

**‘Who’s Got The Look?’:
Emotional, Aesthetic and Sexualized Labour in Interactive Services**

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Abstract

This article examines sexualized work and, more particularly, how and why, at the organizational level in interactive services, employees become sexualized labour. In doing so it assesses the thin line between ‘selling service’ and ‘selling sexuality’. The analysis revisits existing literature on emotional labour, organizational aesthetics and workplace sexuality, noting the common concern in these literatures with employee ‘looks’. The article argues that current conceptualization of interactive services and sexualized work is partial and blunt; either not adequately incorporating employee corporeality or failing to distinguish between the different forms of sexualized work. The article argues that better conceptualization is enabled by incorporating aesthetic labour into the analysis, demonstrating how aesthetic labour is extended to sexualized labour through organizational demand for corporate ‘looks’. From this analysis a double shift is argued to be needed to understand sexualised work – a conceptual one from emotional through to aesthetic and sexualized labour; and a second one focussing on managerial engagement from sanctioned and subscribed to strategic employee sexuality.

Keywords: sexualized labour, aesthetic labour, emotional labour, employee appearance, interactive service work.

Introduction

If sex is, as Burrell (1984: 115) states, ‘a major driving force behind human endeavour’ and sex also sells, it is not surprising that organizations are *situs* of employee sexualization and that this sexualization is used by organizations as a source of commercial benefit. However there is a range of sex *and* work. At one end is sex *in* work (for example sexual harassment and office romances), at the other sex *as* work (for example prostitution). Both can involve consensual and coerced sexualization. Bridging the two poles is *sexualized work*. This work is not inherently sexual but can be imbued with sexuality, and for a number of reasons. This article examines how and why work becomes sexualized, focusing on employees at the organizational level in interactive services.

The analysis draws upon aesthetic labour. The dominant paradigm in interactive services of emotional labour is useful in highlighting the attempt to capture and shape employees feelings but, as this article indicates, its dominance colonises some issues and crowds out others. Two important issues that are crowded out are employee corporeality and the sexualization of employees - despite Hochschild (1983) signalling the importance of bodily displays within emotional labour and how emotional labour can feature sexiness. These issues are more usually addressed through what is often a parallel but rarely intersecting literature on the gendering of interactive service work. Again this literature is useful, particularly in revealing male behaviour - both management and worker - towards women within organizations (for example Adkins, 1995). Nevertheless, whilst it recognizes that work can be sexualized, this sexualization is cast as covert and, even if overt, is an informal rather than formalized feature of work and employment. The problem is that the framework of analysis is conceptually blunt, unable to distinguish between employee sexualization that is *driven by employees for employees* and that which is *driven by organizations for commercial benefit*. As a consequence, this literature is unable to adequately discern the point at which employee sexualization shifts from being informal to formal. Incorporating aesthetic labour into the analysis, this article argues, enables a conceptual shift in analysis of employee looks and the prescribing of these looks as sexual and so how managerial engagement of employee sexuality also shifts.

Aesthetic labour foregrounds embodiment, revealing how employee corporeality, not just feelings, are organizationally appropriated, transmuted and controlled for commercial benefit. This embodiment is intended to appeal to the senses of customers, creating affective service interaction based, typically, on having employees perceived to be ‘good looking’ or simply having the ‘right look’. By focusing on these ‘looks’ it is possible to identify how aesthetic labour extends to sexualized labour. As this article demonstrates, in prescribing the ‘look’ of employees, some organizations then further refining their desired corporate image to include the mobilization, development and commodification of employee sex appeal. Through the lens of aesthetic labour, therefore, it is possible to re-interpret existing literature on employee sexualization in interactive services to demonstrate how ‘selling the service’ becomes ‘selling sexuality’ (Filby, 1992).

Centring employee looks into the analysis requires the boundaries and overlaps between emotional and aesthetic labour, and aesthetic labour and sexualized labour to be explored. It also requires recognition of the differing forms of employee sexuality in the workplace. The article outlines firstly the interface between emotional and aesthetic labour, then the relationship between aesthetics and sexuality in the workplace. The article then demonstrates how aesthetic labour becomes recast as sexualized labour. Finally, in its concluding remarks and emerging from the analysis, the article suggests a number of areas for future research.

From Emotions to Emotional Labour and Aesthetic Labour

Current approaches to the study of interactive service jobs are dominated by the emotional labour paradigm. Hochschild's (1983) benchmark work has established the terms of analysis of employees' work and employment in these jobs, spawning a mini-industry of research and literature that seeks to apply her concept or critique it (for a review, see Bolton, 2005). It is an approach that is insightful in identifying and foregrounding the study of workplace emotions, the organizational management of emotions and the emotion work required of employees. No longer are organizations regarded as dispassionate, with emotions 'excluded' and 'avoided', as Bolton notes. This recognition that emotions pervade organizations is long overdue. Despite recent interest in emotions as a feature of service jobs, emotions were displayed in manufacturing too and had effects on the employing organization. Baldamus' (1961) classic *Efficiency and Effort* noted that manufacturing workers can have differing 'emotional attitude' such as 'annoyance' with production and which can affect job performance (p.61). The occupational communities literature, typically focused on primary industry, also noted the emotional ties that bind worker to job and worker to workers (Warhurst, 1996), often providing what are now cast within the emotional labour literature as 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003). Often the emotions identified in this earlier literature were beyond the direction of management, and sometimes served to circumvent or undermine managerial control. Thus far from being emotionless, workplaces have always been and continue to be infused with emotions here, there and everywhere, even if much of this emotionality has been implicit (Bolton, 2000).

Such emotionality has to be disentangled, conceptually and empirically, from emotional labour, which specifically features interaction between employee and customer, the inducing of emotional states in customers and the managerial manipulation and regulation of employees' emotion work with the purpose of creating commercial benefit for the organization. Emphasis focuses on the appropriation and transmutation of employee feelings by organizations, which then create 'feeling rules' that prescribe required employee emotional engagement with customers. Employees in interactive services have to be 'positive, joyful and even playful' for example, suggests Burns (1997: 240). To do so, employees need emotion management skills (Bolton, 2004) and it is these skills that dominate academic and policy attention with regard to the 'soft skills' needed to affect efficacious customer service (see for example Burns, 1997 and Futureskills Scotland, 2002). Moreover there is a particular feature of these soft skills that tends to receive most attention – attitudes; with these attitudes as proxy indicators of employees

having or being able to display the 'right' emotions (see for example Callaghan and Thompson, 2002).

However, an analytical double squeeze is occurring: emotional labour colonises comprehension of soft skills and soft skills become equated with attitudes. Conceptually and empirically other soft skills are crowded out of the analysis, even in cases in which their existence is noted. For example, Bain (2001) has noted the attempt by some call centre employers in the US to 'train out' certain accents deemed undesirable in agents although this managerial intervention is unexplored. As this example indicates interactive service organizations are not just concerned with the attitudes of their employees but also how these employees appear to customers, visually or aurally for example. It is not only how workers feel but also how they look that concerns management. These requirements are particularly prevalent in interactive services such as the retail and hospitality industries, as research is beginning to demonstrate. A UK Hospitality Training Foundation (2000) survey of the key skills regarded by employers as important now and in the foreseeable future rated attitudes *and* appearance as most important. A detailed account of the importance of attitude and appearance as the soft skills demanded by UK retail and hospitality employers and its conformation by employees can also be found in Nickson *et al.* (2005) and Warhurst and Nickson (2007) respectively. This demand is not confined to the UK. A survey of nearly 100 human resource professionals responsible for hiring entry-level hospitality industry employees in the US revealed that the top two criteria were 'pride in appearance' and 'good attitude' (Martin and Grove, 2002). Research on skill demands in Australia too, revealed that employers want the 'right attitude' and, to varying degrees, the 'correct look' for their customer-facing employees (Jackson and Briggs, 2003).

It is this other soft skill, turned as such by management, which is the analytical concern with aesthetic labour. This labour refers to the hiring of people with corporeal capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customer senses and which are then organizationally mobilized, developed and commodified through training, management and regulation to produce an embodied style of service. It has become popularly translated as those people who are employed on the basis of 'looking good' and/or 'sounding right'. Having such staff, employers believe, not only helps companies create a distinct image but also provides competitive advantage for these companies. Companies want employees with a particular look - the 'right look' - or who are perceived simply to be good looking - and not unusually both. These two requirements were revealed respectively by one manager in discussing her company's recruitment and selection when she said that the company wanted 'people that look the part ... fit in with the whole concept of the hotel' and by a bar manager, also female, when she explained that 'if you've got nice looking staff then it brings in people [customers]' (cited in Nickson and Warhurst, 2007: 156). These organizations often claim to be responding to customer demand and, indeed, one customer survey reported in *Caterer & Hotelkeeper* (1997) claimed good-looking staff to be the most important priority for customers. The mobilization, development and commodification of employees corporeality is thus a corporate strategy, featuring in *some* employers' work and employment requirements. Employees are, for example, hired because of the way they look and talk; once employed,

staff are instructed how to stand whilst working, what to wear and how to wear it and even what words to say to customers because such comportment, dress and language appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously visually or aurally (Nickson *et al.*, 2001).

The initial research of Warhurst and Nickson *et al.* focused on what has been termed the 'style labour market' but even in the pilot study reported in Nickson *et al.* (2001) it was apparent that the success of companies drawing upon this style labour market was creating 'demonstration effects' for other, more prosaic, high street retailers and hospitality outlets. These companies too were beginning to use employee corporeality to appeal aesthetically to customers. The now emerging 'case study' type literature on aesthetic labour (for example Pettinger, 2004; Spiess and Waring, 2005) emphasizes this point, suggesting that companies use their employees' corporeality to create a 'look' that can help brand those companies.

Aiming to affect the desired service encounter, employers therefore demand not just emotional but also aesthetic labour. With emotional labour, employers attempt to appropriate, transmute and control employees' feelings for commercial benefit. The same is true with aesthetic labour and employees' corporeality. However, although conceptually distinct, empirical disentangling can be difficult. The overlap is highlighted in Rafaeli and Sutton's (1987: 33) contention that 'emotional performance typically involves a complex combination of facial expression, body language, spoken words and tone of voice'. The boundary should be an important analytical focus, for embodiment is continually evoked in the emotional labour literature, as Witz *et al.* (2003) note. Part of Hochschild's (1983: 7) core definition of emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' exemplifies this point. Employees' corporeality, involving bodily displays, is a crucial element of emotional labour, as Hochschild notes. Indeed, management prescribe 'display rules' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) to make manifest required emotions. These display rules intentionally embody employees' required emotions, whether real or affected. For example smiling as an indication of friendliness or standing with uncrossed arms to indicate openness. Moreover, these display rules create 'looks' that are a key feature of 'the emotional style of ... the service' according to Hochschild (1983: 5). Moreover, with different 'looks' companies can create different styles of service or products. In the *Managed Heart*, Hochschild notes that there are varying forms or 'ideal types' of emotional labour: 'sophisticated' and 'neighbourly' for example, and which represent different 'company personalities' targeting different 'market segments' (p.97). That companies position themselves with different product offerings targeted at particular market niches, with a typology of 'looks' embodying this positioning, is a recognized feature of marketing practice. Unfortunately, the embodiment involved in producing these styles of service is raised but not explored with emotional labour. The problem is that, with display rules, emphasis is placed on feelings rather than corporeality. As a consequence, embodiment is analytically retired. Foregrounding this embodiment reveals not only how emotionality and corporeality are linked by extension but also provides an opportunity to better understand how employee sexuality can be turned as a labour strategy.

Aesthetics and Sexuality at Work

Typically, aesthetics and organization are narrowly articulated, with aesthetics equated only with corporate hardware - product design and physical environment for example, as Rafali and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) exemplify. Such organizational artefacts create affective events that provoke sensory reactions; in other words manipulate customers' emotions. Drawing on the work of Olins, Witz *et al.* (2003) refer to this articulation as the 'aesthetics of organization'. They note that a key development in this articulation is the shift in emphasis by organizations to include employees as 'human hardware' through the appropriation, transmutation and control of employee corporeality. Employees become 'walking billboards' to use Zeithaml and Bitner's (2003: 318) phrase, deliberately aestheticized, becoming organization artefacts also intended to evoke sensory affect in customers.

This development recognizes the already existing use of aesthetic attributes and capacities *by employees for employees* in the workplace. This 'aesthetics in organization' comprises a range of behaviours, most usually associated with 'getting in' and 'getting on' in organizations, as potential and existing employees present themselves through comportment – posture, gesture, use of personal space, facial characteristics and eye contact for example – at interviews and during meetings for personal gain (Huczynski, 1996). Popular business literature casts this comportment as 'impression management' or 'non-verbal influencing' between organizational members. In addition to comportment, dress codes also feature in this literature. 'Dress to impress' is the advice offered by James (1999) for example; listing the do's and don'ts of suits, shirts and ties for men, and jackets, skirts, pantyhose and tops for women. Elsewhere 'voice matching' is encouraged, as is the use of particular words to elicit rapport from co-workers (O'Connor and Seymour, 2002). That both sexes are similarly exhorted - and for the same reason - should not be over-looked. Evidence from the US and the UK reveals that for both male and female employees in all sectors, being perceived to be attractive enhances pay and career prospects (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Harper, 2000 respectively). As a general piece of advice therefore, Davies suggests that 'in the way that manufacturers pay great attention to the packaging of products in order to get us to buy them, we need to attend to our "packaging" if we want to "sell" ourselves to others, and get them to take a closer look at what's inside' (1990: 75).

Getting other people to take a 'closer look' also pervades the 'mating manoeuvres on company time', as Donald Roy so succinctly put it (quoted in Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 121). Thus, in addition to 'getting in' and 'getting on', aesthetics in organizations involves employees 'getting off' with other employees (to use the Northern English vernacular).¹ That is, in the organizational setting, employees present themselves in particular ways – through dress, comportment and language (Quilliam, 1997) – in order to appeal to the senses of work colleagues in pursuance of sexual engagement or, in nicer parlance, 'office romance' (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2004). This *sex in work* has proved problematic during the early days of industrial capital; viewed at best as disruptive, at worst as morally corrupting. In the past organizations were thus concerned to separate the labouring and libidinous capacities of the body and suppress or eradicate

the latter. This desexualization of labour required the stripping out of emotion from organizations - most particularly through bureaucratic organization (Burrell, 1984). The futility of this approach is today recognized. In a US survey reported by Bolchover (2005) 20 per cent of respondents claimed to have had full sex whilst at work, with 44 per cent of men and 35 per cent of women having had at least some sexual contact. According to IRS (2000), whilst the majority of UK employees disapproved of overt sexual activity in the workplace, the majority of survey respondents were comfortable with flirting and almost 40 per cent are or had been involved in workplace romantic or sexual relationships. This estimate is cautious given that such relationships are often covert but echoes Kakabadse and Kakabadse's (2004) international study in which the authors conclude that the workplace is 'a common meeting ground for romantic liaisons' (p.42).

Some of this sexualized employee interaction is a form of resistance by employees intent on re-appropriating time and identity from their employers and sometimes contributes to employees' undermining of managerial control (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). As such, appealing to the senses of other employees, through flirting for example, is behaviour used to create less boring and less bureaucratic, more exciting and more personal workplaces (Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2004; Pringle, 1988). For some workers sexualising employee interaction, is not merely impression management but a tactic intended to enhance jobs and careers. Both Gutek (1985) and Backhouse and Cohen (1980) note female employees who use sex as a commodity in exchange for rewards or to lever gain in the workplace; expectations however which are often unfulfilled. However, it can also be an expression of genuine 'mating' needs and desires, with the workplace as a surrogate dating agency. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (2002), the greater proportion of sexual relationships amongst workplace colleagues result in marriage.²

There might be a number of common features or contextual factors that enable or disable sexualized employee interactions. Ackroyd and Thompson suggest opportunity, proximity and unrestrained contact. Bunting (2004) argues that with employees working longer and more intensely, there is increased need and desire for employees to find fulfilment, friendships and affirmation in their jobs that can lead to sexual intimacy. Kakabadse and Kakabadse likewise note opportunity and the influence of longer and more intensive work but suggest that both are underpinned by changes in societal norms and values. Fox (2004) is more pragmatic, suggesting workplaces in which employees are sociable, have shared interests and in which alcohol is present. The latter especially necessary for the inhibited English, she claims. These last two points - national specificity and alcohol - will be revisited later. All factors suggest however that there are possible variations in the extent to which workplaces are sexualized.

With aesthetics in organizations, employees aesthetically develop and mobilize their corporeality to get in, get on and/or get off. Embodied attributes and capacities are used to affect the senses of the receiver and to 'add value' to create differentiation amongst employees. Employees, potential and existing, present themselves on the basis that, in the words of Mae West 'It's better to be looked over than overlooked' (quoted in James,

1999: 7). However, the important point to be emphasized is that this aesthetic labouring is for employees' own benefit: to enhance personal employability, pay and career or the attraction of a 'mate'; it is not deployed for the commercial benefit of the company.

As organizations seek to mobilize, develop and commodify employees' corporeality, these employees become part of the 'aesthetics of organization' and a particular labour strategy is being pursued by employers - aesthetic labour. Significantly, because employee aesthetic labouring extends into getting off, not just getting in and on, it is reasonable to assume that such labouring might also be appropriated and transmuted as sexualized labour intended for commercial benefit. In this way employee looks become sexualised as an organizationally-prescribed style of service. Through a more detailed review and discussion of the sex at work literature, the next section of the article explores this possibility.

From Appeal to the Senses to Sex Appeal

Despite attempts to desexualize work, just as with emotions, 'sexuality is suddenly found to be everywhere' (Thompson and McHugh, 2002: 141). The difference however is that unlike emotions (Bolton, 2000), there has yet to be a conceptualization of *sexualized work* that adequately differentiates between forms of employee sexuality that are employee-driven and those that are, importantly, organizationally-driven, with this conceptual bluntness most salient in analyses of interactive service jobs. Drawing on the discussion in the previous section, this section offers that conceptualization. It suggests three forms of sexualized work – that which is *sanctioned by management*, that which is *subscribed to by management* (and both employee-driven) and that which is a *management strategy* (and organizationally-driven). It is the latter, we argue, that is intended to create a distinctive, prescribed sexualized 'look' as a style of service. It is these three forms of sexualized work that this section of the article now outlines.

The previous section of this article explored how employees sexualize themselves through their aesthetic labouring for personal benefit, most obviously through their comportment, language and dress. Such inter-employee interactions seemingly pervade all workplaces. That employees can mobilize and develop their own sexuality through aesthetic labouring is also apparent in their interactions with customers. Even in the 1830s, as gin palaces and pubs developed in urban areas, Kirkby (1997) notes the sexualization of barmaids, who were seen as an 'allurement' and 'seducer' but only in 'hindsight', and not as a deliberate employer strategy. This lack of managerial intervention was still apparent in the 1950s. C. Wright Mills, in his classic *White Collar* (1951) for example, notes an increasing customer-orientation on the part of organizations and how a 'personality market' was emerging amongst employees. Amongst his seven 'personality' types, he identified 'the charmer': a female department store worker who 'focuses the customer less upon her stock of goods than upon herself ... attract[ing] the customer with modulated voice, artful attire and stance' (p.175). The particular department store worker cited by Mills was deliberate and explicit in how she described her aesthetic labouring in her approach to sales work:

It's really marvellous what you can do in this world with a streamlined torso and a brilliant smile. People do things for me, especially men when I give them that slow smile and look up through my lashes. I found that out long ago, so why should I bother about a variety of selling techniques when one will do the trick? I spend most of my salary on dresses which accentuate my goods points. After all a girl should capitalize on what she has, shouldn't she? And you'll find the answer in my commission total each week. (p.175)

Clearly this sexuality is driven by the employee and seems not to be organizationally prescribed. Mills does briefly discuss the selection, training and supervision of employees, but these processes, as with the concept of the 'personality market' centres on what is now referred to as emotional labour. For example, supervision is intended to enforce employees being 'friendly, helpful, tactful and courteous' to customers (p. 183). Employee appearance, sexualized or otherwise, has disappeared from Mills' analysis and seemingly escapes organizational intervention. It is perhaps noted by the organization as well as the researcher for its outcomes but organizational intervention is absent; a sexualized encounter between employee and customer is permitted but not promoted or prescribed. It is *sanctioned* sexuality that occurs in spite rather than because of management; recognised and passively accepted by management.

It might be that Mills analysis is time-bound, with organizational sanction of employees' sexualized customer interaction a feature of, as yet, under-developed customer orientation. Mills recognizes that his analysis was being undertaken at a time when customer service orientation was only just emerging. That a shift in organizational orientation to employee sexuality was emerging is exemplified in Albert Mills' work. He suggests that over the 1950s and 1960s airlines began to sexualize their stewardesses, mainly through their advertising and marketing (Mills, 1996).

More recent research suggests that some organizations now *subscribe* to their employees' sexuality, with management actively assenting to but not appropriating employee sexuality. Filby (1992) is illustrative in this respect. He noted how employees, with 'sexy chat', embraces and kisses amongst each other and with customers, deliberately sexualize the service encounter. This sexualization enlivens otherwise 'tiring, tedious and repetitive' work (p.29), he says. Although Filby notes that management again recruit particular 'personalities', it is clear that this sexualized language and comportment is not organizationally prescribed. Indeed, at times this sexuality is a form of employee resistance, 'directed to undermining authority' (p.34). Management appreciate, however, that this sexuality does have commercial benefit by creating affective events that provoke sensory reactions from customers: bolstering regular customers' esteem by 'playing up to their foibles and interests' (p.30). Nevertheless management do not mobilize, develop or commodify this sexuality. Instead, they subscribe to it: permitting and if possible promoting it. Whereas organizations that sanction employees sexuality do so passively, seemingly some employers actively encourage it, but do not control it; it is at best '*implicitly* constructed by management' (p.29 emphasis added). Resultantly, in Filby's betting shop at least, such behaviour reveals 'the tenuous grasp of management over the use of sexuality as a resource for commercial purposes' (p.30). Indeed, when a new

manager arrives, he is quick to condemn this sexuality. Unwilling to subscribe to it, he terminates it. The important point here is that employee sexualized service interactions again lack organizational prescription. Employees are selected because they had the right ‘personalities, because they were attractive and could perform’ (p.36) but once at work this performance was beyond the control of management. As Filby comments:

The management problem is having unleashed ‘personality’ and, *implicitly*, sexuality there are no obvious ways of calibrating it and providing staff with benchmarks of what is and what is not acceptable. While it is possible to monitor cash flow and slippage handled by individual staff, it is virtually impossible to monitor emotional or personality work.³

This subscribing seems to be the dominant form of sexualized service interaction in the literature. However there are attempts by organizations to mobilize and develop employee sexuality that, whilst explicit, are limited. One example is that of clothing. Whilst ‘talk is the main way in which “sex” and sexuality are constituted in the workplace’ Filby maintains, as did C. Wright Mills, this ‘sexuality is also embodied in gaze, comportment and clothing’ (1992: 29). Such clothing, as workwear, features heavily in some service organizations’ prescription of appearance standards and dress codes for both men and women (IRS, 2005). Sometimes, but not always, these appearance rules can mobilize and develop employee sexuality. Adkins (1995) is one of several authors who recognize how such rules create an ‘attractive’ or appealing employee appearance. Usually it is young women who are so sexualized. Hall (1993: 456) notes how ‘Hiring young attractive women and dressing them in uniforms to highlight their “sexy” looks is commonplace.’ Adkins (1995) also reports how managers in the leisure organization she studied would require female workers to wear their dresses off their shoulders. She even notes how male managers would sometimes physically pull down these dresses into that position. In this way potentially neutral dress and appearance standards are sexualized by managerial intervention. However, these interventions to prescribe employee sexuality are limited.

These limitations occur because organizations fear breaching sex discrimination legislation or incurring action from trade unions; in both cases organizations being accused of sexism (see for example, Clement, 1997 and Mills, 1998). Thus although some organizations recognize the commercial benefit of mobilising and developing employee sexuality, these organizations are reluctant to do so in ways that might suggest a deliberate corporate strategy. More recent research on the sexualization of airline stewardesses claims this sexualization to be organizationally-prescribed and so a corporate strategy but evidence of organizational intervention is again limited, tending to extend only to recruitment and selection (Hancock and Tyler, 2000; Tyler and Abbott, 1998; and Tyler and Taylor, 1998). The exchange of aesthetics is a ‘gift exchange’ that is beyond contract. Indeed Hancock and Tyler explicitly state it to be a ‘somewhat “invisible” labour process ... one which was neither remunerated nor particularly acknowledged as labour by management, clients or even the [flight] attendants themselves’ (p.120). With aesthetic labour, however, organizations intentionally mobilize

and develop the corporeality of employees and valorize embodiment so that it is not beyond contract but a key feature of it (Witz *et al.*, 2003).

Any deliberate strategy of sexualization tends to centre on advertising and marketing rather than labour. In other words, some organizations promote an image of sexualized labour but do not actually intervene and prescribe that labour. This approach is one common to the airline industry. Speiss and Waring (2005), for example, note 'how the mobilization of employees' physical disposition can move beyond more aesthetic appeal to appealing to the sexual desires of customers' (p.198). Examining the advertising and marketing of two new airlines, Virgin Blue and Air Asia, Speiss and Waring highlight how female employees are sexualized, particularly in Virgin Blue - described in one newspaper as the world's sexiest airline. For example, one advertisement produced by the company featured smiling, attractive and youthful flight attendants and was captioned 'Plane Fares, Beautiful Service'. This marketing approach is not new in the industry. Pontell *et al.* (1983: 301-302) note the sexually suggestive advertising slogans used in the past, for example Delta's 'Ready when you are' and National's 'I'm Anne, fly me'. It might be that such service organizations would like to move beyond subscribing to employee sexuality and promoting that sexuality as a marketing strategy to also enforcing that sexuality as a labour strategy but, as we noted earlier, feel unable to do so fearful of trade unions and legislation - which is why Hooters, an American restaurant chain, is significant.

Hooters is explicit in the sexualized labour that features as part of its 'product'. It believes that 'sexual appeal is legal and it sells'.⁴ The company has a uniform of short shorts, and a choice of a tight tank top or crop or tight T-shirt to deliberately make up female employees as 'sexy' waitresses. So-called 'Hooters Girls', or more prosaically the waitresses in the restaurants, are expected to embody the 'Florida Beach Girl look' (Golding, 1998), which is the corporate image projected by the company. The company states that the Hooters Girls are 'the cornerstone of the Hooters concept'. Indeed, Golding notes how the company 'unashamedly uses nubile young waitresses dressed in skimpy tops to attract customers' (p. 7).

A common theme in much of the literature on the sexualization of service workers is the extent to which female employees in particular are expected to cope with unwanted or demeaning sexual behaviour from customers as 'part of the job' (Adkins, 1995). In Loe's (1996) thinly disguised ethnographic study of 'Bazooms' she notes how she had to sign the official Bazooms sexual harassment policy that explicitly states: 'In a work atmosphere *based upon sex appeal*, joking and innuendo are commonplace' (p.400).⁵ Of course, there is a thin line between creating deliberate sexual innuendo and generating sexual harassment, and Bazooms seeks to clarify what it believes to be the important differences - seemingly to both protect its employees and delineate the types of work that it prescribes as legitimate and required of its employees. The Bazooms employee handbook states:

Sexual harassment does not refer to occasional compliments of a socially acceptable nature. It does not refer to mutually acceptable joking or teasing. It

refers to behaviour that is unwelcome, that is personally offensive, that debilitates morale, and that, therefore, interferes with work effectiveness (quoted in Loe, 1996: 412).

Complementing the 'blond wood' décor, the Hooters Girls are 'blond bombshells ... bosomy but also bubbly ... approachable all-American girl[s] not distant Miss Universe[s].' (Heylar 2003 2 & 3) Whilst critical, Loe does not cast her work colleagues as passive in this customer interaction. Some of the waitresses sought to emphasize other roles in their interaction with customers, such as being college students or mothers in order to move beyond being seen simply as an objectified, stylized Bazoom Girl. However other waitresses emphasized their sexual appeal to obtain higher tips as 'Playing up the sexualized Bazooms girl role can be a serious money-making strategy' (p.416), she states.

The success of Hooters is such that they now have over 340 restaurants in the US as well as presence in 14 other countries. Until recently, the company also had an airline, Hooters Air, which in addition to the airline crew also featured two Hooters Girls on each flight. A recent case study of Hooters in *Fortune* recognizes the extent to which, perhaps paradoxically within the American context, Hooters is considered a mainstream business success (Helyar, 2003). It is also instructive to note that Hooters' corporate strategy has survived a challenge in the American courts, which upheld the company's right to promote itself on the basis of 'female sex appeal' (Prewitt, 2003). The company justifies this strategy by referring to the fact that sex appeal is prevalent elsewhere: 'newspaper, magazines, daytime talk shows and local television affiliates constantly emphasize a variety of sexual topics to boost sales' and that 'Hooters Girls have the same right to use their natural female sex appeal to earn a living as do super models Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell' (www.hootersofamerica.com, 2001). The reaction of the then editor of *Caterer and Hotelkeeper* (the trade magazine for the hospitality industry) to the arrival of the first Hooters restaurant in the UK is also interesting. In an opinion piece the editor saw little to worry about in the emergence of Hooters. In answer to his own question of whether 'the moralists and protectors of womens' rights [are] being distracted by a bit of harmless fun', he suggests that: 'Blatant titillation has become widely accepted in the selling of countless commodities, from fast cars to chocolate bars, from drinks to holidays ... If we are not offended by this, then we shouldn't get upset about Hooters, because the principle is much the same' (Mutch, 1998: 23). Moreover it seems that the company has few recruitment problems. Loe reveals that she was one of 60 waitresses appointed to a newly opened Bazooms, for which over 800 women had applied. Without knowing more about the local labour market, it is difficult to comment on this application rate but it is a point worth further investigation.

Organizations can use aesthetics to portray different kinds of looks to differentiate themselves in the market and/or simply attract customers. A sexualized look is just one of those looks - a point also noted by Hochschild (1983) in her examination of the range of looks required of her female flight attendants as the different airline companies sought to distinguish and position themselves in the marketplace. Using comportment, dress and language, Hooters has mobilized, developed and commodified the embodied capacities

and attributes of its employees to appeal to the senses of its customers with a style of service based on a 'look' featuring sexual appeal. The sexualized labour required of this service is constituent of the waitresses' jobs: being a 'Florida Beach Girl'. As such, employee sexualization is not 'permitted'; it is actively promoted and, significantly, organizationally-prescribed as a deliberate corporate strategy. This strategy involves management attempting to appropriate employee sexuality to develop and mobilise the sex appeal of these employees for commercial benefit.

Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on sexualized work in interactive services. It has argued that current conceptualization of this sexuality is too narrow; either because in the dominant emotional labour paradigm employee corporeality is analytically retired, so that feelings crowd out appearance, or because the literature on sex and work misjudges employee-driven sexuality in the workplace for that which is organizationally-driven and so is unable to now discern corporate strategies that do prescribe sexualized labour. Better conceptualization of how, at the organizational level, employees are 'made up' as sexualized labour is enabled, the article has argued, by viewing sexualized employee interaction through the lens of aesthetic labour. In doing so, the article identified and disentangled three different forms of employee sexuality. Within all three, employee corporeality is displayed through comportment, dress and language to create a sexualized look. However there are important differences amongst the three forms. Many employees aesthetically labour at work for their own benefit, with management sanctioning or subscribing to this sexualization. Whilst emotional labour does recognize the importance of employee looks, it is aesthetic labour that better indicates how organizations strategically hire employees with particular looks. These organizations then mobilize, develop and commodify this employee corporeality to create embodied styles of service that are intended to project a corporate image or simply attract customers. This aesthetic labour can then be used to produce a range of styles of service requiring different employee looks – a point highlighted but not developed in the aesthetic labour literature. For some organizations, the required look is 'sexy' and the style of service deliberately, strategically sexualized. This double shift firstly from emotional through to aesthetic and sexualized labour; and secondly from sanctioned and subscribed to strategic employee sexuality is represented in Figure 1 below. The vertical axis represents the required conceptual shift through which employees' sexualised looks as prescribed by organizations becomes more analytically explicit. The horizontal axis indicates how managerial engagement with employee sexuality increases from passive to active through acceptance, assent and appropriation, in which with the latter employees sexualized work becomes organizationally-driven. This new research framework overcomes the conceptual partiality and bluntness in existing analyses within the emotional labour and sex and work literatures. Through it, it is also possible to discern how and why management attempt to organize and control employee sexuality - despite Filby's (1992) belief otherwise.

Figure 1 here

The strategic sexualization of employees, whilst deliberate in some organizations, is not a feature of all organizations. Management can have different approaches to sex in work: it can prevent, permit, promote and even, as this article shows, prescribe it. As Williams *et al.* (1999: 91) note, 'sexual behaviour that would scandalize and result in sexual harassment lawsuits in one context could be part of the job description in another'. Some of the differing approaches might not be just organizationally-specific but might reflect the national business systems in which organizations are embedded. For example, US organizations seek to regulate and discourage it more than European countries - though a UK trend of adopting US practice is apparent according to Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2004). The extent to which corporate strategies that sexualize employees exist might therefore also vary by country. Although why US organizations discourage sex in work, whether consensual or coerced, but seem accepting of sexualized work so long as it is a business strategy requires further examination. A further and related aspect, as Fox (2004) notes, is the issue of alcohol consumption, which in addition to also possibly varying by country, appears to be a gendered issue. As Guerrier and Adib's (2003; 2004) research on overseas tour reps reveals, male reps would often consume large amounts of alcohol whilst working. Female reps, although participating, would often drink as little alcohol as possible in order to remain in control. Alcohol may then be a catalyst for encouraging greater sexual activity amongst employees and also, in certain circumstances, between employees and customer. Indeed, as a more general point the male reps in Guerrier and Adib's work were more likely to take the opportunity for actual sexual interaction with female guests rather than merely offer these guests the allure of sex, although it is unclear whether this is as a direct consequence of the greater alcohol consumption described by Guerrier and Adib or simply gendered behaviour. Related to this point is the behaviour and expectations of customers. In Crang's (1994) ethnographic research, female customers stated that they wanted 'hunkier waiters' and Crang, a participant observer, had to respond to female customer requests for him to participate in their sexualized games in the restaurant. Men, not just women, being expected to respond in such ways by customers needs to be appreciated and can become a more pressing issue in need of researching as the number of men working in hospitality continues to increase (BHA, 2005).

This increase in male-worker participation in interactive services suggests that the gendering of sexualized work needs to be rethought. To date, the sexualization of women has dominated the literature on sexualized work, with, as Hancock and Tyler (2000a: 96) explain, an underpinning assumption that practices such as the 'locating [of] "attractive" women at frontstage areas such as reception desks is clear indication of the interplay between gender, body image and power within work organizations'. As more men now work in interactive services, the power issue becomes more problematic if analyses of sexualized work are premised only on women conforming to male, heterosexualized demands. Research by Nickson *et al.* (2001) highlights how both women and men are constituted as aesthetic labour, and often with males as subordinates to female managers. Future research should therefore examine how, as aesthetic labour becomes cast as sexualized labour, men's sexuality too becomes organizationally-driven to appeal to the senses of female customers. Finally and related to the last point, implicit within the analysis of this article has been the heterosexualization of employees, and with obvious

reason – most of the literature analysing sexualized work focuses on heterosexual encounters and this article has revisited this literature. But there is another reason: the majority of interactive services organizations in which aesthetic labour becomes sexualized labour do so to appeal to the senses of the majority of consumers – heterosexuals (94 per cent of the UK population according to government, see Campbell 2005). There does exist a niche of service organizations intended for homosexual consumers, as designated gay and lesbian bars, restaurants, hotels and shops indicate (see www.pinkuk.com). As with organizations such as Hooters, which are also explicitly sexually orientated by product/producer, it is likely that these niche organizations too will want a particular aesthetic-cum-sexualized labour - sometimes to the exclusion of heterosexual consumers (Bloomfield 2006). Although this discrimination in service provision is now outlawed under the EU's Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, it is reasonable to speculate that these organizations, still chasing the 'pink pound', will continue to require a sexualized labour whose corporeality embodies the desired corporate image. The work and employment practices of such niche service organizations could and should be analysed through the conceptual framework outlined in this article.

Indeed, although distinguishing different forms of sexualized work within the range of sex and work, the purpose of this article has been to provide better analysis and so understanding of how, at the organizational level, sexualized labour occurs and why. Examining interactive services, the article has highlighted how employees' sexualized work becomes appropriated and transmuted as organizations mobilize, develop and commodify employee corporeality through aesthetic labour. With the latter's emphasis on employee appearance, a look is prescribed that is intended to embody sexiness. As such, through employees, organizational appeal to customers' senses becomes organizationally-driven sex appeal. Providing new insights and raising new issues, this conceptualization suggests that there is more, better and different research yet to be undertaken of sex and work, particularly, though not necessarily exclusively, in relation to interactive services.

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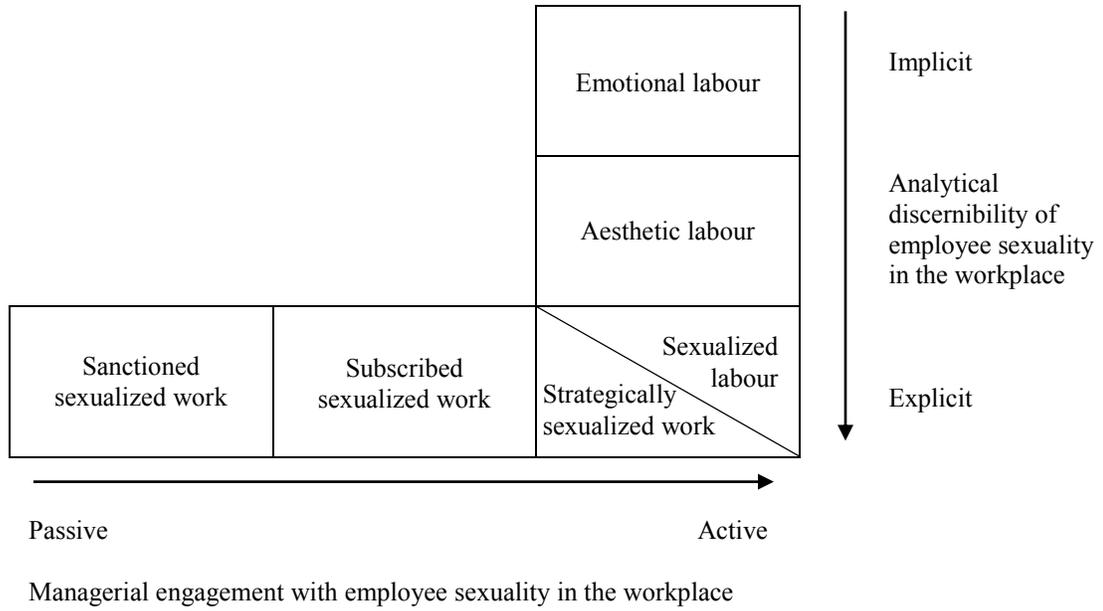
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Figure 1: The double shift in employee sexuality in interactive services



Endnotes

¹ In this English context, 'getting off' is a phrase referring to a successful initial romantic or simply sexual liaison with another person.

² And so is distinct from that involving the pseudo-eroticized subordination of one sex by another that creates sexual harassment (Alvesson and Due Billing 1997; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999) and is the other, coercive sex in work.

³ Note again that the necessary body work is written out of the analysis, subsumed again within emotion labour and something labelled 'personality'. Our emphasis.

⁴ All quotes are from the Hooters website, <http://www.hooters.com> unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Our emphasis.