Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality

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ABSTRACT

Interactive service job growth in the UK is significant. Analysis of labour within these services has tended to focus on employee attitudes, framed through emotional labour. Such analysis is not incorrect, just partial. Some employers also demand aesthetic labour, or employees with particular embodied capacities and attributes that appeal to the senses of customers. Reporting survey and focus group data, this article explores aesthetic labour as it is experienced by interactive service employees in the retail and hospitality industries. Issues examined are recruitment and selection; image and appearance; uniforms and dress codes; skills and training. By extending awareness of aesthetic labour so that both employee attitude and appearance are empirically and conceptually revealed, the article extends understanding of the job demands made of employees in interactive services.

KEY WORDS
aesthetic labour / appearance / attitudes / emotional labour / hospitality / retail / students

Introduction

Routine interactive services will provide most job growth in the UK for the foreseeable future (Wilson et al., 2004). Even if the much eulogized but little evidenced knowledge economy materializes, interactive service jobs involving the ‘person-to-person’ or ‘soft skills’ will need to underpin the ‘thinking skills’ jobs
of this new economy (Crouch, 2004). The retail and hospitality industries in particular will provide much of this job growth. This article seeks to examine employee experience of work and employment in these jobs, focusing on ‘aesthetic labour’ involving the attempt by some employers to lever competitive advantage through the use of employee appearance.

The starting point for the research was awareness of a number of job advertisements featuring person specifications, listing necessary attributes such as being ‘well spoken and of smart appearance’, ‘well presented’ or just more bluntly ‘good looking’. From this awareness developed the concept of aesthetic labour, referring to the employment of workers with certain embodied capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers and which are then organizationally mobilized, developed and commodified (Nickson et al., 2001). Aesthetic labour has become translated in the popular press as employment based on ‘looking good’ and/or ‘sounding right’, and ‘lookism’ is even being suggested as the latest form of workplace discrimination (Oaff, 2003).

Most current research examining employee experience of interactive service jobs is concerned with emotional labour (for a review and critique see Bolton, 2005). An emergent concept and a developing area of empirical enquiry, there has been little research of employee experience of aesthetic labour. Reporting findings from a survey and series of focus groups with front-line employees in the retail and hospitality industries this article seeks to identify the extent of aesthetic labour among employees and how this type of labour impacts their jobs. In addressing these research objectives the article seeks to explore and extend current understanding of the nature of interactive service work and employment. The survey was initially intended to provide a cross-check of the veracity of responses in an employer survey on the same topic. This quantitative material is supplemented by qualitative material from a series of focus groups with employees. The article focuses on employees’ reported experiences of the sub-themes of employee recruitment and selection; image and appearance; uniforms and dress codes; skills and training. The article has two main parts. The next section reviews existing literature on interactive service work and employment, and explains aesthetic labour in more detail with regard to jobs in both retail and hospitality. The research methods are then outlined before the reporting of the research findings, with this latter section presented using the sub-themes outlined above. The research suggests that analysis of employee appearance addresses gaps in awareness and understanding in existing empirical research and conceptualization of job requirements in interactive services.

**Interactive services, attitudes, appearance and aesthetic labour**

Service jobs now account for around three-quarters of all jobs in the UK, with retail and hospitality featuring prominently and expected to continue to do so. The retail industry now employs three million workers in the UK. These jobs grew by around 17 percent from 1979 to 2003. Of this workforce, there is a
63/37 percent female/male split, with 54 percent working part-time. A similar pattern exists for the hospitality industry, which employs 1.9m people. Again job growth was good at 7 percent in the five years to 2002. The female/male split is 59/41 percent and part-time employees comprise 54 percent of this workforce (Wilson et al., 2004). Together retail and hospitality account for approximately 16.3 percent of all jobs in the UK.

Such interactive service jobs have grown while manufacturing has shrunk in the UK but it is important to appreciate that a double shift has occurred as services displace manufacturing. The first and most cited shift is the quantitative one: the increase in the number of jobs now provided by services. The second shift and the one focused upon in this article is qualitative: the nature of work and employment changes with service jobs. As with manufacturing, a production process still occurs in service jobs. However, unlike manufacturing, the service production process is simultaneously produced and consumed, employees directly interact with consumers, the ‘service encounter’ between employee and customer is intangible, contingent, spontaneous and variable and, finally, employees are part of the product.

Determining this service encounter can be problematic for employers. In response, employers attempt to mould or recruit the right attitudes among workers, desiring employees with personalities that are typically ‘good-natured, helpful and friendly’ (Fuller and Smith, 1991: 3) and ‘positive, joyful and even playful’ (Burns, 1997: 240). To ensure the ‘right’ personality projection, the service encounter can be systematized with tight rules and regulations that include scripted employee interaction with customers. The aim, as one of Leidner’s (1993) case studies exemplifies, is to engender ‘positive mental attitude’ among employees. Companies can also seek to employ only those workers who already demonstrate the right attitudes (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). With this approach employers attempt to employ the right staff at the point of entry rather than having to train them once employed, and to avoid possibly messy exits for those who are subsequently deemed unsuitable. Interestingly, whereas previously academic concern with employer attempts to prescribe employee attitudes featured in corporate culture research (see for example Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990), it is now subsumed within the dominant emotional labour research agenda as emotions are discovered to be here, there and everywhere (Bolton, 2000). Emotion management skills have then come to be regarded as constituent of the soft skills needed in the service encounter because of the emphasis on social interaction.

However, awareness and understanding of the importance to employers of employee attitudes is only part of current job requirements in interactive services: appearance too is important. Appearance has always featured in employment but, outside the performance industries, its past prescription was rudimentary and often an outcome of adhocery on the part of employers; sometimes apparent but not systematic – an approach replicated by researchers. In their analysis of airline cabin crew appearance for example, Hancock and Tyler (2000: 120) regard the exchange of aesthetics as beyond contract, a ‘somewhat
“invisible” labour process … neither remunerated nor particularly acknowledged as labour by management, clients or even the [flight] attendants themselves. Similar under-analysis is reflected elsewhere. In his classic and prescient *White Collar*, Mills (1956), for example, suggested that a ‘personality market’ exists in retail in which the employer ‘buys the employees’ social personalities’ (p.186) and within which he notes both the attitude and appearance of sales staff feature (p.183), though his discussion thereafter focuses only on employee attitudes. Mills is also indicative of another, more common, assumption about employee appearance – that its use is driven by employees for employees and for personal gain. Thus Gutek’s (1985) benchmark study of sex in the workplace recognizes that workers’ appearance matters, even noting that for some employees appearance can be a requisite of their jobs but discussion thereafter focuses on interactions between employees, with the main focus sexual harassment. Such studies of course are not wrong, just myopic in their analytical framing. Service encounters involve not just social interaction but also sensory engagement, most obviously visually and aurally. The importance of employee appearance for both obtaining and doing jobs as part of employer labour strategies therefore needs to be recognized and researched.

One starting point can be the current preoccupation with emotional labour. There are clearly overlaps between attitudes and appearance, with the body as the manifestation of feelings, acted or otherwise, and this embodiment is continually evoked in the emotional labour literature. Hochschild’s (1983: 7) definition of emotional labour as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ exemplifies this point. Indeed facial and bodily displays are crucial elements of the performance of emotional labour as Hochschild exemplifies in her discussion of the ‘war of smiles’ (1983: 127). The smile is the physical embodiment of certain real or affected feelings. One is the display of the other, an extension. The problem, as Witz et al. (2003) point out, is that this embodiment is empirically and conceptually retired in subsequent analysis, even that of Hochschild; because they are a feature of employer labour demands, these bodily expressions should be analytically foregrounded.

These demands are most obvious during recruitment and selection. In an analysis of sales and personal services job advertisements, Jackson et al. (2005) point out that the skills stated as necessary by employers are ‘social skills’ and ‘personal characteristics’. Likewise, an examination of nearly 100 human resource professionals in the USA responsible for hiring entry-level hospitality industry employees revealed that the top two criteria were ‘pride in appearance’ and ‘good attitude’ (Martin and Grove, 2002) – criteria common too for the industry in the UK (Hospitality Training Foundation, 2001).

This awareness needs to be extended to encompass not only what employers demand of potential employees at the point of job entry but also what is expected of these workers to do the work for which they are employed. In the previously mentioned employer survey reported by Nickson et al. (2005) employers were interested in the attitudes and appearance of employees. Sixty-five percent
suggested that the right personality was critical in selecting customer-facing staff, with almost all of the remainder suggesting personality to be important. Thirty-three percent also stated that the right appearance was critical and 57 percent saw it as important. Only one respondent thought that qualifications were critical, and only 19 percent thought qualifications even important. Significantly, employee appearance and its aesthetic appeal was regarded an important part of companies’ branding and competitive strategies. Asked to assess the centrality of employee appearance to business success, 53 percent of employers described it as critical and 40 percent as important. There was also extensive evidence of attempts to continue to mould employee appearance in support of the corporate image through, for example, uniforms and dress codes. Eighty percent of the organizations surveyed operated a uniform policy, primarily for the purposes of maintaining a corporate image. Ninety percent of employers also operated an employee dress code for the same reason. Thus while debate continues about whether or nor attitude and appearance constitute skills, and how and if they can be trained (see Grugulis et al., 2004), there can be little doubt that they are important to employers and they are being configured as the skills that matter to these employers. What is new is the need for the conceptualization of soft skills to be widened to include not just the social but also the aesthetic: attitudes and appearance respectively.

Aesthetic labour is the employment of workers with desired corporeal dispositions. With this labour, employers intentionally use the embodied attributes and capacities of employees as a source of competitive advantage. These dispositions are, to an extent, possessed by workers at the point of entry to employment. However, and importantly, employers then mobilize, develop and commodify these dispositions through processes of recruitment, selection, training, monitoring, discipline and reward, reconfiguring them as ‘skills’ intended to produce a ‘style’ of service encounter that appeals to the senses of customers, most usually visually or aurally. In other words, employee corporeality is appropriated, transmuted and then managed by employers for commercial benefit (or at least employers attempt to do so). Commercial benefit arises because in aesthetic labouring employees contribute to the production and portrayal of a distinct and defined corporate image or, more prosaically, are simply (perceived by employers to be) attractive to customers and so likely to enhance initial and repeat custom. Valorizing embodiment, aesthetic labour is therefore not beyond contract but a key feature of it for employers.

Pilot research reported by Nickson et al. (2001) focused on what was termed the ‘style labour market’ around the ‘high end’ services of designer retailers, boutique hotels and style bars, cafes and restaurants. However, in the course of the study it became apparent that the perceived success of these companies was creating ‘demonstration effects’ for other, more prosaic, high-street retailers and hospitality outlets. These companies too were attempting to use employee corporeality for its appeal to customers, albeit less systematically developed, perhaps focusing on recruiting rather than training the right appearance or having different ‘looks’ related to differentiated corporate product market
strategies that have complementary and likewise varied labour strategies. This latter distinction is one that is developed in Pettinger’s (2004) work in the retail industry and which subsequently distinguished aesthetic labour and aestheticized labour. This approach informed the employer survey administered to all hospitality and retail organizations in particular districts of Glasgow, regardless of market segment. Limited by participation observation, Pettinger’s research involved analysis of employee experience of aesthetic labour in a small number of case studies. Nickson et al. (2005) reported the extent of demand among employers for aesthetic labour. What has yet to be researched is the wider extent and experience of aesthetic labour among employees and how this aesthetic labour affects their work and employment. This article addresses this gap.

The research project and methods

Part-funded by the Scottish Executive and SKOPE, a survey was conducted across the retail and hospitality industries of Glasgow over the winter of 2002–3 to assess the importance and extent of soft skills demand by employers, focusing on recruitment, selection, skills requirements and training provision. This survey was cross-referenced with a similar survey of employees. The surveys encompassed the retail and hospitality industries as a whole, regardless of company product and labour market strategies. The full findings from the employer survey are reported in Nickson et al. (2005).

Employee experience was initially sought to provide data triangulation to the employer survey. As with the employer survey, a questionnaire was developed and piloted in conjunction with human resource practitioners, a government research unit, trade unions and employees. Examining current and future supply and demand, the focus of the questionnaire was recruitment, selection, employee appearance, skills and training. The findings reported here are predominantly drawn from the employee responses, though some reference is made to the employer survey. In addition to the questionnaire, in order to explore employee experience in more depth, qualitative data was also generated with a series of focus groups with employees conducted in 2004. There were five focus groups. For three, participants were divided into industry sub-groups of retail, bars and restaurants. The other two focus groups included a mixture of employees from retail, hotels, bars and restaurants.

With the main research sponsor requiring the quantitative fieldwork research to be completed by early 2003, students were selected as respondents because they offered an easily accessible segment of the labour market. However, students are now also a structural feature, and even indicative, of the retail and hospitality workforce generally (Curtis and Lucas, 2001). In the UK, Curtis and Lucas note how over one million students were active in the labour market in 2000, with projections of a further 156,000 entering the labour market by 2011. These figures represent a significant growth of student employment over a relatively short
period. There are obvious reasons why more students in the UK are now working – to service tuition and living costs (Canny, 2002). Equally though, there is a ‘coincidence of needs’, with employers keen to use student labour because it is relatively cheap, flexible and perceived to be of good quality (Curtis and Lucas, 2001).

Students at three Glasgow-based universities were surveyed. The sample included a mix of social science, business and hospitality undergraduate students. The students were informed about the research and only those students who worked or had worked in retail and/or hospitality completed the questionnaire. Across the three universities, 324 questionnaires were distributed and 207 were completed giving a response rate of 64 percent. Of the 207 responses to the questionnaire, 67 percent were female and 33 percent male – a split similar to that for these industries generally (Wilson et al., 2004). The majority of respondents had worked or were working in retail (61%) and the rest in hospitality (hotels 11%, bars 14%, restaurants 14%). The largest number had worked with their employers for less than one year (39%), 23 percent had worked for at least two years with the same employer and 4 percent five or more years. Seventy-three percent of respondents worked between two and three days a week. A high percentage, 79 percent, worked both during and outwith term-time. Selected to explore the survey results in more detail, the focus groups involved 22 male and female business and hospitality undergraduate students at one of the universities. Again participants were working or had worked in the retail or hospitality industries. All references to the companies for which these employees worked have been anonymized, as have the employees themselves.

Research findings

This section presents data from the employee survey, supplemented by data from the employer survey, and complemented by data from the focus groups with employees. It explores employee experiences of recruitment and selection; image and appearance; uniforms and dress codes; skills and training. All data refers to either employees’ current job or their most recent job within the retail and hospitality industries.

Recruitment

Studies report high levels of informality in recruitment and selection, including word of mouth, referrals and casual callers for interactive service jobs (see, for example, Lockyer and Scholarios, 2005). Such recruitment and selection prioritizes employees’ social and aesthetic skills, that is, employees’ deployed attitudes and appearance. This point was reflected in both the employee and employer surveys reported here. Although formal methods of recruitment were used, such as advertisements in the local press and job centres, the most popular method of finding a job for employees was word of mouth (65%). This informality was also apparent among employers, with almost half (49%) favouring speculative calls
and letters from potential applicants. The majority of focus group participants too noted how they gained employment by informal means:

At the Lock Up [a local nightclub] it was purely by chance. I went there with a friend of mine to retrieve her jacket she left the night before and I just mentioned to the guy is there any spare jobs going and he said ‘Yeah, sure’.

Another noted, ‘I just walked in [a bar] and asked them if they were looking for staff and then they asked for my CV and I had one with me and I got started the following day.’ By presenting themselves in person potential employees are ‘selling their wares’ (Lucas and Ralston, 1997) and doing so enables employers to screen for aesthetic attributes and capacities. This aspect of employer screening, and screening for fit with the company’s demands, was highlighted by one employee’s experience of the recruitment process in her organization:

If people were coming in to the shop and just asking off hand if there are any jobs available the manager would sort of screen at the first take and then go back and consult with other people: ‘Do you think she is Bolero enough?’

Likewise with another high-street clothing retailer, ‘when people came in … we have to get a manager to screen them to see if they’re suitable and … everyone has to be “Snaptastic”’, referring to ‘model employee’ attitudes and appearance requirements expected by the company.

Selection

In interactive service work the producer is part of the product. Employers seek employees with personal characteristics likely to make them act spontaneously and perform effectively and which, as this article highlights, are commensurate with the company’s image. Soft skills, encompassing the social and aesthetic, are more important selection criteria than technical skills for employers (Nickson et al., 2005). To discern the required characteristics and attributes most surveyed employers relied on the so-called ‘classic trio’ of application forms and/or CVs, interviews and references. The interview remains a popular method with managers and applicants alike (87% of respondents from both surveys used or had interviews) because it is simple, quick and cheap – despite reliability concerns. It also fulfils a filtering function, enabling the applicants’ social and aesthetic attributes and capacities, which are integral to front-line service work, to be directly assessed. While some focus group participants reported relatively searching, often competency-based interviews, a larger number indicated their experience of interviews equated to little more than an informal ‘chat’.

One focus group participant recalled an interview lasting less than five minutes for a job in a fast food shop, while another noted how for a bar job ‘… it wasn’t really an interview, it was basically him telling me about Bar Sushi in five minutes’. Similar experiences were also apparent in the retail sector: ‘I didn’t really get an interview at all … the woman in charge asked me to come in to the shop and went “So are you available?”’
One of the more noticeable differences between the employer and employee responses concerned the use of photographs as part of the selection process. Twenty-three percent of employees stated that they had been asked to provide a photograph; however, only 3 percent of employers stated that photographs were requested. This low employer figure may reflect recognition by employers of the discriminatory implications of such requests – a point that the UK Employment Service has made in its advice to employers to desist from using photographs as a selection tool.

The employee survey also asked respondents whether they had encountered an emphasis on appearance at the selection stage. Eighty-nine percent stated that employers always emphasized appearance during the selection process. Additionally, 86 percent of the employee respondents noted how employers referred to the requirement of a dress code. The importance of appearance and dress codes in the selection process was also raised in the focus groups:

They said that I had to look right, when you turn up make sure you’re smartly dressed and then I turned up [for an interview] and he was like ‘Oh you’re dressed quite well.’ And he says, I think I had a chain on my arm and a wee kind of bracelet thing and he said ‘You’ll have to lose that if you’re working here and there’s no earrings or anything like that as well.’

**Image and appearance**

As noted earlier, it is increasingly recognized that attempts to determine employee attitudes and appearance are regarded as legitimate managerial interventions for companies aiming to provide the desired service encounter. Employer responses to the question about the importance of the appearance of front-line staff to the overall success of a business were noted earlier. Employees too recognized the commercial utility of having well presented employees. Eighty-five percent of employees and 93 percent of employers regarded the image of customer-facing staff as at least important. A number of focus group participants picked up on this issue. One participant suggested that ‘You want someone that’s clean and presentable and tidy looking.’ Another made a point about not just being presentable but having ‘style’, noting the need to ‘mak[e] the effort to put yourself together in a decent way because you know there is certain people who just don’t have that … [pause and laughs] just don’t know what to wear and when to wear it.’ In recognizing the need for congruence between company image and employee appearance it was suggested that ‘… you can’t have someone who has got dyed pink hair and a wee miniskirt [in a family pub]. You have to be kind of in keeping with the image of the company.’

As well as attempting to ensure the ‘right’ appearance, there was also evidence of more pernicious prescriptions based on what is identifiably ‘lookism’: employment discrimination centred on employee appearance (Oaff, 2003). A number of focus group participants recalled selection procedures that were overtly based on judging both men and women by their looks, though seemingly more so for women. One female respondent noted of her employer, ‘You had to be a Sin
girl. ... You had to be good looking and when good looking girls handed in their CV the male manager was like “Yeah, we’ll hire you because you are so good looking.” Nevertheless, another noted that the men in her high-street retail outlet were ‘really styled’ and that, in terms of male looks too, the employer had ‘a typical person that they want to work there’. ‘I wouldn’t personally say there wasn’t anyone in there who wasn’t in some way pretty or good looking’ recalled another participant who worked in a style bar. Comparing this bar to a more prosaic chain of pubs she further suggested, ‘If you go in there it’s not ugly people at all, don’t get me wrong, but it’s a very different style [in the pubs] and not very well groomed.’ Much of this discussion would arguably reflect the distinction noted earlier between aesthetic labour and aestheticized labour.

**Uniforms and dress codes**

In discussing the importance of ‘packaging the service provider’ (Solomon, 1985) it is clear that organizations are increasingly taking an interest in further refining corporate image through uniforms and dress codes for employees. A survey by Industrial Relations Services (2003) of 85 organizations across a variety of sectors found that 63 of these organizations were operating a formal policy on uniforms and dress codes. The vast majority of these organizations introduced these policies to maintain a corporate image. A question in the employee survey reported in this article elicited a similar response, with 84 percent being required to wear a uniform, primarily for the purposes of maintaining a corporate image. If companies are willing to spend money on uniforms to project a positive brand image to customers then they are equally keen to ensure that the overall ‘look’ is not undermined by other aspects of employee appearance. Here the survey respondents, both employees and employers, reported a number of ways in which aspects of personal appearance are circumscribed by dress codes and appearance standards: tidiness and personal hygiene (employers 99%, employees 76%), clothing style (employers 74%, employees 72%), jewellery (employers 66%, employees 62%), make-up and/or personal grooming (employers 63%, employees 45%) and hair style and length (employers 45%, employees 43%). In addition, a third of employees (34%) and employers (31%) noted that visible tattoos were not permitted in their organizations.

Clearly employee appearance matters and employers are concerned not only with recruiting employees with the ‘right’ appearance but also then further developing this appearance through the use of uniforms and dress codes, with many employers often strictly enforcing grooming standards. One focus group participant, working at a major sports event, recalled an incident in which employees were lined up to be checked by a supervisor before they could start serving customers in the food court outlets:

We had to go through a grooming check before we went to work. They checked your shoes, they checked your hair, it had to be tied back with a dark hair bobble and boys were sent away with disposable razors before they were allowed to go to work ... one guy ... got sent back because he didn’t pass the grooming check.
Interestingly, and mirroring the findings reported in Nickson et al. (2001), a number of focus group participants were happy to support these prescriptions: ‘I think it looks good when you come in somewhere that everyone wears more or less the same uniform.’ Much of this discussion reiterates the importance of company image and staff being used to portray that image, with the link between labour and product market strategies recognized by employees: ‘It is kind of understandable that they want you to wear Creek jeans because you’re promoting their own product.’

Nevertheless, uniform and dress code prescriptions could also impact negatively on employees and even potential employees. One employee working for a designer clothing retailer tried to get her best friend a job and was told that her friend wore too much make-up so would not be considered for a job. The focus group participant who had recalled being lined up for a ‘grooming check’ recognized that ‘I’d have been devastated if I’d been turned away, imagine failing a grooming check.’ Another participant noted how:

... there is one guy in the place where I worked, he had a piercing in his lip and his eyebrow and he had a few piercings in his ears as well and they didn’t really tell him to take them out but he was just shunted from doing bar work to kind of doing kitchen porter work ... so people wouldn’t really see him out front ... he wasn’t happy and left after that.

Similarly, another employee remembered how a colleague ‘was told to wear long sleeved shirts to cover up his tattoos because it didn’t portray the right image’. Prescriptions could also extend to managers; one focus group participant explained how an assistant manager ‘was told on numerous occasions to wear make-up ... she says “I don’t like wearing it” and the manager was like “No, you have to portray that image with you being the assistant manager in authority.”’ Indeed, 82 percent of employees in the survey stated that dress codes were rigidly applied to all staff and 68 percent said that they would be disciplined for not conforming to the company dress code, including the ultimate sanction of being dismissed for repeated infringements: ‘They had one girl in the restaurant and she came in with sort of highlighted strips [in her hair]. There wasn’t anything wrong with it but she was told to get it changed or lose her job basically.’ Other examples of dress codes being enforced punitively included employees being sent home to wash, to change clothes or appearance and not being paid for the loss of hours; tips being withheld; facing disciplinary procedures such as receiving verbal and written warnings; and not being allowed to work. One focus group participant who worked in the hospitality services at a prominent golf course recalled how, before a major golf championship, one of her colleagues was told to take a week’s holiday ‘because they didn’t think she was what they were looking for for such a prestigious event’.

Skills and training

With respect to training it is worth recalling that the skills that matter to employers among their front-line staff during recruitment and selection are the
right attitude and appearance (Nickson et al., 2005). Consequently, for much retail and hospitality work, ‘hard’, technical skills are likely to be much less important than soft skills. Intended to be recruited rather than trained, these soft skills then require less need for training than hard skills so that the latter are more likely to be trained among those workers employed.

The employee survey findings confirmed this pattern, highlighting training in both technical and soft skills, with training more prevalent in the former rather than the latter. Eighty-one percent of employees had received training in company systems and equipment and 77 percent in product knowledge. It should be noted however that in the retail and hospitality industries the acquisition of such technical skills does not equate with successful completion of an apprenticeship that involves formalized training through which physical dexterity and technical ‘know how’ are mobilized and certified. Instead what is offered is perfunctory training in product knowledge and limited technology usage. This point was exemplified by one employee when she commented, ‘I’d never worked in retail before in my life and they threw me in at the deep end and I just got on with it, but when we got a new manager ... she gave out sheets about brands and all that and we had one till-training session.’ Another focus group participant describing bar work noted, ‘I don’t think that there are many technical skills you can have, it’s more about being a kind of people person and your attitude and things ... because it’s not difficult to pour a pint.’ Moreover respondents were aware that it was easier to train technical rather than soft skills: ‘I think it’s probably easier to employ someone that has a good personality and teach them how to work the till than someone who has already experience of a till but is really shy or something.’

Nevertheless some soft skills training was evident with over half of the employees reporting having received training in social skills. Thirty-nine percent had received some appearance-related training. Arguably, the ability of organizations to filter out applicants considered inappropriate for front-line service work during recruitment and selection means that there is less need for this training. For those employees who had received appearance-related training 62 percent had training in dress sense and style, 60 percent in body language and nearly a third in make-up and grooming (29%). Often training in what to say would be linked to broader customer care strategies. One focus group participant working for one high-street clothes retailer described a training video which aimed to create an ‘I can’ culture among front-line staff:

We’ve got this thing now, it’s like the training is ‘I can’, you’re never to say ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ It’s always ‘I can get that for you’, ‘I can help you in the fitting room’ ... that was a video for like an hour on this.

Several other participants noted similar training emphases, including explicit scripting on what to say to retail customers for example. Suggesting helpfulness, such phrasing is prescribed because it is more appealing to customers than negative statements. It should be noted however that while any number of words can be deemed as affirming by customers, some words can
have more appeal than others. In Nickson et al. (2001), designer retail employees interacting with customers were exhorted by their managers to use some words rather than others because these particular words appealed more to those customers: the superior-sounding ‘exquisite’ rather than the more prosaic ‘lovely’ for example when these employees were called upon to comment on clothes being tried on by customers. In Bragg’s (2003: 59) biography of the English language, he outlines the way that ‘class is buried in language’, with words of particular origin having ‘a touch more cultural clout’, denoting and enforcing hierarchy. One example is the way that French words, drawn from Latin, came to be associated with the ruling class. In this respect, returning to the retail example, ‘exquisite’ has Latin origins and ‘lovely’ is Old English.

Less prevalent, though still very significant in some cases, for example with dress sense and style and body language, was the overt emphasis on developing employee corporeal aesthetic capacities and attributes. One participant recalled training intended to encourage ‘heads up’, wherein ‘whatever you’re doing you’re always to have your head up so that customers are aware of you’. It is interesting too that respondents stated that 16 percent of organizations also attempted to mould the voice and accent of employees. On the one hand, compared to other training, this figure is low (though still remarkable). On the other hand, it resonates with the point made earlier that employers filter in employees with the required aesthetic capacities and attributes and that the type of worker employed is more likely to already possess the right voice and accent, in this case. Conversely and linking back to the point about recruitment and selection or training for the service encounter, Bain (2001) has noted the attempt by some call centre employers in the US to ‘train out’ certain accents deemed undesirable in agents.7

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to expand understanding of work and employment in interactive services. Such jobs comprise a significant proportion of all jobs in the UK and the number is forecast to continue growing. The article has recognized that much research into these jobs already exists but notes that current analyses are partial, myopically focused on employer attempts to recruit or mould the right attitudes among workers – and most usually framed through the concept of emotional labour – in order to affect the desired service encounter. There has been some research that indicates employer concern in interactive services with workers’ appearance. Consequently, the article has argued that what is required is more expansive conceptualization of the work and employment of these jobs that incorporates aesthetic labour into the analysis. Employers seek embodied capacities and attributes from potential employees and also seek to mobilize, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through these employees’ subsequent work in order to aesthetically appeal to customers. In this respect, what comprises soft skills also needs to be broadened to include not just employee attitudes but also their appearance.
The conceptual links between emotional and aesthetic labour have been made in Witz et al. (2003) and this article provides empirical support for those linkages. Drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative data, it has reported research on employees’ experience of aesthetic labour in the interactive services of retail and hospitality demonstrating that employee appearance is an integral part of that work and employment; though there are indications that the demand for and use of aesthetic labour is more widespread, for example with voice and accent in call centres. As such the research provides an important complement to Nickson et al.’s (2005) analysis of employer demand for aesthetic labour. This data triangulation indicates the need to appreciate and analyse both employee attitudes and appearance as features of these jobs, and signals the need to extend the analytical framework from emotional labour to aesthetic labour. It is also important to recognize that, as with emotional labour, this research has highlighted that aesthetic labour can be and is performed by both male and female workers. Similarly, and contra Hancock and Tyler (2000), aesthetic labour valorizes embodiment, and so need not be conceptualized as an exchange of labour beyond contract. Indeed, the commodification of worker aesthetic capacities and attributes is now emerging as a focus of research (see for example Wright, 2005).

In using worker aesthetics, employers are seeking to create congruence (or fit) between employee appearance and corporate image, and only those workers with the right appearance are employed. This labour market bounding has a new exclusionary potential, with ‘lookism’ or discrimination based on appearance a distinct possibility. Such labour market discrimination is legitimized by companies in the UK having a right to determine employee appearance if a business case for this appearance is made (Hay and Middlemiss, 2003). Employees in the research appeared to accept this business case though they noted its negative consequences for workers who are excluded. The research revealed that some training in employee appearance is provided by companies though companies are keener to recruit than train the right appearance. This finding echoes similar research in relation to attitudes (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Prior skill formation and the possibility of this formation having discriminatory outcomes then become consequential issues for both attitudes and appearance. Notwithstanding debates about whether attitudes and appearance are skills, there is recognition that ways of being can be trained through familial socialization to become ‘internalized as a second nature’. These ‘conditionings’, manifest through manner of speech, body language and dress for example, produce habitus or ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53 and 56). These habitus are not only socially constructed, but socially differentiated and differentiating, denoting a class. Thus manner of speech, body language and dress vary according to class. Consequently, not only is the negative consequence of aesthetic labour in terms of labour market access an issue but also the (re-)location of skill formation.

In this respect Canny’s (2002) point about the ‘student effect’ on work and employment should be a point of departure for future research. The
research reported here used students as respondents because they are an accessible, integral part of interactive service labour markets. Still typically middle class by background in the UK (HESA, 2006), students are popular with retail and hospitality employers because they are considered to be good-quality labour – articulate and possessing good customer care skills (Curtis and Lucas, 2001). Recast, these employer skill demands, as features of appropriate emotional and aesthetic labour, are those argued to be associated with ‘middle-classness’ (see respectively Hochschild, 1983, and Nickson and Warhurst, 2007) and might explain the employee acceptance of aesthetic labour reported in this research. A coincidence of needs between employers and students in terms of labour demand and supply then creates the potential for students to displace other types of workers from jobs such as retail and hospitality. For obvious reasons the skills that matter can be lacking in other groups in the labour market, such as the long-term unemployed and lone parents (Nickson et al., 2004) for whom such jobs are the UK government’s target (Bunt et al., 2005). Certainly in the Netherlands, research by Hofman and Steijn (2003) found a substantial displacement of lower-skilled job seekers by students in the retail and hospitality industries in particular. It would seem reasonable to suppose that a similar displacement potential is likely within the UK as employers emphasize employee attitudes and appearance as the necessary soft skills within these industries. It is unsurprising therefore that, concerned with creating employability, the familial location of skills formation is becoming a concern of policy discussions in the UK and US. In these discussions the children of families disadvantaged in the labour market – the long-term unemployed and lone parents – are cast as having soft skills deficits arising from their (lack of or, at best, particular) socialization and so justifying state-led early childhood interventions (see for example McLaren, 2005; Karoly et al., 2005).

Understanding and research of retail and hospitality jobs, as well as jobs generally in interactive services, thus requires a wider analytical framework that encompasses both emotional and aesthetic labour. The importance of attitude is already accepted within academic analysis; appearance is only now becoming so. Both feature in labour demand and supply, and reveal much about the nature of these types of jobs both in terms of labour market and labour process developments and issues.

Notes

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2 The scope for reporting the research was much longer however, into 2004.
3 A high-street footwear retailer.
4 A play on this high-street clothing retailer’s name.
5 A high-street clothing retailer.
6 A high-street clothing retailer.
7 The importance to employers of voice and accent and their use by employees as a form of resistance are under-analysed in call centre research. Some indication is apparent though unexplored in Taylor (1998).

References


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