

Employee Gender Characteristics Among Retail Sectors

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Abstract

Employee gender characteristics vary among different retail sectors. For example, male dominated retail sectors such as hardware employ more male staff, while female dominated retail sectors such as cosmetics employ more female staff. The purpose of this paper is to explain such gender differences in retail employment. The data used for this study is a subset of the 'Australia at Work' survey, which is a longitudinal survey tracking the experiences of the Australian labour force via telephone interviews. In answering the research questions, a subset of telephone interview data from the 'Australia at Work' survey consisting of 702 respondents employed in the retail industry will be analysed. The results indicate that retail employment in Australia is dominated by females, and that certain retail sectors were found to have different employee gender characteristics. Managerial positions in retail were found to have only a slightly larger proportion of males, implying that there is little gender discrimination in retail managerial positions in Australia as compared to findings from the United Kingdom and the United States. Customers are likely to have preferences as to who they are being served by when shopping for specific products, affecting their purchase decisions and consequently the business performance of stores. Hence, managers can use such information in employment decision making to create a competitive advantage and increase profitability.

Key words: Management, Employment, Demographics, Gender, Retail.

1. Introduction

The retail industry is the largest employer in Australia (Wanrooy et. al. 2009). Due to changes within the retail industry such as changing retail structures, improving technological developments, and evolving customer characteristics, there is a need for current research in this area. In particular, research on retail employment will provide businesses with information that can improve hiring decisions and business strategy. As customers of different categories of products have varying expectations of retail staff, businesses need to make informed hiring decisions to improve customer service and consequent profitability. Hence, research on demographic stereotypes in retail employment is important. Research points out that gender stereotypes exist in retail employment (for example, Sparks, 1991; Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor, 1997; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Korczynski, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Foster, 2004; Pettinger, 2005). Most of the existing research on gender stereotypes in retail employment has been carried out in the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the United States, with no significant study undertaken in Australia, despite retail being its largest employer. Based on the foregoing, research is necessary to address these issues in the Australian retail context. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify gender characteristics in retail employment within Australia.

2. Stereotypes In Retail

A substantial body of literature points out occupational differences between males and females. Occupational segregation occurs when workers are excluded from certain jobs, and over represented in others, for reasons such as race, gender, or national origin (Gabriel and Schmitz, 2007). Tikka (1999) points out that there are more male dominated occupations than female dominated occupations, in consideration that the female occupations tend to be lower paying, lower status, with fewer advancement opportunities. Gabriel and Schmitz (2007) highlights that recent analyses of gender employment patterns suggest that occupational differences between men and women are a

persistent presence in the U.S. labour market. For example, traditional blue-collar occupations continue to be male dominated, while women remain concentrated in service and clerical occupations. Likewise, Finch and Groves (1983) suggest that employers consider women to be better at service roles due to their natural ability to care for others. McGauran (2000) explains that gender segregation in the labour market depends on the supply of workers of each gender, and the interplay between the cost of workers and the skills sought of them. McGauran's findings suggest that a less regulated labour market, in conjunction with few male peripheral workers, contributes to stronger gender segregation in the labour force. 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 females, giving the example of the retail industry.

Gender specific characteristics can explain the occupational differences. Generally, men are perceived to be more suited to more physically demanding roles (Lynch, 2002), such as work that involves heavy lifting like construction, and women are perceived to be more suited to social interaction roles such as customer service. Pettinger (2005) found that men dominated where goods were heavy, valuable or when the clientele was largely male and 'male' jobs were more likely to be associated with craft and training than female jobs. Sparks (1992) highlights that the expansion of the female component in retail employment has in the past been associated with increasing part-time employment. While there is a fundamental shift from full-time to part-time employment irrespective of gender, female part-time employment remains as a massive component of modern retail employment and operations. Brockbank and Airey (1994) postulates that the traditional pattern of part-time employment for married women has provided retail employers with a readily available pool of labour, and that they accept inferior terms and conditions to accommodate their traditional child-care and domestic obligations.

Retail employment has been found to be dominated by women (Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Sparks, 1992; Office for National Statistics, 2006; Pilcher, 2007). Sparks (1992) found that retailing in the United Kingdom has for a long period been a primarily female occupation, and there is evidence of a continued feminisation of the workforce, with one in seven of all women work in retailing. This is supported by Brockbank and Airey's (1994) finding that retailing in the United Kingdom is dominated by women. Pettinger (2005) explains that the gendering of retail employment lies with the feminisation of customer-service work due to the emotion management content. This is reiterated by Pilcher (2007), who points out that women are disproportionately represented in the service sector's five 'C's'; 'Catering; Cashier or Checkout, Clerical, Cleaning and Caring' occupations, most of which require a degree of emotional labouring. Similarly, Lynch (2002) found that departments such as checkouts and administration tended to be dominated by part time females.

Substantial research concludes that gender stereotypes exist in retail employment (Sparks, 1991; Fischer, Gainer, and Bristol, 1997; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Korczynski, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Foster, 2004; Pettinger, 2005). Fischer et al (1997) state that gender stereotype or in-group bias/homophily may exist and influence evaluations of service quality depending on whether the service provider is a male or a female. Foster (2004) argues 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 reflect this association. Research by Brockbank and Airey (1994) shows that in one company which retails maternity and child-care products exclusively, 93 percent of employees were female.

In the example for DIY (Do-It-Yourself) stores, Sparks (1991) points out that male customers perceived male staff to have better technical knowledge and are more physically competent to handle products than female staff and often preferred to seek advice from male staff rather than female staff, with a particular preference toward older male staff. This is due to the assumption that males were more likely to have carried out home improvements or worked as a trade person than women. This finding is supported by Foster (2004), who found that DIY is an activity predominately undertaken by men and many items sold in this sector have stereotypical masculine connotations, such as power tools and electrical, plumbing and building products. Where female staff were employed in DIY stores, they tended to be located on the checkouts, returns desk and in "non expert" roles on more feminine product

areas like decorative, gardening and showrooms (Sparks, 1991). This finding is consistent with Korczynski's (2002) research, which found that trade experts were male and most checkout operators were female in DIY stores. This appeared to be a result of gender assumptions built into the roles. Men were generally perceived to be more adept at retail skills. For example, Bradley (1989: 232) wrote "...the sale of a carpet is considered to involve certain socially defined skills, whereas the sale of hosiery is not. Men predominate in carpet departments; women in hosiery. Of course, selling hosiery requires a variety of skills; they simply go unrecognised".

Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor (1997) state that in some service settings, women expect to receive better service from women and men from men. Pettinger (2005) states that gender is embedded in the work and employment relations in retail in a unique way: female sales assistants tend to serve female customers with products that are culturally 'feminine'. Notwithstanding, women were more likely to work in men's departments than men in women's departments, because of the way the occupation of sales assistant is feminised. The concept of female staff serving men can imply a degree of sexualization in their roles. For example, Hochschild (1983) suggests that the role of female flight attendants are sexualised by advertising using slogans such as 'Fly me, you'll like it', which could imply that they not only had to be 'unfailingly helpful and open to requests' but also should 'respond to the sexual fantasies of passengers' by acting in a 'sexy' manner, flirting with customers as though their behaviour is not 'intrusive or demeaning'. Hochschild also highlights the contrast between genders by stating that females 'enhance the customer's status' while males 'deflates the customer's status', giving the example that debt collectors are typically male.

McGauran (2000) found that women are considered better than men at cleaning and stocking goods and at selling to other women, and that women are more likely to be employed for their appearance, in less-skilled posts, and as part-timers. Kerfoot and Knights (1994) wrote that 'a nice mumsy face at the desk' would both increase sales and smooth the flow of production. Accordingly, Taylor and Tyler (2000) found that male managers recruiting telesales staff made stereotypical gendered assumptions about women possessing a 'natural' ability to 'chat' and build up a 'rapport' with others. Kerfoot and Korczynski (2005) state that gender stereotypes about women's 'proper' place in relation to paid work and their presumed attachment to so-called 'softer' skills in service work act to reinforce and reproduce gender division in the workplace.

Research shows that gender differences exist in retail management positions (Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Lynch, 2002; Schmidt and Parker, 2003; Broadbridge, Maxwell, and Ogden, 2006; Gabriel and Schmitz, 2007; Harris, Foster, and Whysall, 2007). While women dominate the retail sector, their dominance is in the non-managerial positions. Brockbank and Airey (1994) and Harris et al. (2007) found that retailing is dominated by women but managed by men. Where women were employed in management, they are more likely to be represented in the junior and middle management positions (Broadbridge et al, 2006). Schmidt and Parker (2003) found that senior management and director level positions in retailing are largely male. Where women are in managerial positions, Brockbank and Airey (1994) wrote that they are believed to be more likely to have a better understanding of their predominantly female staff and customers, and possess a greater ability for developing relationships with them.

The traditional view postulates that men are more capable than women at work, hence occupying the more important positions with women occupying subordinate roles. Bradley (1989) wrote that women and men's participation in retailing has its roots in the onset of capitalism and the existence of male trade union bargaining power which was used to define certain jobs/areas as skilled and kept as male preserves. According to Broadbridge (1997), where skill and knowledge were perceived to be required men prevailed; while if women were found in traditionally male sectors of retailing they were employed as counter assistants or cash clerks. Similarly, Lynch (2002) points out the retail jobs defined as 'peripheral' and 'low skill' were predominately filled by women, whereas men filled occupations considered to be 'skilled', such as management positions.

The reported paucity of women in retail management positions (for example, Lynch, 2002; Schmidt and Parker, 2003; Gabriel and Schmitz, 2007; and Harris et al. 2007) may be due to the unwillingness of female employees

taking up management positions. Harris et al. (2007) found that half of female part-time retail employees were not seeking promotion. Gabriel and Schmitz (2007) suggest that the male dominance of males in senior management is likely to be voluntary, as opposed to gender discrimination as a cause. In their study of gender differences among workers, it was found that while gender differences in occupational attainment persist, they apparently result from voluntary choices of men and women and from long-term changes in labour markets, such as the simultaneous growth of white-collar occupations and women's labour force participation rates. However, research by Kerfoot and Knights (1994) points out that some employment practices deliberately target 'mature' women returners to the workplace who were subsequently employed in low-paid, low-status work outside the main organisational career structure.

3. Research Questions And Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to identify gender characteristics in retail employment within Australia. The data used for this study is a subset of the 'Australia at Work' survey, which is a longitudinal survey tracking the experiences of the Australian labour force. In 2009, the survey documented the findings of a total of 6,801 respondents via telephone interviews. The relevant subset of the data used for this study consists of 702 respondents who are employed in the retail industry. Only data from selected questions in the survey will be relevant for use in this study. Chi square tabular analysis will be employed to confirm the statistical significance among the relevant data based on significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

4. RESULTS

In answering the foregoing research questions in this study, the results (see Table 1) indicate that retail employment in Australia is dominated by females employees in general. Certain retail sectors were found to have different employee gender characteristics. Managerial positions in retail were found to be dominated by a slightly larger proportion of males while women dominated in non management positions such as supervisory and other positions. The findings are largely similar to previous research in this area, suggesting that such relevant aspects of retail employment in Australia have similar characteristics compared to the United Kingdom and the United States.

Table 1: Respondents classified by Retail Sector and Gender

Retail Sector		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Car Retailing	Count	12	6	18
	% within Industry	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Motor Cycle Retailing	Count	3	0	3
	% within Industry	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Trailer and Other Motor Vehicle Retailing	Count	4	0	4
	% within Industry	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Motor Vehicle Parts Retailing	Count	14	3	17
	% within Industry	82.4%	17.6%	100.0%
Tyre Retailing	Count	4	0	4
	% within Industry	100.0%	.0%	100.0%
Fuel Retailing	Count	3	3	6
	% within Industry	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Supermarket and Grocery Stores	Count	46	82	128
	% within Industry	35.9%	64.1%	100.0%
Fresh Meat Fish and Poultry Retailing	Count	5	6	11
	% within Industry	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%

Fruit and Vegetable Retailing	Count	3	1	4
	% within Industry	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Liquor Retailing	Count	9	3	12
	% within Industry	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Other Specialised Food Retailing	Count	2	8	10
	% within Industry	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%
Furniture Retailing	Count	5	4	9
	% within Industry	55.6%	44.4%	100.0%
Houseware Retailing	Count	2	3	5
	% within Industry	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
Manchester and Other Textile Goods Retailing	Count	0	1	1
	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Electrical Electronic and Gas Appliance Retailing	Count	9	1	10
	% within Industry	90.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Computer and Computer Peripheral Retailing	Count	5	2	7
	% within Industry	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
Other Electrical and Electronic Goods Retailing	Count	3	1	4
	% within Industry	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Hardware and Building Supplies Retailing	Count	17	10	27
	% within Industry	63.0%	37.0%	100.0%
Garden Supplies Retailing	Count	8	2	10
	% within Industry	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Sport and Camping Equipment Retailing	Count	9	6	15
	% within Industry	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Entertainment Media Retailing	Count	2	4	6
	% within Industry	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
Toy and Game Retailing	Count	3	1	4
	% within Industry	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Newspaper and Book Retailing	Count	7	15	22
	% within Industry	31.8%	68.2%	100.0%
Clothing Retailing	Count	4	24	28
	% within Industry	14.3%	85.7%	100.0%
Footwear Retailing	Count	0	3	3
	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Watch and Jewellery Retailing	Count	0	3	3
	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Other Personal Accessory Retailing	Count	0	4	4
	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Department Stores	Count	12	27	39
	% within Industry	30.8%	69.2%	100.0%
Pharmaceutical Cosmetic and Toiletry Goods Retailing	Count	5	23	28
	% within Industry	17.9%	82.1%	100.0%
Stationery Goods Retailing	Count	3	4	7
	% within Industry	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%
Flower Retailing	Count	0	1	1
	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Other Store-Based Retailing	Count	5	16	21
	% within Industry	23.8%	76.2%	100.0%
Non-Store Retailing	Count	4	4	8
	% within Industry	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Retail Commission-Based Buying and/or Selling	Count	0	1	1

	% within Industry	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Accommodation	Count	25	31	56
	% within Industry	44.6%	55.4%	100.0%
Cafes and Restaurants	Count	24	41	65
	% within Industry	36.9%	63.1%	100.0%
Takeaway Food Services	Count	17	32	49
	% within Industry	34.7%	65.3%	100.0%
Catering Services	Count	8	8	16
	% within Industry	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Pubs Taverns and Bars	Count	11	7	18
	% within Industry	61.1%	38.9%	100.0%
Clubs (Hospitality)	Count	7	11	18
	% within Industry	38.9%	61.1%	100.0%
Total	Count	300	402	702
	% within Industry	42.7%	57.3%	100.0%

A chi square test carried out on this table produced a value of 106.95 ($p < 0.001$), indicating statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Among the retail sectors, the grocery and supermarkets sector is largest employer, employing 18.2% of the total of 702 respondents sampled. This is followed by cafes and restaurants at 9.3%, accommodation at 8.0%, takeaway food at 7.0% and department stores at 5.6%. Female employees dominated retail employment in general, with 57.2% of all employees being female. This can be attributed to the likelihood that females are more inclined to homemaker or childcare duties and hence suit the part-time / casual nature of retail employment more than males.

Certain retail sectors were found to be dominated by male employees. The most male dominated category is electric and electronic goods with 81.0% being male employees, followed by motor vehicle and parts at 80.4%, garden supplies at 80.0%, and hardware at 63.0%. This finding suggests that retail sectors that involve technical knowledge and involve physical work are largely staffed by males, which corresponds with the findings of Broadbridge (1997), Sparks (1991), Korczynski (2002), and Foster (2004).

Where female employees dominated, the retail category of clothing employed 85.7% females, followed by pharmaceutical, cosmetics, and toiletries at 82.1%, department stores at 69.2%, newspaper and books at 68.2%, takeaway food at 65.3%, supermarkets at 64.1%, and cafes and restaurants at 63.1%. These findings are consistent with a wide range of research. For example, the finding that female employees dominate in areas where customers are more likely to be female such as clothing, cosmetics, and toiletries, have been documented by Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor (1997), and Pettinger (2005). The identified sectors of takeaway food, supermarkets, and cafes and restaurants where female employees dominate tend to be less skilled, check-out related, and part-time posts, a finding consistent with Broadbridge (1997), McGauran (2000), Lynch (2002), Korczynski (2002), and Pilcher (2007).

In relation to managerial positions in retail employment, 15.7% of the respondents were in managerial roles, with 17.7% in supervisory roles and 66.6% in other roles. It was found that the gender division in managerial roles was not substantial, with 53.0% of males in managerial roles (see Table 2). However, there is a higher percentage of females in supervisory roles at 61.9% (see Table 3) and other roles at 66.6% (see Table 4). This finding does not substantially correspond with the non-Australian context findings of Lynch (2002), Schmidt and Parker (2003), Broadbridge et al. (2006), and Gabriel and Schmitz (2007) that found managerial positions in retailing to be male dominated.

Table 2: Respondents classified by Managerial position and Gender

Managerial Position	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Count	53	47	100
% within Industry	53.0%	47.0%	100.0%

Table 3: Respondents classified by Supervisory position and Gender

Supervisory Position	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Count	43	70	113
% within Industry	38.1%	61.9%	100.0%

Table 4: Respondents classified by Other position and Gender

Other Position	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Count	171	254	425
% within Industry	40.2%	59.8%	100.0%

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that gender stereotypes exist in retail employment in Australia. Such stereotypes can relate to perceptions and expectations of customers, management decision making, and discrimination. The demographic characteristics of retail staff can affect service quality. As suggested in the literature review, customers are likely to have preferences as to who they are being served by when shopping for specific products, affecting their purchase decisions and consequently the business performance of stores. Hence, managers can use such information in employment decision making to create a competitive advantage and increase profitability. For example, males shopping for DIY goods perceive male staff to be more knowledgeable (Sparks, 1991). This is reflected in the findings that products requiring technical expertise are male dominated.

It was also found that products for females such as cosmetics and clothing were more likely to be staffed by females. This implies that female employees are more suitable for female related products, as similarly pointed out by Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor (1997), who pointed out that women expect to receive better service from women and men from men. Notwithstanding, it was found that females dominate retail employment in general and from an employer's perspective, this can be explained by research stereotyping women with a 'natural ability' to build rapport (Taylor and Tyler, 2000), possessing 'softer skills' (Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005), and sexualisation (Hochschild, 1983). This implies that female employees are more adept in retailing to both genders as compared to males, which can explain the finding that females dominate in retail employment and that female employees are stereotypical of retail positions.

As reported in the results, the slightly larger percentage of males in managerial positions does not substantially correspond with the non-Australian context findings of Lynch (2002), Schmidt and Parker (2003), Broadbridge et al. (2006), and Gabriel and Schmitz (2007) that managerial positions in retailing are male dominated. However, it is unclear if demographic differences in retail employment are the result of employer preferences or if certain demographic profiles, such as females as reported, generally prefer to work in certain retail positions. Therefore, further research in this area is recommended.

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