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Effects of the new COVID-19 normal on customer satisfaction: Can facemasks level off the playing field between average-looking and attractive-looking employees?

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ABSTRACT

The attractiveness of service employees can have a significant impact on customer attitudes and behaviors. While frontline employees can reduce the risk of the COVID-19 transmission and infection by wearing facemasks, doing so can also influence customers’ perceptions of employees’ attractiveness and thus affect customer satisfaction. Based on the Gestalt theory, this study explores the impact of hotel employees’ facemask-wearing on customer satisfaction through two experimental studies. The results indicate that average-looking frontline employees who wear facemasks induce high levels of customer satisfaction. However, while the impact of wearing facemasks on customer satisfaction is not significant for attractive-looking male frontline employees, attractive-looking female frontline employees who wear facemasks induce lower customer satisfaction. Customers’ perception of employees’ physical attractiveness fully mediates the effects of wearing facemasks on customer satisfaction in the case of average-looking employees. Customers’ self-perceived physical attractiveness moderates the mediated effects. Implications that can help hotel managers improve customers’ service evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic are provided.

1. Introduction

Attractive-looking employees are an important component of human capital (Hakim, 2010). They are commonly employed in the hospitality, catering, and retail industries to represent and promote products, services, and brands since employees’ physical attractiveness can have a significant influence on customers’ evaluation of their service experiences (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Lee et al., 2012). Studies have shown that physical attractiveness is a critical determinant of employee-customer rapport and can influence interpersonal interactions (Kim and Ok, 2010; Macintosh, 2009; Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Studies have also reported that employees’ physical attractiveness can positively influence customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Agthe et al., 2011; Lemay et al., 2010; Luoh and Tsaur, 2009). Furthermore, employee physical attractiveness is also reported to influence customers’ assessment of their overall service experiences (Kotler et al., 2017). Earlier studies assessed physical attractiveness based on body shape, facial features, hairstyle, skin tone, amount of body hair, and other physical traits (Bower and Landreth, 2001; Foster and Resnick, 2013). However, recent studies have suggested that overall perceptions of physical attractiveness are mainly formed based on facial features (Olson and Marshuetz, 2005; Welsh and Guy, 2009; Yeh et al., 2020).

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had both short- and long-term negative effects on society, the economy, and politics (Worldometer, 2020). Service enterprises around the world are forced to take active measures to resume work and production in an orderly manner (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Wearing facemasks has become a common phenomenon in customer-employee interaction per the WHO recommendation that facemasks should be worn to suppress transmission to save lives, and governments should encourage the public to wear facemasks when physical distancing cannot be maintained (WHO, 2020a). Facemasks can be effective in protecting healthy people (to protect themselves when in contact with an infected person) and

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controlling the source of infection (worn by the infected person to prevent further transmission) (WHO, 2020b). However, facemasks can make it harder for customers to determine the attractiveness of service employees, which can influence their assessment of service delivery and their level of service satisfaction since employees’ attractiveness can have a significant impact on customer perceptions, and their attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Customer satisfaction is critical for the sustainability of the hotel industry. It has a strong positive relationship with customer loyalty, repurchase intentions, and financial performance. Unsurprisingly, many studies over the past decades have been devoted to examining the factors that influence customer satisfaction (Assaf et al., 2015; Choi and Kandampully, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Prentice et al., 2020; Sparks and Browning, 2011; Wardi et al., 2018). While much research has concentrated on how the physical attractiveness of employees can influence customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Agthe et al., 2011; Kahle and Homer, 1985; Lemay et al., 2010; Luoh and Tsaur, 2009; Shao et al., 2004), recent studies have investigated how employees’ facial attractiveness affects customers’ perceptions and responses (Andrezewski and Mooney, 2016; Kim, 2018; Magnini et al., 2013; Pinto et al., 2020). However, even though facemasks have become an indispensable component of everyday activities and the service delivery process, the effects of facemasks on customers’ assessment of employee attractiveness and their resulting satisfaction are not known. Furthermore, whether customer characteristics influence the effects of employees’ use of facemasks on customer service evaluations has not been investigated either.

This study uses Gestalt theory to examine the effects of employees’ use of facemasks on customer satisfaction and whether facemasks can level off the differences in customer satisfaction caused by employees’ varying physical attractiveness. It, thus, extends the application of Gestalt theory to the hospitality industry. This study also examines whether customers’ self-perceived physical attractiveness moderates the relationship between employee attractiveness and customer satisfaction, further extending our understanding of the hospitality service delivery process. This study provides managers and service employees with insights into the impacts of facemasks on customers’ perceptions of employees’ physical attractiveness and customer service satisfaction.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Gestalt theory

Gestalt theory was developed by German psychologists in the early twentieth century (Koffka, 1935). It holds that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and perceptions formed based on the whole are greater than the sum of perceptions formed based on each component (Schiffman, 2001). According to Gestalt theory, consumers tend to organize and explain objects through the sensory perception process (Wagemans et al., 2012). During this process, individuals’ cognitive processing does not depend on separate assessments of specific components of a whole but instead is the result of holistic stimuli assessments (Lin, 2004). Because the theory argues that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, it may not be appropriate to study perception by decomposing customer perceptions into smaller pieces, as they may not provide an accurate overall picture of the perception itself (Schiffman, 2001). As argued by Jia et al. (2014), “one cannot visually recognize objects without perceiving the whole.” In recent years, Gestalt theory has frequently been applied in tourism and hospitality research. Studies have primarily focused on the destination image (Assaker and Hallak, 2013; da Silva et al., 2018; Josiassen and George Assaf, 2013; Line and Costen, 2017; Pike, 2016), service experience (Manhas and Tukumushaba, 2015), and brand research (Lin, 2010; Mandagi et al., 2021).

Gestalt theory holds that individuals can create and construct their perceptions of the whole based on heuristic and salient features (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001). Thus, when individuals have little stimulus information, they subconsciously transform those fragmented images into something more complete (Radford and Bloch, 2011), creating an overall impression (Lin, 2010). As argued by Reynolds (1965), consumers can construct composite images based on simple inferences, single facts, or a small amount of available information. One example of this effect is contour completion, in which the visual system determines whether two contour segments are part of a single continuous contour, and then estimates the shape of the hidden portion (Wagemans et al., 2012). Contour completion enables the viewer to estimate and fill in occluded or incomplete areas of an image and perceive it as a whole. For example, in one experiment, models whose private parts were covered were identified as nude models (Han et al., 2018). It can be seen that individuals used an “idealized” image to fill in the occluded part. This study utilizes the notion of contour completion from Gestalt theory to explain the changes in the visual perception of customers interacting with employees wearing facemasks. When a customer sees an employee wearing a facemask, the customer will complete the employee’s facial contour from the part that is not covered (such as the eyes). This suggests that customers can automatically fill in the part covered by a facemask and build a complete “idealized” image based on the visible facial features of service employees.

2.2. Employee physical attractiveness

Physical attractiveness refers to the degree to which a person is perceived to be aesthetically pleasing or beautiful/handsome based on their facial features and physical appearance (Bower and Landreth, 2001; McCroskey et al., 2006), which is a major concern in the hospitality industry (Abubakar et al., 2019; Ethyimiou, 2018; Field Joy et al., 2018; Hanks and Line, 2018; Horng and Hsu, 2020; Jaakkola et al., 2017; Tsaur et al., 2015). Employees’ physical attractiveness has a significant influence on customer-employee interactions (Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015; Welsh and Guy, 2009), which can in turn influence customers’ service evaluations (Welsh and Guy, 2009), decisions (Abubakar et al., 2019; Gueguen and Jacob, 2012), and brand image perception (Magnini et al., 2013; Wang and Lang, 2019). Earlier studies have argued that the perception of physical attractiveness is based on body shape, facial features, hairstyles, skin tone, amount of body hair, and other physical traits (Bower and Landreth, 2001; Foster and Resnick, 2013; Horng and Hsu, 2020). However, recent studies have suggested that overall physical attractiveness perception is mainly based on facial attractiveness (Olson and Marshuets, 2005; Welsh and Guy, 2009).

There are many different ways of measuring physical and, especially, facial attractiveness (Faust et al., 2018; Horng and Hsu, 2020; Li et al., 2019), as it involves individuals’ subjective perceptions (Fang et al., 2020). Studies have utilized a number of criteria such as averageness, symmetry and sexual dimorphism (Grammer and Thornhill, 1994; Rhodes, 2006), facial proportions, harmony, balance, facial skin color and skin condition (Johnston et al., 2005; Reid, 2015; Samson et al., 2010). However, perceived harmony, balance, and proportion are mainly used as the basis of aesthetics perceptions (Adams, 2013; Bakker et al., 2014; Reid, 2015). Harmony, in particular, is closely associated with consumers’ aesthetic perceptions (Horng and Hsu, 2020). Facial harmony refers to the orderly and pleasing arrangement of the various organs of the face (Peck and Peck, 1970; Reid, 2015). Facial balance refers to the appearance of the face where facial features are equal on each side in size and form, and the arrangement of various organs on the face appear in the correct proportions and standard facial angle ranges on each side of the median sagittal plane (Peck and Peck, 1970; Reid, 2015). Facial proportion refers to the comparative relations between the various organs of the face and between each organ and the facial area (Fan et al., 2012; Li et al., 2019; Mihtitnovic et al., 2014). Thus, it can be argued that employees with pleasingly harmonious, balanced, and proportionate facial traits are attractive-looking. In contrast, employees
Physical attractiveness significantly influences interpersonal interactions (Patzer, 2012; Wan and Wyer, 2015; Welsh and Guy, 2009), and especially the formation of initial impressions (Wan and Wyer, 2015). Most individuals form their first impressions of others based on physical appearance and can develop positive feelings towards attractive individuals during interactions in daily life (Ahearn et al., 1999; Villi and Koc, 2018; Wan and Wyer, 2015).

The notion that “beautiful is good” is relatively common among individuals (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000), especially when forming an initial impression (Choi et al., 2020; Wan and Wyer, 2015). Furthermore, numerous hospitality studies have shown that physically attractive employees are more popular (Frevert and Walker, 2014), and are perceived as more intelligent (Kanazawa and Kovar, 2004), more sociable and confident (Frevert and Walker, 2014), and more decisive and logical (Dipboye et al., 1975) compared to average-looking employees. These perceptions clearly reflect the phenomenon of a “beauty cognitive bias” (Johnson et al., 2010). This cognitive bias is formed due to physical attractiveness stereotypes ( Eagly et al., 1991) or the halo effect (Matey, 2016). In short, attractive-looking individuals tend to receive more positive evaluations than average-looking employees (Buunk and Dijkstra, 2011).

2.3. Hypotheses development

2.3.1. Impact of employees’ wearing facemasks on customers’ perception of the employees’ physical attractiveness

Wearing facemasks in public has become an essential part of everyday work life during the COVID-19 pandemic (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020), and represents a safe and hygienic work environment (Chu et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2020). A hotel is a place where customers and employees interact intensively, and employees are required to wear facemasks. Scholars have argued that facemasks can have a significant impact on service interactions. For example, Betteley (2020) found that the use of facemasks by employees can limit the ability of hearing-impaired customers to read facial expressions and lip-reading, which may decrease the effectiveness of nonverbal communications. The requirement that employees wear facemasks may become a common standard in the hospitality industry, which requires intensive personal interactions (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Employees wearing facemasks can have a great influence on customers’ perceptions of employees’ facial attractiveness.

The perception of physical attractiveness is formed based on perceived aesthetic value, which is a Gestalt derived from the perception of various factors and associations (Wagner, 1999) and, which is heavily influenced by individuals’ “visual preference heuristic” (Meyvis et al., 2012; Townsend and Kahn, 2014). The visual system determines whether two contour segments are part of a single continuous contour, and then estimates the shape of the covered part (Wagemans et al., 2012). Visual elements with Gestalt features such as proximity and similarity can be regarded as a whole for earlier, faster, and more accurate information processing (Pomerantz et al., 1977). When the individual perceives an external object, he does not passively accept the external stimuli, but actively integrates each element into a meaningful whole (Wagemans et al., 2012). That is, individuals complete and supplement the covered portion to create a positive and “idealized” image. Therefore, it can be inferred that when people see a face covered by a facemask, they tend to focus their gaze on the upper part of the face (hair, eyebrows, and eyes), and the brain automatically replaces the covered lower half with an “idealized” image. For example, wearing facemasks may make people look more approachable (McCormack, 2020) because customers recreate the image of the covered part of the face with an “idealized” image. Thus, wearing a facemask may make an average-looking employee more attractive to customers. However, facemasks may not have any significant impact on the perceived attractiveness of attractive-looking employees, since they already possess “idealized” features. Thus, facemasks may level off the playing field between average-looking and attractive-looking employees, because physical attractiveness is a major influence on consumers’ evaluation of service delivery (Lin, 2016). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1a. Wearing facemasks will enhance customer perception of average-looking employees’ physical attractiveness.

H1b. Wearing facemasks will not have any significant impact on customer perception of attractive-looking employees’ physical attractiveness.

2.3.2. Customer perception of employees’ physical attractiveness and customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction, “the individual’s perception of the performance of the product or service concerning his or her expectations” (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004), has been widely examined by scholars in recent years (Albayrak, 2019; Koch et al., 2020; Nunkoo et al., 2017; Oh and Kim, 2017; Zhao et al., 2019). It is believed that customer satisfaction results from the gap between results and expectations. Customer satisfaction is a key driver of behavioral outcomes such as customer loyalty, repurchase intentions, positive word of mouth, and customer citizenship behavior (Choi and Kandampully, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Prentice et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018). Hence, scholars and hotel managers desire to promote customer satisfaction.

The intangible, variable, perishable, and inseparable nature of services means that it is more difficult for customers to evaluate services before actual consumption than to evaluate commodities (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Information asymmetry is a problem associated with experience products, whose quality can only be determined after purchase and use (Ruekert and Rao, 1994). The inference theory (Huber and Mccann, 1982) would suggest that hotel employees who wear facemasks during service delivery send positive signals to customers that the hotel is taking necessary steps to ensure the health and safety of employees and customers, which can have a significant impact on customer satisfaction.

The physical attractiveness of employees can have significant positive impacts on interpersonal interactions between customers and employees (Gremier and Gwinner, 2000). Studies have also shown that the physical attractiveness of service providers can result in greater customer satisfaction and purchase intentions (Chaker et al., 2019; Soderlund, 2017; Soderlund and Julander, 2009). For instance, Gabbott and Hogg (2000) report a significant positive effect of attractive service employees on customer satisfaction. Customers are more willing to share necessary information, exhibit expected behavior, be friendly, and respond with less anger and negative reactions to service failures (Villi and Koc, 2018), and are more willing to maintain close social connections with attractive-looking employees (Lemay et al., 2010). Studies have also reported that customers feel more comfortable (Wan and Wyer, 2015) and have a better service experience (Luoh and Tsaur, 2009) when they are served by physically attractive employees. Because service employees’ physical attractiveness can influence service performance evaluations and customer satisfaction, masking much of the face may minimize the differences in the perceived attractiveness of employees by increasing the perceived attractiveness of average-looking employees. Thus, average-looking employees may actually induce higher customer satisfaction when wearing facemasks than when not wearing facemasks, whereas wearing facemasks may not change the customer satisfaction induced by attractive-looking employees. Based on the preceding discussion, this study proposes that:

H2a. Average-looking employees wearing facemasks will improve customer satisfaction.

H2b. Attractive-looking employees wearing facemasks will not have any significant impact on customer satisfaction.
Customer-employee interactions are fundamental to the production, delivery, and experience of services (Otterbring, 2017). Physical attraction, as a core employee attribute, is a critical predictor of interpersonal attraction (Kim and Ok, 2010; Macintosh, 2009; Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Numerous studies have reported that the physical attractiveness of employees has a positive effect on customers’ satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Agthe et al., 2011; Horng and Hsu, 2020; Lemay et al., 2010; Luoh and Tsaur, 2009; Shao et al., 2004). Many scholars have also examined the role of physical attractiveness in hospitality and tourism contexts, especially the role of employees’ physical attractiveness on customer-employee interactions. For instance, Horng and Hsu (2020) point out that employees’ physical appearance strongly affects customers’ pleasure. Li et al. (2019b) indicate that the physical attractiveness of service providers positively affects customer citizenship behavior. Fang et al. (2020) point out that employees’ physical attractiveness impacts customer engagement. Soderlund and Julander (2009) demonstrate that the most attractive-looking flight attendants produce the most customer satisfaction. Furthermore, perceived employee physical attractiveness can encourage the formation of an overall favorable impression of service delivery (Kotler et al., 2017).

Previous studies have also shown that facial attractiveness has a significant influence on customers’ perceptions and behavioral intentions. For example, Andrzejewska and Mooney (2016) find that employees’ smiles play an important role in the customers’ perceptions of service quality. Karl et al. (2016) find that hospitality employees in Mexico and Turkey believe that an unconventional appearance (e.g., facial piercings) harms customer perceptions of service quality. Gueguen and Jacob (2012) find that the aesthetic quality of employees’ lipstick can affect customers’ tipping behavior. McCormack (2020) finds that wearing facemasks can make people seem more approachable.

Overall, we argue that the physical attractiveness of employees has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction, as it signifies friendliness, positivity, beauty, safety, and hygiene. Based on the preceding discussion, perceived employee attractiveness is likely to mediate the effects of wearing facemasks on customer satisfaction. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

H3a. Customers’ perception of employees’ physical attractiveness will mediate the relationship between the effect of average-looking employees wearing facemasks and customer satisfaction.

H3b. Customers’ perception of employees’ physical attractiveness will mediate the relationship between the effect of attractive-looking employees wearing facemasks and customer satisfaction.

2.3.3. Moderating effect of customer self-perceived physical attractiveness

A customer’s self-perceived attractiveness refers to his/her perception of his/her attractiveness, which has been found to influence how a customer views the attractiveness of employees, and thus their attitudes, behaviors, evaluations, and behavioral intentions in consumption settings (Lee et al., 2008). During service interactions, consumers are likely to assess service employees’ attractiveness using similar criteria to those they use to assess their attractiveness (Kwon et al., 2016; Li et al., 2019; Mussweiler, 2003).

The similarity attraction theory holds that similarity/difference in physical attractiveness alters perceived social distance between individuals (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008; Mussweiler, 2003), and the level of attraction between two individuals depends on the similarities between them (Byrne, 1972). In service encounters, if the degree of physical attractiveness between consumers and employees is similar, they may feel closer to each other. For example, Mussweiler (2003) points out that a similar level of physical attractiveness between consumers and the service representative creates a sense of belonging and reduced social distance. Li et al. (2019) argue that the reduced social distance generated by consumer-service representative similarity will increase a consumer’s liking for a service representative.

Because of self-presentation concerns, individuals may attempt to minimize interactions with others who are physically more attractive (Agthe et al., 2014; Wan and Wyer, 2015). The level of physical attractiveness similarity/difference is a critical determinant of the perceived social distance among individuals (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008; Mussweiler, 2003). Out-group members hold less positive attitudes toward one another than toward in-group members, which simultaneously increases social distance and reduces the sense of belonging between low similarity members (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008). Consumers’ own physical attractiveness perception of themselves moderates the physical attractiveness effect, suggesting that low self-perceived attractiveness may lower the positive effects of service employees’ physical attractiveness on customers’ attitudes and behaviors (Li et al., 2019). Wan and Wyer (2015) find that consumers’ self-presentation concerns decrease their intention to interact with a highly attractive service employee.

These findings suggest that a high level of similarity in physical attractiveness creates a sense of closeness between individuals (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008; Mussweiler, 2003). Thus, customers’ evaluation of the service interaction process may be affected by their self-perceived attractiveness and the perceived similarities in physical attractiveness between themselves and employees. However, the use of facemasks may make it difficult, if not impossible, for customers to determine the degree of similarity in physical attractiveness between themselves and service employees. Thus, the use of facemasks may influence the moderating effects of customers’ self-perceived physical attractiveness on their perception of employees’ physical attractiveness and customer satisfaction. Specifically,

H4. When the customer’s self-perceived physical attractiveness is (a) average (b) (high), average-looking (attractive-looking) employees who wear facemasks have a stronger (weaker) positive impact on customer service satisfaction.

The theoretical model proposed in this study is shown in Fig. 1. To test the hypotheses, we conduct two studies. In Study 1, we examine the effects of employees wearing facemasks on customers’ perceptions of employees’ physical attractiveness and customer satisfaction. Study 2 examines the mediating role of customer perception of employees’ physical attractiveness and the moderation effects of customers’ self-perceived physical attractiveness.

3. Study 1

3.1. Stimuli

Because facial appearance is central to overall physical attractiveness (Civre et al., 2013), we used the facial appearance to manipulate physical attractiveness. Even though facial attractiveness is mainly determined by individuals’ subjective perceptions and evaluations (Fang et al., 2020), the evaluation of other people’s facial attractiveness is also affected by norms, objective factors and standards. Thus, first we utilized individuals perceptions to select photos of one moderately looking male and female among six photos. Afterwards, we used the three most commonly utilized critical determinants of facial attractiveness, namely, facial harmony, balance, and proportion (Reid, 2015) to manipulate the attractiveness level.

To determine the photos to use in this study, we first selected three male and three female students with relatively symmetrical, harmonious, and proportional faces from 84 hotel management students and took photos of their upper bodies. Afterwards, we invited three experts in the field of hospitality and tourism management to rate the facial attractiveness of the photos. Based on the ratings of three professors of the facial attractiveness of the photos, we removed the photos that received the highest and lowest scores. Photos of one female and one male student that received average scores were chosen to ensure real-world exemplars of moderately attractive-looking male and female hotel employees. Afterwards, we created average-looking and attractive-
looking versions of each image using photo-editing software utilizing the three most commonly used determinants of facial attractiveness, namely, facial harmony, balance, and proportion. In the average-looking condition, subtle asymmetry was added to the nose and eyes. In the attractive-looking condition, the nose and eyes had perfect harmony, balance, and proportion. This procedure ensured that the images were as similar as possible in all aspects except attractiveness. Finally, we invited a professional photo artist to put facemasks on these four images. This process resulted in eight images (please see Appendix A).

3.2. Design and sample

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (employee gender: male vs female) × 2 (employee physical attractiveness: average looking vs attractive looking) × 2 (employee wearing a facemask vs employee not wearing a facemask) between-subjects experimental design. We recruited 440 Chinese customers via WenJuanXing (WJX). WJX (https://www.wjx.cn/) is a professional survey distribution platform similar to Amazon Mturk and is the most popular Chinese online survey company. Data were collected from August 5–10, 2020. Participants received a reward of RMB 1.5 yuan after completed and submitted the questionnaire. 57 subjects failed the attention check questions and, thus, were excluded from further analysis, leaving a total of 383 responses (cell sizes ranged from 40 to 53). 58.5% of the participants were female, 92.4% were between the ages of 21 and 40, 73.9% of the respondents had a monthly income between RMB 2001 and 10,000 yuan, and 80.4% of the participants hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.

3.3. Procedures and materials

The participants were first asked to read a paragraph about the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on society. Afterward, they were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical scenario in which they were staying in a star-rated hotel in another city in China. An image of a front desk employee was presented to the participants, randomly selected from the eight images designed for the study. They were told that the employee in the photo was checking them in and they were asked to look at the photo for a few seconds. The participants were also asked to imagine brief exchanges and interactions with the front desk employee during the check-in process (See Appendix A and B). They were then asked to answer questions that measured their perception of the employee’s physical attractiveness and their satisfaction with the hotel.

3.4. Measures

Customer perception of employees physical attractiveness was measured by three items adapted from Kim (2018). Customer satisfaction was measured by three items adapted from Hwang et al. (2016). All scales were measured using a seven-point Likert scale. As this research was conducted in a Chinese cultural context, all items were translated into Chinese following the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). The translated questionnaire was distributed to three tourism researchers to confirm its validity. The questionnaire was modified according to their feedbacks.

3.5. Manipulation and realism check

We adapted one item from Fang et al. (2020) for the manipulation check of employees physical attractiveness. The results of independent sample t-tests showed that the image of the attractive-looking female was more attractive than the image of the average-looking female (Mattractive = 6.21, Maverage = 5.117, t (95) = 4.469, p < 0.0001), the image of the attractive male was more attractive than the image of the average-looking male (Mattractive = 5.500, Maverage = 3.547, t (95) = 6.886, p < 0.0001). Therefore, the manipulation of the physical attractiveness of employees was found to be successful.

All respondents were asked to assess the clarity and realism of the scenarios. Three items were used to assess the clarity and realism of the scenarios adapted from Huang et al. (2020) and Chan et al. (2017) (7-point Likert scale). The one-sample t-test result suggested that respondents perceived the scenario as realistic (M = 6.121, SD = 0.841, p < 0.01).

3.6. Results

A series of independent sample t-tests were conducted to analyze the data. As predicted, regardless of gender, average-looking employees who wear facemasks enhanced customer perception of employee attractiveness (Mfemale wearing a facemask = 5.900 > Mfemale not wearing a facemask = 4.869, t = 2.932, p = 0.004), wearing facemasks did not have a significant effect on the attractiveness perception of an attractive-looking female employee (Mfemale wearing a facemask = 5.791 < Mfemale not wearing a facemask = 6.261, t = 2.932, p = 0.004), wearing facemasks did not have any significant effect on the attractiveness perception of an attractive-looking male employee (Mmale wearing a facemask = 5.625 < Mmale not wearing a facemask = 5.386, t = 0.761, p = 0.449). These findings provided support for H1a but not for H1b. Averagelooking employees who wear facemasks significantly enhanced customer satisfaction, while attractive-looking employees who wear facemasks did not result in significant improvements in customer satisfaction. Regardless of the gender, average-looking employees wearing facemasks increased customer satisfaction (Mfemale wearing a facemask = 6.213 > Mfemale not wearing a facemask = 5.615, t = 3.142, p = 0.002; Mmale wearing a facemask = 5.723 > Mmale not wearing a facemask = 5.177, t = 2.261, p = 0.026). While an attractive-looking female employee who wears a facemask decreased customer satisfaction (Mfemale wearing a facemask = 5.686 < Mfemale not wearing a facemask = 6.072, t = 2.093, p = 0.039), there was no significant difference between an attractive-looking male employee who wear a facemask and not (Mmale wearing a facemask = 5.908 < Mmale not wearing a facemask = 5.985, t = 0.338, p = 0.736). These findings provided support for H2a but not for H2b.

3.7. Discussion

These results suggest that regardless of gender, average-looking
employees who wear facemasks are perceived by customers as more physically attractive than when they are not wearing a facemask, resulting in improved customer satisfaction (H1a and H2a). However, our findings also suggest that attractive-looking female employees who wear facemasks are perceived by customers as less physically attractive than when they do not wear a facemask, resulting in lower customer satisfaction, whereas customer perception of the physical attractiveness of attractive-looking male employees who wear facemasks remains unchanged, as does customer satisfaction.

4. Study 2

4.1. Design and sample

Similar to Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (employee gender: male vs female) × 2 (employee physical attractiveness: average looking vs attractive looking) × 2 (employee wearing a facemask vs employee not wearing a facemask) between-subjects experimental design. 646 Chinese adult customers were recruited via WenJuanXing (WJX). Data were collected from August 20–25, 2020. Participants also received a reward of RMB 1.5 yuan after completing and submitting the questionnaire. 71 subjects who failed the attention check questions were excluded from further analysis, leaving a total of 575 responses (cell sizes ranged from 60 to 80). 56.2% of the respondents were female, 92.1% were between the ages of 21 and 40 years, 75.6% of the respondents had a monthly income between RMB 2001 and 10,000 yuan, 79.1% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.

4.2. Procedures and materials

The participants were given a similar hypothetical star-rated hotel check-in scenario as in Study 1. The eight images used in Study 1 were also used in Study 2 (See Appendix A and B). After reading the scenario and viewing the randomly assigned image of an employee, the participants answered a series of questions that measured their perceptions of the employee’s physical attractiveness, their self-perceived physical attractiveness, and customer satisfaction.

4.3. Measures

Similarity to Study 1, customer perception of employees physical attractiveness was measured by three items that were adapted from Kim (2018); customer satisfaction was measured by three items adapted from Hwang et al. (2016), customer self-perceived physical attractiveness was measured by five items adapted from Bentovim and Walker (1991) and (Li et al., 2019). All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-scale from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Table 2 provides measurement reliabilities and validity checks.

### Table 2

| Variable/Items                                      | FL  | α   | AVE | CR   |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|
| Employees’ physical attractiveness                   | 0.969 | 0.941 | 0.980 |
| I think he (she) is quite handsome (pretty)          | 0.968 |     |     |      |
| He (she) is very sexy looking                         | 0.970 |     |     |      |
| I find him (her) very attractive physically          | 0.974 |     |     |      |
| Customer satisfaction                                | 0.932 | 0.880 | 0.957 |
| I am satisfied with this hotel                       | 0.932 |     |     |      |
| I am pleased to visit this hotel                     | 0.942 |     |     |      |
| I am delighted with this hotel                       | 0.942 |     |     |      |
| Customer self-perceived physical attractiveness      | 0.935 | 0.793 | 0.950 |
| I usually feel physically attractive                 | 0.871 |     |     |      |
| People think my appearance is attractive              | 0.909 |     |     |      |
| I feel satisfied with my face                        | 0.871 |     |     |      |
| I think I deserve the attention of the opposite sex  | 0.908 |     |     |      |
| People often compliment me on my looks               | 0.893 |     |     |      |

Notes: FL = Factor loading; α = Cronbach’s α; AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability

We used one item from Fang et al. (2020) for the manipulation check of employees physical attractiveness. The one-sample t-test results revealed that the manipulation for the physical attractiveness of employees was successful. All respondents were also asked to assess the clarity and realism of the scenario similar to Study 1. The results suggested that respondents perceived the scenario to be realistic (M = 6.13, SD = 0.791, p < 0.01).

The independent variable in the study was a categorical variable derived from objective image data, thereby minimizing common method concerns. At the same time, we used the procedural control method recommended by Podsakoff for data collection to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Using an anonymous survey can ensure that participants respond honestly. This study used a previously tested scale, with clear items that avoid ambiguity. The participants were from different regions, increasing the differences in the subjects’ source space. Finally, following the approach used by Bernardes et al. (2019), we found that the three-factor model tested with CFA had a better model fit than the two-factor and single-factor models (χ² = 113.593, df = 41, χ²/df = 2.770, GFI = 0.966, CFI = 0.989, TLI = 0.985, RMSEA = 0.056), suggesting that common method bias was not a serious threat in this study.
4.5. Results

4.5.1. Re-testing of H1 and H2

The independent sample T-test was conducted to re-test the proposed hypotheses 1 and 2 first. As presented in Table 3, regardless of the gender, average-looking employees wearing facemasks significantly enhanced customer perception of employee attractiveness (M\text{female wearing a facemask} = 5.991 > M\text{female not wearing a facemask} = 5.004, t = -4.792, p = 0.000; M\text{male wearing a facemask} = 4.827 > M\text{male not wearing a facemask} = 2.942, t = -6.796, p = 0.000). However, similar to Study 1 results, attractive-looking female employees wearing facemasks reduced the attractiveness perceptions (M\text{female wearing a facemask} = 5.899 < M\text{female not wearing a facemask} = 6.186, t = 2.123, p = 0.035) while wearing facemasks resulted in no significant difference in attractiveness perceptions of attractive-looking male employees (M\text{male wearing a facemask} = 5.633 > M\text{male not wearing a facemask} = 5.399, t = -0.959, p = 0.339). Thus, finding provided further support for H1a but the H1b was rejected.

While average-looking employees who wear facemasks enhanced customer satisfaction, attractive-looking employees wearing facemasks did not bring similar results. Regardless of the gender, average-looking employees who wear facemasks increased customer satisfaction (M\text{female responding with a facemask} = 6.123 > M\text{female not responding with a facemask} = 5.628, t = -3.749, p = 0.000; M\text{male responding with a facemask} = 5.644 > M\text{male not responding with a facemask} = 5.134, t = -2.508, p = 0.012). However, similar to Study 1 results, attractive-looking female employees who wear facemasks reduced customer satisfaction (M\text{female wearing a facemask} = 5.811 < M\text{female not wearing a facemask} = 6.128, t = 2.197, p = 0.030) while attractive-looking male employees who wear facemasks resulted in no significant difference in customer satisfaction (M\text{male wearing a mask} = 5.905 < M\text{male not wearing a mask} = 5.920, t = 0.075, p = 0.940). These results provided further support for H2a but the H2b was rejected.

4.5.2. Mediation tests

To test the mediating effects of customer perception of employee’s attractiveness, we used the Bootstrapping method (Hayes, 2017) with a biased-corrected approach through Process version 3.5 using Model 4 (n = 5000 bootstrap resamples, CI = 95%). Employees wearing facemasks and not wearing facemasks were transformed into dummy variables. Employees wearing facemasks was assigned a value of 1, and employees not wearing facemasks was assigned a value of 0.

Bootstrapping results suggested that in the average-looking employee group, customer perception of employee’s attractiveness mediated the impact of wearing facemasks on customer satisfaction (β = 0.677; 95% CI = [0.4857, 0.8909]), which provided support for H3a. In the attractive-looking employee group, the mediating effect of customers’ perception of employee attractiveness was not significant (β = -0.012; 95% CI = [-0.1801, 0.1257]). Thus, H3b was rejected. Furthermore, the direct effect of average-looking employees who wear facemasks on customer satisfaction was not statistically significant (β = -0.117, 95% CI = [-0.3200, 0.0860]), suggesting that customer perception of employee attractiveness plays a complete mediating role.

4.5.3. Moderated mediation tests

First, we used a variance analysis to investigate the interaction effects between customer self-perceived physical attractiveness and employees who wear facemasks. The results showed that the customer self-perceived physical attractiveness and employees who wear facemasks had a significant impact on customers’ perception of employee’s attractiveness (F = 5.155, p = 0.024), but no significant impact on customer satisfaction (F = 1.009, p = 0.316). As shown in Fig. 2, when customer self-perceived physical attractiveness was low(high), the positive relationship between the employee wearing a mask and customer perception of employee attractiveness was stronger(weaker).

Second, we utilized a moderated mediation test (Model 7) of Preacher and Hayes SPSS macro to test H4a and H4b. The sample size, sampling method, and confidence settings of this model were the same as those of model 4. The results indicated that for the average attractive group, the index of moderated mediation was significant (index = -0.181, 95% CI = [-0.3386, -0.0291]). Thus, H4a was supported. For the attractive group, the index of moderated mediation was – 0.038, and the estimated interval was not significant (index = -0.038, 95% CI = [-0.1825, 0.1103]). Therefore, H4b was rejected.

4.5.4. Discussion

Study 2 examines the mediation and moderation mechanism of the effect observed in Study 1. Study 2 reveals that average-looking employees who wear facemasks can increase customers’ perception of the employee’s attractiveness and further enhance customer service satisfaction. Customer self-perceived physical attractiveness moderates the effects of facemasks on customer perceptions of average-looking employee attractiveness. For attractive-looking female employees, wearing facemasks reduces customers’ perception of the employee’s attractiveness and thus customer satisfaction. For attractive-looking male employees, wearing facemasks has no significant impact on customers’ perceptions of the employee’s attractiveness or customer satisfaction.

5. General discussions

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, wearing facemasks has become a requirement for the general public and hospitality employees (Zhang et al., 2020). The effectiveness of facemasks as a protection against the COVID-19 has been very well established in the literature (Gursoy and Chi, 2021; Leung et al., 2020), but there is scant research on the effects
of hospitality employees wearing facemasks on customers' evaluation of hospitality service experiences. This study examines the effects of employees wearing facemasks on customers' assessment of hospitality employees and customer satisfaction.

Through two experimental studies, we obtain novel yet unexpected findings. We find that wearing facemasks can influence customer perceptions of employees' attractiveness and customers' satisfaction both positively and negatively. While wearing facemasks can enhance the perceived attractiveness of average-looking employees, and thus customer satisfaction, facemasks reduce the perceived attractiveness of attractive-looking employees and thus reduce customer satisfaction. The positive effects of facemasks for average-looking employees are seen in both average-looking female and male employees. However, while facemask does not change customers' perceptions of attractive-looking male employees and thus customer satisfaction, wearing facemasks lowers customers' perceptions of attractive-looking female employees' attractiveness and thus customer satisfaction. The explanation may be that the brain automatically replaces the facial features covered by a facemask with an "idealized" image, as suggested by Gestalt theory (Koffka, 1935). This process results in significant improvements in customers' perceptions of average-looking employees' attractiveness. However, because attractive-looking employees have facial features that are already similar to the idealized facial features, facemasks are not likely to improve customers' perceptions of their attractiveness.

The findings also suggest that customers' perception of employees' physical attractiveness plays a mediating role in the relationship between employees' facemask wearing and customer satisfaction. Because employees' attractiveness can improve satisfaction, the enhanced attractiveness of average-looking employees can increase customer satisfaction. However, because wearing facemasks is not likely to increase the perceived attractiveness of attractive-looking employees, attractive-looking employees who wear facemasks are not likely to improve customer satisfaction. These findings clearly suggest that wearing facemasks can level off the playing field between average-looking employees and attractive-looking employees by minimizing the effects of their actual attractiveness on customer satisfaction.

The findings further reveal the moderating role of customers' self-perceived physical attractiveness. When customers self-perceive physical attractiveness is high, the mediating effect of their perception of employees' attractiveness becomes weaker, and when customers self-perceive physical attractiveness is low, the mediating effect of their perception of employees' attractiveness is stronger. These findings can be explained by the similarity-attraction paradigm, which holds that people are attracted to and prefer to be with similar others (Byrne et al., 1971). Because facemasks level off the differences in perceived attractiveness between attractive-looking and average-looking employees by lowering the perceived attractiveness of attractive-looking employees, customers who perceive themselves as attractive-looking are less likely to view attractive-looking employees as attractive. This decrease in attractive-looking customers' assessment of the attractiveness of employees can increase their perception of the attractiveness gap, which can lower their satisfaction with the service quality. However, customers who view themselves as average-looking are more likely to perceive more similarities in attractiveness between themselves and employees due to decreases in the perceived attractiveness of attractive-looking employees, which can increase customer satisfaction, as suggested by the similarity-attraction paradigm.

5.1. Theoretical implications

During the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing facemasks has become an essential protective measure. Scholars have paid more attention to the protective effect of wearing facemasks (Chu et al., 2020; Leung, Chu, et al., 2020; WHO, 2020b), but have not examined the influence of facemasks on the customer service experience. To address this research gap, this study has drawn on Gestalt theory to explore the impact of employee facemasks on customer satisfaction through two experiments that considered the differential effect for average and attractive-looking employees.

Previous studies have shown that employees' hairstyles, headwear, facial hair uniforms, and other features can affect customer satisfaction (Bower and Landreth, 2001; Foster and Resnick, 2013). This study expands the literature by empirically identifying the effect of facemask wearing by average-looking and attractive-looking employees on customer satisfaction. The findings increase our understanding of how service interactions can improve customer satisfaction.

In recent years, Gestalt theory has become increasingly popular in hospitality research (Choi and Kandampully, 2019). Based on Gestalt theory, this study explores the mediating role of customers' perceptions of employee attractiveness and analyzes the mechanism by which facemasks affect customer satisfaction. This study expands the application of Gestalt theory in the hospitality field by identifying the impact of facemasks on customer satisfaction through customers' perceptions of employees' attractiveness.

This study also explores the boundary of customers' self-perceived physical attractiveness on the effect of employees who wear facemasks on perceived employee attractiveness and customer satisfaction. These findings are consistent with prior research, which has shown that customers' self-perceived physical attractiveness is a critical factor in forming behavioral intentions (Berdychovsky et al., 2015; Li et al.,
Thus, this study extends the research on customer-employee interaction by considering the effects of facemasks on customer satisfaction.

5.2. Managerial implications

Physical attractiveness is crucial in the service industry because employee attractiveness can have significant effects on customer satisfaction. Studies suggest that customers tend to evaluate services delivered by attractive-looking employees more positively than services delivered by average-looking employees (Luoh and Tsaur, 2009). However, the number of attractive-looking employees is limited and most services are delivered by average-looking employees. Improving the service evaluations of services delivered by average-looking employees is an important issue for service organizations. Our results suggest that facemask requirements imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic can enable managers to level the playing field between average-looking and attractive-looking employees because wearing facemasks significantly improves the perceived attractiveness of average-looking employees. Our findings suggest that hotel managers should recruit average-looking frontline employees, and not discriminate against average-looking job applicants.

Enhancing the physical attractiveness of average employees has always been important for managers and hospitality businesses. Previous studies have found that dress (Wang and Lang, 2019), facial features (Andrzejewski and Mooney, 2016; Magnini et al., 2013), and other physical traits (Bower and Landreth, 2001; Horng and Hsu, 2020) play a significant role. This study has shown that facemasks are a new tool to enhance the physical attractiveness of average-looking employees. Therefore, during and after the COVID-19 epidemic, average-looking frontline employees should wear facemasks, which can not only protect healthy employees and control infection but also increase customers’ perceptions of the attractiveness of the employees.

This study may be bad news for attractive-looking employees, especially female employees. Managers in the hospitality businesses can stimulate customers’ perceptions of the attractiveness of employees through methods such as designing facemasks and uniforms that stimulate customers’ perception of employee attractiveness. Attractive facemasks and uniforms provide cues that customers can use when recreating/imagining the covered part of the face with ideal facial features.

The findings also suggest that average-looking employees who wear facemasks can significantly improve customer satisfaction regardless of the customers’ level of self-perceived physical attractiveness. However, managers should also remember that this effect will be weaker when customers’ self-perceived physical attractiveness is high, which clearly indicates the importance of providing adequate and appropriate physical cues to improve customers’ perceptions of employee attractiveness. This can be done through facemask designs and other physical cues such as uniform design.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations, which can be addressed in future studies. First, our research was conducted in a Chinese cultural context. Customers’ evaluation of the physical attractiveness of employees might be influenced by many factors, such as customers’ cultural values, gender, age, and education level (Dion et al., 1990; Swami and Tovee, 2007). Future studies should investigate the applicability of our findings by testing the suggested relationships in cross-cultural contexts. Second, the experimental nature of this study and the use of self-reporting limits its generalizability. Future research could use a longitudinal field study to examine the relationship between frontline employees wearing facemasks and customer satisfaction. Third, employees wearing facemasks can also have a certain impact on other customer behaviors, such as approach behavior, customer repurchase, and customer engagement. This study only explores the impact of employees who wear facemasks on customer attitudes and does not discuss the impact on customer behaviors. These deficiencies should be improved and perfected in subsequent research.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A

Photos of manipulative materials.

Appendix B

Experimental stimuli

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has swept the world and brought serious losses to people. At present, the COVID-19 pandemic...
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