Does Beauty and Personal Connection Counts in Shaping Consumer Response During Service Encounter?

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The research aspires to investigate the role of Physical Attractiveness and Personal Connection during the service encounter. To probe the influence of Physical Attractiveness and Personal Connection on Consumer Response with mediating roles of Social Interaction and Gratification Motivation along with Service Expertise as moderator. The survey strategy was exercised in data collection of 180 responses for hypotheses testing. Results show that Physical Attractiveness and Personal Connection have an absolute influence on Consumer Response. Social Interaction and Gratification Motivation played successful mediating roles between them. Service Expertise bound the influence of Physical Attractiveness on Social Interaction. The study helps in articulating the missing links by grasping the influence of Physical Attractiveness and Personal Connection. The management can make use of rapport between customer and employee to outsource new ideas and feedback from customers in the restaurant industry through relational benefits. Customers can be considered a free market monitor and consultants.

Keywords: Service Encounter, Physical attractiveness, Personal connection, Social interaction, Gratification motivation, Service expertise, Consumer response, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

*It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But it is better to be good than to be ugly (*Oscar Wilde).

The literature about service marketing has explained factors which influence service encounter. The frontline personnel have received much consideration from researchers (Quach *et al*., 2017). Due to rapid change in the competitive hospitality industry, to build customer satisfaction for sustaining business and be competitive the restaurant managers are searching for best strategies. In the restaurant industry, service and food quality are important aspects for influencing customer satisfaction (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Customers forego convenience and value likeable service employees. The managers along with researchers comprehended that service representative has a high effect on consumer response toward service firm (Wan & Wyer, 2015). Only a few studies have been conducted on the service provider's physical attraction effect on consumer response (Li, 2019; Dong & Wyer, 2014; Argo *et al*., 2008). Service managers value employee's appearance but insufficient attention has been given to stereotype of physical attraction throughout the service delivery process (Solomon *et al*., 1985). While providing high-quality service, previous studies have identified the consequences of possible encounters which are moulded due to interpersonal factors (Oliver & Swan, 1989).

By implementing aesthetic labour in service industry there exist a positive relationship between customer and brand which is established due to classifying representative's visual appearance (Tsaur *et al*., 2015). Physical attractiveness effect customer reactions, satisfaction, consumption and desire to interact in a service industry (Wan & Wyer, 2015). Physical appearance is affecting consumption experience. The discrimination in recruiting employees based on physical appearance is being done by Abercrombie & Fitch. People have a natural inclination for beautiful entities (Langlois *et al*., 1991). The concept for good-looks can backfire known as beauty can be vile (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). It lowers purchase intention and business performance. Due to self-presentation concern people avoid interacting with attractive other (Agthe *et al*., 2014).

The personal connection between service employees and customers while interacting influence customer perception, attitudes and satisfaction (Delcourt *et al*., 2013). The level of satisfaction and connection change according to the strength and weakness of customer commitment. The rapport amid customer and employee is thought as a critical indicator which candidly influences customer and employee interaction, surprisingly less examination has been done about the background of rapport (Keh, Ren, Hill & Li, 2013). Customers face employees' multiple attributes during service happenstance, it is essential to comprehend numerous attributes combine on developing customer-employee rapport (Giebelhausen, Robinson, Sirianni & Brady, 2014).

Research Gap

By studying gaps mentioned in literature it suggests the focal point for current research, which emphasized rapport as a specific attribute for investigating about the association and to consider certain factors promoting the establishment of rapport amid customer and employee. There is little research conducted on the attractiveness of employees which relates to service and their impact on appearance (Tsaur *et al*., 2015). The absence of pragmatic support for underlying influence about physical attractiveness upon customers' behavior through directing latent aspects (Lynn, 2009). Despite the awareness of the importance of employees' physical attractiveness in the hospitality industry, few empirical studies have been conducted (Magnini *et al*., 2013). Due to breaks present in literature, the study assessed personnel's appearance, customer-employee as important predictors for consumer response.

Theories Incorporated

The theory regarding social comparison proposed that humans gauge their outlooks and competencies by comparing them with

others' outlooks and competencies (Festinger, 1954). Physical appearance initiates and brings concern regarding social comparison (Patrick *et al*., 2004). Customers compare their psychological connections made with personnel while interaction (Jamal & Adelowore, 2008; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Individuals' comparisons in social comparison are made by the information collected from social interaction (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Interaction Appearance theory states that the perception of physical attractiveness is changed with social interaction (Albada, 2002). The social interaction plays the role in defining and increasing the physical attractiveness in male and female. Interaction is a change agent in establishing a relationship (Sprecher & Duck, 1994) and considerable effects on interpersonal attraction (Insko & Wilson, 1977).

Research Questions

To address the knowledge gaps, the research is being conducted to retort the research questions: (1) Whether physical attractiveness of employees affects consumer response at service encounter; (2) Does employee's physical attraction influence consumer response per social interaction; (3) Does Service expertise moderate the association among physical attractiveness and social interaction; (4) Whether the customer-employee interaction affects consumer response during the service encounter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical Attractiveness and Consumer Response

The physical attraction of a service representative has a positive impact on customer behavior (Arndt *et al*., 2016). Service representative physical attraction has a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000). The quality of service in high- contact services is depended on service provider since high contact services are labour intensive (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). Service evaluation is associated with a tangible aspect of service quality. Physical attractiveness of service representative has a positive influence on customer satisfaction in a service context. The customer perception of attractive service representative is assessed positively (Soderlund & Julander, 2009). Therefore, **H1**: *Physical attractive has a significant positive impact on consumer response*.

Personal Connection and Consumer Response

Personal recognition of customers names and their unique choices and interest helps in building strong existing relationship bond between service employee and customers and helps in increasing service quality. Personal connection is considered an important dimension of service quality (Dabholkar *et al*., 1996). Rapport act as mutual understanding between employee and customers. The strong rapport leads to customer satisfaction. The rapport between employee and customers gives an advantage to service firm and customers which further helps in developing long term relationship. Therefore, **H2**: *Personal Connection has a significant positive impact on Consumer Response*.

The mediating role of Social Interaction

Physical attraction of service provider influences communication between customers (Langlois *et al*., 2000) and it further helps in ensuring the communication about service information (Van Hoye & Turban, 2015). The social interaction between employees and customers is determined by the first impression developed due to physical attraction (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). The aesthetic appeal of a service provider helps in influencing subjective customer perception of the service provider's attitude (Ahearne *et al*., 2010). The service setting experience is enhanced due to interaction among employee and customer in a service setting. Therefore, **H3**: *Social interaction mediates the relationship between Physical attractiveness and Consumer response*.

The moderating role of Service Expertise

Service expertise is measured in terms of knowledge and experience in providing the service. Service expertise plays a major role in high involvement services like health, travel, insurance and education. Competent service provider increases customer value which causes customers to maintain and build stronger relationships (Macintosh, 2009). The social interaction with service employee increases familiarity, mutual understanding and self-disclosure. This type of social interaction between service employee and customers is obtained by personal attention which creates a unique relationship between them which is different from other customers (Gwinner *et al*., 1998). Therefore, **H4**: *Service Expertise moderates the relationship between Physical Attractiveness and Social Interaction*.

The mediating role of Gratification Motivation

Hedonic shopping and utilitarian shopping influences the satisfaction of the customer (Eroglu *et al*., 2005). Consumers realize that when their purchase is based on hedonic preferences, they achieve both psychological experience and joy and delight by using and possessing that product. The reason for realizing hedonic shopping given by the customer is that they have not only satisfied their need but also enjoyed and took pleasure in purchasing without any prior planning and expectation. In group relationship with others are endured due to fulfilling social motives and psychological needs (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Therefore, **H5**: *Gratification Motivation mediates the relationship between Personal Connection and Consumer Response*.
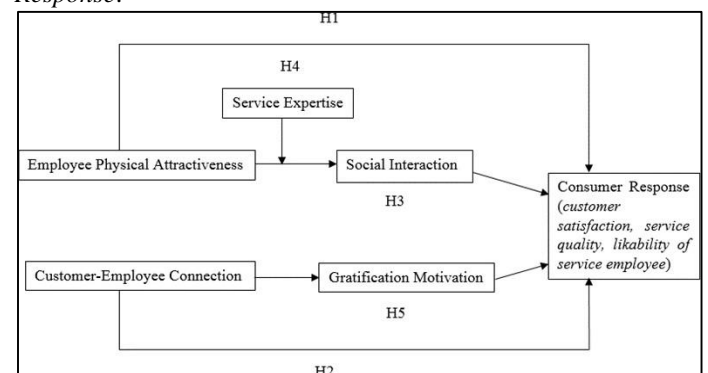

Figure 1: Proposed research framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Quantitative Research Design
The choice of research design is quantitative research which is related to the research philosophy of positivism. The approach to developing theory used for our research is deductive. The research design is a mono method of quantitative study. The quantitative research conducted is a glimpse of one aspect in time which is cross-sectional. The research conducted has regulated ethical considerations before an investigation of research variables. The research design has been made modest. The questionnaire is designed such that the respondents do not feel embarrassed, shy, angry, harm and face other material disadvantages. The respondents were aware of the research topic and have given their consent before data collection. The research is conducted with minimal interference in the non-contrived setting.

Study context
The service industry is a spontaneous setting for studying and practising relationship marketing. In the food service industry, full- service restaurants account for the largest segment of total revenues (Statista, 2015). Full- service restaurants provide table services rather than counter service or self-service. They are more expensive and provide personalized services than fast-food and counter service restaurants. To have the overall experience, feel good about food consumption and receive total package customers tend to visit full-service restaurants. Customers dine-out to create experience and connection with other people and to build a sense of community. (Nation's Restaurant News, 2015).

Survey development
The structured questionnaire is employed for the survey research strategy for data collection. The questionnaire was used to quantify the research variables of the study with a five-point Likert scale. The customers were asked to respond to the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statements presented to them on a questionnaire. The scale was anchored at 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree. The variables were operationalized to define constructs into measurable factors. All variables have an ordinal scale so category scale was used in a survey questionnaire. Consumer response was measured by adopting the scale from (Wan & Wyer, 2015) with 3 items. Physical attractiveness was measured by adopting the scale from (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 2010) with 3 items. Personal connection was measured by adopting the scale from (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) with 5 items. Social Interaction was measured by adopting the scale from (Agthe *et al*., 2011) with 2 items. Gratification motivation was measured by adopting the scale from (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003) with 2 items. Service expertise was measure by adopting the scale from (Doney & Cannon, 1997) with 2 items.

Data collection
To find the relationship between service employee physical attractiveness and Personal Connection with consumer response we selected Restaurant Industry as the target population. The target population are customers of three branches of Gloria Jeans Café Lahore (Kasori Road Gulberg III, DHA Phase V, Mall 1). The data were collected from both male and females aged below 25 to above 65. The sampling technique incorporated for data collection is convenience sampling. The sample size is 180 keeping in mind item response theory (18 response items x 10) (Nunnally, 1977).

Data Analysis
Data were analysed using SPSS Software and Process Hayes. To inspect the reliability and validity of Construct and items, we use loadings which are the main output for PCA (principal components analysis) (Table 1). It describes the estimates of the correlation between variables and the components estimated. The value for KMO test describes the variance in the data set. The KMO test value is 0.853. Bartlett's Test has significant value for all variables. The values presented have loadings greater than 0.5 which are acceptable. All these tests prove the quality of Research design with the reliability and construct validity of variables.

Table 1 Measurements model results

Constructs and Items	α	Loading
Service Employee's Physical Attractiveness (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 2010)	**0.902**	
The service employee is very good looking.	0.869	0.932
The service employee has an attractive appearance.	0.832	0.912
The service employee would generally be thought of Beautiful/handsome.	0.879	0.908
Customer-Service Employee Connection (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000)	**0.930**	
I feel like there is a "bond" between service employee and myself.	0.921	0.928
I look forward to seeing service employee when I visit the cafe.	0.904	0.903
I strongly care about this service employee.	0.912	0.891
The service employee has taken a personal interest in me.	0.912	0.861
I have a close relationship with service employee.	0.922	0.860
Social interaction (Agthe *et al*., 2011)	**0.957**	
The degree to which you would like to interact directly with the service employee.	-	0.981
The degree to which you would like to become friends with the service employee.	-	0.981
Gratification motivation (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003)	**0.989**	
When I am in down mood, I dine at this cafe to make me feel better.	-	0.994
To me, dining at this cafe is a way to relieve stress.	-	0.994
Service Expertise (Doney & Cannon, 1997)	**0.959**	
The service employee is very knowledgeable.	-	0.980
The service employee knows the service very well.	-	0.980
Consumer response (Wan & Wyer, 2015)	**0.906**	
The satisfaction of the service provided by the service employee.	0.806	0.956
The service quality provided by the service employee.	0.879	0.931
Your liking for the service employee.	0.916	0.904

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY
Sample Characteristics
The diverse areas in the sample are identified through a demographic study of the sample. The analysis shows that female respondents comprise 67.2 % and male 32.8 % of the total sample. About 42.2 % of the total sample falls between the age limit of below 25 years and another main chunk of 35 % of the total sample is between 26-35 years. The analysis shows that a major chunk of income 31 % of the total sample falls between 20,000- 40,000 and 28.3 % is between 100,000-above. Characteristics of the sample are exhibited in Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics
The raw data is transformed into interpretable facts of descriptive statistics that consist of the mean and standard deviation of variables. The independent variable physical attractiveness, mean is 3.52 with a standard deviation of 0.66. Personal connection has a mean value of 3.49 with 0.78 standard deviations. The mediator social interaction mean value is 3.39 with 0.94 standard deviations. Gratification motivation has a

mean value of 3.73 with 0.78 standard deviations. Mean of service expertise is 3.75 with a standard deviation of 0.66. The dependent variable consumer response has a mean value of 3.80 with 0.51 standard deviation. Descriptive statistics are exhibited in Table 3.

Table 2 Respondents background

	Category	Freq	%
Gender	Male	59	32.8
	Female	121	67.2
Age	Below 25	76	42.2
	26-35	63	35.0
	36-45	19	10.6
	46-55	15	8.3
	56-65	6	3.3
	above 65	1	0.6
Income	20,000-40,000	56	31.1
	41,000-60,000	22	12.2
	61,000-80,000	30	16.7
	81,000-100,000	21	11.7
	100,000 above	51	28.3

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	S.D
Physical Attractiveness	3.52	0.66
Personal Connection	3.49	0.78
Social Interaction	3.39	0.94
Gratification Motivation	3.73	0.78
Service Expertise	3.75	0.66
Consumer Response	3.80	0.51

Table 4 Correlation matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Physical Attractiveness	1					
2.Personal Connection	0.640**	1				
3.Social Interaction	0.684**	0.696**	1			
4.Gratification Motivation	0.553**	0.503**	0.600**	1		
5.Service Expertise	0.609**	0.448**	0.573**	0.527**	1	
6.Consumer Response	0.609**	0.687**	0.679**	0.651**	0.690**	1

Notes: **(p<0.01)

Correlation Matrix Analysis

Correlation matrix analysis shows that the dependent variable consumer response has a significant and positive association with independent variable physical attractiveness ($r = 0.609$, $p<0.01$). This means that an increase in physical attractiveness predicts greater consumer response. Consumer response has a significant and positive association with independent variable personal connection ($r = 0.687$, $p<0.01$). This means that an increase in personal connection predicts greater consumer response. The mediator social interaction and independent variable have a significant and positive association ($r = 0.684$, $p<0.01$). The mediator gratification motivation and independent variable personal connection have a significant and positive association ($r = 0.503$, $p<0.01$). The moderator service expertise and independent variable physical attractiveness have a significant and positive association ($r = 0.609$, $p<0.01$). See Table 4 for the correlation matrix.

Hypotheses testing

The results are obtained after entering Physical Attractiveness in Moderated Mediation Analysis. In model 7, physical attractiveness showed a positive and statistically significant relationship with consumer response ($\beta = 0.212$, $p<0.05$) (Table 5). Thus, H1 is supported by statistical analysis of the data. Personal connection showed a positive and statistically significant relationship with consumer response ($\beta = 0.317$, $p<0.05$). Thus, H2 is supported by statistical analysis of the data (Table 6). The results for H3 show that both Lower (0.098, 0.149) and Upper confidence interval (0.248, 0.301) which have the same positive signs. The Indirect effects are (0.177, 0.222) which indicates that there is significant and partial mediation of Social

interaction between Physical attractiveness and Consumer Response. Thus, H3 is supported and confirmed that Social Interaction mediates the relationship between Physical Attractiveness and Consumer Response (Table 5). The results obtained for H4 presents that the service expertise in model 7, showed significant regression for interaction term ($\beta = 0.168$, $p<0.05$). Thus, H4 is supported and verified that service expertise successfully moderates the relationship between physical attractiveness and social interaction (Table 5). The results obtained for H5 shows Lower (0.060) and Upper confidence interval (0.245) have the same positive signs. The Indirect effect is (0.135) which indicates that it is significant and mediation of Gratification motivation between Personal Connection and Consumer Response. The partially standardized indirect effect is (0.263) with Lower (0.140) and Upper confidence interval (0.431), which indicates that there is partial mediation between Personal Connection and Consumer Response. The complete standardized indirect effect is (0.205) with Lower (0.103) and Upper confidence interval (0.352), which indicates that there is complete mediation between Personal Connection and Consumer Response. Thus, H5 is supported and confirmed that Gratification mediates the relationship between Personal Connection and Consumer Response (Table 6).

Table 5: Indirect Effect

	Outcome = Y (Consumer Response)				
	B	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.884	20.91	0	2.612	3.156
PHA	0.212	3.723	0	0.099	0.324
	Outcome = M (Social Interaction)				
	B	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
PHA x SE	0.168	2.339	0.02	0.026	0.31
		Indirect Effect			
	PHA	-> SO		-> CRS	
Service	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI		Boot ULCI
Expertise	0.177	0.037	0.098		0.248
(W)	0.222	0.038	0.149		0.301
5,	1000, PH		al Att	ractiveness),	SE (Service E
Bootstrap					

Notes *p<0.0

Table 6: Direct Effect

	B	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.687	12.61	0	1.423	1.951
PC	0.317	8.723	0	0.245	0.389
		Total Effect			
		Effect	t	p	
Total effect of X on Y		0.452	12.62	0	
		Indirect Effect of X on Y			
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI		Boot ULCI
GM	0.135	0.046	0.06		0.245
		Partially standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y			
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI		Boot ULCI
GM	0.263	0.073	0.14		0.431
		Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y			
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI		Boot ULCI
GM	0.205	0.061	0.103		0.352
,	trap	0, PC (Perso	nal Connectio	n), (Gr	atificatio
Boots	100			GM	

Notes *p<0.05
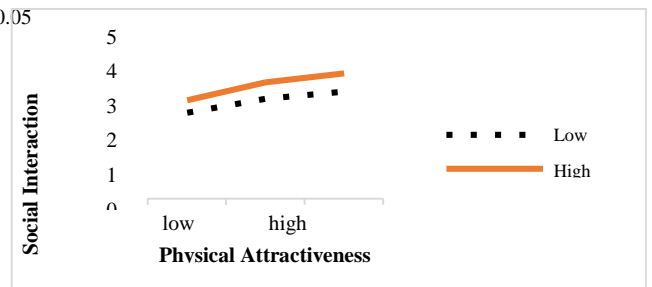
Figure 2: Moderation Graph

DISCUSSION

The research conducted to investigate the association between the independent variables Physical attractiveness and Personal Connection with Consumer Response. The study also aimed at identifying the moderating role of Service Expertise between Physical Attractiveness and Social Interaction. The mediating effect of Gratification Motivation between Personal Connection and Consumer Response. The research describes the attributes of service employee in driving customer satisfaction. According to literature Physical attractiveness effect customer reactions, satisfaction, consumption and desire to interact in a service industry (Wan & Wyer, 2015; Argo *et al*., 2008). The scenarios of service quality show that perception of customers about service quality were higher with attractive service employee than with average appearance in favourable and unfavourable conditions of service quality. The results proved that by employing an attractive server can increase the customer perception of service quality. The stereotype 'the beautiful is good' findings were confirmed (Dion *et al*., 1972).

The personal connection between service employees and customers while interacting influence customer perception, attitudes and satisfaction (Delcourt *et al*., 2013). The level of satisfaction and connection change according to the strength and weakness of customer commitment. The previous research proved that customer satisfaction is increased in service exchange by an increase in the level of rapport (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). The closer personal contact and personal information sharing improve the expectation of customers, which helps in a close relationship between performance and expectation, resulting in higher customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

Figure 2 presents the moderation graph between Physical Attractiveness and Social Interaction.

Limitations

The current investigation has a few limitations that are essential to be addressed in future studies. First, the research was done by using convenience sampling and only target one industry. To establish external validity for our findings, a future study can target diverse industry with more positive evaluations for physical attractiveness and personal connection i.e. hospitals, fitness centres and spas. Secondly, the study did not incorporate the service employee gender effects in the current study as a moderator.

Future research directions

The current study is conducted in the background of Eastern culture, there will be subtle differences of stereotypes in Eastern and Western cultures. The future study could include western countries sample to test the culture effect. To study the gender and job congruence moderating effects in health services (Wang, Keh & Bolton, 2010). The future research can incorporate physical attractiveness stereotypes in organizational decision making, political elections and educational institutions. The variables for personality type, the interplay of gender and racial stereotype can be studied for service quality for different restaurants types and settings for future study.

Theoretical implications

Consumers favour attractive service employees than less attractive counterparts, they purchase products while interacting with attractive service employee which increases customer satisfaction (Wan & Wyer, 2015; Ahearne *et al*., 2010). Our research findings verified the statement that social interaction has the ability to support physical attractiveness with service expertise as a moderator. Our findings contribute to interaction appearance theory, by understanding the physical attractiveness in investigating social interaction as mediator. The interaction between customer and service employee is necessary and influenced by the beauty premium.

Secondly, it increases our understanding of the beauty premium effect in different consumer responses.

Practical implications

To increase service quality and satisfaction the practitioners should work hard on designing a good training programme and define objectives to satisfy customers' demand. This research proves that attractive employees increase customer perception of service quality. The practical implication after presenting results states that highly qualified individuals with neat, pleasant and attractive appearance should be given priority than poorly qualified if there is no difference based on their resumes.

The current study findings validate that in building rapport and customer satisfaction verbal and nonverbal communication is necessary. The service firm should support their brand message with communication strategies and implement them. The rapport between customer and employee will create a competitive edge and attract new customers while retaining existing customers and become a strong advocate of the service brand.

The rapport between customer and employee can outsource new ideas and feedback from customers in the restaurant industry through relational benefits. Providing new ideas to restaurants can give them a competitive edge. in a competitive market. Customers can be considered a free market monitor and consultants. To build customer employee rapport, employees should learn and practice skills to have better communication with customers (Clabby & O'Conner, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The basic conclusion drawn from the current study is that Service Employee Physical Attractiveness and Service Employee-Customer Personal Connection are a strong and valid predictor of Consumer Response. Physical Attractiveness and Personal Connection are emergent concepts and specifically, In Pakistan, Physical attractiveness and Personal connection are still in its infancy. The rapport amid customer and employee is thought as a critical indicator which candidly influences customer and employee interaction, surprisingly less examination has been done about the background of rapport (Keh, Ren, Hill & Li, 2013). The data was collected from Gloria Jeans Café three branches. Future research can target different restaurant setting and type. We anticipate further progression made in future by scholars to expand the scope of this research concept in other sectors of services by contributing their immense efforts.

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