



# How can gender signal employee qualities in retailing?



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## ABSTRACT

The occupational structure in retail employment is known to be gendered, such that women tend to occupy 'softer' social roles, while men tend to occupy 'harder' physical and technical roles. This article presents an integrative model that illustrates the balance of KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personality characteristics) and retail sectors between male and female retail employees, and explains how gender can signal employee qualities in the retail sector. The empirical analysis uses data from a survey of 702 respondents employed across 40 ANZSIC (Australian New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification) retail categories. Based on signalling theory, the findings suggest that an employee's gender can be an unintentional signal for unobservable qualities in retail employment, which has implications for customer service, human resource management, and gender discrimination.

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## 1. Introduction

Signalling theory explains how unobservable qualities can be communicated by observable qualities, thus reducing information asymmetry between two parties (Spence, 2002). Early research on signalling theory from Spence (1973) gives the example of how high-quality job applicants distinguish themselves from low-quality prospects by using higher education to signal high quality. A more recent example from Zhang and Wiersema (2009) shows how CEOs signal the unobservable quality of their firms to potential investors via financial statements, which are observable. The use of signalling theory has gained momentum in the management literature in recent years as scholars have expanded the range of potential signals and the contexts in which signalling occurs (Connelly et al., 2011). Signalling is not always intentional, but can be unintentional and negative (Janney and Folta, 2003; Daily et al., 2005; Perkins and Hendry, 2005). In fact, a sender can

communicate a wide range of signals without being aware of it (Spence, 2002). Because signallers and receivers have partially competing interests, inferior signallers have incentive to cheat by intentionally producing dishonest signals (Johnstone and Grafen, 1993). Examples of this are falsified company reports to prospective investors, or fake university degrees used by job applicants. Conversely, honest signals (Ducikova and Gray, 2009) accurately represent the underlying qualities of the signal. Drawing from this theory, given that the occupational structure in retail employment is gendered (e.g. Sparks, 1991; Fischer et al., 1997; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Korczynski, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Foster, 2004; Pettinger, 2005), this study proposes that the simple and observable characteristic of being male or female can be an unintentional and honest signal for unobservable qualities in the retail employment context.

### 1.1. Aim and need for study

Recent research in retailing has focused on gender differences among consumers (e.g. Cambra-Fierro et al., 2013; Das, 2014; Jackson et al., 2011; Ladhari and Leclerc, 2013; McNeill and Douglas, 2011; Mortimer and Clarke, 2011; Shephard et al., 2014), with a paucity of recent research on gender differences among service providers in retailing. A prominent difference between the retail workforce and the general workforce is that it hires a higher percentage of women (Sparks, 1992; Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Pilcher, 2007). A substantial number of studies report that women tend to occupy 'softer' social-oriented roles (e.g. Sirianni and Negrey, 2000; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005; Pettinger, 2005; Kmec, 2008; Chang and Travaglione, 2012). On the other hand, men tend to occupy 'harder'

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technical-oriented roles (Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Broadbridge, 1997; Lynch, 2002; Schmidt and Parker, 2003; Harris et al., 2007; Chang and Travaglione, 2012). Extant findings in this area show overlap, and an integrative model can help explain such differences more systematically. Therefore, this article presents an integrative model to illustrate the balance of KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personality characteristics) and retail sectors between male and female retail employees by pairing a literature review with empirical data, and explains how gender can signal employee qualities in the retail sector. The empirical component uses data from a survey of 702 respondents employed across 40 ANZSIC (Australian New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification) retail categories (e.g. groceries, clothing, automobiles, hardware, restaurants). The next sections will review extant literature, state the objective and hypotheses, explain the empirical data, discuss the results, and present the model.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Gender segregation in employment

A substantial body of literature identifies occupational differences between men and women in the workplace. Occupational segregation occurs when workers are excluded from certain jobs and are over-represented in others based on factors such as race, gender or national origin (Gabriel and Schmitz, 2007). Some articles suggest that gender stereotypes affect employers' perceptions of male and female workers (Cejka and Eagly, 1999; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Gabriel and Schmitz, 2007). For instance, Cejka and Eagly (1999) comment that many occupations are almost totally dominated by one sex. There are more male-dominated occupations than female-dominated occupations and that the female occupations tend to be lower paying, with associated lower status and fewer advancement opportunities (Tikka, 1999). Gabriel and Schmitz (2007) noted that occupational differences between men and women are persistent, in that traditional blue-collar occupations continue to be male-dominated, while women remain concentrated in service-oriented and clerical occupations. According to Brockbank and Airey (1994), 'occupational segregation' is the tendency for women to work in particular sectors of the labour market which are exclusively, or almost exclusively, staffed by women, with the retail industry identified as a pertinent example. Gender-specific characteristics can explain occupational differences. Generally, men are perceived to be more suited to technical, practical, and physically demanding roles (Deaux, 1984; Lynch, 2002; Wanrooy et al. 2008; Chang and Travaglione, 2012) and women are perceived to be more suited to social interaction roles, such as customer service (Marchington, 1995). Such differences form a basis for gender diversity in employment. For example, Pettinger (2005) found that men dominated in employment sectors in which goods were heavy or valuable, or, when the clientele was largely male, while Regine (2011) found that 'soft' skills such as relational intelligence, emotional intelligence, holistic perspective, inclusion, empathy, and intuition are more developed in women. Additionally, McColl-Kennedy et al. (2003) noted that men are thought to be more assertive while women are more nurturing, and Finch and Groves (1983) noted the natural ability for women to care for others. Service roles have been reported to be filled by women based on their emotional skills (Hochschild, 1983; Mattila et al., 2003; Chang and Travaglione, 2012). Anker (1997) noted that neo-classical/human capital theories correctly point out how women are less qualified than men for certain occupations because of differences in their level of education and years of experience. Similarly, Ngo (2000) explains that prestigious jobs are considered to be male-typed and found that women are

more likely to be represented in sales, clerical and administrative positions.

### 2.2. Women in retail employment

The retail employment sector is known to be dominated by women (Sparks, 1992; Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Cranford et al., 2003; Pilcher, 2007). A substantial number of studies report that women are more suited to service roles (Sirrianni and Negrey, 2000; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005; Pettinger, 2005; Kmec, 2008). For example, Pettinger (2005) explains that the gendering of retail employment lies with the feminisation of customer-service work, due to the emotion management aspect of the work. This is reiterated by Toyne (2006), who notes that women are disproportionately represented in the service sector's five 'C's': 'Catering; Cashier or Checkout, Clerical, Cleaning and Caring,' most of which require a degree of emotional labouring. Similarly, Lynch (2002) found that departments such as checkouts and administration tend to be dominated by women working part-time. Sparks (1992) noted that in the past, the expansion of the female component in retail employment has been associated with the increase in part-time employment. A substantial number of studies show that the majority of part-time workers are female (e.g. Freathy and Sparks, 1995; McIntyre, 2000; Crompton, 2002; Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Chang and Travaglione, 2012). Furthermore, a range of studies show that female retail employees are more likely to seek out flexible work due to domestic responsibilities such as child care and home-related commitments (for example, Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Simpson et al., 1997; Bu and McKeen, 2001; Ngo, 2002; Warren, 2004; McDonald et al., 2008). This is to the extent that some women are willing accept inferior employment terms and conditions to accommodate their child-care and domestic obligations (Brockbank and Airey, 1994). Similarly, Tomlinson (2007) pointed out that part-time work is highly gendered and often of low-status which has serious consequences for women's economic independence, financial security, and quality of working life.

### 2.3. Gender and product connotations

A substantial amount of research indicates that gender patterns exist in retail employment (Sparks, 1991; Fischer et al., 1997; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Korczynski, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Foster, 2004; Pettinger, 2005). Fischer et al. (1997) stated that gender stereotypes, or in-group bias/homophily, may exist and influence evaluations of service quality, depending on whether the service provider is male or female. That is, in some service settings, women expect to receive better service from women, and men from men. Foster (2004) suggests that certain retail sectors are 'gendered'; that is, the products they sell have stereotypical male connotations, such as car sales or men's fashion, or stereotypical female associations, like cosmetic sales and ladies' fashion and, very often, the gender of customer-facing staff reflects this association. Research by Brockbank and Airey (1994) found that in one particular company which retails maternity and child-care products exclusively, 93% of the employees were women. In the example for DIY (Do-It-Yourself) stores, Sparks (1991) found that male customers perceived male staff to have better technical knowledge and greater physical competency when handling products than female staff, and often preferred to seek advice from male rather than female staff, with a particular preference toward older male staff. This was due to the assumption that men were more likely to have carried out home improvements or to have worked as a trade person than women. This finding is also supported by Foster (2004), who argues that DIY is an activity predominantly undertaken by men and many items sold in this sector

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