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### **CREDIBILITY OF A SALESPERSON IN RETAILING: JUDGMENTS ON THE BASIS OF THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC PARAMETERS**

*This paper aims to add to scientific and managerial knowledge about the intersection between a buyer and salesperson based on judgments of buyers about salespeople on the visual information cues. Respondents evaluated credibility of salespeople who differed in their gender and age. These demographic parameters affected the perceived professional and personal characteristics of each salesperson, which in turn affected the measurement of the overall credibility of a salesperson. Analysis of the survey data allowed concluding that age and gender of a salesperson have an important differentiating power in buyer's judgments about salesperson's credibility in general, as well as about separate dimensions of credibility individually. Also, it indicates instances when judgments about credibility of salespeople depend on the buyer demographics: gender, age or their interaction. From the empirical results, conclusions and managerial implications are derived.*

Keywords: salesperson, credibility, retailing, age, gender, Lithuania.

**Research problem.** Though large part of the decision-making process for durable goods takes place outside of store settings, the importance of a salesperson's advice can't be underestimated. A salesperson represents a variety of roles, ranging from a promoter and referent to a highly professional specialized field consultant; and the researchers started investigation of these issues many decades ago [1]. Buyers evaluate credibility of salespeople based on a relatively large number of their characteristics, which are considered both separately and in an integrative manner, forming factors of salesperson credibility [2]. The result of this evaluation often predetermines whether advice of the salesperson is considered, and, subsequently, whether the purchase will be made.

Potential buyers have rather limited span of time to evaluate characteristics of a salesperson. It comes as no surprise that many decisions whether to ask for the assistance of a salesperson is made spontaneously, based just on a visual presence of a salesperson. The stereotyping of visual impressions is often made on the basis of minimal set of characteristics, such as perceived age, gender, and their fit with the contexts: products type, store environment, etc. [3; 4]. Out of these characteristics potential buyers derive beliefs about personal and professional characteristics of a salesperson, and develop overall judgments regarding the trustfulness of their recommendations [5].

Conversely, an important part of the buyer-salesperson interaction depends on the characteristics of a buyer. These might range from rather nominal external parameters (like demographics) to much more sophisticated aspects that integrate buyer-product-situation interactions, such as product knowledge, involvement, shopping orientation and many

more [6]. However, from the practical standpoint of a retailer, success of the selling activities in a store often depends on the fit between buyer and salesperson that is often based on the minimal number of demographic characteristics [7; 8]. Thus, retailers can potentially maximize perceived credibility by better matching salespeople and consumer characteristics, and thus achieve higher consumer trust and cooperation [9]. The span to make the correct decision is often limited to seconds, and therefore clear recommendations about decisions, based on visually observable characteristics of a potential buyer, are very much demanded by retailers.

**Literature analysis and research questions.** The concept of credibility is used in relation to various types of communication sources. Salesperson credibility consumes an important sub-stream of the research in this area. Salesperson credibility is important because the message, provided by a credible salesperson, is processed deeply, and deeper processing of a sales message leads to a higher likelihood of the sales message being accepted [10].

Typically, credibility is understood as a multidimensional construct that reflects rather large number of dimensions of source credibility, grouped into two major factors; namely – competence and trustworthiness [11]. The two have been widely accepted and are typically used in current research. However, numerous studies approach measurements of trust and credibility in many different ways [5; 12; 13]. Other frequently used dimensions of this construct include two aspects: dimensions that are linked with sales communication/presentation, and dimensions, related with the appearance of the source [2]. The process of research on credibility continues to include modifications of the measured scope of dimensions, and their number often is the result of factor analysis on the basis of the obtained data for a specific study. One of the most comprehensive efforts to systematize measurement of credibility has been made by Martin Eisend, who on the basis of numerous previous studies has extracted specific factors for the salesperson credibility, company credibility and spokesperson credibility. In his study, the eight factors of salesperson credibility include attractiveness, experience, dynamism, fairness, objectivity, sincerity, expertise and closeness to reality/sympathy [2].

Credibility is a generalization that is perceived by the receiver and has no strict and objective criteria. Thus, some of the results in social psychology research may not be applicable to the personal selling situation [10]. An interaction with a salesperson is relatively short during which a buyer develops judgements about a salesperson on the basis of the first impression and stereotypes that are not necessarily favorable [3; 14]. Linking the observed visual characteristics of a salesperson with the type of the product and specifics of the outlet, a buyer “converts” them into the judgement about salesperson credibility. It is suggested that the interpretations depend on selling-related experience of a buyer and other factors [15]. However, the existing scope of research on judgments about salesperson credibility on the basis of small number of visually observable characteristics of a salesperson is not sufficient, and can be defined as a research gap, which is attempted to address in this study.

The most instantly noticed obvious characteristics of a salesperson are age and gender, and this allows raising the *first research question* of this study:

1) How evaluations of salespersons’ credibility differ, depending on his/her age and gender?

As it is discussed above, the credibility construct is made-up by numerous dimensions. Assuming that the differences on the basis of the above mentioned demographics will be observed, we develop the *second research question*:

2) What dimensions of salespersons’ credibility influence higher or lower judgments

about the overall credibility of salespeople who have different demographic characteristics?

The two questions make the base for the study; however, the relation between a buyer and a seller is often considered as being dyadic by its nature [16]. This requires considering characteristics of a salesperson together with characteristics of a buyer and taking into account their interaction.

Buyer characteristics has been extensively researched in the context of buyer segmentation; one or another set of the buyer characteristics has been used in majority of studies on purchasing behavior or intent. In this study, we analyze the buyer characteristics from the standpoint of the buyer-seller similarity concept. Rooting from the relational demography, buyer-seller similarity concept might include rather large number of similarity aspects. However, in marketing and sales-related studies their scope is significantly narrowed. In this instance, J. Brock Smith proposed using five aspects of similarity: similarity in life stage, gender, culture, work attitudes, and personality [17]. All these aspects represent visual parameters and behaviors of a salesperson that at least to some extent can be observed by a buyer. Among them, age (which is simplified expression of the life stage) and gender are the easiest to be noticed instantly. Since this study concentrates on researching the credibility of a salesperson on the basis of the age and gender, the same demographic variables of a buyer are chosen to achieve similarity/dissimilarity with the potential buyers (respondents of the survey). Age and gender are simple biological comparisons, which (especially – the gender) immediately elicit well-developed sex-based schema for exchange [18]. This allows developing the *third research question*:

3) How evaluations of credibility of salespeople are affected by (dis)similarities in age and gender between the salesperson and buyer?

Comparison of the buyer-seller similarity has been used in studies on related issues in the sales context, analyzing other (not credibility-related) of sales process, [8; 19; 20]. Such studies allowed disclosing specifics of the age and gender-based differences in perceptions, attitudes and behaviors [6; 21].

**Research methodology.** The data collection has been performed on the basis of internet survey, based on convenience sampling. Respondents have been shown four pre-tested pictures of salespeople, who differ among themselves in terms of their age and gender. The age categories have been matched to the groupings of respondents; thus two salespeople (male and female) represented younger adults (18-37 year old), two others – elder adults (above 37). The study has been performed controlling for the type of a store; respondents have been shown pictures of salespeople within the environment of a store that sells home furnishing products, and with the relevant outfit. After a screening question that checked whether a person was responsible for buying interior items or furniture for a household, each respondent was sequentially shown all four pictures.

The research instrument measured eight dimensions of salesperson credibility: Attractiveness, Experience, Dynamism, Comprehensiveness, Objectiveness, Sincerity, Expertise, and Accommodation (with minimal modifications taken from Eisend, [2]). The presence of characteristics of each salesperson that has been shown on a picture has been measured on a seven point Likert scale from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”. Cronbach’s alpha of the characteristics showed high level of reliability for the overall credibility scale in regards of all the pictures ( $\alpha = 0.894$  for elder woman;  $\alpha = 0.859$  for younger woman;  $\alpha = 0.901$  for younger man; and  $\alpha = 0.811$  for elder man). The questionnaire included the typical demographic characteristics of a respondent (gender, age, incomes and education).

More than 200 respondents participated in the survey, 149 answered positively to the screening question and were suitable for the further analysis. The distribution of respondents according their gender was close to the distribution of the population of Lithuania – the sample was made up of 54% of women and 46% of men. Respondents have been divided into two groups, representing younger adults (18-37) and elder adults (38-57). This is related with the two life stages – the variable concerned with progression through the human experience and an assessment of similarity along combined attributes such as age, marital status, and family situation [17]. In the sample, 69% respondents were between 18-37 years old, and 31% – older than 37. Almost half of them had bachelor or equivalent level of education; more than a half of them had 401-800 € of personal income per month.

**Findings.** Analysis of overall credibility evaluations of four salespeople was performed to address the *first research question*. It was found that credibility differs, depending on the age and gender on a salesperson. Repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction determined that perception of credibility differed statistically significantly between four types of salespeople ( $F(2.44, 360.96) = 7.880, p < 0.01$ ). Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction revealed that younger male salesperson was evaluated statistically significantly better than other salespeople ( $M_{YM} = 5.01$  vs.  $M_{EF} = 4.74, M_{YF} = 4.60, M_{EM} = 4.62, p < 0.01$ ). However, there were no statistically significant differences among evaluations of the other salespeople. This allows stating that the younger male has been evaluated as the most credible salesperson, and this age/gender combination is the most suitable for retailing of home furnishing products. However, the credibility of the all salespeople was higher than the mean of the seven-point scale, which means that the respondents found all four salespeople being rather credible (Table 1).

Table 1 – Overall credibility of four salespeople

Salesperson	Mean	Std. Deviation
Elder female	4.74	0.91
Younger female	4.60	0.87
Younger male	5.01	0.97
Elder male	4.62	0.78

Repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used to find differences of characteristics among the four salespeople to address the *second research question*. Several differences in evaluation of characteristics are detected; however, the most important is to understand what makes the younger male salesperson to be evaluated higher than others.

Rather surprisingly, the younger male has been perceived as the best expert among the four. The evaluation on expert-like characteristic differed from the evaluation of three other salespeople statistically significantly ( $F(2.53, 374.96) = 30.573, p < 0.01$ ). Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction revealed that evaluation of expert-looking dimension of younger male salesperson was statistically significantly higher than of the other salespeople ( $M_{YM} = 5.49$  vs.  $M_{EF} = 4.48, M_{YF} = 4.28, M_{EM} = 4.47, p < 0.01$ ). Another important characteristic, which distinguished younger male from others, was also rather surprising, and cannot be directly linked with his younger age – this was experience ( $F(2.30, 339.98) = 27.544, p < 0.01$ ). He received high evaluation on this dimension together with the elder female ( $M_{YM} = 5.29, M_{EF} = 5.11$  vs.  $M_{YF} = 4.23, M_{EM} = 4.58, p < 0.01$ ). The third dimension on which the younger male salesperson was superior to others was

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sincerity ( $F(2.53, 375.11) = 6.805, p < 0.01$ ). Again, higher evaluations have been given to him and the elder female ( $M_{YM} = 4.99, M_{EF} = 5.07$  vs.  $M_{YF} = 4.68, M_{EM} = 4.62, p < 0.01$ ). Finally, the younger male salesperson has been superior to the others on the dimension of dynamism ( $F(2.72, 402.29) = 17.817, p < 0.01$ ). This characteristic was high for both male salespeople, comparing that with evaluation of the both females ( $M_{YM} = 4.95, M_{EM} = 4.85$  vs.  $M_{EF} = 4.42, M_{YF} = 4.09, p < 0.01$ ). This shows that the younger male salesperson was graded highest (alone or together with another salesperson) in 4 instances out of 8, and this led to his higher overall evaluation of credibility (Table 2).

Table 2 – Evaluation of dimensions of credibility of four salespeople

Dimension	Elder female	Younger female	Younger male	Elder male	F	Sig.
Attractiveness	4.16	5.29*	4.30	4.19	35.341	0.000
Experience	5.11*	4.23	5.29*	4.58	27.544	0.000
Dynamism	4.42	4.09	4.95*	4.85*	17.817	0.000
Comprehensiveness	4.42	4.15*	4.58	4.58	4.42	0.006
Objectiveness	4.79	4.48*	5.06	4.83	7.027	0.000
Sincerity	5.07*	4.68	4.99*	4.62	6.805	0.000
Expertise	4.48	4.28	5.49*	4.47	30.573	0.000
Accommodation	5.46	5.56	5.41	4.86*	15.655	0.000

\* – statistically significant

Other salespeople differed one from another on some dimensions both positively and negatively. Younger female salesperson had lowest evaluation of comprehensiveness ( $F(2.73, 404.24) = 4.42, p < 0.01$ ). The same salesperson has been evaluated as being less objective ( $F(2.62, 388.35) = 7.03, p < 0.01$ ). On the other hand, the younger female salesperson was the most attractive ( $F(2.38, 352.26) = 35.341, p < 0.01$ ). Another salesperson – elder male – was perceived as less accommodating than anyone else ( $F(2.57, 381.02) = 15.655, p < 0.01$ ).

The *third research question* was raised in order to study how evaluation of credibility of salespeople, who differ in age and gender, vary depending on the age and gender of potential buyers. This was analyzed with factorial ANOVA for each type (age/gender combination) of a salesperson.

*Evaluation of the elder female salesperson.* In this case we found statistically significant difference of Gender ( $F(1, 145) = 8.582, p = 0.004, Power = 0.829$ ), Age ( $F(1, 145) = 4.429, p = 0.037, Power = 0.552$ ) and interaction of Age and Gender ( $F(1, 145) = 4.369, p = 0.038, Power = 0.546$ ). However, the latter had rather low value of observed power. This suggests that female respondents evaluated the elder female salesperson as more credible ( $M = 4.86$ ) than male respondents ( $M = 4.60$ ).

In addition, the evaluations of younger respondents were more positive ( $M = 4.77$ ) than those of the elder ones ( $M = 4.67$ ). The interaction between gender and age suggests that 38-57 years old male respondents evaluated credibility of elder female salesperson less positively ( $M = 3.92$ ), compared with all other groups. In summary, the analysis shows that elder female salesperson is the least suitable type of a salesperson for men of 38-57 years old in this environment (see Table 3 and Fig. 1).

*Evaluation of the younger female salesperson.* Statistically significant difference occurred as the effect of Age ( $F(1, 145) = 40.101, p = 0.000, Power = 1.000$ ) and interaction of Age and

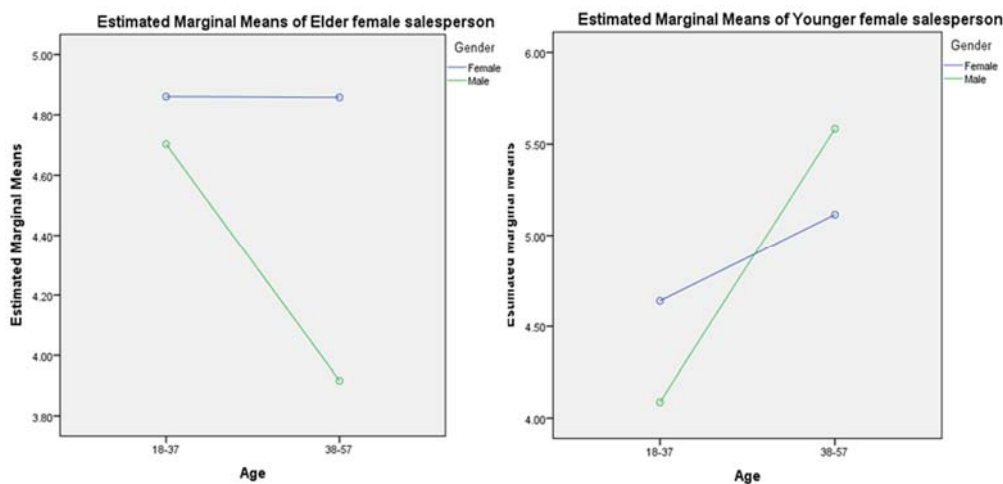
Gender (F1, 145 = 10.744, p = 0.001, Power = 0.903), while Gender had no impact (F1, 145 = 0.073, p = 0.788, Power = 0.058). This allows summarizing that the elder group of respondents (38+) evaluated younger female salesperson as more credible (M = 5.21) than respondents who were 18-37 years old (M = 4.32).

Interaction analysis showed that evaluations of the younger group significantly differ among themselves on the basis of the gender of respondents. Male respondents evaluated credibility of the young female salesperson less positively (M = 4.09), comparing to the female respondents (M = 4.64). This allows stating that the younger female salesperson is the least suitable demographic type of a salesperson for younger men (see Table 3 and Fig. 1).

**Table 3 – Credibility of the elder and younger female salesperson, depending age and gender of respondents**

Gender of respondent	Age	Elder female salesperson		Younger female salesperson	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	18-37	4.86	1.01	4.64*	0.79
	38-57	4.86	1.01	5.11	0.73
	Total	4.86*	1.00	4.86	0.80
Male	18-37	4.70	0.51	4.09*	0.74
	38-57	3.92*	1.56	5.58	0.25
	Total	4.60*	0.77	4.28	0.86
Total	18-37	4.77*	0.76	4.32*	0.81
	38-57	4.67*	1.18	5.21*	0.69
	Total	4.74	0.91	4.60	0.87

\* – statistically significant



**Figure 1 – Evaluation of credibility of elder and younger female salesperson, based on the interaction of age and gender of respondents**

*Evaluation of the younger male salesperson.* In this case a statistical difference was found for the main effect of the Age (F1, 145 = 64.830, p = 0.000, Power = 1.000) and for the interaction of Age and Gender (F1, 145 = 4.637, p = 0.033, Power = 0.571), while Gender had

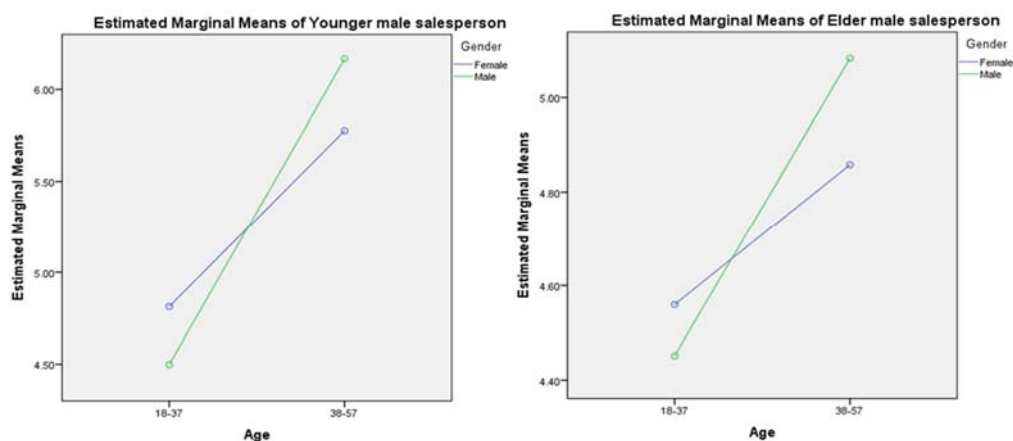
no impact on evaluation ( $F_{1, 145} = 0.053$ ,  $p = 0.819$ ,  $\text{Power} = 0.056$ ). The elder group of respondents evaluated the younger male salesperson as being more credible ( $M = 5.85$ ) than respondents who were younger ( $M = 4.63$ ). Statistically significant result of the interactions disclosed that while younger (18-37 old) male respondents were quite skeptical about credibility of a younger male salesperson ( $M = 4.50$ ), the same age females were much more positive ( $M = 4.81$ ). In general, we conclude that younger male salesperson is the most suitable demographic type of a salesperson for buyers who are older than 38 (see Table 4 and Fig. 2).

**Table 4 – Credibility of the elder and younger male salesperson, depending age and gender of respondents**

Gender of respondent	Age	Younger male salesperson		Elder male salesperson	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	18-37	4.81*	0.70	4.56	0.58
	38-57	5.78	0.57	4.86	0.93
	Total	5.25	0.80	4.70	0.77
Male	18-37	4.50*	0.96	4.45	0.79
	38-57	6.17	0.31	5.08	0.44
	Total	4.72	1.07	4.53	0.78
Total	18-37	4.63*	0.87	4.50*	0.71
	38-57	5.85*	0.55	4.90*	0.86
	Total	5.01	0.97	4.62	0.78

\* – statistically significant

*Evaluation of the elder male salesperson.* In this instance the difference has occurred just for the main effect of the Age ( $F_{1, 145} = 8.432$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\text{Power} = 0.822$ ); while Gender ( $F_{1, 145} = 0.133$ ,  $p = 0.716$ ,  $\text{Power} = 0.065$ ), while the interaction Age\*Gender ( $F_{1, 145} = 1.084$ ,  $p = 0.300$ ,  $\text{Power} = 0.179$ ) had no significance. Therefore, we only conclude that the elder respondents (38-57) evaluated the elder male salesperson as being more credible ( $M = 4.90$ ) than the respondents who were younger ( $M = 4.50$ ) (Table 4 and Fig. 2).



**Figure 2 – Evaluation of credibility of elder and younger male salesperson, based on the interaction of age and gender of respondents**

The analysis on credibility of salespeople in various age/gender combinations of the respondents confirmed theoretical knowledge that the age of buyers is important factor in evaluation of credibility of salespeople. We have found that younger respondents (18-37) were more skeptical about the credibility of salespeople, comparing that with the elder (38-57) respondents. Also, we can state that the gender plays important role only in the interaction with the age. In some cases, this interaction had lower value of observed power, but that was influenced by the unequal distribution of respondents among the groups.

**Conclusions and directions for further research.** The study helped answer the three research questions regarding the dyadic fit between buyers and salespeople, based on their age and gender, in regard of evaluation of salesperson credibility. The analysis allows making several observations.

First, the findings allow concluding that age and gender of a salesperson have an important differentiating power in buyer's judgments about salesperson's credibility. Knowing that the judgments typically are made on the basis of rather limited (often – just visual) information, this aspect is important in recruitment and management of the retail personnel.

Second, analysis on evaluations of the individual dimensions of salesperson credibility allowed looking deeper into the “building blocks” of the overall judgement about credibility. All the measured dimensions differentiated on at least one of the analyzed salespeople. The best overall evaluation of a younger male salesperson is derived from the high scores in experience, dynamism, sincerity and expertise dimensions. Part of this is rather controversial, since it is expected that experience and (partly) expertise typically are related with the elder age of a person [7].

Third, there are instances when judgments about credibility of salespeople depend on the buyer demographics: gender, age or their interaction. More specifically, we found that a younger female salesperson is the least suitable demographic type of a salesperson for younger men; while an elder female salesperson is the least suitable type of a salesperson for older men. To some extent, this goes into the contradiction with knowledge about the buyer-seller similarity and even with the similarity-attraction paradigm [8].

It is also disclosed that a younger male salesperson is the most appropriate demographic type of a salesperson for buyers who are relatively older, independent of their gender. The elder male salesperson also has been evaluated higher by the elder respondents. Perhaps, this could be interpreted by the fact that younger respondents (18-37 years old) generally tend to give lower evaluations across the board. This may be related with their more negative stereotypes about salespeople (majority of them have no experience of a similar type, see [15], or their service expectations differ from those of the other age groups [6]. However, these aspects are outside of the scope of this study.

In general, above mentioned observations are limited to the context of home furnishing products retailing, and broader conclusions require analyses in broader/different settings. Another limitation of this study is the disproportionate distribution of respondents among the demographic categories which had negative influence on value of the observed power. For the future studies of similar type, it would be very suggestible not just to balance up proportions of the sample, but also to increase the number of respondents in general, which enable using other types of the statistical analysis.

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**С. Урбонавічюс, В. Дікчюс, Дж. Рирдон.** Довіра до торгового персоналу в роздрібній торгівлі: судження на основі демографічних параметрів

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**Довіра до торгового персоналу в роздрібній торгівлі: судження на основі демографічних параметрів**

*Метою цієї статті є розширення наукового та управлінського знання про відповідність між покупцем і продавцем шляхом аналізу суджень покупців про торговий персонал, що базуються тільки на візуальній інформації. У ході дослідження респонденти оцінювали ступінь довіри до торгового персоналу, який різнився за статтю і віком. Респонденти пов'язували ці демографічні параметри з очікуваними професійними та особистісними характеристиками кожного продавця. Їх рішення були інтегровані у вимірювання загальної довіри до продавця. Аналіз даних дослідження дозволив зробити висновок, що вік і стать торгового персоналу мають важливий диференційований вплив на судження покупця про довіру до продавця в цілому, а також про окремі аспекти довіри. Крім того, це дозволило визначити випадки, коли судження про довіру до продавців залежить від демографічних характеристик покупця: статі, віку або їхнього поєднання.*

Ключові слова: торговий персонал, довіра, роздрібна торгівля, вік, стать, Литва.

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**Доверие к торговому персоналу в розничной торговле: суждения на основе демографических параметров**

*Целью данной статьи является расширение научных и управленческих знаний про соответствие между покупателем и продавцом методом анализа суждений покупателей про торговый персонал, которые базируются только на визуальной информации. В ходе исследования респонденты оценивали степень доверия к торговому персоналу, который отличался по полу и возрасту. Респонденты связывали эти демографические параметры с ожидаемыми профессиональными и личностными характеристиками каждого продавца, и эти решения были интегрированы в измерение общего доверия к продавцу. Анализ данных исследования позволил сделать вывод, что возраст и пол торгового персонала имеют важное дифференцированное влияние на суждение покупателя о доверии к продавцу в целом, а также про отдельные аспекты доверия. Кроме того, это позволило определить случаи, когда суждения про доверие к продавцу зависят от демографических характеристик покупателя: пола, возраста, либо их сочетания.*

Ключевые слова: торговый персонал, доверие, розничная торговля, возраст, пол, Литва.

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