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**‘“Feeling Bodies” in Marketing: Aesthetics, Emotions and Gender**

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## **‘“Feeling Bodies” in Marketing: Aesthetics, Emotions & Gender’**

### **Abstract**

Aesthetic labour and emotional labour are neglected topics within the marketing field, despite their relevance to services marketing, and to date none of this work has found its way into the marketing literature on gender. This is despite the fact that there is a significant and growing body of work that explores the intersections of gender and marketing. Taking this latter literature as a starting point, the article seeks to incorporate the literatures on aesthetic labour and emotional labour into that discussion, as taken together these literatures offer us a fresh opportunity to consider where we are, where we’ve been, and where we have yet to go in marketing in terms of the ‘gender issue’. Above all, the article reintroduces a ‘trailblazing’ (Bettany et al, 2010) feminist element into discussions of gender in marketing, by raising concerns about the deployment of ‘feeling bodies’ in key customer service roles. It concludes by arguing that there continues to be a gender dichotomy in marketing, and that sex role typing is alive and thriving in our marketing practices, particularly in service roles. The article calls for greater critical awareness from professional bodies, employers and employees in the marketing field about gender issues in our discourses and practices, and suggests areas for empirical research into this important topic.

**Keywords:** Critical Marketing, Gender, Aesthetic Labour, Emotional Labour, Embodiment, Feminism

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## **‘“Feeling Bodies” in Marketing: Aesthetics, Emotions and Gender**

**‘It is the interaction between ideologies and material circumstances that make any system so powerful and enduring’ (Cockburn, 1983)**

### **Introduction**

There is a rich vein of research in marketing, advertising and consumer research fields that address gender issues, much of it organised under the auspices of the Association for Consumer Research conferences on gender, marketing and consumer behaviour, which began in 1991 and continues to the present day (see Bettany et al 2010, for an overview of this significant body of work). There is an under-explored area of gender research, however, one that has preoccupied researchers in the fields of organisation and management studies, but has yet to be fully addressed in the marketing field, and indeed incorporated into the on-going discussion of marketing and gender. That is the topic of aesthetic and emotional labour, and how it intersects with gender in the workplace.

This article aims to bring the literature on aesthetic labour and emotional labour together in order to advance the discussion about marketing and gender. Specifically, it critically discusses the deployment of ‘feeling bodies’ in key customer service roles, a marketing domain within which women proliferate. This article’s focus on the customer service role takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Maclaran and Catterall in 2000, when they wrote that we needed to examine the sub areas of marketing work such as market research or customer care in order to fully understand the issue of gender and marketing.

In recent years there has been much work on both aesthetic labour and emotional labour in the management literature (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003; Knights and Thanem 2005; Nickson and Korczynski 2009; Warhurst and Nickson 2007, 2009; Koskina and Keithley 2010). Some of this work has also found its way into the marketing field as well (Pettinger 2004; Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton 2005; Phillips, Wee Tan and Julian 2006), but to date this work has not yet intersected with the marketing literature on gender. This article therefore offers a review of theoretical and empirical research in these fields in order to bring aesthetic labour and emotional labour to the forefront of marketing and gender studies. In particular, it brings distinct but related fields together in order to explore issues of gender coding and sex role typing in relation to marketing roles in organisations. In so doing, it explores the extent to which marketing has undergone ‘feminisation’ in the past decade in terms of theory and practice, or whether a masculine value system, what Moore (2009) refers to as ‘embedded hegemonic masculinity’, still dominates in the marketing workplace.

The feminisation of marketing was first alluded to in Maclaran and Catterall’s *Journal of Marketing Research* article of 2000, called ‘Bridging the Knowledge Divide: Issues on the Feminisation of Marketing Practice’. In their article, the authors discussed the feminisation of marketing in both practice and discourse. In particular, they considered the impact of the feminisation of marketing as a profession for men and women. They also noted that no research had been done on ‘gender segregation’ in terms of marketing roles (p. 637), and they suggested that we needed to talk to male and female graduates prior to their marketing careers, as well as track their subsequent progress in the marketing workplace. Having problematised the concept of the feminisation of marketing, the authors went on to highlight key areas for research. These included the need to pay close attention to ‘wider structural and ideological circumstances’ and have ‘more analyses of marketing discourse and its underpinning ideology [in order to] identify the role of the marketing academy in

constructing and sustaining these discourses' (p. 643). They also noted that data needed to be gathered on women in marketing professions, including the 'sub-areas' of marketing such as customer care. Finally they called for more research on the everyday working lives of those doing marketing work.

In keeping with the spirit of Maclaran and Catterall's article, this paper picks up on several of the issues raised in their article. It also aspires to answer the clarion call of Bettany et al in their special issue of *Marketing Theory* on gender (2010), in which they argued that 'normalising discourses' continue to surround gender issues in marketing (p. 17), and that because of this we need to stand back and critically interrogate the discourses and their political, social and material implications for women and men. Above all, then, the overall position taken in this paper is that gender continues to be a relevant and problematic issue in the marketing field.

The discussion moves on to the customer service role or 'interactive service' role, as Warhurst and Nickson (2009) describe it, and considers the extent to which service roles in the contemporary workplace are gender coded as 'feminine'. It also discusses whether or not gender coding, if it occurs, leads to sex role typing in the workplace in relation to customer service roles, namely that sex and gender conflate to create jobs that are assigned to men and women according to the perceived 'masculine' or 'feminine' nature of those roles.

By addressing this issue, the intention is to return to topics that may be considered passé by some, in the sense that on the face of it gender equality has been achieved in the workplace, and women's rights have been secured. However, as Bettany et al (2010) argue, this may be an optimistic and simplistic position to take. Indeed, they note that 'significant inequalities, drawn upon gendered lines, still remain a ubiquitous part of developed, western societies and are even more pressing in developing nations.' (p.4). If we accept this view, it therefore

behoves us to continue to inspect our own discipline's discourses and practices in a critical and enquiring way.

In the first instance the article offers a historical overview of the gendered discourse that underpins marketing. This enables consideration of the customer service role in greater detail, examining the gender issues that are explicit and implicit in the service role and exploring how 'masculine' and 'feminine' values are applied to marketing roles in the workplace. The discussion then turns to the management literature on aesthetic labour and emotional labour. These literatures enable exploration of the twin influences of emotion and embodiment (encapsulated in the term 'feeling bodies') on recruitment, specifically as they relate to roles and practices in the customer service role. After reviewing these literatures and their inter-relationships, the paper then goes on to consider how 'feeling bodies' are mobilised in the workplace to interface and engage with customers, and it considers the gender issues embedded in such mobilisations. Finally, the article suggests key areas for research studies that might enable us to better determine where marketing is in relation to the gender issue in our field.

### **Marketing and gender**

The evolution of marketing as a discipline is a gendered story on many levels. Historically, a gendered discourse can be perceived as an overarching metaphor in marketing discourse from the nineteenth century onwards, when consumer culture emerged and the gender dichotomy of the marketplace – male producers and female consumers – was born. This Cartesian split within marketing can be understood, in broader terms, as a manifestation of the mind/body dichotomy in Western thought, whereby women were identified with the body and nature,



and men were identified with the mind and culture (Paglia 1992). The political significance of dichotomous thinking is that it inevitably maintains inequalities of power (Squires 2002). In marketing the Cartesian split has been largely played out in terms of a discourse of male producers targeting women consumers in the marketplace. The male/female dialectic in marketing has been deconstructed in a number of key studies, primarily in consumer behaviour research, notably by Hirschman (1993) and Fischer and Bristor (1994), and the identification of consumption with the feminine and vice versa, served to de-value both in marketing discourses, according to Hollows (2000).

Joy and Venkatesh (1994) unmasked the conflation (and trivialisation) of women and consumption in marketing discourse. In marketing discourse, consumption, despite being a bodily act, was disciplined and contained within a mechanistic discourse, the rationale for this being that since the mind makes the body consume, it is not necessary to deal directly with the body. The consequence of this was that consumer behaviour and consumption itself came to be conceptualised as a disembodied phenomenon in traditional marketing discourse. This was most memorably apparent in the consumer buying behaviour model, which conceptualised consumer buying behaviour as a rational, logical, and sequential process. Furthermore, transcendence of the body tended to be a privilege of the male in marketing discourse, with female consumers defined in bodily terms, as being at the mercy of their needs, wants and desires, all of which could be satisfied by careful segmentation, targeting and positioning on the part of astute marketing managers.

In tandem with this mechanistic and masculine discourse was a military one, equally 'masculine' in its emphases, not least it's 'cut and thrust' values. The military strategist model of the marketing manager intent on market penetration through segmentation, targeting

and positioning, has been deconstructed to reveal an underlying gendered discourse of conquest and mastery (Desmond 1997). Likewise, the concept of customer service work as 'front line' work reinforces a military (and gendered) analogy, as research would indicate that women are typically much more likely to have 'front line' roles, thus being in the firing line, so to speak, in terms of any conflict that may arise with customers (Taylor and Tylor 2001; Kerfoot and Korczynski 2005).

The much heralded 'return to the body' which has taken place across all disciplines has had as powerful an impact on the marketing discipline as it has had in other disciplines. Its elevation to primacy reflects the widespread disbanding of binary opposites that has occurred across many disciplines, and it is particularly apparent in its recognition of the interconnectedness of the mind and body in consumption acts (Bordo 1993; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Given that the feminine is associated with the body and the masculine is associated with the mind, one way in which this 'return to the body' is reflected in organisations has been in the elevation of 'feminine' values in the workplace.

According to Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) this 'feminisation' is characterised by relationship building, teamwork, intuitive decision making, flexibility and collaborative problem solving, and it is largely attributed to a shift from manufacturing to service industries (Rosener 1990; Bradley 1999). Growing numbers of jobs are based on 'serving and caring', and there has been a trend towards less hierarchical and more empathetic and cooperative management styles, and 'other essentialised feminine attributes' (McDowell 1997 p. 11). Significantly, these service jobs also reflect a gender dichotomy in management, however, with most jobs being gender-coded along traditional lines, in what Knights and

Thanem (2005) refer to as a 'dichotomous economy of gender' (p. 40). Elsewhere Claes (1999) refers to sex role socialization in this regard. The relationship marketing paradigm is regarded as marking the 'feminine' turn in the marketing discipline (Tynan 1997). It has led to a shift in emphasis towards 'soft', qualitative, emotional and social skills, away from 'hard', quantitative, rationalist and task oriented skills.

In a study in 1998, Maclaran, Stevens and Catterall discussed marketing management and the gendered discourse embedded in it, arguing that a gender dichotomy persisted at the heart of marketing management. The study drew attention to the actual, embodied experiences of women marketing managers, and one of the key findings to emerge from the study was that these women often felt that they were consigned to 'decorative' and 'cosmetic' roles within their organisations, 'smiling faces' who were used to project the right image for the organisation. Typically they found themselves in PR, sales and customer service roles and other frontline jobs, but these roles were less important in terms of strategic influence or financial remuneration than the marketing roles performed by their male colleagues. Significantly for this present argument, many of the women interviewed felt that they were pigeonholed because they were younger and often more aesthetically pleasing than their male counterparts! This would be consistent with research carried out by Alvesson (cited in Maclaran, Stevens and Catterall's study), which showed that attractive young women employees were often actively recruited to enhance the prestige of the organisation and the men within it.

Building on their earlier work, Maclaran and Catterall (2000) explored the extent to which progress had been made in marketing in relation to gender roles. They noted the influx of women into the marketing profession, particularly in PR, market research and customer care roles, and they speculated on the impact of this, namely whether this would lead to a

feminisation of marketing in the workplace. Of equal concern to them in the article was the issue of whether marketing discourse had become more feminine in tandem with other disciplines, and what impact this might have on men and women doing marketing work. Whilst the study raised more questions than it answered, it highlighted key issues of concern, not least that there had been little progress made by women, despite the so-called feminisation of the marketing workplace. They argued that we therefore needed to identify the role of the marketing academy in constructing and sustaining these discourses (p. 643).

In order to explore the issue of gender and marketing further we now turn to one of the domains where the 'feminisation' process is probably most intense, as noted by Maclaran and Catterall (2000), namely customer services or interactive service roles in marketing. To do so it is necessary to firstly review key services marketing concepts, and then consider these concepts from a gender perspective.

### **Services Marketing and Gender**

Services marketing is based on certain key characteristics: intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption aspects, perishability, heterogeneity, and lack of ownership (in Gabbott and Hogg 1997, p. 137). If we consider these characteristics, it is apparent, indeed obvious, that people and physical evidence are key in terms of the services marketing mix, and one might argue that the latter two aspects conflate to tangibly represent the service encounter. Furthermore, a successful service encounter often hinges on the emotional qualities that the service worker embodies and 'performs'. Lovelock, Wirtz and Chew (2009) write that frontline staff are expected to be 'cheerful, friendly, compassionate, sincere or even humble' (p. 281), and in their work on the dimensions of service quality, Zeithaml, Berry and

Parasuraman (1996) make reference to a number of specific competencies expected from service employees, such as empathy, courtesy and listening skills.

Given that there has been an acknowledgement of the growing importance of relationship marketing in our discipline, and that relationship marketing emphasises long term service with consumers rather than short term transactions, it is understandable that research in the field of services marketing increasingly focuses on ways to enhance ‘the personal relationship between provider and consumer’, and extols customer service employees to offer ‘empathy and sympathy’ at the moment that the service encounter takes place (Gabbott and Hogg 1997, p. 145).

In their identification of a service quality measurement tool: SERVQUAL, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) describe eight dimensions of service quality which they later refined to five. These were reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness (RATER). These core attributes have both physical and emotions dimensions. Essentially it is this blend that is considered key to successfully fulfilling customer service roles in many industries, namely that employees need to be ‘feeling bodies’, comprising, indeed embodying, both tangible (bodily) and intangible (mind) dimensions.

The service literature traditionally draws on a dramaturgical metaphor, notably Grove, Fisk and Bitner’s now classic study of service management (1992), to explore the relationship between consumers (audience) and service workers (actors). Indeed the notion of customer service as a performance is one that has been employed in a range of services marketing studies, such as those by Berry 1981; Berry, Zeithaml and Parasuraman 1985 and Gronroos 1985). Interestingly, Grove, Fisk and Bitner (1992) refer to ‘front stage’ and ‘backstage’ roles

in this regard, with front stage personnel being carefully selected and trained to ensure consistency in terms of their performances with customers. As such, they also suggest the primary challenge of such service roles, namely that customer service employees may be considered to be putting on a false 'front' in order to appear to be sincere. The challenge in this is to make consumers believe in the sincerity, honesty and authenticity of the 'performance' (p. 90).

In their discussion of the service experience, Grove, Fisk and Bitner (1992) refer to the importance of 'dress, grooming and demeanour' on the part of the 'actors' engaged in customer service. Others have highlighted non-physical traits such as 'competence, courtesy, knowledge, reliability and communicative abilities' (Berry, Zeithaml and Parasuraman 1985). What is particularly interesting in these early studies of services marketing is that there is only a somewhat oblique reference to physical appearance in them. The comprehensive textbook *Essentials of Services Marketing* (2009) by Lovelock, Wirtz and Chew, for example, makes very little reference to physical appearance and no reference to aesthetic labour, stressing instead the importance of such things as 'smart outfits and a ready smile' (p. 24). This coyness with regard to references to physical appearance has gradually disappeared in recent times, however, as organisations actively recruit employees who are aesthetically pleasing in order to fulfil customer service roles in what has become an increasingly appearance-driven consumer society. The recruitment of staff on the basis of their attractiveness may be overt and formal or more often covert and informal, note Warhurst and Nickson (2009). Furthermore, the recruitment of service staff resurrects a range of gender issues, issues that have perhaps never gone away but have merely been submerged beneath the surface, waiting for the right time and the right opportunity to resurface once again.

This paper argues that one of the most tangible ways in which the ‘feminisation’ process has manifested itself in the past few years has been in the rise of ‘feeling bodies’ in the marketing labour force (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003), and furthermore, research by Kerfoot and Korczynski (2005) indicates that women predominate in frontline service roles. This is a gender issue, as such work typically reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, roles and performativities (female feeling bodies and male intellectual minds) in the workplace. This re-affirmation of traditional gender stereotypes invariably results in the normalisation of embodied, gendered performances, whereby certain behaviours are deemed appropriate (and preferred) for women, and certain behaviours are deemed appropriate (and preferred) for men (Butler 1999). These behaviours may also lead to discriminatory practices in the workplace, if men or women do not conform to gendered expectations embedded in their jobs. This normalisation process in relation to gender is ‘embedded within marketing, advertising and consumer offerings’, argues Bettany et al (2010, p. 17). Indeed they call for a post-structuralist and political approach to the issue of gender, which addresses long-standing feminist concerns such as equal opportunity and parity in the workplace. Furthermore, they note that these issues aren’t resolved, and nor have they gone away; in fact they argue that they ‘are still to be fully articulated and realised’ (p. 17). In order to further explore issues of gender in relation to service work the discussion now turns to the literature on aesthetic labour and emotional labour.

### **Aesthetic labour**

Aesthetic labour focuses on how employees’ appearances are organizationally appropriated, transmuted and controlled for commercial gain (Warhurst et al 2000). Much of the published research on aesthetic labour is located in organisational studies, where aesthetic labour is

typically conceptualised as an 'embodied performance' (McDowell 1997, p. 33). Indeed aesthetic labour valorises embodiment, according to Witz, Warhurst and Nickson (2003). They argue that employees are both the 'software' and the 'hardware' of organisations, moulded to portray an organizational aesthetic, and to embody a service offering. The 'hardware' of organizations refers to marketing material, product design and the physical environment, and 'software' refers to its employees. Employees are required to behave in an appropriate way in terms of posture, gesture, use of personal space, facial characteristics and eye contact. Whilst there is a distinction made between 'hardware' and 'software', the reality in most organizations is that the two conflate in the shape and form of the aesthetic worker, who embodies and materialises the organizational aesthetic and organization's identity. They are thus 'aesthetically produced in order to be constituent and expressive of the corporate landscape' (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003, p. 48). They make a distinction between hard skills such as technical skills and abilities, and soft skills, which refer to appearance and attitude. Essentially those who embody the organisational aesthetic will be recruited and groomed in order to assume the physical characteristics that help define the organization, but they must also have the right attitude, which in combination with an attractive appearance, enables positive interaction with customers.

Such organizations are typically located within the service industries, where facial and bodily displays are a key part of the role. Indeed they have become crucial elements of the performance of the service role, note Warhurst and Nickson (2007). In their study Warhurst and Nickson conclude that the emphasis on 'soft' skills in service roles acknowledges the pivotal part played by aesthetics, namely employees' bodily appearance. Indeed 'lookism'



has been identified as the latest form of workplace discrimination (Oaff, 2003 in Warhurst and Nickson 2007, p. 104). These positions typically recruit young people of both sexes.

The 'soft' skills associated with frontline, service roles, whilst deemed necessary, are not particularly valued in terms of employee remuneration, however, as typically such frontline jobs involve long hours and low pay (Warhurst et al 2000). In many respects this is very surprising, given that the core of the marketing concept is customer focus and customer satisfaction. Aesthetic labour thus raises another issue, that of class. Class issues permeate aesthetic labour practices, creating tensions and hierarchies at all levels. Indeed in their study of cosmetics counters in an upmarket department store, Johnston and Sandberg (2008) argue that aesthetic labour 'can be seen as the materialization of class practices' (p. 399). Wright's 2005 study of the UK retail book trade also explores class issues. He observes how cultural capital (with its attendant elitism) and cultural value are produced and reinforced by lowly paid workers in this retail environment, arguing that their subjectivities are co-opted to meet commercial imperatives. Deans (2005), in her research on the acting profession, also observes that aesthetic labour is 'framed by shared, if contested, constructions of social positions' (p. 771), and these constructions are often resistant to change.

Such studies suggest that we need to see employees, customers and managers as 'an integrated whole' (Entwistle 2002, p. 413), negotiating both the logics of production *and* consumption. The conflation of production and consumption is particularly apparent in the world of fashion modelling, notes Pettinger (2004) and Wissinger (2009). Models engage in self-commodification at both an aesthetic, entrepreneurial and immaterial level, modelling a desirable lifestyle 'that is then packaged and sold to consumers as an experience that can be had for the price of their attention' (Wissinger 2009, p. 274). Brand managers work with

models to capitalise on the meanings and energies consumers bring to the branded experiences. Brand managers thus 'farm out' their brands to influential and attractive groups, using the social worlds and networking to develop their brand's equity and value. Entwistle (2002), in her study of the fashion modelling field, notes that as part of the cultural economy, 'the aesthetics of cultural production are not abstract but grounded in everyday commercial practices' (p. 319).

There can be no denying the fact that employees with 'soft' skills (Witz et al, 2003) whose jobs require them to look attractive, have important, key parts to play in terms of the organisational aesthetic, actively recruited in order to embody the image and personality of the organisation. In marketing terms they thus have an extremely important role and considerable responsibility, one might argue, in terms of the marketing 'offer'. Employees who are recruited according to aesthetic criteria understand that their good looks are important assets for the organisation, and they are often uncritical about being recruited on aesthetic grounds to do aesthetic work, according to a study carried out by Dennis and Binns (2002). These 'aesthetic' service roles in certain retail environments have been referred to by Warhurst et al (2000) as the 'style labour market'. What the above examples demonstrate is that, in marketing terms, aesthetic labour is a complex interplay of marketing management, employees and customers, wherein the boundaries between each are blurred within what Rosenthal, Peccei and Hill (2001) refer to as 'a discourse of enterprise' that exists both within the organisation and outside of it.

### **Aesthetic labour and gender**

There is another important dynamic to consider in relation to the burgeoning aesthetic labour market, and that is gender and its significance in relation to this market. Pettinger (2008) suggests that aesthetic labour is gendered labour, and it needs to be understood as a form of social and cultural capital, every bit as influential as age, class and ethnicity, in terms of how it shapes individual opportunities in the employment marketplace.

There have been a number of studies that have addressed gender issues in relation to aesthetic labour, and it may be argued that frontline jobs are often explicitly gendered. It is also agreed that many service roles embody and reflect a 'feminine aesthetic'. This adherence to a 'feminine' aesthetic usually results in the recruitment of women rather than men, as women are perceived to more easily project 'feminine' codes, although men may also be recruited to certain service roles if they conform to a 'feminine' aesthetic in terms of 'soft' skills, as in the airline industry. Warhurst and Nickson (2007), for example, note that service roles in the retail and hospitality industries are dominated by women. Pettinger (2004, 2005) has connected aesthetic labour to the gendering of retail work. Furthermore, frontline service roles are usually gender-coded in organisations according to 'feminine' attributes, writes McDowell, (1997). Examples of service occupations that are coded as 'feminine' include female secretaries, female bar attendants and female employees in leisure parks (Spiess and Waring, 2005).

Warhurst and Nickson (2009) discuss the growing trend in organizations such as bars and restaurants to sexualise their female employees. Whilst the recruitment of staff on sex appeal grounds is often not explicit, nevertheless they note that more and more organizations 'recognise the commercial benefit of mobilising and developing employee sexuality' (p. 395). They offer the example of the Hooter's restaurant chain in the USA as one organization

that unabashedly recruits sexualised labour in order to appeal to their target market. Pettinger (2004) points out that aesthetic labour is not always about ‘corporate obligation’ but may be about the active involvement of service workers, as previously noted, and in enacting their roles they may be agents engaged in a ‘self-conscious project of the self.’ (p. 18). In so saying, she underlines how service workers may willingly engage in aesthetic roles because they are intricately related to their identities as individuals, and this perception makes for a much more nuanced interpretation of aesthetic labour roles, in that many employees may not see such work as demeaning or problematic from a sex-typing perspective.

Some studies, however, paint a more critical picture of aesthetic labour and female employment. The airline industry has been under scrutiny for a considerable period of time for their mobilization of attractive women to provide in-flight service. In their 2005 study of aesthetic and sexualised labour in the Asia Pacific airline industry, for example, Spiess and Waring (2005) discuss how aesthetic and sexualised labour in low cost airlines is used to attract potential customers. Typically this appeal is focused on young and attractive female cabin crew tending to the needs of their male customers. Alongside their physical attributes, cabin crew are also required to have emotional skills to engender the appropriate image, and display ‘organisationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions’ (Morris and Feldman 1996, cited in Spiess and Waring 2005, p. 196). The flight attendant is expected to have the ‘feminine’ qualities of nurturing mother combined with sexually alluring mate (Hochschild 1983).

In some senses, flight attendants, through their embodiment of certain physical and mental qualities, also become the ‘hardware’ of the company (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003; Warhurst and Nickson 2009), comparable to product design and other tangible marketing

material. One is reminded here, perhaps, of Virgin Atlantic's mobilisation of attractive, red-suited young women as both aesthetic labour and as emblems emblazoned on the sides of Virgin Atlantic aircrafts. Women working in such feminised work spaces must 'perform' a particular brand of 'femininity', consciously using their bodies, clothing and deportment as well as their speech, accent and style, to reflect and embody the required expectations and aesthetic codes of 'femininity' that go with the job (McDowell 1997; Tyler and Abbott 1998; Taylor and Tyler 2000).

The airline industry thus uses women to promote a 'feminine' aesthetic in their organisations. Spiess and Waring (2005) use the case studies of Virgin Blue and Air Asia, specifically their advertising campaigns, to deconstruct how the female labour force is mobilised to project the required image of the organisation. They also show how such positioning on the basis of gender can be problematic. For example, the overtly sexual appeals of both organisations' marketing campaigns may create considerable difficulties for flight attendants, as well as heightened expectations on the part of male customers. To illustrate this, the Air Asia slogan goes: 'There's a new girl in town. She's twice the fun and half the price'. This positioning may create a somewhat fraught working environment, whereby male customers may interpret such appeals as a licence to touch, and indeed sexual harassment is a recognised hazard that goes with such work (Spiess and Waring 2005).

The hazard of being a woman in the workplace in an environment wherein a 'full-on' 'masculine' discourse dominates has also been pointed out by Young (1990), who writes that the idealization of dis(embodiment) in masculine discourse within organisations may disadvantage women, who may find themselves objectified and sexualised if they don't fit in with a disembodied, neutral (male), bureaucratic ideal. Women's material bodies may thus

have far reaching effects in terms of how they are employed and indeed perceived in organisations.

More recently, Warhurst and Nickson (2009) observe that the strategic sexualisation of employees may be encouraged, condoned or even prescribed if it is considered to be a key part of the marketing mix on offer, and indeed the recruitment of sexualised female labour is usually consistent with the company's overall marketing strategy, including its segmentation, targeting, positioning and advertising strategy, and it is thus clearly visible in its marketing mix.

The above examples demonstrate how women's material bodies may shape their experiences and opportunities in the workplace in relation to marketing occupations. The aesthetic labour literature, with its focus on the commodification of bodies, serves to highlight issues that are often not explicitly acknowledged in terms of women's experiences as employees in marketing-oriented organisations, namely that employees are themselves commodities that must visually (and sometimes sexually) appeal to the intended market, and project a pleasing image of the organisation. It thus behoves young women (and increasingly, young men) to do the kind of work that is deemed most suitable for them, and often that work is of an aesthetic nature.

### **Emotional labour**

According to Warhurst and Nickson (2009), the emotional labour paradigm now dominates the study of interactive service roles. There is a clear connection between physical and mental dimensions in customer service roles, and indeed it is difficult to disentangle them, as

Warhurst and Nickson (2009) note. Nevertheless, we now endeavour to do so as the discussion turns to the ‘feeling’ part of the equation. Whilst we are discussing aesthetic labour and emotional labour separately, they are in reality intricately connected, as Pettinger (2004) points out. She writes that emotions are the link between the external and internal presentation of self and the successful performance of the service role. Furthermore, the various domains within which we perform gender have fluid boundaries between them and each has their own distinct characteristics (Pilcher 2007).

The term emotional labour was first coined by Hochschild in 1983 in the book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. In this she wrote that emotional labour was the management of feeling to create a publicly facial and bodily display. This demonstrates how emotional and bodily displays work together to create a desired impression on customers (see Warhurst and Nickson 2009, for a full discussion of this). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) define emotional labour as ‘the display of expected emotions by service agents during service encounters’, and that emotional labour facilitates ‘task effectiveness and self-expression’ (p. 88). Hochschild refers to surface acting (one’s outward behaviour) and deep acting (one’s inner feelings) in relation to emotional labour. This definition conflates both aesthetics and emotions and emphasises that such service roles are visual performances during which employees act out an appropriate part that requires them to appear to be engaging with customers in a positive and indeed empathetic way, irrespective of how they may actually be feeling beneath the surface. Ezzy (2001) refers to the ‘simulacrum of community’ that service work and management encourage. Not surprisingly, this acting out can be the cause of considerable psychological stress and ‘emotive dissonance’ for service workers, notes Hochschild (1983). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) also address the psychological challenges of emotional labour, such as pressure, dissonance and self- alienation on the part of the

service agent. More recently, Varca (2009) has studied the degree of stress experienced by employees in a large communications firm call centre.

Given its performative nature, emotional labour has a lot in common with other performance roles such as acting. Indeed much of the literature on emotional labour uses phrases like 'surface acting', 'deep acting', 'feeling rules', 'display rules' and 'affective displays', as well as words such as 'actors' and 'personas' (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). This emphasis, however, may suggest that emotional labour is always a form of acting to win over an audience, whereas emotional labour may also be genuine in some instances and thus not require acting. In fact, a service agent may be expressing an authentic self in the service encounter and indeed this constitutes a third kind of emotional labour, which is a genuine expression of expected emotion (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). In other instances, emotional labour may be relatively effortless given the habitual, repetitive and scripted nature of many service roles.

The significance of emotional labour in the context of marketing is obvious. Given that customer satisfaction is at the core of the marketing concept, service workers must be able to engender positive feelings on the part of customers they're interacting with, as this is more likely to encourage both short term and long term exchanges, thus meeting organisational objectives. In the retail and hospitality industries, for example, Warhurst and Nickson (2007) note that employees are required to be good-natured, helpful, friendly, positive and playful. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) write that there are four factors of significance in relation to emotional labour and the service encounter. These are that front-line service staff represent the organisation to customers; such encounters involve face-to-face interaction; they often have a 'dynamic and emergent quality'; and there are intangible elements. These four factors



place a premium on the behaviour of the service agent (p. 90). Another factor that is less often referred to in the literature is the class issue. Macdonald and Sirianni (1996) studied questions of power and governance at work and referred to the 'emotional proletariat' in this regard (p. 3).

### **Emotional labour and gender**

Emotional labour is not a gender neutral phenomenon (Taylor and Tyler, 2000, Wolkowitz, 2006). This labour is primarily undertaken by women, and therefore women engaged in emotional, service work are also doing gender, in the sense that they are enacting gendered roles based on 'stereotypical beliefs in the social capital and interpersonal skills of women as women' (Kerfoot and Korczynski 2009, p. 4). Furthermore, in service roles, individuals may find themselves identifying with such roles and assuming prototypical characteristics that go along with the role, to the extent that 'acting' becomes part of one's authentic self-expression. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) draw on social-identity theory to argue that it is easier to comply with such role expectations, as dissonance can create considerable identity problems for service workers. Indeed they suggest that we need to consider both macro and micro issues in relation to service roles, such as 'societal norms, occupational norms and organizational norms' (p. 22).

Knights and Thanem (2005) write that women's suitability for service roles is bound up with assumptions about their fitness for such work, namely their affective, emotional bodies, and this perception may in turn lead to sexual role typing in the workplace, whereby women may be deemed to be unsuitable for certain, typically management positions, but ideally suited to less strategic and lower prestige roles at the interface between organisations and customers.

Toynbee (2003) notes that 'suitable areas' in the service sector are typically around what she describes as the 5 'c's: catering, cashier or checkout, clerical, cleaning and caring occupations. James (1998) has made similar observations in this regard, noting that women's employment in emotional labour roles often conflates their domestic and public roles. She also argues that those who work as 'emotional managers' and whose remit it is to control the emotional labour of others are usually male, and the emotional workers themselves are usually women.

The confinement of women to service roles is particularly telling in the case of mature women returning to the workplace. Unlike the recruitment of young women as aesthetic labour, older women may find themselves much prized in certain frontline (and often part-time and poorly paid) service roles if 'mothering' qualities are deemed to be appropriate for their jobs. In many respects, such frontline, mothering service roles serve to conflate women's public and private lives. They bring their supposedly 'innate' and 'natural' feminine skills to the workplace, and whilst this work is not unpaid, as housework and care in the home is, it is usually lowly paid, and it is almost indivisible from the domestic, maternal, caring roles many women have in their day to day, private lives (Kerfoot and Korczynski 2009).

The perception that service roles are typically 'feminine' ones is evidenced by the fact that some men may be very reluctant to work in emotionally driven and female-concentrated occupations, as they may perceive service work to be demeaning and servile, according to research by Nixon, Lindsay and McQuaid (in Nickson and Korczynski, 2009). This may vary somewhat, however, according to class, education and age. Young male students, for example, may not perceive service roles in this light, as they regard such service roles as

temporary positions that provide them with necessary funds whilst they are studying. The so-called 'emotion work' that many women do is typically undervalued because of its 'feminine' nature, and often the gendered tussle between a 'feminine' and 'masculine' value system is played out in terms of a battle between a more systematised, surveillance (masculine) thrust on the one hand and a more inter-personal, caring (feminine) emphasis on the other (Hjalmarsson in Nickson and Korczynski 2009, p. 297).

This battle is also played out in terms of marketing discourse generally, according to Maclaran et al (2009, p. 719), who suggest that the feminisation of marketing may have resulted in a degree of 'status insecurity' in the marketing discipline which, they argue, has led to a subtle backlash against the 'feminine', and a return to a more 'masculine' value system. Fisher (2007) writes that a 'new managerialism' is increasingly gaining currency in the marketing discipline, which typically manifests itself as 'macho-masculinity' in terms of its rhetoric and practices (in Maclaran et al 2009). One might see the growth of explicit sexualised labour (Walter 2010) as tangible evidence of this backlash, as in many ways it marks a return to a more traditional, dichotomous way of thinking in terms of what roles are appropriate for women and what roles are appropriate for men.

## **Discussion**

This article has brought together the literatures on marketing and gender, specifically the feminisation of marketing argument, and examined this in relation to the customer service or interactive service role, as well as in relation to aesthetic labour and emotional work. It has explored the intersections between these literatures, in particular the identification of

aesthetic labour and emotional work with the 'feminine', encapsulated in the term of 'feeling bodies'. In order to underline that feminist issues are still current and relevant, the article has also introduced the emerging field of study on sexualised labour (Warhurst and Nickson 2009). In bringing these literatures together, it has aimed to draw attention to the on-going significance of gender in relation to customer service roles in organisations, at both a symbolic and material level.

Furthermore, and more significantly, in assembling the arguments for this article, there is evidence to suggest that there continues to exist what Moore (2009) has described as an 'entrenched gender division of labour' (p. 668) in relation to how marketing roles are allocated and performed in the workplace. Specifically, it would seem to be the case that gender issues are embedded in the customer service, interactive service role in terms of the roles assigned to men and women, and that the issues highlighted by Maclaran and Catterall in their 2000 article continue to be pertinent and indeed pressing issues in the current climate. Walter (2010), in her book *The Return of Sexism*, writes that we are currently witnessing a 'stalled revolution' in relation to feminism and equality for women in this country, with women's empowerment and choices identified with (and reduced to) sexualised behaviour and occupations. If we accept this argument, we might see this rise as a depressingly retrogressive step in relation to gender roles and expectations in contemporary society.

There may be silence around the gender issues that have preoccupied feminist writers in marketing since the 1990s, but the gendering of marketing roles in relation to service positions illustrates that the issue is still very much a current and indeed pressing one. This article has also highlighted that the gendering of marketing roles in relation to service positions illustrates that sex-typing is not only apparent but apparently acceptable in current

marketing practices in relation to the roles assigned to men and women. Furthermore, it is also apparent in our marketing discourses, thus highlighting both areas of concern raised by Maclaran and Catterall in their 2000 article. Specifically, studies in the marketing field reveal that aesthetic labour and emotional labour are typically gendered, and these gender-coded roles are persistent ones because they reflect deeply embedded social and cultural norms and expectations about masculinity and femininity, norms that are mapped on to men and women in relation to employment roles and opportunities. These ‘normalising discourses’, as Bettany et al (2010) refer to them, have a profound impact on us, and yet, because of the so-called ‘neo-topicalism’ that pervades the marketing discipline, they are no longer being discussed (Bettany et al, 2010). The dominant discourse in the marketplace is that gender issues are no longer problematic or even relevant in the workplace, a view that this assemblage of evidence from related scholarly fields hopes to go some way to challenge.

This article suggests, based on its literature reviews in this article, that there is strong evidence that ‘masculine’ values continue to attract greater prestige and remuneration than ‘feminine’ ones, and that these ‘masculine’ values are typically expected from men, and ‘feminine’ values are expected from women. Indeed it would be hard not to be sceptical about whether marketing has become more ‘feminised’, as previously noted by Maclaran et al (2009), and any discussion of the multiplicity and fluidity of gender roles and identities in a so-called postmodern, post-structural world may not actually match the lived experience of men and women in terms of the marketing roles they fulfil in the workplace. After all, material, structural and institutional realities are deeply embedded cultural ideologies that shape our work and life experiences, and employers can easily apply sex-typing criteria when assigning and filling marketing roles. We therefore need to revisit these issues, and deconstruct that which is taken for granted and normalised, unpicking the social and cultural

fabric to expose the underlying structures that hold these practices together, and that stubbornly reinforce and even at times reinstate binary systems in terms of gender.

Moore (2009) suggests that issues such as gender, class and race need to be contextualised within a capitalist system that revolves around production and indeed reproduction, and that when we emphasise the performative and representational aspects of gendered labour we may underestimate or even trivialise the wider forces that shape our world. In other words, customer services roles and the mental (feeling) and physical (body) aspects of these roles need to be understood as more than simply performances. Rather, such service roles reflect profound cultural norms, privileges and prejudices, and these norms may ultimately lead to gender inequalities. Furthermore, we shouldn't underestimate how powerful these norms are, as they offer individuals a collective identity and a sense of belonging with others in the workplace, as well as with society at large, as Pettinger (2004, 2008) has noted in her studies of the fashion industry.

It is also pertinent to note here that there is an increasingly widely held belief that we are living in a hyper-sexualised world that has particularly significant implications for women, especially women who may perceive themselves to have limited career options beyond aesthetic ones (Walter, 2010). In keeping with the 'feminization' of marketing buzz when it first emerged a decade ago, there were a number of studies that expressed optimism about the positive effects of this feminization on roles assigned to men and women (see for example, Claes, 2001 and Rutherford, 2001). We clearly have a long way to go, however, before we can claim that marketing roles no longer reflect gendered biases in our society, and be aware and continually question the engrained gendered prejudices, stereotypes and taken for granted assumptions that would seem to continue to underpin the customer service interactive service

roles. We also need to place these debates in what is an increasingly challenging economic climate in the UK, where even those young people who are able to avail of third level education will probably have to work part time in whatever jobs they can get in order to afford this luxury. Those for whom that privilege is not an option may also find themselves trading in whatever currency they have to offer in order to avail of limited job opportunities in the marketplace.

Times of economic hardship often show a return to traditional values, and retrenchment on the part of organisations. This conservatism does not bode well for any disadvantaged or marginalised members of a society. When power is limited and challenges are great, those with power struggle to maintain the status quo and are risk averse. The death of feminism and the return of sexism is a refrain that is growing, particularly in relation to the entertainments industry. If this is an all-pervasive trend, one might expect it to impact on other industries too, such as marketing, as part of the 'normalisation discourse' previously discussed. And in post-feminist terms, young women recruited into 'feeling bodies' roles may be more than happy to adopt traditional feminine roles, especially in a climate that may conflate sex with female empowerment in society (see the work of McRobbie 2009, Powers 2009 and Walter 2010 for a fuller discussion of these issues).

One way that we might progress (reactivate?) the debate is to examine the social, cultural and material circumstances that enable gendered prejudices to survive, thrive and go unchallenged. We also need to unpack the ways in which these gendered assumptions are enshrined in organizational cultures and marketing strategies. From the evidence assembled here, marketing is far from free of dichotomous thinking in terms of the expectations and experiences of male and female employees in customer service roles in marketing. If we are

indeed returning to a more divisive (and traditional) regime in terms of marketing roles assigned to men and women, we should perhaps actively work towards acquiring a more critical and sensitised approach to all that which we take for granted in marketing roles and marketing practice, and become more aware of the ways and means through which ideologies and material realities interact with institutions and organizations to maintain the status quo.

A number of key research areas emerge as important ones in order to reintroduce a 'trailblazing' element into discussions of the intersection between marketing and gender (Bettany et al 2010, p. 17). Building on important studies carried out in the services industry in the fields of retailing, hospitality and the airline industries, research into the actual experiences of men and women doing marketing work may offer us insights into workplace practices and the ideologies and discourses that underpin them in relation to gender. It would be particularly fruitful to interrogate what is considered 'normal' from a gender perspective in the marketing workplace in relation to specific roles. Research into the career progression of women and men in marketing roles in industry and also in higher education, as well as content analyses and discourse analyses of job vacancy advertisements in the marketing field would also be fruitful areas for research. The advertising industry has been scrutinised in some depth in recent years in relation to the gendered nature of roles, with women predominating in account planning and account management and men predominating in creative roles, the latter of which attracts greater prestige and remuneration. Similar work needs to be done in marketing, to see what progress, if any, has been made since Maclaran, Stevens and Catterall's work in the late 1990s.

We would benefit from similar studies of marketing managers, which may also reveal gender discrepancies and sex-typing, and may also show the 'normalising discourses' that subtly



move us in certain directions in the workplace. The field of marketing communications, particularly visual communication forms such as billboards, posters and print advertisements, etc. also offer a rich arena for research, particularly semiotic analysis. Drawing on the premise that advertisements are significant myth carriers in society (Holt 2004) and thus can reveal much about a society's norms, values and taboos, this is an especially rich vein for research. The current TV advertising campaign for Virgin Atlantic, for example, is an excellent exemplar of a campaign that invokes female 'feeling bodies' in order to materialise the brand.

To conclude, an awareness of gender issues in relation to marketing discourses and marketing practices is not just a managerial issue, nor is it merely an issue for marketing theorists and academic debate. This is an issue that should concern us at an institutional and indeed macro level. As a discipline we need to take more responsibility for how marketing practices are evolving, and adopt a proactive and critical approach to the marketplace and the 'normalising discourses' that proliferate in it, discourses that often serve to uphold and maintain the traditional status quo (and vested interests) in our field.

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