THE EFFECTS OF FACIAL ATTRACTIVENESS AND GENDER ON CUSTOMER EVALUATIONS DURING A WEB-VIDEO SALES ENCOUNTER

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The use of virtual environments as a support platform for demonstrating products and providing after-sales advice is today relatively commonplace. The Web-video interface represents a fundamental shift away from traditional selling atmospherics where the facial appearance of sales personnel replaces many traditional dimensions of service quality. Although salesperson attractiveness has previously been studied empirically, research into facial attractiveness remains scant. As gender has been proposed as a moderating factor in dyadic selling relationships, this study employs an experiment to test the combined effects of salesperson facial attractiveness, complainant gender, and salesperson gender, on three customer evaluations—satisfaction, perceived quality, and loyalty intentions—during a Web-video encounter. The findings show that facial appearance significantly affected satisfaction at the encounter level although not perceptions of overall service quality or intentions to repurchase. In addition, the study found that dyad gender mismatching resulted in higher customer satisfaction scores for an attractive salesperson. Based on these results, managerial implications and opportunities for future research are discussed.

Interactions between customers and an organization usually take place through employees (Meuter et al. 2000; Solomon et al. 1985). The environment in which this occurs is known as "atmospherics" (Bitner 1990; Kotler 1973) or "service-scapes" (Bitner 1992; Wakefield and Blodgett 1994). The term "personal selling atmospherics" has been coined to describe "contextual aspects of this dyadic interaction including the physical qualities of both the seller and the setting" (McElroy, Morrow, and Eroglu 1990, p. 31). The role of verbal behavior of personnel within atmospherics is underscored by the many studies that explore their effects (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 1996; Elizur 1987; Mohr and Bitner 1995; Price, Arnould, and Deibler 1995).

In marketing and psychology, the role of nonverbal cues such as height, race, age, gender, and attractiveness has also been shown to influence our impressions of others during these encounters (Caballero and Pride 1984; Perlini, Bertolissi, and Lind 1999; Pinar and Hardin 2005; Sundaram and Webster 2000; Wagar and Lindquist 2010). Sales practitioners have long understood the importance of nonverbal forms of expression on sales performance (Comer and Drollinger 1999)—dress code, effective use of body language and proxemics (McElroy, Morrow, and Eroglu 1990), and physical attractiveness (DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 1996; Reingen and Kernan 1993).

The growth of e-business heralds the need for a fresh investigation into the effects of attractiveness. Technology has changed dramatically the way products and services are sold and customer relationships are maintained (Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon 2003; Rust and Kannan 2003; Szymanski and Hise 2000), resulting in changes to the selling atmospherics as described by McElroy, Morrow, and Eroglu (1990). Several studies have emphasized the benefits of improving customer evaluations using new technology in order to personalize the sales experience (Childers et al. 2001; Dholakia and Kshetri 2004). Video-chat systems such as Skype, Windows Live Messenger, iChat, and Paltalk, used in conjunction with a camera and Web interface, are now commonplace (Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon 2003; Masey, Khatri, and Montoya-Weis 2007), For example, Lands' End and Home Depot offer live video chat to enhance the sales experience, using it to demonstrate products and for one-to-one after-sales support. In an online environment, traditional dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction, such as the physical appearance of the company, its equipment, and facilities, are unobservable, thereby shifting greater emphasis onto those remaining elements (Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon 2003). In a Web-chat interface, one considerable element remaining is facial appearance.

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This discussion raises an important yet unanswered question concerning possible effects of a salesperson's facial appearance during an online interaction. Demonstrating a strong effect for facial attractiveness would be of interest to researchers and practitioners as a deeper understanding could improve decision making regarding online service interface design and selling strategies. To date, empirical research into the role and the effects of facial attractiveness of salespeople in virtual environments remains scant.

Employee response to service problems is one of the three main types of encounters between a company and its customers (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). Given previous findings that conclude that customers value highly the responsiveness of their sales representative to provide follow-up service and help resolve problems (Amyx and Bhuian 2009), the use of a customer complaint and company response as the context for this study is warranted.

The paper begins by reviewing research issues from the extant literature covering physical appearance, facial attractiveness, customer complaint behavior, and service recovery strategies. Hypotheses are then presented in relation to key customer evaluations to a sales recovery—customer satisfaction, service quality, and loyalty. In the next section the methodology is outlined. Analysis and findings are discussed in the following section. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the contribution of this research to the current body of theory, providing recommendations for practitioners, and making suggestions for further research.

BACKGROUND

Physical Attractiveness Stereotyping (the Beauty Effect)

Researchers from sociology and psychology have for some time studied attractiveness-stereotype theory (Berry 1990, 1991; Berry and Brownlow 1989; Hammermesh and Biddle 1994; Perlini, Bertolissi, and Lind 1999; Zebrowitz and Montepare 1992). There is strong evidence from these studies that in many walks of life, attractive people fare much better than those considered less attractive. For example, attractive people are more likely to be chosen as group members for teams (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008) and attractive loan applicants tend to be more successful than those perceived to be less attractive (Golightly, Huffman, and Byrne 1972). Physically attractive job applicants are treated more positively during the employment selection process and receive higher starting salaries due to the attractiveness factor (Stevenge and McKay 1999).

Attraction is generally defined as "an attitude, an overall predisposition towards some person . . . and may be conceived as a composite evaluative response based on a number of dimensions" (Caballero and Resnik 1986, p. 18). Cognitive

response theory offers an explanation for the effects of physical appearance on others. This theory suggests that people respond automatically to certain cues without realizing that their nonverbal characteristics influence our impressions and evaluations of others (Marshall, Stamps, and Moore 1998).

Consistent with attractiveness-stereotyping theory, Reingen and Kernan (1993) found a strong main effect for physical attractiveness, with attractive salespeople perceived more favorably on characteristics typically associated with selling effectiveness. Similarly, the findings of DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak (1996) demonstrated that purchase intentions were more favorably influenced by the attractive salespersons' message. Raza and Carpenter (1987), in a study of applicant suitability for employment positions, developed a simple model to explain the process of trait inference. They postulate that when attractiveness is recognized it results in arousal stimulus, affecting likability (positive labeling), which in turn positively influences judgements.

Contrary to the conclusions found in these studies, empirical research has occasionally shown physical beauty to be unhelpful, for example, when attractive models were used to advertise products in unsuitable categories (Brumbaugh 1993; Caballero and Solomon 1984). Beauty stereotyping can also raise expectations of performance (Andreoni and Petrie 2008). These findings indicate that the effects of attractiveness are neither conclusive nor straightforward. Facial appearance, a subset of physical appearance and defined as the visible aspect of a person (Cabellaro and Solomon 1984), is discussed next.

Facial Appearance

Facial appearance is considered to influence observer judgements in the sender, and importantly, attribute traits based on that information (Masip, Garrido, and Herrero 2004). People with attractive faces are considered to be more dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, and socially skilled than less attractive people (Feingold 1992). Mature faces infer traits of coldness, physical strength, shrewdness, and cunningness, whereas baby-faced adults are seen as warm, physically weak, naive, honest, and submissive (Berry and Brownlow 1989). For instance, McArthur and Baron (1983) found that adults attribute childlike qualities to individuals with immature facial features, resulting in them receiving less severe judicial outcomes than mature-faced offenders (Zebrowitz and McDonald 1991). Trait inferences may be formed within a fraction of a second, according to results from laboratory experiments that measured impressions of attractiveness, likability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness (Willis and Todorov 2006).

In a sales context, buyers are known to form judgments about a salesperson's expertise, credibility, and trustworthiness during the initial contact (Jones et al. 1998). Salesperson

credibility is an important element in persuasion, described as the degree to which the receiver perceives a communication source as trustworthy and delivering confidence (Jones et al. 1998). Facial attractiveness has been an underresearched topic in the field of personal selling, most likely due to the presence of many other factors within selling atmospherics that obfuscate the need to concentrate on this particular factor.

To summarize the discussion to date, there is sufficient evidence from prior studies that the beauty effect operates in many domains, including sales. Cognitive response theory suggests that assessments of attractiveness are made quickly, often at a subconscious level and beginning at an early age. A positive effect from beauty appears to be dependent on the setting and circumstances. Although generally beneficial to an attractive person, beauty may sometimes prove detrimental by unduly raising performance expectations. Certain traits admired in salespeople, such as competence, credibility, trustworthiness, and confidence, can be inferred on the basis of facial appearance. Employee responses to an after-sales problem is a common service encounter, prompting companies such as Lands' End and Home Depot to offer live video-chat in order to deliver one-to-one support. Therefore, the main research objective of this study is to explore the effects of facial attractiveness in a virtual environment during an after-sales encounter. The next section discusses the subjects of customer complaint behavior and a company's recovery efforts.

Customer Complaint Behavior and After-Sales Recovery

Customer complaint behavior has been defined as a multiple set of behavioral and nonbehavioral responses, triggered by a dissatisfactory purchase episode (Singh 1988). A dissatisfied customer may engage in multiple actions ranging from nothing to complaining publicly (Blodgett, Wakefield, and Barnes 1995; Colgate and Norris 2001; Day et al. 1981; Singh 1990). However, a "voiced complaint" to a company representative can be helpful to an organization because it provides an opportunity for service recovery and diagnostic information about sales or service problems (Davidow and Dacin 1997; Dolinsky 1994; Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987; Kendall and Russ 1975; Nyer 2000; Oliver 1986; Resnik and Harmon 1983; Spreng 1995). In a sales environment, complaining customers tend to prefer asychronous communication channels (letter and e-mail) to demonstrate their frustrations but prefer synchronous channels such as face-to-face, telephone, or Web interface when seeking restitution (Mattila and Wirtz 2004).

When a customer complains to a company, the company has an opportunity to recover the situation. Recovery refers to the actions a company takes in response to a problem (Grönroos 1988) or the process of returning a complaining customer to a state of satisfaction (Zemke and Bell 1990).

Although recoveries are precipitated by problems, such episodes can positively influence overall satisfaction and loyalty if the recovery is strong (Droge and Halstead 1991; Etzel and Silverman 1981; Gilly 1987; Heskett, Sasser, and Hart 1990; Liu, Sudharshan, and Harmer 2000; Spreng 1995).

Many studies have provided insights into an effective complaint recovery strategy. Researchers recommend that complaints be recovered quickly and personally (Zemke and Bell 1990). A tangible offer of compensation should be made in order to demonstrate that the organization is willing to make financial restitution for problems (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Boshoff and Leong 1998; Goodwin and Ross 1990; Zemke and Bell 1990). In response to the growing industry practice of using online sales and support, there has been a call to incorporate new technology communication channels in future empirical studies of sales recovery (Wilson, Daniel, and McDonald 2002).

Web-chat technology suggests a fundamental change in the selling atmospherics and consequently the attributes used by customers to evaluate an encounter (Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon 2003). Greater emphasis is likely to be placed on those attributes at the heart of an online encounter such as facial characteristics because webcams generally present head-and-shoulder images. In the next section, a number of hypotheses are developed around possible effects of facial appearance on customer evaluations in this virtual environment.

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

In considering the outcome of an after-sales encounter, two primary evaluations are typically considered by researchers— service quality and customer satisfaction. Sales compensation and bonuses are often linked to these two measures (Amyx and Bhuian 2009). Customer satisfaction has been used as a critical measure of performance during online interactions (Meuter et al. 2000; Szymanski and Hise 2000).

Despite many years of debate surrounding their definition and measurement (Iacabucci, Ostrom, and Grayson 1995; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996), there now appears to be some agreement among academics concerning their respective definitions. Service quality is generally conceptualized as a general attitude about an organization, but not necessarily based on past experiences with a supplier, and to its being multidimensional and varied across industries (Cronin and Taylor 1992, 1994; Oliver 1997; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988, 1991, 1994; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). However, customer satisfaction requires interaction with an organization and concerns an evaluation of the encounter itself (Bitner 1990; Bolton and Drew

1991; Carman 1990; Cronin and Taylor 1994; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1991).

Based on the discussion presented here concerning the impact of attractiveness stereotyping, it is hypothesized that during a positive Web-video sales recovery:

> *Hypothesis 1: Facial attractiveness has a positive effect on the level of customer satisfaction during the encounter.*

> *Hypothesis 2: Facial attractiveness has a positive effect on the company's overall service quality perceptions during the encounter.*

Customer Loyalty

A further measure often incorporated into evaluations of a customer's experience is customer loyalty (Dolen, de Ruyter, and Streukens 2008). Customer loyalty is generally conceptualized as the intention to purchase again from the same company (Söderlund 1998). Many studies across a variety of industries have demonstrated the links between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability, making this construct an important measure of a customer experience (Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann 1994; Banwarri and Lassar 1998; Buzzell and Gale 1987; Heskett et al. 1994; Luo and Homburg 2007; Parasuraman and Grewal 2000; Rapert and Wren 1998; Rust and Zahorik 1993; Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995; Taylor and Baker 1994; Zahorik and Rust 1992; Zeithaml 2000). Customer loyalty metrics may also be used as a basis for compensating sales force personnel (Amyx and Bhuin 2009).

As service quality and customer satisfaction are hypothesized to be linked to, and antecedents of, loyalty (Heskett, Sasser, and Hart 1990), it is also expected for there to be a significant effect on loyalty intentions during a positive Web-video sales recovery. Stated formally:

> *Hypothesis 3: Facial attractiveness has a positive effect on customer loyalty intentions during the encounter.*

Moderating Effects of Gender

Evidence from the sales and marketing literature suggests that there may be a moderating effect of gender in selling atmospherics based on differences in the way men and women process information. Findings from the retailing sector for example, indicate that women have higher decoding ability of nonverbal cues, especially facial expressions of sales staff. Men, on the other hand, are considered more functional and outcome oriented, suggesting that attractiveness may be less important than the outcome of the encounter (Ganesan-Lim, Russell-Bennett, and Dagger 2008). Dwyer, Orlando, and Shepherd (1998) found that salespeople generally prefer

selling to prospects of the same gender, although this may be accounted for by historical gender imbalances in the field of selling.

Similarity-attraction theory posits that individuals tend to be attracted to, and feel more comfortable associating with, those demographically similar to themselves (Byrne 1971; Graves and Powell 1995). However, Graves and Powell (1995) concluded that mismatched dyads significantly performed better than gender matched pairs. Conversely, Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) surmised that the relationship between dyadic similarity and salesperson performance is weak at best, undermining the applicability of similarity-attraction theory alone to explain gender interaction preferences.

When considering the possible moderating effects of gender on attractiveness, the sales scenario employed in a study by Debevec and Kernan (1984) may provide some guidance as to how this might apply in a virtual environment, although fewer traditional cues would be transmitted in this setting. They found that during a group sales presentation, women reacted more positively to the attractive male presenter compared with the female presenter for affective measures, although these feelings did not transcend into behavioral intentions (e.g., attending more meetings or agreeing to a new levy). Men were also more affected in the unmatched dyad when the presenter was female versus male. These findings have been supported by Morrow (1990), who concluded that attractiveness is advantageous to both men and women. Given these conclusions, attractiveness stereotyping may provide a stronger explanation for the moderating affect of gender than similarity-attraction theory.

Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is posited concerning the moderating affect of gender on attractiveness during a positive Web-video sales recovery.

> *Hypothesis 4: For attractive salespeople, when the gender of the complainant and salesperson are unmatched (male/female or female/male), scores for customer satisfaction will be higher than when matched (male/male or female/female).*

Figure 1 presents a model to encapsulate our hypotheses.

METHOD

The hypotheses were tested using a $2 \times 2 \times 3$, between-subjects factorial experiment. The independent variables comprised 2 levels of *complainant gender* (male, female), 2 levels of *salesperson gender* (male, female), and 3 levels of *salesperson attractiveness* (attractive, average, and unattractive), resulting in 12 treatment cells. The treatments were studied under a condition of positive service recovery, operationalized through an apology plus an immediate offer of monetary compensation,

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Figure 1
Hypothesized Model

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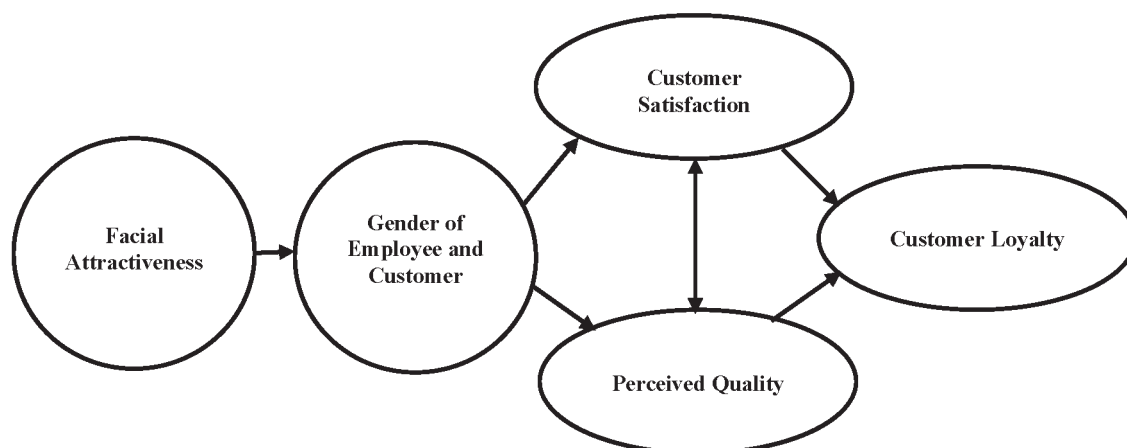
as recommended in the extant literature as critical elements of a positive after-sales recovery.

Development and Pretest of Facial Attractiveness

To develop the salespersons' attractiveness stimuli, four alternative color, head-and-shoulder photographs were used for each of the three levels of attractiveness in order to select the one most suitable for each gender. Image "morphing" software was tested in an effort to maximize internal consistency using one photograph for each gender, artificially modified to convey different levels of attractiveness. Unfortunately, pretest results were unsatisfactory when compared with traditional photographs. Despite the availability of morphing technology, photographs are the most common approach to operationalizing attractiveness (Liechty, Freeman, and Zabriskie 2006) and were therefore utilized in the current study. Photographs were sourced online from portfolios of various talent agencies that offer a variety of facial types.

The photographs depicted people of a similar age range, 25 to 35 years, to minimize risk of age being introduced as a confounding variable. A sample of 85 graduate students rated each photograph on one question across a nine-point Likert scale of attractiveness. Attractiveness is often measured on a single-item scale, "operationalized as the degree to which a person's facial features elicits favorable responses" (Marshall, Stamps, and Moore 1998, p. 24). Mean averages were established at 8.0 or above for the attractive portrait, between 4.0 and 5.5 for the average portrait, and 3.0 or below for the unattractive portrait.

The category of mobile phone services was selected as the product setting. Mobile phones are frequently cited in after-sales complaint data in many countries and have a high level of market penetration among younger people (Rappaport 2007).

It is also reasonable to expect that a mobile service provider would employ Web-camera technology in a sales or service situation. The experimental stimuli were operationalized using role-plays based around the look of a Skype screen. The respondents viewed a fictitious page from Skype containing a photograph of the salesperson and simultaneously listened to audio dialogue between the complainant and salesperson. Consideration was given to using professional actors in the role-plays rather than still photographs, however, this was rejected because eye and mouth movements have been shown to influence our impressions of a speaker (Tipples 2007). The after-sales response was scripted to portray a motivated, helpful, and honest contact person, as these traits are valued in online, after-sales personnel (Gruber, Szmigin, and Voss 2006). A different customer voice was used for the male and female complainants, but the same voice was adopted for each level of attractiveness. Sales encounters lasted between 30 and 40 seconds, as recommended by Lemmink and Mattsson (1998).

Development of Sales Scenarios

Customer complaints were developed around "core" customer experience problems expressed by mobile phone users. Core problems are considered more likely to result in customers feeling aggrieved and leading to a complaint to the supplier (Keaveney 1995). Causes of each complaint were attributed to the company rather than the customer, as attribution of blame is also more likely to translate into a voiced complaint to the company (Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham 1987).

Scripts were pilot tested on a separate convenience sample, this time with 92 graduate students. Survey questions ascertained whether respondents thought that the after-sales scenarios depicted in the scripts were (1) believable, (2) showed

Table 1
Summary of Constructs, Scale Items, and Sources

Constructs	Scale Items	Source of Scale
Customer Satisfaction	The customer has the right to be satisfied with this service experience.	Adapted from Bitner
	I would be pleased with how this problem was handled by the staff member.	(1990); Oliver and
	I would be completely satisfied with the organization's staff behavior in this situation.	DeSarbo (1988)
Perceived Service Quality	This organization looks after its customers.	Adapted from Bitner
	Employees at this organization are competent and professional.	(1990); Oliver and
	I could place trust in this organization.	DeSarbo (1988)
	Service quality seemed high.	
Repurchase Intentions	I would continue to use this organization in the future.	Adapted from Maute
	I would recommend this organization to friends and associates if they asked my opinion.	and Forrester (1993)

breakdowns in core problems, and (3) whether the service recovery was positive. Survey questions were rated on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with 7 = "strongly agree" and 1 = "strongly disagree." Average scores of at least 5.5 were achieved for each of the criteria tested, which is acceptable for stimuli testing (Shamdasani and Sheth 1995).

Development of Measurement Instrument

The dependent variables represent important customer evaluations of an encounter as described earlier—service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Measurement of the dependent variables was performed using a survey. The specific items were adapted from scales previously published in empirical studies (see the last column of Table 1). The scale items were designed to measure service quality at a global level and customer satisfaction at an encounter-specific level. The loyalty items were designed to capture feelings toward repurchasing from the company or recommend to someone else.

Although the construct items were adapted from previously validated scales, they were rechecked for reliability using the guidelines proposed by Churchill (1991) and Coolican (1994). The Cronbach alpha scores ranged between 0.78 and 0.95, exceeding the acceptable score of 0.6 as suggested by Malhotra (1996). Factor analysis, using principal axis factoring to evaluate construct validity, confirmed the three factors that emerged from the literature.

Sampling and Experimental Procedure

To perform the experiment, a fresh sample of 360 of graduate students was taken from an international business school in France. Using convenience sampling, each participant was allocated to one of the 12 treatments with a quota of 30 respondents for each cell (Tabachenik and Fidell 1996). Each group then received one treatment combining the options of *complainant gender, salesperson gender,* and *salesperson attractiveness.* The respondents viewed each after-sales situation twice,

imagining that they were the customer depicted in the role-play, then asked to complete a short questionnaire.

Findings

The impact of the experimental manipulations on the dependent variables was investigated using MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) and ANOVA (analysis of variance). Tests on assumptions of adequate cell size, univariate and multivariate normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices showed no violations.

There were statistically significant differences for the interaction between attractiveness and gender on the combined dependent variables. Results revealed significant multivariate effects for *salesperson's attractiveness* ($F_{[6, 332]} = 7, 32, p < 0.001$; Wilks's lambda = 0.73; partial eta squared = 0.122) and the two-way interaction between *complainant gender* and *salesperson attractiveness* ($F_{[6, 334]} = 2, 16, p < 0.001$; Wilks's lambda = 0.92; partial eta squared = 0.037). Results were also calculated using Pillai's trace, Hotelling's trace, and Roy's largest root, and provided similar results.

When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately at the univariate level, *salesperson attractiveness* was statistically significant, using a Bonferroni-adjusted level of 0.017 to reduce risk of Type I error, but only for *customer satisfaction* ($F_{[2, 180]} = 17.12, p = 0.001$). These findings therefore provide support for Hypothesis 1, which predicted that facial attractiveness would have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Inspection of the mean average scores for customer satisfaction indicated that there were significant differences for attractive versus unattractive males (*M* [mean] = 6.12, SD [standard deviation] = 0.60; *M* = 5.29, SD = 1.07), and also for females (*M* = 5.21, SD = 1.06; *M* = 6.27, SD = 0.77). Although there were slight differences between mean average scores for attractive versus average photographs, these were not significant.

Results for the variable *service quality* almost achieved significance, but the findings for the variable *loyalty* were

not significant. Therefore, H2 and H3 were not supported. H4 posited that unmatched dyads with attractive salespeople would have significant effects on customer satisfaction. The results showed that the interaction between *complainant gender* and *salesperson attractiveness* achieved significance with Bonferroni adjustment for *customer satisfaction* ($F_{[2, 168]}$ = 5.96, p = 0.003), thereby supporting H4. Inspection of the mean scores reported higher levels for unmatched (male complainant/female salesperson: M = 5.93, SD = 0.72) versus matched (male complainant/male salesperson: M = 5.18, SD = 0.55). Unmatched females (female complainant/male salesperson) achieved scores of M = 6.12, SD = 0.60 and matched (female complainant/female salesperson) M = 5.76, SD = 0.73.

DISCUSSION

Findings from many studies demonstrate how our perceptions of others can be affected by a person's physical appearance, known as "attractiveness-stereotype theory." The current study evaluates the impact of facial attractiveness, a subset of physical appearance, during an after-sales encounter. The findings support the general hypothesis that a salesperson's facial attractiveness can effect customer evaluations, during a sales encounter, of satisfaction with the encounter rather than quality perceptions of a firm's service or intentions to repurchase.

Previous research on attractiveness (DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 1996; Reingen and Kernan 1993) has concentrated on the overall physical attractiveness of a salesperson. This approach is modeled on a traditional selling environment that includes nonverbal and verbal characteristics of a salesperson together with physical elements of the sales environment. In such a setting, facial appearance might be expected to play only a minor role. However, a Web-chat interface used to enhance sales and after-sales experiences represents a significant change in selling atmospherics, a situation where facial characteristics of a salesperson comes under more intense scrutiny.

Support for H1 demonstrates that customer perceptions of an after-sales, Web-video recovery are affected by the facial attractiveness of a salesperson, explained by attractiveness-stereotyping theory. The results were significant for both males and females when comparing attractive versus unattractive photographs. However, when comparing photographs of average attractiveness versus unattractive photographs, the differences in scores were not significant. The positive effect for facial attractiveness on customer satisfaction is important given the links between customer satisfaction, service quality, and long-term customer loyalty.

The expectation in H2 that facial attractiveness would positively affect perceptions of an organization's service quality was more exigent than for satisfaction. Traditional measures of service quality are usually broad, encompassing many dimensions of experiences with an organization. For example, in their seminal paper, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) proposed a service quality model (SERVQUAL) and measurement instrument that included 22 attributes of service quality. Because customer satisfaction is seen as an antecedent of service quality, it may require multiple experiences to improve scores on this particular metric.

In a similar way, customer loyalty generally develops over time, based on many encounters between an organization and a customer. The lack of support for H3 may be explained by the use of a *strong,* as opposed to *outstanding* after-sales recovery. It is not uncommon for there to be no immediate effect on loyalty intentions after only one positive encounter. As noted by Heskett et al. (1994), customer loyalty is also much stronger for those who are either extremely satisfied (rating an organization 9 or more out of 10) or very dissatisfied, with a nonlinear relationship for scores within one standard deviation of the mean.

The current study found that dyads with a mismatched gender, (male/female) or (female/male), resulted in significantly higher customer satisfaction with the sales recovery effort when using the image of an attractive salesperson. Results were significant for both men and women, providing support for H4. The findings from the current study confirm gender-stereotyping conclusions drawn by Debevec and Kernan (1984), who studied the effects of overall physical attractiveness during face-to-face sales presentations, as well as research by Dwyer, Orlando, and Shepherd (1998) and Morrow (1990). However, the current study focuses on facial attractiveness rather than the overall physical appearance considered in those studies. To conclude, the findings demonstrate that the facial attractiveness and gender of a salesperson do influence customers' evaluations during a Web-chat sales recovery.

IMPLICATIONS

The study provides a number of important managerial implications for companies using or planning to utilize a Web-video interface to enhance a sales experience. First, sales managers should be sensitive to the different nature of an online camera experience. When salespeople communicate using Web-camera technology, nonverbal cues such as the facial appearance of the salesperson play a more important role than in a typical face-to-face sales situation because of changes in sales atmospherics. In traditional selling, other cues may be more important to the customer or the initial impact of attractiveness may diminish over time. In some companies, customer complaints may be handled by untrained sales staff or back office personnel not normally involved in sales, which, based on these findings, would be a mistake.

In addition to considering these human resource issues, managers should reinforce the importance of verbal and nonverbal behavior during online video-interface sales training programs. Factors such as voice characteristics, face animation and deportment, which have not been evaluated in this study, may also come under increased attention from customers during a Web-video interface.

By examining the effects of facial attractiveness and gender during a Web-chat recovery, this paper makes three contributions to the personal selling and sales management literature. First, as evident from the Discussion section, research into facial attractiveness opens a new debate on its role in a virtual selling environment, a practice that is now more commonplace. Understandably, the topic of facial attractiveness has received little attention in the sales literature given the presence of so many other quality dimensions of traditional selling atmospherics. Studies that consider online sales atmospherics are scant, as are those that address the role of facial appearance.

Second, the current study adds to our knowledge of the role of facial attractiveness and its interaction with a salesperson's gender as a moderating factor. The results suggest that this research stream offers potential for further investigation. Third, the current study provides a platform to consider the role of other nonverbal cues that may also be important during an online sales experience.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all empirical studies, there are several limitations that warrant consideration as they may restrict the extent to which the findings may be generalized beyond this study. There is always a risk in using role-plays to depict a sales situation because they may not reproduce the same emotions as a real-life choice situation. Using role-plays in experiments increases control and manipulation of specific variables but potentially decreases external validity. Further limitations of the study are that it considers only one product type (mobile phones) and a narrow age demographic. Caution is therefore recommended when extrapolating the results beyond the sector and sample studied here. While these limitations are acknowledged, they do not detract from the importance of the findings, but instead provide a platform for future research.

Researchers have many opportunities to pursue this topic further. While this study considered only one type of product and within an after-sales situation, findings may vary with different product categories and in different sales settings. Future studies might also consider the extent to which personality traits are communicated during a Web-chat interface. Important salesperson traits such as credibility, friendliness, competence, empathy, courtesy, and trustworthiness may be antecedents of customer evaluations during an online sales experience warranting investigation given the

growing adoption of new technology to support face-to-face communications.

Finally, the use of Web-chat systems by companies such as Lands' End raises questions concerning how this medium compares with traditional communication channels, including face-to-face, telephone, mail, and e-mail, across various customer segments. Comparing customer perceptions of different communication channels was not, however, an objective of this study; rather, its focus was to evaluate the importance of facial attractiveness and gender on customer evaluations during a Web-video interface.

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