

**Title:**  
**The role of age and gender in the retail service encounter**

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**Abstract**

Research typically explores the service encounter in relation to the soft and hard skills of front line staff, yet has neglected the role the visible diversity of sales staff have on the interactions between the service deliverer and receiver. This paper therefore attempts to address this gap in knowledge by reporting on how the age and gender of customer facing staff can influence customer evaluations of the retail service encounter in a health and beauty retailer. An analysis of qualitative interviews with forty customers and twenty store staff propose that customers attempt to ‘match’ and ‘mirror’ the age and gender of sales staff with their expectations of who should deliver good retail service during the retail service encounter.

**Keywords:** Retail service encounter, age, gender, skills

## **The role of age and gender in the retail service encounter**

### **Introduction**

Retailers are finding it increasingly difficult to compete on factors such as price alone since price is only one influencing factor which is used by retailers to persuade consumers to purchase. Instead, consumers buy "...the location, shop brand, ambience, service etc...in effect they buy the 'service'" (Dawson 2000:7). Similarly Dick et al. (1995) argues that as well as the physical store environment and merchandise, perceptions of retail service quality help consumers to evaluate the store brand. This suggests then that retailers have the opportunity to distinguish their retail brand through the service delivered by their customer facing staff and create a competitive advantage which unlike other elements of the retail marketing mix cannot be easily replicated by competitors (Nickson et al, 2005; Uncles, 1995). Service staff can therefore play an important role in influencing customers' evaluation of service quality in the retail service encounter (Heskett *et al*, 1994).

A wide body of research suggests that high quality service encounters are dependent on both the hard/technical skills and soft/ emotional skills of front line staff (Payne, 2009). However, the impact that the visible appearance and diversity of these staff (in terms of characteristics like age and gender) have on the service encounter have had only limited attention. The study reported here contributes to existing knowledge of retail service encounters by exploring the extent to which the age and gender of store staff influences customers perceptions of the retail service encounter. Given that the UK population and workforces are ageing (Dixon, 2003) and the retail and service industries typically employ a large number of women (Honeyman, 2007) the research reported in this paper is therefore timely. The paper begins by reviewing existing knowledge which draws upon the service encounter literature and the role of 'aesthetic labour' as an element of this. The paper then explores the research design and presents the findings of the study and the implications these have for retail theory and practice.

### **Background**

Retail sales staff 'can exert a major influence upon patronage decisions and retail image' (McGoldrick, 1990:322) because in their search for information relating to the retail offering, customers draw upon their experiences with sales staff to help form a buying decision (Naylor and Frank, 2000). Store staff can therefore act as a source of competitive advantage for the retailer particularly as they can play an important role in influencing customers' evaluation of service quality (Heskett *et al*, 1994) as the level of service offered combined with other factors such as physical facilities, merchandise, post-transaction satisfaction and store atmosphere all contribute to a store's image (Lindquist, 1974). It is argued that service quality is determined through the service encounter, which concerns an interactive process between both the service provider and the service receiver (Svensson, 2006). The interactivity between the service provider and the service user can build a relationship in which the various dimensions of the interaction can evolve into a consistent pattern of performance, perceptions, and attitudes that represent the "personality" of a relationship (Svensson, 2006:52). Furthermore, there is general consensus that service quality 'involves a comparison of expectations with performance' (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985:42) proposing that customers compare the service they expect with their perceptions of the service they receive. The challenge for organisations is to ensure consistency of

delivery in this service encounter which is made problematic in retailing due to its heavy reliance on a large, heterogeneous workforce and the fact that what the retailer may intend to deliver may be perceived differently by customers (Booms and Binter, 1981). The delivery of the service may also vary from provider to provider, from customer to customer and may vary over time (Parasuraman, *et al*, 1985).

Research concerning how the service provider can consistently meet the service quality expectations of customers has tended to emphasise the importance of technical as well as soft skills, such as the emotional skills and the general attitude of customer facing staff, in the service encounter. Specifically, it has been proposed that good customer service is achieved by employing customer facing staff who are extrovert, have agreeable personalities and have a high level of empathy with the customer (Hurley 1998; Klenz 1999). More recently work by Nickson *et al* (2005) has highlighted additional characteristics of customer facing staff deemed to be important by employers. Their notion of 'aesthetic labour', that is the extent to which employees are expected to '...embody the product in industries such as retail and hospitality' (p. 196), is concerned with issues of dress sense/style, voice/accent and physical looks in customer facing staff. They argue that such self-presentation skills form part of a broader package of essential soft skills for service providers. Similarly, Pettinger (2004:180) has proposed that 'The clothing worn by workers is part of the performance of an organisation's brand image, and workers' bodies are part of how that brand is communicated'.

It is logical then that a consideration of self-presentation skills should also consider the visible characteristics of customer facing staff, such as their age, gender and ethnicity and the extent to which these factors might influence how retail service is evaluated and ultimately the store's image, particularly in retail environments where advice is sought by customers. Yet, research which considers the visible diversity of the service provider in the retail service encounter is limited. A study by Johnson-Hillery *et al.* (1997) found, for instance, that older consumers preferred to be served by older retail staff rather than younger employees as they perceived older staff to be more helpful and more likely to suggest products that catered for their needs. More recently, work by Wagar and Lindquist (2010:515) found that '...age is a relevant factor for customers' evaluations of service encounters' but '...the role of age differs in different service settings'. Research which considers the role of gender conducted by one of the authors of this paper (xxx) in the DIY retail sector found that male customers were more likely to approach male staff for advice on technical aspects of DIY than women because they perceived men to have more knowledge of DIY. Customers assumed that male staff were more likely to have carried out home improvements or worked as a trade person than women. Furthermore the study found that if a female member of staff did offer guidance, male customers would question the credibility of their advice despite all staff receiving the same product training. Comments by Kerfoot and Korczynski (2005) also support this notion. They have acknowledged that gendered occupational stereotyping also extends to the gendered assumptions customers bring to the service encounter.

The lack of literature which considers the visible diversity of customer facing staff, particularly gender, in the retail service encounter is surprising given that the retail industry employs a large number of women, especially at store level. Recent statistics show that 62% of retail staff in England are women and nearly half of all retail staff

work in sales and customer service occupations (Skillsmart Retail 2008). Furthermore, it can be proposed that certain store environments are perceived to have for example, gender or age group related identities which are largely determined by the merchandise they sell and the market they are trying to target. Obvious examples of this are women’s and men’s high fashion stores where very often the gender and age of customer facing staff reflect this association (Wagar and Linqvist, 2010). Other examples could include, for instance, car dealerships (masculine connotations) and baby and children’s clothing (female connotations).

The aim of the study therefore is to investigate the extent to which the visible diversity of sales staff influence how customers evaluate the service delivered in a retail environment, particularly in terms of customer experiences of service quality in the retail service encounter. The study focuses upon age and gender dimensions since these appear to be the most influential factors reported as influencing the service encounter in the literature and are characteristics which do not appear to have been considered simultaneously as part of the same study.

**Research Design**

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and used a leading UK health and beauty retailer as a case study. A qualitative, inductive approach was adopted because this enabled the researchers to identify themes in an area which has received little theoretical development up until this point (Creswell, 1994). The case retailer was selected because the nature of the products sold in the stores meant that customers were likely to ask for advice from staff in terms of for example, usage instructions and benefits of using a product. Furthermore, both the content of the marketing communications and product ranges sold in store (cosmetics, toiletries and baby products, for example) meant that the retailer had a ‘feminised’ image which the researchers felt may have an influence on how service encounters were perceived by customers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty store staff and forty customers across four flagship stores in the UK. Staff were selected using purposive sampling and held senior customer-facing roles within the store such as the store manager and senior pharmacist. Customers were selected through convenience sampling whilst shopping in the store. Themes explored in the interviews included the image of the store/retailer, the role of retail staff in delivering retail service and the extent to which the visible diversity, particularly age and gender, influenced customers’ perceptions of the service encounter in the store. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants.

**Table 1: Profile of participants**

	Average Age	Female: ratio	Male	Employment status	Average no. of visits to store
<b>Customers n=40</b>	30.5 years	75:25		35% F/T 27.5% P/T 37.5% Other	22.5% x twice a week 27.5% x once a week 30% x twice a month 15% x once a month 5% infrequent
	Average Age	Female: ratio	Male	Employment status	Average length of service
<b>Store Staff n=20</b>	37.1 years	75:25		70% F/T 30% P/T	17.9 years

Template analysis was used to analyse the interview materials. This method of analysis involved developing a ‘coding template’ from the materials which identified the main themes in hierarchical order and subsequently modified these as the analysis progressed (University of Huddersfield, 2009). This template was then applied to all the interview transcripts to aid the interpretation of the materials. Template analysis in this study began with a set of *a priori* codes, that is the identification of themes which were felt to be important to the study prior to the analysis commencing such as ‘sales assistant’s gender’ and ‘sales assistant’s age’.

## **Findings**

### *Gendered identity*

Analysis of the interview material found that the retailer and its stores were perceived by its customers and staff to have a feminine identity. This was largely because the products sold were perceived by the participants to be associated with feminine activities, such as skincare, hair care and beauty treatments. As one customer stated ‘*it’s a more female shop*’ and another customer provided an explanation for this by saying ‘*there’s more here [in the store] for females than males*’. Other participants believed the store and retailer had a female identity because of its friendly, approachable and helpful staff. One customer believed the store was like ‘*a warm, friendly grandma*’ and another felt the store had a feminine identity because ‘*the majority of people who work here are female aren’t they?*’

### *The role of age and gender in the service encounter*

Whilst some customers reported that they looked for help from the first person they could find in the store irrespective of their visible diversity, the findings do suggest that the age and gender of the sales staff had some influence on how the service encounter was evaluated by customers, particularly in terms of what service the customers expected from retail store staff. This influence appeared to manifest itself in two different ways.

### *‘Mirroring’*

Customers seeking guidance and advice in relation to certain products frequently looked for sales assistants who ‘mirrored’ their own age and gender. These customers reported that they felt more comfortable interacting with staff who ‘looked like them’ and consequently more likely to trust their advice. As a store manager commented ‘*From what I’ve observed, customers tend to go like-for-like so for your gender and your age, you find someone who is the same. So you can communicate on the same level*’ and similarly a customer commented that ‘*I want to speak to someone like me*’. In relation to gender more specifically, another participant stated that their preference was for a ‘*...female. Because I’m female I normally go to them.*’ Other female customers reported that for more personal problems they preferred speaking to a sales assistant of the same gender, as one customer reported ‘*If it’s something personal, I’d prefer a female*’ and another who stated that they preferred ‘*A female, every time because it can be personal can’t it?*’ ‘Mirroring’ was also apparent in relation to age as a member of staff noted ‘*Young people like to ask someone younger as they feel more comfortable*’, similarly in the photographic section the manager noted that in his experience ‘*You’ll probably get a younger person going to a younger assistant and an older person going to an older assistant.*’

### *'Matching'*

Customers reported that they also sought advice from retail store staff who 'matched' their perceptions of what a sales assistant with good knowledge of the product/problem should look like. In other words, the sales assistant's age and gender appeared to give a strong indication to customers of whether that person had the relevant technical expertise or not. In relation to age, one customer stated that *'Age does matter. I may not ask advice from people who are quite old on things like cosmetics'* implying that they preferred to seek cosmetics advice from a younger member of staff. Another customer commenting on her experiences of buying health products said that *'I prefer to be served by someone older...who has more experience'*. In this instance an older member of staff was perceived to have more knowledge of healthcare. Similarly another customer said that they would *'Probably go for someone a bit older as you would think they would be more knowledgeable about things. A bit more authority about what they are talking about.'* This role of age in the 'matching' process was perceived in a similar way by a member of staff who stated that in her store *'wisdom is associated with age and beauty with youth'*. The process of 'matching' also occurred in relation to gender as one female customer noted *'I wouldn't grab a male assistant if I was going to ask him about mascara...I suppose when I'm looking for advice on make-up, I do look for ladies who have nice make-up on'*. Another female customer commenting on whom she would seek advice from when buying cosmetics said *'You wouldn't ask a man that would you?'*

### *The role of ethnicity, religion and race in the service encounter*

An unexpected finding to emerge from the study was the extent to which the race, religion and ethnicity of staff appeared to be a factor influencing expectations around the retail service encounter particularly in a 'mirroring' sense. In most cases this happened where healthcare advice was sought. Store staff reported that women from certain religious groups were asking for medical advice from female staff as a pharmacist noted *'there is an increasing religious element with certain faiths requesting a woman advisor'*. This it can be argued, represents the 'mirroring' process in that female customers were seeking guidance from female store staff as a result of their religious beliefs. 'Mirroring' also occurred when customers who were unable to speak English, preferred healthcare advice to be communicated in their native language. In some stores, this could be done as a pharmacist explained *'We had one dispenser but she was part-time and she was Turkish, so it was quite nice when she was there. And the customers would always be looking out for her...customers do look out to see who is in, someone who they feel comfortable with rather than having to translate.'*

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that both the age and gender of retail store staff have an influence on customer expectations and evaluations of the retail service encounter. Customers may seek out staff who 'look like them' and therefore mirror their own age and gender since the expectation is that communication between the service deliverer and receiver will be better and consequently trust increased in the service encounter. These findings lend support to the argument that reflecting the visible diversity of customers in front line staff can improve business performance in terms of enhancing the corporate and employer brand (Digh, 1999) and that front line staff can be a source of competitive advantage (Heskett et al, 1994). Customers also use age and gender as a way of evaluating whether a member of staff can offer good

advice about a certain product or problem. They are therefore attempting to ‘match’ the age and/or gender of a front line employee with their expectations of what a person with good product knowledge should look like. This study has shown then that intangible aspects are just as important when evaluating service quality as tangible aspects, and as reported in a similar study by Nickson et al (2005), this reflects the work of Parasuraman et al (1985). The process of ‘matching’ and ‘mirroring’ also suggests that the skills of retail staff should not be understood simply in terms of the ‘hard’ technical abilities they possess but also the emotional, softer skills required to do their job (Payne, 2009).

According to the findings customers are also more inclined to ‘match’ or ‘mirror’ when looking for help with certain products. Although not specifically investigated, the study indicates that this appeared to happen when customers were seeking advice on cosmetics and healthcare. Generally these products represent ‘high involvement’, in other words they are not products which can always be purchased through self-selection as advice is required in terms of for example, usage and product information. Customers, it can be argued, are therefore looking to gain ‘clues’ to the quality of advice they are about to receive and they do this through the visible diversity of those providing the advice. Based on the findings of this study, current models of service quality and retail customer service skills should therefore be adapted to take account of how the visible diversity of front line staff might influence the service encounter, particularly in a retail context.

This study also raises an interesting dilemma for retailers. The work here suggests that the visible diversity of staff has an impact on how customers evaluate the service encounter and in some cases customers will prefer to interact with older/younger or male/female staff. However, the current UK equal employment legislation means that retailers must demonstrate equity and fairness in selection procedures and recruiting staff on the basis of their visible diversity or engaging in positive discrimination is unlawful (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009). Furthermore, attracting applicants who are under-represented in a workforce, such as men in the case of the stores in this study, can be particularly difficult when that organisation or industry has, for instance a feminised employer brand as is the case for the retailer reported on here (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). So whilst customers may have a preference for interacting with retail staff with certain visible characteristics, the retailer in reality is relatively restricted in terms of meeting this demand.

By adopting a qualitative approach the study has attempted to address the call for future research which should understand better the role of factors like age in service encounters (Wagar and Lindquist, 2010). Nevertheless, it is recognised that this study has limitations, particularly as the materials were collected from one retailer, albeit four stores. It could be that the notions of matching and mirroring are less prevalent in retailers which have more gender or age neutral store environments such as supermarkets. As the findings indicate, this case retailer has a feminised image employing large numbers of women and selling products with strong female associations. Future research, therefore, should explore the notions of matching and mirroring in other retail environments. It is also suggested that whilst the age and gender of retail sales staff appear to have an influence on customer evaluations of the service encounter, other aspects of visible diversity also appear to be having an

impact. It was not the intention of this study to consider factors like ethnicity, race and religion yet these factors emerged as having an influence on the nature of the service encounter. Future research should therefore also explore these aspects of visible diversity in the retail service encounter.

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