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Aesthetic Labour at the Coffee Shop: Exploring Young Workers' Perceptions of the Service Encounter

Diana Judit Szabo
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Tracey L. Adams
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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Diana Judit Szabo

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CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Supervisor   Examiners

_____   _____
Dr. Tracey L. Adams   Dr. Kim Clark

                                                          _____
Supervisory Committee   Dr. Lorraine Davies

_____   _____
Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann   Dr. Wolfgang Lehmann

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Abstract

Using qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews, this research aims to elucidate how young coffeehouse baristas experience the service encounter. As "aesthetic labourers," baristas are hypothesized to possess a certain level of embodied capital, which empowers them in their interactions with customers. However, many young interactive service workers are stopgap workers who do not intend to make careers out of their part-time jobs. How does their unique position in the labour market influence the ways in which these workers experience employment in the lower tier of the service sector? The findings suggest that age and class intersect in the coffeehouse setting to gentrify barista work, but coffeehouse employers' efforts to "empower" their employees have variable results. Thus young workers' working conditions and career aspirations appear to be important in determining whether and how resistance plays out in the three-way relationship among employers, workers, and customers.

Keywords: youth; service work; aesthetic labour; inequality; employment; agency;

      resistance

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The services-producing sectors of Western economies have been growing for several decades, and many sociological studies have been devoted to understanding the rise of this so-called "new economy," which is supposed to promise increasing demand for highly-educated knowledge workers. Many of these studies have failed to capture the extent to which contemporary service economies rely on interactive service workers— those who care for and counsel individuals; those who cook, clean, and entertain; and those who sell us goods and serve us food and drink. Workers of this sort are the focus of this thesis.

The sociological study of service work emerged in response to the gap left by "new economy" theorists. Researchers in this field have endeavoured to gain a more complete picture of the service society by identifying how interactive service work is unlike other forms of employment, mainly due to the customer's participation in the service labour process. Since service workers are part of the product being consumed by the physically or verbally co-present customer, employers must hire and manage their workers accordingly. That is, to maximize profits, employers must empower their employees to enhance customer service without relinquishing their control to them.

Employers' efforts to manage workers in this more "unobtrusive" manner have resulted in what has been called the "cult(ure) of the customer." This culture privileges the identity of *customer*; it requires workers to see themselves as customers, and to see customer satisfaction as their prime motivator (du Gay and Salaman 1992). Having

worked in the lower-tier service sector myself, this project originated with a desire to understand how workers perceive serving in light of this cult(ure)—which I could not name at the time, but which I certainly sensed. Quickly, partly because less is known about how youth experience the work they do while transitioning to adulthood (Tannock 2001), the project became about how *young workers* experienced serving in this context.

The final piece of what would become my ultimate research question is "aesthetic labour" (Warhurst and Nickson 2007a). This concept, which refers to the way in which employers manage and capitalize on the appearances of their customer-facing employees, aptly corresponded to my experience of barista work. I already knew I wanted to interview young coffeehouse workers (see chapter 3 for a thorough explanation of my methodology), but the concept added another dimension: Since its originators believed aesthetic labour empowered some lower-tier service workers in their interactions with customers, I wanted to find out if workers themselves agreed.

Therefore, the research question this thesis is designed to explore is, *How do young coffeehouse workers—who are simultaneously "empowered" and marginalized by virtue of their stopgap relationship(s) to the labour market—experience the service encounter?*

I developed this question by immersing myself in the service work literature, which I review in chapter 2. The chapter begins with a discussion of Marxist theory on labour since, as the literature indicates, the exploitative relationship between labour and capital remains important in spite of interactive service work's unique characteristics. Then, I examine the changes attendant to the rise of the "new economy," and elaborate on

how the latter concept, introduced above, is inadequate in terms of recognizing the significance of (high-touch) interactive service work[1] to contemporary service societies. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of interactive service work, with particular emphasis on how service employers control their workers and how workers resist such control. To understand the dynamics of control and resistance, the chapter draws on the literature about subjectivity. Since less is known about subjectivity in the service encounter, this discussion borrows from the findings of industrial sociology. I conclude the literature review by highlighting the little that is known about youth *as (service) workers* and outlining Warhurst and Nickson's (2007b) argument regarding a new labour aristocracy among aesthetic labourers. I juxtapose their "gentrification" hypothesis with a few competing explanations for how service workers might avoid feeling humiliated in their subservient roles.

In chapter 3, I discuss the methodology used to answer my research question. I outline the research process and provide my justifications for using qualitative methods. I also speak to the study's strengths and limitations.

In chapter 4, I present my research findings, which relate to how my participants perceived customers, coworkers, and both middle- and upper-management; how they handled (difficult) customers; how they understood the significance of their age and their employers' appearance standards to their interactions with customers; and how they felt about their jobs on the whole, including whether they thought their barista employment was relevant to their career aspirations. I also share my findings about "work ethic,"

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1 The term *high-touch* is used here to distinguish interactive services from "high-tech" knowledge/information-based services (McDowell 2009: 44–45).

which is a theme many participants brought up in their interviews.

Finally, chapter 5 brings this study and the existing literature together and explains how my thesis fills a gap in the literature. I summarize the findings from chapter 4 and discuss their significance for the argument that some aesthetic labourers experience service work more positively than others. I also discuss young workers' agency in the cult(ure) of the customer: The data suggest that, in the coffeehouse setting, managerial efforts to "empower" participants had inconsistent results, with implications for how participants perceived management as well as customer service and, hence, for whether participants engaged in resistance. Given the exploratory nature of my study, though, my findings can only be tentative. As such, I conclude by recognizing the limitations of my study and making suggestions for potentially fruitful areas for further investigation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing literature on (interactive) service work. Since much of this literature seeks to establish the differences between service work and other forms of employment, I start the chapter by revisiting Marxist theory on labour, which has been thoroughly applied to factory work, but needs to be revised slightly to account for the third party who consumes the products of labour, namely the customer. The literature shows that the participation of the customer in service work changes several aspects of working, specifically (1) the significance of workers' emotions and bodies, (2) the means used by management to control workers and increase productivity, and (3) the nature of resistance and the conceptualization of subjectivity. Before addressing the unique characteristics of interactive service work, though, I will first contend with theories of the "new" service economy. These theories focus almost exclusively on the impressive high-tech jobs on offer in the knowledge sectors of Western service economies, neglecting the transfer of valuable personal services from the private sphere into the market.

In the final sections of this chapter, I highlight the lack of research on interactive service work looking specifically at the experiences of youth. Although the literature on youth employment is extensive and researchers are quick to point out that youth are overrepresented in the lower-tier service sector, youth's relationship(s) with service work are somewhat less well understood. Finally, given the importance of embodiment, I also address the idea of a new labour aristocracy among young aesthetic labourers.

MARXIST THEORY: WORK IN (INDUSTRIAL) CAPTIALISM

The study of work in modern capitalist societies has been greatly influenced by Marxist theory on labour. Marx argued that in capitalist societies there are two distinct classes: (1) capitalists, who own the means of production (e.g., land, raw materials, equipment, and nowadays even information and technology through patenting); and (2) workers, who must sell their labour to make a living since they no longer can survive fully off of the land. Marx assumed that labour is the source of all value; therefore, he argued that capitalists harness workers' labour power—using control, coercion, or the "manufacture of consent" (Burawoy 1979)—in order to create surplus value, which they appropriate. In other words, capitalists turn a profit by paying workers less than the value of the goods they produce. Because capitalists keep for themselves the surplus value that workers create, Marx argued that capitalism is an exploitative economic system (1967: 181–92).

Not only did Marx believe that labour is the source of all value, he also believed that through labouring human beings express their essential humanity (unlike animals, humans have the ability to conceive an idea in the imagination before executing it) (1967: 174). In capitalist societies, however, workers are alienated from labour since capitalists control the labour process: Capitalists decide what workers produce and how (1975: 322–32). Consequently, work under capitalism is not an expression of workers' humanity but a means to an end, and workers likely experience work negatively—both physically and psychologically. Further, work does not bring workers together; it forces them to compete with one another for various rewards, including jobs, promotions, and survival itself.

In the above formulation, customers as people with whom workers may interact are absent. Marx did not theorize the service encounter.

Although I elaborate on the ways in which the presence of the customer *changes* the experience of work, many would argue (but not all would agree [see du Gay 1996: 4–5]) that the worker-employer "dyad," which Marx formulates as an exploitative relationship between labour and capital, *remains* of central importance. As the literature indicates, while the customer wields significant power, it is nevertheless the employer who seeks to determine the parameters of the service encounter by controlling customers and workers alike. Whether the employer is altogether successful is another matter, which is of interest to me in writing this thesis.

Marx also makes no mention of the possibility that workers might enjoy their objectively alienating and exploitative jobs. Therefore, in addition to reviewing the literature on (interactive) service work, I also review the literature on subjectivity, a concept Marx failed to theorize adequately (Burawoy 1979; Smith 1988).

THEORIZING THE "NEW ECONOMY"

This chapter started by establishing how Marxist theory is broadly relevant to labouring under conditions of economic capitalism. However, there are many changes of which to speak in the "new economy." The discussion that follows focuses specifically on two relatively optimistic theories of change—Bell's theory of the post-industrial society and Castells' theory of the network society—that have been put forward in an effort to explain the rise of the service sector and its consequences for contemporary workers.

In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, the oft-cited Bell (1973) forecasts "a

change in the social framework of Western society" (p. 9) based largely on the movement

of the majority of workers from agriculture and manufacturing to services, which sector

Bell groups into the following categories: "personal (retail stores, laundries, garages,

beauty shops); business (banking and finance, real estate, insurance); transportation,

communication and utilities; and health, education, research, and government" (p. 15).

Indeed, Bell's prediction that the percentage of the labour force engaged in services

would steadily grow has proved accurate throughout Western economies. For example,

currently in the UK, almost three quarters of all employees work in services (McDowell

2009: 2). Recent Canadian figures are comparable: As of February 2012, 78% of workers

were employed in the services-producing sector (Statistics Canada 2012).

However, for Bell, it is growth in health, education, research, and government (the

last of the above categories) that is "decisive for post-industrial society" (p. 15). Having

overcome the challenges of pre-industrial and industrial societies (chiefly raw materials

extraction and goods production), what remains is to improve people's quality of life

through social control and innovation—that is, services. According to Bell, the increased

valuation of the *theoretical knowledge* (p. 20) required to develop and implement such

services would foster continued growth in professional and technical employment. He

states, for example, that the post-industrial society is a knowledge society, and that "the

weight of the society—measured by a larger proportion of Gross National Product and a

larger share of employment—is increasingly in the knowledge field" (p. 212). For Bell,

then, the big players of the post-industrial society are teachers, engineers, and (above all)

scientists (pp. 215–16); and presumably because the fruits of these knowledge workers'

labour would benefit the whole of society, he never discusses workers employed in other areas of the service sector. Indeed, that Bell overlooks services not performed by knowledge workers is a significant flaw in his theory.

Castells (2000b) shares somewhat in Bell's optimistic outlook on the "new economy." However, using grounded theory "distilled from observation," Castells is more in touch with recent trends like the feminization of paid labour (p. 12), and the accompanying trend toward more flexible and precarious types of employment. Arguing that "[w]e have entered a *new technological paradigm*" (p. 9), Castells develops a tentative theory surrounding the ideal type of the *network society*: "a specific form of social structure […] characteristic of the Information Age" (p. 5). In the network society, like in the post-industrial society, productivity and competitiveness are predicated on the capacity to generate knowledge and process information. Thanks to microelectronics-based, information/communication technologies (p. 9), firms, regions, and countries from around the world are being integrated into *networks* (p. 10). The network, according to Castells, is a highly efficient (because adaptable) form of social organization: It easily incorporates relevant "nodes" and eliminates or ignores nodes that do not perform a useful function (p. 15)—with major consequences for the organization and experience of work.

The form of economic organization characteristic of the network society is the *network enterprise*[2] (Castells 2000b: 10), which manifests itself in continuous change and instability—corporate strategic alliances; the flattening of hierarchy, in what are

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2   As Castells writes, the network enterprise "is not a network of enterprises. It is a network made from either firms or segments of firms, and/or from internal segmentation of firms" (2000b: 10).

known as "horizontal corporations"; and the adoption of flexible forms of production and new methods of management (Castells 2000a: 166–80). Accordingly, individuals' experiences of employment have changed: A worker's viability in the new economy depends now on his or her ability to adapt to the ever-shifting demands of the network. Workers who can constantly retrain themselves to be "useful" (i.e., self-programmable labour)—who, "released from traditional forms and ascribed roles" (Beck, qtd. in McDowell 2009: 33), individually embrace risk to build "portfolio careers"—fare better than those workers who cannot (i.e., generic labour) (Castells 2000b: 12).[3]

In acknowledging a trend toward polarization, Castells' theory of the network society is less one-sided than Bell's theory of the post-industrial society, but still the impression one gets from Castells' emphasis on adaptability and retraining is that the products and services most highly in demand in the new economy are those related to knowledge and technology. This, as Sassen (2002) argues, is not the case. At the same time that demand has increased for highly skilled knowledge workers (e.g., in financial services and in business and legal services), there has been a corresponding growth in demand for low-paid service workers: In global cities, where the corporate headquarters of multinational firms and the stock exchanges of the world are located, not only are clerks and janitors needed to work inside the firms of their better-off counterparts, but maids, nannies, and restaurant and shop staff are also needed elsewhere to cater to their consumerist lifestyles (Sassen 2002: 255).[4]

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3   There is no long-term for Castells, so he does not discuss the role of differential access to secure employment in contributing to social inequality.

4   The demand for consumer services is not caused solely by the consumptive patterns of high-income professionals. Many high-touch services were formerly provided for free by women in the home

Thus, Sassen's critique of the dominant narrative of globalization—that it "concerns itself with the upper circuits of global capital, not the lower ones, and with the hypermobility of capital rather than with capital that is bound to place" (p. 254)—can be applied to Castells' theory of the network society, as well as to other theories of "epochal change" (McDowell 2009). Castells in particular concentrates on what he calls the *space of flows*, or "the technological and organizational possibility" of carrying out social practices without geographic constraints (2000b: 14). His observations are of "core activities," such as "financial markets, science and technology, international trade of goods and services, [and] advanced business services" (p. 10), which are more evidently influenced by the impressive technologies of the current era. For example, based on the success of companies like Cisco, Castells predicts that "[n]etworks are the fundamental stuff of which new organizations are and will be made" (2000a: 180). However, given that the company employs mostly knowledge workers and "[t]he core of [its] operation is its website" (Castells 2000a: 181), Cisco is relatively exceptional. How would a website prepare food for time-pressed families? What kind of technology could be applied to the task of *caring* for children and the elderly? In actuality, the "new economy" is less high-tech than the dominant narrative suggests; to see this, however, we need to "recapture the geography behind globalization" (Sassen 2002: 257) and introduce two aspects of working—emotion and embodiment—whose significance has been ignored or diminished by "new economy" theorists. Filling out the theoretical picture in this manner is the aim

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(Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 2). As women entered the waged labour force—sometimes as well-paid knowledge and public sector workers, but often as low-paid consumer service providers—they were no longer willing or able to provide these services for free at home (McDowell 2009: 7).

of the next section.

At first glance, theories of the "new economy" are appealing. They appear to capture the changes that are going on around us in this "Information Age," and they suggest that, from now on, work will be cleaner, safer, and more cerebral: The messiness of working with our hands, in the dirt, and the tedium of the assembly line are relics of the past. As long as workers "keep up" and get educated, the future looks promising. But these narratives—including Castells' (even though he tries to account for the experiences of workers who perform "generic labour"[5])—belie the fact that the "new economy" is a service economy in a more literal sense. While there are individuals whose work in the service sector is a "game between persons" (Bell 1973: 127) mediated by sophisticated technology, there are also individuals whose contact with people is more intimate and, arguably, less accurately described by the word *game*, for they deal with the day-to-day needs and desires of the body (McDowell 2009). "New economy" theorists like Bell and Castells do not account for the work of these individuals.

INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK: FILLING OUT THE THEORETICAL PICTURE

McDowell (2009) argues that the reason many theorists of the "new economy" focus on the *changes* that have occurred since the end of the previous "Fordist regime of accumulation" (Harvey 1990) is that they are working within the tradition that defines only *waged labour* as work. This definition, as McDowell writes, "excludes all that work that is undertaken in the home for 'love' rather than money" (p. 27), including preparing

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5   The term *generic labour* in itself is problematic because workers are never entirely interchangeable: In interactive service work especially, they are hired and fired on the basis of "personality" skills, which are thought to be unevenly distributed among various status groups. I discuss the significance of "personality" in the following section.

food, caring for dependants, cleaning, entertaining, and having children. These services,

referred to as domestic or reproductive labour, are essential for an economy—whether or

not they are part of the cash nexus—but have received little attention in non-feminist

analyses. For example, McDowell cites the following passage from Marx (qtd. on pp. 28–

29), in which he delimits the "products" of labour in spite of evidence that *servants*, not

factory workers, were the largest group of employed persons during the nineteenth

century (Steedman 2007):

> Types of work that are consumed as services and not in products … separable from the
> worker, and not capable of existing as commodities independently of him … are of
> microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production. They
> may be entirely neglected.

As McDowell explains, even when these services had shifted into the market, the fact that

they were performed by women meant their importance was downplayed. Hence, the

decline of manufacturing—the sector where men traditionally found work—and the rise

of a "weightless," disembodied knowledge economy took the spotlight in recent decades:

causes either for celebration, as described above, or mourning (e.g., Sennett 1998).

However, as McDowell (2009) and Sassen (2002) argue, a large proportion of

jobs in today's "new economy" are in (high-touch) interactive services. These jobs,

unlike the ones envisioned by the likes of Bell and Castells, are place-bound and employ

mostly women. Furthermore, they are characterized by an interesting paradox: While they

are "old" in that they entail the provision of services that have always been integral for

the smooth functioning of an economy, they are now undertaken in the market and so

have undergone changes associated with commodification (McDowell 2009: 25–26). To

fill out the theoretical picture of the "new" service economy, then, this section focuses on

the unique nature of interactive service employment.

Two features of interactive service work are unique: First and foremost, in contrast with other forms of employment, interactive service work is usually carried out in the physical presence of the individual who consumes the "product" of the worker's labour.[6] Indeed, the customer is a *participant* in the service's production since, without the customer, the service could not be produced (Packham, as cited in Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 3). Second, because interactive services demand the co-presence of worker and service recipient, they cannot be stored and therefore productivity gains are difficult (McDowell 2009: 35)—although, as I will show, fast food companies in particular have gone to great lengths to try to standardize their workers' interactions with customers (Leidner 1993, 1996; Ritzer 2011). These features make service work markedly different from other forms of employment in two ways: (1) Service workers "inhabit" their jobs differently than do assembly-line workers (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 4). Not only do they use their bodies completely differently, they are also required to engage their emotions in carrying out their work. Consequently, (2) managerial efforts to increase productivity may involve more intimate intrusions. While these differences apply to working in both the upper and lower tiers of the service sector, their significance is amplified for the lower-tier "emotional proletariat" (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996) who are the focus of this thesis.

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6 Interactive service work typically involves local, face-to-face interactions between service providers and consumers (McDowell 2009: 35); however, voice-to-voice interactions are also considered interactive service work (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 3).

Inhabiting Service Work: Embodiment and Emotional Labour

The co-presence of worker and customer in interactive service work means that "the personal embodied attributes of workers enter into the exchange process in a direct way" (McDowell 2009: 9). Because "the producer in some sense equals the product" (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 15), workers themselves—their bodily presentation and performance—are commodified. As McDowell (2009: 9) writes,

> When we ask for a waiter's advice about what to choose to eat, or consult a stylist about what might suit us, we evaluate their advice not just on the basis of the technical information that they might give us but also on the basis of what we think about them: whether we find them sympathetic or trustworthy, whether we admire or resent their youthful good looks or their facial piercings and fashionable dress.

In other words, in addition to the service itself, a business's sales and reputation rely heavily on the appearance and personality of its workers. Therefore, as Mills argued more than 50 years ago, when service employers hire white-collar workers, they are purchasing not merely workers' "time and energy but their personalities as well" (1953: xvii). Here, "personality" refers not only to whether a worker is courteous or rude; it refers also to whether she or he *looks* the part.[7]

Who is hired for which jobs of course reflects and reinforces the fact that certain bodies and embodied dispositions are preferred over others based on judgments about who is suited to serve and have close contact with others' bodies. These preferences are shaped by widely held attitudes and assumptions about gender, race/ethnicity, and class, as well as age, sexuality, and (dis)ability (see McDowell 2009). Predictably, youthful,

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7 Although the word *personality* generally denotes behavioural and emotional tendencies (*The Penguin Concise Dictionary* 2004), Mills (1953: 186) was aware of the "commercial relevance" of physical attractiveness. He recognized that personality is in part an *embodied* display that encompasses one's gestures and one's style of dress and bodily adornment. For example, a smile can be affectionate or insincere. Likewise, a hairstyle can be simple or "edgy."

"healthy" (i.e., physically fit), well-groomed bodies that exhibit middle-class manners and patterns of speech are generally preferred because such embodiments are deemed superior overall. However, working particularly closely with or on the body, and facing "with equanimity" (McDowell 2009: 224) its fluids and emissions are considered the special purview of women, especially minority women, who can show the expected deference and empathy—and who are (perhaps above all) "manageable" (Shih 2002; Zamudio and Lichter 2008). In fact, young, working-class men are at a disadvantage in the lower tier of the service sector. Their masculinity—aggressive and arrogant—is at odds with the requisite docility and deference (McDowell 2009: 193–99).[8] In short, as Acker (1990) argues, jobs are "gendered": While "masculine" qualities like leadership and aggression are built into the descriptions of the jobs that are most highly rewarded in our economy, "feminine" qualities like empathy and docility are favoured in (high-touch) jobs with low status and pay. Similarly, employers use other status markers like race, class, and age "to serve as […] prox[ies] for required personality types" (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 7; Macdonald and Merrill 2009; McDowell 2009; Williams 2006).

Claiming that the embodied aspects of interaction have been under-analyzed (Warhurst and Nickson 2007a: 105–106), Warhurst and Nickson develop the concept of *aesthetic labour*, which they define as the "organizational mobilization, development and commodification of employees' corporeality" (2007b: 789). Along the same lines as Mills, they argue that, particularly in retail and hospitality organizations, employers intentionally recruit workers who either already possess or have the potential to develop

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8 Macdonald and Sirianni (1996: 15) make a similar point about heterosexual men.

certain (i.e., middle-class)[9] embodied dispositions (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003).

Once corporately "made up," or inculcated in the corporate "doxa," these workers form

an animate component of the *aesthetics of organization*—that is, the "expressive forms"

that "signify the identity of an organization" (Witz *et al.* 2003: 41). In other words, like

the decor and architecture, "[a]s aesthetic labour, employees are *part of* the

materialization of the corporate idea" (Witz *et al.* 2003: 45); as such, the physical

appearance of workers is a matter with which management concerns itself.

Although high-end designer retailers, boutique hotels, and style bars, cafés, and

restaurants most clearly rely on the aesthetics of organization, Warhurst and Nickson find

evidence of a "demonstration effect" (2007a: 107) among more "prosaic" companies, as

they too begin to actively recruit on the basis of appearance and prescribe dress codes or

uniforms. Warhurst and Nickson (2007a) found that employers' appearance standards,

regardless of labour market segment, could regulate everything from hair length and the

wearing of makeup to personal hygiene and the visibility of tattoos (p. 112). Despite

these disconcerting intrusions by management, they suggest that aesthetic labour might

signal the rise of a new "labour aristocracy" (2007b) among some lower-tier service

workers. I return to this notion of theirs later on.

Up to this point, I have shown how "personality" is (assumed to be) written *on* the

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9 Macdonald and Merrill (2009) rightly argue that "looking the part" does not always entail the same thing. They cite one management study that found that older, working-class men were preferred in a prominent "do-it-yourself" (DIY) store chain "because they appeared to have 'been in that trade all of [their lives]'" (pp. 123–24). However, some aspects of working-class masculinity might still preclude certain older, working-class men from being hired for such service jobs: Although hardware stores may want *physically* masculine men who, by virtue of their age, look like they have working-class expertise in DIY, the men hired would probably still have to have the appropriate sociability. That is, they can look like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood (Macdonald and Merrill 2009: 124), but most likely they cannot really *behave* toward customers exactly in accordance with such figures' tough and rugged personae.

bodies of workers, and how employers use workers' "corporeality" as a commercial tool. However, in service work, employers also purchase bodily performances like smiling and being agreeable or flirtatious, which require workers to draw on their emotions to varying degrees. As part of their jobs, then, service workers must engage in what Hochschild (1983: 7) called *emotional labour*: "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display." Whereas emotions are otherwise private, in service work they are sold and consumed. Management appropriates and controls their provision through selective hiring practices,[10] training and (cult-like) indoctrination, scripting of speech and movement, feeling rules, and of course surveillance (Leidner 1999: 86–89). Before addressing these management techniques for controlling workers and increasing productivity more generally, I will first discuss feeling rules, which are specific to emotional labour.

Hochschild defines *feeling rules* as the "standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling" (p. 18). As the title of her book—*The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*—suggests, however, when emotion work is no longer private but managed by one's employer, the emotional system of which feeling rules are a part undergoes a "transmutation" (p. 19). At this point, feeling rules are more "instructions about how one should feel" (Leidner 1999: 88); their aim is to elicit emotional displays from workers and to create (usually positive) feeling states in customers. Therefore, according to Brook (2009: 12),

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10 In her study of flight attendants, Hochschild (1983: 97) found that recruits were "screened for a certain type of outgoing middle-class sociability." The "animation test" used by most airline companies to evaluate recruits' sociability took place *after* an applicant passed an initial screening in which weight, figure, teeth, complexion, facial regularity, and age were assessed (p. 96).

management-defined feeling rules[11] serve two functions: (1) enhancing customer

service[12] and (2) reducing emotive dissonance, or the strain workers experience when

they try over long periods to maintain "a difference between feeling and feigning"

(Hochschild 1983: 90). That is, in an effort to protect the private, "at-ease me"

(Hochschild 1983: 132) while also minimizing the stress that can result from identifying

too closely with the demands of their work roles, interactive service workers may try to

separate their real and acted selves (pp. 132–34). Workers may decide it is best to *show*

feeling without actually feeling it (*surface acting*). While this tactic may be acceptable

for some jobs (Leidner 1996: 35), managers' feeling rules increasingly prescribe *deep*

acting to elicit authentic displays (Brook 2009: 12). The latter requires workers either to

fuse their real and acted selves (here, selectively hiring employees who already possess

the desired sociability is helpful), or it requires workers to use their imaginations to treat

customers *as if*, for example, they were guests in their own home.

   Whether corporate feeling rules succeed in completely transforming workers'

private feelings or merely elicit a superficial behavioural acquiescence, Hochschild

argues that there are human costs when the capacity to manage feeling is controlled by

someone else. Although some of the workers in her study were able to avoid stress by

developing a "healthy" estrangement (p. 188),[13] many experienced burnout, emotional

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11 According to Williams (2006: 121), workers may develop their own informal feeling rules. For
   example, in contrast with managerial preference, salesclerks at one of the toy stores where Williams
   conducted her study sometimes engaged in an "affectless performance," which "kept customers under
   control and lessened the likelihood that they would be insulting or make a scene."
12 The goal of "enhancing customer service" is profit-motivated, as I will show in the next section.
13 Hochschild found that older, experienced, and married workers were more likely to engage in the deep
   acting that permitted them to have two separate, but equally meaningful, "selves" (p. 133). In other
   words, she found that age, level of experience, and marital status influence how workers experience

deadness, or feelings of "phoniness" (pp. 187–89). For her, these symptoms of emotive

dissonance are comparable to the mortification of flesh and ruination of mind to which

Marx (1975: 326) refers in his discussion of alienation. The symptoms reflect the fact that

service workers control neither the product nor the process of their labour (Brook 2009);

as such, they are estranged from their emotions. Moreover, since emotion is for

Hochschild "a biologically given sense […] by which we know about our relation to the

world" (p. 219), emotional labour has the potential of alienating workers from their

selves as well as others (see also Brook 2009).

In this section, I have shown how interactive service work is unlike other forms of

employment because it requires that workers use their bodies and emotions differently. In

particular, service jobs often demand that workers be pleasant, sociable, and deferent.

These characteristics are frequently assumed to be associated with gender, race/ethnicity,

class, age, and sexuality, and candidates for service jobs are commonly evaluated on the

basis of their appearance. I have also hinted at the ways in which employers take an

interest in the personal, embodied attributes of their workers, including establishing

feeling rules and prescribing dress codes or uniforms: As Mills (p. 183) says, "Neglect of

personal appearance on the part of the employee is a form of carelessness on the part of

the business management." In the section below, I describe the extent to which workers'

interactive service skills are managed, or controlled, by service-sector employers.

Cultivating a "Customer Orientation": Control and Productivity in Interactive Services

Because their work requires them to be co-present with customers, interactive

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emotional labour.

service workers draw on a special set of skills to do their jobs. These are "skills, abilities, and traits," as I have shown, "that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge"—*soft skills*, as Moss and Tilly (2001: 44) call them. Although soft skills have been distinguished analytically from "hard skills,"[14] they are not immune to managerial control: Management tries to appropriate control of soft skills the same way it does any other purchased competencies, for there are several advantages for management in doing so. As Leidner (1993: 3) explains, when management monopolizes control of work tasks, "it [management] loses much of its dependence on the cooperation and good faith of workers and can impose its own rules about pace, output, quality, and technique." Determining the labour process in this manner also deskills workers (Braverman 1974), making them interchangeable and therefore cheaper.

According to Braverman (1974: 114), management attempts to control the labour process by separating the conception of tasks from their execution—that is, by planning every detail of the labour process ahead of time so that workers need only follow the directions given to them by their superiors. In the production of interactive services, however, the participation of the customer introduces an element of unpredictability that makes it both difficult and, to some extent, undesirable to prevent workers from working relatively autonomously and from using their discretion. As Fuller and Smith (1996: 75) argue, service firms have come to define "quality service" as a source of profitability, yet what constitutes "quality"—whether it is friendliness, deference, or speed—varies from

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14 The term *hard skills* refers to cognitive and technical abilities that can be measured relatively objectively: literacy, numeracy, problem solving, computer proficiency, and so on (Moss and Tilly 2001: 44).

one customer to the next. Good service has come to mean "personal service" (Leidner 1996: 32), and to deliver it, workers rely on "on-the-spot, subtle judgments about what would please individual customers" (Fuller and Smith 1996: 75).

The standardization associated with conventional forms of control lends itself more to uniformity than customization (Leidner 1996: 32). Constant close supervision,[15] electronic surveillance, and scripting—examples of, respectively, simple, technical, and bureaucratic forms of control (Edwards 1984)—tend to stamp out spontaneity and authenticity (Fuller and Smith 1996: 76). Further, these forms of control may engender hostility and paranoia (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 11) among employees, inhibiting them from feeling cheerful or helpful toward customers (Fuller and Smith 1996: 76). So how do service-sector employers resolve this dilemma? What means do employers use to ensure that the ephemeral encounter between worker and customer (both of whom are fallible human beings) unfolds more or less exactly as they would like—that is, with a satisfied customer who will keep coming back?

On the one hand, despite their drawbacks, service employers still make extensive use of conventional methods that routinize the service encounter. These methods, referred to by Ritzer (2011: 117) as *nonhuman technologies*, are aimed at workers and customers alike. As Macdonald and Sirianni (1996: 6) argue, whenever possible, managers "attempt to determine [service] interactions in advance." Managers try to curb the unpredictability and inefficiency that human beings bring to service encounters by controlling the people

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15 Macdonald and Sirianni (1996: 6) use the phrase "'spoiling' the product" to describe how constant personal supervision by management would affect the service relationship. Arguably, such supervision would also threaten to spoil the illusion, which some service enterprises try to create, that interactive service workers are not *serving* people, or playing a subservient role; instead, they are "sales assistants," "beauty advisors," electronics "experts," and so on.

who take part in them (Ritzer 2011). As these efforts to routinize the service encounter

pertain to workers, management *prescribes* how workers should present themselves and

how they should interact with customers. Management uses dress codes and uniforms to

control workers' aesthetic labour, and feeling rules and scripts (Leidner 1999: 87–89) to

control their emotional labour, thereby codifying workers' "soft skills." Management also

mechanizes the workplace, installing equipment that "necessitates compliance with the

rules of the organization" (Perrow 1973, qtd. in Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 7). For

example, the cash registers at McDonald's prompt workers to offer patrons dessert

(Leidner 1996: 33). Thus, control over much of interactive service workers' emotional

labour and "corporeal skills" (Nickson and Warhurst 2007: 157) is removed from workers

and "moved upstairs in the hierarchy" (Hochschild 1983: 120).

Service-sector employers are equally inclined to attempt to control the service

encounter by trying to control service recipients (Leidner 1993, 1996; Ritzer 2011). For

example, Leidner (1993: 32) describes how workers' routines themselves may be used to

elicit customer compliance with organizational routines:

> [W]hen interactions are openly, obviously routinized, customers can see that they are
> expected to limit their demands to a predetermined range. They are less likely to insist
> that their wants be met when it seems that to press for satisfaction would mean 'holding
> things up,' 'making trouble,' or 'demanding extra favors,' or when it is clear that the
> service worker is not trained or authorized to handle special requests.

In effect, managerial efforts to reduce unpredictability involve in part minimizing

customers' expectations of individualized treatment (Leidner 1996: 33).[16] Again,

McDonald's is the prime example, but as Ritzer (2011) argues, there is a trend toward

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16 Lowered service expectations appear, on the surface, to be at odds with "the cult(ure) of the customer"
   discussed below. However, depending on the service enterprise, both approaches to the delivery of
   service can be seen as profit-maximizing and therefore "rational."

"McDonaldization," whereby the principles of the fast food restaurant, including control through nonhuman technology, are being adopted by more and more enterprises.[17]

Employers reap several benefits from routinizing the service encounter, but they increasingly see competitive advantages in giving workers the freedom to make decisions "on the floor." Accordingly, they have adapted a new technique, which allows them to give workers a modicum of autonomy while they (i.e., employers) retain control. I refer to this technique as cultivating a "customer orientation," and it combines two elements: (1) self-direction and (2) surveillance by customers. These two elements "form the twin pillars of continuous, unobtrusive control systems, whereby managers attempt to insure [*sic*] the delivery of quality service by enlarging the arena of employee self-direction" (Fuller and Smith 1996: 87). Cultivating a customer orientation among workers entails convincing them to manage themselves.

Managers try to get their employees to manage themselves first by selectively hiring individuals they think already possess, or have the potential to develop, the appropriate soft skills.[18] Then, if necessary, managers indoctrinate workers into the corporate culture (Leidner 1999: 86–87). This "empowerment approach," by which workers are armed with "information rather than instructions" (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 7), ensures that workers are "the sorts of people who will make decisions the employers would approve" (Leidner 1993: 36–37). Leidner (1993: 37–38) argues that management by self-direction is most likely to be used when high levels of customization

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17 For instance, IKEA proclaims in its 2012 catalogue, "We have prepared the IKEA store for you to shop on your own." Shoppers can expect to spend the day meandering through IKEA's maze-like stores without any help from staff—no service at all! As Ritzer (2011: 20) argues, the architecture *controls* customers: "There seems to be no way out that does not lead to the checkout counter."

18 I have already shown how various status markers serve as proxies for "personality."

are desired, when the interactive task is particularly complex, or when direct supervision is not feasible—for example, life insurance agents who call on prospective customers door to door. "Life agents" work without supervision, and they have the difficult task of convincing individuals and businesses, most of whom are unwilling participants in the service interaction, to buy insurance (Leidner 1993: 105). For Leidner (1993: 37) and critics of the empowerment approach (see Macdonald and Sirianni 1996: 8), selective hiring practices and indoctrination are invasive forms of routinization since their goal is to standardize workers themselves.

The second part of cultivating a customer orientation, surveillance by customers, entails using customer feedback to control workers and middle management (Fuller and Smith 1996). Surveillance is more than ceiling-mounted video cameras, call recording, and computerized tracking: Now, data gathered from comment cards, "secret shoppers," and customers' unsolicited phone calls and letters are also used by companies to monitor the quality of service at each "delivery unit," and to reward or discipline workers and middle managers (Fuller and Smith 1996). Since workers have no idea when a customer might contact their employer about them or when a secret shopper might do business with them, Fuller and Smith (1996: 85) argue that management by customers decentralizes organizational power so that workers are motivated to direct, or "discipline" (Foucault 1979), *themselves* in accordance with company values. In some ways, then, customers appear to collude with management against workers in what Leidner (1996: 40) terms the "dominant pattern of alliance," augmenting rather than diluting managerial power (Fuller and Smith 1996: 84–85).

Du Gay and Salaman (1992) refer to the cultivation of a customer orientation as the "cult(ure) of the customer." They argue that the cult(ure) of the customer is used to legitimate organizational restructuring focused on "staying close to the customer," or treating (workers as if they were customers and) customers as if they were managers. According to them, regardless of sector, organizations attempt to "define and structure employees' subjective meanings and identities" (p. 621) so that "customer satisfaction" becomes their ultimate goal. Ultimately, du Gay and Salaman argue that the cult(ure) of the customer winds up privileging the needs of individuals as customers over their needs as citizens or workers (see also du Gay 1996).

Below, I explore how people on either side of the service counter experience service delivery. Because adopting a customer orientation is intended to increase managerial control and maximize company profits, both workers and customers can get annoyed or suffer indignities when what is rational for management is revealed to be irrational for them (Ritzer 2011). However, since consumers are viewed as the main source of profits, their needs and desires are more often congruent with the needs and desires of management. As such, of particular interest to me in the sections that follow is how the cult(ure) of the customer influences lower-tier service workers—whose jobs are already "poorly paid, highly 'flexible' (i.e. part-time or casual), lacking in benefits, with low levels of protection" (Hughes and Tadic 1998: 208).

EXPERIENCING SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE "CULT(URE) OF THE CUSTOMER"

The Sovereign Consumer?: Customers Behaving Badly

Over the last few decades, both public- and private-sector organizations have

come to adopt a "customer orientation," or the "cult(ure) of the customer" (du Gay and Salaman 1992), allegedly putting the interests of the customer or client first (Bolton and Houlihan 2005; Fuller and Smith 1996; Reynolds and Harris 2006). According to the marketing literature, this strategy will improve not only business performance but employee and customer satisfaction too (Reynolds and Harris 2006: 95). Especially in the lower-tier consumer services and retail trade industries, firms increasingly *compete* on the basis of the quality of service itself in what are referred to as "service wars" (Fuller and Smith 1996; Tannock 2001: 51). The result is a consumer culture in which the customer appears truly to be "king" (Hochschild 1983).

However, the point has been made that organizations are merely "convincing the customer that they are in control" (Bishop and Hoel 2008: 343; Fuller and Smith 1996). Bolton and Houlihan (2005), for example, challenge the notion of consumer sovereignty, arguing that customers are led merely to *feel* empowered in the service encounter; the speed and efficiency that are supposedly for their benefit are really profit-driven and can sometimes actually make for very unsatisfactory customer service experiences. For example, the call-centre workers in Bolton and Houlihan's study had to sacrifice quality of service and keep calls short to meet hourly sales targets. In some cases, customers' frustrations caused them to lash out at workers. For Bolton and Houlihan, then, customers are not malevolently reveling in some new-found opportunity to demean others; rather, they "are discomfited by the experience of de-personalized, target-driven service" (p. 698). Bolton and Houlihan thus assert the humanity of the customer in spite of the dehumanizing nature of profit-maximizing service enterprises.

That is not to say that customers—or even workers—are "fully aware" (Bolton and Houlihan 2005: 698) of the role of management in deciding the parameters of the service encounter. In fact, customer-worker relations are far from peaceable. Reynolds and Harris (2006: 97) claim, for example, that "frontline employees are faced with endemic customer misbehavior." Customers are known to sexually harass workers (Hughes and Tadic 1998), bully (Bishop and Hoel 2008), and even physically assault them (Tannock 2001: 54). As is suggested above, because customers are seen as the primary source of profits, employers often tacitly condone these behaviours (Bishop and Hoel 2008). The female retail service workers in Hughes and Tadic's study (1998), for example, were less likely to confront their harassers directly or inform employers of incidents of harassment, preferring instead indirect and individual means of coping (e.g., discussing it outside of work with friends or family) for fear of losing their jobs. Furthermore, due to a tendency to normalize customer misbehaviour, workers are often blamed if they cannot skilfully handle so-called "difficult" customers (Bishop and Hoel 2008; Hughes and Tadic 1998).

Workers' Resistance in Service Work

Interactive service workers' ability to respond assertively to "difficult" customers is constrained by the cult(ure) of the customer; nevertheless, workers *do* react—sometimes even in ways that are labeled "deviant" (Browning 2008; Harris and Ogbonna 2009; Reynolds and Harris 2006). Among other things, workers sometimes withdraw service from or gain revenge on customers (Browning 2008; Reynolds and Harris 2006). Contrary to conventional understandings of resistance (Hodson 1991; Roscigno and

Hodson 2004), though, *employers are not the direct targets of these forms of resistance—* that is, if resistance is defined as strategies used by workers to "preserve their autonomy and dignity in the face of excessive or inappropriate demands" (Hodson 1991: 55–56). For Korczynski (2009a: 964), the new target of resistance in service work is problematic:

> In many service jobs, workers may intuit the customer as the primary alienating figure within their jobs. This may reorder the ways in which class conflict around the labour process is played out. Specifically, spontaneous, individualized conflict may be played out against the customer as the party who is experienced as the prime alienating figure rather than against the more distant management figure who plays such a central role in structuring the worker–customer relationship.

Korczynski here alludes to how the unique nature of service work (i.e., the direct participation of the customer in the service work process) makes resistance in service work itself unique. While management is not "likely to appreciate workers hurting their customers" (Watson 2008: 314) and therefore workers' efforts to defend their sense of self can be seen as protest against managerial control, the question remains as to whether these forms of resistance can be considered effective or, less optimistically, misguided.

But not all workers engage in "service sabotage," or resistance directed at the customer, in spite of endemic customer misbehaviour. So what determines the way workers respond to service work and (deviant) customer behaviour? In their study of call-centre workers' appraisals of customer verbal aggression, Grandey, Dickter, and Sin (2004: 411) suggest that there is such a thing as "poor person–job fit," referring to an individual's affectivity: "A person high in NA [negative affectivity] is more likely to have a negative world-view and to interpret ambiguous comments as negative." They claim that such individuals can "evoke more aggression" (p. 401). However, since Grandey *et al.* do not discuss negative affectivity in any detail, their assertion is not very helpful,

except insofar as it provokes questions about what causes an individual to be negatively affective in the first place. Would addressing person-job compatibility entail "fixing" people (e.g., by controlling them, as discussed above) or changing jobs?

One factor Grandey *et al.* (2004) found to *reduce* the likelihood of reporting customer verbal aggression was the perception of autonomy. Like Wharton (1993), they find that the more workers perceived themselves to be in control in interactions with customers, the less likely they were to report experiencing customer verbal aggression. While Wharton (1993) limits the implications of her findings to future research, Grandey *et al.* encourage managers to help "boundary-spanners [i.e., individuals whose position requires them to represent the organization for which they work to outside groups] *feel like* they have control in their jobs" (2004: 414; my italics). In other words, they advise managers to adopt what Bolton and Houlihan (2005: 689) refer to as "'soft' management touches," such as providing more customer service training and creating "off-stage" areas where service employees can "vent" with their coworkers (Korczynski 2009b: 84). These solutions address the subjective experience of alienation without addressing objective alienation.

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE SUBJECTS OF PRODUCTION

The preceding paragraphs prompt several questions about where and how workers develop their orientations toward work, including "negative affectivity": Are individuals' orientations toward work the product of the workplace itself, or do workers come to the workplace with them already shaped? What outside forces play a part in shaping the way workers experience performing service work? And to what extent can "soft" management

touches successfully minimize the negative consequences of objectively "bad" jobs (e.g., emotive dissonance) that might breed "service sabotage"? Questions precisely like these inform the "subjectivity debate," a longstanding debate confined for a long time to industrial sociology (see du Gay 1996 for an exception).

The debate, at its core, is concerned with Marx's theory of work in capitalist society and whether his predictions about the revolt against degradation will ever come true. Marx argued that capitalism contained within it the seeds of its eventual demise, that revolution was the inevitable outcome of capitalism, and that, through the revolt against degradation, the sources of man's alienation would be destroyed, creating the conditions "for a society in which man can for the first time become fully human" (Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhoffer, and Platt 1969: 2). However, the apparent failure of Marx's prognoses—evidenced by an "eerie" absence of class consciousness among the working class—provoked scholars to look for flaws in Marx's otherwise impressive theory. The result of their scrutiny is more refined conceptualizations of both subjectivity and agency. Starting with the findings of *The Affluent Worker* project, the following is a brief overview of the debate.

Looking for an answer to the absence of working-class consciousness in the material conditions of twentieth-century industrialized societies, Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhoffer, and Platt (1969) sought to test the *embourgeoisement* thesis, according to which the working class was progressively becoming integrated into the middle class, forgetting its revolutionary potential. In contrast with the *embourgeoisement* thesis, Goldthorpe *et al.* found that the "affluent worker" (the well-off manual worker, who was

the product of income homogenization and other post-WWII trends) remained distinct

from middle-class workers because he had an "instrumental" orientation to work, seeing

it "as a means to the pursuit of ends outside of work" (p. 164). For example, the affluent

workers of Goldthorpe *et al.*'s study had accepted their positions even though many had

preferred a previous, less well-paid job, which was more intrinsically satisfying (pp. 55–

56). Further, because the instrumental orientation of the workers interviewed appeared to

originate *outside* the workplace, Goldthorpe *et al.* suggested that shop-floor experiences

are "*mediated* through the meanings" (p. 181) workers give them. Therefore, they argued,

to understand worker consciousness, consumption (not merely production) deserves

attention.

Partly in response to *The Affluent Worker* project (which effectively denied the

existence of objective alienation by emphasizing subjective meanings), Burawoy (1979)

asserted the need to examine subjectivity *within* the labour process. He argued that Marx

had no need to theorize subjectivity or consciousness, considering the fact that when he

was writing, during the nineteenth century, "the arena of consent was small" (p. 27);

workers were economically coerced to expend effort, and so the capitalist did not need to

"elicit a [worker's] willingness to cooperate" (p. 27) in order to produce surplus value.

He goes on to write, however, that,

> [w]ith the passage of time, as the result of working-class struggles, the wage becomes
> increasingly independent of the individual expenditure of effort. Accordingly, coercion
> must be supplemented by the organization of consent. (P. 27)

In other words, eventually it becomes necessary that the capitalist arranges the labour

process so that workers will choose to partake in it. (It helps, too, that workers today see

their livelihoods as tied to their employers' [p. 29].) For example, during his participant observation of an industrial plant, Burawoy found that consent was generated on the shop floor through the game of "making out," which Knights and Willmott (1989: 547) rephrase as "maximizing bonus pay out." He argued that, in agreeing to play the game, which was organized by management, workers at the plant accepted their "naming" (McDowell 2009: 60) by management as "workers"; that is, they were *interpellated* as persons who permit the appropriation of their labour.

Burawoy agrees that industrial workers exhibit an instrumental orientation to work, since they enter into the game of making out for its "*relative* satisfactions" (p. 81), but he disagrees that this orientation is derived from any source other than the labour process itself. He argues that the labour process is *relatively autonomous*, that "the labour process may itself determine the effect of imported consciousness" (p. 152). Specifically, based on his examination of race relations at the plant where he conducted his study, he minimizes the importance of subjectivities generated outside the workplace. He says that, although workers were assigned to positions in the labor process based on race, "[i]t was not a worker's race that shaped the relations in production; rather, these relations recreated and reproduced racism at the point of production" (p. 214). Because Burawoy argues for the relative autonomy of the labour process, du Gay (1996: 17) simplistically interprets Burawoy as suggesting that the way in which individuals experience work is independent of their gender, race, age, and so on. However, Burawoy does not foreclose the significance of these subjectivities; he simply reinstates the labour process as the main determiner of an individual's subjectivity as *worker*.

Burawoy's argument is controversial enough as it pertains to manufacturing (du Gay 1996; Knights and Willmott 1989), but the service labour process appears even less likely to be "relatively autonomous." Since interactive service work brings employees face-to-face with customer expectations of service-appropriate bodily presentations and performances, service workers confront imaginings of themselves as individuals who possess identities *beyond that of "worker."* Any distinction between production and consumption that might once have existed is arguably blurred (Urry 1990; du Gay 1996), and service workers can be expected to find it all the more difficult to leave their personal, non-work lives "at the door."

Indeed, referring to how "managers imagine a specific, embodied worker in each job," Williams (2006: 55) argues that, in service work, interpellation takes a dual form— once by management and once by customers. As Williams writes, "[M]anagers imagined different kinds of people in each job, who came to see themselves in terms of these stereotypical expectations. Because these jobs involved interacting with customers, managers also considered the public's expectations when making job assignments" (p. 56). For example, as a white woman, when Williams started her participant observation of two toy stores, she was hired as a cashier. This position involved significant contact with customers, and Williams argues that she was assigned to the position because white women "are generally believed to be the friendliest and most solicitous group and thus best able to inspire trust and confidence" (p. 57).[19] Further, while Williams' racialized female colleagues coveted the position, her male colleagues did their best to avoid it (pp.

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19 Other times, African American men are preferred as cashiers because they are assumed to offer some protection against robbery (Talwar, as cited in Williams 2006: 59).

56–62), making them "complicit in the social organization that management prefers" (p. 62). In other words, customers' real or perceived preferences about the embodiment and disposition of service providers are integral to the way(s) in which interactive service workers identify themselves at work.[20]

Workers can challenge and resist the stereotypes that inform customers' preferences and employers' hiring decisions, but they "typically consent to and embrace the stereotypes, since their opportunities depend on their conformity to these managerial imaginings" (Williams 2006: 55). That workers comply with the organization of work preferred by management does not mean they lack agency, or that they are passive objects (Knights and Willmott 1989). Workers sometimes *choose* to participate in their own subjugation.

This discussion started with the question, "Where and how do workers develop their orientations toward work?" To answer this question, the scholars taking part in the subjectivity debate tried to ascertain why more often than not workers consent to, rather than resist, their "naming" by management as good, obedient workers. While Goldthorpe *et al.* argued that the affluent worker endured less satisfying work because he brought to work with him an instrumental orientation, Burawoy claimed that the labour process itself "manufactured" consent. With the rise of service work, however, the complexity of (workplace) subjectivity became still more apparent, challenging the dichotomy between production and consumption espoused by industrial sociologists (du Gay 1996). The

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20 As I noted previously, assumptions about who is suited to serve and have close contact with others' bodies are held broadly in a society. Employers use these assumptions, or stereotypes, to their advantage. Here, I distinguish analytically between managers and employers, on the one hand, and customers, on the other, to show how outside or "non-work" consciousnesses are made more salient with the participation of the customer in the service work process.

participation of the customer in the service work process—or the three-way relationship among customers, workers, and managers that characterizes service employment—has as significant an impact on the subjectivity of workers as it does on the methods of control management employs to curb unwanted customer and employee behaviour, including resistance (Leidner 1996: 46).

As the literature on control in service work shows, interactive service employers are very concerned with their employees' subjectivities. For example, the objective of the cult(ure) of the customer is to "define and structure employees' subjective meanings and identities" (du Gay and Salaman 1992: 621) so that "customer satisfaction" becomes their ultimate goal. Yet despite management's use of very sophisticated control techniques, including the decentralization of managerial power using "management by customers" (Fuller and Smith 1996), resistance has not been extinguished. In fact, some management studies researchers (e.g., Browning 2008; Harris and Ogbonna 2009) view the resistance exhibited among service workers to be "deviant," yet widespread. So although workers often choose to partake in the labour process for various reasons, the possibility that they will behave in ways that management does not approve is never precluded.

"Service sabotage," as a form of resistance, is thus a reflection of the complexity of (workplace) subjectivity; it indicates that interactive service workers experience contradictions "in and among subject positions" (Smith 1988: 25), or that workers sometimes "challenge the dissonances between their own desires and self-identities and managerial/client expectations" (Wright 2006, qtd. in McDowell 2009: 60). Interactive service workers are perhaps especially prone to such contradictions, given that their

employment situates them in a realm where they are simultaneously subjects of production and objects of consumption, and there is a dearth of research on how employees respond to service employers' attempts to elicit their consent.

YOUNG STOPGAP WORKERS AND "LIMITED EXPERIENCE"

The literature on service work reviewed so far has focused broadly on the dynamics of delivering (and consuming) services in contemporary Western service economies, especially how managers try to control workers' embodiment and emotions—and how workers sometimes resist such control. While the gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, and sexuality of interactive service workers has sometimes been significant in the theories of service work examined above, the unique subject positions of young workers have often been left out. This section serves to highlight the little that is known about "youths *as workers*" (Tannock 2001: 23). Although youth employment has been studied for decades (e.g., Greenberger and Steinberg 1986), these studies have been flawed by the assumption that most young people who work are taking advantage of a moratorium in which they can explore potential adult identities and careers, without being encumbered by any serious commitment (e.g., Arnett 2000). From this perspective, the jobs young workers perform are less important than where they eventually end up in the labour market (Tannock 2001: 23).[21] As a result, although there is a substantial body of work that examines how service workers as an aggregate group experience delivering service, little research looks at how young people, specifically, experience the service encounter.

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21 Alternatively, especially if the work is acknowledged to be "bad," young workers are encouraged to limit their involvement in employment so as not to jeopardize the more important pursuit of a good education (Mortimer and Finch 1986: 87; Mortimer 2003: 225–36).

The neglect of young workers' experiences of service work is surprising for two reasons: First, as Usalcas (2005) reports, a majority of Canadian young workers (ages 15–24) is employed in retail and fast-food jobs. Second, researchers like Hochschild (1983: 133) and Wharton (1993: 222–23) have found age to be a variable that affects the way workers experience emotional labour, an integral part of performing service work, as I have shown. According to their findings, there appears to be a positive relationship between age and an individual's ability to develop what Hochschild (1983: 188) called a "'healthy' estrangement, a clear separation of self from role." What is the meaning of this finding for the way young workers experience interactive service employment?

Recently, business and management studies researchers have found that younger workers are more likely to engage in acts of retaliation directed at customers (Harris and Ogbonna 2002: 173; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker 2008: 1344). However, since the focus of these studies has not been youth themselves, but rather the phenomenon of "service sabotage," the reasons for why youth might be more likely to engage in such behaviour have had to be surmised. The proposed hypotheses often assume that young workers lack maturity ("moral identity" [Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker 2008: 1344]) and other soft skills needed to interact successfully with customers. For example, Browning (2008: 465) hypothesizes that "limited experience" in service work can mean that an individual is unable to deal appropriately with customers. When a customer is perceived to misbehave, the inexperienced worker may resort to what Browning calls "deviant" behaviour. From a more sociological perspective, Lucas (1997: 608)[22] echoes

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22 Unlike the other studies cited in this paragraph, Lucas' (1997) study is about youth (specifically, age

this hypothesis when she finds that undergraduate students surveyed at the Manchester Metropolitan University had negative perceptions of customers: "[N]egative perceptions of customers suggests [*sic*] that teenagers may have not yet developed or acquired some of the tacit skills of service work." That is, the student workers may not have mastered, or internalized, the social competencies necessary for handling customers and their varying demands and idiosyncrasies. Presumably, such skill comes with practice and maturity.

The assumption that young workers lack the soft skills required to engage effectively with customers is somewhat inadequate, though, given the extent to which employers actively recruit workers based on "personality." Employers purposely hire workers they believe demonstrate the appropriate sociability. Then, service employers continue to concern themselves with the subjectivities of their workers even after they are hired, instilling in them a "customer orientation" so that they manage themselves. While workers are not passive objects who can be deterministically inculcated in a corporate culture, the hypothesis that young workers lack the skills and maturity that prevent "deviant" behaviour trivializes the incredible efforts of management to control their workers from the outset. What is more, this hypothesis homogenizes the experiences of young workers, who in fact have varying levels of experience, and gives them little credit.

Qualitative researchers seeking young workers' narratives about work have been able to shed light on other factors that influence the way youths experience employment.

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segregation in hotel and catering services), not service sabotage. However, I include her study with the others because her methodology does not permit her to understand young workers' negative perceptions of customers from the perspective of young workers themselves.

Specifically, besides being (supposedly) less experienced than older workers, young

workers usually have a different orientation toward work, being less committed to any

one job in particular (Lucas 1997; Tannock 2001; Willis 1998). As Tannock (2001: 127)

writes about the unionized grocery and fast-food workers of his study, "Youth service-

sector workers are stopgap workers and therefore are generally uninterested in, and

sometimes even adamantly opposed to, turning their youth jobs into careers." Young

workers see themselves—and are seen by others—as being employed only temporarily

while pursuing other goals, particularly post-secondary education. Indeed, Tannock

argues that this "student-worker" perspective legitimates young workers' low wages, poor

benefits, and irregular hours (pp. 34–35), while also posing a significant challenge for

efforts to unionize. To the extent that a stopgap orientation explains high turnover among

young lower-tier service-sector workers, young workers may be more inclined to quit

"bad" jobs, or at least not to take them very seriously. This possibility would appear to

support the claims of management studies researchers who believe youth lack soft skills

like commitment and maturity, which prevent "service sabotage."

However, qualitative researchers like Tannock and Besen (2006) recognize that

young workers are capable of enjoying their objectively "bad" stopgap jobs. In addition

to offering valuable work experience (Lucas 1997: 607; Mortimer 2003), youth see part-

time work as a chance to socialize and have fun (Besen 2006)—"easy money" (Lucas

1997: 609). For example, Besen (2006: 326) argues that the coffeehouse workers she

interviewed enjoyed their routinized and scripted jobs because they were free when it

came to "the important stuff": their appearance and the music they listened to at work.

More importantly, and more to their credit, young workers are capable—as are other workers—of finding meaning, value, and pleasure in even the worst jobs (Hodson 1991; Tannock 2001: 57). In fact, Tannock seeks to emphasize the extent to which young workers come to invest themselves in their stopgap jobs:

> Many young workers in both [the settings where Tannock undertook his ethnographic fieldwork], in fact, view their corporate employers' centralized work policies and procedures as being hopelessly out of touch with the day-to-day realities of the grocery and fast-food business and develop their own "workarounds" to get the work that needs to be done in their stores done right and done on time. (P. 122)

Almost inevitably, by virtue of the fact that these youth actually *do* the work, they come to acquire local expertise (Tannock 2001: 122), or tacit skills (Manwaring and Wood 1985), which they exercise in earnest and often with pride.

By asking young workers themselves about their employment experiences, Tannock (2001) and Besen (2006) reveal the complexity of young workers' orientations toward (service) work. To some extent, they supply evidence supporting the hypothesis that, because young workers lack soft skills like commitment, they are more likely to engage in acts of retaliation directed at customers. At the same time, their findings challenge such an assumption: Young workers are capable of finding pleasure in their work, and they invest themselves in it. They may adopt an instrumental orientation—emphasizing the money they earn, the experience they gain, and the friends they make. They may, perhaps simultaneously, find their jobs intrinsically rewarding, developing local expertise and taking pride in a job well done. This complexity encourages us to ask about the differences and similarities *among* young workers. What factors determine the way young workers perceive their jobs? How does a worker become invested in his or

her work? And how do the various determining factors shape the way young workers perceive the work of delivering service?

YOUNG AESTHETIC LABOURERS: A NEW LABOUR ARISTOCRACY?

Recently, Warhurst and Nickson (2007b) have posited one important difference among service workers relating to their concept of *aesthetic labour*: the "organizational mobilization, development and commodification of employees' corporeality" (p. 789). They argue that the demand in the lower tier of the service sector for workers with a middle-class embodiment means that some workers will enjoy a more empowering experience of service work than is recognized in "conventional academic accounts" (p. 786). Citing several newspaper articles written from the customer's perspective and personnel managers' exhortations for workers to be "themselves" (confident, cocky, and brash—as opposed to servile) (pp. 788, 791–92), Warhurst and Nickson claim that young, attractive upscale nightclub and retail employees, unlike other service workers, are able to define the customer-worker relationship (pp. 792–93). These workers are portrayed in popular accounts, for example, as intimidat*ing* (p. 786), rather than intimidat*ed*—that is, superordinate to customers, not subordinate. And while this "new labour aristocracy" experiences neither a wage premium nor increased employment security, they do receive "in-kind" remuneration and benefits, such as free coffee beans (Besen 2006: 334) and discounts on designer clothing (Warhurst and Nickson 2007b: 791).

However, Warhurst and Nickson (2007b) provide limited evidence *from aesthetic labourers' perspectives* that middle-class appearance empowers them in their interactions with customers. One waitress is quoted as saying, "I do not smile and demure myself to

[my customers]. I am aggressive, witty and sometimes sarcastic" (p. 792), but otherwise the voices of workers are absent from their article. Overall, Warhurst and Nickson appear to be interested in the phenomenon of "aestheticization" from the employers' point of view. Even in their (2007a) article entitled "Employee Experience of Aesthetic Labour in Retail and Hospitality," they focus on how workers experienced the *demand* for aesthetic labour—how they were recruited and what sorts of rules governed their appearance at work—rather than whether workers thought aesthetic labour influenced their interactions with customers. Do interactive service workers agree that middle-class embodiment improves their working conditions?

Nevertheless, some evidence does suggest that low-status work can be "gentrified" (Warhurst and Nickson's 2007b). Freeman (1998) found that "pink collar" informatics workers in Barbados (overwhelmingly women) took pride in maintaining a middle-class appearance[23] because it helped them to identify their work and themselves as professional. The workers had no contact with customers; instead, they used their clothing and accessories to distinguish themselves from other low-status workers: "In fact," writes Freeman, "professional dress is as important for the workers' *commute* as for the workplace itself" (p. 256). By dressing above their station, the workers were able to associate their "repetitive, tedious, semi-skilled" (p. 252) data processing work with high-tech, white-collar clerical work—and the prestige they perceived themselves to gain heightened their job commitment so that they were more willing to work overtime and

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23 Freeman argues that the informatics sector in Barabados has become a site of display (p. 254). Encouraged in their effort to maintain a "professional look," informatics workers have become consumers of the global fashion industry.

accept flexible scheduling (p. 253). Freeman's findings show how workers' professional looks can define the identity of an industry and those it employs, enhancing workers' perceptions of their jobs and, hence, their manageability. However, further research is necessary to extend her findings to how aesthetic labour influences interactive service work, which is unique from other forms of employment.

"Conventional academic accounts" acknowledge that interactive service work—in contrast with "gentrified" high-end aesthetic labour—is dirty, devalued work (Adams and Welsh 2008: 239). Service work is devalued in part because it requires workers to engage in emotional labour and, usually, to show deference toward customers—who often fail to treat workers with respect. As Hochschild writes, service "workers have weaker rights to courtesy than customers do" (Hochschild 1983: 89). In the cult(ure) of the customer, the already uneven emotional exchange that characterizes lower-tier service work is further entrenched.

People who perform dirty work often find ways to frame their jobs in a manner that makes their work not only palatable but valuable as well (Adams and Welsh 2008: 240). For example, Newman (1999) found that, "to develop the backbone it takes to stay the course in a stigmatized job" (p. 101), inner city fast-food workers in Harlem, New York, drew on a workplace "rebuttal culture" (pp. 104, 116) based on work ethic. Managers and veteran employees would counsel workers to find strength in the fact that, unlike many of the belligerent customers they served, *they* were working (even if it was just at a menial job). Newman argues that, while being employed is broadly valued in American culture, the workplace reinforced the value of work for these low-status

workers and helped them weather the regular humiliation of always having to defer to customers.

Newman's concept of a "rebuttal culture" based on work ethic, although distinct, parallels the notion of *emotional professionalism*: Both Hochschild (1983) and Leidner (1996: 34) find that, in jobs requiring emotional labour, managers teach workers to distance themselves from their jobs so they do not take ill-treatment from customers personally. The workers who are most successful at abiding by this feeling rule are those who are able to develop two separate, but equally meaningful, selves—that is, workers who can maintain a "healthy" estrangement (Hochschild 1983: 188). They can be aloof emotionally when dealing with customer misbehaviour, yet they still "identify with their jobs at least strongly enough to regard job performance as reflective of their discipline and capability" (Leidner 1996: 34).

Thus, the "rebuttal culture" of inner city fast-food workers and Hochschild's concept of "healthy" estrangement, or emotional professionalism, provide a foil for Warhurst and Nickson's (2007b) claim that aesthetic labourers' "jobs appear ameliorated in relation to other workers' jobs in routine sales and services" (p. 793). While it may be true that middle-class embodiment empowers some workers because it gives them access to jobs that allow them greater leeway in defining the customer-worker relationship, is middle-class embodiment in itself enough to subjectively buffer workers against potential mistreatment by customers, who are themselves "empowered" by the cult(ure) of the customer? Specifically, do all young, attractive aesthetic labourers have the same ability to develop a "healthy" estrangement? What else do they have in common—besides their

appearance—which makes them appealing to higher-end service-sector employers?

Finally, in North American society youth are generally viewed in a negative light. Age remains a socially acceptable basis for discrimination, as Côté and Allahar (2006) argue. Adults (and occasionally youth themselves) regard young people as immature, inept, and even unmotivated. These assumptions were evident in the management studies literature that claims youth lack the soft skills that prevent "service sabotage." Are young workers who perform aesthetic labour untouched by these stereotypes? Might customers be *more* likely to abuse their perceived power in service encounters with youth?

In short, there are many questions that need to be asked before we can accept Warhurst and Nickson's (2007b) claim that some aesthetic labourers are allowed to define the customer-worker relationship and, hence, experience the service encounter more positively than do other interactive service workers. To answer any of these questions, however, we must ask young aesthetic labourers' themselves. Only they know how they perceive their jobs.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature on interactive service work, which is a form of employment that is gradually coming to be better understood. The literature indicates that the participation of the customer in the service work process makes service work unique in terms of (1) the importance of emotions and embodiment; (2) the means used by management to control workers and customers alike, including the cultivation a customer orientation; and (3) the nature of resistance and subjectivity. However, less is known about the experiences of youth in service work, especially as aesthetic labourers.

Therefore, this thesis is designed to try to answer the following questions: First, how do young workers perceive the service encounter, especially in light of the cult(ure) of the customer? Second, what motivates young workers' resistance or, alternatively, their "enthusiastic compliance" (Hodson 1991)? And, finally, do young workers who perform aesthetic labour agree that their appearance empowers them in their interactions with customers? I discuss the methodology I used to answer these questions in the chapter that follows.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The primary objective of my research is to explore young coffeehouse baristas' perceptions of the service encounter. As demonstrated in the literature review, "aesthetic labourers," including employees of higher-end cafés, are hypothesized to possess a certain level of embodied capital, which empowers them in their interactions with customers. At the same time, many young interactive service workers are stopgap workers who do not intend to make careers out of their part-time jobs. In this study, I explore the ways in which young aesthetic labourers—uniquely positioned in the labour market as simultaneously marginalized and "empowered"—understand their interactions with customers in the lower tier of the service sector. To explore this group of young workers' perceptions of the service encounter, I rely on qualitative data gathered from five in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with five young workers (ages 18–25) who were employed or had formerly been employed as coffeehouse baristas in one Southwestern-Ontario city. My own experiences and observations from my three-year stint as a barista were also occasionally relevant during data collection.

In this chapter, I first provide a broad overview of the study, followed by a discussion of the sampling procedure used. I then provide a brief description of the sample and overviews of the interview guide and process of data analysis. The chapter concludes with a rationale for the use of qualitative methods and a discussion of the study's overall strengths and limitations.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Participant recruitment for this study began in November 2010, and the first four interviews, which were conducted face-to-face, were completed by the end of January 2011. Face-to-face interviews took place at a location of the participant's choosing (usually a coffee shop)[24] and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The last face-to-face interview was supplemented with additional correspondence via e-mail, while the fifth participant requested to participate strictly via e-mail due to scheduling difficulties. Her interview was completed by the end of May 2011. Interviews that were conducted face-to-face were audiotaped and transcribed by me for analysis.

Recruitment became a challenge when it appeared in January that there was not sufficient interest in the study and that several individuals who initially expressed a desire to participate found themselves too busy with school and other obligations. In February, I approached a handful of coffeehouse managers, asking them to post a call for participants in their establishments—to no avail. As a result, recruitment ceased in April 2011 without having obtained the desired minimum number of participants (i.e., 10).[25]

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

Participants for this study were recruited informally using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling, as Neuman and Robson (2009: 138–39) indicate, is used to identify a nonrandom sample of cases in a network of individuals. Specifically, one "[g]et[s] cases

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24 Talking about coffeehouse customers while being surrounded by them was sometimes awkward for me. I was most uneasy during one interview where the informant asked to meet at his very place of work—with his manager "on the floor" nearby! I concluded that his choice to conduct the interview at that particular location was indicative of the fact that he was extremely at ease in the setting and had no intention of saying anything that would have suggested otherwise.
25 The potential ramifications of this fact are discussed at the end of this chapter.

using referrals from one or a few cases, and then referrals from those cases, and so forth"
(Neuman and Robson 2009: 136). For the purposes of this study, a sample was obtained
by first contacting acquaintances of mine whom I had met during the course of my
employment as a barista. I informed these individuals of the study and asked them to tell
their potentially interested co-workers about the study and how I could be reached. Three
of the individuals who were contacted directly by me agreed to participate in the study.
Two other participants were contacted indirectly through individuals who were known to
me but who did not participate in the study.

For this study, snowball sampling had several advantages. First, it meant not
having to approach upper management, which strategy might have had the potential of
biasing the results of the study, as well as compromising the confidentiality of study
participants. Had management approval been sought, participants might have perceived
the study to be aligned with managerial objectives, rather than being neutral or employee-
friendly. Participants might consequently have been less inclined to speak openly about
their experiences.[26] Seeking approval from management also might have meant reporting
back with the study's findings (or otherwise increasing accountability to management),
thereby opening the study and its participants to scrutiny by management. Recruiting
participants informally using snowball sampling therefore had the added advantage of
protecting confidentiality and minimizing the risk of repercussions for myself as study
investigator, my participants, and lower-level management, too.

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26 At least, this had been the rationale used at the outset. Given the difficulties encountered in participant
recruitment, working more closely with management (oddly) might have lent legitimacy to the study
and facilitated communication with a broader "sample frame."

The main advantage of snowball sampling, as a non-probability sampling technique, however, was that it ensured a relatively homogeneous sample (Miller and Crabtree 2004). That is, snowball sampling made it so individuals in my sample were alike in that they all worked in similar settings. Accordingly, the workers performed the same kind of work—wherever they were employed—by virtue of the fact that they served the same type of products to similar target clienteles. For Miller and Crabtree (2004), the homogeneity of the sample is important in in-depth interviewing because the cultural context needs to be "controlled." They say the focus should be on "the relations of the individuals to [a particular cultural] context" (p. 191). Given the small sample, it was important to reduce heterogeneity amongst participants by focusing on workers working in one type of setting.

Coffeehouses were chosen as the setting for this study for two reasons. First, in many ways, coffeehouses exemplify the customer-is-always-right mentality that is of particular interest to this study, as it forms the basis of competition in the service industry and privileges customers' needs over those of workers. One coffeehouse advertizes, for example, "If your coffee isn't perfect, we'll make it over. If it's still not perfect make sure you're in a Starbucks" (Gregory 2009). Second, baristas are, at least to an extent, high-end aesthetic labourers: The clientele of the coffeehouses where baristas work are those who can afford a more expensive daily cup of coffee, and the "image" the coffeehouses project reinforces an upper-class preoccupation with leisure. For example, Ritzer (2011: 219) discusses the atmosphere that Starbucks tries to create for its customers: a homey "third place" between home and work, where people can relax and enjoy "a taste of

luxury."[27] As the animate components of the corporate idea, coffeehouse workers are hired and dress(ed) with this aesthetic in mind.

While homogeneity thus had several advantages, it was impossible—and indeed undesirable—to control completely for contextual differences across coffeehouses and, of course, among workers. Given that the study participants were employed throughout the city in various neighbourhoods in the suburbs and downtown, each coffeehouse had its own service dynamic[28] (see Korczynski 2009a for how shared cultures or subcultures can humanize service interactions). The service dynamic also varied depending on how busy each café was, both in comparison with the other cafés and at different times during the day. Finally, like the coffee shops where they worked, the participants themselves were not alike. Although they worked in similar settings, and were likely hired using similar criteria, they varied in terms of gender, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and so on. Some of these differences are outlined in the following section.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

As stated above, the sample consisted of young workers (ages 18–25) who were working or had formerly been employed as coffeehouse baristas in one Southwestern-Ontario city. Three participants were male and two were female. All participants either were pursuing or had already completed postsecondary studies at college or university, but this commonality was accidental (i.e., participation in postsecondary education was

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27 Ritzer (2011: 219–21) goes on to argue that, in fact, only a small percentage of customers actually takes advantage of the cozy armchairs and sofas on offer at Starbucks; the rest are too busy and simply take in the show.

28 I use the term *service dynamic* loosely to refer to the ensemble of factors that can influence encounters between coffee shop workers and the customers with whom they interact.

not one of the inclusion criteria). All participants had been employed as a barista for at

least a year. Below, table 3.1 summarizes participants' biographical information. The

table does not include data for either race/ethnicity or socioeconomic background

because most participants did not (have the chance to) refer to themselves in terms of

these characteristics. Only one participant referred to her socioeconomic status. The

participants' age and educational attainment are consistent with my observations of

coffeehouse baristas.

Table 3.1 Participants' biographical information (at time of interview)

Pseudonym	Employment status	Length of café employment (years)	Gender	Age	Educational attainment
Geoffrey	Shift Supervisor	3	M	24	College (completed)
Kevin	Barista	4	M	22	College
Claudia	Former Barista	1	F	19	University[*]
Stephen	Barista	2	M	18	University
Lydia	Former Barista	1	F	21	University (completed)

[*] While working as a barista, Claudia was attending high school.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The study design required specifically of participants that they answer questions

relevant to the research questions, which centred on identifying (1) young service

workers' perceptions of the service encounter; (2) the ways in which they dealt with

customer misbehaviour—that is, if such behaviour figured in their narratives; and (3) the

meaning they attribute to their actions and reactions. Therefore, in order to establish a

basis for conversation, workers were initially asked about themselves (i.e., biographical

information including age, commitments outside of work, plans for the future) and their

employment as a barista. From there, questions focused on interactive service work (e.g.,

How do you like working with customers? Generally, what are your interactions with customers like? Have you ever had to deal with a difficult customer?) and the potential relevance of age and managerial control to the participants' perceptions of the service encounter (see appendix 2 for a copy of the interview guide).

Interviews were semi-structured to "allow individual respondents some latitude and freedom to talk about what [was] of interest to them" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 125), while also guiding conversation to remain on the set of questions developed for the interview guide. In other words, I adhered to a degree of structure that permitted both depth of discussion on predetermined topics and breadth of discussion on new issues, when they surfaced.[29] This balance was essential, given the exploratory nature of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Since the amount of data in this study was relatively small, the process of coding and theme identification was undertaken without the use of a data management program. After some initial descriptive coding, I began to familiarize myself with the data by writing a memo for each individual transcript, copying out quotations I thought were relevant to my research questions. Data analysis continued inductively as codes gradually became more abstract and theoretical, and participants who did not "fit the pattern" (i.e., negative cases) were identified.

Data were analyzed for themes within the following predetermined topic areas:

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29 As an inexperienced interviewer, I tended to follow the interview guide as closely as possible (and I occasionally missed markers: the pieces of information a respondent offers while talking about something else [Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 128–29]). Even still, no two interviews were exactly alike. The order of questions was not fixed, and as different themes began to emerge, the interview guide evolved to incorporate them.

(1) participants' perceptions of their jobs on the whole; their perceptions of the service encounter specifically, including (2) customers, (3) middle- and upper-management, and (4) coworkers and supervisors; their perceptions of the relevance of their (5) age and (6) appearance to their interactions with customers; and (7) their strategies for dealing with (difficult) customers. In addition, the topic area of (8) "motivation" became significant during data analysis. Usually, several themes emerged within each topic area. For example, in the topic area of perceptions of customers, "human connection," "making customers happy," and "excessive demands" were all important themes. Of course, this description is intended to illuminate the process of data analysis for the purposes of transparency; it does not adequately capture the extent to which the process occurred organically and iteratively (i.e., moving back and forth between data exploration and interpretation).

RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGY

I chose to explore young workers' perspectives of the service encounter using in-depth interviews because I wanted to solicit youths' service work narratives, which have been neglected in the literature (see Besen 2006 and Tannock 2001 for two noteworthy exceptions). As Miller and Crabtree (2004: 188) write, "The depth interview […] focuses on facilitating a co-construction of the interviewer's and an informant's experience and understanding of the topic of interest." In other words, by opening up a two-way dialogue with them, the interviewer encourages informants to consider their experiences in greater depth than they might have otherwise. The in-depth interview is therefore better suited to teasing out the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences and actions than is

ethnography or quantitative methods. Further, in terms of studying "service sabotage" as resistance, versus deviance, the articulation of *subjective* motives (as opposed to the testing of "objective" variables) is valuable.

The challenge was in getting participants to feel comfortable telling their stories the way *they* wanted to tell them. While I feel that my personal experience as a barista was an asset, particularly in terms of building rapport with participants and expressing empathy, several challenges come with being an "insider" (Gallagher 2004). As a former service worker, I had experienced many of the situations and emotions my participants described, but as a critical social scientist who had engaged with the literature, my interpretation of these same situations and emotions sometimes differed. In fact, one of the dilemmas I encountered while conducting interviews was whether it was appropriate to disagree with and challenge my participants.[30] I was reminded by my supervisor and the Research Ethics Board before entering the field not to make assumptions about how my participants perceived their jobs, their managers, or their customers.[31] Essentially, I had to adopt "outsider" status to do my participants' stories justice: Even a "you know" was not allowed to pass without asking for clarification (although, of course, some did). At the same time, I wanted to avoid slipping into purely interpretive sociology (cf. Besen 2006) and give my participants full credit as critical-thinking, agential beings.

With this aim in mind, I decided to share my findings with my participants and ensure that they had the opportunity to respond before my thesis was complete. This

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30 Depending on how I read the situation, I did sometimes play a very cautious devil's advocate.
31 Several prompts were duly developed to allow respondents the opportunity to express what aspects of their jobs were *positive*, before moving onto what was more challenging or stressful. Initially, there had been only one question: "How do you like working at ——?"

technique is often referred to as member checking, and it is intended to enhance validity by allowing respondents to corroborate or disagree with study findings. Accordingly, I encouraged all participants to review the results of my study, including drafts. Not all of them took up the offer, but discussing my findings with at least some of my participants and incorporating their input I hope enriched my final analysis (Borland 2004). More importantly, by revealing or validating an empowering perspective of their experiences, my research may actually directly benefit the study participants themselves. As Borland (2004) argues, "identifying our field collaborators as an important first audience" (p. 532) opens the possibility of a truly reciprocal exchange between researcher and participant.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

While I hope I have adequately justified the design of this study and its methodology, I am aware that it possesses some limitations relating to the sampling technique used and the size of the sample, which is small even by the standards of qualitative research. This study uses a nonrandom sample of five individuals, which cannot yield statistically generalizable findings. However, my goal is not to generalize my findings widely. Rather, it is to begin to develop a context-specific understanding of the ways in which young workers, working in a similar setting, perceive the service relationship and cope with customer demands. In other words, the contribution I make here is in asking a new question and answering it using the resources available to me. Later research can explore how the experiences of young workers compare across different settings and service dynamics.

Finally, due to the difficulties encountered during recruitment, the question arises

whether the study achieved "theoretical saturation": the point at which further data

collection results in no new insights (Agar, cited in Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 72).[32]

According to Morse (1995: 147), "saturation is the key to excellent qualitative work,"

and the sampling technique used in this study, snowball sampling, is not conducive to

saturation being achieved quickly (p. 149). The study undoubtedly would have benefited

from the opportunity to sample further, but the body of data that *was* obtained forms in

itself a whole and is still valuable, especially for exploratory purposes. I am confident

that the themes discussed in the following chapters are fully developed and theoretically

significant.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have attempted to make transparent the methodology used in this

study by providing a complete picture of the research process—from study design and

participant recruitment to interviewing and data analysis. I also provided a rationale for

the use of qualitative methods and addressed the study's overall strengths and limitations.

The following chapter will present the results of my study.

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32 The concept of theoretical saturation is borrowed from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Chapter 4

Results

Although there is a growing body of literature that addresses the way in which service workers perceive their work, little is known about how *young workers* experience their lower-tier service sector jobs. Even less is known about how young so-called "aesthetic labourers" experience their work. This chapter aims to fill this gap and explores, in an in-depth fashion, young coffeehouse workers' perceptions of the service encounter. Specifically, I examine variations in study participants' perceptions of service work (*serving* customers) and explore factors that may influence their perceptions.

To explore young coffeehouse workers' perceptions of the service encounter, I examine participants' ideas on various aspects of service work, including emotional and aesthetic labour, as well as other themes that participants discussed in their interviews. First, I examine participants' perceptions of the three parties involved in service work: customers, workers (i.e., participants' coworkers and supervisors), and both middle and upper management. Then, I examine the ways in which participants described dealing with difficult customers and their feelings about deferring. I present a theme introduced by participants: work ethic. I also explore the significance of appearance standards and age. Finally, I present findings regarding participants' overall experiences of their barista jobs—whether their workplaces fostered commitment (to customer service) or, instead, alienation. Overall, the interviews suggest a pattern: Participants who espouse a customer orientation also display considerable interactive skill and are more committed to their employers, while participants who are more critical of the cult(ure) of the customer

dislike deferring and are more critical of their employers. There is also evidence that barista work might be gentrified—but not purely because baristas have middle-class looks.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER

Perceptions of the service encounter varied among participants. While Geoffrey, Kevin, and Stephen thought the majority of service interactions were positive, Claudia and Lydia reported that interactions were mixed. In this section, I examine how study participants understood the service encounter, especially how they perceived customers. In addition, I examine how participants saw the role of coworkers and middle and upper management.

Perceptions of Customers

Despite acknowledging that excessively demanding or rude customers were stressful, participants emphasized the human connections they made with customers. In fact, every participant said that making personal connections with customers *as people* was one of the aspects that made their job satisfying on the whole. As Lydia said, "[I]t's enjoyable talking with kind or interesting people." Such connections with customers were often mentioned in the same breath as the connections and friendships that participants made with their coworkers. Geoffrey said,

> I find the human connection that you can make with customers—and with your fellow [workers]—to be particularly satisfying. It's very enjoyable to have someone come in as a person just looking for coffee and leave knowing something new about them. That's really awesome.

Some of these connections are fleeting. For example, Geoffrey explained how he gained satisfaction from connecting even briefly with a customer:

> Even one person in the day! You can be having very standard [interactions], but then one person stops and talks to you and you go into this five-minute conversation, or what have you, and you feel a very genuine connection to them. It definitely… it makes your entire day worthwhile, as far as working at the [coffee shop] goes.

Other connections take time to develop, as well as a degree of effort to maintain. For example, Kevin described initially being the "new person" and then eventually feeling a more personal connection with customers, as they gradually got to know him:

> But now, after a year and a half, there's a lot of customers that recognize me, that know me, and I know their drinks and, like, it just kind of… they make me feel welcome working here. Like, they appreciate me being here. And if I'm reading a book or working on homework and I'm not working, they'll come over and talk to me while I'm just sitting down, working [on homework]. I don't really feel that in any other job that I've ever had. It's kind of been that disconnect with customer/employee, and here it's kind of like we're all just a family getting coffee.

Interactions with customers that were personal and less rushed ("like with regulars," as Lydia said) were thought to be most conducive to such "human connections."

Participants also described feeling good about being able to make customers happy. When asked what was satisfying about his job, Kevin responded,

> Honestly, [what is satisfying about my job] is making customers happy. Like, I really enjoy just that whole experience that they want something and I can deliver it, and then that makes their day. Like, that first cup of coffee in the morning when you're, you know, half asleep still. It just makes your [the customer's] day *that* much better. And if you get it from someone who's happy to be awake and happy to be there, it just makes you feel better. So that makes me wanna do it that much more. Like, it's very satisfying.

Kevin frames "making customers happy" in terms of "customer service"—he says, "[W]e deliver excellent service and then they just kind of [get] that warm, fuzzy feeling *when you get what you ask for, when you want it*" (my emphasis)—but participants also talked about general decency and "helping." For example, when I asked Lydia what a successful transaction with a customer was like, she replied, "Well, it's probably different from what [my employer] wants. [My employer] wants you to up-sell, but I don't give a flying rat's

ass about [up-selling]." For her, "[k]nowing that I've helped someone and they are

happy" was more important.

Participants sometimes arrived at answers that emphasized the non-commercial

aspects of service when talking about what they thought they would like as customers.

When asked whether it was important to her personally to give good service, in addition

to ideas of "service," Claudia invoked ideas about reciprocity (i.e., treating others as one

would like to be treated):

> I think so. Like, I feel like, if I was in that position of the customer, which I always sometimes [am], I don't wanna be, like, treated badly if I'm paying for something, right? 'Cause it's just not nice. And, like, someone could be having, like, a really bad day, and if you treat them well, then, like, it can totally change the way they're viewing something, right?

While she says she would not want to be treated badly as a *paying* customer, she frames

this point using an emphasis on decency, being "nice." When I asked Stephen what

motivated him to do his job well, he emphasized genuineness. In fact, like Lydia, Stephen

explicitly rejected profits ("numbers") as a motivator:

> Well, okay. Well, I often think, like, if I wanted to walk into… and get a coffee, what would I want to get from a barista, right? So I try to give, like, the friendly smile… genuine smile, genuine conversation. I also want my drink to look good, right? I mean, if you just splash foam on there… you know, [abruptly] "Grande Latte!" No, I want a little bit of care taken, a little time. That's all. That's what always made me wanna do my job—but only in, like, drinks, right? I don't really care about, um, how our numbers are this quarter or whatever.

Stephen aims for genuine interactions with customers and would rather take his time to

make a drink carefully. Thus, making customers happy is a goal the participants shared,

although they defined it differently.

However, not all interactions with customers were good. Geoffrey, Kevin, and

Stephen estimated that one in every 10 interactions with customers was not what they

would like it to be, while Claudia and Lydia described interactions as a mixture of bad

and good. As Claudia said, although her coffeehouse customers were nicer than the

customers who visited the pizza parlour where she used to work, working with customers

"can be challenging. Like, there's certain customers that would come in every day and,

like, sometimes they'd be in a really bad mood. And obviously [when] some people are in

a bad mood, they take it out on whoever, right?" Lydia echoed Claudia's feeling that

working with customers can be challenging, but she experienced customers' rudeness

differently; for her, rather than reflecting a customer's mood, rudeness was indicative of

disrespect toward (lower-tier) service workers:

> It can be challenging when there is miscommunication or disrespect from customers—
> which there often can be. [My coffee shop] is located in a fairly well-to-do
> neighbourhood and when you work in a service job you experience discrimination—
> based on your being a service worker.

She believed customers were rude toward her because they thought they were better than

her: "Their overall demeanor was rude. It just felt like they separated themselves. They

were pretentious, holding their shopping bags. They were accessorizing with their drinks.

It felt like they were thinking, 'I'm better than you.'" Lydia added that customers made

assumptions about her intelligence, based on her status relative to them while in her

service role: "They think you're stupid. The way they talk to you, you can tell they think

you're stupid. I felt like I deserved more respect. I was a university student but they

assumed I was stupid." Although most participants were able to recall encounters with

rude customers, Lydia was the only one to characterize the rudeness she experienced as

resulting from her status relative to customers.

In addition to experiencing rudeness, participants thought some customers were

excessively demanding. For example, Stephen, when asked if he found anything stressful about his job, referred to long lineups and customers whose beverage orders were very complicated:

> Oh man, when lineups are to the door, yeah. When, like, someone comes in and they've ordered, like, this drink with, you know, X amount of modifiers, you know? They've run through every box several times, you know? And, like, when I'm trying to deal with a difficult customer over something so simplistic. You know, "Why's my bagel taking so long?" "Well, sir, you see, there are several other bagels in front of yours." Um, and that's pretty much as much stress as I get. It's just from customers, not from the job itself.[33]

As Stephen says, customers are the only source of stress for him at his job; he enjoys the tasks of his work, but dealing with customers' "simplistic" complaints is frustrating for him. Claudia also found demanding customers stressful. She characterized difficult customers in the following manner:

> [E]xamples are, like, people who would want their drink made exactly the way they wanted, and they would make us do it, like, twice or three times in order to get it the way they wanted. Or, like, usually [my employer] always has price changes and they're usually, like, higher prices, so people are not happy about that. And then, some people, when you tell them the pricing changed, they say that it's your fault. Like, they take it out on you, like, they get angry at *you*. And then we say, "It's not coming from us; we're just the messengers," right? But they still get angry, and then they just drive away from the [drive-thru] window.

Claudia shares Stephen's frustration with demanding customers, some of whom made her and her coworkers remake drinks more than once if they did not meet their expectations. Claudia also experienced difficulty in her role as a "boundary spanner" (Miles, as cited in Wharton 1993) representing her organization to the public. She received complaints about her employer and was blamed when prices went up, even though she was, as she says, only the messenger. Claudia's and Stephen's experiences with demanding customers

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33 In this quotation, "modifiers" refers to modifications that can be requested to a beverage's default recipe. Customers can modify the number of shots of espresso, the type of milk used, and so on. "Modifiers" are marked on a cup in the corresponding "box."

were typical of the others'.

The participants' perceptions of customers were more complicated than some researchers have allowed. Customers were admittedly a source of stress, but they were also people with whom the participants occasionally enjoyed genuine conversation and "human connection," and with whom they often identified. In fact, all participants said making people (customers) happy was satisfying. As is already beginning to be evident, though, there were variations among participants' perceptions of customers—and of customer service. As I discuss below, while all participants were able to recall encounters with difficult customers, they dealt with them in different ways.

Coworkers and Supervisors: Providing Emotional Support and Backup

All participants agreed that their coworkers and supervisors were a source of support in dealing with customers. For all but one of the participants, coworkers and supervisors provided support in two forms. The first of these two forms was as team members who worked together to deliver quality service and provided backup to one another when dealing with difficult customers. For example, when asked how her coworkers reacted when she was dealing with a difficult customer, Claudia responded as follows:

> Well, they kinda help you out. Like, they've been in the same situation, right? So if it's getting to a point where you can't handle it, they'll come in and, like, help you out, or call the manager, or see what they can do to help. Like, it's never like they leave me alone; it's always a teamwork.

Likewise, although Kevin's extensive service experience (four years with his current employer, plus several more in other service-sector jobs) meant he felt less likely to need assistance, he was confident that any of his coworkers would help a fellow barista if

necessary:

> Usually if I have a difficult customer, because I've got the experience that I do, usually they'll say, "Okay, well, he's been here for so long, he can handle it." But if it gets to be something I can't handle, or I don't have the answer to… if I ask for help with dealing with it, I've never met anyone who works here who could say no to helping. And there are actually some people who, if they see that… kind of those first stages of a conflict starting, will kind of slide in and just ease the tension out. But they're very supportive. Like, if you need them, there's not a single [barista] I've ever met that wouldn't be there to help out if they could. So kind of a good feeling 'cause you know that if something happens, they've got your back covered so you don't have to worry.

Geoffrey and Stephen also referred to their coworkers and supervisors as assisting them, or providing backup, with delivering service and dealing with difficult customers. Lydia, on the other hand, did not mention this first type of support.

The second form of support participants experienced was emotional. For most of the participants, emotional support was accompanied by the type of support described above. As Geoffrey said, his coworkers and supervisors could be relied on to assist each other in delivering quality service, as well as to bolster each other emotionally: "I would say that's the standard state of being… is that those around you help to support you, not just in terms of providing the customer service but also just *being* supportive of your state."

However, unlike the other participants, Lydia referred only to emotional support. She said her coworkers, whom she referred to as "work sisters,"[34] were one of the (few) positive aspects of her job, explaining that talking amongst each other (for which they were chastised because it was thought to indicate slacking) "made work enjoyable and contributed to [a] team/positive atmosphere." Lydia said that, by commiserating about their "problems and experiences" related to work, family, relationships, and housing,

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34 All of Lydia's coworkers were young women of approximately the same age.

"talking helped [me and my coworkers] to relate to each other and kind of build solidarity." This sense of solidarity extended to dealing with difficult customers. As she says, "Coworkers tend to side with other coworkers." When asked to explain in what ways her coworkers "sided with" each other, she responded simply, "In terms of being like, 'Yeah, that person was a jerk.'" While it had a different tone, other participants described a similar type of emotional reassurance (e.g., "It's okay. I know they were being difficult, but you did well").

All participants experienced their supervisors and coworkers as emotionally supportive. Most of the participants also experienced supervisors and coworkers as a source of backup, especially when dealing with difficult customers.

The Role of (Middle) Management: "On the Floor" and At a Distance

In contrast with coworkers and supervisors, management was not perceived positively by all participants. While middle management was more likely to be perceived as siding with the participants and their coworkers, upper management was perceived by some to be disinterested in the day-to-day happenings of participants' workplaces. As a result, attitudes toward upper management—sometimes referred to as "corporate"—were more negative than attitudes toward middle management. Still, some participants were able to justify upper management's directives from a financial point of view, including one participant who felt that his employer had achieved the perfect balance between the "bottom line" (i.e., profit) and customer satisfaction.

Participants who voiced positive impressions of management perceived their employers to be facilitating positive interactions with customers. Participants believed

their employers provided the appropriate training and an adequate amount of leeway to

resolve problems, when they arose. Middle management especially was considered to be

supportive, offering help and useful advice, and encouraging participants to come up with

their own solutions when dealing with difficult customers. In short, the participants'

employers cultivated a customer orientation among their employees, and the participants

seemed to appreciate it. For example, Geoffrey mentioned that the training provided by

his employer enabled him to "connect" with customers in the expected manner: "Well, I

find that [my employer] actually provides in its training a model for connecting with

people, discovering their needs, and responding to those (i.e., sort of a 'connect, discover,

respond' model)." Geoffrey also believed his employer promoted fulfillment among

employees by encouraging positive relations between customers and workers.

Similarly, Claudia said her employer encouraged a "positive atmosphere" in

which employees and customers were *expected* to connect with one another. She

compared the coffeehouse where she worked as a barista to her previous job at a pizza

parlour:

> Well, when I worked at [the pizza parlour], it was pretty much, "Here you go," and you
> didn't have to say, like, "Have a good day." Well, I still did it, just 'cause it was, like,
> common courtesy, right? But, like, it wasn't… you didn't *have to*. And they don't really
> always put the customer first, like they do at [the café]. It was just like, "We're right;
> you're not" kind of thing [laughs]. I mean, like, [the] customer's always supposed to be
> right, but not at every place. And here we actually… I don't know. I feel like I was nicer
> to people here than over there.

Claudia attributes the improved relations at the coffeehouse to her employer requiring

baristas to adhere to a customer orientation (being "nicer"), thereby successfully "putting

the customer first."

Participants also said that their employers gave them the leeway necessary to give good service. Geoffrey's employer's "Just Say Yes" policy, for example, not only allowed him and his coworkers to fix beverages when they did not meet customers' expectations; they were also permitted to void transactions and give out coupons and free pastries, if necessary:

> Knowing that you can totally give someone a free drink. That's the big thing too. Like, you have the power to give someone a free drink if something has gone wrong, rather than just profusely apologizing or telling them to move on. I definitely noticed that with people that I work with, the fact that they are able to give free drinks, give samples, give free pastries if necessary, give recovery coupons—that's all within their power—they feel much more invested, they're not as detached.

Geoffrey recognizes that being able to use one's discretion enhances baristas' feelings of investment in the provision of quality service since customer satisfaction becomes their responsibility. Below, Claudia echoes Geoffrey's feelings about her employer's policy, which allowed her, too, to easily assuage an unhappy customer if a beverage was made incorrectly: "Like, I like that the rules allow us to change that… 'cause at some places you can't give free stuff. Like, let's say, at Tim Hortons, you wouldn't be able to even give a free doughnut." The trust entrenched in policies that give baristas the freedom to do whatever they feel is necessary to enhance customer satisfaction was experienced positively by participants.

In addition to viewing their employers' policies as facilitating positive interactions with customers, participants also saw middle management as supportive. Geoffrey said that, instead of waiting for employees to make a mistake, management observes relatively neutrally (i.e., "like anyone else would be"). Therefore, as Geoffrey said, a barista at his coffee shop would not be reprimanded for giving bad service, but he or she would likely

be coached on ways to improve:

> I don't know necessarily *get away with* [bad service]. It's not something that you would necessarily be… you would necessarily see repercussions for, but it's something that everyone around you is aware of and oftentimes they will try to coach you on a more appropriate method to be using.

Both Claudia and Kevin expressed similar sentiments about management's role. Kevin, in particular, described management as empowering, as well as supportive:

> As far as I know, like, any time I've ever had a problem, either with a difficult customer or with anything in general in this store, the management team's always been there and they're always supportive… but they're, at the same time, they're very empowering to say, "Okay, well, you have a problem. What would *you* do to fix it?" They're kind of like, "If you were the customer, what would you want to fix… how would you be satisfied [unintelligible]?" And because they kind of come with that approach, you kind of, when you work with them, you kind of develop that, "Okay, well, this happened; this is how I'm gonna fix it."

In short, some participants perceived middle management to be behaving consistently with the cult(ure) of the customer espoused by upper management by assisting employees to deliver quality service, and by coaching them to internalize a customer orientation.

Stephen's and Lydia's impressions of management varied significantly from the others'. They were more likely to focus on how management's concern for profits was incompatible with high service standards and stress-free working conditions. Instead of feeling like management was supporting them in the provision of quality customer service, they experienced managers as siding with customers, against them. For example, Lydia said that, in contrast with her coworkers, "[m]anagers will side with customers." Although Stephen described management as "forgiving" about mistakes, he also said he felt that it is the exception for managers to side with a barista when dealing with difficult customers. When asked whether managers are often on his side, he responded,

> Very few. My manager right now is, but that's because she's, um, a little unorthodox, to

> say the least. But she knows when not to take crap, and that's why I'm compelled to stay at [my job] because I know that—even if it's one person—that one person is on my side.

Stephen believed that, while middle management was more in touch with what customers wanted (i.e., the "café experience," meaning the enjoyment of a quality beverage and, for some, genuine human *interaction* with a barista), upper management was more interested in financial *transactions*. In fact, Stephen felt that he and his coworkers had to disobey the rules in order to avoid harassing customers and deliver the service they believed customers truly wanted.

Like Stephen, Lydia (who felt that her manager expected her to make mistakes and would not entrust her with important tasks) perceived managers as more concerned with the bottom line—and, therefore, customers' concerns—than with their employees. For example, when asked whether she thought her employer could do something to make dealing with customers more positive, she said, "I don't know that there is. It is about money for mangers and companies. For them, they have to side with customers if they want to keep customers happy."[35] In contrast, other participants, who did say they could benefit from an extra hand during rushes, justified their employers' staffing practices in financial terms. Kevin, in particular, felt his employer had found the perfect balance between the bottom line and customer satisfaction:

> It's like, they worry about the bottom line, like costs and labour and stuff like that, but, at the same time, I think they've understood that concept—that it doesn't matter what your costs or how little you're spending on labour: If you're not serving anyone, you're not making money. So I think they kind of got that idea 'cause, like, you always… here, it doesn't matter how slow it is, or how busy it is, you're always giving customer time. And if there's something wrong, you're always fixing it, you're always doing something. Even if it costs the company money, they don't really care 'cause that customer's gonna come back now, or that customer was already a regular. So it's… I really feel like they've

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35 Lydia repeats this sentiment when discussing the cult(ure) of the customer (see below).

grasped that whole the-customer-first concept.

Thus, Stephen's and Lydia's experiences of management contrasted with those of the participants who felt that management facilitated positive interactions with customers, either directly through assistance and training, or indirectly through salutary policies. While some participants felt empowered by management to deliver the service they believed customers wanted, Stephen and Lydia experienced management's support as inadequate and its drive for profits as obstructive.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS: DEFERRING, DELEGATING, AND DEVIANCE

The participants held varying opinions about the "customer is always right" saying, and (accordingly) they had different approaches to dealing with difficult customers. All participants recognized deferring to be the official policy for handling customers' idiosyncratic requests, but not all of them managed to see the policy in a positive light. While some considered deferring to be the optimum way to meet service expectations and resolve complaints, others experienced deferring more adversely and even engaged in "deviant" front-line employee behaviour. The participants who perceived the cult(ure) of the customer most unfavourably were also the ones who were more likely to dislike deferring. In the following sections, I discuss three approaches the participants used when dealing with difficult customers: deferring, delegating, and deviance.

Deferring: Espousing a Customer Orientation

Participants expressed ambivalence about the saying, "the customer is always right," maintaining that it was at once true and not true. Geoffrey was among those who

rationalized the saying, espousing a customer orientation as beneficial for customers, management, and himself:

> I think that [the saying's] a little bit misleading, in that to every statement there are exceptions or extenuating circumstances. But the spirit behind it, in that you're always trying to satisfy the customer—the core of it is absolutely true. And [my employer] reflects that in their "Just Say Yes" policy, in that it's better to satisfy the customer at this juncture than to try to push against them—within reason. And for the most part, it does work because it's a lot less stressful when you feel like you're trying to balance customer needs and, you know, financial goals for the corporation, when they can be more interlinked, in that, if you're providing a positive experience, then the financial success will follow.

That is, satisfying customers, or "just saying yes, " makes sense financially for Geoffrey's employer, but it is also less stressful for him. As he says, "It's much simpler and less emotionally draining to give them what they want, if for no other reason than to move things forward." In other words, for Geoffrey, letting the customer be right—even if he or she is "wrong"—is practical because it harmonizes the needs of all involved parties.

Like Geoffrey, Kevin expressed ambivalence about whether the customer is always right but ultimately espoused a customer orientation. He felt that "the customer may not always be right, but they're not wrong." In contrast with Geoffrey, though, Kevin considered himself naturally suited to interacting with customers and, hence, he felt he could mostly avoid confrontations with them. For example, when I asked him if he ever experienced a conflict between what a customer needed or wanted and what he needed as a worker, he responded,

> I don't get too many of those [situations] 'cause I'm really easygoing about things like that, but I've worked with some people that get really… they're making a latte and the person asks for no foam and they put foam on it, or something like that, and the customer says, you know, "There's supposed to be no foam," and as the employee, I've seen a lot of people get really mad and just get really bent out of shape because they have to stop and remake that. Whereas I'm like, [casually] "Okay." So for me, there's not a lot but I've *seen* a lot of that.

Therefore, rather than talking about deferring as a useful tool codified in official policy,

Kevin sees his easygoing (not submissive or obsequious) personality as the key to his

personal success with customers. However, for both Geoffrey and Kevin, regardless of

their differences, deferring was the standard technique for dealing with customers; and,

further, it was not regarded as being too distasteful.

Participants used different techniques when deferring, but usually it entailed

maintaining an appropriate emotional display, such as a smile or the appearance of calm.

Kevin, for example, said he smiles even in spite of being treated badly by a cranky

customer:

> It seems really weird, but when people are angry, I almost, like, subconsciously *have* to smile because I find it either pisses them off even more—in which case there's something wrong and then you should, you know, deal with that—or it causes them to not focus on the negative part of themself [*sic*]. It's like, if I'm putting on a smile to them, even though they know that I know that they're upset, they're like, you know, "Well, that person's still taking the time to smile to me—even though I'm cranky or I treat them bad." So… in a way, it kind of makes us think about it so….

Claudia (who was more sanguine about the saying that the customer is always right,

calling it "just marketing") described keeping an even temper and not raising one's voice:

> Claudia: I guess you just try to keep calm… not like over-smile because then that would be sarcastic.
> [laughter]
> Claudia: But you just try to manage the situation. Like, keep calm and not, like, yell at them, obviously. And if they're yelling, then not yell back but, like, speak clearly, and… just like normal—as if you were to a normal person that wasn't angry.

These techniques amount to what Geoffrey referred to as "keeping the positive

environment."

In addition to engaging in emotional labour *during* the service encounter itself

(i.e., deferring, involving the techniques described above), participants also dealt with

customers by managing emotions more generally at work. For example, Geoffrey and

Kevin both referred explicitly to separating their work and personal lives in order to

prevent stress. For Geoffrey, this meant keeping his two selves—his "café persona" and

his "not-café persona"—apart at work:

> Geoffrey: When I walk through the door, I'm in [café] mode. I think every person who's
> worked [here] sort of has their [café] persona—and then their not-[café] persona, or when
> they're not working—which is still a reflection of themselves; it's just filtered through
> what's expected in that environment.
> DS: Yeah, it's kind of like a professionalism.
> Geoffrey: Yeah, it is. It's very much a form of professionalism. That's definitely a good
> way to put it.

When asked how he handled stress, Kevin used the same imagery of crossing the

threshold of his work and leaving off part of his identity:

> Usually for that I just, when I come to work, once I walk through that front door, I leave
> all my personal stuff off—like, as much as I can. Like, if it's some serious things going
> on—family or whatever—that will always bother…. But I try to, once I cross that door,
> just… even though it's really stressful… if something happens, just put that smile on, and
> I find by just forcing myself just to keep that smile on, a lot of stress doesn't happen—
> until of course I get home and kind of process the day. It allows me to go through it. So I
> just think happy thoughts. And drink a lot of coffee.

Thus, both Geoffrey and Kevin made a conscious effort to be "happy" and emotionally

professional at work. They cultivated two separate identities so they could deep act

(Hochschild 1983), or offer more authentic emotional displays, without getting burnt out.

The other participants did not describe their emotional labour in these terms.

Managing emotions at work also meant preventing a negative encounter from

tainting the rest, which Geoffrey referred to as "compartmentalizing"—"just sorta being

able to laugh off a situation." He said that, once a customer's negative influence was

"politely and quickly" removed using his employer's "Just Say Yes" policy, he could then

"take the time to get some perspective on the situation or speak to someone else about

it."[36] Similarly, Claudia mentioned "letting it go," "forgetting about it," and "moving on."

Thus, some participants appear to manage their emotions even after the customer is gone

by "getting perspective" and distancing themselves emotionally from a bad encounter.

This form of emotion management was more common than wittingly cultivating an at-

work, café persona.

Delegating and Deviance: When Deferring is Unpalatable

Unlike the other participants (especially Geoffrey and Kevin), who found

deferring useful or easy, Stephen and Lydia were the only participants to say they had

ever resorted to tactics other than deferring, including engaging in "deviant" front-line

employee behaviour, or "service sabotage." They were also more critical than the other

participants about the cult(ure) of the customer.

While voicing ambivalence about the "customer is always right" saying, Stephen

and Lydia expressed significant critiques of it. For example, Stephen felt customers

abused their power:

> I'm sure the customer is right most of the time, but when it's like, you know, [imitating an angry customer] "My coffee should be free! I should get free this." And it's like, "Mm, no." No! You know what I mean? I think [sighs] the customer knows that they have that power but, like, you can't abuse it.

Stephen at times espoused a customer orientation,[37] but he had criticisms of it. He said he

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36 The process of gaining emotional distance can be facilitated by talking to coworkers, as I described above.

37 I asked Stephen who he thought benefited when he delivered the "legendary" service his employer expected. He had this to say: "Who benefits from legendary service? The easy answer is all of us. *When you are genuine, kind, and passionate*, customers leave satisfied, you feel better about the work you do, and [the employer] profits. There is no downside to *genuine* legendary service" (my emphases). By emphasizing genuineness, which I did not mention in my question, Stephen subverts his employer's definition of good service, as if to express a desire to transcend the "commercialization of feeling" (Hochschild 1983). As he says later, he is unhappy that the routinization of the café experience permits no time for "authentic human relationships," to use Ritzer's (2011: 157) phrase.

would like to see customers "grounded," their power reasonably limited:

> Like, I get if you're, you know, your coffee had too much foam. "Alright, cool. I'm sorry." But when you demand a free drink and a free pastry, and you wanna talk to my manager about it, it's like, "Are you serious? It's that big of a deal?" So, you know, if we could… I think if we could be like… if I could say no, I think it would ground customers a lot more and it would just kinda give me that sense of [takes a deep breath] "Okay, good." You know what I mean?

Similarly, Lydia saw the "customer is always right" saying as pernicious (since it drives a wedge between workers and customers), and the rule inconsistently applied:

> The saying is nice if you're the customer, but then when *you're* the customer it never seems to apply. It's good for the "little people"—it's supposed to protect customers from corporations—but divides the "little people," pitting customers and workers against each other.

None of the other participants offered similar critiques of the cult(ure) of the customer.

Delegating the task of dealing with difficult customers was one tactic Stephen used to avoid deferring to unruly customers. Describing himself as far from a pushover, Stephen said that he has to hold back his natural instinct to "push back" when provoked by difficult customers.[38] Therefore, he said, he would hand difficult customers over to someone else (more willing or able):

> [W]hen I get any difficult customer, I just kinda, like… well, I bite my tongue 'cause I know I really shouldn't tell them what I think but…. I try to bite through it, but if it's… I'll apologize—maybe I won't mean it, but I'm sure it'll comfort them—and I try to do that until they calm down. But if it's kinda like a continuous thing—they just won't stop—I just say [to myself], "You know what? I can't do this right now." I speak to my supervisor and tell them, "You need to deal with this 'cause I won't."

Stephen engages in emotional labour during encounters with difficult customers, refraining from "telling them what he thinks." However, since deferring is uncomfortable for him beyond a certain point, he would sometimes ask a supervisor or coworker for

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38 There are likely gender overtones in Stephen's portrayal of himself as "far from a pushover."

help.

Stephen also admitted to what management studies researchers have termed "service sabotage." For example, he admitted to purposely getting a beverage order wrong (e.g., using two-percent instead of non-fat milk): "I've never, like, really ever told someone like, 'You're being difficult.' So in that sense, no, I've never given them bad service to their face, but I've kinda, like, behind the bar, I have, yeah." He said, "It kinda just feels like I'm getting that little bit back when I do that." Likewise, Lydia related a specific incident in which she can be described as taking revenge on a customer: "Well, one time someone was like, 'I saw you itch your nose. Cut me another piece of cake!' The next time, I itched my nose. 'Oh, look! I'm just gonna do it again!' I mean, my nose isn't dripping with snot!" Although she would usually defer to customers—as she says, "I would fall back on the 'customer is always right' because I knew there was no point to argue. I didn't want to lose my job"—she appears not to have the same easygoing mentality that Kevin has. For example, she said that capitulating to customers' demands "was embarrassing": "You had to remake the drink. It's tedious and you get flustered." In short, both Stephen and Lydia at times experienced deferring to customers negatively, and both admitted to engaging in vengeful "service sabotage."

The way in which the participants dealt with difficult customers coincides with how they perceived the "customer is always right" saying. Many participants exhibited interactive skill and some managed their emotions to cultivate a "healthy" estrangement, or emotional professionalism, but others experienced deferring as a more serious threat to their dignity.

WORK ETHIC (AND INTERNALIZING A CUSTOMER ORIENTATION)

Even though the participants did not feel the same about the "customer is always right" saying, and they coped with demanding customers in different ways, most of them referred to having a work ethic and taking pride in their work. For Geoffrey and Kevin, taking pride in their work was more closely linked to providing good service; for the other participants, it was a broader notion that encompassed personal standards of quality, as well as their coworkers' perceptions of them. In other words, some of the participants' definitions of work ethic were more closely aligned with a customer orientation, but all participants mentioned wanting to do their jobs well.

Geoffrey was among the participants who mentioned taking pride in his work in the same breath as providing good service. For example, Geoffrey said, "I find that as a person who takes pride in my work—whether that be at a professional level or at the food-service level—I place a great deal of importance in providing that, sort of, expected level of service." He said, "I'm definitely much more pleased when the service can be to that level, that's come to be associated with [my employer]." He also said he feels bad about giving bad service:

> Yeah, well, absolutely [you feel bad about giving bad service]. Because you know what you should be doing to help provide that legendary customer experience and, if you're not doing it, then you definitely feel like you're missing a beat somewhere, like you're not quite doing what you need to be.

Geoffrey internalizes a customer orientation so that he feels he is "missing a beat" if the service he provides does not meet his employer's standards. In fact, part of his definition of a successful transaction is that a customer "returns repeatedly."

Like Geoffrey, Kevin brought up work ethic when asked whether he had ever

given (what might be considered) bad service:

> Can't actually think of any—just 'cause it's… one of those things my dad did, as a kid, was he [would] always [tell] me, "If you do something, do something well. Always deliver your best, and if that's not good enough, then you shouldn't try it." Like, I've never purposely given bad service. I've never been like, "Well, I hate this customer, I'm gonna take a long time to make their drink" or anything. And I can't think of any times where I [have] even done anything that was even perceived as bad service 'cause it's never been brought to my attention if I have. So, as far as I know, I deliver, you know, at worst, average service and, at best, […] legendary service. But I don't think there's ever really a time where I do bad service.

Kevin cannot imagine giving bad service on purpose—or "even subconsciously, like,

without thinking about it," he says—since he always strives to do his best at everything.

Like Geoffrey, he feels bad when he does not do the best job, but he also says he is

always thinking about ways to improve:

> Yeah. Even if I don't do, like, the best job on something, I kind of feel bad about it. Like… and that's still doing a good job. *I'm like, "Well, I could've done something better." I'm always kind of looking at what I could do better next time.* (My emphasis)

In addition to internalizing his employer's service expectations, Kevin appears also to

manage himself by virtue of his work ethic.

Claudia and Stephen also mentioned work ethic, but in different contexts. For

example, I asked Claudia what motivates her to do her job well; her response was that she

wanted to be perceived to be a good coworker:

> Um, I don't know. Well, usually I just always wanna do my job well anywhere. Yeah, like, anything I'm doing I wanna do it well, just because… I don't know… that's just always the way it's been for me. Like, I don't wanna be the kind of person [about whom others are] like, "Oh, she's the one that nobody likes because she doesn't know how to work with other people."

Likewise, Stephen mentioned work ethic not when he was discussing service standards;

he mentioned it when discussing a bad performance review. The review made him angry

"not because I had bills to pay, but because no one ever told me I was pushing some

limits [by sharing my feelings about my job]. *How would you feel if you were told you were doing a sub par job?*" (my emphasis). Although he said he "take[s] pride in giving good customer service," he placed emphasis on non-commercial aspects of service, like appreciation: "When someone walks away with a smile or someone says thanks or, you know, 'This was really great.' You know? [It] makes you think, 'Great. 'Kay, I'm gonna keep going.'" In other words, work ethic for Claudia and Stephen appears to be less intertwined with a customer orientation.

Most of the participants mentioned taking pride in their work or wanting to do a good job,[39] which I refer to in this section as *work ethic*. However, not all participants necessarily associated work ethic with providing the level of service expected by their employers.

BEING YOURSELF AND "FITTING IN": APPEARANCE AT WORK

Participants were also asked about their appearance at work. Specifically, they were asked, "In jobs such as this, where workers are sometimes encouraged to act and look the same, what (if anything) makes you different from your coworkers?" (see appendix 2). Most participants responded in one or both of the following ways: First, they claimed that, in spite of appearances, they were in fact different from their coworkers. Second, they said they had a dress code but, compared with a uniform, they were free—within certain limits—to be themselves and to change their appearance from day to day.[40]

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39 Lydia did not freely mention work ethic. When I asked her about her opinion about other participants describing themselves as taking pride in their work, she said, "Whenever I start a job, I think I give 100 percent, but eventually I get bored. […]. I still try to do things right, but it's like, 'Oh, I gotta go to work….'" At her barista job, she says she did not feel challenged by attainable goals.

40 None of the participants had to wear uniforms; instead, they were prescribed a dress code. Geoffrey and Kevin referred to their dress code(s) as business-casual. Lydia's dress code mandated that she wear a T-

Many participants added that their employers' appearance standards were reasonable,

giving various justifications for the standards. Despite asserting their individuality at

work, though, participants also expressed the importance of "fitting in"—not only in

terms of appearance (specifically hygiene), but also attitude. Fitting in posed more

difficulties for some participants than others.

Most participants said that, although everyone had to look and act alike, they each

had their own personality. Claudia said, for example, that baristas' interests vary, and this

fact is reflected in the conversations they have with customers:

> It's just usually everybody has a different personality, right? So, like, we all have to dress the same and, like, we all have to do the same tasks, but when it comes to, like, talking to customers… I mean, I'm gonna speak a different way than other people are, right? And, like, I'll be interested in other things, that other people will not be interested in, I guess.

Likewise, Geoffrey said that the style of interaction varies from barista to barista: While

some are always cheery and others like to talk about current events, he prefers to gently

tease customers. Kevin repeated this theme, but he brought up the notion of the "café fit":

> [E]veryone's kinda got their own personality. It's almost like, as much as we're forced to look and act the same, it's more of as an outward appearance, but then they wanna embrace the idea of us having our personalities. So like every person on the floor has a different personality but kinda the same [café] fit.

As Kevin says, he and his coworkers look and act alike, but they have their own

personalities—all of which fit with his employer (i.e., they match the employer's

aesthetic or brand).

In addition to asserting their individuality, participants emphasized the relative

freedom of a dress code. They felt that their employers' appearance standards were more

lax *in comparison with* other workplaces. As they compared their employers to others (in

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shirt with her employer's logo on it, the cost of which came out of her first paycheque.

the lower-tier service sector), participants often began to offer justifications for the restrictions their employers placed on employees' appearances. For example, Stephen said he was happy not to have a uniform. He did not mind that he looked the same as his coworkers since they were a team:

> I don't feel the same. I feel like we're a team, right? Teams dress… like, hockey teams, baseball teams dress in jerseys; they dress in uniforms. So I don't mind that. I do enjoy the fact that [my employer] doesn't give us a uniform; they let us choose, you know, what we wear—if I'd like to wear something a little bit baggy, or tight-fitted, or a tie, perhaps. I love that! I think that's great! What I don't enjoy is sometimes how, you know, how much they'll get into it. Like, I wear black running shoes with a little bit of yellow in them, and sometimes I get nailed on it. But it's just, like, no one sees my feet. These are just for comfort. So sometimes they kind of give us that, but sometimes they kind of, um, pull in the reins sometimes, which I don't mind.

While acknowledging that he does not appreciate nitpicking, Stephen experiences some freedom within the confines of his employer's dress code and therefore does not "mind" it. Kevin said that his employer's standards, which are hygiene-specific, are necessitated not only because he and his coworkers interact with customers, but also because they are handling food. Unlike other workplaces (where they cater to a "young and hip" clientele, as Geoffrey says), Kevin believes hygiene standards are not particularly restrictive, so employees are free to be their diverse selves:

> Myself, like, really the only importance of fitting in here I've ever really found is, like, just for hygiene […]. You know, you don't want someone coming in that looks like they just crawled off a three-day bender. 'Cause we're dealing with food, we're dealing with drinks, we're dealing with people, so you have to kind of look… in a way, you have to look conscious and kind of clean but not… I don't think it has to be, you know… you have to look like a whole bunch of Abercrombie models that all just walked in. Like, we don't have to be that picture-perfect, same person. We can be ourselves as long as, you know, we're clean—we're not pierced and tattooed all over. And it just kinda makes that… nothing too scary or, kind of, offsetting or a disgusting look. So I think that really makes [my employer] good 'cause they're kind of like, "You can be yourself as long as you're hygienic and safe about it." It's really kind of how I've kind of perceived everything.

Kevin also maintained that the business-casual dress code stipulated by his employer lent

baristas a professional appearance, which enhanced his employer's image:

> [I]f you were able just to wear a T-shirt or jeans or something, you wouldn't have the same kind of, um, professional appearance—because you could come in ripped jeans; you could come in with whatever you really wanted, and it wouldn't look good. Whereas this you have to at least look *kind of* neat, kind of professional, kind of like that business-casual, open-ended frame there. And that really reflects well on [my employer] 'cause, you know, you come in and you know that you're not gonna be served by some guy that looks absolutely ridiculous, or who can't even afford clothes. Like, you know that you're gonna be served by people who wanna be there-ish, um, and who take the time to dress themselves to look at least respectable enough to work in a place like this.

Like Kevin, Geoffrey saw the restrictions imposed by his employer as reasonable. Below, he discusses the relative advantages of his employer's dress code:

> [I]t's much more lax than most places. For one thing, we don't have a uniform. And, generally speaking, it's not dissimilar from just business-casual that you would encounter in an office environment, so… aside from, you know, certain things, like not displaying tattoos or political affiliations. There's some limitation but, when you have perspective on what it would be in a similar company, it's actually much more freeing than you would expect it to be. But, in general, I mean, everyone must feel a little bit limited that they're not able to, say, you know, come into work in a bad mood, and be able to display that bad mood, but that's just a manner [matter] of being a polite person in society. You don't try and dump on other people.

What Geoffrey describes above as not being able to "dump on other people" he refers to elsewhere as the requirement that baristas filter themselves through expectations of workplace-appropriate behaviour, to cultivate an at-work (café) persona. He explains that a barista's at-work persona is a reflection of his or her non-work self, minus the emotions that do not belong in the interactive service setting. Indeed, he admits that, in this sense, sometimes individuals cannot be the kind of worker that his employer expects. It appears, then, that the "café fit" mentioned above might be about more than an employee's aesthetic; it might also pertain to attitude.

What Kevin refers to above as "having the same professional appearance"—and what he hints to when he says that customers can expect to be served by people who can

"afford clothes"—Lydia refers to as "hiding class." Although, as she goes on to say, the

laxness of a dress code also permitted her coworkers to personalize their outfits in a way

that she could not indulge in so easily:

> Wearing a uniform/dress code hid class—you couldn't tell your class. Though people started to dress up their outfits for work, which was difficult for me. I was like, "I don't have enough money to wear nice things to work. I'm not gonna wear a pretty skirt that's just gonna get milk spilled on it."

Lydia tried to "fit in" in terms of appearance, while still being herself: "Sometimes I

found I tried not to be myself because I wanted to feel like I fit in, was from the same

area, was rich. But then you still wanted to be accepted for who you were, so you wanted

to be yourself." In short, the appearance standards that other participants either defended

or accepted as posing little threat to their identities posed a challenge for Lydia. She did

not feel like she "fit in."

The participants did not say outright that their appearance at work had a positive

influence on their interactions with customers; however, they did express feeling lucky

that they did not have to wear a uniform and, in their justifications of their dress codes,

they identify how appearance is important to the way in which customers perceive them

and their employers. They also begin to reveal how "fitting in" at the coffee shop is about

more than the way one looks.

BEING YOUNG: HOW PARTICIPANTS PERCEIVED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AGE

Participants agreed that their age did not affect their interactions with customers.

They often said that they could imagine why customers *might* make assumptions about

young workers (one participant gave several examples of how being young influenced his

interactions with customers at a previous job), but such assumptions were not significant

at their barista jobs. Some offered explanations for why they thought being young was not important for them. These explanations hinged on their impression that interactions at their coffee shops were generally positive. Hence, customers were less likely to draw on their negative assumptions about youth when interacting with participants. Although negative assumptions appeared not to affect the participants at work, they were aware of stereotypes about young workers. They also occasionally voiced their own assumptions about "maturity" and *other* young people.

Many participants said their age did not influence their interactions with customers. For example, Claudia said that the customer service training her employer offered enabled all employees—regardless of their age—to interact equally positively with customers:

> I think it was the same. Like, I mean, they do train you how to interact with customers, and it's usually the "How are you doing today?" Like, "How's your day going? What are your plans?" or whatever. And it's just pretty much the same questions, like, let's say [that] someone [who] was older, or me, would ask. And it would be the same type of interaction, I think.

Similarly, Geoffrey said his ability to have a conversation with someone transcends age:

> I don't think that it matters as much as some people might expect it to because, as a person in my mid-twenties, I'm able to relate to someone that might be forty years older than me and have a very personal and enjoyable connection with them, just as a matter of, you know, interacting with them as a human being.

In fact, he said he sees assumptions not as negative, but as the basis for conversation:

> Well, I would say that everyone makes assumptions based on what they see about a person. So if they see me as someone that's in my early twenties, they think that I'm likely in school, and so they're more likely to ask about things like that. I don't know if they'll necessarily assume anything that has an effect on my ability to make their drink, but they might think that my life outside of the work might be a little bit different, which is not a bad thing at all 'cause that can just lead to, you know, making those connections, because they think, "Oh, this person's in school!" You know, "I can ask them how school is going," or what have you. Just like if you're talking to a customer that's this age or that

age, there are different talking points that you can go towards.

In other words, Claudia and Geoffrey perceive themselves to have interactive skills that enable them to interact successfully with customers of any age. As such, any negative assumptions customers might have about youth do not affect their barista work.

Although most participants felt age was not significant in their interactions with customers, every participant had a sense of the assumptions people make about young workers. For example, Lydia, who had no basis for comparison at her work, was nonetheless able to conjecture about the significance of age:

> Most girls at [my café] are the same age. It's hard to know how age would affect interactions with customers. I think at [my café] there is almost an atmosphere of youthful girls for a reason. They are "pleasant" to deal with, or enjoyable to chat with. The owner seems to strive for this atmosphere. There must be a reason. Quite possibly older workers would receive more respect because this job might be internalized by customers as the worker's "career," as opposed to it being a part-time job—the worker might be seen as taking their role more seriously and subsequently treated with more respect. Perhaps, though, there would be greater disrespect from customers based on discrimination towards older individuals working in "lower" end jobs.

Lydia cannot decide whether an older worker would enjoy more respect from customers than younger workers, but she identifies the main assumption that other participants do— that young workers' (presumed) part-time status indicates a lack of commitment to their jobs.

To an extent, participants themselves held assumptions about young workers, especially relating to their attitude toward customer service. For example, Kevin felt that getting older has made him better-equipped to deliver good service:

> As I've matured, I've kind of changed my way of thinking to delivering a better product, better service. And I think that it just kind of comes with the whole maturity in general 'cause that's the way… you know, when you're younger, you're thinking about what you need and then, as you get older, you get that, "What does everyone else need? What do friends need? What do my family need?" You kind of… it just comes naturally with

maturing.

Kevin believes he has matured so that he is less focused on himself, and more focused on

what others—including customers—need. That is, he believes getting older has improved

his customer orientation. In the quotation below, Geoffrey compares himself and his

coworkers to other young workers:

> I would say that I may fall out of the norm. Not as much so for the particular [place] that I'm working at but, in general, I would say that people in my age group are not taking such a positive outlook on interacting with customers. They tend to slip more towards the adversarial, as opposed to the cooperative.

Geoffrey is suggesting that his employer does not hire the average young worker, who is

not as likely to have the desired (as Kevin argues, "mature") orientation toward customer

service.

Most commonly, participants said age was significant in cases where customers'

service expectations were not met or when an interaction was otherwise unsatisfactory.

For example, Geoffrey and I had the following exchange regarding customers'

assumptions about young workers:

> Geoffrey: [A]ssumptions are made, but I don't think that it's in such a fashion that it necessarily affects their view of you—although it might.
> DS: Yeah. It probably depends on the success of the encounter in general.
> Geoffrey: Yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely. Because if you're, you know, talking to someone else and not making their drink, then they'll think, "Oh, lousy young people not focusing on their job," that sort of thing. Not that that ever actually happens, but….

That is, a negative interaction confirms negative stereotypes of youth, while a positive

interaction does not. As Stephen says about less successful interactions, "They think, you

know, 'This kid's a teenybopper, 18 years old, working a part-time job.'" Stephen's

response was to assert his expertise, saying, "Well, I've been here a little longer than a

month, so I know a lot. And so I just get frustrated when they think, like, 'What do you

know? You're only 18 years old. Lemme talk to a real adult.'" In this statement, he rejects the assumption that young workers are "only" working part-time and, therefore, are not to be taken seriously.

Others, like Kevin and Geoffrey (see the quotation above), were more likely to say negative interactions were an anomaly: "I've never really thought about it [i.e., age] here 'cause it's just been… to me it's kind of still that [café] feeling." Kevin explained that he can understand that customers might assume young workers have an instrumental orientation toward their jobs that means "they don't care"; however, this assumption does not apply to workers who put a great deal of effort into their work, like himself:

> I can definitely see a customer having that because, you know, as a student, you know, you have to work to pay your tuition, to pay your rent and that, and as a customer you could definitely see that employee being… "Well, okay, well, they're just here to make money; it's just a job." Like, "They don't really care." And then, of course, I find that that whole assumption is shattered the moment they talk to the ones who are actually… who actually care about their job and are there to do their job, not just to make a paycheque at the end of the week.

Kevin identifies negative stereotypes of young workers as not really caring because they work just to pay their bills, but he says such assumptions are "shattered" when customers interact with workers who "actually care." By framing negative interactions as abnormal, Kevin upholds a dichotomy between two kinds of young workers.

The participants agreed that being young did not influence their interactions with customers, but they were aware of the negative assumptions people have of young workers—and even occasionally voiced the stereotypes themselves. The major theme throughout the participants' discussions of the significance of age was perhaps that their coffee shop employers hired young workers who were (exceptionally) well-suited to

customer service, and perhaps that customers shared this impression of the participants.
As Claudia says, customers at her workplace made a positive assumption about the
baristas employed there: "Like, people that come into [the café] are… they treat you
nicer. *They realize that you're a student, not just, like, a worker or something like that*"
(my emphasis). Thus, the participants' experiences suggest that they (somehow) escaped
or were shielded against customers' negative perceptions of youth.

EXPERIENCING (STOPGAP) WORK: HOW THE WORKPLACE FOSTERS

COMMITMENT OR ALIENATION

Participants' ability to internalize a customer orientation appears to be related to
their overall impressions of their jobs. Some participants were fortunate to work in cafés
where they felt their hard work was appreciated, and where they saw opportunities for
advancement. In the sections that follow, I contrast participants' experiences to show how
the coffee shop fostered commitment for some and engendered alienation for others.

Feeling Appreciated and Sense of Belonging

In terms of feeling appreciated and experiencing a sense of belonging at work, the
participants fall along a continuum: On the one end, Kevin felt very welcome at his job
and felt like part of a family in which

> everyone kind of just looks out for each other 'cause we're all doing it together. So we're
> all very like-minded people with, kind of, our focus on customer service and products and
> stuff like that, but it just feels like, when you're here, you're kind of with that family.
> Like, it doesn't even feel like you're working. Like, I've had a lot of days where I come
> home and I'm like, "I just worked twelve hours and I don't feel like it"—other than I'm a
> little tired… but it's like I haven't been working.

Kevin feels surrounded by like-minded people and even occasionally works long hours
without complaint. On the other end of the continuum is Lydia, who became disillusioned

at her coffee shop job and grew to dread going to work:

> At first, I enjoyed [my barista job]. At first, working at [the coffee shop] was very fun, challenging, and exciting. There was something new to learn each shift, the challenges presented themselves as attainable, and I was always looking forward to making drinks for people. After a bit of getting to know [my manager] and working in very stressful circumstances—circumstances in which I was regularly not treated kindly or with respect by either customers or my manager—work began to be something I dreaded.

As Lydia said later in the interview, "Working in such a stressful environment, for such a low wage, with little respect, and always having to be polite or presentable—physically and emotionally—got to be such a drain and subsequently I never felt much motivation to perform my job well." Further, while Kevin felt he received "[a] lot of recognition from the management, the higher-ups," Lydia said it was stressful to be constantly "busy and working hard but feeling little respect for having worked so hard." Her experience is in stark contrast with Kevin's. In order, Geoffrey's,[41] Claudia's, and Stephen's overall impressions of their jobs fell in between Kevin's and Lydia's.

Alienation at the Coffee Shop

In contrast with participants whose overall impressions of their jobs were mostly positive, Stephen and Lydia both voiced themes of alienation. Specifically, Stephen felt disconnected from the product and process of his (physical) labour:

> What really frustrates me is, like, we don't tamp our own espresso. I'd like to pack it myself, make sure it's packed in well… pour it myself. You know? We just hit a button and it does it. So I'm kinda really frustrated with the postmodernism. There's no individuality. Two lattes are the same, you know?

Both Geoffrey and Kevin acknowledged the routinization in the labour process to which Stephen is referring—as Geoffrey says, the job is "very repetitive, routine"—but they

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41 Geoffrey is enthusiastic about and committed to his employer, describing himself as "having drunk the Kool-Aid."

both claimed spaces for creativity and skill, nonetheless. For example, the way Kevin

described making beverages starkly opposes the way Stephen described it:

> [B]eing able to, like, build the drinks is the most creative outlet here 'cause, like, sure you have the same layering with everything but, you know, when you have the top and you can do a design with caramel, you can do different things with it and kind of… and then you can create your own drinks, which is…. That gets to be quite a lot of fun.

For Kevin, making beverages has been routinized (i.e., every drink recipe has "the same

layering"), but he still gains creative fulfillment from garnishing beverages and coming

up with his own drink recipes. On the other hand, for Stephen, not being able to *take the*

time to "tamp our own espresso" is one of the most frustrating aspects of his job.[42]

Stephen also felt that he and his employer did not share the same ideas about the

purpose of his labour. Stephen emphasized what he sees is his employer's hypocrisy. He

believes his employer has jettisoned its core principles in the pursuit of profits. He

referred throughout the interview to how his employer's greed detracts from customers'

service experience—he says, for example, that "[p]atrons were absolutely infuriated with

being pestered to 'have a blueberry muffin with that.'" He felt especially strongly about

his employer not taking more responsibility for its impact on the environment:

> I feel like [my employer] sometimes has a lot of hypocrisy going on. One of their big things is, like, you know, "Take care of yourself, take care of each other, and take care of the environment." That was one of their [guiding principles]. And I've seen them go from, you know, chalk signs, where you'd have to draw them yourself, to these totally, you know, unneeded cardboard signs. We could've simply drawn it, but they had to give it to us in paper. And nobody [i.e., no barista] cares about offering it [a customer's beverage] in a for-here cup. And it's all like, "[I'll use a] paper cup because then I don't have to clean it."

While he said he would like to see his employer make certain changes, he felt that his

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42 All participants mentioned a conflict between time and quality, but their attitudes toward the conflict varied in the overall pattern discussed throughout the chapter.

voice was too small to be heard by upper management, in part because one of the rare times he felt permitted to share his opinion was during performance reviews, which were already nerve-wracking enough.[43] He added, "What power does my manager *really* have? All she can do is tell her boss, and he can tell his, and so on, and so on, until my idea is either forgotten or rejected." Not only does Stephen disagree with the purpose for which his employer uses his labour, he feels powerless to effect the change he would like to see.

While the other participants discussed their connection with the physical product of their labour, Lydia commented on her (dis)connection from service, the intangible product of her labour. When I asked her what she thought about customers wanting "service with a smile," Lydia said the following:

> Lydia: Service with a smile puts the customer in a better mood, makes it seem like you're being served by someone who wants to be there. When you think about it, the atmosphere of a good job makes for better service, kinda like mom-and-pop shops. You can tell when people are not enjoying their job, which is not their fault. Other than a couple girls I worked with, a lot of people that were there didn't want to be there. Maybe when I first started I thought it would be cool to work at a coffee shop, like Rachel from *Friends*. But even she had a miserable experience—she would get people's drinks wrong, her boss wanted her to get trained again because she hadn't learned what she was supposed to, etc.
> DS: Yeah, Rachel wanted to be doing something else.
> Lydia: If you enjoyed the job, cared about the cause, were treated well, you'd be able to offer a genuine smile.

Lydia admits that she cannot offer a genuine smile to customers—instead, she engages in surface acting (Hochschild 1983)—because she does not enjoy her job or feel invested in the outcome of her emotional labour (e.g., Lydia distinguishes herself from the owners of mom-and-pop shops). Since she feels that she does not "care about the cause"—she says,

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43 Stephen believes he was denied a pay increase because he was perceived by superiors to be "complaining" about what he thought could be improved about his workplace.

"I was never wildly passionate about working part-time in a coffee shop, not to mention I never felt like I made the world a better place because some caffeine addict got their fix"—and that she is not treated well (see above), she claims it is not her fault that she cannot give customers service with a smile.

"Exit Strategies": The Impact of Aspirations and Opportunity

The participants were all asked about their plans for the future and whether their barista employment was relevant to their career-related goals. Claudia, Stephen, and Lydia frankly expressed no desire to pursue a career with their coffeehouse employers. For them, their jobs were temporary, or stopgap—although they sometimes said they gained both instrumental and intrinsic rewards from their work. On the other hand, both Geoffrey and Kevin perceived opportunities for advancement with their employers, since they were pursuing or had completed education in a field that (could be) related to the food services sector. Neither Geoffrey nor Kevin wished to remain indefinitely in their current positions, but their commitment to their jobs (and to customer service) appears to have been enhanced by the promise that they might be promoted to a position in their desired field.

Specifically, Geoffrey said he would like to pursue a career in human resources, and would stay with his employer to do so, if possible. Since starting at his current place of employment three years ago, he has already seen one promotion. Similarly, Kevin said he wanted to move up at his current place of employment. His studies at college (food and beverage management) made his barista employment highly useful in terms of gaining experience in the field in which he hoped to work in the future:

> [B]ecause my schooling is in this industry, it causes me to look a lot further than I did before. So now I can look deeper into reports; I can look deeper into trends and that than I was able to before. And when... if I say, "Okay, we need to do something," and I see it happen, it kind of just is really satisfying, knowing that people listen to your ideas about different parts of the business.[44]

More importantly, he said he saw real opportunities to fulfill his intentions of being promoted:

> Kevin: I have every intention of moving up, um, as far as they'll let me go. 'Cause I love working [here], but there's only so long I can stay working at a certain level before I get bored with it, and I wanna learn more things. And so, like, I wanna go up. I wanna see the different levels of everything and kind of experience each level of the management and, you know, offices and all that stuff, and go to every level.
> DS: And you definitely see those opportunities available?
> Kevin: Oh, yeah! Like, [with my employer], if you wanna do something, they'll find you a place to let you in. It might take you a little while, but they'll do it for you.

For Geoffrey and Kevin, then, their barista employment was significantly more than just temporary, stopgap work.

The other participants did not consider pursuing careers with their coffeehouse employers, even though they liked aspects of their jobs. For example, Claudia said working at a coffee shop was "good experience." She liked to work with food and her studies (food and nutrition) relate to the food service industry; however, she did not think she could work a 40-hour workweek in a coffee shop: "Like, 40 hours a week is too stressful to be, like, here—like, *serving people* 40 hours a week" (my emphasis). Further, coffee was not where Claudia's passion lay: "I'm not the kinda person who does research on coffee, and like… so I would just come in just because I had to kind of thing—and like sometimes it'd be fun, and sometimes it'd be challenging. But it was fine." Stephen, on the other hand, was passionate about coffee and espresso—he even said, "I wish I

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44 This quotation also illustrates how Kevin feels he and his ideas are appreciated by his employer.

could start my own café." As is clear in the previous section, though, he felt alienated from the work he once thoroughly enjoyed. He had no career plans related to his barista employment. In fact, during the course of my contact with Stephen, he eventually resigned.[45] Either because it provided them with experience or simply because they were passionate about coffee, the participants had reasons to invest themselves in their work. Nevertheless, unlike Geoffrey and Kevin, the others appear to have had a more stopgap orientation toward their barista jobs.

SUMMARY

Overall, this chapter illustrates the complexity of young coffeehouse workers' experiences of the service encounter. Customers were not viewed exclusively in a negative light; in fact, besides their relationships with their coworkers and supervisors, engaging in genuine human interaction with customers *as people* was one of the most satisfying aspects of participants' jobs. Nevertheless, some of the participants appear to have internalized a customer orientation more successfully than others, leaving some participants more critical of both management and the cult(ure) of the customer. The data suggest that coffee shop workers are hired for an aesthetic *and* an attitude, including work ethic, but that the workplace itself—whether it fosters feelings of belonging or alienation—plays an important part in determining whether an individual is motivated to adopt a customer orientation.

In the following chapter, I discuss the implications of my findings for sociological understandings of young workers' experiences of service-sector employment. Further, I

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45 Like Claudia and Stephen, at the time of this writing, Lydia was no longer working as a barista and had no future plans related to her former employment.

discuss study limitations and avenues for further research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The goal of this study has been to explore young coffee shop workers' perceptions

of the service encounter, especially in light of a "cult(ure) of the customer" that privileges

the needs of individuals as customers over their needs as citizens or workers. In soliciting

the narratives of young interactive service workers employed in higher-end cafés, this

study has also sought answers to the following questions: What motivates young workers'

compliance with or resistance to employer-defined service standards? That is, what

factors influence the way young workers perceive the task of delivering service? And do

young workers who perform "aesthetic labour" agree that their appearance empowers

them in their interactions with customers? In this chapter, I present a brief overview of

the findings detailed in the previous chapter. I then link the results back to the existing

literature on interactive service work, focusing on the question of whether barista work is

in fact gentrified and how the participants' unique position in the labour market affected

their decision to be inculcated in the cult(ure) of the customer. Last, I summarize the

limitations of the study and identify areas for future research.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Overall, despite sharing some positive impressions of customers and coworkers

and supervisors, participants' perceptions of the service encounter varied, depending on

how they perceived their jobs on the whole. Some participants successfully internalized a

customer orientation, including developing a "healthy" estrangement, while others were

more critical of the cult(ure) of the customer, as well as of their employers. Nevertheless,

the interview data suggest that being a barista does lend young interactive service workers at least some protection against customers' negative assumptions about youth and those whose job it is to serve others.

Participants agreed that pleasant interactions with customers and the backup and emotional support of coworkers and supervisors were among the positive aspects of their jobs. Although customers were admittedly a source of stress, the possibility of developing "human connections" with them made participants' jobs (at times) very rewarding. In addition, having supportive coworkers and supervisors made delivering service—even to unruly customers—all the easier. The young workers interviewed in this study did not have (exclusively) negative perceptions of customers, as some researchers have argued, nor were their jobs merely a chance to socialize and have fun: While their definitions of quality service varied, often depending on how *they* liked to be treated as customers,[46] many of the participants worked together with their coworkers and supervisors to make customers happy. That participants' definitions of quality service varied hints at the inconsistency and unpredictability of managerial efforts to mold workers' subjectivities.

There was less consensus among the participants about management. Some voiced positive impressions of their employers, saying they facilitated interactions with customers by providing employees with the appropriate training and an adequate amount of leeway to deal with (difficult) customers. These participants were also able to justify managerial directives from a financial point of view. Other participants felt management was disinterested in the day-to-day happenings of their workplaces, believing it was more

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46 The participants often put themselves in the place of the customer, asking themselves what they would want if they were the customer.

concerned with profits than with either the well-being of employees or the true needs and desires of customers. These participants thought that, in conflicts with customers, their employers tended to side with customers, against them. In short, the level of support they experienced was likely an important element comprising participants' perception of their work and their interactions with customers. While some appreciated managerial efforts to promote a customer orientation among employees, others thought management failed to support them in the provision of (quality) service.

The participants also differed in the extent to which they internalized a customer orientation and how they handled difficult customers. Those who espoused a customer orientation considered deferring to be useful or easy, while those with criticisms of the cult(ure) of the customer had more difficulty deferring. Those participants who espoused a customer orientation rationalized "just saying yes" as a win-win-win situation— customers were satisfied, their employers profited, and they themselves averted stress. In contrast, those participants who were critical of the cult(ure) of the customer were also critical of management. The two participants who most clearly exhibited a customer orientation also described cultivating an at-work, café persona, suggesting a deftness at developing a "healthy" estrangement (Hochschild 1983) that the other participants did not possess to the same degree. That is, while these two participants could distance themselves emotionally so that they more rarely perceived customers to misbehave, others experienced having to defer as a more serious threat to their dignity—or, as one of the participants might say, they were less "easygoing"—and they occasionally tried to avoid (feeling like they were) capitulating to customer demands by handing over a

difficult customer to a coworker or supervisor, or by engaging in more "deviant" acts of retaliation.

It is important to note, however, that deviance was not the norm: Even those participants who admitted to engaging in so-called "service sabotage" said they usually *would* defer. This finding supports Williams' (2006: 55) comment that workers typically comply with the organization of work preferred by management since they perceive advantages to conforming (e.g., not getting fired). Indeed, all but one of the participants brought up the notion of "work ethic" at some point during their interviews—although taking pride in one's work was more closely linked with wanting to provide good service for some than for others.

The study's findings also suggest that baristas believe their interactions with customers are improved by their having a dress code, rather than a more restrictive uniform. However, coffeehouse employers' appearance standards seem to overlap with expectations regarding behaviour. Most participants felt that their employers' appearance standards were lax enough that employees could express their individuality, but strict enough that they all had "the same professional appearance." Some participants brought up the notion of "café fit," saying that, although baristas each had their own personality, every barista belonged in some sense. Belonging, or "fitting in," entailed at least two things: (1) meeting hygiene standards; and (2) having the right attitude toward service, being capable of filtering out emotions that do not belong in the service setting. "Fitting in" also appears to pertain to socioeconomic status and the ability to dress middle-class. Participants talked about their dress codes hiding class and lending them a professional

appearance. Thus, the participants demonstrate an awareness that baristas are hired for certain embodied characteristics, especially good hygiene, but they also understand that "fitting in" is about more than having the right appearance; it is also about interactive skill and sociability. This finding suggests that, at least for baristas, the right (i.e., middle-class) appearance and the right (i.e., professional) attitude may be very closely entwined.

The interview data regarding the significance of age lend further support to the finding that participants benefited from the aesthetic their employers tried to cultivate through, in part, an image-enhancing "professional" dress code. Specifically, participants felt that age had no effect on their interactions with customers. They attributed this fact partly to the interactive skills they possessed, and partly to the "positive environment" their employers fostered by *expecting* customers and workers to connect—and expecting baristas to "put the customer first" (i.e., defer whenever necessary). Participants were able to identify the assumptions customers *might* make about young workers, but they asserted that neither they nor their coworkers behaved in accordance with such assumptions. In other words, the participants considered negative stereotypes of youth to apply to *other* young workers, not themselves. Further, it appears customers came to their café interactions with similar beliefs. For example, the following quotation from one of the participants bears repeating: "Like, people that come into [the café] are… they treat you nicer. *They realize that you're a student, not just, like, a worker or something like that*" (my emphasis). That is, coffeehouse clientele may take part in the service encounter with positive assumptions about baristas' work ethic and maybe even their class or class aspirations. Thanks to customers' assumptions about the participants' class *in the café*

setting, the participants appear not to have experienced age as negatively as other young workers might.

In spite of the relative benefits of being a barista, not all workers experienced their jobs equally positively. The interview data suggest that several factors affect participants' motivation to adopt a customer orientation. Those participants who were most critical of the cult(ure) of the customer and of their employers were also the ones who had fewer reasons on the whole to invest themselves in their jobs. Specifically, some participants felt like they belonged and that their efforts were noticed and appreciated by management and customers alike, while others felt that they worked hard for little reward. The latter participants also expressed themes of alienation. Additionally, the two participants who demonstrated the strongest commitment to their employers' service standards and the best ability to develop a "healthy" estrangement were the same two participants who were considering pursuing careers with their coffeehouse employers and, importantly, who perceived real opportunities to do so. In contrast, the others thought their most worthwhile opportunities lay elsewhere. This finding highlights the participants' agency in *choosing* to internalize a customer orientation and underscores the importance of young workers' working conditions in determining their commitment to their jobs. That is, it appears that some young interactive service workers are motivated to accept the organization of work that their employers prefer because they have reason to believe that their commitment will pay off. Not even the participants who could imagine themselves staying with their coffeehouse employers planned on being baristas indefinitely—they intended to move up into higher positions within their organizations, if possible. "Human

connections" offer only a limited amount of satisfaction, if that is all one can expect from her or his work.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the participants were hired for their (potential to develop a) customer orientation. Insofar as it shows attention to good hygiene, appearance is important, but it appears that work ethic is also a proxy that coffeehouse employers use to determine whether an individual would "fit in" with the café aesthetic. What the two—good hygiene and work ethic—have in common could tentatively be called "middle-classness" (I discuss the significance of class in a bit more depth below). Ultimately, though, whether managerial efforts to inculcate their workers with the cult(ure) of the customer are successful appears to be a matter decided by young workers themselves, based on how they experience serving and where they see themselves in the future.

A NEW LABOUR ARISTOCRACY? YES… TO AN EXTENT

That several participants felt that customers rarely made negative assumptions about them or their coworkers suggests that barista work is gentrified, at least to an extent. But since not all participants agreed that their interactions with customers were mostly good, it appears that a dress code in itself is not enough to subjectively buffer workers against the humiliation, as some experienced it, of having to defer. In fact, the participants de-emphasized the significance of appearances (e.g., they contrasted their coffee shops with employers for whom physical attractiveness and "trendiness" were more important), highlighting instead their diversity. For them, "fitting in" applied rather to having the right attitude, which meant possessing interactive skill and, essentially, a

"healthy" estrangement. While pouring espresso and flipping burgers are different, the two share a common denominator: serving customers in rationalized (Ritzer 2011) settings. The emotional padding that a "healthy" estrangement offers is likely equally useful, if not equally necessary, for both. The participants had no need for Newman's (1999) rebuttal culture because they were less stigmatized in their jobs than fast-food workers and, therefore, less susceptible to harassment. Nevertheless, some participants still experienced customers to be rude or disrespectful. Those who were able to distance themselves emotionally from negative interactions were the most enthusiastic about serving. Therefore, the evidence suggests the need to foreground Hochschild's (1983) concept of "healthy" estrangement, which I have referred to occasionally also as "emotional professionalism," when asking whether interactive service work can be "gentrified."

Notably, some of the participants drew a line between young workers like themselves—who were "mature" and "actually cared"—and "other" young workers. In perpetuating negative stereotypes of youth as workers, despite themselves negating them, these participants identified themselves as exceptional, which perhaps served to uphold the gentrification of their work. The implications of this finding for how young aesthetic labourers identify themselves—and how they identify themselves in relation to other young workers—warrant further research.

YOUNG WORKERS' AGENCY IN THE CULT(URE) OF THE CUSTOMER

In chapter 2, I discussed the complexity of (workplace) subjectivity, especially in service work. Based on Burawoy's (1979) concept of *manufacturing consent*, I argued

that workers usually choose to participate in the labour process that management has organized and accept their "naming" as good, obedient workers; however, given that individuals experience contradictions "in and among subject positions" (Smith 1988: 25), resistance is never precluded. This dynamic is apparent in the participants' experiences: Although a couple of participants admitted that they had resisted deferring and even engaged in "service sabotage," the participants appear to have successfully played the customer satisfaction game, obeying the "customer is always right" rule most of the time.

The participants' coffeehouse employers tried to manufacture consent in at least two ways: first, relying less heavily on rationalization to control employees, promoting instead a customer orientation; second, creating an aesthetic that gentrified barista work. To instill a customer orientation among employees, rather than routinizing the service encounter, the participants' employers (1) gave them leeway to (2) manage themselves, using customer satisfaction as the benchmark of their success. Macdonald and Sirianni (1996) refer to this as the "empowerment approach," and the participants did experience their autonomy positively, as might be expected (Wharton 1993). Of course, the service employer's aim remains the same as ever—"to simultaneously exclude workers from exerting genuine control yet secure their participation in the process of production" (Cardan, as cited in Fuller and Smith 1996: 77)—and this fact was not lost on those participants who voiced feelings of alienation.

The participants' employers created an aesthetic that gentrified barista work by selectively hiring individuals who possessed a good work ethic and good hygiene, or (arguably) a middle-class attitude and appearance. Customers took their signal from the

"animate components of the aesthetics of […] organization" (Witz *et al.* 2003: 46) and chose to participate in the service encounter accordingly—that is, they chose to afford participants the courtesy they felt was owing to young people who looked and acted like "good workers," who displayed hard work and commitment, and who could strike the perfect balance between initiative and obedience. In the coffeehouse setting, then, "good (young) worker" appears to have class connotations that promote positive relations with customers.

However, the appearance of commitment is not the same thing as actually being enthusiastically invested in one's job. The latter is a choice the participants each made agentially, and the manner in which they made their choices underlines the complexity of young workers' subject positions, as well as the complexity of the service labour process. Based on how they experienced barista employment and where they perceived their most worthwhile opportunities, the participants decided whether to apply themselves to master the skills necessary to serve without getting burnt out or feeling phony (Hochschild 1983). Two participants developed strong customer orientations and had become adept at distancing themselves emotionally from negative encounters by honing their ability to develop a "healthy" estrangement.[47] As I mentioned, these two were the only participants who had considered staying with their coffeehouse employers. The rest of the participants varied in the extent to which they had internalized a customer orientation, and none of them exhibited the same interactive skill level, as evinced by their views on the cult(ure) of the customer and by how they handled difficult customers. The latter participants had

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47 Interestingly, these participants were both men.

fewer reasons to try to reconcile the conflicts they experienced being simultaneously "empowered" and alienated; they chose instead to adopt or keep a more stopgap orientation (Tannock 2001) toward their jobs.

In short, the participants consented to look positively on serving based on their working conditions and the opportunities they perceived themselves to have—that is, based on their exit strategies. Each participant oriented him- or herself to barista work differently, but to understand *how* they did so, it is important to acknowledge what they all had in common: their unique position in the labour market as young workers.

Thus, being young was highly significant to how the participants experienced their jobs, even though they did not perceive age to be significant in their interactions with customers. The participants all believed they would be moving on to better things; there was little discussion about the need to improve working conditions for baristas, regardless of how "gentrified" their work might be. The question arises, then, whether consenting to a customer orientation also means necessarily consenting to the cult(ure) of the customer more broadly. That is, to what extent does internalizing a service orientation mean defining oneself as a customer first and a (young) worker second? The data suggest that participants did identify closely with customers, but the effect was not always to strengthen their self-management in the manner their employers hoped: Some defined quality in such a way as to subvert their employer's definition of good service.

If workers do not see themselves as workers—as individuals who produce surplus value for an employer—then the implications for the study of work in contemporary society are profound. What are the consequences for meaningful resistance and solidarity

among *workers*? Is this phenomenon more prominent among young workers, since they are more likely to see their jobs as just-for-now (Tannock 2001)? These are questions I could not answer in my exploratory study, but which may also warrant further research. I briefly explore other areas for future research in the section below.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

By and large, this study sheds light on young coffeehouse workers' perceptions of the service encounter and their experiences as relatively empowered lower-tier service sector workers. This study does have a number of limitations, however, that suggest the need for future research. Future research could also explore in more depth some of the study's tentative findings.

First, as I discussed in chapter 3, the sample size used in this study is small, even by the standards of qualitative research. Although I am confident that my participants are consistent with my personal observations of young baristas in terms of their age and educational attainment, the study's nonrandom sample of five individuals cannot yield statistically generalizable findings. Further, coffeehouse baristas are not necessarily representative of all young interactive service workers who perform "aesthetic labour." The participants I interviewed relied less on physical attractiveness and "trendiness"— and had less autonomy over their appearance—than other aesthetic labourers might. That is, there are different types of aesthetic labourers, and this study was not equipped to make comparisons among them. For a more comprehensive understanding of young workers' experiences of aesthetic labour, this study could be expanded to include a variety of service settings, such as high-end boutiques, nightclubs, etc., as well as—for

further comparison—workplaces where aesthetic labour is not featured. Expanding the study in such a manner would help determine whether my findings are supported by the experiences of other young workers, employed in a variety of settings.

An expanded study could also examine in more depth the study's tentative findings relating to the significance of working conditions and work ethic. Recruiting participants from a variety of workplaces would allow comparison of managerial styles: Are some workplace cultures more conducive to workers' applying themselves to the mastery of interactive skill? How does the development of "healthy" estrangement vary from one workplace to the next, or from one individual to the next, depending on his or her background? How is "work ethic" manifested *vis à vis* class? How do age and class intersect in various interactive service settings to shape the way youth experience serving?

Finally, the focus of this study was on participants' subjective perceptions of their jobs. The methodology used, in-depth interviewing, does not allow for an examination of some of the more "objective" elements of young workers' experiences of aesthetic labour. To answer whether age and appearance have a real, objective impact on service workers' interactions with customers, it might prove fruitful to complement the interview data gathered in this thesis with an ethnographic study that examines the service encounter *as it takes place*. A more systematic analysis of customers' perceptions than is offered by the popular, journalistic investigations cited by Warhurst and Nickson (2007b) might also be worthwhile. The triangulation of these methods would offer a more complete picture of the "aestheticized" service encounter.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis has been to explore the experiences of young workers employed as baristas. While the findings bring up more questions than they provide answers, my research suggests that baristas, compared to (other) fast-food workers, are afforded some protection by the aesthetics of the organizations for which they work; however, ultimately, whether they experience service work positively appears to be the result of whether they choose to invest themselves in the *mastery* of interactive skill, specifically developing a "healthy" estrangement.

My participants give the lie to the assumption that young workers share a negative attitude toward serving: Although some of them admitted to engaging in acts of "deviance" directed at customers, the norm was to defer and they all took pride in making customers happy. An important contribution of my thesis, then, for those interested in the phenomenon of "service sabotage," is to show it for what it is: a form of resistance that "often reflect[s] broader grievances about work organization and treatment on the job" (Roscigno and Hodson 2004)—that is, it is not personal. Looking at "deviant" front-line employee behaviour in this light will hopefully counterbalance the tendency to downplay the negative aspects of service work because, supposedly, only young workers do it, and they will not have to "deal with" serving for long. This perspective obscures the fact that service jobs are a growing source of employment in Canada, and the precarious working conditions they endorse could stand to be improved.

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Appendix 1

Office of Research Ethics

The University of Western Ontario
Room 4180 Support Services Building, London, ON, Canada N6A 5C1
Telephone: (519) 661-3036 Fax: (519) 850-2466 Email: ethics@uwo.ca
Website: www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. T.L. Adams	
Review Number: 17226S	**Review Level:** Full Board
Review Date: September 09, 2010	**Approved Local # of Participants:** 15
Protocol Title: Exploring Young Workers' Perceptions of the Service Encounter	
Department and Institution: Sociology, University of Western Ontario	
Sponsor:	
Ethics Approval Date: October 29, 2010	**Expiry Date:** April 30, 2011

Documents Reviewed and Approved: UWO Protocol, Letter of Information and Consent.

Documents Received for Information:

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. If you require an updated approval notice prior to that time you must request it using the UWO Updated Approval Request Form.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the subject or when the change(s) involve only logistical or administrative aspects of the study (e.g. change of monitor, telephone number). Expedited review of minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered. Subjects must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation.

Investigators must promptly also report to the NMREB:

a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
b) all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
c) new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

If these changes/adverse events require a change to the information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment advertisement, the newly revised information/consent documentation, and/or advertisement, must be submitted to this office for approval.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussion related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

Chair of NMREB: Dr. Riley Hinson
FDA Ref. #: IRB 00000941

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information		
☑ Grace Kelly (grace.kelly@uwo.ca)	☐ Janice Sutherland (jsutherl@uwo.ca)	☐ Elizabeth Wambolt (ewambolt@uwo.ca)

This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.   cc: ORE File

UWO NMREB Ethics Approval - Initial
V.2007-10-12 (rptApprovalNoticeNMREB_Initial)   17226S   Page 1 of 1

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Identifying/Background Questions
Tell me a little bit about yourself.
1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been working at ——?
3. What is your position at ——? (What does that position entail?) How many hours are you working per week?
4. What are some of your **commitments** outside of work?
   ❏ school
   ❏ area of concentration: _____
   ❏ married
   ❏ children
   ❏ other: _____
5. What would you like to be doing in the **future**?
   ❏ relevance of current employment

Main Questions
6. How do you like working at ——?
   (a) What are some of the **positive aspects** of your job?
   (b) In what ways is your job satisfying?
   (c) Do you feel that working at —— is in any way creatively fulfilling?
   (d) Do you feel attached to your work, your coworkers and supervisors, and the your employer on the whole?
   (e) Would you say you invest (a lot of) yourself in your work here?
   (f) How does this job **compare** to other jobs you've had? How are —— employees treated in comparison with other service workers?
7. In general, what **motivates** you to do your job well?
8. What (if anything) do you consider to be stressful about the job? **How do you handle the stress?** (What do you do to make your work interesting/enjoyable?)

9. How do you like **working with customers**?
   (a) How do you feel when you provide quality customer service?
   (b) What would you consider to be a successful transaction with a customer?
   (c) How important is it to you personally to provide good service?
10. Generally, what are (your interactions with) customers at —— like?
11. What do you think about the saying that "the customer is always right"?
    (a) How does this saying affect you?
    (b) Do you think some customers abuse their power?
    (c) How does this affect other customers?

12. Tell me about some of the **difficult customers** you have had to deal with. How were

they difficult? How did you handle the situation? Why? Was this method effective?

13. Have you had customers that have been repeatedly difficult (e.g., coming on to you, asking you out, criticizing you on multiple occasions, treating you as if you were stupid)?

14. When you are dealing with a difficult customer, **how do your co-workers react**?

15. (a) How do **managers** react? In tough situations with customers, do you feel that they are supporting you?
(b) Do you ever feel that management is looking over your shoulders, waiting for you to mess up? Are they watching to ensure you provide the best service all the time?

16. Have you ever given what could be considered **bad service**? Why? What were the circumstances?

17. Is it hard to get away with giving bad service?

18. What do you think/Is there anything your manager, or ——, could do to make dealing with customers less stressful?

19. Overall, how would you describe **management's connection with customers'** needs and wants? Are they in touch with what customers require on a day-to-day basis? Have you ever had to break a rule to give a customer what they wanted?
    (a) What do *you* think customers want (e.g., speed, service with a smile, a quality product)?
    (b) Are they getting what they want?
    (c) Who do you think benefits when you provide the expected level of service?

20. How does your **age** influence your interactions with customers?
    (a) Do you think older, or younger, workers are treated differently?
    (b) In what ways (if any) are you **empowered** in your interactions with customers by the knowledge and skills you've gained on the job?

21. In jobs such as this, where workers are sometimes encouraged to act and look the same, **what (if anything) makes you different** from your co-workers?

DIANA J. SZABO

Education	Master of Arts, Sociology The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario 2012
	Bachelor of Arts (Honors), French and Sociology The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario 2009
Academic Employment Experience	Research Assistant The University of Western Ontario November 2010–April 2011
	Teaching Assistant The University of Western Ontario September 2010–April 2011
	Teaching Assistant The University of Western Ontario September 2009–April 2010
Scholarships and Awards	Ontario Graduate Scholarship, valued at $15,000 2010
	Social Science Dean Graduate Scholarship, valued at $2,518 2010
	Western Graduate Research Scholarship, totalling $9,018 2009–2011 (four academic terms)
	The University of Western Ontario Gold Medals (French and Sociology Majors) 2009
	Dean's Honor List 2006–2009
Presented Papers	2012. "Exploring Young Workers' Perceptions of the Service Encounter." Presented at the Fourth Annual Sociology Graduate Student Conference, March 16, London, Canada.