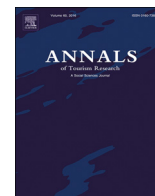




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Physical attractiveness of service employees and customer engagement in tourism industry

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ABSTRACT

As the importance of customer engagement gains more and more recognition, it is critical to study customer engagement strategy in the intensely competitive tourism industry. Answering the call for research on antecedents of tourists' customer engagement in the tourism industry, we consider the role of employees' physical attractiveness. We adopt a mixed-methods approach; using interviews and three scenario-based experiments, we explore, hypothesize, and test the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement of tourists. The results show that (1) physical attractiveness of employees affects tourists' customer engagement, that (2) the main effect of physical attractiveness is mediated by the desire for social interaction, and that (3) the main effect is moderated by tourism service characteristics (i.e., tourism service expertise).

Introduction

Customer engagement has been given increasingly attention by scholars and practitioners in the last two decades, as the way customers communicate with firms and other customers has dramatically changed due to the advancement of smartphones and social media (Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013). For example, customers can write reviews to influence other customers, share bad experiences to warn others and solve other customers' problems through collective intelligence in the virtual community. In particular, customer engagement becomes more important in the tourism industry, as engaged tourists could decrease the rising costs of marketing and enhance competitiveness (So, King, & Sparks, 2014). Almost all the services of the tourism firms can be ordered and reviewed through online platforms such as TripAdvisor and Airbnb. Most tourists make decisions based on other tourists' recommendations, online reviews and their experiences; therefore, it is imperative for tourism firms to facilitate tourists' engagement to further influence other tourists (So et al., 2014). In this stance, this paper aims to investigate the drivers that could elicit customer engagement.

Customer engagement is defined as “the attitude, behavior, the level of connectedness among customers and with the firm” (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p.499). The majority of the extant research focuses on the customer-focused factors of customer engagement, such as customer involvement (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017), customer perceived value (Han, Tian, & Sun, 2016) and customers' intensity of social media (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015). Although Ge and Gretzel (2017), and Wei, Hua, Fu, and Guchait (2017) have studied firm-focused factors, these factors are virtual and invisible. It is no exception of the study of Cabiddu, Carlo, and Piccoli (2014), which explored factors supporting customer engagement from the perspective of social media affordance using qualitative method. According to Bitner's framework of servicescape, physical surroundings could influence

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customer behavior; service employees are especially important cues for customers, as services are produced and consumed simultaneously (Bitner, 1992). Though Tassiello, Viglia, and Mattila (2018) report that handwriting, as a physical activity, influences customer engagement, the extant research ignores the fundamental and physical cues of employees. Furthermore, the extant research provides limited information of underlying factors that drives customer engagement, with only two studies trying to do so (Han et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2017).

The current paper tries to study the drivers of customer engagement from the perspective of physical attractiveness, which is one of the most significant components of physical surroundings in the tourism industry (Bitner, 1992). Interpersonal interactions play a vital role in tourists' consumption experiences (Gohary, Hamzulu, & Alizadeh, 2016). During such an interaction, an employee's physical attractiveness is an inevitable trait that tourists encounter (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). This subtle yet important factor can extensively influence the entire service delivery process and post-purchase evaluation, including customer engagement. However, no research has investigated the impact of physical attractiveness of service employees on customer engagement of tourists. To fill this gap, the current research investigates the relationship between customer engagement and employees' physical attractiveness in tourism industry. Specifically, this research examines: (1) Whether the physical attractiveness of employees affects tourists' customer engagement; (2) If so, does physical attractiveness of employees affect customer engagement via desire for social interaction? (3) What boundary conditions that may exist for the main effect?

We adopted mix-methods approach to address three questions. Qualitative methods are preferred when the current theory and framework cannot provide clear explanations for phenomena (Wang, 2017). Given that there is limited research on the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and tourists' customer engagement, we began with an exploratory study to investigate their relationship, underlying mechanism and boundary conditions. We then tested the relationship by experimental method and found that employees' physical attractiveness affected tourists' customer engagement positively; this effect was contingent on the service expertise. We also proved that employees' physical attractiveness affected tourists' customer engagement through the desire for social interaction. Hence, this study provides a meaningful perspective to investigate customer engagement through physical attractiveness in the tourism industry. Besides, this study contributes to a better understanding of customer engagement by examining the mediating role of desire for social interaction. Furthermore, the conditional effect of service expertise was originally reported in the qualitative study and was then confirmed empirically. We used Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain that this phenomenon was due to tourists' different foci in consumption process. To the best knowledge of the authors, this work is among the first attempts to examine these effects. Finally, this study serves as a reference to tourism practitioners that they need to scrutinize the hiring criteria of service employees to better stimulate tourists' customer engagement. Particularly, in high-expertise tourism context, practitioners should focus on employees' skills other than their physical appearance to improve tourists' customer engagement.

Literature review and theoretical background

Customer engagement in tourism

Customer engagement, an important customer relationship management construct (Hapsari, Cledes, & Dean, 2017), is believed to be distinctive from customer participation or customer involvement. Specifically, customer involvement is defined as a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). It manifests as an information source through which customers decrease risk in the consumption decision process (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), whereas, customer engagement describes the connectedness among customers. Customer participation represents the level that customers involve in the process of producing and delivering services, and is mainly considered as a behavioral concept (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). On the contrary, customer engagement, regarded as an overarching concept, includes cognitions, emotions and behaviors (Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010).

We adopted the definition proposed by Kumar and Pansari (2016) and considered customer engagement as a multidimensional concept, which is comprised of cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects. Specifically, cognitive dimension refers to a customer's level of firm-related thought processing and elaboration (e.g. A can take up all my attention); emotional dimension involves a customer's degree of firm-related affect (e.g. I am pleased about A); behavioral dimension is defined as a customer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a firm (e.g. I recommend A to my friends; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Customer engagement can be either positive or negative (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). Similar to the previous research (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2014), this study focuses on the positive valence of customer engagement.

Practitioners and academics in tourism industry have recognized the importance of customer engagement (e.g. Cabiddu et al., 2014). We provided an overview of the empirical studies of customer engagement in tourism industry in Table 1, which reveals the following observations: first, studies have paid much attention to the drivers of customer engagement. van Doorn et al. (2010) categorized the influencing factors of customer engagement into three types: customer-based, firm-based, and context-based. In line with this category, most scholars investigated the antecedents of customer engagement from the perspective of customers. The antecedents include customer brand experience (Ahn & Back, 2018), customer perceived value (Han et al., 2016), customer satisfaction and brand image (Hapsari et al., 2017), customer involvement (Harrigan et al., 2017) and customers' intensity of social media use (Dijkmans et al., 2015). All of the aforementioned studies focus on customers. Apparently, there is lack of studies focusing on the firm-focused antecedents of customer engagement.

Although there are a few firm-focused studies researching customer engagement, no physical surrounding factors have been investigated. For example, Lei et al. (2017) investigated the effect of media-type and content-type factors of brand posts on customer engagement. Wei et al. (2017) tested the role of error management culture in customer engagement; Ge and Gretzel (2017) showed

Table 1
Overview of current empirical study of customer engagement in tourism industry.

Antecedent type	Antecedent(s)	Authors (year)	Mediator(s)	Outcome(s)	Method	Context
Customer-focused	Customer brand experience	Ahn and Back (2018)	Customer engagement	Behavioral intention	Mixed-methods	Resort
Customer-focused	Customer involvement	Harrigan et al. (2017)	Customer engagement	Customer loyalty	Survey	Airline
Customer-focused	Perceived value, customer satisfaction and brand image	Hapsari et al. (2017)	Customer engagement	Customer loyalty	Survey	Tourism virtual community
Customer-focused	Customer perceived value	Han et al. (2016)	Community identification	Customer engagement	Survey	Tourism
Customer-focused	Customers' intensity of social media	Dijkmans et al. (2015)	Customer engagement	Corporate reputation	Survey	Airline
Firm-focused	Media-type factors and content-type factors	Lei, Pratt, and Wang (2017)	/	Customer engagement	Content analysis	Resort
Firm-focused	Humor, product-focus, complexity and length of firm-initiated posts	Ge and Gretzel (2017)	/	Customer engagement	Content analysis	Destination
Firm-focused	Error management culture	Wei et al. (2017)	Consumer trust	Customer engagement	Experiment	Hotel
Firm-focused	Consumers, technology, strategy and management structure and culture	Chathoth et al. (2014)	/	/	Interviews	Hotel
/	Customer engagement	van Asperen, de Rooij, and Dijkmans (2018)	/	Customer loyalty	Survey	Travel agency
/	Customer engagement	So, King, Sparks, and Ying (2016)	Service brand evaluation, brand trust	Brand loyalty	Survey	Tourism
/	Customer engagement	So et al. (2014)	/	Customer loyalty	Survey	/
Firm-focused	Physical attractiveness of service employees	This study	Desire for social interaction	Customer engagement	Mixed-methods	Tourism

Note: The oblique lines showed that it had not studied or elaborated by the corresponding studies.

that firm-initiated posts could produce impacts on customer engagement. Chathoth et al. (2014) summarized the influencing factors into consumers, technology, strategy and management structure and culture. They adopted interview methodology while leaving the results lack of empirical examination. These studies are important for customer engagement research in tourism industry; nonetheless, they ignore the physical surroundings of tourism firms, which could be as fundamental to influence customer engagement.

Furthermore, some scholars have considered community identification and consumer trust to explain the formation and development of customer engagement. Specifically, Han et al. (2016) have examined the effect of consumption value on community identification and the effect of community identification on customer engagement separately without examining the mediating effect for customer engagement. Wei et al. (2017) tested the mediating role of consumer trust. Their study investigated how invisible culture affected customer engagement. The possible influence of physical surroundings on customer engagement, such as the physical attractiveness of employees, however, has not been examined (Bitner, 1992).

The role of physical attractiveness

Originated in the field of social psychology, stereotype has been an important concept for understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations (Stangor & Lange, 1994). Scholars define stereotype as the consensual belief of members of certain groups about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors (Chen, Lai, Petrick, & Lin, 2016). Physical attractiveness stereotype is one stereotype that explains people's positive reactions to physically attractive individuals. Physical attractiveness can be measured objectively by physical characteristics such as face symmetry, height, skin color and eye color (Hill, 2002; Weeden & Sabini, 2005). It can also be detected subjectively through perceptions (e.g., how pleasant an individual looks, Ahearne et al., 1999). We believe that the real customer-service representative interactions pertinent to the physical attractiveness are heavily relied on the subjective perceptions. Thus, in this paper, we measured physical attractiveness through individuals' subjective perceptions. While being different from physical appearance, physical attractiveness is evaluated based on the physical appearance (Čivre, Knežević, Baruca, & Fabjan, 2013).

Studies showed that beautiful people are believed to be more popular and more highly evaluated than less attractive people (Frevort & Walker, 2014). This physical attractiveness stereotype is also called "what is beautiful is good". However, some scholars have recently noted that being physical attractive is not always beneficial. For example, Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, and Gibbons (2010) found that highly attractive women were discriminated against when they applied for masculine-type jobs. Based on a longitudinal cross-sectional research on Chinese families, Guo, Fei, and Lin (2017) reported a heel curve relationship between physical attractiveness and income. To be specific, Guo et al. (2017) found that the benefit of being physically attractive disappears for extremely beautiful people. Fisher and Ma (2014) found that attractive children experience a higher level of difficulty in evoking empathy from unrelated adults when their needs are not severe.

Furthermore, a negative effect of physical attractiveness on attitudes towards attractive same-sex targets was reported after considering the impact of self-threat (Agthe, Spörrle, & Maner, 2011). Individuals with low self-esteem tend to avoid the highly attractive same-sex candidates. In line with the findings, Wan and Wyer (2015) studied several consumption situations that could produce self-presentation concerns and demonstrated that a consumer's intention to interact with a highly attractive service employee could be decreased. Therefore, it is possible to observe a negative effect of physical attractiveness when the possible moderators are in consideration: customer characteristics and consumption situations (Li, Zhang, & Laroche, 2019). Thus, it is of great importance to study the boundary conditions of physical attractiveness effect.

Most physical attractiveness research has been carried out in the field of economics, psychology, human resources management and marketing (e.g. Agthe et al., 2011; Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2008; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Guo et al., 2017). Only recently have scholars begun to investigate the effect of physical attractiveness in tourism context. Čivre et al. (2013) studied how front-line employees categorize hotel guests based on guests' facial attractiveness levels. Knežević, Tomka, Bizjak, Fabjan, and Kukulj (2015) found that the physical appearance of hotel guests positively correlated with their satisfaction with the service received. Both studies examine customers' physical attractiveness. However, there is lack of studies testing the physical attractiveness of service employees. Given that the employees' physical attractiveness is crucial yet underexplored in the customer engagement research, and is vital in implementing right hiring criteria in tourism industry, studying the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement in the tourism industry is of great importance and necessity. Our current work aims to fill the gap of missing research on employees' physical attractiveness.

The role of desire for social interaction

According to the physical attractiveness stereotype, highly attractive individuals are associated with good personalities such as warm, kind, trustworthy and sociable. Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg (2010) further studied the underlying mechanism that why people exert this evaluation towards attractiveness. They found that high attractiveness elicits individuals' positive emotional reactions to targets, which creates a desire for individuals to build close relationships with targets. This desire for social interaction further exerts positive evaluations towards highly attractive people. Agthe et al. (2011) argued that, attractive individuals are believed to possess a variety of positive traits, and people tend to have more face-to-face interactions with such individuals. They found that desire for social interaction plays a mediating role between applicants' physical attractiveness and hiring preference. We can infer from the findings that desire for social interaction plays a mediating role between attractiveness and evaluation of the attractive people.

Furthermore, Deshields, Kara, and Kaynak (1996) demonstrated that salesperson physical attractiveness positively affects

customer purchase intention. [Ahearne et al. \(1999\)](#) suggested that physical attractiveness worked as a surrogate indicator used by the buyers to evaluate salesperson performance. Per the logic, we argue that desire for social interaction bridges the effect of physical attractiveness on respective outcomes, possibly customer engagement. In summary, we expect that employees' physical attractiveness affects customer engagement through the desire for social interaction in tourism consumption scenarios. We designed four studies to test this relationship.

Overview of the current research

We adopted a mixed-methods approach using both interviews and scenario-based experiments. Specifically, Study 1 adopted interviews to explore the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement. Using three coding steps of grounded theory, we found that employees' physical attractiveness produced positive impacts on customer engagement (e.g., referrals, online review and sharing on social media). Additionally, employees' physical attractiveness influenced customers' engagement through their desire for social interaction. More importantly, the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement was no longer positive in the high-expertise context. Based on the qualitative findings and theoretical background, we proposed three hypotheses to examine the main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement (H1), the underlying mechanism of desire for social interaction (H2) and the boundary condition of service expertise (H3). Study 2 examined the main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement (H1) in a general tourism firm setting among student samples. Study 3 tested the mediating effect of desire for social interaction (H2) in the context of restaurant using student samples. Study 4a checked the moderation effect of service expertise (H3) and the full model in the airline context among real tourist samples. Besides, we conducted Study 4b and specified service expertise to be a moderator working at industrial-level.

Study 1

Method

We adopted a qualitative study based on the consideration that prior studies have not explored the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement ([Wang, 2017](#)). This study aimed at exploring the relationship, boundary conditions and elements between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement. To gain a better understanding of service encounters as a whole, we carried out in-depth interviews with both customers and human resource managers. We started the interviews with questions about the customers' general perceptions of factors affecting their consumption experiences and their perceptions of employees' physical attractiveness. Then we asked questions about their engagement with high/low attractive employees. For example, participants were asked whether they would like to interact with a highly attractive employee and talk about the highly attractive employee to their friends. To triangulate the results, for each firm of which customers were interviewed, we interviewed its human resource manager. Managers were asked about their hiring criteria of the positions mentioned in the interviews with customers. The interviews were stopped when no new substantive information emerged. Forty customers and eight HR managers from the paired industry were interviewed. The aforementioned interviews were carried out among service firms that were studied most in marketing, for instance service and tourism domain, for their intense interpersonal interactions ([Azer & Alexander, 2018](#); [Bitner, 1992](#); [So et al., 2014](#)). Specifically, we interviewed six customers from a low-end restaurant, six from a high-end restaurant, six from an airline, two from a barber shop, five from a hospital, four from a hair salon, five from a security firm, and six from a mobile phone shop (see [Table 2](#)).

Data collection and analysis

Forty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview outlines were presented as in [Appendix 1](#). In the interviews

Table 2
Number and characteristics of interviewees in Study 1.

Service firm	Customers						HR managers	
	N	Sex		Age				N
		Males	Females	Below 20	20–30	30–40	40–50	
Airline	6	3	3		4	2	1	
Low-end restaurant	6	3	3		3	3	1	
High-end restaurant	6	3	3		5		1	
Hair salon	4	2	2		2		1	
Security firm	5	3	2		3	1	1	
Hospital	5	3	2		4	1	1	
Mobile phone shop	6	3	3		6		1	
Barber shop	2	1	1	2			1	
Total	40	21	19	2	27	7	8	

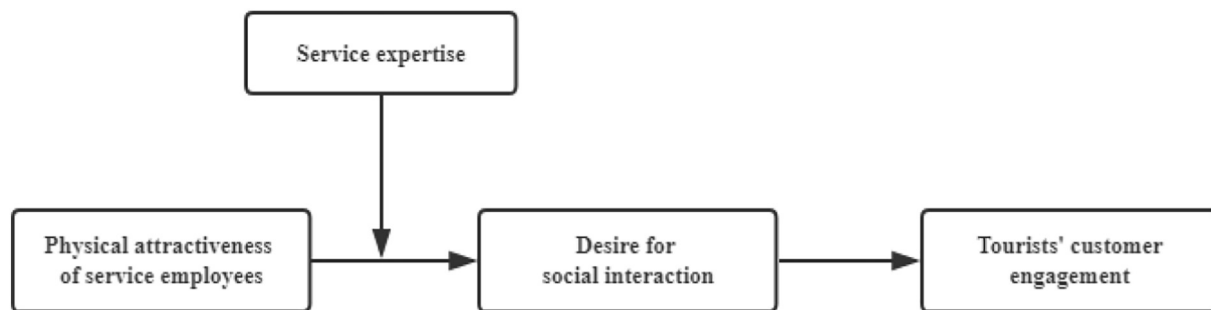


Fig. 1. A model of tourists' customer engagement from the perspective of physical attractiveness.

with customers, participants were first asked about factors that might affect their consumption experiences. We then asked participants about their perceptions of employees' physical attractiveness. Participants were encouraged to discuss the reasons of their perceptions. During the interviews with HR managers, we asked questions related to recruiting preferences. A sample question was "what requirements do you ask for when recruiting service employees?". Both customers and HR managers were asked about their perceptions of the profession level of the service. Lastly, demographic information was collected. As shown in Table 2, we tried to interview customers with different ages and genders to avoid demographic characteristic bias. We conducted face-to-face interviews on the scene. Each lasted approximately 30 min. All of participants were informed that their interviews would be recorded and transcribed. If they did not agree, interviewers would take notes with as many details as possible. Two of the authors coded and analyzed the transcripts; minor disagreements were solved through discussion.

We used grounded theory to analyze the interview scripts, which helped to facilitate a theory framework emerging from coding. Therefore, we implemented three steps: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Among these, open coding involved that transcripts are broken into incidents, ideas, events or acts and thus given codes. For example, "it makes me enjoy my meal a lot more" was coded as liking for the provided product. Axial coding refers to more abstract groupings and relationship forming between codes. Selective coding was used to extract a core category and develop a model integrating the categories. As a result, we developed a model that contained the antecedents and mechanism of customer engagement.

Findings

Similar to Wang's (2017) study, we generated a model of customer engagement and related factors through coding. Specifically, the model delineated the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement, and the role of desire for social interaction and service expertise (see Fig. 1).

The relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement. Through analyzing the interview data, we found that employees' physical attractiveness affects customer engagement. For example, when asking E whether he would pay attention to the employees' physical attractiveness, he said, "Yes. I will be very happy about interacting with the [highly attractive] service employee and I will enjoy the service experience" (Emotional dimension of customer engagement; Hollebeek et al., 2014). He also stated that, "I will patronize the restaurant again or recommend it to my friends if the restaurant also served high-quality food" (Behavioral and cognitive dimensions of customer engagement; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Participant F had similar answers: "I feel pleasant when seeing highly attractive service employees" (Emotional dimension of customer engagement; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Further, she was more motivated to talk about the highly attractive service employees with her friends and would be more willing to review the employees online (Behavioral dimension of customer engagement; Hollebeek et al., 2014). The observations of the customer engagement dimensions (i.e., cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) indicate that employees' physical attractiveness has impacts on customer engagement.

The role of desire for social interaction. Desire for social interaction is defined as customers' desire to interact with service employees in consumption (Agthe et al., 2011). We discovered initial evidence to support the mediating role of desire for social interaction. For example, one interviewee said, "I prefer female service employees... Because I feel that they are more approachable. I want to be served by them and I feel comfortable". Another interviewee stated, "I prefer a highly attractive male, because people of the opposite sex attract each other (and the same sex will repel). Then, I may interact with the service employee". We can infer from the interviews that employees' physical attractiveness elicits customers' desire to interact with employees, which further produces customer engagement emotion. More evidence was shown in another interview: "I guess I will choose more attractive service employees, because if the employee is good-looking, I can chat with him more comfortably". The interviews with HR managers confirmed the initial findings from the interviews with customers. For example, an HR manager of a phone shop said that salespersons were hired mainly because of their good body image, merit interaction with customers and high communication ability. We thus expect that employees' physical attractiveness affects customer engagement through the desire for social interaction.

The role of service expertise. Service expertise is considered as employees' capability to satisfy customers' expectancy (Doney & Cannon, 1997), which reflects service employees' skills, knowledge and so on. Interestingly, we found that consumers showed different reactions to physical attractiveness between different service expertise levels. Accordingly, services can be categorized into professional/high-expertise services and generic/low-expertise services. Among the forty interviewees, customers reacted differently to highly attractive employees. For example, in a hair salon context, participant G mentioned, "I mainly pay attention to the whole service package of a hairdresser rather than his physical attractiveness". It was especially evident in the hospital and security firm contexts. Most of the participants suggested that they cared more about the employees' skills other than their physical attractiveness. This provides a preliminary evidence of consumers' less appreciation of high physical attractiveness in the high-expertise services. In contrast, in a low service expertise context (e.g., a low-end restaurant), customer A noted that "I feel good when I see a good-looking person, and it makes me enjoy my meal a lot more". A female interviewed in barbershop also stated that, "I like highly attractive employees (to provide service for me) ...It makes me happy". Therefore, we interpreted the findings as that customers like highly attractive employees more in low-expertise context. Thus, we propose that service expertise moderates the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement.

Discussion

In summary, we obtained three main findings through interviews. First, we found that employees' physical attractiveness has impacts on customer engagement. This research is the first to explore the ways to improve customer engagement from the perspective of physical attractiveness. It is particularly important for tourism industry, which emphasizes very much on-site experiences. Additionally, the findings suggested that customers' desire for social interaction played a mediating role. Therefore, this research contributes to broadening our understanding of the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement in tourism industry. Importantly, we found that interviewees react differently to physical attractiveness in different service context. It seemed that interviewees preferred highly attractive service employees in the low-service expertise context, whereas they did not care about physical attractiveness in the high-service expertise context.

In the following section, we developed hypotheses according to the theoretical background and findings from our interviews. Three scenario-based experiments were carried out to provide empirical evidence for our main findings.

Hypotheses development

Main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement

According to the physical attractiveness stereotype, what is beautiful is good (Eagly et al., 1991; Frevert & Walker, 2014). Physically attractive individuals are believed to possess a wide variety of positive personal qualities (Eagly et al., 1991). They usually receive higher evaluations than their low-attractive counterparts do (Frevert & Walker, 2014). In service industry, physical attractiveness can affect customer reactions, including customer satisfaction, customer consumption intention and consumer's desire to interaction (Argo et al., 2008; Wan & Wyer, 2015).

In line with the literature, we obtained evidence of the main effect of employees' physical attractiveness from Study 1. According to the qualitative data, customer engagement activities are more likely to be observed among consumers who interact with highly attractive employees: consumers are more likely to write reviews (behavior), feel comfortable and happy (emotion), and engage in high appraisal thinking of service employee (cognition), which are the main components of customer engagement. Therefore, we conclude that employees' physical attractiveness can generate impacts on customer engagement in tourism industry. We hypothesize as follows:

H1. Employees' physical attractiveness has a positive impact on tourists' customer engagement.

Mediating role of desire for social interaction for the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement

According to Bitner (1992)'s framework of servicescapes, physical environment can influence customer behaviors in tourism firms. Specifically, physical environment can generate two forms of behaviors: approach and avoidance behaviors. In the approach form, individuals manifest behaviors to lower the psychological distance between themselves and the targets (Bitner, 1992). The interaction with the highly attractive individuals can fall into the "approach" category when highly attractive individuals are considered to possess a variety of positive traits which elicit face-to-face interaction from others (Agthe et al., 2011). More examples from the extant literature support this notion. Lemay et al. (2010) argued that attractive romantic partners and attractive friends are more interpersonally receptive and responsive; this preference can be explained by perceivers' desires to bond with attractive individuals (Lemay et al., 2010). Thus, we can conclude that when encountering highly attractive employees, tourists will produce approach behaviors, which leads to the desire for social interaction with the highly attractive employees.

Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Sese, and van Doorn (2018) proved that positive interactions between customers and firm could improve customers' attitudinal (perceived relationship investment and relationship quality), behavioral (customer cross-buy and service usage), and financial (customer profitability) outcomes. Customers' interactions with service employees will affect their engagement with the firm. What's more, we found in Study 1 that customer engagement increases following social interaction. Specifically, customers will make recommendations about the service and share their positive experiences on social media after

encountering with good-looking employees.

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following:

H2. The impact of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement is mediated by the desire for social interaction.

Moderating role of service expertise for the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement

Jeanne Hill (1988) proposed that there are many distinctions between professional services and generic services. Professional services not only meet the generate requirements of a service, but also possess expertise through education (Jeanne Hill, 1988). Hence, we regard professional service as service expertise that are mainly reflected by employees' professional skills. Jeanne Hill (1988) also suggested that the decision process from problem recognition through use and post-purchase evaluation is different across different service expertise levels. It implies that service types may influence customers' cognitions, purchase behaviors and evaluations. Thus, we conclude that service expertise have impacts on tourists' reactions to service employees' physical attractiveness.

As noted in Bitner's servicescapes framework, individuals' reactions to the physical environment are influenced by situational factors. Service expertise, one of the surrounding clues, can affect what tourists notice, remember and feel (Bitner, 1992). Per Elaboration Likelihood Model, attitudes can be altered through information processing: central route and peripheral route (Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Individuals adopting central information processing route involve effortful cognitive activities based on the prior experience and knowledge. They carefully scrutinize all the relevant information. Whereas individuals adopting peripheral route pay attention to the peripheral and insignificant information (Petty et al., 2009). It is worth noting that the selection of the information proceeding route depends on one's motivation and ability (Petty et al., 2009).

In the low-expertise context such as the low-end restaurant, tourists are fully motivated to scrutinize the service situations using the peripheral information processing, thus are more likely to focus on the cues (e.g., physical attractiveness) that are not tightly associated with service expertise. Instead, in the high expertise context where professional skills are appreciated, tourists tend to adopt central information processing, and use most relevant cues (e.g., service skills) to make evaluation. Hence, physical attractiveness no longer plays as an important role as in the low-expertise context.

As presented in Study 1, in the context of low-expertise services, such as low-end restaurants, interviewees showed a preference for highly attractive service employees. In the context of high-expertise services, such as hospitals, physical attractiveness was no longer important in the service consumption decision-making. In conclusion, tourists' perceptions of the appearance of service employees differ according to service expertise. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H3. The effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement is moderated by tourism firms' service expertise. In the low-expertise context, tourists elicit a higher engagement with the firm when served by highly attractive service employees, whereas in the high-expertise context, the effect does not exist.

Study 2

Based on the initial evidence from Study 1, we developed the following three studies to test three hypotheses. As noted earlier, an offline context such as hotels and airlines is particularly important for on-site consumption, since interactions between tourists and service employees occur more frequently in the tourism context (Harrigan et al., 2017). Hence, we used tourism firms in the following empirical studies. We first conducted Study 2 to check the main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement in one tourism firm (H1).

Design, procedure and measurement

In Study 2, we carried out a single-factor (physical attractiveness: high vs. moderate) between-subject design. As facial appearance is the main element of physical attractiveness (Čivré et al., 2013), we manipulated physical attractiveness by facial appearance. To manipulate individuals' facial attractiveness, we followed Fisher and Ma (2014) and gathered several male and female ID photos from students and working people. The individuals in the photos should look mature and moderate-attractive. We selected a few same-size photos with individuals wearing light blue shirts. We chose one male photo and one female photo at the end and invited a professional retoucher to process the two photos to make one of them look more attractive and the other less attractive. After this process, we obtained four photos, including one highly attractive female, one moderately attractive female, one highly attractive male and one moderately attractive male. To avoid the effect of skin tone and clothing, we used black-and-white photographs in the experiments.

As an important segment of tourism-consumption tourists, students are a good fit for the experiments. We conducted Study 2 in the library of a university in South China. Participants were assured that the experiment was anonymous and their answers would be used only for academic purposes. As in the study by Fisher and Ma (2014), we only used female photos in Study 2. Participants were then randomly shown one of the two photos in A4 size. The same photo was presented again following the scenario description in the questionnaire. In the stimuli, we described a scenario of service consumption in a tourism firm and concealed the firm's characteristics. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they were at a tourism firm, and then one employee (with the pretested photo showed after the description) came to serve them. After reading this scenario, participants rated the attractiveness of

Table 3
Measurements and references of all constructs.

Constructs/variables/references	Scale
Physical attractiveness (Fisher & Ma, 2014) What do you think of the physical attractiveness of the service employee?	7-point
Customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014) The service employee gets me to think about ***. The service employee stimulates my interest to learn more about ***. I feel very positive when I consume at ***. Consuming at *** makes me happy. I am proud to consume at ***. Compared to other ***, I would like to purchase in this ***. Whenever I need to consume, I usually choose this ***.	7-point
Desire for social interaction (Agthe et al., 2011) The degree to which you would like to interact directly with the service employee. The degree to which you would like to become friends with the service employee.	7-point
Service expertise (Doney & Cannon, 1997) This service employee is very knowledgeable. This service employee knows the product very well.	7-point

the service employee shown in the photo and then evaluated their perceptions of the service. The demographic information was recorded at the end of the questionnaire.

As listed in Table 3, we adapted one item from Fisher and Ma (2014) for the manipulation check of physical attractiveness. The dependent variable was customer engagement. We measured it using a seven-item scale adapted from Hollebeek et al. (2014). All the variables were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We considered age and gender as control variables in all experiments.

Pretest

We did a pretest to check whether the manipulation of attractiveness was successful. There were 50 respondents in the female group. The results showed that the highly attractive female was rated significantly more attractive than the moderately attractive one ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.27$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.46$, $t = 6.138$, $df = 48$, $p < 0.0001$). There were 36 respondents in male group. The results showed that the highly attractive photo was also rated significantly higher than the moderately attractive one ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.79$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 2.88$, $t = 5.084$, $df = 34$, $p < 0.0001$). Hence, the manipulation of physical attractiveness was successful.

Results

Sixty-six participants completed the questionnaires. Among them, 45.5% were male and 54.5% were female; 42.4% were aged 20 and below and 57.6% were aged between 21 and 30. All participants were randomly assigned to one of the two groups: highly attractive female group, moderately attractive female group. The former group had 35 participants while the latter had 31 participants.

Manipulation check

To check the manipulation of physical attractiveness of female service employees, we used an independent sample *t*-test. The result showed that females in the highly attractive group were perceived more attractive than those in the moderately attractive group ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.31$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.35$), $t = 7.357$, $df = 64$, $p < 0.0001$. Therefore, the manipulation was successful for the physical attractiveness of female service employees.

Main effect

The main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement was tested using one-way ANOVA while controlling age and gender. Results showed that highly attractive service employees led to higher customer engagement than moderately attractive ones ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.05$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.47$, see Fig. 2), $F(1, 62) = 4.691$, $p < 0.05$. That is, employees' physical attractiveness positively affects customer engagement. Thus, H1 was supported.

Study 3

Based on the findings in Study 1, we proposed desire for social interaction as the underlying mechanism of the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement (H2). In Study 3, we carried out an experiment to examine the mediating effect of desire for social interaction in a restaurant setting (H2).

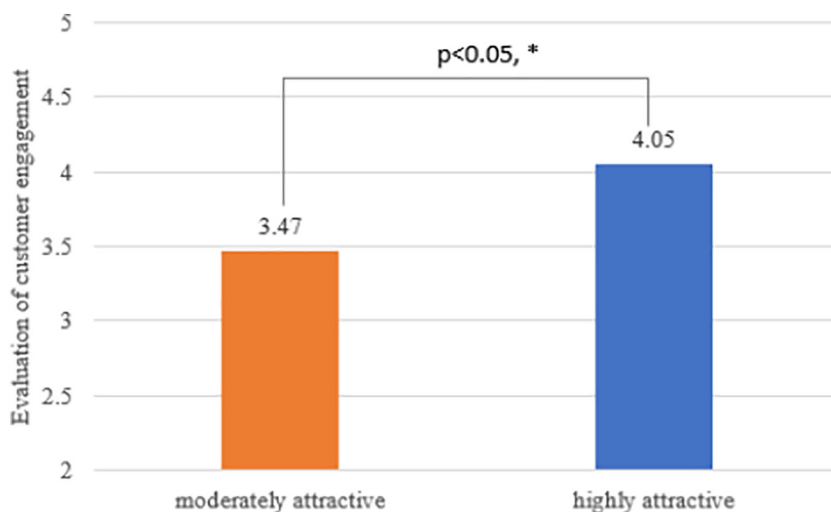


Fig. 2. The main effect of physical attractiveness of employees on customer engagement.

Design, procedure and variables

We carried out a single-factor (physical attractiveness: high vs. moderate) between-subject design. The manipulation procedure of employees' physical attractiveness was identical to the one used in Study 2. One difference was that we used four photos: one highly attractive female, one moderately attractive female, one highly attractive male and one moderately attractive male. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups. Being assured of the confidentiality, participants first read a scenario description. Participants were invited to imagine that they were in a restaurant. After they were seated, a service employee came to serve them. Similar to Study 2, participants viewed a photo of the service employee below the description. After, participants answered questions on the evaluations of employees' physical attractiveness, their desire for social interaction and customer engagement. Finally, they answered questions on their demographic information.

We used the same measurement of employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement used in Study 2. We controlled age and gender as we did in Study 2. In addition, we used two items to measure desire for social interaction (Agthe et al., 2011), which is defined as the extent to which tourists want to interact with encountering employees.

Results

We collected data from a university in South China. Three hundred and nine participants completed the questionnaires (48.5% were male and 51.5% were female). Among the participants, 40.8% were aged 20 and below 20 and 57% were aged between 21 and 30. Additionally, 38.5% were junior undergraduate students, 31.4% were senior undergraduate students, 24.6% were graduate students and 5.5% were doctoral students. They were then randomly assigned to highly attractive male group, moderately attractive male group, highly attractive female group and moderately attractive female group, with 75, 78, 78 and 78 participants respectively.

Manipulation check

The manipulation of physical attractiveness of service employees was successful. Through an independent sample *t*-test, highly attractive employees were rated more positively than the moderately attractive ones ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.22$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.72$), $t = -11.777$, $df = 307$, $p < 0.0001$.

The mediating effect of desire for social interaction

We examined the main effect through ANOVA and found that the highly attractive employees elicited higher customer engagement than the moderately attractive ones ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.63$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.22$), $F(1, 305) = 12.289$, $p < 0.05$. Hayes, Preacher, and Myers (2011) suggested Bootstrapping to be used for mediation analysis. To check the mediating effect of desire for social interaction, we used the Bootstrapping method through Process version 2.16.3. We entered model 4 and generated 5000 bootstraps based on the 309 observations with a 95% confidence interval. As shown in Table 4, the results showed that the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on desire for social interaction was significant (Boot LLCI = 0.4569, Boot ULCI = 1.0330) and the effect size was 0.7449; the effect of desire for social interaction on customer engagement was also significant (Boot LLCI = 0.3932, Boot ULCI = 0.5430) and the effect size was 0.4681. More importantly, the indirect effect of desire on social interaction was significant (Boot LLCI = 0.2104, Boot ULCI = 0.4988, which did not include the value of zero) with an effect size of 0.3487. After controlling for the desire for social interaction, the direct effect of attractiveness on CE was not significant ($p > 0.05$). Thus, it implies that desire for social interaction played a fully mediating role. H2 was supported.

Table 4
Mediation test by Bootstrapping.

	Direct effect			Indirect effect		
	Coefficient	LLCI	ULCI	Coefficient	LLCI	ULCI
Employees' physical attractiveness → customer engagement	0.1067	-0.0918	0.3052	0.3487	0.2104	0.4988
Employees' physical attractiveness → desire for social interaction	0.7449	0.4569	1.0330			
Desire for social interaction → customer engagement	0.4681	0.3932	0.5430			

Study 4

In Study 1, we obtained the evidence of the moderating effect of service expertise from interviews. To the best of the authors' knowledge, it has not been empirically tested. Thus, in Study 4, we examined the moderating effect of service expertise, and tested whether the effect can be observed at a firm-level or an industry-level. If the service expertise was a firm-level moderator, we expected to obtain different physical attractiveness effects under different service expertise in the same industry (e.g., high-end restaurants versus low-end restaurants). Otherwise, the moderating effect of service expertise can only be observed across different industries (e.g., airlines versus restaurants).

Study 4a

Design, procedure and measurement

We carried out a 2 (physical attractiveness: high vs. moderate) \times 2 (service expertise: high vs. low) between-subject design. As indicated from the results in Study 1, we chose a restaurant and an airline to be included in the stimuli. A low-end restaurant and an airline company were used in the low-versus-high service expertise context, respectively.

According to the report of Centre for Aviation, low-cost airlines only account for 13% of Chinese domestic seat capacity. Therefore, we expect that most airlines in China fall in the high expertise category. Besides, we did not name a specific airline in the experiment. Instead, we asked participants to image a service employee serving them on an airplane, which they were waiting to board. Then, they were asked to rate the service expertise of the airline. In the restaurant scenario, we invited customers who were about to consume in a restaurant with an average spend about 50 yuan per person (about 7.5 dollars). Similarly, they were asked to image a service employee serving them in a restaurant, at which they were waiting to have dinner. They were then asked to rate the service expertise of the restaurant.

Different from the studies above, we used real tourists who were waiting for services in the exact context to increase the external validity. We conducted experiments in the departure hall of Guangzhou Baiyun airport as a high-expertise context, while doing so in low-end restaurants in a plaza of Guangzhou as a low-expertise context. A pretest among 100 participants indicated that airline service was perceived to be a higher service expertise level than the low-end restaurant, $M_{\text{high}} = 5.06$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.18$, $t = -4.453$, $df = 98$, $p < 0.0001$. Thus, manipulation of service expertise was successful.

In the current study, the procedure, measurement of physical attractiveness and customer engagement were identical to those used in Study 2. The same photos, including two male photos and two female photos, were again used. We defined service expertise as the capability that the extent to which service employees satisfy tourists' expectancy, consisting of two items, "This service employee is very knowledgeable" and "This service employee knows the product very well" (Doney & Cannon, 1997). We controlled age and gender of the participants as well.

Results

Two hundred and eighty-nine participants participated in the experiment. Twenty-four responses were discarded due to missing data, leaving the valid rate at 83.0%. Among the 265 respondents, 54.3% were male and 45.7% were female; 60.8% were aged between 21 and 30 and 20.4% between 31 and 40; 47.2% of the respondents held a university degree, 27.5% had a college degree, 7.2% had a master's degree and 18.1% held a high school degree or below. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, with 56, 80, 42 and 87 participants respectively.

Manipulation check

The manipulation of physical attractiveness was successful on service employees. Through an independent sample *t*-test, the highly attractiveness service employees were rated higher than the moderately attractiveness ones ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.22$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 4.34$), $t = 5.715$, $df = 263$, $p < 0.0001$.

The moderating effect of service expertise

We analyzed the main effect by ANOVA and results showed that there was a significant difference between the highly attractive group and the moderately attractive group, $F(1, 261) = 5.690$, $p < 0.05$. Using a two-way between-subject ANOVA, the interaction between employees' physical attractiveness and perceived service expertise was significant, $F(1, 259) = 9.505$, $p < 0.05$. As shown in Fig. 3, in the low-expertise context, the customer engagement was higher in the highly attractive group than those in the

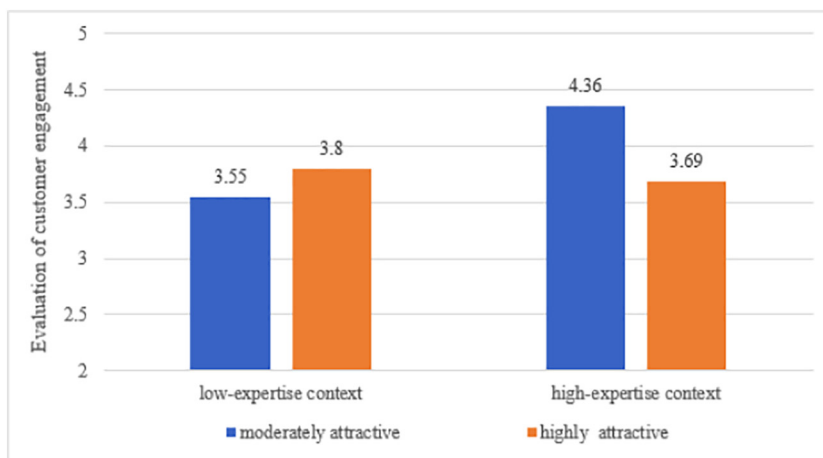


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of service expertise on customers' responses to physical attractiveness of employees.

moderately attractive group ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.80$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.55$). Whereas in the high-expertise context, the customer engagement was lower in the highly attractive group than those in the moderately attractive group ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.69$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 4.36$). Consequently, H3 was supported.

Moderated mediation model

We also tested the full model of moderated mediation by PROCESS in SPSS. The Model 8 was entered and 5000 bootstraps with a 95% confidence interval were generated. After controlling participants' age and gender, results indicated that the indirect effect was significant when service expertise was low (with the effect size of -0.3530 , $LLCI = -0.6036$, $ULCI = -0.1159$). It was not significant for high-expertise context (with the effect size of 0.1867 , $LLCI = -0.0017$, $ULCI = 0.3770$).

Study 4b

Study 4a proved the moderating role of service expertise. However, we were not sure if the service expertise perception was from the firm or the industry characteristics. We carried out an additional study to test the moderating effect of service expertise using one industry rather than two different industries. We adopted the same procedure as used in Study 4a. Participants were instructed to project themselves into a situation where they were served by a service employee and then indicate their attitudes. We chose a restaurant as our context and manipulated it as high or low expertise using different recruitment requirements from real restaurants. In the low expertise context, the restaurant did not require much for service employees and only basic work was needed for the job. In the high expertise context, the restaurant was in need of service employees who had been trained before starting their jobs, and service employees were expected to know products and service very well to provide good services to tourists. We recruited 139 real tourists, of which 52.5% were males; 64.7% were between 21 and 30 and 25.2% were between 31 and 40.

We first conducted a manipulation check for the service expertise at the firm level. The results indicated that the manipulation was successful; $M_{\text{high}} = 5.52$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.08$, $t = 7.053$, $df = 137$, $p < 0.0001$. The main effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement was examined. Results indicated that employees' physical attractiveness had a marginally significant effect on customer engagement ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.03$, $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.67$), $t = 1.862$, $df = 137$, $p = 0.065$. Subsequently, we checked the moderating effect of service expertise using ANOVA. The interaction effect of service expertise and employees' physical attractiveness was not significant, $F(1, 135) = 0.745$, $p > 0.05$. This shows that regardless of the level of service expertise, the high physical attractiveness of employees leads to higher customer engagement in the restaurants. We conclude that the moderating effect of service expertise should be from the industrial level rather than the firm level.

General discussion

Discussion and conclusions

In this research, we focused mainly on the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement in the tourism industry. We used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews and scenario-based experiments, to test three hypotheses. Supported by the results from both interviews and experiments, we found that employees' physical attractiveness did have an impact on tourists' customer engagement. It is especially true for tourism industry where interpersonal interaction affects tourists' experiences and decisions so frequently. This study provides an additional piece of evidence that employees' physical attractiveness not only can improve tourists' satisfaction and purchase intentions (Ahearne et al., 1999), influence social interactions (Wan & Wyer, 2015), but also can enhance tourists' customer engagement.

We also obtained insights into the reasoning of the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement. As evidenced in the interviews in Study 1, tourists feel more inclined to engage in service interactions because of approachable service employees. We sought and tested the mediating effect of desire for social interaction (H2) in Study 3. As we predicted, the results demonstrated that desire for social interaction played a fully mediating role between employees' physical attractiveness and tourists' customer engagement. In the extant research, desire for social interaction was used to explain the effect of physical attractiveness of candidates on social decision-making (Agthe et al., 2011). We, instead, tested the desire for social interaction in the tourism context. Our study demonstrated that desire for social interaction can be used to explain the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement.

One interesting finding was that interviewees react differently to highly attractive employees. It implies that the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement may not always hold. We further uncovered that the link between employees' physical attractiveness and tourists' customer engagement no longer exists in the high service expertise context. We conducted Study 4 to check the moderating effect of service expertise. Results showed that employees' physical attractiveness could enhance tourists' customer engagement in the low expertise context but not in the high expertise context. We also added another study to test whether the moderating effect exists at a firm level or an industrial level. The results indicated that the moderating effect of service expertise does not work at the firm level. Therefore, we concluded that the effect of physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement was moderated by service expertise at an industrial level, namely, the characteristics of the tourism industry.

Theoretical and managerial implications

The current research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we examined the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on customer engagement, a novel perspective in the tourism context. Despite the vital drivers of invisible factors, it is particularly necessary to study the impact of physical surroundings on customer engagement in the tourism industry. Due to the significance of tourist experiences and interpersonal interactions in the tourism industry, physical attractiveness should never be overlooked (Gohary et al., 2016). Ahearne et al. (1999), Čivre et al. (2013) and Wan and Wyer (2015) studied physical attractiveness in interpersonal interactions, while the study of employees' physical attractiveness in the tourism-related setting has not been fully explored. In this stance, we investigated the customer engagement drivers from the perspective of physical attractiveness in the tourism industry. We initially explored it through qualitative method, which was appropriate when the current theory and framework could not provide clear explanations (Wang, 2017). We then tested the qualitative findings by experiment method. Hence, we make theoretical contributions to the tourists' customer engagement study through testing a conspicuous and important factor (i.e., employees' physical attractiveness) in tourism context through mixed-methods approach.

Second, this paper advances our understanding of customer engagement in the tourism industry by examining the mediating role of tourists' desire for social interaction. Due to the interactive characteristic of tourism services, the interaction between a tourist and service employees is necessary. We demonstrated the mediating role of desire for social interaction (employees' physical attractiveness → desire for social interaction → customer engagement), which helps us understand how employees' physical attractiveness affects tourists' customer engagement. Therefore, the current research is a valuable addition to the literature of customer engagement in tourism.

Third, this study provides new insights into the physical attractiveness stereotype by examining the moderating effect of service expertise. To the best of our knowledge, we are among the first to present the conditional effect of service expertise in the tourism context. Scholars have recently scrutinized the beauty premium more closely and argued that what is beautiful is not always good because of moderators such as gender (Agthe et al., 2011), self-presentation concern and product type (Wan & Wyer, 2015). We sought an alternative explanation that has not yet been studied: the service expertise. Insights from interviews and results from the empirical studies both confirmed that service expertise moderates the effect of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement. Although 'what is beautiful is good' is still the most widely accepted notion, we presented a case where the beauty premium may not hold in tourism context. We contribute to a more complete and thorough understanding of the physical attractiveness stereotype in the tourism industry.

Our research also has practical implications. Recently, practitioners have considered customer engagement as a competitive advantage in tourism industry. However, it is still unclear how to improve customer engagement. Employees' physical attractiveness is one of the most conspicuous traits in the tourism service encounters, which largely affects tourist experience. This study investigated the impact of employees' physical attractiveness on tourists' customer engagement. It helps practitioners better understand the relationship between employees' physical attractiveness and customer engagement, and thus implement more effective customer engagement strategies. Besides, our study indicates 'what is beautiful is good' does not always hold. In the tourism industry, managers of restaurants, airlines, travel agencies, hotels and scenic areas should be extra careful of the effect of physical attractiveness. We suggest that tourism practitioners develop different customer engagement strategies based on the service expertise. For example, in the high-expertise context, practitioners should be clear that customers focus mainly on professional skills rather than on the physical attractiveness. Finally, the current study has practical implications for the society to decrease recruitment discrimination in the hiring processes. The stereotype of beauty premium is pervasive, whereas our study demonstrated what is beautiful is not always good. Using good-looking employees does not seem to be as effective in managing customer relationship in the high-expertise context. The finding of moderating effect of service expertise demonstrates that good-looking employees are a double-edged sword in tourism industry. Thus, more attention should be given to low attractive individuals and reform the recognition of physical attractiveness in the current society.

Limitations and future directions

Despite using a mixed-methods approach, the current study still has some limitations that indicate directions for future research. First, the external validity of the findings could be tested in a broader population. Thus, more studies could be done using field experiments to test the impact of physical attractiveness on customer engagement in different samples. Second, the results are limited to the restaurants and high professional airlines. Future research could be extended to other tourism industries to test the moderating effect of service expertise at the industrial level and at the firm level, such as national airlines compared to low-cost airlines. Third, we examined only service expertise as the moderator and did not include other possible moderators in the current research. Future studies could consider other factors such as perceived risk and product type. Fourth, as this study was conducted in the Eastern cultural background, there may be subtle differences in physical attractiveness stereotypes between Western and Eastern cultures. Further study could include samples from other countries to examine the effect of culture. Lastly, this study focused on the positive customer engagement only, while negative customer engagement could be an interesting venue for the future research.

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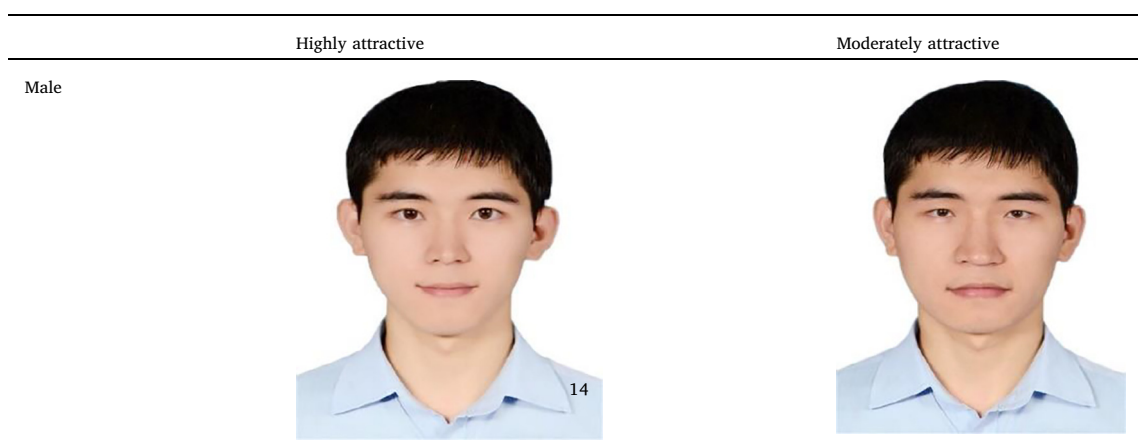
Appendix 1. Examples of interview outline (customers)

1. How many times have you been to restaurants in the last three months?
0, 1–3 times, 3 times above?
2. What factors of the restaurants will influence your dining experience?
3. What about service employees? What do you think about their role in the restaurants?
4. If a highly attractive employee comes to serve you, how do you feel?
5. Do you prefer a highly attractive employee to provide service for you?
6. Why?
7. When encountering a highly attractive employee, would you like to interact with her/him?
8. Will you talk to your friends about a highly attractive employee?
9. Under these circumstances, would you recommend the establishment to your friends or patronize it again?
10. If you did, please recall what happened at that time.
11. Have you ever reviewed restaurants online?
12. If so, what reviews have you written? Please recall them.
13. Do you like to talk about the physical appearance with your friends?
14. What do you think of these employees' service expertise?
15. What do you think of your encounter frequency with these employees?

Interview outline (HR managers):

1. What requirements do you have when recruiting service employees?
2. Is appearance a requirement?
3. Why or why not?
4. Do you prefer to recruit highly attractive employees?
5. Why or why not?
6. What do you think of the skills of the employees in this restaurant?
7. What do you think of the service encounter between service employees and customers?

Appendix 2. Samples of manipulation materials in Study 2, Study 3 and Study 4



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