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## **The announcement effect. The surreptitious construction of age discrimination in employment advertisements**

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### **Introduction**

Since the passing of the antidiscrimination law in France on November 16, 2001,<sup>1</sup> “no one may be excluded from a recruitment procedure [. . .] due to [. . .] their age.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this law, however, evidence of age-related employment discrimination continues, as has been revealed by three approaches developed by Delattre et al. (2013). In the first approach, which is indirect, statistical observations of indicators of success in the labor market, such as the rate of employment,<sup>3</sup> reveal a

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1. Law no. 2001-1066 relating to the fight against discrimination, JORF 267, November 17, 2001, p. 18311.
  2. Translator’s note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.
  3. According to the 2016 Eurostat “EU Labour Force Survey.”

significant gap between the success of 55–64-year-olds (49.8 percent) and that of 15–64-year-olds (64.2 percent), with discrimination believed to account for the gap. The second—experimental—approach involves the use of correspondence studies, also known as job interview access tests, which make it possible to identify the age of candidates and to establish that their age may be a reason for discrimination. For example, a study of 1,806 *résumés* sent in response to 258 sales job offers found that 75 percent of the responses were positive for the “reference candidate” (“male, French first and last name, residing in Paris, white, standard appearance”), while only 20 percent of the “applicants” were called for an interview when they were “[a] male, [with] French first and last names, residing [in] Paris, white, [presenting a] standard appearance and [aged] 50 years” (Amadiou 2004). The third approach is subjective: a number of quantitative surveys that measure discrimination in terms of perception or feeling indicate that age is the primary reason given by French people who have experienced discrimination in the workplace (ninth barometer of the Defender of Rights and the International Labour Organization, 2016); older people feel particularly exposed to discrimination (94 percent of those aged 50 and over, compared to 80 percent of those aged 25–34, according to the Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP) (French Institute of Public Opinion) (IFOP 2013).

While employment discrimination against those who are considered to be too young also deserves to be analyzed (Eckert and Primon 2011; Hidri Neys and Macé 2020, etc.), it must be noted that most judicial and extrajudicial cases apply to those who have been considered to be too old (Caradec, Lefrançois and Poli 2009; Rennes 2019, etc.). Age-related prejudices, conceptualized in the United States fifty years ago under the term of ageism (Butler 1969), may be based on a number of different ways of conceptualizing age: so-called civil or chronological age, when age limits are set for access to certain jobs; a person’s stage of life or a socially relegated category based on a statutory age; and/or the visible, physical signs of age (Rennes 2019).

Research in sociolinguistics has always taken an interest in the issue of age and its relationship with language—more frequently focusing on the language of “young people” (Auzanneau and Juillard 2012, for example) and assuming that “age by itself has no explanatory value; it is only when examined in the context of its social significance as something reflecting differences in life experiences that it becomes a useful analytic construct” (Milroy and Gordon 2003, 39). In this respect,

this article analyzes the ages implicitly suggested or rejected in the use of discursive strategies employed in job advertisements. The study brings to light ageist discrimination against applicants, even when no civil or statutory age is specified and before the employer can take into account an applicants' physical appearance (by means of a photograph in the application or in a job interview).

After presenting the characteristics of our fieldwork (in Section 1), we demonstrate the extent to which analysis of job advertisements is heuristic for understanding why older applicants may exclude themselves from the recruitment process of the company we studied (Section 2). Despite sticking to the letter of the French antidiscrimination legislation (Section 3), job advertisements appear to reflect an indirect, remote preselection process by the employer. We discovered two discursive practices: the use of the familiar form "tu," a departure from the formal form "vous" normally used in the vast majority of French texts directed at the public (Section 4), and the intensive use of sports metaphors and a certain blurring of the distinction between "doing a sport" and "being passionate about sport" (Section 5).

## **1. Employment of older employees in the retail sector**

### **1. 1. From young and willing workers to older workers**

The retail sector has historically been constructed around the figure of the keen young worker able to meet the physical demands of the activity; even today, workers aged 50 to 64 are underrepresented<sup>4</sup> among cashiers or self-service staff (16 percent) and salespeople (14 percent).

Fache and Waelli (2013) have shown that there are three reasons why the French retail sector has developed recruitment policies for employees aged 45 and over. First, companies face finance penalties if they do not meet legal requirements. Based on a report of the Fédération des entreprises du commerce et de la distribution (FCD), (Federation of retail companies), the authors show the extent to which 2009–2010 was a pivotal year, with the signing of a large number of "senior contracts" formalizing the short- and medium-term commitments of companies in the retail sector. During those years, "the Auchan group and the Carrefour hypermarkets signed a company agreement 'promoting the employment of older people' (2009); and

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4. According to the 2009 and 2010 "Enquête emploi" ("Labour Force Survey") carried out by INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies).

the Casino group announced a provisional plan to hire 500 employees aged 50 or over between 2010 and 2012” (Fache and Waelli 2013, 72). Second, companies wish to improve their image (Philonenko and Guienne 1998; Boussemart 2008) and promote themselves as employers of choice. Recruiting, incorporating, and retaining older workers thus becomes a way of making a virtue of necessity. Third, companies wish to improve their quality of service and boost client retention by employing salespeople who have similar characteristics to their customers, with more people now living longer. By responding to this desire for reflexive identification between the client and salesperson (Péretz 1992), the sector has taken into account that “since the year 2000, people aged 65 and over account for a significant proportion of the turnover of supermarkets (24.3 percent) and hypermarkets (16.3 percent)” (Tréguer 2002). This is an essential target market, especially if one takes into account that INSEE predicts that by 2060, one-third of French people will be aged 60 and over.<sup>5</sup>

As in the US, the French retail sector is one of the sectors that has made the most progress in this area (see Box 1) (Gallouj, Kaabachi and Laïb 2010).

Box 1  
**Employment in the retail sector in 2016**

Nearly 620,000 full-time employees in the sector, employed in 21,054 outlets

Between 2010 and 2018, employment grew by 5.3 percent (90,000 jobs)

Predominance of young people: 28 percent of the workforce under 30 years old

89 percent of staff have permanent contracts and 70 percent are full-time employees

Average age: 39.6 years in 2016

Average time in company: 13.8 years

Internal promotion: 60 percent of supermarket managers started out on the shop floor or as supervisors

Source: Observatoire prospectif du commerce, “Repères et tendances 2017”

5. According to the “Projection de la population 2007–2060” (2007–2060 population forecast) carried out by INSEE.

## 1. 2. Sports retail: An ideal focus of research

For the last ten years, researchers in the sociology of work and employment have studied the organization of work and human resources management policies in the so-called sports retail sector (stores such as Decathlon, Go Sport, etc.). We chose to study COMSPORT<sup>6</sup> because it has struggled to attract candidates over the age of 50, despite numerous attempts to do so (See Box 2).

### Box 2

#### Average age of COMSPORT employees (2010–2016)

“[In 2010] the average age is 29, and only 4 percent of employees are over 40 years old.” Source: Article published in *L'Express* [online]. Accessed March 11, 2020 at 11:01.

“[In 2011] the average age of the staff is no more than. . . 28 years old.” Source: [www.leparisien.fr/amp/economie/COMSPORT-11-06-2011-1489500.php](http://www.leparisien.fr/amp/economie/COMSPORT-11-06-2011-1489500.php), accessed March 1, 2020 at 11:19<sup>7</sup>

“[In 2014] on average, staff at COMSPORT stay for five and a half years. And only 5 percent of the staff are over 45, equating to 750 of its 15,000 French employees.” Source: Le Saint R. (2014), “Attirer les vieux dans une entreprise de jeunes.” Blog “Et voilà le travail. Chroniques de l'humain en entreprise”: <http://voila-le-travail.fr>, accessed March 1, 2020 at 10:20.

“[In 2016] more than 65 percent of people working for the group were between the ages of 20 and 29 [and] people over the age of 50 accounted for only 1.78 percent of the global workforce.” Source: Data relating to the HR policy of COMSPORT published on Statista. Accessed March 1, 2020 at 10:09.

Contrary to the findings of studies conducted among self-service employees (Bernard 2005; Hidri Neys 2013, etc.), the working conditions and salary offered by COMSPORT could well be attractive

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6. COM for “commerce,” and SPORT for “sporting goods and services.” The company’s real name remains confidential.
  7. Please note: These online sources were available at the time of writing the article, but are no longer accessible.

for older workers. The company offers mostly permanent thirty-five-hour contracts and working hours are regular: six to nine hours a day, no time clocks, same rest days every week, and unbroken shifts, etc. Salaries are fixed and, in addition to benefits and quarterly and/or annual bonuses, a share ownership scheme has been offered to company employees since 1985. These conditions have meant that COMSPORT has, on several occasions, been either a winner or one of the best ranked companies with over five thousand employees in the rankings of the Great Place to Work Institute.

All this, and the fact that COMSPORT's role as a benchmark has encouraged certain competing brands to copy its HR management policy (Dalla Pria and Leroux 2010), prompted us to consider the company as a good place in which to carry out our empirical research.

## 2. From “announcement effect” to “announcement effects”

Threatened repeatedly with being fined over the last ten years, COMSPORT has issued numerous announcements, or rather, “announcement effects.” As others have done in the past, COMSPORT has publicly and repeatedly stated its desire to recruit more mature workers:

Older people just don't apply spontaneously to work with us [. . .]. We have a very wide-ranging clientele, from grandchildren to grandparents, and our staff should reflect this. [. . .] The French population is getting older and our older customers would prefer to be served by someone who is more mature.

(Carine, 32 years old, in charge of diversity at COMSPORT)<sup>8</sup>

Carine's comment is an example of an announcement effect and implies that the problem can be easily solved. In reality, however, the problem has several dimensions which the speaker cannot influence herself. In other words, it is not a matter of just saying the right thing. There must be action as well. The particularly low average age of sales assistants at COMSPORT (Box 2) make it necessary to bridge the gap between “saying” and “doing.”

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8. See [www.leparisien.fr/amp/economie/COMSPORT-06-2011-1489500.php](http://www.leparisien.fr/amp/economie/COMSPORT-06-2011-1489500.php), accessed March 1, 2020 at 11:19.

The procedures for recruiting sales assistants at COMSPORT are highly standardized, with specific procedures for all jobs. The company employs two main channels for both fixed-term and permanent contracts. There are “spontaneous applications” and applications for jobs that have been advertised online or in the press. Like the majority of the companies surveyed in the “Job offer and recruitment” study carried out in 2005 (Garner and Lutinier 2006), the selection process employed by COMSPORT involves analysis of applicants’ résumés and covering letters followed by one or possibly two interviews if the application is taken further.

In order to study the role of age in the sports retailer’s HR management policies, we chose to focus on one of the first stages in the recruitment process, one that occurs “remotely” (Marchal 1999, 43) even before the employer and the applicants “meet” in writing or in person. We set out to understand whether COMSPORT explicitly specifies an ideal age expected of applicants and what it does (or fails to do) that results in only the youngest applicants joining the company.

Our hypothesis was that the discursive elements in the texts directed at the public,<sup>10</sup> in this case the job advertisements published by COMSPORT, result in the “paucity” of older workers, since the majority of older workers are “literally” unable to meet the expectations of the vacant positions. According to Rennes, this could be considered ageist discrimination, as these discursive elements run contrary to the principle of equal treatment by judging “an individual or a group to be too old [. . .] to have access to a social (material or symbolic) good, regardless of their aptitudes and interests” (Rennes 2019, 263). Based on a thematic analysis of the content of some thirty job advertisements published by the retailer and some twenty semi-structured interviews with HR managers and recruiters in operations (future colleagues, immediate supervisors, or store managers), this article examines the potential “announcement effects” that cause older workers to be stigmatized and discriminated against in the hiring process.

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9. It should be said that COMSPORT has online generic job descriptions that are copies of widely used specific job advertisements, but do not include the name of a store or the section area.
  10. A text directed at the public was offered to a number of largely anonymous readers: newspaper articles, advertising texts, user manuals, information notes, urban billboards, job advertisements, etc. For more information, see the special issue coordinated by Pires (2004a).

The job advertisements for sales personnel at COMSPORT all follow the same model (see Box 3). After the job title and some information about the position, there is a paragraph (line 3 to 6) about the company. A second paragraph (7 to 15) refers to the job description, while a third paragraph (16 to 22) describes the profile of the applicant sought. After listing a few “qualities,” the advertisement specifies the company’s interest in the applicant’s previous experience and level of education.<sup>11</sup>

Box 3  
Example of a job advertisement

**1 SALES ASSISTANT/GOLF PLAYER**

**2 TALK ABOUT SPORT IN YOUR APPLICATION!!**

3 At COMSPORT, our teams are committed to sport.

4 Our company values initiative as it enables everyone to do their bit and evolve. “Playing together”

5 is part of our DNA; we can only win together if we are a united and committed team.

**6 Join COMSPORT and you join a great place to work**

7 Come and share your passion for sport with a team that is united and motivated. Score points by

8 taking responsibility, expressing your sense of initiative, and helping to make sport accessible to all.

9 When you join, you will be working as both a sales assistant and a host

**10 You’ll need to use your interpersonal skills to do your job**

11 You’ll welcome our customers and tell them about our products, services, and innovations. You’ll check

12 whether products are available and stock shelves. You’ll have genuine opportunities on the playing field. Free to make your own decisions,

13 you’ll improve your game, allowing you to develop and manage your resources independently.

14 You’ll work closely with the section head who manages you and you’ll benefit from a

15 training plan to help you succeed in all you do.

11. See: <https://www.indeed.fr/jobs?q=COMSPORT&start=10&vj=718e4368303051fe>, accessed March 9, 2020 at 13:07.

16 **Profile sought: WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND YOU**

17 The sports you do and your sales experience are what interest us. You are passionate about sport, you have a taste for business, and you want to get ahead

18 with your first professional experience in this field. You enjoy being in the field,

19 advising users of all levels, and you are keen to share your passion and make sport accessible to

20 everyone. Your priority is making sure that the customer/sportsperson is satisfied! You are known for your team spirit

21 and your energy. You are responsible and organized, and you know how to give of your best in order to achieve your

22 ambitions.

23 **Qualities:** Self-starter, Welcoming, Passionate, All-rounder, Supply, Product knowledge, Sporting Relationship, Commitment to the Role

24 Local Sport

25 Experience: Not essential

26 Level of education: Unimportant

Since the comparative method has its virtues (Gasparini and Koebel 2015) and because it was deemed valuable to include retailers of non-sporting items in our study in order to measure the unique characteristics of the sports sector in this respect (Hidri Neys and Bohuon 2011), it seemed heuristic to include in our analysis sample job advertisements from other specialist retail chains (household appliances and multimedia; home improvement; games and toys; car maintenance and equipment, etc.), offering similar jobs and belonging to the same group. In this article, the job advertisement presented in Box 4 will serve as a typical example.

Box 4

**Example of a job advertisement**

1 **Sales assistant—COMBRICO**

2 COMBRICO has 27,000 employees and 140 home improvement stores in France.

3 The company specializes in DIY, building, garden, and home decoration. As a member of the sales team

4 (25 to 50 employees) of your store, your role is to help your customers find what they need

5 and make sure their shopping experience at COMBRICO is special. You will be assigned to one of the thirteen product areas

6 in the store and you will help your customers find what they need to carry out their home improvement projects.

**7 Your job as a sales assistant**

8 is to make sure that your customer has a great shopping experience. How will you do that?

9 By establishing a high-quality relationship with your customers in order to provide them with the best response to their needs;

10 By making sales that contribute to the store's performance;

11 By actively participating in group projects by suggesting new ideas;

12 By ensuring the quality, cleanliness, and safety of your department.

**13 Profile sought**

14 Dynamic, versatile, smiling, and a good listener!

15 Are you motivated by performance? Do you like rising to challenges and meeting objectives?

16 Endowed with excellent interpersonal skills, you like to help others and you are clearly customer-orientated.

17 More than a sales job, satisfying customers and coming up with new ideas will help you find

18 tailor-made solutions for your customers

19 If this job description fits you, then the job may be for you!

**20 Experience:**

21 Sales: 2 years (Desirable)

**3. No direct reference to age**

While COMSPORT job advertisements do not specify age, the 2001 French antidiscrimination law has not been sufficient to “clean up” job advertisements altogether. A pairwise comparison survey conducted by Amadiou (2004) revealed that age was frequently mentioned in job advertisements for salespeople. Of the 168 job advertisements published weekly in two job publications and two dailies, 28 of them (or 17 percent of the advertisements studied) specified an age range that excluded older candidates (see Box 5).

Box 5  
Example of a sales advertisement

Tour opérateur dans le secteur jeunes-linguistiques  
et centres de vacances, recherche

**ATTACHE COMMERCIAL/  
TRANSPORT H/F**

Prospection téléphonique, organisation du transport  
de nos séjours, assistance gares et aéroports.  
Maîtrise parfaite de l'outil informatique et internet,  
moins de 26 ans, permis B, Bac+2 de type BTS  
commercial ou équivalence. Dynamique.  
Disponibilité immédiate.

Source: Amadieu (2004)

The nature of the formal recruitment channel used by COMSPORT facilitates both self-selection of candidates and preselection by recruiters. Since it is true that job advertisements “operate like a filter and have an impact on selection” (Rieucou and Salognon 2013, 55–56), it is also true that at this stage of the analysis the young age of COMSPORT’s sales staff does not seem to be the result of preselection by the employer, but rather of self-exclusion by older candidates, since almost all applications come from young job seekers. At least, this is what all the comments made during the interviews suggest, as shown by this extract from an interview below:

No, it’s true, we don’t have any seniors in the company.

Is that deliberate?

No, you have to understand that not many seniors apply. I know that, because someone said in a meeting the other day that there are only young people here, nobody gray—

[interrupting] Gray?

Yes, old people (laughs). Gray hair, you know (laughs). It’s really noticeable. We talked about it a bit, but then we said that we only get résumés from young people, so naturally that’s reflected in the teams. But it’s definitely not our fault. I’ve been recruiting for seven years, and I’ve never had a résumé from a guy or a girl over 28 or 29 years old! Older people must think that this place isn’t for them. . . Or they just feel too old.

(Kenny, 29 years old, head of section)

And it is true that seniors who exclude themselves from the labor market—that is, those do not look for a job despite the fact that they would like to find one—do so because they think they will not be able to find one. The vast majority of those who are not looking for work “think they are (or think they are seen to be) too old to get a job”<sup>12</sup> This behavior reflects their feeling, either perceived or internalized, that age makes them unsuited to the labor market.

But why does this not also occur in the non-sports sector? In our study, we detected two discursive practices that may increase older people’s feeling of being unsuitable and prompt them not to apply for jobs.

#### 4. “TU”<sup>13</sup> times three

Numerous studies in linguistics have shown that the choice of terms of address in writing for the public is never completely benign. As in standard French, in which “the use of VOUS continues to predominate” (Coffen 2002, 237), texts aimed at the public make more extensive use of the formal VOUS than the informal TU. The first discourse strategy that we identified in our study was a preference for use of the TU form, which is amplified by three recurrent techniques: the use of exclamations, imperatives, and the TU form itself, which is repeated numerous times. This is unlike the job advertisements in the non-sporting retail sector shown in Box 4, in which the VOUS form is used. It is important to point out that the VOUS form in French can be used both as plural marker and to show respect to an individual; the VOUS here, however, should not be interpreted as a plural pronoun directed at more than one reader, but as a singular pronoun indicating respect directed at a single reader. This is indicated in the phrase “Vous êtes rattaché/e,” for example, in which there is no plural agreement in the past participle. How should one interpret COMSPORT’s departure from the standard form of address used in the vast majority of French public writings?

First, some studies have shown that the TU form is sometimes favored by writers as a relaxed and familiar discourse that is simple and truthful rather than respectful, flattering, or polite, a discourse that conveys cultural, social, and even professional solidarity (Pires 2004b). All of these

12. According to INSEE’s 2013–2015 “Labour Force Survey.”

13. When written in capital letters, the terms TU and VOUS refer to the lexical paradigms of the informal tu form, (tu, ton, tienne, viens, etc.) and the formal/polite form vous (vous, votre, vôtres, venez, etc.).

objectives are reflected in the comments made by Serge, a 54-year-old HR manager in France. For Serge, TU became widespread within the company because it referred to being “straightforward [. . .], which used to be one of the company values. This is no longer the case because we have reduced the number of values. But they used to include the value of being straightforward and authentic. It’s a bit like sports: when you have straightforward relationships on the field, it’s much friendlier, the game is better, generally, and you say things more frankly, more directly.”

When used among everyone in the company, the aim is to create a feeling of equality. These job advertisements seek to highlight the anti-hierarchical social dynamic showcased by the company. Indeed, according to them, you are “free to make your own decisions” and “you’ll improve your game, allowing you to develop and manage your resources independently.” COMSPORT’S opposition to the use of VOUS, which is associated with formality and power (Brown and Gilman 1960), helps it to stand out from competitors and to be represented publicly as a company in which future recruits will “join a great place to work” (Ughetto 2007).

Although TU is mainly used in writing for children, it has been used occasionally in French advertising since the 1980s. A study by Degoutte (1985, 46) of an advertisement by DIM showed that the aim of using TU was to bring out the complicity that already existed between the brand and its target market: women and especially young people. While the choice of terms of address “is obviously linked to both the age of the speaker and the interlocutor” (Gardner-Chloros 1991, 150), it is interesting to note that even though our interviews had been obtained in order to discuss recruitment in the retail sector, almost all of the interviews conducted began in the same way:

Hello Roman, thank you (VOUS) for your time, especially on your day off—

[Interrupting me] Hi, Maya, first of all, could you use TU with me because I don’t like being called VOUS, it makes me feel old (laughs).

(Roman, 24 years old, section head)

For the last twenty years, the “staging of offers” is a response to the “need to filter the applications and to assess what applicants can offer” (Marchal and Torny 2003, 59 and 65). The choice of TU is therefore also associated with the image of youth that COMSPORT wishes to project.

Last, in her analysis of the use of forms of address in French print media interviews, Claudel (2004) demonstrates how settings influence the choice of terms used. In water sports magazines, for example, the use of TU is common, whatever the status and the age of the interlocutor, because TU is used among people who do water sports. The choice of these terms of address in the job advertisements studied therefore involves a kind of complicity between the company and its pool of applicants. It encourages applicants to identify with the group, to “come and share your passion for sport with a team that is united and motivated,” to “work with people who understand you.”

This departure from the standard form of address used in the vast majority of French public writing, including the job advertisements of other specialized retail chains (see Box 4) inevitably makes an impact on readers, but how do they respond to it? Loffeier (2016, 80) showed that the use of TU with elderly people in retirement homes is strictly forbidden. According to institutional rules and professionals, only the use of VOUS provides “the ‘appropriate’ distanced and ‘respectful’ relationship” with elderly people. Although a few residents did wish to be called TU, their request was ultimately connected to wishing to create less formal relationships with the staff members in order to feel completely “at home.” This can hardly be said for potential job seekers.

### **5. Sport, sport, sport. . . but there’s a right way and a wrong way**

The second strategy involves the requirement for all job applicants to “talk about sport” in their applications. “The number one criterion” in the sports retail sector in the analysis of résumés and the theme most frequently explored during job interviews were applicants’ regular participation in a sporting activity, even though the means of evaluating this selection criterion is problematic (Hidri Neys and Bohuon 2008). Companies have recently modified this criterion in their job offers: it is no longer possible to say that applicants must *do* a sport regularly, but they should be “passionate about sport”; recruitment rationales and practice are now based on a philosophical vision of the virtues of sport and their transferability to the business world. The sporting metaphors in use at COMSPORT are based on the company’s desire to inspire prospective employees by guaranteeing that newcomers will “work with people who understand you.” Sales personnel, for example, will have the opportunity to “play as a team” on “[their] playing field,” to “improve [their] game,” to “score points” in order to be able to progress. The use of sports metaphors in HR management policies

is not unprecedented (Pichot 2000) nor only used by companies in the sports market: COMBRICO (see Box 4), for example, asks if you are “dynamic,” “motivated by performance,” and if you “like rising to challenges,” evidence of the powerful influence of the neo-management of the 1990s, which bought into the ideology of performance (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) in the labor market.

The use of sports metaphors, however, takes on a particular meaning in a company whose employees are recruited for their “sports profile.” Analysis of the company’s job advertisements reveals a blurring of the lines between the two requirements: participation in sport, on the one hand (“Salesperson/Golf player” in the job title), and the requirement to be “passionate about sport” in the applicant profile, on the other. This supposed distinction was not respected, however, in the interviews with the company’s recruiters. The following interview excerpts confirm that being active in sport is essential:

You have to be sporty?

Yes, sport is in our DNA. That’s not going to change.

Let me ask you an awkward question then: how does being sporty make you a better salesperson?

We are passionate about the products we sell, and the way we relate to customers is by sharing our passion rather than as salespersons to customers [. . .]. We talk to each other as sportsman to sportsman.

(Serge, 54 years old, HR director, France)

I like my guys to do sport at a high level. Not necessarily on the French team, but an excellent level nonetheless.

For example?

Well, for tennis, there’s a guy in our sales team who’s fifteen. I like my salesmen to have a reputation, because they quickly make a name for the team in the department, and when they take part in competitions on the weekend, when they win, people notice them and very quickly, customers find out they work for us and they come back. You see, to answer your earlier question, doing sport is essential for me, yes, but not on the weekend with grandma, jogging along the canal, that’s for the wrinklies, it’s boring; competitive sport, really going for it, that’s exciting.

(Alexandre 26 years old, head of section)

The fact that the company's HR management policy makes doing a "sport" a precondition for being hired is not without consequences, especially if one accepts that active involvement in sport decreases as one gets older.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, involvement in a federation and/or competitive sports, which Alexandre (26 years old, section head) is particularly enthusiastic about, goes down with age (see Table 1), as sportspeople engage in fewer institutionalized activities as they get older (Burlot and Lefevre 2009). Deliberately or not, COMSPORT communicates an ageist culture through its job advertisements.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1 – Sportspeople aged 15–54 and 55–75

	In percent					
	Women		Men		Total	
	15–54	55–75	15–54	55–75	15–54	55–75
Do sport at least once a week	72*	80	67	80	70	80
Belong to a club	34	22	24	16	29	19
Belong to a federation	34	21	16	9	26	15
Take part in competitions	38	15	14	3	27	9

Source: Survey MJS/INSEP, July 2000

Note: \*Out of 100 men aged 15 to 54 who said they did physical activity or sport, 72 did so at least once a week.

14. Physical and sporting activity is undertaken by 61 percent of 15–24-year-olds, 44 percent of 25–39-year-olds, 40 percent of 40–54-year-olds, 33 percent of 55–69-year-olds, and 22 percent of 70-year-olds and over, according to the Eurobarometer report on "Sport and Physical Activity." Fieldwork 2009. Publication 2010.

15. It is interesting to note the atypical nature of COMSPORT job advertisements. If we look at advertisements for sales staff for other brands, there is no expectation that the applicant should either be passionate about or engage actively in the specialist activity: multimedia; home improvement; games and toys; car maintenance and equipment, etc.). Moreover, the recruitment of a salesperson for the COMBRICO chain does not require the applicant to specialize in one of the store's thirteen product areas (see Box 4).

By deliberately describing their salespersons as “salespersons who do [a certain] sport,” the COMSPORT’s recruitment policy is reminiscent of the policy of X FRANCE SAS.<sup>16</sup> In an official investigation by the Defender of Rights, X FRANCE SAS, whose main activity is the retail sale of women’s and men’s clothing, justified taking physical appearance into account in the recruitment of its salespersons—appropriately named “models”—saying that it was an “essential and crucial professional requirement.”<sup>17</sup> However, after conducting an investigation and hearing an expert opinion, the Defender of Rights found that the representation activity of the company’s salespersons was only incidental and that their job was more closely related to sales than to modeling as such. It therefore considered that physical appearance could hardly constitute an essential and crucial requirement for staff recruitment at X FRANCE SAS and with regard to the reality of the actual job of the salespeople, the use of this criterion was disproportionate (Hidri Neys and Duflos 2017).

### Conclusion

When the law of November 16, 2001<sup>18</sup> was about to come into force, National Assembly report no. 2609 invited deputies to be aware of the fact that “discrimination does not necessarily take the form of harsh decisions [ . . . ] it often takes the form of innocuous measures, which, when repeated on a regular basis for years, lead to profound differences between entire groups of employees” (Vuilque 2000, 16). Although the job advertisements analyzed in this article comply with French antidiscrimination legislation, with no mention of civil, statutory, and/or physical age, they do a number of things that create a portrait of the applicants who are best suited for the post (Benguigui 1981) and, on the flip side, those that are not. These include the deliberate use of informal form TU; the use (and abuse) of sports metaphors; the blurring of the lines between the need to be “passionate” about sport and to “do” a sport; the redefinition of job titles; and the blending of “work

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16. The anonymity of the company in question is also respected. For more information on this case regarding employment discrimination based on physical appearance, which was referred to the Human Rights Defender, please refer to “Décision du Défenseur des droits, MLD-2014-147, November 3, 2014.”

17. Law of May 27, 2008, Code du travail, article L.1132-1

18. Law no. 2001-1066 relating to the struggle against discrimination, JORF 267, November 17, 2001, p. 18311.

and passion for sports in employees who are generally young and do sport” (Gasparini 2004, 53).

Consciously or unconsciously, the company’s atypical job advertising practices play a role in limiting the number of older candidates, even before the selection process has begun. Since job advertisements should enable “applicants to adapt to meet demand” (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997, 54), it is hard to believe that these discursive practices have no impact on those who read them or that they do not lead to older job seekers feeling that they are not suited for the jobs offered. In fact, job descriptions and advertisements always have an impact on the selection process: the “remote” competition between applicants is a means of selection in itself. This article shows how behind seemingly neutral practices, management ideology (i.e., the worldview and belief system at work in the company’s management tools) is likely to disadvantage older job seekers. This is clearly indirect discrimination, as the company is operating forms of classification, hierarchization, and domination based on age differences between individuals (Rennes 2019) without even specifying the threshold it considers to be the limit between being an “adult” and being “old.” The investigation of sales job advertisements produced and disseminated by COMSPORT thus produces evidence of discrimination at work, thereby increasing employment vulnerability—namely, the reduction of older workers’ chances of access to employment, to the resources, and to the social protections that work would enable them to accumulate (Ledrut 1966).

This investigation opens stimulating perspectives, since job advertisements belong in the arsenal of company managerial devices—a coherent system of techniques and discourses aimed at shaping executives’ practices and representations to the company’s wishes. It therefore appears to be heuristic to study age in all aspects of recruitment of COMSPORT.

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### Abstract

For twenty years, France's antidiscrimination legislation has prohibited, among other things, age discrimination in the hiring of new employees. However, discrimination on the basis of "being too old" remains a social reality. The average age of sales staff in large, so-called "sporting" goods outlets is low, making them an appropriate terrain for empirical research. Through a thematic analysis of the content of thirty employment advertisements and twenty semi-structured interviews with "recruiters," we highlight the way in which these advertisements exercise a preemptive stigmatization of, and discrimination against, the hiring of older workers. The article shows that the

formal channels of recruitment are in fact a continuation of a prior selection process instigated by the employers, indirectly, and remotely. The two main discursive methods deployed for this purpose are the use of the informal “tu,” which departs from the standard form of address in French public documentation, and the frequent and ambiguous use of sporting metaphors: “practice,” “passion,” and so forth.

**Keywords:** employment advertisements, discrimination, being too old, forms of address, sport, large retail outlets