

## Chapter 15

# Frontline Employees' Self-Perception of Ageism, Sexism, and Lookism: Comparative Analyses of Prejudice and Discrimination in Fashion and Food Retailing

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this chapter is to identify whether frontline employees perceived themselves as having feelings of sexism, ageism, and appearance discrimination against customers in retail services. This investigation is a quantitative research, a conclusive description (Gil, 2002), and ex post facto study, which utilises a survey to collect the data and sampling by convenience. Three protocols are used (1) to format the questionnaire, (2) to produce 12 different standards combining age, gender, and appearance, and (3) to create social classification (Rattam, 1998). In a previous study (Palmeira, Palmeira, & Santos, 2012), customers of different ages and genders perceived some degree of prejudice and discrimination in face-to-face retail services. Now, on the other side of the coin, frontline employees who work in Fashion and Food retailing recognise that there is prejudiced behaviour against customers, depending on their age, gender, and appearance, when providing them with face-to-face retail services. More than 95% of female and more than 64% of male attendants believe that well-dressed, young female customers are given priority when being served. Almost 80% of female and only 58% of male frontline workers believe that badly-dressed middle-aged men (not younger men) are the last to be served when there is no clear queuing process in the retail spatial area. This context strongly suggests the growing importance of an interpersonal skills training process for an organisations' staff as a way of avoiding behaviour that makes the customers think that there are prejudice and discrimination in the service process, as well as ASL development (T&D against Ageism, Sexism, and Lookism) being part of the strategic statements.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In a previous work (Palmeira, Palmeira & Santos, 2012), there is an analysis of how customers perceived prejudice and discrimination from frontline employees during the face-to-face retail service process. They believe that somebody else receives the staff's attention before them even if they were the first to arrive in the retail spatial environment. They have a perception of some degree of prejudice and discrimination because there is always somebody else to be served before them. There are some different responses depending on age and gender. The respondents indicated a list of retail businesses they usually frequent, such as fashion shops, shoe shops, restaurants, fast food restaurants, IT stores, and so on. To produce this research, the frontline employees of the types of retail companies with the highest scores are interviewed about their self-perception of ageism, sexism and lookism against customers, and they admit that this type of bias does indeed exist in both the Fashion and Food retail sectors. Considering this context, the research problem and the objectives are set.

### Research Problem

Do frontline employees perceive themselves as having feelings of sexism, ageism and lookism against customers in Fashion and Food Retailing?

### Objectives

**Central Objective:** To identify whether frontline employees perceived themselves as having feelings of sexism, ageism and lookism against customers in Fashion and Food Retailing.

#### Operational Objectives:

- To describe the characteristics of the frontline employees that provide face-to-face retail services (age, gender, social class and job rank) in Fashion and Food Retailing;

- To evaluate the impact of the sector on the frontline employees' self-perception of ageism, sexism, and lookism;
- To evaluate whether frontline employees perceive the use of an inner self-discretionary system to provide service to different kind of customers, considering age, gender and appearance (first customer *versus* last customer to receive attention).
- To evaluate the self-perception of prejudice related to age, gender and appearance against customers (ASL Syndrome – Palmeira, Palmeira, & Santos, 2012).

## BACKGROUND

The subjects of this research are presented in four groups of concepts and theories: frontline employees; prejudice and discrimination; ageism, sexism and lookism; and retailing. They are of great importance when it comes to helping retail companies to realise that their frontline employees can show some kind of behaviour that produces a prejudiced approach toward customers, at least in the eyes of the customers themselves. Moreover, perception is sometimes more important than reality, especially in retail services.

### Frontline Employees

Frontline employees are any kind of people that interact directly with customers. Some authors consider the groups that make contact by telephone and/or by Internet as frontline employees, working, for example, in call centres, clothing retail, financial organisations and supermarkets (LaRosa & Campbell, 2010; Kerfoot & Korczynski, 2005; Robertson, 2003). Nevertheless, face-to-face contact in the same spatial environment is unique. Any other forms of contact (by phone, e-mail or through companies' Web site) do not provide a possibility of seeing the customer's phenotype and his/her physical characteristics in full. For

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