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Master's Thesis of Business Administration

The Effect of Front-Line Employee's Aesthetic Labor on Consumer's Indulgent Consumption

고객 접점 직원의 미적 노동이 고객의 탐닉 소비에

미치는 영향에 대한 연구

February 2023

College of Business Administration

-경영대학-

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The Effect of Front-Line Employee's Aesthetic Labor on Consumer's Indulgent Consumption

**Submitting a Master's Thesis of
Business Administration**

October 2022

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December 2022

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of front-line employees' aesthetic labor on consumers' indulgent consumption. This research consists of a single yet in-depth study that also investigates how positive emotion mediates the effect of aesthetic labor on indulgent consumption. Within one mediator, several sub-mediators are examined in order to deeply analyze the related emotions imbedded within positive emotions.

I hypothesized that front-line employees' aesthetic labor and consumers' indulgent consumption would have a significant main effect. Moreover, the main effect will be mediated by consumers' positive emotions. Within the mediator, I assessed three mediator elements (gratitude, brand interest, and pride) in order to examine whether there are significant results.

A pretest was done prior to Study 1 for a manipulation check. A total of 101 participants were recruited to respond to a survey of main effect and mediation testing. All mediation turned out to have a significantly positive effect on the main effect, therefore, supporting the hypotheses. The study also conducts Cronbach's alpha to check for validation of the variable constructs.

Aesthetic labor is a term that is not quite actively studied in the Business field; therefore, I want to investigate a minor aspect of it through this study. This paper will explore new insights into how employees' aesthetic labor, including appearance and attitudes toward consumers, will affect the overall brand image and sales in the long run.

Keyword : Aesthetic Labor, Positive Emotion, Indulgent Consumption, Gratitude, Pride, Brand Interest

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1. Introduction

Did you ever purchase anything that the employees recommended? What was the reason? There could be several reasons, such as, you would need to purchase something in advance, you may be forced to purchase, or the employee tried to elicit you to purchase a product. On top of everything, did you ever purchase a product because you thought the employee recommending the product was attractive or very kind?

This paper focuses on how the front-line employee's aesthetic features can affect consumers spending what they did not intend to spend before contacting the employee. I wanted to test the effect whether there is an actual significant effect on one another. This curiosity made me start my paper on aesthetic labor. In real life, I encountered acquaintances who bought a luxury handbag just because he could not resist purchasing it due to her caring attitude and attractiveness. This was the start of my ideation which led to writing a paper on it.

There is not enough aesthetic labor-related research published, so I hope to participate in developing this field of research in the near future.

2. Theoretical Background

Aesthetic Labor

Aesthetic labor is a term used to describe the ways that workers are expected to present themselves and their work in a manner that is pleasing or attractive to others. It could be found from different service sectors to the creative arts, and it often involves the use of physical appearance, demeanor, and other personal attributes to create a desired impression on others (Hochschild 1983).

According to Warhurst et al. (2000) and Witz et al. (2003), aesthetic labor can be explained as a form of emotional labor, where employees are required to regulate their emotions in order to create a desired effect on others. For example, a customer service representative may be expected to maintain a joyous and kind demeanor at all times, even when dealing with difficult or frustrating situations. This can be emotionally burdensome and can require significant effort on the part of the employee.

Indulgent Consumption

Indulgent consumption is defined as a consumer's choice of

"allowing oneself to select and enjoy the pleasure from an option that is considered a treat compared with the alternative option(s)" (Cavanaugh 2014). Researchers have often emphasized the unnecessary quality or delight of indulgence (Berry 1994) and presented indulgent consumption as an irrational act. Two typical domains of indulgent consumption that have been frequently examined in the previous research are luxury (Wilcox, Kramer and Sen, 2011) and hedonic eating (Salerno, Laran, and Janiszewski 2014).

Because indulgences are considered less legitimate and suboptimal by nature (Hoch and Loewenstein, 1991), it is proposed that they may lead to short-term negative emotions such as regret, guilt, shame, or embarrassment (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982). Furthermore, studies suggest that indulgence may have a negative long-term outcome, as reflected in consumer overspending, weight gain and obesity, superfluous materialism, and addiction (Salerno et al., 2014).

In summary, this study examines a situation when a customer encounters a front-line employee with an attractive appearance and kind demeanor, his or her tendency to consume indulgently will be

triggered. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 can be postulated as follows:

H1. If front-line employee's aesthetic level is high (vs. low), then consumers will be more (vs. less) likely to consume indulgently.

Positive Emotions

Izard (1997) defined the term "emotion" as a type of feeling that can arouse, organize, and guide people's perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) examined that people have numerous emotional reactions to an environment, and classified pleasure, arousal, and dominance as the three immediate emotional reactions, creating a relationship between emotion and behavior. Furthermore, they stated that an organism's emotional state of mind is affected when it receives an environmental stimulus, which causes an approach or avoid action. "Organism" refers to the person receiving an external stimulus and producing a final behavior or response (Bagozzi, 1986). Therefore, a customer's affected state is expected to mediate between an environmental stimulus and their final behavioral response.

Emotion is a crucial factor in the consumer decision-making process, and positive emotion is a state created by the preexisting mood of an organism tempered by responses to its surroundings (Rock and Gardner, 1993). Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is postulated as the following:

H2. The effect of H1 will be mediated by consumer's positive emotions.

Gratitude

People with high levels of gratitude tend to be cheerful, optimistic, and have higher self-esteem (Kong et al. 2014; McCullough et al. 2004). Gratitude is also known to correlate negatively with motivation for revenge, avoidance motivation, and the perception that adverse events are permanent and ubiquitous (Szczesniak and Soares 2011). A grateful disposition is also associated with positive affect, prosocial behaviors, and spirituality (McCullough et al. 2002). In addition, grateful people are more likely to be more engaging, sociable, conscientious, open, and less neurotic (Wood et al. 2008a). Based on these inferences, Hypothesis 2a can be proposed as the

following:

H2a. The effect of H1 will be mediated by consumer's level of gratitude.

Pride

Self-conscious emotions are assumed to promote behaviors that increase the stability of social hierarchies and affirm status roles (Tracy & Robins, 2007b). More specifically, shame and embarrassment may promote appeasement and avoidance behaviors after a social transgression, guilt may promote apology and confession after a social trespass, and pride may promote boastfulness and other approach-oriented behaviors after a socially valued success (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). This paper observes pride as one of the positive emotions and examines the relationship of pride as an emotion as a mediating factor on the effect of aesthetic labor on indulgent consumption. Therefore, Hypothesis can be proposed as:

H2b: The effect of H1 will be mediated by consumer's level of pride.

Brand Interest

Studies refer to the term "Brand Interest" as the base level of approachability, openness, inquisitiveness, or curiosity as consumers have about a brand. It is conceived as having a behavioral orientation, like the 'exploring' element that arises from Plutchik's (1980) primary emotion of expectancy. Another study proposed a definition of brand interest as a "positive emotion that motivates approach, exploration and creative encounter" (Izard 1977). Consistent with both of the definitions, this study focuses on the concept of brand interest as a construct involving a motivation and action tendency. With these references, Hypothesis 2c can be introduced as the following:

H2c. The effect of H1 will be mediated by consumer's level of brand interest.

3. Experiment

STUDY 1: Effect of Positive Emotions on Front-Line Employee's Aesthetic Labor to Consumer's Indulgent Consumption

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the main effect, Hypothesis 1, that the front-line employee's level of aesthetic labor would have higher chance on increasing consumer's indulgent consumption. Additionally, Study 1 examined the mediation effect that front-line employees' aesthetic labor will affect consumers' indulgent consumption through positive emotions. Within the mediation, there were three main elements of positive emotions: gratitude, pride, and brand interest. The mediator, which is "positive emotion", was averaged out of the three mediation items.

Method

A pretest was done first in order to check for aesthetic labor manipulation. Twenty-four participants were recruited from Prolific, an online survey website where respondents participate in answering the survey in exchange for monetary compensation. Only participants who have answered more than 100 surveys in the past were recruited for all

the surveys done in this paper to get higher accuracy of the results. The results showed that participants who saw a picture and scenario of high aesthetic labor provided higher ratings on aesthetic labor ($M_{\text{high}}=6.06$, $SD=0.39$) compared to those who saw a picture and scenario of low aesthetic labor ($M_{\text{low}}=2.86$, $SD=0.48$; $F(1,22) = 90.67$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, participants completed the pretest survey by selecting the emotion they believe is closest to positive emotion. The results showed in the order of gratitude (37.5%), brand interest (29.2%), pride (20.8%), and other (12.5%).

For Study 1, 101 participants were recruited from a separate sample. Most respondents were women (59.8%) aged 20-29 years (71.9%), and University or college students (63.4%). The study was designed between subjects with two aesthetic labors (high vs. low).

Front-line employee's high aesthetic labor was introduced as:

(Picture of a smiling woman on a uniform)

This is Catheryn, an employee from a well-known Italian restaurant in Washington D.C. She has a good reputation among regular customers

as a caring employee who always treats customers with a kind tone and manner. Please refer to Cathryn to answer the questions below.

Front-line employee's low aesthetic labor was introduced as:

(Picture of a mad woman with rugged appearance)

This is Megan, who works in a famous and high-end cafe in New York City. She has a bad reputation among customers because she is always in a bad mood and serves customers with a rude manner and tone.

Please refer to Megan to answer the questions below.

For aesthetic labor, participants completed four items to measure aesthetic labor or Cathryn or Megan, each using a seven-point Likert scale (1 – *strongly disagree* and 7 – *strongly agree*, $\alpha=0.70$). They were asked the following, "Her appearance (looks) is attractive", "She corresponds to the famous/high-end restaurant/café" and "I would like to receive services from her".

After participants read the introductions (aesthetic labor high vs. low), they were to respond to 3 mediator items. For gratitude measurement items, "I will be thankful for the service that she

provides", "I will feel grateful for the service that she provides" were each measured on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 – *strongly disagree* and 7 – *strongly agree* ($\alpha=0.98$). The measurements were taken from a longer measure and revised from McCoullough et al. (2002).

Pride was assessed using two items quoted from Hart & Matsuba (2007) with questions of "When I think about receiving service from Catheryn, I would feel a great deal of pride", and "I feel a sense of pride when I receive services from aesthetically attractive employees" using the seven-point Likert scale ($\alpha=0.87$). The name of the woman in the picture would be changed to "Megan" when in low aesthetic labor condition.

For brand interest measurement items, "I will be more interested in this brand once I receive service from her", and "I will be more curious about the hotel/café brand once I receive service from her" ($\alpha=0.71$) were quoted and revised from the study of Machleit and Madden (1993).

The participants were to respond to two item measures of indulgent consumption. "Let's say that I received service from her. If she

offers me with an additional menu, I will happily accept and pay for another menu”, and “Despite my current financial status, I am willing to pay for the additional menu that she recommended me to order” ($\alpha=0.87$). These items were taken and revised in a study by Nenkov and Scott (2014). After answering these questions, participants were to click on the submit button in order to receive their payments.

4. Data Analysis and Results

A t-test by using SPSS was conducted in order to examine the main/direct effect from front-line employee’s aesthetic labor on consumer’s indulgent consumption. The result of the main/direct effect came out to be significant ($M_{\text{High}}= 5.80$ & $M_{\text{Low}}=4.83$; $t=2.22$, $p<0.05$); therefore, supporting Hypothesis 1.

In order to test for mediation, Hayes Model 4 was conducted using SPSS Process Macro. Process Macro is efficient and valuable when conducting data analysis as it provides convenient ways to test various models. The first mediation element tested was Gratitude. The results show that, as seen in <Table 1-1>, Aesthetic Labor (AE) positively and significantly affects Gratitude (GR) ($\beta=0.87$, $p<0.001$) and Aesthetic

Labor along with Gratitude (<Table 1-2>) positively and significantly affects Indulgent Consumption (IC) ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, it can be stated that there is an indirect effect of front-line employees' Aesthetic Labor on consumer's Indulgent Consumption through Gratitude ($\beta = 0.31$, CI 95% 0.15-0.52). Details can be seen in <Figure 1>.

<Table 1-1> The Result of IV (X: AE) Affecting Mediator (GR)

LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	0.06	0.76	0.07	-1.45	1.56
AE	0.87	0.13	6.28***	0.59	1.15
<i>F=39.44, R²=0.33</i>					

*** $p < 0.001$

<Table 1-2> The Result of IV (AE) and Mediator (GR) Affecting DV (IC)

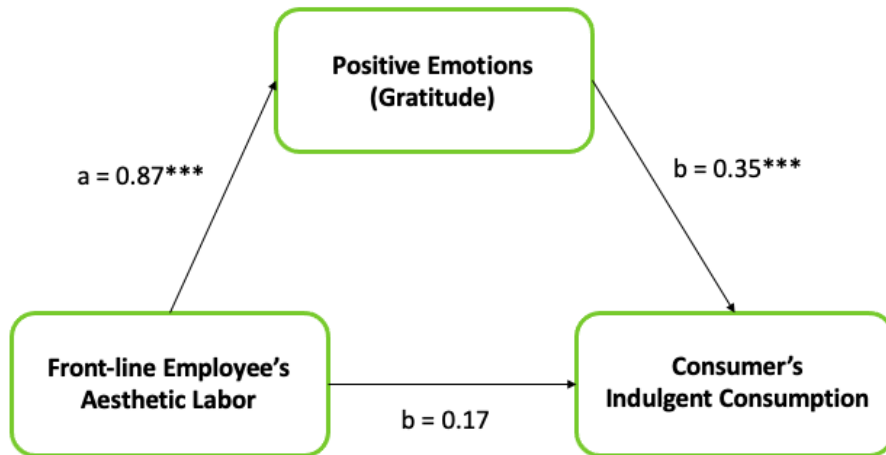
LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	-0.10	0.62	-0.16	-1.34	1.14
AE	0.23	0.14	1.66	-0.05	0.51
GR	0.35	0.09	3.84***	0.17	0.54
<i>F=18.53, R²=0.32</i>					

*** $p < 0.001$

<Table 1-3> Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of X on Y

LABEL	EFFECT	BOOT S.E.	CI 95%	
			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
TOTAL EFFECT	0.54	0.12	0.29	0.78
DIRECT EFFECT	0.17	0.14	-0.05	0.51
INDIRECT EFFECT	0.31	0.10	0.15	0.52

<Figure 1> Result of Mediation (GR) Effect ($p < 0.001$ *)**



<Figure 1> shows that direct effect is non-significant and indirect effect as significant; therefore, it is confirmed that gratitude fully mediates the effect from aesthetic labor to indulgent consumption.

Hayes Model 4 is used again to test for the second mediation element, Brand Interest (BI). It confirms that just as seen in <Table 2-1>, Aesthetic Labor (AE) positively and significantly affects Brand Interest (IN) ($\beta=0.63$, $p<0.001$) and Aesthetic Labor along with Brand Interest positively and significantly affects Indulgent Consumption (IC) as seen in <Table 2-2> ($\beta= 0.68$, $p<0.001$). Details on framework can be seen on <Figure 2>.

<Table 2-1> The Result of IV (X: AE) Affecting Mediator (IN)

LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	0.86	0.61	1.41	-0.35	2.07
AE	0.63	0.11	5.67***	0.41	0.85
<i>F=32.14, R²=0.29</i>					

p<0.05, **p<0.01, *p<0.001*

<Table 2-2> The Result of IV (AE) and Mediator (IN) Affecting DV

(IC)

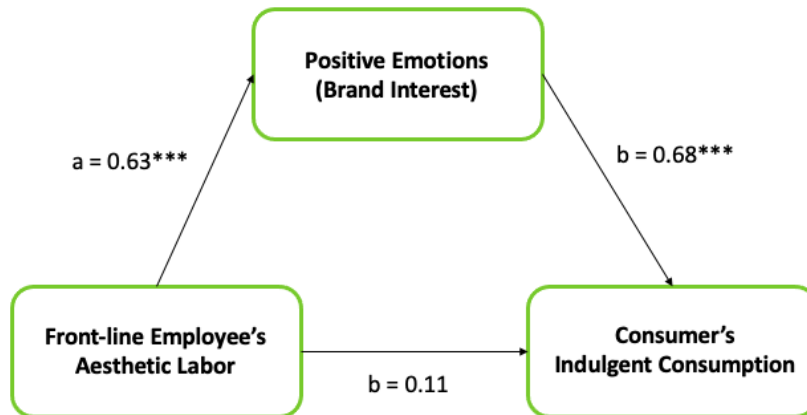
LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	-0.66	0.54	-1.22	-1.74	0.42
AE	0.11	0.12	0.94	-0.12	0.34
IN	0.68	0.10	6.92***	0.48	0.87
<i>F=38.99, R²=0.50</i>					

p<0.05, **p<0.01, *p<0.001*

<Table 2-3> Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of X on Y

LABEL	EFFECT	BOOT S.E.	CI 95%	
			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
TOTAL EFFECT	0.54	0.12	0.29	0.78
DIRECT EFFECT	0.11	0.12	-0.12	0.34
INDIRECT EFFECT	0.43	0.10	0.26	0.66

<Figure 2> Result of Mediation (IN) Effect (p<0.001*)**



According to <Figure 2>, direct effect is non-significant whereas indirect effect is significant ($\beta=0.43$, 95% CI 0.26-0.66). This confirms that brand

interest fully mediates the effect from aesthetic labor to indulgent consumption.

Lastly, Hayes Model 4 was conducted to test the third mediator element, which is Pride (PR). <Table 3-1> shows Aesthetic Labor (AE) positively and significantly affects Pride (PR) ($\beta=0.69$, $p<0.001$). Additionally, <Table 3-2> confirms that aesthetic labor along with pride positively and significantly affects indulgent consumption (IC) ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.001$). Detailed results on framework can be seen on <Figure 3>.

<Table 3-1> The Result of IV (X: AE) Affecting Mediator (PR)

LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	0.18	0.78	0.24	-1.36	1.73
AE	0.69	0.14	4.86***	0.41	0.97
<i>F=23.63, R²=0.23</i>					

<Table 3-2> The Result of IV (AE) and Mediator (PR) Affecting DV (IC)

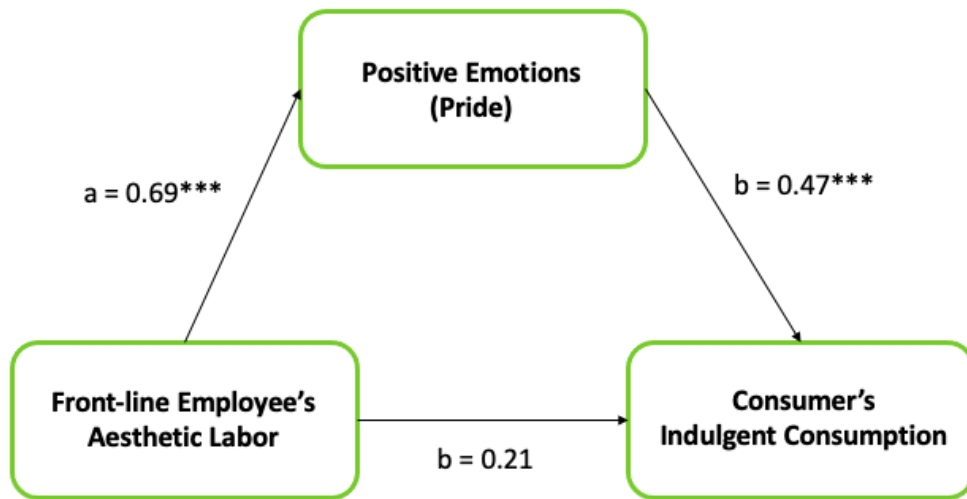
LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	-0.17	0.57	-0.29	-1.30	0.96
AE	0.21	0.12	1.78	-0.03	0.45
PR	0.47	0.08	5.79***	0.31	0.64
<i>F=30.17, R²=0.43</i>					

p<0.05, **p<0.01, *p<0.001*

<Table 3-3> Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of X on Y

LABEL	EFFECT	BOOT S.E.	CI 95%	
			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
TOTAL EFFECT	0.54	0.12	0.29	0.78
DIRECT EFFECT	0.21	0.12	-0.03	0.45
INDIRECT EFFECT	0.33	0.09	0.17	0.45

<Figure 3> Result of Mediation (PR) Effect ($p<0.001^{*}$)**



<Figure 3> shows that the direct effect is non-significant while the indirect effect is significant ($\beta=0.33$, 95% CI 0.17-0.45). Just as other two mediator elements, pride also confirms that it fully mediates the effect from aesthetic labor to indulgent consumption.

In order to examine the mediation effect of Positive Emotion (PE), it was measured as the average of the mediator elements: Gratitude, Pride and Brand Interest. After the mediator elements were averaged to conduct Hayes Model 4, the results confirmed that Aesthetic Labor (AE) positively and significantly affects positive emotion ($\beta=0.69$, $p<0.001$) (refer to <Table 4-1>). Moreover, <Table 4-2> confirms that aesthetic labor along with positive emotion positively and significantly affects Indulgent Consumption (IC) ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.001$).

<Table 4-1> The Result of IV (X: AE) Affecting Mediator (PE)

LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	0.37	0.60	0.62	-0.82	1.55
AE	0.73	0.11	6.71***	0.51	0.95

$F=45.07, R^2=0.36$

*** $p<0.001$

<Table 4-2> The Result of IV (AE) and Mediator (PE) Affecting DV (IC)

LABEL	COEFF.	S.E.	T	LLCI	ULCI
(CONSTANT)	-0.34	0.54	-0.63	-1.40	0.73
AE	0.03	0.12	0.23	-0.22	0.27
PE	0.70	0.10	6.94***	0.50	0.90

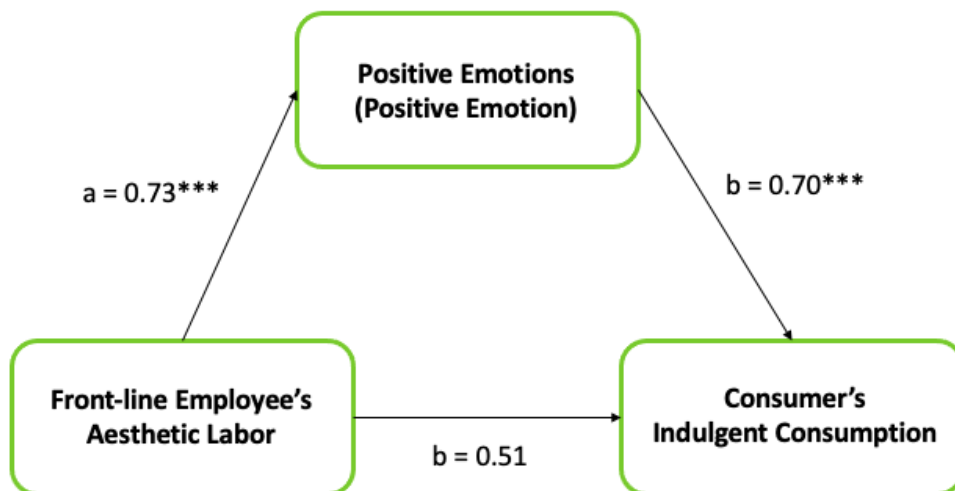
$F=39.22, R^2=0.50$

*** $p<0.001$

<Table 4-3> Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of X on Y

LABEL	EFFECT	BOOT S.E.	CI 95%	
			Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
TOTAL EFFECT	0.54	0.12	0.29	0.78
DIRECT EFFECT	0.03	0.12	-0.22	0.27
INDIRECT EFFECT	0.51	0.10	0.33	0.71

<Figure 4> Result of Mediation (PE) Effect ($p<0.001$ ***)



For this study's mediator, direct effect is non-significant while the indirect effect is significant ($\beta=0.51$, 95% CI 0.33-0.71) as shown in <Figure 4>. Just as other two mediator elements, positive emotion also

confirms that it fully mediates the effect from aesthetic labor to indulgent consumption.

5. Discussion

The hospitality industry used aesthetic labor on first-line employees in order to provide consumers with quality customer services (Tsaur and Tang 2013). However, studies on the relationship between aesthetic labor and indulgent consumption are scant. In this study, I demonstrated a significant correlation between aesthetic labor and indulgent consumption. This relationship resulted in a significant number, thus, supporting Hypothesis 1. In order to further investigate any mediating roles in this relationship, positive emotions are examined as a mediating factor. Three main positive emotions were tested to investigate which sub-emotions are triggered that would lead to consumers' indulgent purchases. Eventually, all mediations have proved that it has an indirect effect (full mediation) from aesthetic labor to indulgent consumption, hence, supporting Hypothesis 2, 2a, 2b and 2c. According to the results, customers are more likely to purchase products which are

recommended by attractive workers. The action can be explained by the fact that customers tend to purchase the recommended products because they feel several positive emotions, such as gratitude, pride, and gain interest in the specific brand.

Limitations and Future Research

This study touches on the field that can be contributed to marketing strategies and offline store sales, but there are several ways it could have been improved. Since this experiment is conducted as a scenario-based survey, there should be different results shown when the same study is done in a field experiment. Even though photos of Catheryn and Megan helped participants to easily visualize the situation, participants experiencing the situation would have made the study more realistic and could have produced more accurate results. Moreover, changing the situation to an offline store that sells luxury goods would have made extreme results. Stores that sell luxury goods will be more vulnerable and sensitive to aesthetic labor. Due to luxury goods' target customers, it would be possible to further the gap between the two conditions.

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7. Abstract in Korean

본 연구는 고객 접점 직원의 미적 노동 수준이 소비자의 탐닉 소비에 미치는 영향을 고찰한다. 또한, 본 연구는 하나의 심층적인 연구로 구성되어 있으며, 긍정적인 감정이 그 효과를 어떻게 매개하는지를 조사한다. 하나의 매개 변수에서 긍정적인 감정에 내재된 관련 감정을 깊이 분석하기 위해 여러 하위 중재자가 검사된다.

고객 접점 직원들의 미적 노동과 소비자의 탐닉 소비가 유의한 효과가 도출될 것이라는 가설을 세웠다. 또한, 주요 효과는 소비자의 긍정적인 감정에 의해 매개될 것으로 예상하였다. 매개 변수 내에서 3가지 매개 요소(감사, 브랜드 관심, 자부심)를 평가하여 유의미한 결과가 있는지 살펴보았다.

연구 1 이전에 미적 노동에 대한 조작 (manipulation) 검정과 긍정적 감정의 하위 중재자를 도출해내기 위한 사전 테스트가 수행되었다. 연구 1에서는 총 101명의 참가자를 모집하여 특정 상황을 사진과 함께 주어주며 주효과 조사 및 매개 변수 효과와 관련된 질문에 응답하게 하였다. 모든 매개 변수는 주효과에 유의하고 긍정적인 영향을 미치는 것으로 나타났으므로 가설을 채택할 수 있었다. 변수 측정을 위한

아이템의 신뢰성을 확인하기 위해 Cronbach의 alpha도 수행하였다.

미적 노동은 비즈니스 분야에서 그다지 활발하게 연구되지 않는 영역이기 때문에 본 연구를 통해 사소한 부분을 기여하고자 한다. 이 논문은 외모와 소비자에 대한 태도를 포함한 직원의 미적 노동이 장기적으로 브랜드 이미지와 매출에 어떤 영향을 미칠지에 대한 새로운 통찰력을 탐구한다.

키워드 : 미적 노동, 탐닉 소비, 긍정적 감정, 감사, 브랜드 관심, 자부심

학번 : 2021-26754