

## International Journal of Applied Business and Economic Research

ISSN : 0972-7302

available at <http://www.serialsjournals.com>

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Volume 15 • Number 24 • 2017

### The Antecedents of Customer Empathy toward Service Providers in the Cosmetology Industry

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**Abstract:** This research shows the academic and practical implications of a service marketing strategy in the cosmetology industry by analyzing the antecedent factors that influence the cognitive and emotional empathy of consumers. Existing studies focus on the effects and dimension of salesperson empathy. Researchers find that empathy plays an important role in the relationship between service provider and customer but pay scant attention to the customer's empathy for the salesperson and has not explored the antecedents of empathy. The aim of this study is to highlight customer empathy and to explore antecedents that have a positive influence on customer empathy in the cosmetology industry. We surveyed women aged in their 20–50s with experience using a nail-care service in the previous 3 months. They were asked to respond to questions about their recent beauty service. The survey was conducted in South Korea by mobile interview using smart phones, using 255 questionnaires. We confirm the validity and reliability of each measure by confirmatory factor analysis and a reliability test. Finally, we test the model through structural equation model analysis; the model has good fit. We found that the following four antecedents have positive effects on customer empathy: expertise, opportunism, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective. However, opportunism influences only cognitive empathy. Customer cognitive empathy has a positive effect on emotional empathy, and cognitive and emotional empathy have a positive effect on customer loyalty. Key implications of this research are that customer empathy is one of the important factors in service marketing in the cosmetology industry and that marketing ideas could be triggered by knowledge on the four antecedents: expertise, opportunism, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective.

**Keywords:** customer empathy, cosmetology industry marketing, empathy antecedents

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is an important topic in research on the salesperson–customer relationship when service is provided face to face between the service provider and customer. The service marketing literature focuses on a salesperson's empathy with the customer, and the effect of that empathy. Scholars find that empathy affects

the buyer–seller relationship, ethical behavior, customer loyalty, and sales performance (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005; Agnihotri and Krush, 2015). The literature notes that empathy is significant for the buyer–seller relationship regarding service products where the emotional aspect is important (Eu and Lee, 2009).

Most research studies empathy from the viewpoint of the service provider and concludes that a salesperson’s empathy with customers is related to customized service from the emotional perspective (Eu and Lee, 2009; Kim and Kim, 2013). Hence, salesperson empathy for customers improves customer service and could have a positive effect on the salesperson’s performance, such as increased sales, customer loyalty, and customers’ positive attitude toward the service provider. So far, researchers have paid scant attention to customers’ empathy for the salesperson and has not explored the antecedents of empathy (Park *et al.*, 2015).

The aim of this study is to highlight customer empathy and to explore variables that have a positive influence on customer empathy in the cosmetology industry. With a stronger emotional aspect compared to other industries, the cosmetology industry shows diverse interactions between service providers and customers throughout the service delivery process. In order to deliver services like hairstyles, esthetics, or nail art, it is inevitable that psychological interactions will result in the formation of empathy through communication during service delivery. Customers’ emotional aspect has been given considerable attention in recent research on the cosmetology industry as an important influencing factor in the service provider–customer relationship—as much as the technical aspect of the service. Based on the characteristics of the cosmetology industry, the service provider–customer relationship is formed in the shop by the emotional aspect, like empathy; it would be difficult to form such a relationship for that service outside the shop.

With recent growth in the cosmetology in East Asia, the cosmetology industry has potential for further growth. Combined with new consumer trends, like wellbeing orientation and emotional consumption, the rapidly growing cosmetology industry has grabbed the attention of academics.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first review the existing literature and explore the antecedent variables of empathy as well as develop our hypotheses and propose a conceptual model to understand the effects of antecedents of empathy and the roles of empathy. Next, we explain the methodology of this study and the survey instrument. Then, we test the research model and show the results. Finally, we discuss our major findings, discuss proper marketing strategies for companies in the cosmetology industry, and report our study’s limitations.

## **II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Empathy**

Empathy is defined as “the state of emotion feeling equally or together with others” (Park, 2014). In recent years, there have been several accounts that point to the role of empathy in buyer–seller interaction (Aggarwal *et al.* 2005; Agnihotri and Krush 2015). Unfortunately, the researchers focus on the empathy of salespersons but pay scant attention to that of customers in the buyer–seller relationship.

Emotional responses by empathy could be divided into empathic interest, which is a conforming response to positive emotions, and personal pain, which is a conforming response to negative feelings. Empathic interest is a tendency to experience such feelings as interest, compassion, and warm heartedness

for others, while personal pain is a tendency to experience such feelings as anxiety and displeasure for negative experiences of others (Kim and Kim, 2013).

Empathy is one of the important concepts in the relationship between service providers and customers (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). The understanding and prediction of others through empathy could play positive roles in mutual relationships, while empathy could resolve many problems in mutual interactions and could even strengthen relationships (Bylund and Makoul, 2005). As well as salesperson's empathy, customer empathy with service providers is an important element arousing consumers' positive behavior toward service provider in the service delivery process (Park *et al.*, 2015).

There are two dimensions of empathy: cognitive and emotional. Cognitive empathy is understanding others' emotional states and perspectives, and emotional empathy is feelings of experiencing others' emotions, mental states, and experiences (Kim and Kim, 2013). Cognitive empathy, including the ability to accept roles and perspectives, is defined as an attitude of respecting/accepting others by discarding self-centered thinking and by considering others' perspectives, the ability to understand others' internal states at their own intellectual level, and the ability to understand/accept others' emotions and thinking by putting oneself into others' positions. Emotional empathy, which is similar to other-oriented consideration, mercy, and kindness, is defined as a tendency to experience others' feelings, and is different from cognitive empathy, which understands others' behavior (Eu and Lee, 2009; Bae and Jo, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2014; Park *et al.*, 2015). Cognitive empathy is helpful to strengthen social solidarity, reduce stereotypes and prejudices against others, and adjust own behavior in advisable directions in social interactions (Park, 2012). Emotional empathy could strengthen social interactions through emotional contagion, shared emotion, empathic interest, vicarious emotion, sympathetic vibration, and sympathy (Eu and Lee, 2009).

Nam (2012) defined customer empathy with service providers as cognitive and emotional sharing based on experience, and said that if consumers felt that companies' diverse attempts and efforts would accord with their effort to solve problems, shopping pleasure, and their lifestyle, then they could feel more happiness by using that companies' products and services. In other words, it could be estimated that consumers form loyalty to companies' products or services for such reasons as bigger happiness in the case when empathy with companies is formed.

According to most existing research related to emotion, when customers' emotional response is more positive, it has positive (+) effects on customer loyalty (Jin *et al.*, 2013). In addition, Kim and Kim (2013) found that consumers' cognitive and emotional empathy forms trust and favorable feeling toward service providers, which has significant effects on customer loyalty. In line with these arguments, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1. Empathy has positive effects on customer loyalty.

H1-1. Cognitive empathy has positive effects on customer loyalty.

H1-2. Emotional empathy has positive effects on customer loyalty.

## **2.2. Expertise**

In relationship marketing of the services industry, service providers' expertise works as an important factor to form trust as a positive emotion in customers (Kang *et al.*, 2006). Expertise comprises special and

professional knowledge and techniques possessed by service providers. Service providers' perceived expertise is a main factor in customer retention. When perceived expertise is higher, customers' positive emotion and dependence on the relevant companies are increased, which leads to repurchase of the service (Park *et al.*, 2012).

Perceived expertise plays an essential role in retaining relationships with customers and affects the quality of the customer relationship as well as the positive emotions and reputation of the service providers (Jang *et al.*, 2011).

According to research on the effects of service quality on customers' emotional responses, expertise has positive effects on positive emotions toward service providers and service providers' expertise has significant effects on the relationship with customers through positive emotions toward service providers (Jang *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, we formally hypothesize as follows.

H2. Expertise has positive effects on empathy.

H2-1. Expertise has positive effects on cognitive empathy.

H2-2. Expertise has positive effects on emotional empathy.

### 2.3. Opportunism

Opportunism is defined as using tricks to pursue personal benefits (Lee, 1998). In the formation of relationship, an opportunist behaves to procure benefits, including absence of fairness and honesty, nonfulfillment of concluded agreements, and wrong acts in contract. Opponents' opportunist behavior could hinder solidarity and cause negative emotions. Corporate opportunist behavior for short-term unilateral benefits could cause negative results in the long term (Yoon and Kim, 2006).

For the long-term relationship between suppliers and customers, it is essential to minimize and properly manage opportunism (Cho *et al.*, 2015). According to Kwon and Lee (2012), opportunist behavior involves causing conflict that could disturb empathy. Aligning with the past literature, we hypothesize as follows.

H3. Opportunism has negative effects on empathy.

H3-1. Opportunism has negative effects on cognitive empathy.

H3-2. Opportunism has negative effects on emotional empathy.

### 2.4. Preferential Treatment

Odekerken-Schroder *et al.* (2003) defined preferential treatment as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which a retailer treats and serves its regular customers better than its nonregular customers."

Preferential treatment has significant relationships with customer satisfaction and retention (Huh, 2012). In addition, according to Lee (2011), only preferential treatment of relational benefit gives confidence to customers, so that it has effects on positive emotions, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Kang *et al.* (2013) noted that differentiated preferential treatment based on customer desire or taste in the case when providing personal service would increase customers' emotional satisfaction. According to Sung (2013), preferential treatment would have effects on positive emotions by influencing the social identification that

could be a way to express which group the customer belongs to, and also personal identification, which is a feeling of preferring a product after identification with the product; such a positive emotion could strengthen emotional combinations with the service provider. Based on this prior research, we propose the following hypotheses.

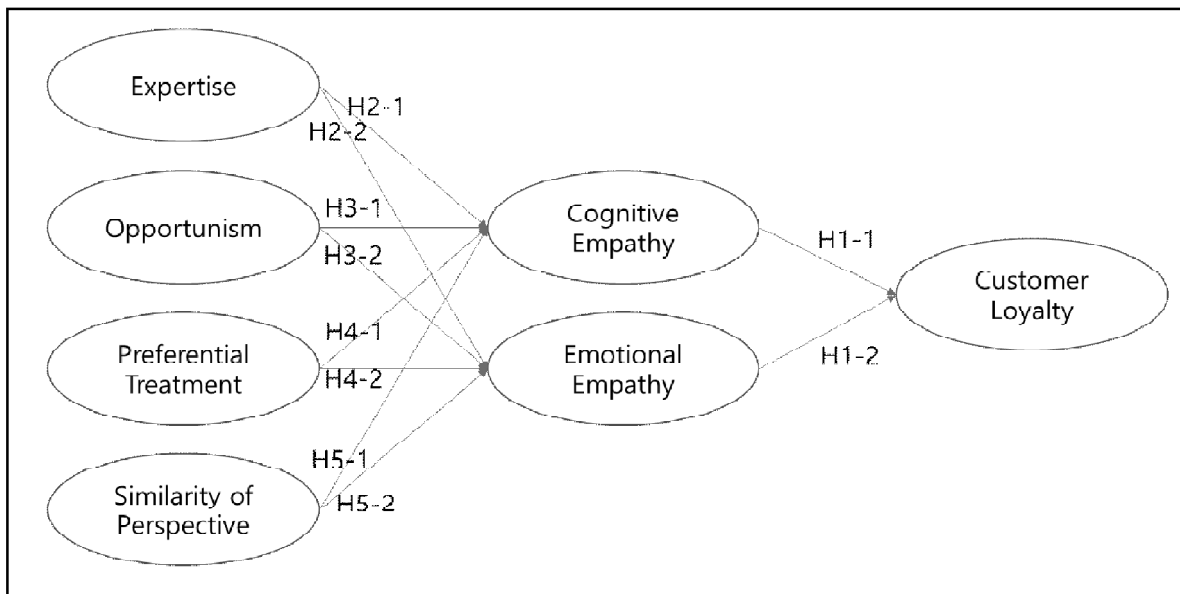
- H4. Preferential treatment has positive effects on empathy.
- H4-1. Preferential treatment has positive effects on cognitive empathy.
- H4-2. Preferential treatment has positive effects on emotional empathy.

### 2.5. Similarity of Perspective

Similarity of perspective is defined as the degree of similarity between the service deliverer and customer, as well as feeling more trust and likability toward people similar to oneself. The perception of similarity positively works on the retention of continuous relationship and formation of trust, on top of increasing the likability for the formation of mutual relationship (Lee and Kang, 2010). Nelson *et al.* (2003) argued that the similarity of perspective would be an important element of empathy. According to Stürmer *et al.* (2005), interactions with people in the same culture group have bigger effects on empathy than cases of other groups. In other words, with regard to social empathy, cultural similarity between group members could promote interpersonal interactions, so that mutual similarity would be an important antecedent of empathy. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

- H5. Similarity of perspective has positive effects on empathy.
- H5-1. Similarity of perspective has positive effects on cognitive empathy.
- H5-2. Similarity of perspective has positive effects on emotional empathy.

Figure 1 depicts the research model with all hypotheses.



**Figure 1: Research Model**

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1. Sample

We surveyed women aged in their 20–50s with experience of using a nail-care service in the previous 3 months in the capital city of South Korea. They were asked to respond to questions about their recent beauty service experience.

**Table 1**  
**Demographics of Responses**

			N = 255
AGE (years)	20–29		33.3%
	30–39		29.8%
	40–49		23.5%
	50 +		13.3%
JOB	Office job		42.0%
	Professional		12.9%
	Sales/Service		11.0%
	Homemaker		24.7%
	Other		9.4%

The survey was conducted by mobile interviews using smart phone. A total of 255 questionnaires were used for the analysis, after excluding 25 questionnaires with insincere responses (giving a total response of 280 questionnaires). The demographic characteristics of the subjects are presented in Table 1.

#### 3.2. Measures

Based on existing research, this study selected expertise, opportunism, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective as antecedent variables that would have effects on cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and customer loyalty. Likert scales comprising multiple items were used as the basis of measurement. To ensure adequate understanding, the survey was pretested by doctoral students. The final scales selected for the analysis are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Measures**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Expertise	(X1) Expertise felt from the nail beauty service provider	Park <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	(X2) Professional techniques felt from the nail beauty service provider	Lee and Kim (2012)
	(X3) Professional experience felt from the nail beauty service provider	
Opportunism	(X4) Nail beauty service provider’s distorted information behavior, I felt	Lee (2008) Nam and Kang (2014)
	(X5) Nail beauty service provider’s fact-transformational behavior, I felt	
	(X6) Nail beauty service provider’s exaggerated behavior, I felt	

*contd. table 2*

Variables	Measures	Reference
Preferential Treatment	(X7) Services provided only to me, I felt	Min and Lee (2012)
	(X8) Preferential treatment only for me, I felt	Kang <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	(X9) Many benefits provided only to me, I felt	
Similarity of Perspective	(X10) Similarity of perspective with the nail beauty service provider, I felt	Lee and Kang (2010) Kim (2014)
	(X11) Similarity of overall style with the nail beauty service provider, I felt	
	(X12) Similarity of preferred style with the nail beauty service provider, I felt	
	(X13) Perception as a similar class with the nail beauty service provider, I felt	
Cognitive Empathy	(X14) Nail beauty service provider's effort to understand my behavior, I felt	Kim (2006)
	(X15) Nail beauty service provider's effort to understand situations in my perspective, I felt	
	(X16) Nail beauty service provider's effort to understand my problems in my perspective, I felt	
	(X17) Nail beauty service provider's effort to understand my requests, I felt	
Emotional Empathy	(X18) Nail beauty service provider's emotional agitation by my condition, I felt	Kim and Kim (2013)
	(X19) Nail beauty service provider's vicarious experience of my uncomfortable feelings, I felt	Park <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Customer Loyalty	(X20) Intention to reuse the nail shop	Chung <i>et al.</i> (2009)
	(X21) Intention to continuously use the nail shop	Jeong (2014)
	(X22) Intention to recommend the nail shop	

### 3.3. Analysis

In order to examine the reliability and validity of each item for measurement, exploratory factor analysis and a reliability test were conducted. The factor analysis was rotated using the Varimax method. In the results of the reliability test, all Cronbach's  $\alpha$  are higher than .7, thereby verifying the reliability of measures. Table 3 shows the results of the exploratory factor analysis and reliability test.

For the verification of validity, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS 19.0. In the results of confirmatory factory analysis, the model fit is in the acceptable range ( $\chi^2 = 265.986$ ,  $df=188$ ,  $CMIN/DF=1.415$ ,  $GFI=.915$ ,  $AGFI=.885$ ,  $NFI=.930$ ,  $TLI=.973$ ,  $CFI=.978$ ,  $RMSEA=.040$ ,  $SRMR=.048$ ) (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). All relationships between measures and latent variables are significant ( $p<.001$ ). The average variance extracted of the standardized factor loading of the measure composition items were all 0.5 or more, thereby verifying the convergent validity. All AVE values are larger than the square values of the correlation coefficients of latent variables, thereby verifying the discriminant validity. We present the intercorrelation among the constructs and average variance extracted in Table 4.

**Table 3**  
**Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis and Reliability Test**

Measure	Expertise	Opportunism	Preferential Treatment	Similarity of Perspective	Cognitive Empathy	Emotional Empathy	Customer Loyalty	Cronbach's $\alpha$
X1	<b>.890</b>	-.112	.048	.025	.104	.080	.091	0.8660
X2	<b>.898</b>	-.118	-.013	.057	.153	.034	.097	
X3	<b>.761</b>	-.049	.033	.029	.241	.090	.263	
X4	-.065	<b>.828</b>	-.001	-.020	-.078	-.002	-.132	.797
X5	-.128	<b>.876</b>	.021	-.065	-.086	.034	-.079	
X6	-.066	<b>.776</b>	-.053	.155	-.126	-.099	-.085	
X7	.028	-.034	<b>.858</b>	.126	.122	.160	.056	.847
X8	.005	.002	<b>.806</b>	.341	.178	.058	.129	
X9	.031	.001	<b>.777</b>	.244	.161	.096	.109	
X10	-.007	.009	.191	<b>.856</b>	.073	.060	.102	.918
X11	.032	-.003	.182	<b>.876</b>	.102	.096	.111	
X12	.091	-.025	.161	<b>.864</b>	.103	.118	.095	
X13	.021	.091	.145	<b>.844</b>	.108	.157	.033	
X14	.144	-.124	.210	-.035	<b>.754</b>	.108	.181	.895
X15	.149	-.118	.189	.185	<b>.832</b>	.145	.228	
X16	.109	-.076	.145	.265	<b>.811</b>	.156	.186	
X17	.272	-.112	.024	.091	<b>.729</b>	.161	.330	
X18	.154	-.035	.199	.206	.279	<b>.736</b>	.232	.748
X19	.077	-.037	.162	.246	.215	<b>.798</b>	.200	
X20	.187	-.131	.090	.071	.295	.121	<b>.848</b>	.915
X21	.160	-.139	.090	.129	.253	.179	<b>.857</b>	
X22	.178	-.153	.180	.189	.301	.166	<b>.744</b>	
Eigenvalue	2.465	2.205	2.329	3.454	3.046	1.451	2.510	
Total variance explained (%)	11.203	10.024	10.585	15.701	13.846	6.595	11.408	

**Table 4**  
**Intercorrelation of Variables and AVE**

Latent Variables	Intercorrelation of Variables						
	Expertise	Opportunism	Preferential Treatment	Similarity of Perspective	Cognitive Empathy	Emotional Empathy	Customer Loyalty
Expertise	1.000						
Opportunism	-.288** (.068)	1.000					
Preferential Treatment	.113** (.070)	-.055** (.073)	1.000				
Similarity of Perspective	.132** (.068)	-.022** (.071)	.556** (.051)	1.000			
Cognitive Empathy	.422** (.058)	-.290** (.066)	.467** (.056)	.375** (.059)	1.000		
Emotional Empathy	.345** (.070)	-.149** (.078)	.530** (.061)	.521** (.059)	.661** (.050)	1.000	
Customer Loyalty	.423** (.058)	-.329** (.065)	.351** (.062)	.310** (.062)	.648** (.041)	.625** (.052)	1.000
AVE	.704	.549	.637	.674	.667	.513	.730

Notes: numbers in parenthesis are S.E.; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$



In order to verify the hypotheses, a study model like that shown in Figure 1 is suggested. We test the research model using structural equation model analysis. The model fit of the test was in the acceptable range ( $\chi^2 = 307.959$ ,  $df=193$ ,  $CMIN/DF=1.596$ ,  $GFI=.901$ ,  $AGFI=.870$ ,  $NFI=.919$ ,  $TLI=.961$ ,  $CFI=.968$ ,  $RMSEA=.048$ ,  $SRMR=.062$ ) (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

#### IV. RESULTS

All hypotheses except the H3-2 are supported. The hypothesis verification results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Results of Model Test**

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Standardized Estimation</i>	<i>C.R.</i>	<i>Result</i>
H1-1. Cognitive Empathy → Customer Loyalty	.509***	6.651	Supported
H1-2. Emotional Empathy → Customer Loyalty	.365***	4.938	Supported
H2-1. Expertise → Cognitive Empathy	.312***	5.001	Supported
H2-2. Expertise → Emotional Empathy	.283***	3.989	Supported
H3-1. Opportunism → Cognitive Empathy	-.201***	-2.949	Supported
H3-2. Opportunism → Emotional Empathy	-.096	-1.223	Not supported
H4-1. Preferential Treatment → Cognitive Empathy	.341***	4.698	Supported
H4-2. Preferential Treatment → Emotional Empathy	.351***	4.194	Supported
H5-1. Similarity of Perspective → Cognitive Empathy	.117*	1.899	Supported
H5-2. Similarity of Perspective → Emotional Empathy	.268***	3.171	Supported

*Note:* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

We find that cognitive and emotional empathy has a strong positive relationship with customer loyalty (H1-1 and H1-2). Expertise, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective positively influence both cognitive and emotional empathy (H2-1, H2-2, H4-1, H4-2, H5-1, and H5-2). Opportunism is negatively related to cognitive empathy (H3-1) but is not significantly related to emotional empathy (H3-2). The results of this study are summarized in Figure 2.

#### V. DISCUSSIONS

This study examined factors affecting customer empathy and found that customer empathy plays a significant role in customer loyalty. From a review of the existing literature on empathy, the following four variables were suggested to have effects on empathy, customers' cognitive and emotional empathy with service providers, in the context of the cosmetology industry: expertise, opportunism, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective. In the study results, all hypotheses except one are supported. Opportunism had negative effects on cognitive empathy. Expertise, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective had directly positive effects on both cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. Both cognitive empathy and emotional empathy had positive effects on customer loyalty. However, opportunism had no significant effect on emotional empathy, which we infer from the customer's understanding of the salesperson's emotion

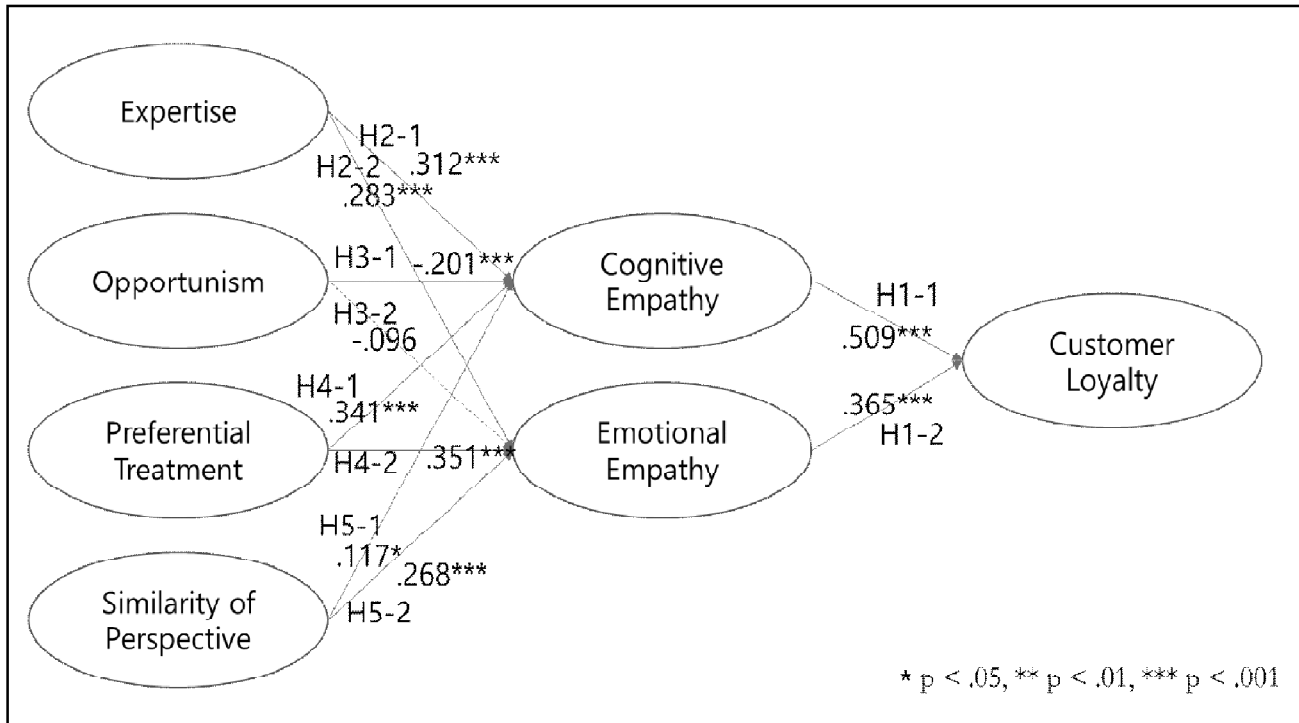


Figure 2: Results of the Model Test

or mental states. Customers cannot rationally accept the opportunism of the service provider, but can understand that the seller always tries to make money from the customer emotionally. Hence, opportunism has a negative influence on cognitive empathy but no influence on emotional empathy.

The implications of this study are as follows. First, we highlighted the importance of customer empathy in the relationship between service provider and customer. Most existing literature focuses on the service provider’s empathy, as this is easy to improve by training. However, empathy can occur on both sides—service provider and customer.

Second, we found four factors—expertise, opportunism, preferential treatment, and similarity of perspective—that have positive effects on customer empathy. Hence, marketing managers should present an image of expertise to the customer. Training salespeople to be experts, or letting customers understand the expertise of salespeople by displaying their various certificates, are possible strategies for a company to adopt. Marketing managers can minimize opportunism by incentivizing salespeople to serve customers from a long-term perspective. Preferential treatment can be adopted if the company has enough information about customers and has enough knowledge to utilize that customer information to customize service. Building a database of customers and customizing service would improve preferential treatment of customers. Communication training programs are a proper tool to improve similarity of perspective. Most communication training programs include training on how salespeople can understand the customer’s point of view, which would make it easy to improve similarity of perspective.

Third, this study established new marketing ideas for the sales provider–customer relationship in the cosmetology industry by revealing the importance of customer empathy and the antecedents of empathy.

Despite the theoretical and practical implications of this study, there are several limitations. It did not consider the effects of diverse moderating variables and environmental variables. In addition, comparative research on nations with different cultures would aid understanding of customer responses in service encounters in the cosmetology industry.

## NOTE

This article is a version of the first author's published master's thesis

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