Consumer Reactions to Attractive Service Providers:
Approach or Avoid?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Consumers often interact more effectively with physically attractive service providers, resulting in greater consumer satisfaction and stronger purchase intentions (e.g., Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999). The present research qualifies this assumption, however. We find that attractive service providers can sometimes lead consumers to have self-presentation concerns, that is, concerns about their ability to make a good impression on others (Leary, Nezlek, Downs, Radford-Davenport, Martin, & McMullen, 1994). Research on impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) suggests that people are generally motivated to make a favorable impression on attractive others and that their inability to accomplish can create anxiety (Leary, 1986; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). This suggests that when a provider’s physical attractiveness elicits self-presentation concerns, it might have a detrimental effect on their purchase decisions. This concern can be activated by consumption of embarrassing products.

We predicted that when consumers’ self-presentation concerns are heightened, they often avoid interacting with physically attractive providers and so the providers are relatively ineffective. The processes that underlie this effect are likely to depend on whether the consumer and provider are the same or the opposite sex. That is, the self-presentation
concerns that are stimulated by exposure to an attractive opposite-sex provider are sexually
driven, whereas the concerns activated by an attractive same-sex target are a result of social
comparison processes. Nevertheless, their effects on provider effectiveness are similar.

We investigated these conditions in two studies. Study 1 confirmed that consumers’
avoidance of an attractive opposite-sex provider depends on their self-presentation concerns
and these concerns are activated by characteristics of the consumption situation itself. Study 2
demonstrated similar effects when the attractive service provider was of the same sex rather
than the opposite sex.

Conceptual Background

The Effects of Physical Attractiveness

The positive impact of physical attractiveness on social interactions is well established
(e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1974). The “beautiful is good” stereotype is pervasive. People
think that attractive individuals are more persuasive, have more influence on others, and are
better liked (Sigall & Aronson, 1969). They also perceive attractive individuals to be more
intellectually competent, popular, and sociable (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991).
Consumer research appears to confirm implications of these findings. Studies of service
marketing have found that attractive service providers are often better liked and produce
greater consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions (e.g., Ahearne et al., 1999; DeShields,
Kara, & Kaynak, 1996; Koernig & Page, 2002; Reingen & Kernan, 1993).

However, little if any previous research has investigated the conditions in which the
physical attractiveness of a service provider might decrease the favorableness of consumers’
reactions to a service encounter. We predicted that when consumers’ self-presentation
concerns are heightened, they often avoid interacting with physically attractive providers and so the providers are relatively ineffective.

Self-Presentation and Opposite Sex Providers

People attempt to control the impressions they convey (Leary & Kowalski 1990). When a person is not particularly attractive, individuals may not always think about the impression they make. When the person is attractive, however, self-presentation concerns are more likely to come into play (Schlenker, 1980). As noted earlier, physically attractive persons are attributed generally favorable personal qualities (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) and are preferred as dating partners (Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). These persons can therefore spontaneously activate self-presentation concerns that are sexually driven.

When individuals want to make a good impression on someone and feel able to do so, they may be motivated to interact with this person. For example, female participants eat less snack food in the presence of an attractive male in order to enhance their apparent femininity (Mori, Chaiken, & Pliner, 1987) and males display luxury possessions in order to impress attractive women (Griskevicius, Tybur, Sundie, Cialdini, Miller, & Kenrick, 2007). Situations can arise, however, when individuals are motivated to make a favorable impression on someone but believe they are unable to attain this objective. In this case, they could expect that interacting with the person will be aversive and might try to avoid doing so (Bernstein, Stephenson, Snyder, & Wicklund, 1983).

In consumer situations, self-presentation concerns are likely to be activated by the anticipation of purchasing a product or service that is typically used privately or that calls attention to undesirable personal attributes (e.g., condoms, beast pads, weight-loss pills, etc.). Such purchases are particularly likely to elicit embarrassment when the salesperson is
attractive and of the opposite sex. Therefore, people may be especially motivated to avoid interacting with such a salesperson.

Self-Presentation Concerns in Same-Sex Interactions

The conditions described in the previous section are likely to be evident in service situations in which the salesperson or service provider is an attractive person of the opposite sex. However, self-presentation concerns could induce avoidance of interactions with attractive same-sex providers as well, albeit for different reasons. Attractive members of the same sex are generally regarded as potential threats to a person’s status and self-esteem in social interactions (Agthe, Spörrle, & Maner, 2011; Maner, Miller, Rouby, & Gailliot, 2009). In this case, self-presentation concerns are more likely to be driven by a social comparison process. Comparisons with an ostensibly superior person can lead to jealousy and can decrease self-esteem (Tesser & Collins, 1988). Attractive same-sex individuals stimulate upward comparison and consequently threaten self-esteem (Agthe et al., 2011; Kenrick, Montello, Gutierres, & Trost, 1993; Wood, 1989). Women often compare their appearance to that of attractive female peers (Jones & Buckingham, 2005) and models (Dittmar & Howard, 2004) and these comparisons can elicit negative affect. Thus, although people are in a positive mood after being exposed to attractive opposite-sex faces, they are in a negative mood after viewing attractive same-sex faces.

In summary, we assume that when individuals encounter service providers of average attractiveness, their concerns about making a good impression are unlikely to be activated and so they are unlikely to think about the quality of their interaction with the person. In this case, individuals’ desire to interact with a provider will increase with the provider’s physical
attractiveness, and this may be true regardless of whether the provider is of the same or the opposite sex.

When the provider is physically attractive, however, they may have concerns about their self-presentation. These concerns could be activated by embarrassing consumption. When the provider is of the opposite sex, consumers are likely to experience evaluation apprehension and their willingness to interact may decrease. When the provider is of the same sex, consumers are likely to engage in upward comparison and evaluate themselves negatively in relation to the provider. In this case, they may dislike the provider and be unwilling to interact for this reason.

**Methodology and Results**

Two experiments were conducted to examine consumers’ reactions to attractive (vs. unattractive) providers. Study 1 was a field experiment conducted at a hospital. It was a 2 (attractive: high vs. average) × 2 (consumption conditions: embarrassing vs. not embarrassing) between-subjects design and we examined the opposite-sex interaction. We contacted a company that was selling two new products at a roadshow: a thermal waist belt (a product to facilitate weight loss) and a foot insole (for use in relieving foot pressure and pain). The company arranged to have two part-time male salespersons (age = 31 and 33 respectively) with different levels of physical attractiveness and set up two booths at the show about 5 meters apart, one of which displayed each type of product. One salesperson manned each booth, switching their position every hour. A total of 153 females stopped at the booths. Results confirmed that female consumers were more likely to interact with the attractive salesperson when he was selling foot insoles but were less likely to interact with this person when he was selling thermal waist belts.
Study 2 was a lab experiment and we examined the same-sex interaction. One hundred four female undergraduate students participated for pay of HK$30 (around US$3.85). They were assigned to cells of a 2 (salesperson attractiveness: high vs. average) × 2 (consumption conditions: embarrassing vs. not embarrassing) between-subjects design.

Participants were told to imagine that a company wanted to receive feedback from consumers about having a *thermal wear* product and their sales representatives. On this pretense, their attention was directed to a computer screen showing a picture of a same-sex salesperson and some pictures of the thermal wear with product descriptions. They were asked to imagine themselves interacting with the salesperson. A physically attractive female confederate (age = 28) served as the salesperson in the picture. In the high attractiveness condition, she styled her hair, make-up, and wore a T-shirt that fitted her well and flattered her shape and looked thin. In the average attractiveness condition, the same confederate did not wear make-up and wore an oversize T-shirt and a pair of glasses to detract from her appearance. Written messages were used to manipulate the embarrassment level of the product. In embarrassing consumption conditions, the materials indicated that the primary function of the thermal wear was to reduce weight and keep the body slim during the winter. In the non-embarrassing consumption condition, the materials indicated that the thermal wear was intended to keep the body warm during the winter. Results showed that participants reacted more favorably to an attractive same-sex salesperson than to an average looking one when they were buying non-embarrassing products but reacted less favorably to an attractive salesperson than to an unattractive one when they were buying embarrassing products.

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, the conditions in which the physical attractiveness of a service provider can decrease as well as increase consumption behavior have not previously been
examined. To this extent, our research not only identifies these conditions but also provides evidence of the mechanisms that underlie these effects.

The impact of embarrassment in the situations we investigated extent previous research in this area. Previous research has been mainly concerned with how embarrassment prevents consumers from achieving positive benefits, for example, purchasing condoms to have safe sex (Moore, Dahl, Gorn, & Weinberg, 2006), having appropriate medical examination to save lives (Consedine, Krivoshekova, & Harris, 2007) and using in-store coupons to save money (Brumbaugh & Rosa, 2009). With few exceptions (e.g., Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001; Wan, 2013), little attention has been given to the factors that influence consumers’ behavioral reactions to embarrassing consumption situations. To this extent, our research adds to our understanding of the moderating effect of embarrassment on consumers’ behavior in actual consumption situations and the conditions in which this effect occurs.

In this regard, our research suggests constraints on the desirability of using attractive service providers to increase the sale of products. This strategy may indeed be effective when the product being promoted is not embarrassing. It can have an adverse effect, however, when the purchasing the product can be embarrassing. That said, it is important to note that the negative impact of attractive service providers is restricted to face-to-face situations in which the motive to create a favorable impression is relatively high. The use of attractive models or celebrities in advertisements for embarrassing products could have a positive effect on online shopping in which social interaction is not an issue.
REFERENCES


