

# The Effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation among Chinese Estheticians: A Moderated Mediation Model

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## Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success, and Customer Orientation among estheticians in first-tier Chinese cities. Using Hayes' PROCESS macro, the study examined the mediating effect of Subjective Career Success and the moderating effect of Pay Satisfaction on the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation. Results showed that Subjective Career Success partially mediated the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation. Furthermore, the indirect effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success was significantly stronger at higher levels of Pay Satisfaction. These findings highlight the crucial role of Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success, and Pay Satisfaction in shaping customer-oriented behavior among estheticians in the Chinese beauty industry.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the rise of the middle class have fueled the expansion of the beauty service industry, with skincare services at its core (Liu, 2015). Estheticians, once limited to providing basic beauty techniques, are now assuming roles that encompass skin health, beauty, and even psychological well-being (Wang et al., 2019). Consequently, their ability to meet diverse customer needs, deliver professional services, and build close customer relationships has become increasingly vital (He, 2017). This shift has brought greater attention to their professional identity, career development, and customer satisfaction (Yao et al., 2023).

Recent studies on estheticians' professional identity highlight its significance in shaping service quality, job satisfaction, and customer orientation. For instance, Zhang and Li (2020) examined the role of professional identity in enhancing job satisfaction and its influence on turnover intention, emphasizing the importance of identity in workforce stability. Liu et al. (2021) explored the relationship between professional identity and service innovation, suggesting that a strong identity fosters creativity and customer-focused service. Sun and Wang (2022) investigated the mediating role of professional identity in the relationship between job satisfaction and career commitment,

highlighting its impact on career stability. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2023) analyzed the role of professional identity in building customer trust and loyalty, while Zhou and Yang (2023) studied its influence on psychological well-being and resilience among estheticians. Despite these contributions, existing research has largely focused on general outcomes of professional identity, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, without delving into its dynamic interplay with subjective career success and customer orientation in specific cultural and industrial contexts. Particularly in China, where cultural constructs like face culture and guanxi culture heavily influence professional and interpersonal dynamics, there is a need to understand how these unique factors shape the development and outcomes of professional identity (Sun & Wang, 2022). Moreover, while previous studies have identified professional identity as a determinant of service quality, they have not adequately addressed how its impact on customer orientation is mediated by subjective career success or moderated by pay satisfaction. Pay satisfaction, as a critical factor influencing job motivation and performance, may significantly alter the extent to which professional identity contributes to customer-oriented behaviors (Aksoy, 2024). Therefore, addressing these gaps is essential to provide a holistic understanding of how professional identity operates within the Chinese beauty service industry. This research is necessary to offer insights into enhancing estheticians' career satisfaction, fostering sustainable human resource practices, and improving customer service quality in a rapidly evolving and culturally distinct market.

This study explores the relationship between professional identity, subjective career success, and customer orientation among Chinese estheticians, focusing on the mediating effect of subjective career success and the moderated mediating effect of pay satisfaction. It aims to identify how pay satisfaction influences the process by which professional identity impacts customer orientation through subjective career success. Additionally, this research considers China's unique cultural and social contexts, such as face culture and guanxi culture, and examines factors like career stage, shop size, and regional characteristics. Through empirical analysis and robust methodology, this study seeks to contribute to enhancing job satisfaction, human resource management, and customer service quality in China's dynamic beauty service industry.

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by exploring the intricate relationship between professional identity, subjective career success, and customer orientation within the specific context of the Chinese beauty service industry, moving beyond prior research that primarily emphasized general outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. By incorporating cultural factors such as face culture and guanxi culture, it provides a culturally sensitive perspective on how these unique dimensions shape the development and outcomes of professional identity among Chinese estheticians. Additionally, the study examines the moderating role of pay satisfaction, offering valuable insights into the factors influencing customer-oriented behaviors and enhancing human resource management practices. By addressing these gaps, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of employee performance and customer service quality in the dynamic and culturally distinct Chinese beauty service industry.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 An overview of Chinese estheticians**

Estheticians are skincare specialists who offer a wide range of treatments, including facials, waxing, and chemical peels (Gallagher & Joppe, 2016; Yao et al., 2023). These professionals are essential to the thriving beauty industry in China. The Chinese beauty market has experienced exponential growth, driven by increasing consumer demand for skincare products and services. The government has recognized the importance of this industry and has established regulations to

govern both medical and daily beauty practices (Ferreira et al., 2022). However, the lack of a specialized national certification for skincare professionals presents a gap in the industry (Yao et al., 2023). This paper argues that the implementation of a national skincare certification system is crucial for enhancing the professionalism of the industry and ensuring the quality of skincare services in China (Samizadeh, 2019). In China, the term "beauty" (美容, měiróng) is synonymous with skincare, involving the use of specialized cosmetics and beauty devices (Wong & Or, 2021). The country's modern society places a significant emphasis on appearance, driving a rapidly growing beauty market. The skincare market alone is projected to reach \$590 billion in 2024, with a compound annual growth rate of 10.3% from 2024 to 2029 (Interesse, 2023, July 20). The medical beauty market is also expanding rapidly, fueled by increasing consumer disposable income and advancements in aesthetic procedures.

The Chinese government has enacted regulations to oversee the beauty industry, dividing it into medical beauty, regulated by the Ministry of Health, and daily beauty, overseen by the Ministry of Commerce (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China, 2008). While a national certification system for cosmetologists exists, there is currently no specific certification for skincare professionals (Yao et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for a more specialized certification to ensure the quality and safety of skincare services provided by estheticians.

The implementation of a national skincare certification system would offer several benefits. Firstly, it would enhance the professional status of skincare practitioners, including estheticians, leading to increased consumer trust and confidence (Gallagher & Joppe, 2016). Secondly, a standardized certification would ensure that skincare professionals, such as estheticians, possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide safe and effective treatments (Yao et al., 2023). Finally, a certification system could help to regulate the beauty industry, protecting consumers from unqualified practitioners and substandard services (Wong & Or, 2021).

The Chinese beauty industry is poised for continued growth, driven by increasing consumer demand and government support (Yao et al., 2023). However, the lack of a specialized skincare certification system represents a significant gap in the industry. To ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of the Chinese beauty industry, the government should prioritize the development and implementation of a national skincare certification system, which would benefit both consumers and estheticians by enhancing the professionalism and quality of skincare services.

## **2.2 The relationship between professional identity and customer orientation**

Customer orientation, a core tenet of successful service businesses, emphasizes understanding and fulfilling customer needs (Kotler et al., 2016). In the highly competitive Chinese beauty care market, where personalized interactions are crucial, customer-oriented estheticians prioritize customer satisfaction through active listening, empathetic problem-solving, and continuous professional development (Duan, 2022; Zeithaml et al., 2013). This customer-centric approach is essential for building long-term relationships, fostering loyalty, and driving business success.

Professional identity, an individual's subjective evaluation of their knowledge, skills, and experience within their profession, plays a significant role in shaping customer-oriented behavior (Bandura, 1997; Kumar et al., 2022). A strong professional identity, nurtured by factors such as skill development, ethical practices, and strong customer relationships, fosters confidence and self-efficacy (Kumar et al., 2022). This, in turn, empowers estheticians to deliver high-quality services, exceeding customer expectations (Duan, 2022). In the Chinese context, while the government's beautician licensing system aims to establish professional standards, challenges such as low social

status and occupational esteem (Kim et al., 2021; Liu & Li, 2016; Yao et al., 2023; Zhang & Wang, 2017) can undermine professional identity development.

Building upon Super's (1953) career development theory and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, we propose the following hypothesis: The higher the level of professional identity among estheticians, the higher their level of customer orientation will be (Edgley et al., 2016). A strong professional identity equips estheticians with the confidence and motivation to prioritize customer needs, actively respond to their requests, and strive for continuous improvement (Kumar et al., 2022). This, in turn, fosters a customer-oriented approach, leading to enhanced customer satisfaction and overall business success in the competitive Chinese beauty care market (Park & Lee, 2018).

In essence, a high level of professional identity encourages estheticians to adopt a customer-focused mindset by fostering a sense of responsibility to deliver the best service. This includes actively listening to customer needs and striving for satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of professional identity among estheticians, the higher their customer orientation will be.*

### **2.3 The mediating effect of subjective career success**

Subjective career success refers to the subjective experience of individuals perceiving that they have achieved their career goals, are satisfied with their jobs, and are growing through career development (Briscoe et al., 2021; Greenhaus et al., 2010). Unlike objective indicators such as salary or promotion, subjective career success emphasizes the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that individuals personally feel about their careers. It is positively associated with outcomes like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and psychological well-being (Kundi et al., 2021).

For Chinese estheticians, subjective career success holds particular significance. In the rapidly expanding Chinese beauty market, estheticians do more than provide skincare services; they act as advisors and counselors for beauty and health, forming close relationships with their customers (Chen et al., 2021). In this context, it is crucial for estheticians to recognize their professional value, appreciate their growth, and feel satisfied with their careers. Estheticians who experience subjective career success are more likely to provide positive and proactive customer service due to their high job satisfaction. Additionally, they are motivated to pursue continuous self-development with a long-term vision. This not only enhances customer satisfaction and service quality but also contributes to the overall growth of the Chinese beauty industry (Han, 2023). Given its importance, research on the factors that promote subjective career success among Chinese estheticians—and on career management strategies based on these findings—is vital for the development of the beauty industry (Gordon, 2021). Subjective career success has implications for both individuals and organizations and serves as a crucial link between professional identity and customer orientation for estheticians.

The logic of the hypothesis that subjective career success mediates the relationship between professional identity and customer orientation is as follows: According to Lawler's (1992) job characteristics theory, individuals achieve subjective career success when they have meaningful job experiences and their accomplishments are recognized. For estheticians, a strong professional identity provides recognition of their abilities and value. By offering high-quality services based on this recognition, estheticians experience a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which fosters subjective career success. A high level of professional identity enhances self-efficacy (Bandura,

1997), enabling estheticians to approach their work with a positive and proactive attitude, even in challenging situations (Kundi et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2023). This increased self-confidence translates into greater efforts to satisfy customers and a stronger commitment to customer orientation.

Subjective career success strengthens job satisfaction and motivation, encouraging estheticians to dedicate themselves to providing exceptional service and fostering long-term customer satisfaction (Choi & Nae, 2022; Lehtonen et al., 2021). This mediates the impact of professional identity on customer orientation, creating a virtuous cycle of growth for both the individual and the organization.

*Hypothesis 2: Subjective career success will mediate the relationship between professional identity and customer orientation among estheticians.*

## **2.4 The moderated mediating effect of pay satisfaction**

Pay satisfaction refers to the level of satisfaction individuals feel about the compensation they receive for their work (Carral et al., 2005). This includes not only the actual pay amount but also perceptions of fairness, such as whether the compensation reflects their effort and abilities and how it compares to that of their colleagues (Judge et al., 2010). Pay satisfaction is a critical factor influencing job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance (Aksoy, 2024). High levels of pay satisfaction contribute to employee motivation and improved productivity (Auer et al., 2021).

For estheticians, in particular, pay satisfaction plays a crucial role in shaping job satisfaction and career stability. Their work involves significant emotional labor and direct customer interactions, making fair compensation essential to maintaining motivation and fostering long-term career development (Khan, P., & Tabassum, 2010).

In the Chinese cultural context, pay satisfaction has additional significance. China's rapid economic growth has emphasized material wealth as a key factor in work satisfaction (Song et al., 2020). Furthermore, the cultural importance of face-saving elevates pay to a symbol of social recognition and individual ability, beyond being merely financial compensation (Zhao et al., 2021). Consequently, fair compensation is perceived as a reflection of professional value and social status.

Improving pay satisfaction among Chinese estheticians can enhance individual job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and service quality. At the industry level, addressing pay fairness can boost the social standing of estheticians and strengthen the professionalism of the beauty sector (Asnoni et al., 2021). Effective measures, such as improving pay levels, introducing well-structured incentive systems, and offering comprehensive welfare benefits, are essential to achieving these outcomes.

According to Adams' (1963) equity theory, individuals assess fairness by comparing their rewards-to-inputs ratio with those of others. When estheticians feel their compensation fairly reflects their expertise and efforts, their professional identity is reinforced, strengthening their subjective career success (Daniel, 2019). This heightened sense of success fosters greater motivation to develop professionally and to provide superior customer service (Asnoni et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2000). As a result, subjective career success—fueled by professional identity and fair compensation—leads estheticians to approach their work with more enthusiasm and dedication, ultimately enhancing customer orientation. Conversely, when pay satisfaction is low, estheticians may feel undervalued, which undermines subjective career success and weakens the connection between professional identity and customer orientation.

Thus, pay satisfaction is expected to act as a moderating variable in the mediating effect of subjective career success on the relationship between professional identity and customer orientation.

*Hypothesis 3: Pay satisfaction will moderate the mediating effect of subjective career success on the relationship between professional identity and customer orientation among estheticians. Specifically, the higher the perceived pay satisfaction, the stronger the positive effect of professional identity on customer orientation through subjective career success.*

The literature referred to above has focused on the relationships established by this research. The relationships are presented more clearly in the research model presented below (see Figure 1).

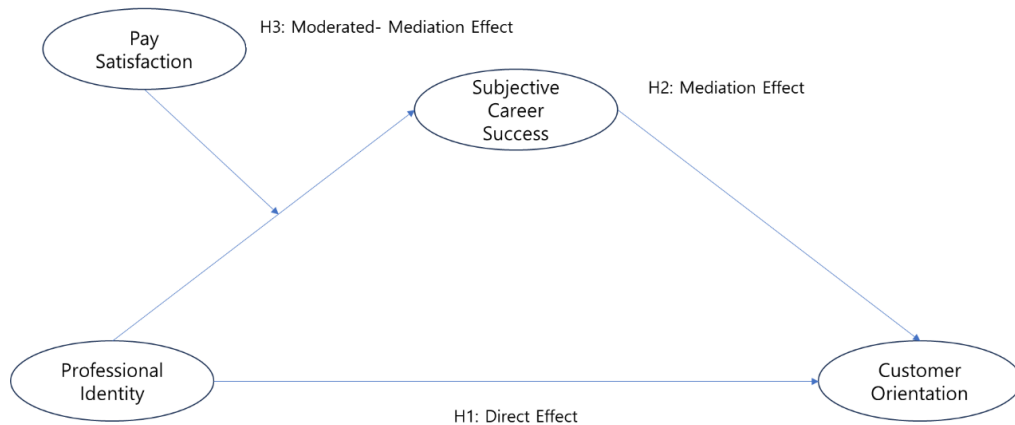


Figure 1. Research Model.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Samples

This study focused on first-tier cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Chengdu) renowned for their advanced beauty industries and well-developed beauty infrastructure. These cities were selected due to the expectation of a higher level of professionalism among beauty practitioners. A random sample was drawn from membership lists obtained from the Chinese Beauty Association and regional beauty associations, and a professional survey agency was commissioned to conduct the study. Participants were limited to beauty practitioners employed in salons with a minimum of three staff members, holding relevant beauty certifications, and possessing at least one year of professional experience. The rationale behind this selection criterion was the assumption that larger salons are more likely to have established training programs and offer higher quality services.

A face-to-face survey method was employed, with surveyors visiting beauty salons directly to distribute and collect questionnaires. Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, 425 were returned, and after excluding 43 responses deemed incomplete or of low quality, a final sample of 382 was utilized for data analysis. The survey was conducted between December 1, 2024, and December 14, 2024. The primary objective of this study was to delve into the relationship between the professionalism and customer orientation of beauty practitioners in these first-tier Chinese cities, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the developmental trajectory of the Chinese beauty industry.

#### 3.2 Measures

This study operationalized Professional Identity, the independent variable (measured with six items and exhibiting a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.85), as the extent to which beauty industry workers perceive their occupation as valuable, fulfilling, and compatible with other aspects of their lives, encompassing their affection for the profession and the sense of value derived from it (Hofman, 1977; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). Six items adapted from Adams et al. (2006), such as "I am pleased to belong to this profession," were used to assess this construct. Customer Orientation, the dependent variable (measured with five items and exhibiting a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88), was defined as the extent to which a firm prioritizes understanding, serving, and satisfying customer needs and wants (Yang & Tsai, 2019), and was measured using five items developed by Yang & Tsai (2019), with an example item being "Our company has a strong commitment to serving customer needs." Subjective Career Success, the mediator variable (measured with five items and exhibiting a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82), was conceptualized as an employee's personal evaluation of their career progress, encompassing factors such as job performance, income, and promotions (Greenhaus, 1990), and was assessed using five items developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990), with an example item being "I am satisfied with the new skills I have acquired." Finally, Pay Satisfaction, the moderator variable (measured with four items and exhibiting a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.79), defined as the level of contentment individuals experience with their compensation (Curren et al., 2005), was measured using four items developed by Heneman and Schwab (1985), with an example item being "I am satisfied with my overall level of pay."

### **3.3 Data analysis**

For data analysis, this study employed SPSS 28.0 and AMOS 28.0 statistical packages. To examine sample characteristics and item properties, frequency analysis and descriptive statistics were conducted. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to assess reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis and correlation analysis were performed to verify validity. The SPSS PROCESS Macro was utilized to test the research hypotheses.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Demographic characteristics**

The demographic profile of the study participants is shown in Table 1. The analysis revealed that 38.9% of the respondents were in their 30s, followed by those in their 40s or older (35.6%) and those in their 20s (25.5%), indicating that the beauty industry is dominated by individuals in their 30s; 39.8% of respondents had completed a junior college education, followed by high school graduates (34.4%), university graduates (20.5%), and graduate school graduates (5.3%), suggesting that junior college education is preferred for entering the beauty industry; 41.2% of respondents had 5-10 years of work experience, followed by those with 3-5 years (19.5%), 1-3 years (15.5%), and over 10 years (23.8%), indicating that individuals with 5-10 years of experience are the most prevalent in the beauty industry and are likely to play a pivotal role in the industry; 81.9% of the respondents held a beauty-related certification, indicating a growing level of professionalism among beauty therapists; 38.2% of the respondents worked as general therapists, followed by team leaders (24.8%), part-time leaders (12.1%), directors (12.4%), and owners (12.5%), indicating that the majority of individuals in the beauty industry are directly involved in providing beauty treatments; 73.5% of the respondents were employed full-time, while 26.5% were part-time employees, indicating that full-time employment is the predominant employment type in the beauty industry; and 68.2% of the respondents worked at franchise establishments, while 31.8% worked at private shops, indicating a high prevalence of franchises in the beauty market.

Table. 1 Demographic Characteristics

Dimensions	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20-29	97	25.5
	30-39	149	38.9
	40-49	136	35.6
Education	High school	131	34.4
	Junior college	152	39.8
	University	78	20.5
	Graduate school	20	5.3
Work experience	1-3 years	59	15.5
	3-5 years	74	19.5
	5-10 years	157	41.2
	Over 10 years	91	23.8
Certification	Yes	313	81.9
	No	69	18.1
Position	General therapist	146	38.2
	Team leader	95	24.8
	Part leader	46	12.1
	Director	47	12.4
	Owner	48	12.5
Employment type	Full-time	281	73.5
	Part-time	101	26.5
Institution type	Franchise	261	68.2
	Private shop	121	31.8

#### 4.2 Validity and correlation analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the construct validity of the research model. Specifically, various alternative models were analyzed among the variables of Professional Identity, Pay satisfaction, Subjective Career Success, and Customer orientation, and the fit of these models was compared with the proposed four-factor model. The results of the model comparisons are presented in Table 2. The CFA results for the proposed four-factor model showed a good fit to the data, with  $\chi^2(df)=340.574$  (164), CFI=.957, TLI=.950, and RMSEA=.053, meeting the recommended thresholds (CFI  $\geq$  .90, TLI  $\geq$  .90, RMSEA  $\leq$  .08; Hair et al., 2017). Compared to competing models, including three-, two-, and one-factor models, the proposed four-factor model exhibited superior fit across all fit indices. Notably, comparisons based on differences in  $\chi^2$  values provided significant evidence for the superior fit of the four-factor model compared to the other models ( $\Delta\chi^2(df)=1006.857$  (3),  $p<.001$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2(df)=1399.276$  (5),  $p<.001$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2(df)=2170.945$  (6),  $p<.001$ ). These findings support the notion that Professional Identity, Pay satisfaction, Subjective Career Success, and Customer orientation are distinct and independent constructs.



Table.2 CFA Model Comparison Results

Model	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df)
Four factors model: PI+PS+SCS+CO	340.574	164	.957	.950	.053	
Three factors model: PI+(PS&SCS)+CO	1347.431	167	.711	.671	.137	1006.857 (3)
Two factors model: PI+(PS&SCS&CO)	1739.850	169	.616	.568	.157	1399.276 (5)
Single factor model: (PI&PS&SCS&CO)	2511.519	170	.427	.360	.191	2170.945 (6)

Note: PI=Professional Identity; PS=Pay satisfaction; SCS=Subjective Career Success; CO=Customer orientation.

The validity of the measurement tool was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis. Specifically, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were calculated to assess construct validity, as presented in <Table 3>. The results showed CR values ranging from 0.850 to 0.907, exceeding the threshold of 0.7, and AVE values ranging from 0.537 to 0.640, surpassing the minimum standard of 0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). These findings confirm that the measurement tool effectively captures the intended constructs.

To address potential common method bias, the survey was administered at separate intervals, and a post hoc Harman's single-factor test was conducted (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The analysis revealed that the factor with the largest eigenvalue explained only 20.5% of the total variance, far below the 50% threshold indicative of significant bias. Therefore, common method bias is not a critical issue in this study.

Table 3. The results of the validity analysis

Construct	Items	Estimate	C.R	p	CR	AVE		
Professional Identity	PI1	.830						
	PI2	.789	17.548	.000***				
	PI3	.767	16.858	.000***	.907	0.620		
	PI4	.762	16.706	.000***				
	PI5	.770	17.946	.000***				
	PI6	.805	18.052	.000***				
Pay satisfaction	PS1	.886						
	PS2	.744	16.511	.000***			0.876	0.640
	PS3	.814	18.658	.000***				
	PS4	.747	16.618	.000***				
Subjective Career Success	SCS1	.941						
	SCS2	.819	21.812	.000***	0.867	0.576		
	SCS3	.816	21.650	.000***				
	SCS4	.598	13.173	.000***				
	SCS5	.546	11.658	.000***				
Customer orientation	CO1	.662						
	CO2	.703	12.042	.000***	0.850	0.537		
	CO3	.740	12.579	.000***				
	CO4	.592	10.432	.000***				
	CO5	.925	14.446	.000***				

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

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between key variables, with the results presented in <Table 4>. The analysis showed that Customer Orientation was significantly positively correlated with Professional Identity ( $r = .308, p < .001$ ), Subjective Career Success ( $r = .347, p < .001$ ), and Pay Satisfaction ( $r = .138, p < .01$ ).

To verify discriminant validity, the method proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was used, comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with the squared correlation coefficients between constructs. The analysis revealed that the smallest square root of the AVE value (.640) was greater than the largest squared correlation coefficient (.573), thereby confirming discriminant validity (Woo Jong-pil, 2015). In other words, it was confirmed that each variable represents a distinct construct. Meanwhile, to minimize Common Method Bias (CMB), the survey was conducted by separating the measurement time points, and Harman's single-factor test was performed post hoc (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The analysis revealed that the factor with the largest eigenvalue explained approximately 30.8% of the total variance. Considering that the presence of common method bias is generally indicated when a single factor explains more than 50% of the total variance, it can be concluded that common method bias is not a serious issue in this study.

Table 4. Correlation results

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Professional Identity	3.64	.74	(.787)			
2. Pay satisfaction	3.92	.81	.138**	(.800)		
3. Subjective Career Success	3.73	.76	.347***	.113*	(.759)	
4. Customer orientation	3.34	.82	.308***	.160**	.377***	(.757)

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , ( ) represents the square root of AVE.

## 4.2 Mediation analysis

This study examined the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation (Hypothesis 1) and investigated the mediating role of Subjective Career Success (Hypothesis 2). To analyze these relationships, the SPSS PROCESS Macro Model 4, proposed by Hayes (2013), was employed. This model assesses mediation by examining the relationship between an independent variable (Professional Identity), a mediator (Subjective Career Success), and a dependent variable (Customer Orientation). The significance of the indirect effect was determined using the bootstrapping method with 5,000 samples. A significant mediation is indicated when the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect does not include zero.

The results of the direct and mediation effect tests are presented in Table 5. In Model 3, which represents the full mediation model, the direct effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation was significant ( $\beta = .292, t = 6.274, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.200, .383]$ ). This indicates a significant positive relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Furthermore, the mediating effect of Subjective Career Success was analyzed. The results showed a significant positive effect of Professional Identity on Subjective Career Success ( $\beta = .284, t = 7.173, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.206, .361]$ ) in Model 2. Additionally, Subjective Career Success also significantly predicted Customer Orientation ( $\beta = .356, t = 6.152, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.242, .470]$ ) in Model 3.

Table 5. Results of Process Model 4 Verification

	Model 1: Customer Orientation (CO)				Model 2: Subjective Career Success (SCS)				Model 3: Customer orientation (CO)			
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	95% CI		$\beta$	<i>t</i>	95% CI		$\beta$	<i>t</i>	95% CI	
			LLCI	ULCI			LLCI	ULCI			LLCI	ULCI
PI	.292(c)	6.274***	.200	.383	.284(a1)	7.173***	.206	.361	.191(c'1)	4.032***	.977	.284
SCS									.356(b)	6.152***	.242	.470
R <sup>2</sup>		.095				.120				.178		
F		39.368***				51.453***				40.537***		

Note: \*\*\* p<.00, 1PI=Professional Identity; PS=Pay satisfaction; SCS=Subjective Career Success; CO=Customer orientation.

The bootstrapping results for the mediation effect are presented in <Table 6>. The indirect effect of Subjective Career Success was found to be significant ( $\beta = .101$ , SE = .021, 95% CI = [.063, .148]). This indicates that Professional Identity significantly influences Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success. Additionally, the total effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation was significant ( $\beta = .292$ , SE = .047, 95% CI = [.200, .383]).

Since both the direct and indirect effects were significant, it can be concluded that Subjective Career Success serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation. In other words, Professional Identity impacts Customer Orientation both directly and indirectly through Subjective Career Success.

These findings confirm Hypothesis 2, which posits that Professional Identity enhances Customer Orientation by fostering members' Subjective Career Success.

Table 6. Bootstrapping Results for Mediation Effects

PI → SCS → CO	Coeff	Se	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect ( $c'_1 + a_1b$ )	.292	.047	.200	.383
Direct Effect ( $c'_1$ )	.191	.047	.977	.284
Indirect Effect ( $a_1b$ )	.101	.021	.063	.148

### 4.3 Moderated Mediation Analysis

Visually illustrates the moderating effect of Pay Satisfaction levels on the relationship between Professional Identity and Subjective Career Success, using a specific value selection method. As shown in the figure, there is little to no relationship between Professional Identity and Subjective Career Success in the low Pay Satisfaction group. However, in the high Pay Satisfaction group, a strong positive relationship between the two variables is observed (see Figure 2) .

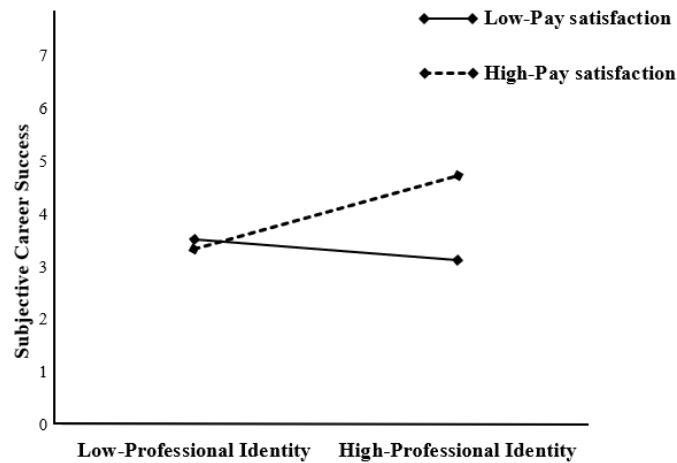


Figure 2. The Moderating Effect of Pay Satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3 was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 7 to examine the moderated mediation effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation via Subjective Career Success, with Pay Satisfaction as the moderator. Results are shown in Table 7. The analysis revealed a significant moderated mediation index (Index = .159, BootSE = .035, Boot LLCI = .092, Boot ULCI = .231), indicating that the effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success is moderated by Pay Satisfaction. In other words, a higher level of Pay Satisfaction strengthens the relationship between Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success, and Customer Orientation.

Further analysis using bootstrapping to compare high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of Pay Satisfaction revealed that while no conditional indirect effect was found at low levels of Pay Satisfaction (conditional indirect effect = -.038, SE = .029, 95% CI = [-.095, .019]), a significant moderated mediation effect emerged at high levels of Pay Satisfaction (conditional indirect effect = .219, SE = .041, 95% CI = [.143, .303]). The linear function of the moderated mediation effect is represented by the equation: Index = 0.107 + 0.201IN, indicating that the moderated mediation effect is 0.107 when the perception of Pay Satisfaction is at the mean (IN = 0).

Therefore, the mediating relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success varies as a function of Pay Satisfaction, and the impact of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success is stronger when Pay Satisfaction is high. Hypothesis 3 is thus supported.

Table 7. Conditional Indirect Effect by Pay Satisfaction

Pay satisfaction	DV: Customer orientation			
	<i>boot indirect effect</i>	<i>boot SE</i>	<i>boot LLCI</i>	<i>boot ULCI</i>
-1SD (-.808)	-.038	.029	-.095	.019
Mean (.000)	.091	.021	.053	.135
+1SD (.808)	.219	.041	.143	.303
Index of moderated mediation		<i>boot SE</i>	<i>boot LLCI</i>	<i>boot ULCI</i>
.159		.035	.092	.231

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Discussions

This study investigated the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation, examining the mediating role of Subjective Career Success and the moderating role of Pay Satisfaction. The results provide valuable insights into the factors that influence customer-oriented behavior among estheticians in China

First, the findings supported Hypothesis 1, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the importance of a strong professional identity in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors (Kim et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022). A strong professional identity likely fosters a sense of purpose and commitment to one's work, which in turn can drive employees to prioritize customer needs and provide high-quality service.

Second, consistent with Hypothesis 2, Subjective Career Success was found to partially mediate the relationship between Professional Identity and Customer Orientation. This suggests that individuals with a strong professional identity are more likely to experience subjective career success, such as feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment (Kundi et al., 2021). These positive career experiences, in turn, positively influence their customer-oriented behaviors (Chen et al., 2021). This finding highlights the importance of fostering employee well-being and career development in cultivating a customer-centric workforce.

Third, importantly, the results supported Hypothesis 3 by demonstrating a significant moderated mediation effect. Pay Satisfaction was found to significantly moderate the indirect effect of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success. Specifically, the positive impact of Professional Identity on Customer Orientation through Subjective Career Success was stronger at higher levels of Pay Satisfaction. This suggests that when employees are satisfied with their pay, the positive influence of a strong professional identity on their customer-oriented behavior is amplified through its positive impact on their subjective career success (Asnoni et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). This finding underscores the importance of fair and competitive compensation in fostering a customer-oriented workforce.

### 5.2 Implications

The findings of this study have several important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between individual factors (Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success), organizational factors (Pay Satisfaction), and customer-oriented behavior. The findings extend existing research by demonstrating the moderating role of Pay Satisfaction in the relationship between Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success, and Customer Orientation. This study provides several theoretical implications. First, it demonstrates the interplay between individual-level factors, such as professional identity and subjective career success, and organizational-level factors, such as pay satisfaction, in shaping employee behavior (Kim et al., 2021). This finding aligns with the social-cognitive perspective, which underscores the reciprocal influence between individuals and their environments, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how these factors interact to impact organizational outcomes.

Second, it expands the scope of professional identity research by moving beyond traditional outcomes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment to explore its relationship with subjective career success and customer orientation, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of professional identity's role in workplace dynamics (Kumar et al., 2022). Third, by incorporating cultural factors such as face culture and guanxi culture, the study emphasizes the

critical importance of cultural context in shaping professional identity and its outcomes, encouraging future research to examine how cultural values and norms influence these dynamics across diverse settings (Liu & Li, 2016). These theoretical implications contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence employee performance and customer service quality, not only within the Chinese beauty service industry but also in other service-oriented sectors.

This suggests that the findings can provide valuable guidance for estheticians and the beauty industry. Cultivating a customer-centric organizational culture requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses various initiatives. By providing employees with diverse professional development opportunities, establishing clear career paths, and implementing robust mentoring programs, organizations can foster a strong Professional Identity among their workforce (Edgley et al., 2016). This, in turn, instills a sense of belonging, pride, and purpose in their roles, motivating them to prioritize customer satisfaction (Kumar et al., 2022). Furthermore, organizations can enhance Subjective Career Success by implementing supportive policies and practices that promote employee well-being and career growth (Joo & Lee, 2017). This includes offering flexible work arrangements, providing opportunities for skill enhancement, and recognizing and rewarding employees' contributions (Lehtonen et al., 2021). Such initiatives help employees feel valued and fulfilled, thereby increasing their commitment to the organization and enhancing their customer-oriented behaviors. Lastly, organizations should ensure that compensation packages are competitive and equitable (Daniel, 2019). By offering fair and rewarding compensation, organizations can directly improve employee satisfaction and amplify the positive impact of both Professional Identity and Subjective Career Success on customer-oriented behaviors. A well-compensated workforce is more likely to be motivated, engaged, and committed to delivering exceptional customer service (Asnoni et al., 2021).

In essence, by strategically combining these initiatives, organizations can create a work environment where employees feel valued, empowered, and aligned with the organization's goals. This holistic approach not only boosts employee morale but also fosters a customer-centric culture that drives long-term organizational success.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This study has some limitations that should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish the temporal order of the relationships between the variables. Second, the study was conducted within a specific organizational context. Further research is needed to examine the generalizability of these findings to other organizational settings and industries. Finally, the study focused on a limited set of variables. Future research could investigate other potential predictors and moderators of customer-oriented behavior, such as organizational culture, leadership styles, and customer feedback mechanisms.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that influence customer-oriented behavior. The findings highlight the crucial roles of Professional Identity, Subjective Career Success, and Pay Satisfaction in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. By understanding these factors, organizations can develop and implement effective strategies to enhance customer service and achieve organizational success.

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