A Perception of Prejudice in 
Face-to-Face Retail Services: 
Comparative Analyses of Age, Gender, and Appearance

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to identify customers’ perception of prejudice related to age, gender and appearance in face-to-face retail services. The results, through quantitative research, Likert-scale process and simple statistics, show that young women (51.28%) and men (36.36%), and older men and women (68.42% women, 36.36% men) have perceived that well-dressed young female customer receive face-to-face retail services prior to everybody else if there is not a clear queuing process in the retail area, and almost both young women (48.72%) and men (48.48%) and the older groups (31.58% of the women and 63.64% of men) believe that a badly-dressed young man is the last to have the service. Retail companies should provide training to their staff to avoid behaviour that leads customers to believe that there is prejudice in the service process and develop a clear queuing system in the face-to-face retail service spatial environment.

Keywords: Age, Appearance, Face-to-Face Retail Services, Gender, Prejudice

1. INTRODUCTION

The intense use of many types of technology makes the physical differences of products and services fade and they become very similar, almost commodities (Grönnroos, 1990). Some examples are the food industry and restaurants, cars, computers, banking services, hospitals and clinics, schools and universities, just to mention some industries. The difference among them is the brand (Andrade, Palmeira, & Kato, 2010; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). The competitive advantage that gives strength to the brand is linked to the excellence of the people who works for the organisation. And staff competence levels are the result of development, commitment and motivation (Lovelock & Wright, 2007, p. 408). The organisation should provide the environmental conditions that help the employees develop the necessary competences to provide a more suitable service with
quality to customers and to other stakeholders. The understanding of this logic is apparently shared by academia and marketing executives. However, when someone pays attention to what is going on in the daily activities, especially in retail companies, where there is a continuing face-to-face contact with customers, he or she can realise that the logic of service quality excellence is not working the way it should be.

What is happening in a branch of an important British drugstore chain during the weekends when the head manager is not on duty? In the Brook Street branch, London-UK, for example, near Bond Street, an observer can see a very cheerful socialisation process among the staff, behaving as they were in their own homes, providing little attention to customers who cannot find an available employee to ask for advice. Moreover, one can see the clerk who attempts to give torn bank notes as change in a purchase. Or the clerk’s “apparent” lapse of memory to deactivate the security device alarm, causing the noise alert when the customer goes through the exit. A “plastic” apology and an insincere smile, and noisy laughter follow the customer as she leaves the store, but still observing all the laughing and giggling through the windows. There is also the case of the Italian restaurant on Cromwell Road, where the owners, husband and wife, almost knock the customer out just because she, the customer, insists on having a proper receipt for what she has paid for. Another case related to restaurants is that of a pizza restaurant that does not know how to prepare a buffalo cheese pizza! Or a bistro at Gloucester Arcade that closes at 11pm and the waiter tries to refuse to serve customers that have arrived at 10:40pm, telling them that the restaurant was already closed. But the customers talk to the manager and insist on being served. The manager agrees. Salads are ordered and, “what a coincidence,” they have been dressed with a hot spicy dressing. Still, there is the situation of the staff that works at weekends at the stores and supermarkets with gloomy faces, making no eye contact, looking tired and demotivated. And weekends are very special moments for selling and business! Who is to blame? The Credit crunch? The European Union? The Immigration? The foreigner workforce? Desperate needs to reduce costs? The head manager? The owner? The employees themselves? The customer? These are some examples of problems that occurred in London, in September 2010. Imagine what might be going on around the world?

The undermined academic belief that service quality is due to committed and motivated people with proper skills cannot be seen in the daily reality of some retail and services companies (Lovelock & Wright, 2007, p. 408). It seems to get worse when the frontline employees should attend customers with different gender and age of their own. Are the employees well-trained to supply service to aged people who no longer have the youthful sex appeal? Furthermore, do they have suitable competences and behaviour to provide the service to people of different gender and age? The situation becomes more difficult in face-to-face retail services, when the frontline employees should interact with the customers and they can see the person’s phenotype. If these employees are not trained, committed and motivated, it is possible that they extract some “commands to action” from their “inner” background behaving differently when attending a young woman or an old lady, a young man or a senior gentleman (Yeganeh & May, 2011). Cultural aspects can make the situation more complicated because they influence the frontline employees’ evaluation, considering whether the customer’s appearance is “suitable” for the service that is going to be provided. Considering whether the customer is well-dressed/smarty-dressed or badly-dressed, the staff can “customise” the service quality level based on their perception.

Another important issue is that retail companies’ practices create a positioning in the prospects and customers’ minds. It “crystallises” people’s perceptions on some basic images, such as, “the service is good (or not!)”, “the employees are nice (or not!)”, “I feel good (or not!) in this shop (restaurant!)”. Once these basic ideas have entered people’s minds, it is very hard and expensive to change them because
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