



## A View of Aesthetic Labour Practice in Higher Technical and Vocational Education

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### ABSTRACT

Even though aesthetic labour has gradually revealed social and economic value in the employment market, little research has been carried out on the connection and practice of aesthetic labour in technical and vocational education. Front-line ground staffs account for the largest proportion of the employees of airlines and can provide colleges with more off-school internships or well-matched employment vacancies. The aesthetic labour displayed by ground staff combines functional value with emotional value, contributing to a unique customer experience. According to the frequency distribution of retrieved questionnaires, the interviewed passengers tended to have positive verbal comments for the generalization of their evaluations of employees' aesthetic attributes. The 'aggregation function by verbal evaluating' was used to evaluate the weight values of the aesthetic dimensions as well as their corresponding items. The results showed that the passengers paid the most attention to the 'service contact norms' that integrated all their needs concerning individual interest, followed by the 'behaviour norms' of interpersonal interactions and then the explicit 'dressing norms' and 'appearance norms' of service suppliers. This study offers reference for the curriculum and internship planning of relevant departments of colleges, and provides enterprises with a direction for strategic recruitment, development, and reward programs.

**Keywords:** aesthetic characteristics, higher technical and vocational education, airport passenger service, ground staff, aggregation function by verbal evaluating

### INTRODUCTION

With the dramatic changes to the labour market, career development patterns have become increasingly diversified and flexible, and "employment competence" has become an important topic for many national policies regarding youth. For instance, "enhancing citizens' employment competence" was redefined as the primary objective in the reform of the European higher education system in the Bologna Declaration, which was signed by the educational ministers of 29 European countries in Bologna, Italy on June 19, 1999. To follow the trend and strengthen the overall competitiveness of technical and vocational education,

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### **State of the literature**

- In line with the mainstream of higher technical and vocational education, the trend of “enhancing citizens’ employment competence” is highly promoted in order to enhance students’ core competence, nowadays many of university departments relating to tourism and hospitality have implemented off-school internships by cooperating with airlines.
- The existing literature on customer service issues shows that among many of industries that firmly adhere to “Customer First” as their guideline, airlines always parade and constantly emphasize their high standards of aesthetic perception. Especially front-line ground staff often plays a critical role in each service encounter.

### **Contribution to the literature**

- In conducting in-depth interviews with the students completing off-school internship, the study probes into the host–guest interactional relationship in airport passenger services. As well as the focus group interviews with senior superintendents and passenger representatives were completed. In addition, the validity of the measurement instrument all met the requirement in terms of the appropriateness, availability and definiteness.
- The findings of this study contribute to the literature in terms of the application of the ‘aggregation function by verbal evaluating’ to evaluate the ‘preference weight values’ of the aesthetic dimensions as well as their corresponding items. This measure can reduce the risk of decision misjudgments, which were probably caused by a blurry boundary of weight distribution under the traditional concept of the equal-interval scales.

Taiwan’s Ministry of Education implemented the Technical and Vocational Education and Recycling Programs in 2010. From 2013 to 2017, a total amount of NTD 20.2895 billion will be invested to implement the strategies that aim to equip the students of technical and vocational education with practical capabilities. Among these strategies, the Technical Colleges of the Open Campus Internship Programs aim to enable students to acquire knowledge at school and during employment in the “sandwich intern program” (Lee, Lu, Jiao, & Yeh, 2006), as created through the school-enterprise cooperation model of vocational education and off-campus internships, rendering the model an essential tool for enhancing students’ practical professionalism, reducing the gap between enterprises and schools, and obtaining employed after graduation.

Over the past decade, departments related to the industry of tourism and hospitality have been established in 34 higher technical and vocational schools in Taiwan, and 109 relevant departments have been established (Chen & Shen, 2011), with an annual enrollment of about 60,000 students on average. The industry also ranks second in the recruitment of technical and vocational schools in 2016. In the four-year college curriculum, a large number of departments related to airline and transport services in the industry of tourism and hospitality claim to be practice-oriented (such as National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, China University of Science and Technology, Vanung University), where juniors and seniors are sent to airlines to attend the courses of off-campus internships

for two semesters, in order that they can accumulate service skills and knowledge during their interactions with passengers. Such a curriculum demonstrates what they learned in school and verifies learning through the 'sandwich intern program', which helps students develop a positive attitude towards work and increases their job opportunities. Schools can effectively use the resources of social enterprises to expand the resources for practical instruction and create their industrial features; the participant enterprises can select potential talents who are consistent with their corporate spirit through early communication with students. Moreover, the practical problems enterprises encounter in the service field can be taken back to classroom or labs to determine solutions through students' internship participation, which can make good use of the abundant research resources at school and provide support for the research and development of enterprises.

In practice, airport passenger service is an important professional field, it has the largest number of airline employees, and can provide the departments of tourism and hospitality with more off-campus internships or well-matched employment vacancies. Despite the service features of high repetition and limited technical content, the positions play a vital role in the positive maintenance of the host-guest interactional relationship (Yang & Tseng, 2010). In today's highly competitive aviation industry, excellence in customer service is critical for an airline's survival (International Air Transport Association [hereafter IATA], 2003). However, achieving differentiation is difficult due to essentially common environments, virtually identical aircraft and similar airports; moreover, airlines do not control some crucial elements of their customers' journeys (Laming & Mason, 2014). Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) believed the host-guest interactional relationship of full-service carriers (FSCs) is the best basis of differentiation to win over competition. Laming and Mason (2014) argued that improving the measures of customer experience for airline passengers would enable airlines to create individual defensible brand spaces.

Good service starts with passengers' acceptance of the first impression of the airport passenger service. Airport passenger services cover a wide range of services and interactions that begin when passengers check in at the airport and go through completing boarding (including the check-in desk, assistance with customs clearance, boarding gates, lost and found services, ramp services, load controls and premier lounges) (Yang & Chang, 2012). To ensure punctual airliner departure, ground staff often shoulder heavy workloads within a short time while being confronted with passenger crowding and experiencing stress (Karatepe & Choubtarash, 2014); moreover, they must show positive emotions, calmly address unexpected matters and console passengers (Yang & Tseng, 2010). Passengers' perceptions of quality are associated with the efficiency of the processes, short wait times and the positive attitude of ground staff (Bezerra & Gomes, 2016; Fodness & Murray, 2007). Hence, ground staff influence whether passengers feel satisfied with the level of received service and consequently how passengers perceive the organization (IATA, 2003).

Aldrich and Herker (1977) explained that front-line employees are the 'boundary spanning roles' because they establish the link between the customer, the environment and

the organization. It is essential that ground staff occupy boundary spanning roles because their most important functions are to obtain, filter and explain internal and external sources of information, build bridges of communication between supervisors and passengers and abide by all relevant contextual constraints (Prior, 2015). Obviously, ground staff in direct contact with passengers have the strongest role to play during moments of truth (IATA, 2003; Karatepe & Choubtarash, 2014). The term 'moments of truth' was coined by Jan Carlzon, the former president of Scandinavian Airlines. Carlzon (1987) believed that every moment of contact with a customer is a moment of truth because it shows the form of employees' three factors (appearance, behaviour and communication). The percentage share from these three factors giving customers their first impressions are 52%, 33% and 15%, respectively. In simpler terms, this is complemented by the service staff, whose aesthetic capital, emotional labour and embodied performances of self are intertwined in the experiential proposition (Lugosi, 2014).

Even meeting various aesthetic requirements and improving personal aesthetic skills might create stress for employees and make them feel burdened (Tsaour & Tang, 2013). However, we must admit that the aesthetic labour of employees with high levels of physical attractiveness can produce higher levels of customer satisfaction than that of employees with lower levels of physical attractiveness (Söderlund & Julander, 2009); moreover, it has also been proved that employees' behaviours can affect a customer's overall evaluation of the firm (Frazer Winsted, 2000). As economic growth in the Asian-Pacific region stimulates the demand for tourism, aviation companies have been driven to create job opportunities for ground staff. Potential entrants regard such job opportunities as fascinating and attractive. Baum (2012) noted that airline employment is widely coveted due to the perceived glamour of working in the environment. Even though the selection of ground staff is not as complicated or strict as that of cabin crews, communication skills, affinity, clean appearance, response to emergencies and social presentation are still considered and those who are selected must still receive a physical adaption evaluation and diversified aesthetic and professional training. According to FSC managers, if team replacement and renewal aircraft fleet become common airliner behaviours, no differentiated or attractive properties would be generated. Thus, only by arousing consumer emotions through the essence of the service and gradually moving towards the addition of innovation-based value and service brand can an aviation company survive in competition (Yang & Tseng, 2010).

Aesthetic labour has gradually revealed social and economic value in the employment market, and has become a significant market segmentation factor in the operation of enterprises. Nevertheless, little research has been carried out on the connections and practices of aesthetic labour in technical and vocational education, or career fields. This study adopted qualitative research methods to develop a scale and used the verbal evaluation function to calculate and rank the preference weight values of the aesthetic dimensions perceived by customers as well as their corresponding items. The results of the analysis aim to help the departments related to airline and transport services in colleges

review the programs that seek to achieve employment, in terms of knowledge and skills development, prepare students to meet the labour needs of tourism and hospitality industry, and help aviation companies illustrate how appropriate strategic recruitment, development, and reward programs can lead ground staff to enhance their professionalism and aesthetic attainments, and thus, help create a pleasing service experience for customers.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has addressed the definition and important role of ground staff and has clarified some of the professional expectations. The main findings are summarized below.

##### **Front-Line Ground Staff**

In the tourism and hospitality industry, front-line employees have face-to-face and voice-to-voice interactions with customers; for this reason, they play a crucial role in customers' evaluations of the service quality (Kim, 2014; Tsaur, Luoh, & Syue, 2015). Hartline, Maxham III and McKe (2000) believed that front-line employees' performance can fully demonstrate the quality and level of their enterprise. In other words, the main role of front-line employees is to offer products and services that meet customers' needs and make them feel positively toward the organization (Cossette & Hess, 2015), which plays a key role in influencing the consumption atmosphere for customers (Dennis, Desharnais, Cushing, Henson, & Costantino, 2001).

Ground staff are workers who are appointed by aviation companies to maintain highly frequent communication with passengers. Their duties include handling ticketing and check-in operations, boarding gate service, ramp service coordination, baggage, lounge services, unexpected problems and customer complaints; they also provide a full range of services for the special care of unaccompanied minors (UMs), VIPs and passengers with special needs. They must interact with passengers according to the emotional display rules and standard operating procedures set by the organization (Yang & Chen, 2006); moreover, they must have decent attire, be polite and professional and shoulder their position duties and social responsibilities (Zhu, 2008). IATA (2003) noted that effective front-line ground staff have the ability to keep existing customers and to encourage new ones to choose a particular airline over the many others providing the same or similar products/services. Ineffective front-line ground staff can, over time, slowly but surely erode an airline's customer base and decimate its business.

In each airliner, every service encounter including passengers, employees, facilities and environment is a moment of truth (Gronroos, 1990) and passengers develop their perceived quality evaluation of service based on such encounters. Zhu (2008) summarized flight complaints from 2004 to 2007 released by the Civil Aviation Administration of China and noted that the type and proportion of the majority of customer complaints come from comments regarding a perceived service encounter rather than the subjective technical definition of aviation companies.

### **Aesthetic Labour**

The conceptual starting point of aesthetic quality is Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of memorable experiences (Yoshida & James, 2011). The term 'aesthetics' has various meanings ranging from sensory experiences related to arts and everyday objects to a wide variety of conceptual categories, such as form, expression, symbolism, imagery, beauty, taste and feelings (Carroll, 2001). These meanings contain good and bad judgements regarding enjoyable or repulsive views, beautiful or hideous sounds, pleasant or nasty aromas, or something that is soothing or abhorrent to come into physical contact with. Those aspects are relational in that they are learned during interactions with others and developed during informal negotiations (Karlsson, 2012).

In the structure of classic aesthetics, 'aesthetics' is narrowed down to art and criticized as the source of differences in hierarchical tastes. Nevertheless, the aesthetic sense today is no longer confined to this; instead, it underlines equipping the public with a sense of harmony and happiness (Veblen, 2007). The vitality of aesthetics in customers' lives provides opportunities for organizations to appeal to customers through a variety of sensory experiences and thereby benefit customers and organizations through customer satisfaction and loyalty (Simonson & Schmitt, 1997). Tsaor et al. (2015) demonstrated that customers who come into contact with employees exhibiting attractive appearances or professional images experience strong positive emotions, such as pleasure and excitement. Postrel (2003) believed that aesthetic sense is a necessity in life, while style is a necessity in marketing. Style and aesthetic sense have fully dominated consumption, becoming the most significant market segmentation factors following price, quality and service.

'Aesthetic labour' captured popular imagination when a short research monograph was released in 1999 (Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, & Marie Cullen, 2000). Aesthetic labour is experienced by interactive service employees in retail and hospitality industries. The examined issues are recruitment and selection; image and appearance; uniforms and dress codes and skills and training, which extend the awareness of aesthetic labour so employee attitudes and appearances are empirically and conceptually revealed (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Warhurst and Nickson (2007) noted that aesthetic labour comes into play when organizations commodify employee corporeality in an attempt to appeal to the senses of customers via the 'right look'.

In addition to a decent manner and the ability to adjust emotion, tourism and hospitality employees are often expected to possess aesthetic skills, including physical looks, body language, attire sense/style, voice/accents and manner (Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2004, 2005). Warhurst et al. (2000) pointed out that an organization can sharpen employees' aesthetic skills through three stages: recruiting those with excellent self-expression (appearance and eloquence) and social communication during recruitment, interviews and selection; offering courses on good posture, image shaping and social etiquette and making dressing, speaking and manner part of the temperament and personality of employees (Nickson et al., 2005) and standardising the professional attire and appearance of employees through supervision and management and converting enterprise spirit into the standard performance of employees (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

These aesthetic skills are not only an invisible asset to the company but also an essential factor in the atmosphere differentiation of the organization (Warhurst et al., 2000).

## DATA COLLECTION

### Interviews to Create the Questionnaire

Using the IATA Passenger Service Resolution manual and relevant technical manuals of aviation companies, the researchers obtained basic information on airport operations to develop interview guidelines for semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews and focus group interviews (FGIs) to collect information and create the questionnaire.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the senior staff of Airline and Transport Service Management Department, the National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, who had attended the “sandwich intern program” for two semesters, and served as the front-line ground staff. These airlines included the top three FSCs in Taiwan with the largest shares of passenger traffic in 2015 (China Airlines, EVA Air, and TransAsia Airways). The interviewees described the aesthetic attributes they expected of ground staff. The number of invited interviewees was determined when the collected information reached ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the FGIs, senior superintendents and passenger representatives of the three aviation companies (i.e. frequent flyers who had taken six or more flights in the previous year) had a group discussion, and brainstorming was adopted to collect data. Two FGIs were held in Taoyuan and Kaohsiung respectively. Five participants (three representatives of the aviation companies and two passenger representatives) took part in each FGI. Each interview consisted of three stages: First, the representatives of the aviation companies described the duties and tasks of ground staff; defined the relationship among the duties, skills and aesthetic norms necessary for all duties; and deduced the set control points that might influence the service perception evaluation in the host-guest interactional relationship. Second, the passenger representatives gave feedback. Third, all the participants in the FGI reviewed the perceived aesthetic attributes as stated by the above front-line ground staff in the in-depth interview to see if the perceived aesthetic attributes were embedded in situated practice for argument.

After the interviews, the researcher and two scholars familiar with the airport passenger services transcribed the complete recordings of the in-depth interviews and the FGIs for analysis. First, the three panellists used the method of agreement to seek overall similarity among different aesthetic attributes and then adopted the method of difference to identify key differences among similar aesthetic attributes; in other words, concise classification, deduction and grouping were achieved according to the principle of ‘seeking similarity in difference and seeking difference in similarity’. In the classification, if the three panellists shared similar views on the grouping and classification of an aesthetic attribute, it indicated that the classification could be accepted and named. If they had different views, the three panellists would have a face-to-face discussion, express their views and then reclassify the attributes until the aesthetic attributes in a group were similar to each other and different from those in other groups. After the above procedure, a measurement instrument consisting of 27 items in 4 groups was established, as shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Content of the questionnaire

Group	Item No.	Item description
Behaviour Norms	A1	Proper sitting department with smiling
	A2	Proper standing department with natural gesture
	A3	Delivering documents with both hands
	A4	Making eye contact when talking to passengers
	A5	Proper department in public
	A6	Instructing passengers with open palm
Dressing Norms	B1	No personal accessories without permission
	B2	No stain in or damage to the uniform or accessories
	B3	No combination of uniforms of different colours on different occasions
	B4	Not too many objects in the pockets of the uniform
	B5	No images of the uniform or the logo of the company on personal Facebook account or blog
	B6	Uniform should not be used as leisure attire or for personal activities
Appearance Norms	C1	Hair should be well-combed and consistent with the standards (hairstyle, colour, etc.)
	C2	Face, hands and fingernails should be kept clean
	C3	Attention should be paid to personal cleanliness (e.g. avoid unpleasant body odour and bad breath)
	C4	The framework and colour of glasses should be simple and serious
	C5	There should not be tattoos or images on the skin that are not covered by the uniform
	C6	A professional image should be maintained and weight should be kept at the standard level
Service Contact Norms	D1	Ground staff should be patient in listening to passengers and attentive to the passengers' body language
	D2	The company gives appropriate authority, which enhances the flexibility to meet the needs of some customs
	D3	Ground staff should be eloquent and able to explain good reasons for actions/situations in case of problems in service and avoid conflicts
	D4	Ground staff should be able to handle multiple tasks and take quick actions calmly
	D5	Ground staff should be able to understand humour and should be socially humorous
	D6	Ground staff should be able to understand English and have the ability to achieve intercultural communication
	D7	Ground staff should have strong knowledge of ticket service and the skills of the airport passenger service
	D8	Ground staff should be familiar with the Customs/Immigration/Quarantine/Security procedure and the airport facilities
	D9	Ground staff should be able to manage emotion well and resist pressure

### Measuring Content Validity

To check whether the 27 items were consistent with the meaning of the topics to be measured, 12 experts were invited to evaluate content validity on a four-point grading scale. In this scale, Category 1 was 'Irrelevant', Category 2 was 'Somewhat important', Category 3 was 'Quite important, but requires slight modification' and Category 4 was 'Extremely important'. Categories 1 and 2 were each scored as '0', while Categories 3 and 4 were each scored as '1'. The content validity index (CVI) of the scale was computed by counting the number of experts who were in agreement (also obtained 1 point) regarding the relevance of each item included in the questionnaire (Liu et al., 2015). Then, the CVIs of all items were aggregated and divided by the total number of the items in the questionnaire, which led to the final CVI average of the overall measurement instrument.

**Table 2.** Content validity index of the measurement instrument

Item No.	Appropriateness		Availability		Definiteness	
	Mean	CVI	Mean	CVI	Mean	CVI
A1	3.83	1.00	3.92	1.00	4.00	1.00
A2	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00
A3	3.50	1.00	3.58	1.00	3.67	1.00
A4	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
A5	3.67	1.00	3.75	1.00	3.83	1.00
A6	3.42	1.00	3.42	1.00	3.50	1.00
B1	3.17	0.93	3.08	0.93	3.17	0.96
B2	3.58	1.00	3.67	1.00	3.75	1.00
B3	3.83	1.00	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00
B4	3.25	0.93	3.17	0.93	3.33	0.96
B5	3.58	0.93	3.42	0.89	3.50	0.93
B6	3.58	0.93	3.58	0.93	3.67	0.96
C1	3.83	1.00	3.83	1.00	3.83	1.00
C2	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00
C3	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00	3.92	1.00
C4	3.67	1.00	3.67	1.00	3.67	1.00
C5	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
C6	3.08	0.89	3.08	0.89	3.25	0.96
D1	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
D2	3.58	1.00	3.50	1.00	3.50	1.00
D3	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
D4	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
D5	3.67	1.00	3.67	1.00	3.67	1.00
D6	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
D7	4.00	1.00	3.83	1.00	3.83	1.00
D8	3.67	1.00	3.58	1.00	3.58	1.00
D9	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.00
Total average	3.73	0.99	3.72	0.98	3.76	0.99

The CVI of appropriateness, availability and definiteness as evaluated by the 12 experts remained between 0.89 and 1.00. The final CVI averages of the overall measurement

instruments were 0.99, 0.98 and 0.99, respectively, which met the requirement that the CVI should be at least 0.8 (Waltz, Strickland, & Lenz, 1991). The mean values of all the items remained between 3.08 and 4.00 and the total averages of the overall measurement instruments were 3.73, 3.72 and 3.76, respectively (**Table 2**). The experts' opinions on modification merely focused on slight textual embellishments for the improvement of textual comprehension.

### Questionnaire Survey

From March 6–20, 2016, research staff were sent to the Taoyuan Airport, where they used purposive sampling to select frequent flyers who had taken at least six flights (on any airline) in Taiwan during the previous year. The respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of the 27 items listed in **Table 2** according to the five verbal terms, with the five-point ratings ranging from 'extremely unimportant' to 'extremely important'.

This study aims to explore the presentation of the perceived generalized aesthetic attributes of interactions between passengers and ground staff rather than performance difference in the presentation of these aesthetic attributes among aviation companies; therefore, all the collected responses were combined for analysis. Of the 608 retrieved questionnaires, those with unreasonable or incomplete answers were removed, leaving 575 valid responses. Most passengers were male (59%). Those aged over 50 accounted for 32.2% of the total, and those from Taiwan accounted for 39.3%. Those engaging in business accounted for 36%; those who take 9 to 11 flights a year accounted for 63.8%; those seated in economy class accounted for 92.7% and those on a business trip accounted for 50.6%. Those with a college/university education accounted for 61.2% and those with an annual income of USD 16,001–26,000 accounted for 50.1% (**Table 3**).

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Aggregation Function by Verbal Evaluating

Hsiao (2001) noted that extremely positive verbal evaluations (e.g. 'extremely important') and extremely negative verbal evaluations (e.g. 'extremely unimportant') affect the final integrated evaluation results. For instance, the sport strengths of participant countries of the Olympic Games are ranked according to the total number of gold medals, which is a case of extremely positive verbal evaluations (Chen, 2005; Chen, Chang, & Wu, 2013). According to the frequency distribution of the response categories in the five-point Likert scale of the retrieved questionnaires, most respondents chose positive verbal terms, indicating that this study demonstrated the factors obtained from previous literature and the qualitative interviews. To effectively highlight and identify the weight difference among the items, especially the number of questions obtaining the term 'extremely important', this study used the 'aggregation function by verbal evaluation' to observe the degree to which the respondents showed their attitudes through verbal-linguistic terms and estimated the relative weights and rankings among the groups or the underlying items in a specific group.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of interviewed passengers

		Sample size	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	339	59.0
	Female	236	41.0
Age	Below (including) 20	32	5.6
	21-30	99	17.2
	31-40	147	25.6
	41-50	112	19.5
	above 50	185	32.2
Nationality	Taiwan	226	39.3
	China/Hong Kong/Macau	112	19.5
	Southeast Asia	96	16.7
	Northeast Asia	82	14.3
	Europe	28	4.9
	US/Canada	29	5.0
	Other	2	0.3
Occupation	Student	17	3.0
	Military, police, public, and teaching personnel	115	20.0
	Business	207	36.0
	Freelancer	155	27.0
	Manufacturing industry	79	13.7
	Other	2	0.3
Flight-taking frequency per year	6-8	141	24.5
	9-11	367	63.8
	above 11	67	11.7
Frequent travel class option	Economy class	533	92.7
	Business class	39	6.8
	First class	3	0.5
Main purpose of travel	Sightseeing	241	41.9
	Business	291	50.6
	Visiting family	43	7.5
Education	High school	132	23.0
	College/university	352	61.2
	Master/Ph.D.	91	15.8
Annual income (unit:USD)	Under 8,000	32	5.6
	8,000-16,000	151	26.3
	16,001-26,000	288	50.1
	Above 26,000	104	18.1

Chen (2005) attempted to identify the aggregation function that displays the role of extreme value in the final decision-making weight, noting that it is necessary to define a rational index to suit decision makers' emphasis of positive and negative evaluations. The value can reflect decision makers' preferences between positive and negative evaluations; for example, a higher value indicates a preference for positive evaluation and vice versa. To calculate the weight of the verbal terms, the first step is to define a set of verbal terms  $S = \{s_1, s_2, \dots, s_T\}$ , where  $T$  is an odd number and there is a relationship ( $s_T \succ s_{T-1} \succ \dots \succ s_1$ ) among the elements of  $S$ ; the calculation element  $\succ$  means 'surpass.' Make  $v_i, i = 1, 2, \dots, T$  the emphasis on the  $i$  (ordinal number) verbal term. Therefore,  $v_1$  denotes an emphasis on extremely negative terms, where  $v_{(T+1)/2}$  refers to the emphasis on neutral terms;  $v_T$  indicates the emphasis on extremely positive terms and  $\alpha$  denotes the index indicating the respondents' preference for positive or negative evaluations, defined in Eq. (1):

$$\alpha = \sum_{i=1}^T \frac{i-1}{T-1} v_i \tag{1}$$

If  $v_i \in [0,1]$ , then  $\alpha \in [0,1]$ , which can demonstrate the following:

$\alpha = 0$  if  $v_1 = 1$  (extreme emphasis on negative evaluation)

$\alpha = 0.5$  if  $v_{(T+1)/2} = 1$  (neutral evaluation)

$\alpha = 1$  if  $v_T = 1$  (extreme emphasis on positive evaluation)

According to Eq. (1), if  $\alpha$  stays between 0.5 and 1,  $v_i$  tends to emphasize positive evaluation, whereas if  $\alpha$  stays between 0 and 0.5,  $v_i$  tends to emphasize negative evaluation. Therefore,  $\alpha$  can be used to constrict the tendency of  $v_i$ ; however, the calculation of  $v_1, v_2, \dots, v_T$  must be determined by  $\alpha$ . If  $\alpha$  is considered a constrictive equation and  $V = (v_1, v_2, \dots, v_T)$  is regarded as a probability distribution, it is necessary to find the probability distribution  $V^*$  to match the constrictive equation  $\alpha$ . When the probability distribution that matches the constrictive equation is not unique, Chen (2005) used the maximum entropy principles (Jaynes, 1957) to establish an optimization mode with the purpose that information would be maximized when the solution of  $v_1, v_2, \dots, v_T$  is uncertain. The mode is as follows in (2):

$$\max H(v_1, \dots, v_T) = - \sum_{i=1}^T v_i \ln v_i$$

subject to

$$\sum_{i=1}^T \frac{i-1}{T-1} v_i = \alpha$$

$$\sum_{i=1}^T v_i = 1$$

$$v_i \geq 0, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, T \tag{2}$$

Set  $T = 5$ . **Table 4** lists the optimal solution,  $v_i, i = 1, 2, \dots, 5$ , when  $\alpha$  remains between 0.1 and 0.9. Provided decision makers can define their stances (i.e. preferences for positive or negative evaluations) and determine  $\alpha$  according to the emphasis, it is possible to examine the values of the verbal terms in **Table 4** and calculate the relative weight of groups or items.

**Table 4.** Optimal solution of  $\alpha$  remaining between 0.1 and 0.9 when  $T = 5$

$\alpha \backslash v_i$	$v_1$	$v_2$	$v_3$	$v_4$	$v_5$
0.1	0.7105	0.2067	0.0602	0.0175	0.0051
0.2	0.5307	0.2565	0.1240	0.0599	0.0289
0.3	0.3962	0.2574	0.1672	0.1086	0.0706
0.4	0.2884	0.2353	0.1919	0.1566	0.1277
0.5	0.2000	0.2000	0.2000	0.2000	0.2000
0.6	0.1277	0.1566	0.1919	0.2353	0.2884
0.7	0.0706	0.1086	0.1672	0.2574	0.3962
0.8	0.0289	0.0599	0.1240	0.2565	0.5307
0.9	0.0051	0.0175	0.0602	0.2067	0.7105

Source: Chen *et al.* (2013)

### Calculation of the Weight of Perceived Aesthetic Attributes

As previously mentioned, most respondents tended to emphasize positive evaluation. Therefore, this study set  $\alpha$  in Eq. (1) to 0.9 to underline the importance of ‘extremely important’. According to **Table 4**,  $v_1$  (extremely unimportant) = 0.0051,  $v_2$  (unimportant) = 0.0175,  $v_3$  (moderately important) = 0.0602,  $v_4$  (important) = 0.2067 and  $v_5$  (extremely important) = 0.7105. In comparison with the traditional Likert scale based on the equal interval scale, the gap between  $v_4$  and  $v_5$ , which is deliberately highlighted, can be shown in the decision-making results through weight. According to the concept, it is possible to calculate the weights of the groups as well as the underlying items of a specific group. Taking the example of ‘Behaviour Norms’ in **Table 1**, the equation of its evaluation score is as follows in (3):

$$\text{Score} = \sum_{i=1}^5 v_i n_i \tag{3}$$

Specifically,  $n_i, i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$ , which refer to the numbers of ‘extremely unimportant’, ‘unimportant’, ‘moderately important’, ‘important’ and ‘extremely important’ for ‘Behaviour Norms’. Therefore, the ‘Behaviour Norms’ score is as follows:

$$0.0051 \times 0 + 0.0175 \times 2 + 0.0602 \times 20 + 0.2067 \times 225 + 0.7105 \times 328 = 280.791$$

When the scores of all groups are obtained through the same procedure, it is possible to acquire the relative proportions or weights of all the groups in the overall measurement instrument. According to **Table 5**, the groups are ranked according to weight: D. Service Contact Norms (0.269); A. Behaviour Norms (0.252); B. Dressing Norms (0.241) and C. Appearance Norms (0.239). Likewise, it is possible to obtain the weights and rankings of the

underlying items in the four groups ([Appendix 1](#)). The analysis of the results shows the following information.

1. 'Service Contact Norms' ranked the highest (0.269) in terms of weight among the groups and the content was related to the aggregation of the needs of individual interest. Within this group, D6 'ground staff should be able to understand English and have the ability to achieve intercultural communication' (0.125) ranked the highest in terms of importance, followed by D9 'ground staff should be able to manage emotion well and resist pressure' (0.121), D4 'ground staff should be able to handle multiple tasks and take quick actions calmly' (0.118) and D5 'ground staff should be able to understand humour and should be socially humorous' (0.115).
2. 'Behaviour Norms' ranked second (0.252) in terms of importance. Within this first group, A3 'delivering documents with both hands' (0.181) was most emphasized, followed by A4 'making eye contact when talking to passengers' (0.180), A1 'proper sitting deportment with a smile' (0.173) and A5 'proper deportment in public' (0.165).
3. 'Dressing Norms' ranked third (0.241). Within this group, B5 'no images of the uniform or the logo of the company on personal Facebook account or blog' (0.177) was most important, followed by B6 'uniform should not be used as leisure attire or for personal activities' (0.175), B3 'no combination of uniforms of different colours on different occasions' (0.173) and B2 'no stain on or damage to the uniform or accessories' (0.166).

'Appearance Norms' ranked last (0.239). Within this group, the greatest emphasis was placed on C3 'attention should be paid to personal cleanliness (e.g. avoid unpleasant body odour and bad breath' (0.189), followed by C5 'there should not be tattoos or images on the skin that are not covered by the uniform' (0.184), C2 'face, hands and fingernails should be kept clean' (0.182) and C1 'hair should be well-combed and be consistent with the standards (hairstyle, colour, etc.)' (0.182).

**Table 5.** Frequency distribution and relative weight ( $\alpha = 0.9$ ) of the groups

Group	Frequency distribution					Score	Weight
	Extremely unimportant	Unimportant	Moderately important	Important	Extremely important		
A. Behaviour Norms	0	2	20	225	328	280.791	0.252
B. Dressing Norms	3	6	18	242	306	268.638	0.241
C. Appearance Norms	0	2	45	221	307	266.548	0.239
D. Service Contact Norms	0	0	16	195	364	299.892	0.269
						1115.869	1.000

### Sensitivity Analysis

This study conducted cross observations of weight when there was an emphasis on positive verbal terms ( $\alpha = 0.8, 0.7$  and  $0.6$ ). According to the analysis in **Table 6**, when most of the group respondents tended to emphasize positive evaluation ( $0.5 < \alpha < 1$ ) in the oral assessment of a statement stance, the weight ranking of the four groups in the overall measurement instrument showed consistency. However, Chen (2005) believed that if the positive evaluation of the respondents is almost the same as the negative evaluation, the weight should be determined by the preference index ( $\alpha$ ). In this case,  $\alpha$  would affect the final results of evaluation. Moreover, if a more extreme positive or negative preference is adopted, the greater the difference in weight will become. This can reduce the risk of decision misjudgements, which were probably caused by a blurry boundary of weight distribution under the traditional concept of the equal interval scale; thus, it can help decision makers effectively identify the weight differences of verbal evaluations.

**Table 6.** Results of sensitivity analysis

Group	$\alpha = 0.9$		$\alpha = 0.8$		$\alpha = 0.7$		$\alpha = 0.6$	
	Weight	Rank	Weight	Rank	Weight	Rank	Weight	Rank
A. Behaviour Norms	0.252	2	0.251	2	0.251	2	0.251	2
B. Dressing Norms	0.241	3	0.244	3	0.246	3	0.248	3
C. Appearance Norms	0.239	4	0.242	4	0.244	4	0.247	4
D. Service Contact Norms	0.269	1	0.263	1	0.259	1	0.254	1

## CONCLUSION

### Discussions and Implications

1. Establish systematic service contact norms. According to Berry, Wall and Carbone (2006), customers form perceptions based on the technical performance of the service (functional clues), the tangible items associated with the service (mechanical clues) and the behaviour and appearance of service providers (humanistic clues). It is suggested that enterprises review customer service expectations at each contact point in the service flow, motivate employees and enterprises to form customer-centred service triangles and provide well-planned service evidence, including functional clues, mechanical clues and aesthetic experiences embedded in humanistic clues, to influence passengers' perceptions of service commitment. Services must be processed at an airport in an efficient manner to minimize travel time (Martín-Cejas, 2006); moreover, Pantouvakis

and Renzi (2016) mentioned that different national characteristics can affect the customers' perceptions of satisfaction from the service offered. It is suggested that both schools and enterprises create teaching materials regarding cross-cultural communication and understanding in order to support the on-site practical internships according to the technical demands of these cooperative enterprises, set front-line employees in inter-cultural service encounters and pay particular attention to the languages, gestures of different cultures, specific cultural needs and queries and word choices and strive for no discrimination, stereotypes or possible adverse effects on service quality and expectations during interpersonal interaction (Hopkins, Hopkins, & Hoffman, 2005; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005). According to the items in the groups, passengers focus on whether they are treated in a friendly manner and receive efficient and good service during their person-to-person encounters before boarding the plane. Hence, the items that should be emphasized include: (1) to provide good customer care, giving a positive impression to passengers in cross-cultural environments (Cutting, 2012), ground staff should be able to understand English and have the ability to achieve intercultural communication (D6); (2) ground staff should be able to manage emotion well and resist pressure (D9); (3) ground staff should be able to handle multiple tasks and take quick actions calmly (D4); (4) ground staff should be able to understand humour and should be socially humorous' (D5) to alleviate a serious or embarrassing atmosphere or improve a group atmosphere in a humorous manner (Martin, 2001).

2. Make full use of behaviour norms to maintain order within the organization. For any organization to thrive, it must possess the behavioural norms that temper self-interest and instead promote coordinated, cooperative, self-sacrificing action among its members (Dunning, Fetchenhauer, & Schlösser, 2016). The behaviour norms mentioned above refer to the formally or informally agreed-upon interaction model, which aims to regulate human actions among an organization and its members (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Behavioural norms often work against a person's underlying preferences and constitute what people think they should do rather than what they want to do (Dunning *et al.*, 2016) since such norms can facilitate the integration of inter-organizational activities as well as the realization of overall objectives and individual interests (Heide & John, 1990). Therefore, the items that should be highlighted include the following: (1) delivering documents with both hands (A3) to show respect; (2) maintain eye contact when providing an explanation or answering passengers' questions (A4); (3) attention should be paid to an upright sitting posture with a smile (A1) and (4) maintain decent behaviours on public occasions (A5). Before students seek employment, schools should summarize all courses and open different specialized courses or general education courses in an appropriate semester and year of study, add physical and mental training courses, and invite experts in the field to give lectures and teach students how to make effective use of nonverbal tools, such as poses, gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact. In addition, schools should record instructions with recording devices to help students correct their inappropriate manners in physical movement. Enterprises can authorize colleges or training centres to offer appropriate modularized on-the-job training (OJT) according to vacancies in order to continually

enhance personnel quality.

3. Establish the attire norms of an organizational uniform: Organizational uniforms have multiple forms of managerial effectiveness and diverse social values (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) because they create the group membership emblem, convey legitimacy in the exercise of power, generate group cohesion, form symbolic interactions and enhance employees' self-esteem (Daniel, 1996). In addition, uniforms indicate and convey brand image and form a unique culture that is functional, symbolic and fashionable (Xie, 2005). Moreover, customers' feelings regarding organizational uniforms influence their judgments of enterprises and the professionalism of employees (Bazin & Aubert-Tarby, 2013). Therefore, attention should be paid to the following aspects regarding uniforms, which are regarded as an important symbol of corporate spirit: (1) employees should not be allowed to show pictures of their uniform on their personal Facebook accounts or blogs (B5) or (2) use them for personal activities (B6); (3) uniforms of different colours should not be combined on different occasions (B3) and (4) there should be no stains or damage to the uniform or accessories (B2). Professional uniforms and manners show the comprehensive qualities of employees in their work. Both colleges and enterprises can adopt lectures, demonstrations, and micro-teaching to teach their students or employees how to appropriately use organizational uniforms, and view them as an internal norm and requirement in this career.
4. Provide the externalized and internalized appearance norm mechanism. The performance of front-line employees at the moment of interaction with the consumer is key in driving perceived service quality (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990), with the personal appearance (grooming, cleanliness), attire/uniform, deportment and behaviour of the employee being crucial factors in addition to the 'product' itself (Baumann, Timming, & Gollan, 2016). Human physical appearance reflects a person's spiritual state and manner. Employees should be required to keep themselves clean, neat' and presentable and training, education' and professional development are considered tools for quality assurance (Chen & Yen, 2015). Therefore, the items that should be highlighted include the following: (1) 'attention should be paid to personal cleanliness (e.g. avoid unpleasant body odour and bad breath)' (C3); (2) 'there should not be tattoos or images on the skin that are not covered by the uniform' (C5); (3) 'face, hands, and fingernails should be kept clean' (C2); and (4) 'hair should be well-combed and consistent with the standards (hairstyle, colour, etc.)' (C1). It is suggested that the enterprises and schools implementing the "sandwich intern program" should establish an information and exchange platform, sort the appearance norms and assessment projects that should be revealed in the service field according to the personnel demands of enterprises, offer training or career lectures that match the needs of schools, and strengthen students' self-discipline in manner, appearance, and hygiene. After students are employed, enterprises would manage and assess them according to position requirements and standards.

In short, 'aesthetic labour' includes external features as well as the value and faith internalized in organization members. In moments of truth, interpersonal interactions can

form potential cultural identity and emotional attachment and thus enhance difference and brand identification.

### Suggestions for Future Research

This study aimed to investigate the perceived generalized aesthetic attributes of ground staff; differences in the aesthetic performances of aviation companies was not the focus. Passengers of low-cost carriers (LCCs) were not included in this study because most LCCs outsource their airport passenger services to local FSCs to reduce costs; thus, they do not have direct contact with passengers. Hence, only frequent flyers of FSCs were used as research subjects. It is suggested that future studies consider the differences in business modes and customer groups between FSCs and LCCs or increase the sample size and explore the differences in aesthetic evaluations of the three FSCs' travel class options (economy class, business class and first class).

In addition, the outcome of this study reveals that relative weights among the groups or the underlying items in a specific group could be identified and distinguished in terms of ranking based on importance. Therefore, the aggregation function of verbal evaluation is highly practical and extensible in similar managerial decisions regarding importance ranking.

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**Appendix 1.** Weight and ranking ( $\alpha = 0.9$ ) of relevant underlying items in the groups

The Groups and Corresponding Items	Score	Weight	Group rank	Item rank
<b>A. Behaviour Norms</b>	280.791	0.252	2	
A1 Proper sitting deportment with smiling	323.020	0.173		3
A2 Proper standing deportment with natural gesture	286.336	0.153		5
A3 Delivering documents with both hands	339.517	0.181		1
A4 Making eye contact when talking to passengers	336.834	0.180		2
A5 Proper deportment in public	308.604	0.165		4
A6 Instructing passengers with open palm	278.193	0.149		6
<b>B. Dressing Norms</b>	268.638	0.241	3	
B1 No personal accessories without permission	308.604	0.161		5
B2 No stain in or damage to the uniform or accessories	317.944	0.166		4
B3 No combination of uniforms of different colours on different occasions	331.060	0.173		3
B4 Not too many objects in the pockets of the uniform	283.561	0.148		6
B5 No images of the uniform or the logo of the company on personal Facebook account or blog	339.854	0.177		1
B6 Uniform should not be used as leisure attire or for personal activities	334.879	0.175		2
<b>C Appearance Norms</b>	266.548	0.239	4	
C1 Hair should be well-combed and consistent with the standards (hairstyle, colour, etc.)	332.364	0.182		4
C2 Face, hands and fingernails should be kept clean	333.353	0.182		3
C3 Attention should be paid to personal cleanliness (e.g. avoid unpleasant body odour and bad breath)	345.738	0.189		1
C4 The framework and colour of glasses should be simple and serious	274.218	0.150		5
C5 There should not be tattoos or images on the skin that are not covered by the uniform	337.377	0.184		2
C6 A professional image should be maintained and weight should be kept at the standard level	205.658	0.112		6
<b>D. Service Contact Norms</b>	299.892	0.269	1	
D1 Ground staff should be patient in listening to passengers and attentive to the passengers' body language	317.625	0.113		5
D2 The company gives appropriate authority, which enhances the flexibility to meet the needs of some customs	311.937	0.111		6
D3 Ground staff should be eloquent and able to explain good reasons for actions/situations in case of problems in service and avoid conflicts	304.655	0.108		7
D4 Ground staff should be able to handle multiple tasks and take quick actions calmly	331.796	0.118		3
D5 Ground staff should be able to understand humour and should be socially humorous	324.807	0.115		4
D6 Ground staff should be able to understand English and have the ability to achieve intercultural communication	352.598	0.125		1
D7 Ground staff should have strong knowledge of ticket service and the skills of the airport passenger service	266.384	0.095		9
D8 Ground staff should be familiar with the Customs/Immigration/Quarantine/Security procedure and the airport facilities	267.538	0.095		8
D9 Ground staff should be able to manage emotion well and resist pressure	340.525	0.121		2