment influences customers' service experiences (e.g., Ali, Amin, & Cobanoglu, 2016; Han & Ryu, 2009; Lin, 2010). Of note is the extended scope of environmental elements to include employees (Ryu & Jang, 2007) or service providers (Wang & Mattila, 2015), due to their critical importance in service encounters. However, current studies tend to examine the combined effect of service providers with other environmental cues, instead of focusing on frontline employees. In other words, there is insufficient research on which specific attribute of service workers interacts with customer service evaluations. This study thus sheds light on the role of attractiveness. In the few empirical studies that tested the relationship between the attractiveness of service providers and customer satisfaction, the results are inconsistent, with some identifying a significant relationship (Söderlund & Julander, 2009) and

others finding an insignificant one (Koernig & Page, 2002). Thus, it is important to look more closely at the potential link between these two constructs by incorporating positive emotions as a mediator as supported by the SOR model.

2. Literature review

2.1. Physical attractiveness

Nonverbal communication" is defined as body language, which include "eye contact, posture, gesture, smile, and inter-personal distance" (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000, p. 386). Almost 70% of all interpersonal communication is nonverbal (Barnum & Wolniansky, 1989; Sundaram & Webster, 2000), thus making it nearly impossible for people to interact without it. This highlights the significant role of nonverbal communication in human communication, especially within a service environment where interaction between service providers and customers is crucial.

Among the various possible nonverbal cues, appearance is considered to be one of the most important criteria that people use to evaluate others (Lee, Chen, Yu, & Tsui, 2012). Hence, physical attractiveness has been identified as a major component of consumer marketing (Yin & Pryor, 2012). Caballero and Resnik (1986) defined *attractiveness* as "an attitude, an overall predisposition towards some person, and it may be conceived as a composite evaluative response based on a number of dimensions" (p.18). It is assumed that people form their first impressions of others based on physical appearance (Leung & Law, 2010). Especially when other information is limited, people tend to make judgments based on another person's age, gender, and physical attractiveness. This foundation may be based on a "cognitive response theory" which assumes that people unconsciously react to environmental stimuli cues without realizing that their evaluations of others are primarily influenced by first impressions (McColl & Truong, 2013).

The notion that "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Bersheid, & Walster, 1972) has long been discussed, perpetuating the assumption that physically attractive individuals are more socially skilled. Emphasizing the role of physical attractiveness in human communication is not a recent phenomenon. One of the earliest examples dates back to the 16th century, when Jesuit Order candidates were chosen based on their physical appearance, in addition to their communication skills (Knežević, Tomka, Bizjak, Fabjan, & Kukulj, 2015). However, back then, physical attractiveness was taken as evidence that a person was

shallow, non-egalitarian, and undemocratic (Patzer, 2012). It was only by the late 1960s that physical attractiveness in job applicants started to gain attention (Morrow, 1990). This phenomenon is what Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, and Cullen (2000) have termed "aesthetic labor." This means that firms expect their service providers to meet certain standards of beauty to be capable of performing the labor (Tsaur & Tang, 2013). Two factors considered especially important in aesthetic labor are the appearance and voice of service providers (Williams & Connell, 2010).

From the perspectives of customers in Asia, physical appearance crucial in their evaluation of a service (Knežević et al., 2015). This is especially true in the hospitality industry, because due to the intangible characteristics of service, the interactions between customers and service providers are critical (Kwong & Yau, 2002). In other words, service providers are "walking billboards" for their firms, which makes it inevitable for hospitality firms to exert some control over their service providers' physical appearance (Tsaur & Tang, 2013).

In response to this, many hospitality and service firms have clear expectations and standards regarding the physical appearance of their service providers (Knežević et al., 2015). And by adhering to these criteria, service providers conform to the aesthetic preferred by their firm and its customers (Tsaur, Luoh, & Syue, 2015). For example, firms purposefully select service providers based on whether their physical appearance meets the company image (Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009). Moreover, firms that hire service providers monitor their service providers by requiring uniforms or dress codes (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Accordingly, aesthetic labor plays a fundamental role in human resource management (Knežević et al., 2015). Through various processes of recruitment, firms select, train, develop, and transform their service providers into aesthetically skilled professionals (Tsaur et al., 2015).

A plethora of research has been conducted on physical attractiveness. Based on that research, some attributes of physical attractiveness that firms consider to be important include friendliness, extraversion, responsiveness (Bloch & Richins, 1992; Dion & Dion, 1987), voice and accent (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007), grooming, cleanliness and style of dress (Ryu & Jang, 2007). More specific attributes are clean teeth, a pleasant smile, tidy hair, and desirable body proportions (Warhurst et al., 2000). Furthermore, for flight attendants and other professions, there may be stricter standards such as having not being overweight (Spiess & Waring, 2005) or having to maintain body weight, and being young (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Tsaur et al., 2015). It is evident from these examples that firms strive to attract potential customers by creating an aesthetically pleasing image through the monitoring and training of their service providers. Previous studies have determined that physical attractiveness affects customers' perceptions and attitudes (Bitner, 1992; Knežević et al., 2015). Therefore, this paper focuses on the effects of employees' physical attractiveness on customers' perception of service quality, positive emotions, perceived value and satisfaction, which would contribute to the theoretical research in this area (Yin & Pryor, 2012).

2.1.1. The effect of physical attractiveness on positive emotions, service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intention

During a service experience, the core service is accompanied by facilitating services (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). The airline industry's core service, transportation, is the base competency in creating value (Ferguson, Paulin, Pigeassou, & Gauduchon, 1999). Facilitating services include the physical attractiveness of flight attendants and amenities. Understanding the entire service evaluation and the judgments of those service attributes assists in more efficient resource allocation and strategic development. Approaching the process with smaller, manageable elements allows for more a refined understanding and enables a firm to develop more effective service design and strategies.

Behavioral intention is a highly sought-after variable in relationship management because it is conducive to strategic planning and provides

management insight. Understanding positive emotions and being satisfied with emotional outcomes is a crucial goal for managers to achieve but something that is not easy to understand within a re-purchase intention framework (Hume & Mort, 2010). The emotional aspects of experiences are based on the subjective evaluation of the service that has been received, and has been found to be crucial in assessing customer-perceived value in experiential services (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Defining perceived service quality allows for a comprehensive understanding of the holistic service experience and its augmentations (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). Customer satisfaction is the result of service assessment and has been identified as the main predictor of behavioral intention (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000). As a mediator, emotion can also communicate and stimulate behavior, while offering implications for action (Hume & Mort, 2008). Thus far, this complex model has not been tested in an airline context, and the variables were selected as the relevant constructs for research in the airline industry.

2.2. Physical attractiveness and positive emotions

Consumption emotions are defined as customers' emotional reactions (e.g., anger, fear, joy) that guide perceptions during consumption experiences (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Mehrabian and Blum (1997) suggested that the more attractive the target, the more pleasure and arousal, and the less dominance that it produced. Their study also showed that perceptions of physical attractiveness were positively linked with positive emotions. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) and Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn, and Nesdale (1994) have both confirmed that environmental stimuli influence customers' emotional state, and that their emotional state leads to behavioral intention. However, these two studies failed to include service providers as part of the environmental stimuli by limiting themselves to built environments. Admittedly, software environments (e.g., service providers) have been largely ignored in the composition of environmental stimuli (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). One factor in the software environment is the appearance of service providers; another is how they interact with customers (Ryu & Jang, 2007; Turley & Milliman, 2000).

Due to the complexities of service environments, researchers are realizing the value of incorporating software environments when looking into the environmental stimuli of service industries. The social relationship between service providers and customers can be even more important in customers' evaluations of the firm than a hardware (built-in) environment (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). When a customer is interacting with a service provider that he or she finds attractive, that customer is likely to experience a positive emotional response (Hazlett & Hoehn-Saric, 2000). Notably, previous studies showed that service providers' physical appearance, professional manner, politeness, and neatness, all influence the emotional responses of customers, and in turn, their behavioral intentions (Ryu & Jang, 2007). Thus, based on these findings, it is logical to formulate the following hypothesis:

H2-1. Physical attractiveness has a positive effect on positive emotions.

2.2.1. Physical attractiveness and perceived value

Perceived value is defined as "a consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Perceived value is a critical factor in the long-term profitability of companies (Woodruff, 1997). According to Ryu et al. (2012), customers will patronize firms that offer higher customer-perceived value than their competitors. For example, attractive people tend to be perceived as friendlier, warmer, and more poised than less attractive people (Keh, Ren, Hill, & Li, 2013). However, customer-perceived value tends to be personal and subjective (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Numerous studies show that environmental stimuli have a positive relationship with perceived value (Bitner, 1992). Among these stimuli, physical attractiveness significantly affects perceived value. For example, Tsai, Huang, and Yu

(2012) stated that customers prefer to interact with attractive employees (Chaiken, 1979). Sundaram and Webster (2000) also proposed the notion that employees' physical attractiveness would significantly influence "customers' perceptions of friendliness, credibility, competence, empathy, and courtesy" (p. 386). This perceived value also increases when customers believe that a product and service has been touched by an attractive service provider (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2008). Thus, based on these findings, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2-2. *Physical attractiveness has a positive effect on perceived value.*

2.2.2. Physical attractiveness and customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is "a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides pleasurable consumption related fulfillment" (Oliver, 1997). Customer satisfaction is formed through customers' evaluation of a firm based on their service encounter (Bitner, 1990). The service provider is an important source of information about customers' evaluation of the firm (Söderlund & Julander, 2009). The assessment and satisfaction (liking, trusting, and perceived expertise) are maximized when the attractiveness of a service provider is congruent with the image of the service (Koernig & Page, 2002).

Several researchers have empirically tested the positive relationship between physical attractiveness and satisfaction (e.g., Ahearne et al., 1999; Riniolo et al., 2006; Söderlund & Julander, 2009). The findings indicate that a service provider's physical attractiveness leads to a higher evaluation on the part of the customer. For example, Söderlund and Julander (2009) found that customer satisfaction was significantly higher when an attractive service worker assisted customers. Gabbott and Hogg (2000) concurred that a service provider's physical attractiveness had a significantly positive influence on customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is formed through customers' evaluation of the firm based on their service encounter (Bitner, 1990). Thus, based on these past findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2-3. *Physical attractiveness has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.*

2.2.3. The effect of service quality on positive emotions, perceived value, and satisfaction

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) defined *service quality* as "global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service" (p. 16). Due to the trend from goods to services marketing in the 1980s, service quality has become an important factor in evaluations of organizational performance (Rapert & Wren, 1998). Parasuraman et al. (1985) developed a five-dimensional measurement scale called SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Based on Parasuraman et al. (1985), p. 1) service quality is more difficult to evaluate than the quality of goods; 2) the result comes from a comparison between expectations and performance; and 3) it considers the process of service delivery in its measurements.

2.2.4. Service quality and positive emotions

Previous studies have confirmed that service quality plays a key role in the formation of positive emotions about consumption (Jang & Namkung, 2009; Ladhari, 2009; Prayag, Khoo-Lattimore, & Sitruk, 2015; Wong, 2004). For instance, Jang and Namkung (2009) examined the impact of three restaurant-specific stimuli on diners' emotions. They concluded that the restaurant atmosphere and service quality are significantly related to diners' positive emotions. Similarly, Prayag et al. (2015) verified the positive link between service quality and positive emotions. Thus, based on these past findings, we arrive at the following hypothesis:

H1-1. *Service quality has a positive effect on positive emotions.*

2.2.5. Service quality and perceived value

The abundance of literature on these topics demonstrates that service quality can predict perceived value (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Chen & Hu, 2010). With service quality driving customers' perceived value, better service quality has been found to lead to better perceived value (Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2016). For example, Ryu et al. (2012) believe that the quality of food service significantly influences perceived value. And as these service quality dimensions closely relate to the tangible aspect of service, they also come to affect customers' perceived value (Keh et al., 2013). Thus, based on these past findings, we arrive at the following hypothesis:

H1-2. *Service quality has a positive effect on perceived value.*

2.2.6. Service quality and satisfaction

There is a debate over whether service quality and customer satisfaction should be viewed as similar or as different constructs (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Only a few studies have suggested that satisfaction be the antecedent of service quality (e.g., Bitner, 1990). Instead, most marketing has empirically proved that service quality leads to satisfaction (e.g., Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Jun, Yang, & Kim, 2004; Malik, 2012; Nimako & Mensah, 2013). Based on the empirical studies from four industries (banks, pest control, dry cleaning, and fast food), Cronin and Taylor (1992) found a positive relationship in path coefficients: service quality → satisfaction → purchase intention.

Similarly, Jun et al. (2004) confirmed a significantly positive relationship between online retailers' service quality dimensions (reliability, attentiveness, and ease of use) and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha, and Yun (2007) investigated the relationships between service quality and customer satisfaction and identified that three dimensions of service quality (interaction quality, physical quality, and outcome quality) have a significant influence on customer satisfaction. Jang and Namkung (2009) also found that three dimensions of service quality (product, atmospherics, and service) are vital components of customer satisfaction. Thus, based on these findings, we offer the following hypothesis:

H1-3. *Service quality has a positive effect on satisfaction.*

2.2.7. The mediating role of positive emotions on physical attractiveness, service quality, perceived value, and satisfaction

Emotion is formed from an organism tempered by responses to its environmental stimulus (Rook & Gardner, 1993). Consequently, emotion is a vital component of customers' evaluation of service. In environmental psychology, there has been an abundance of research on the relationship between environmental stimuli and individuals' behaviors. Among them, Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model is one of the earliest models that delineates the effect of environmental stimuli on one's emotional state leading to behavioral responses. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), environmental stimuli (S) provoke emotional responses (O), which lead to a customer's behavioral response (R). The main advantage of the S-O-R model is that it points out the role of positive emotions in the consumption process (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). S-O-R expects the emotional response of a customer to mediate between an environmental stimulus and a behavioral intention (Tsaur et al., 2015). In other words, customers who are influenced by environmental stimuli stimulate emotional statements.

Customers who experience positive emotions during their consumption experience are found to engage in subsequent positive behaviors (Yalch & Spangenberg, 2000). Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) S-O-R model has since been widely applied in order to examine environmental stimuli in different contexts (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Tsaur et al., 2015). Based on the S-O-R model, service providers are likely to play a crucial role in the customer service process, enabling customers to generate emotional reactions that may influence their

future behavioral intentions toward the company (Tsaur et al., 2015).

The importance of emotion on service quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction has been widely discussed in the literature (McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1988). The relationships among these constructs have been empirically tested in many studies (e.g., Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Hu, Kandampully, & Juwaheer, 2009; Kuo, Wu, & Deng, 2009). For instance, Söderlund and Julander (2009) studied the effects of physical attractiveness on customer satisfaction in relation to the mediating role of positive emotions. Their study confirmed that customers based their evaluation of the service provider on his or her physical attractiveness. This evaluation generated positive emotions that affected customer satisfaction. Dube and Menon (2000) distinguished the impact of emotions on satisfaction, associating decreases in positive emotions with stronger negative emotions. Based on these findings, we posit the following hypothesis:

H3-1a. Positive emotions positively mediate the effect of service quality on perceived value.

H3-1b. Positive emotions positively mediate the effect of physical attractiveness on perceived value.

H3-2a. Positive emotions positively mediate the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction.

H3-2b. Positive emotions positively mediate the effect of physical attractiveness on customer satisfaction.

2.2.8. Perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intention

Perceived value mediates service quality and satisfaction. Previous studies show that not only does customer-perceived value contribute to behavioral intentions, but it also acts as a mediator between other emotional responses and behavioral intentions (Ryu et al., 2012). Perceived value is a known determinant of customer satisfaction (Cronin et al., 2000; Petrick, 1999; Tam, 2000). The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction can be better illustrated when perceived value is taken into account as a mediating variable. In their empirical study of Taiwan's high-speed rail, Wu, Lin, and Hsu (2011) synthesized the effects of service quality, perceived value, corporate image, and customer satisfaction on behavioral intentions. The results indicated that service quality had a direct influence on perceived value, which then had a direct effect on customer satisfaction. The positive relationship also suggested that the improvement of the service quality and perceptions of value would likewise increase customer satisfaction. Similarly, the mediating role of perceived value can also be found in Malik's (2012) study of Pakistan's service sector, which demonstrated that perceived value is an important factor in the evaluation of customer satisfaction. Lai, Griffin, and Babin (2009) also revealed that customer-perceived value mediated the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. Thus, based on these findings, we reach the following hypothesis:

H4. Perceived value has a positive effect on satisfaction, and perceived value positively mediated the relationship between service quality and satisfaction.

Satisfaction and behavioral intention (word of mouth and repurchase intention). *Behavioral intention* is one's intention with regards to executing certain actions or behaviors toward a product or service (Ajzen, 1991), which encompasses word of mouth (WOM) and repurchase intention (Chen, Peng, & Hackley, 2008). Behavioral intentions are used to measure the likelihood of whether customers will remain with a company (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). It is important for firms to cultivate positive intentions in its customers, as intentions imply a customer's willingness to recommend the company to others through word of mouth and/or to repurchase its products or services (Han & Back, 2008; Namkung & Jang, 2007).

Warhurst and Nickson (2007) propose that the effective management of aesthetic labor can help a firm to attract customers, and

subsequently increase their behavioral intentions. Past research has revealed that employees' physical attractiveness influences customers' behavioral intentions (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). The literature also indicates that customer satisfaction is an important and reliable construct with which to predict word of mouth and repurchase intention (Choi & Chu, 2001; Petrick & Backman, 2002; Tam, 2000). For example, Ryu and Jang (2007) confirmed that when customers interact with attractive service providers who dress appropriately, positive behavioral intentions are generated. Liu and Jang (2009) also revealed that service providers who are professionally dressed conveyed higher perceptions of value, which increased their customers' positive behavioral intentions. Kim, Ng, and Kim (2009) found that customer satisfaction was positively related to positive word-of-mouth and return intention in university dining services. Based on these inferences, if customers perceive a high perceived value and feeling of satisfaction, the result would be positive behavioral intentions such as spreading positive word of mouth and cultivating repurchase intentions. We therefore arrive at the following hypotheses:

H5-1. Satisfaction can positively lead to word of mouth.

H5-2. Satisfaction can positively lead repurchase behavioral intentions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was based on items adapted from previous studies. The questionnaire was forwarded for comment to a group of six academic researchers who are familiar with consumer behavior and service marketing literature. The questionnaire was modified based on their comments and pretested with 20 graduate students who had traveled by air. To minimize ambiguity and improve readability, the respondents were briefed on the definition of physical attractiveness used in this study. They were also asked to report any difficulties that they encountered and to suggest improvements. The questionnaire includes all constructs in the proposed conceptual model. Measuring instruments for each construct were designed based on our review of the literature. The constructs were:

1. Five items of service quality (Gilbert & Wong, 2003)
2. Four items of physical attractiveness (Park, 2007; Sundaram & Webster, 2000; Tsaur & Tang, 2013)
3. Three items of perceived value (Carpenter, 2008; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006)
4. Three items of satisfaction (Carpenter, 2008),
5. Three items of positive emotion (Van Dolen, De Ruyter, & Lemmink, 2004)
6. Three items of WOM (Cronin et al., 2000; Gruen et al., 2006)
7. Two items of repurchase intention (Tsai & Huang, 2007).

Therefore, the survey instrument is adequate in terms of content validity. Respondents were asked to indicate their perception of each attribute using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

3.2. Data collection

The data were collected at an international airport in Korea by five trained student researchers. All survey respondents were intercepted on a non-random basis in the arrival areas, and for air passengers who were unable to complete and return the survey before continuing their travels, a postage-paid, pre-addressed envelope was attached to the research instrument. The envelope reassured travelers who were worried about not having the time to complete the survey before leaving the airport. A total of 556 respondents were approached, 460 surveys

were distributed, and 401 surveys (87%) were completed. Of those, 378 were used for data analysis. According to Kline (2011), the required sample size for SEM is 5 or 10 cases per perimeter and thus the study with 378 responses has a sufficient sample size for a SEM model with 23 items.

3.3. Data analysis

Demographically, slightly more respondents were married (51.2%). Male travelers slightly outnumbered female travelers, 54.3%–45.7%. In terms of age, travelers between 24 and 43 accounted for 59.9% of respondents. Most travelers fell in the monthly income brackets of $1,001 to $3,000 (47.2%), $1,000 or less (24.1%), and $3,001 to $5,000 (18.6%). The majority of participants (74.4%) had a college education or higher. More than half (54.7%) of participants were fully employed, 17.1% were university students and 16.3% were stay-at-home mothers. Of the participants, 56.4% had traveled overseas more than eight times during the 2-year period. The majority of the participants (72.2%) reported that the purpose of their trip was leisure.

The data analysis consisted of two steps. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the measurement model using the maximum-likelihood method. This study used CFA to verify the factor structure of the seven constructs and to investigate whether any significant modifications were needed. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then used to examine the proposed theoretical relationships among these constructs. The data were analyzed by SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 21.0.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the latent variables are. As seen in the table, all correlations among the latent variables were significant.

4.2. Measurement model

CFA was conducted to examine the convergent and discriminant validity. Table 2 presents the results. The measurement items were modeled as reflective indicators (Chin, 1998). For all latent constructs, the indicator variable that most closely resembled the implied concept was selected. Its parameter was set at 1 (Hayduk, 1996). The results demonstrated that all variables were significantly related to their respective constructs.

Convergent validity was supported by factor loading, construct reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Table 2, shows that all standardized factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Chin, 1998), and t-values were found to be significant ($p < 0.001$). Most loadings reached values above 0.80. Moreover, construct reliability coefficients were computed for the latent constructs. All seven constructs, ranging

from 0.84 to 0.91, far surpassed the recommended threshold value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2006). Therefore, the indicators for all seven constructs were determined to represent the underlying factors. The AVEs of all constructs ranged from 0.66 to 0.78, which exceeded the suggested 0.5 cutoffs (Hair et al., 2006).

Discriminant validity was examined using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) formula. The discriminant validity can be established only if the square root of AVE for each latent factor was greater than the construct's other correlations. Table 3 shows the correlation matrix and the square root of AVEs for each construct, indicating adequate discriminant validity.

The overall fit of the measurement models was examined based on the common key indices (e.g., Bollen, 1989; Hu & Bentler, 1998), which were chi-square (χ^2), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), non-normed fit index (NNFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (e.g., Bollen, 1989; Hu & Bentler, 1998). Specifically, the χ^2/df should be < 5, but it is sensitive to sample size (Bollen, 1989). Gatian (1994) stated that a GFI close to 0.90 is strong evidence that the model being tested fits the data very well. NFI, NNFI, and CFI should be greater than 0.90 (Bentler, 1990), and RMSEA should be smaller than 0.08 (Hair et al., 2006). The results show that the measurement model demonstrated clearly satisfactory goodness of fit indices (χ^2/df = 1.66, GFI = 0.928, AGFI = 0.904, NFI = 0.980, NNFI = 0.975, CFI = 0.980, RMSEA = 0.042).

4.3. Structural equation model

A structural equation model was used to understand the effects of physical attractiveness on satisfaction, perceived value, and repurchase intentions, and then to test hypothesized causal relationships among the variables. This model has been improved by specifying the relationships in the model, testing the model fit, making improvements if necessary, and estimating path coefficients for the final model. Table 4 shows the goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesized structural model. As indicated, the ratio of χ^2 to D/F is an accepted 1.66. The GFI was 0.926 and AGFI was 0.905. Gatian (1994) stated that a GFI close to 0.90 is strong evidence that the model being tested fits the data very well. Other indices, CFI = 0.979, RMSEA = 0.042, NFI = 0.979, and NNFI = 0.976, are excellent.

Table 4 displays the completely standardized path coefficients and t-values for the relationships in the model. Based on the significance of t-value, all hypothesized causal relationships were examined. Service quality (SQ) had a positive relationship with positive emotions (PE) ($\beta = 0.47$) and perceived value ($\beta = 0.28$), thus supporting H1-1 and H1-2, respectively. However, regarding its insignificance on structural coefficients, the hypothesis that service quality (SQ) has a positive impact on satisfaction (SAT) (H1-3) was not supported. Meanwhile, physical attractiveness (PA) was positively related to positive emotions (PE) ($\beta = 0.37$), perceived value (PV) ($\beta = 0.20$), and satisfaction (SAT) ($\beta = 0.13$), thus supporting H2-1, H2-2, and H2-3, respectively. Further, positive emotions (PE) was significantly and positively related

Table 1
Means, standard deviation, and correlation among latent variables.

Construct	Mean	Std. Dev.	PSQ	PA	PE	PV	SAT	WOM	REP
SQ	3.73	0.8	1						
PA	3.79	0.81	0.725	1					
PE	3.61	0.79	0.737	0.708	1				
PV	3.51	0.79	0.715	0.684	0.745	1			
SAT	3.53	0.76	0.644	0.697	0.807	0.784	1		
WOM	3.33	0.73	0.588	0.613	0.732	0.751	0.765	1	
REP	3.45	0.85	0.602	0.587	0.696	0.684	0.804	0.692	1

Note: SQ = service quality; PA = physical attractiveness; PE = positive emotion; PV = perceived value; SAT = satisfaction; WOM = word-of-mouth; REP = repurchase intention.

Table 2
Factor loadings, reliability, and validity of the measurement model.

Factor	Item	t-value	Standardized factor loading	Construct reliability	AVE
SQ	always willing to help		0.851	0.91	0.67
	prompt service	21.33	0.861		
	courteous	19.55	0.817		
	handle requests/complaints promptly	16.47	0.729		
	have knowledge to answer question	19.92	0.826		
PA	has an attractive appearance		0.799	0.89	0.67
	properly dressed	24.54	0.860		
	an arranged hairstyle	16.99	0.826		
	wear proper makeup	16.26	0.794		
PV	offers a good value for the price.		0.821	0.86	0.68
	provides a good return on the cost of my flight	17.88	0.820		
	Value for money	17.99	0.824		
SAT	pleased with my flight		0.845	0.89	0.73
	satisfied with my flight	21.84	0.886		
	meet my expectation	18.59	0.837		
PE	joyful		0.897	0.91	0.78
	delighted	23.77	0.865		
	happy	24.72	0.882		
REP	consider myself a loyal patron of this airline		0.883	0.84	0.73
	consider this airline as my first choice	19.06	0.824		
WOM	recommend this airline to others		0.812	0.85	0.66
	mention this airline to other quite frequently	17.85	0.845		
	recommend the airline's other products (i.e. package) to other travelers	16.32	0.781		

Table 3
Discriminant validity of the measured constructs.

Construct	AVE	PSQ	PA	PE	PV	SAT	WOM	REP
SQ	0.67	**0.818**						
PA	0.67	0.725	**0.820**					
PE	0.78	0.737	0.708	**0.881**				
PV	0.68	0.715	0.684	0.745	**0.822**			
SAT	0.73	0.644	0.697	0.807	0.784	**0.856**		
WOM	0.66	0.588	0.613	0.732	0.751	0.765	**0.813**	
REP	0.73	0.602	0.587	0.696	0.684	0.804	0.692	**0.854**

Note: PSQ = performance-based service quality; PA = physical attractiveness; PE = positive emotion; PV = perceived value; SAT = satisfaction; WOM = word-of-mouth; REP = repurchase intention. The diagonal elements (bolded) represent the square root of AVE values.

to perceived value (PV) ($\beta = 0.40$) and satisfaction (SAT) ($\beta = 0.47$), supporting H3-1 and H3-2, respectively. H4 was supported through the positive effect of perceived value (PV) on satisfaction (SAT) ($\beta = 0.38$) based on the result. Finally, as predicted, satisfaction was a strong indicator of word of mouth (WOM) ($\beta = 0.79$) and repurchase intentions (REP) ($\beta = 0.88$), supporting H5-1 and H5-2, respectively.

As indicated, two paths appeared in the estimated model:

(1) Service Quality (SQ) → Positive Emotions (PE) → Perceived Value (PV) → Satisfaction (SAT) → Behavioral Intentions (WOM and re-purchase), and
(2) Physical Attractiveness (PA) → Positive Emotions (PE) → Perceived Value (PV) → Satisfaction (SAT) → Behavioral Intentions (WOM and repurchase).

However, service quality has only an indirect effect on satisfaction through positive emotion and perceived value; physical attractiveness exerts both direct and indirect effects on satisfaction.

5. Conclusion

Although studies of customer-employee relationships have been amply investigated, there is a scarcity of empirical studies on how nonverbal communication cues influence customer-employee relationship building during service provision. This study is among the first to explore the interrelationships between physical attractiveness as a nonverbal communication cue and other critical constructs of the quality, value and satisfaction model in the airline service context. Among the nonverbal communication cues that account for 60% of interaction between customers and service providers (Riddle, 1992), passengers' emotional response to interactions with employees (i.e.,

Table 4
Standardized path coefficient and hypothesis test results.

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient	Estimate	S.E.	t-value	Outcomes
H 1-1	SQ– > PE	0.47	0.469	0.07	7.23***	Accepted
H 1-2	SQ– > PV	0.28	0.264	0.07	3.75***	Accepted
H 1-3	SQ– > SAT	−0.03	−0.031	0.06	−0.54	Rejected
H 2-1	PA– > PE	0.37	0.393	0.07	5.58***	Accepted
H 2-2	PA– > PV	0.20	0.206	0.07	2.81**	Accepted
H 2-3	PA– > SAT	0.13	0.126	0.06	2.14*	Accepted
H 3-1	PE– > PV	0.40	0.386	0.07	5.55***	Accepted
H 3-2	PE– > SAT	0.48	0.427	0.06	6.95***	Accepted
H 4	PV– > SAT	0.38	0.366	0.06	5.70***	Accepted
H 5-1	SAT– > WOM	0.79	0.734	0.05	14.24***	Accepted
H 5-2	SAT– > REP	0.88	0.994	0.06	17.82***	Accepted

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.10$; $\chi^2 = 354.99$; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.66$; GFI = 0.926, AGFI = 0.905, NFI = 0.979, NNFI = 0.976, CFI = 0.979, RMSEA = 0.042; PSQ = performance-based service quality; PA = physical attractiveness; PE = positive emotion; PV = perceived value; SAT = satisfaction; WOM = word-of-mouth; REP = repurchase intention.

physical attractiveness) is a critical factor in customers' evaluations. It is believed that matching the physical attractiveness of frontline employees to customer expectations can lead to a positive consumption experience (Keh et al., 2013; Magnini, Baker, & Karande, 2013; Shao, Baker, & Wagner, 2004) and behavior which is mediated by positive emotion. While the independent paths (e.g., physical attractiveness → positive emotions, physical attractiveness → perceived value, and physical attractiveness → satisfaction) have previously been tested, this study contributes to the understanding of customer-employee relationship building by testing a complex model that examines the effects of attractiveness simultaneously and confirms the mediating role of positive emotions. It found direct and positive effects of attractiveness on perceived value, positive emotions, and satisfaction.

Our findings provide evidence a service provider's physical attractiveness significantly improves the interaction with the customers. Customers tend to place greater value in the service provided by employees with a professional appearance; in other words, more value is added to their experience, resulting in greater perceived value (e.g., Keh et al., 2013; Sundaram & Webster, 2000; Tsai et al., 2012). Moreover, customers are more likely to be satisfied when served by attractive employees, a finding consistent with previous studies (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000; Söderlund & Julander, 2009). Worth noting here is that while attractiveness can elicit immediate favorable responses, its effect can also be strengthened when it elicits perceived value and satisfaction, which predicts positive behavioral intentions.

With regards to positive emotions, theoretically, this study contributes to the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) by identifying two stimuli of positive emotions, i.e., service quality and physical attractiveness; and by incorporating perceived value and customer satisfaction as outcomes of emotions. Unlike previous studies that focus on physical surroundings or built environments in service contexts (Bitner, 1992), this study sheds light on the effect of software environment factors, service quality, and physical attractiveness.

The effect of stimulus one (service quality) in terms of generating positive emotions is consistent with studies conducted in the restaurant context (e.g., Prayag et al., 2015; Tsaur et al., 2015). Additionally, we identified the mediating role of effective responses between service quality and perceived value, indicating that airline companies can enhance customers' perceived value when positive emotions are derived from high levels of service quality.

Stimulus two (physical attractiveness) elicits positive consumption emotions. Customers interacting with physically attractive employees are more likely to experience joy, pleasure, and excitement, which leads to a positive evaluation of their experience. Thus, emotion works links the causal relationships between stimuli to customer responses (perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intention).

This study extended the scope of the SOR model by incorporating perceived value and customer satisfaction. Some previous studies have demonstrated that customers with positive consumption emotions are more likely to repurchase and recommend the service using a direct path (e.g., Prayag et al., 2015; Ryu & Jang, 2007; Tsaur et al., 2015). However, as suggested by Prayag et al. (2015), mediating variables can be used to examine the relationship between positive emotions and behavioral intentions in order to understand the mechanisms of consumer behavior. Previous studies concentrated on restaurants where face-to-face interaction is essential and intensive, while the effect of positive emotions in the airline industry has rarely been explored. Therefore, this study incorporated perceived value and customer satisfaction in order to understand the indirect paths between positive emotions and behavioral intentions, and empirically tested interrelationships in the airline. The results show that customers in a positive emotional state are more likely to perceive a higher value and be satisfied with their travel experience, resulting in positive behavioral intentions. The positive relationship between emotions and customer satisfaction is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Ali, Amin, &

Cobanoglu, 2016; Jung & Yoon, 2011; Lin & Liang, 2011). Furthermore, we revealed that considering both cognitive and emotional responses when measuring customers' satisfactory experience was valuable.

In the service literature, respondents are often asked to recall an experience that was 6–12 months in the past. This may cause recall bias, a systematic error which occurs when respondents cannot remember all details of a past experience. To minimize recall bias, we used a shorter time frame (i.e., same-day on-site data collection) to collect data from passengers than the previous studies (e.g., 6 months or 12 months).

This study has the following managerial implications. Our study proposed that hiring physically attractive employees can be more profitable for service companies. The results show that physical attractiveness exerts both direct and indirect effects (through positive emotions and perceived value) on customer satisfaction, one of the most important determinants of behavioral intentions. This is partially evidenced by flight attendants employed by Asian airlines being regarded as the friendliest, most helpful, and most attentive (Logan & Matousek, 2019). Undoubtedly, the physical attractiveness of cabin crews should be acknowledged, considering their indispensable role in generating positive emotions, increasing perceived value and customer satisfaction, and leading to post-purchase behavioral intentions within the airline industry.

However, despite its proven importance in relation to customer satisfaction, physical attractiveness should not be the only criterion for the recruitment of flight attendants. It may even be illegal or unethical to recruit employees based only on their appearance. Instead, various controllable attributes of physical attractiveness can be cultivated in human resource management and customer experience management. Airline companies should allocate financial resources to refining the preferred physical image of its crew members. A flight attendant's attractiveness can be equated with professional appearance (e.g., smile, pleasant tone of voice, clean uniform; makeup and good grooming) instead of beauty.

Employees' physical attractiveness can be manipulated through training and service manuals after hiring. Companies may need to identify those attributes that are most significantly linked to the evaluation of physical attractiveness, and then prioritize those attributes. Airline companies can provide guidelines or even pictures to illustrate their preferred employee image, which makes it easier for employees to monitor their professional appearance. For instance, Singapore Airlines establishes specific and strict standards of grooming, including five acceptable hairstyles. Their flight attendants can reproduce their signature look after completing designated training courses. Some other Asian airline carriers have strict guidelines on makeup, for instance, permitting only red lipstick from a particular brand. Additional training can also cover the intrapersonal skills necessary to ensure that employees are professional, friendly, approachable, and helpful. For their part, managers can identify uniform designs (e.g., fashionable, modern, authentic, cultural) to ensure that their employees' appearance is consistent with the brand image. It is worth noting that all of these efforts can be completed with the assistance of professional image consultants.

Airline companies should educate flight attendants on the importance of their professional appearance and its impact on the bottom line. Employees should be motived to maintain physical attractiveness through subsidies or reward/recognition programs. Nuralia Mazlan, a flight attendant for Air Asia, says that in addition to undergoing training not only for safety and excellent cabin service, she receives a grooming allowance.

Tsaur and Tang's (2013) study suggested different ways to reduce the burden of aesthetic labor on frontline employees in the hospitality industry, such as refining the training content and reducing the pressure of internal supervision. It would be encouraging if employees' efforts in these areas could be rewarded in their performance assessment. It should also be noted that the actions taken to improve employees' physical attractiveness does more than just please customers. Carriers

can stand out from their competitors by making customers aware of their efforts to cultivate attractiveness, which generates positive emotional connections with customers.

Another critical focus of the managerial implications of the study lies in generating positive emotions, which mediates the effects of environmental stimuli and customer responses. Our study showed that well-designed and accurate service by attractive employees can elicit positive consumption emotions, which sheds light on the directions that airline managers can work toward with regards to service quality and physical attractiveness. This result provides critical managerial implications, because compared to the hard environment (e.g., the airplane), the attractiveness of flight attendants and service quality can be improved. Our study also showed that nonverbal methods have a significant role in generating positive emotional responses when communicating with customers. It is thus suggested that the effect of other types of nonverbal communication be further explored. Marketers can also develop strategies (e.g., effective advertisements) that help customers recall positive emotional responses when they return home, since positive emotion is a strong determinant of post-consumption experiences such as satisfaction and future intentions.

The importance of the positive emotion is apparent. In addition to traditional measurement tools, such as customer satisfaction, additional training programs should be developed to monitor and assess customer emotions. It is imperative to detect customers' emotions (e.g., joy, surprise, excitement and anger) and combine them with customer experience management; that is, to include both the cognitive and emotional attributes of onboard experience in customer management. By offering such training programs to cabin crews, they can enhance nonverbal communication (i.e., physical attractiveness) to respond to passengers' emotional states.

5.1. Limitations and future studies

Several research limitations provide possible directions for future studies. First, this study only empirically tested the effects of two environmental stimuli on customer emotions, and the SOR model can be investigated by incorporating more environmental stimuli. For instance, in Prayag et al.'s (2015) restaurant study, aside from service quality, stimuli such as food quality and restaurant atmosphere were identified as critical factors in positive emotions. Therefore, we suggest examining the effect of other factors such as airplane facilities, entertainment, and meals with regards to creating a pleasant flight experience.

Another limitation is related to the sampling method, as the data were only sampled from an international airport in Korea. It is imperative to collect data in different countries and at different times to reduce measurement bias and to generalize the study results. We also did not distinguish among types of travelers (e.g., long-haul vs. short-haul, domestic vs. international, low-cost vs. economy-class, and business vs. leisure). Future research needs to consider whether traveler type moderates the effect of physical attractiveness and positive emotions on post-consumption experience.

For operational considerations, we used a limited range of scales to measure physical attractiveness and did not estimate the influence of each attribute in terms of generating positive emotions. In the future, researchers can examine the effect of each component of physical attractiveness and then rank them. Similarly, the role of different emotional states, such as pleasure, arousal, and dominance (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), can be studied in terms of the post-consumption experience. Finally, we focused on positive emotions, while consumer behavior researchers (e.g., Han & Back, 2007; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Jung & Yoon, 2011; Xu, Liu, & Gursoy, 2019) have suggested that positive and negative emotions can coexist under certain circumstances. Future studies can incorporate the effect of negative emotions into the proposed model.

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