

# ‘Knows how to please a man’: studying customers to understand service work

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## Abstract

This paper argues that sociologists interested in service work in consumer culture should pay attention to customers’ understandings and accounts of their experience and participation in service encounters. It takes the market for sex as a case study and counters the neglect of customers within the study of service work by analysing customer service reviews of paid-for sex published on a UK website, Punternet. It argues that male customers, familiar with the norms of consumer culture, assess the erotic, aesthetic and emotional labours performed by female workers to make judgements of service quality which suggests that the feminised ‘good worker’ is defined as professional when they disguise the market transaction.

## Introduction

Research into service work has a curious blind spot. It rarely notices customers’ accounts of service encounters. Yet a customer’s embodied presence and interaction with service providers impacts profoundly on organisations, market exchanges and work. This paper will consider what studying customers can tell us about contemporary service work. Because service work in consumer culture exists to facilitate the processes and practices of consumption, we must listen to the customer who engages in these consumption practices. We can then see what demands a customer places on workers, understand where ‘his’ expectations come from and how ‘his’ judgements of good and bad service are produced in order to make sense of contemporary service work. I refer to the customer as ‘he’ because in the commercial sex studied here, although not more generally, the customer is male and the worker female, and these gender relations are significant to the readings made by customers. I argue that customers’ accounts of purchasing sexual services draw on ideas of masculinity and customer sovereignty to make sense of commercial sex encounters. I use customer (‘punter’) accounts of purchasing sexual services, as reported on the website ‘Punternet’ (<http://www.punternet.com>), to argue that customers expect a worker who engages in consumption practices and is familiar with norms of heterosexual femininity and so delivers an authentic

and professional self. Such a 'work self' pleases customers by occluding the market transaction. The paper begins with a discussion of service work in consumer culture to show why we should consider customers to understand service work. I then move on to explaining the case study and methodology. The paper then discusses Punternet authors' readings of erotic, aesthetic and emotional labour in order to show how good (and bad) service is understood in a market structured by gender and sexuality, and hence to see the role played by the customer in judging and constituting the service encounter.

### **'Work in consumer culture'**

Consumer culture is a defining feature of late modernity (Bauman, 2005; Ransome, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007). It is argued that consumption fulfils individual's desires and expectations and has supplanted work as the central mechanism through which social integration is created (Ransome, 2005). Whilst Ransome recognises how consumption and production cannot be fully imagined as separate, he pays little attention to the production of consumption through service work. This paper takes the position that service work makes a consumer culture possible. Acknowledging consumer culture need not entail rejecting the continuing significance of work; rather it places the question 'what is work like in consumer culture?' at the heart of service work research. If those researching work are to defend the importance of studying work, and especially of contextualising work within the frame of other social relations (Parry *et al.*, 2005), then we must take consumer culture, and consumption seriously. This means engaging with consumption at three levels: grand narrative claims about consumer culture, empirical investigations into how the alleged dominance of consumption is played out in everyday life, and consideration of the behaviour, experience and attitudes of customers in service encounters. To talk of consumption and consumers is not to celebrate it. Perhaps memories of the rather naive postmodernism which saw consumption as liberating (eg Firat and Dholakia, 1998), have coloured the view held by some researchers in the field of work as to what the sociology of consumption can offer, but celebratory visions of consumer culture are not the only possible stories. This paper demonstrates the benefits of considering customers' understandings of service encounters in the case of commercial sex, and makes some suggestions as to the wider applicability of this case.

In a consumer culture, Livingston suggests, the social relations of work play a changed role in regulating wider social relations, as subjectivity itself is commodified as labour. Value is not determined by labour time in production but by 'varieties of subject positions from which goods can be appreciated' (1998: 416), including beauty, cleanliness, sincerity and autonomy. Service work research tends to see such features as products of managerial demands, distant from (although implicitly related to) an aestheticised and commodified consumer culture (eg McDowell, 2007; Taylor and Tyler, 2000). Yet, as consumer

culture is peopled by consumers and workers (and structured by organisations), there is a need to explore the intersections, even ‘unity’ (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 21) between work and consumption in order to map and understand work, consumption and what happens when workers and customers interact. Livingston suggests that sexual difference as a condition of selfhood is a central part of consumer culture (1998: 425), and ‘the male subject typically defined himself by dissociation from the visible, by equating women with what is seen, what is supervised, by man’ (1998: 422). Further, women are implicitly equated with the material, the bodily and the biological. Livingston suggests women’s entry into the public world as consumers is significant in the production of consumer culture, but in the case here women are significant as workers and men as consumers. The subject positions from which goods are appreciated are thereby constituted by gender. The female sex worker is a ‘good’ viewed and appreciated (or not) by the consuming man for her bodily performance of the attributes of consumer culture: beauty, cleanliness, sincerity and autonomy. How customers operate and construct themselves and others within consumer culture is underdeveloped in service work research, and is here explored through consideration of the gendered exchange.

## **Service work**

Although service work is directed at the demanding, paying stranger, the customer’s presence is rarely acknowledged (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005). The study of front-line service work has been dominated by ‘emotional labour’. Since the paradigmatic work of Hochschild (1983), research has developed the concept of emotional labour and explored its prevalence in a range of locations (see Lewis and Simpson (2007) for selected recent work). Service work research has also considered the embodied form of the service worker and its role in the service encounter (Wolkowitz, 2006; Witz *et al.*, 2003; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). Whilst there remain some omissions (for example, comparisons between occupations are rare) there is a comprehensive, sometimes repetitive, body of literature on service work. This literature recognises that service occupations, characterised by interaction between workers and customers, demand emotional and aesthetic labour. However, there is little research which asks about customers’ experiences, which reflects on how different services are distinguished (or not) by the manner of their *consumption*, not production (Gershuny and Miles, 1983: 11–15), and which considers the implications of this for the nature and meaning of service work. Who the customer is, what they count as good service, and how they see the encounter matters to the qualification of value in consumer culture.

Korczynski’s (2005) theorisation of the moments of exchange as an ‘enchantment’ of the customer is intended to compensate for the neglect of customers. He suggests there are two dimensions to interactions between workers (as organisational representatives) and customers at the point of

sale: the 'rational' transfer of information and building of trust, and the 'irrational' enchantment of the customer; I suggest this separation is unsustainable as information might well be part of enchantment. Management and sales workers promote the consumption of an 'enchancing myth of customer sovereignty' (2005: 74) where customers feel as if they are in charge but sales workers exert influence. Sovereignty is performed, yet illusory. A problem with the notion of enchantment is its implicit conceptualisation of the customer. Whilst Korczynski says that 'enchantment cannot work with a passive audience' (2005: 81) the nature of customers' agency is neglected: how are they complicit in their own enchantment? What desires, knowledges and behaviours do they bring? Korczynski only partially engages with the customer; the argument in this paper is that customers make sense of their own consumption behaviour and present strong ideas about what makes good service in the reviews they write, drawing on their self-understandings as (in this case) male customers.

Business and management research pays more attention to the customer, via customer relationship marketing, market research and so on (see Sturdy (1998) and Rosenthal and Peccei (2007) for overviews). This research aims to manage customers more effectively and looks at how organisations seek to shape customers. It tends not to recognise customers' own management of service encounters. Another exception to the neglect of customers are post-structuralist explorations of customer service discourses (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2001; Du Gay, 1996), where the 'sovereign customer' is central to self-identity in consumer culture. Such conceptualisations of 'the customer' (certainly present in the accounts discussed here) need supporting with research into the embodied customer to see how it is that,

the . . . emotions of the actor-consumer take shape through certain specific forms of expression and manners that are mediated, and thus partly shaped, by the contexts of consumption and their ways of metabolizing material culture and the various discourses about the consumer as a social type (Sassatelli, 2007: 108).

To address how customers understand their role in co-producing the service encounter, we must recognise that consumers are embodied subjects situated in time and space, engaging in social action in ways that harness the emotional, corporeal, cognitive and discursive. To understand the practices of customers we must also see those of workers, and vice versa.

Practices of customers and workers are embodied, drawing on a corporeality conditioned through consumer culture (Pettinger, 2008) so that service work in consumer culture is commodified as an encounter between gendered, classed, aged and racialised bodies (Wolkowitz, 2006). This paper uses sex work as an example of service work, and buyers of commercial sexual services as examples of customers. This is a controversial choice, and the parallels with other forms of service work are not absolute.

## **Sex work and sex customers**

The field of sex work is dominated by efforts to understand gender relations and the experience of prostitution (eg Davidson, 1998; Sanders, 2005a; an extensive discussion is beyond the scope of this paper). I conceive of sex work as embodied personal service work, entailing work on and with bodies to provide personalised sexual services. Examining customers' engagement with sex workers reveals some of what customers expect from this service, and, I shall argue, from service workers more generally. In this section I discuss the extent to which sex work is comparable to service work in terms of its corporeality, its modes of organisation and its modes of regulation, arguing that the congruity of gendered 'body work' and service consumption justify the comparison, despite notable differences. In making the comparison, the paper aims to speak to a service work literature which overgeneralises from studies of a narrow range of occupations and a sex work literature which stresses its difference.

Extensive consideration of the nature of commercial sex has not resolved the question of its specificity. Whilst some sex workers speak strongly of their belief that their work is 'work' (not sex) (Day, 2007: 35), sex work is distinctive for Day, because of how the worker is commodified, objectified and othered:

professionals in sex, prostitutes are nonetheless unlike all other professionals for they are still viewed as objects, be these public utilities or luxury goods (Day, 2007: 124).

Wolkowitz's (2006) thematic discussion of body work can be read as suggesting care is needed when making claims over the distinctive corporeality of sex work, given the way other occupations involve body work. Sex work, like some other service work, involves workers' bodies becoming engaged and entangled with the bodies of customers. The sexualisation of the service worker, whether model (Entwistle and Wissenger, 2006), waitress (Boyle, 2007), lap-dancer (Egan, 2006) or prostitute implies that the process of marking out sex work from other occupations is complex.

Service work is distinguished by the way it involves the body of the worker as a commodity in the labour market and consumer market. To paraphrase Hochschild (1983: 5), the corporeal style of offering service is part of the service itself – from the voice of the call centre worker to the flight attendant's smile and the warmed hands of the masseur. In sex work, the worker's body is (often) more fully engaged: the body is commodified as desirable, and the sex worker works on the body of the customer with *more* of their own bodies than in other service/body work occupations. Something 'private' is consumed, the body's intimate spaces, and this is significant to how sex work is rendered ideologically distinct from other forms of service work. Though all service work involves corporeal commodification, sex work is the normative outsider

because sex is damaged when it is marketised (Zelizer, 2005). The claim here is not that there is moral equivalence between sex work and other occupations (that would be a different discussion). It is that the contentious moral standing of sex work should not prevent comparison between sex work and other forms of body work.

The ideological and socio-political contexts of commercial sex problematise the comparison between sex work and other service work. The complex legal status of prostitution in different places, and the contentious discussions to change regulatory structures are not echoed in other discussions of service work. And whilst beauty therapy and hairdressing (Cohen, 2010) may be organised in similar ways to sex work (multiple small organisations, flexible and contingent employment relations, dominance of self-employment), relations of power and legality in the different fields are complex (O'Connell Davison, 1998; West and Austrin, 2005).

Agustín (2005) argues that more attention should be paid to the cultural milieu of commercial sex, arguing that an excessive focus on questions of gendered power relations limits understanding. This paper engages with Agustín's call by locating commercial sex within consumer culture, whilst retaining a focus on gendered power relations, reframed as part of a gendered and sexualised consumer culture. Discussions of 'sex work', especially those criticised by Agustín, tend to presume that the identification of commercial sex work as *work*, or the experience of *doing it* is the best starting point for study. Instead, I argue that starting with service consumers and seeing how they produce complex readings of the sex worker as good woman and good worker (or the inverse) demonstrates how the intersection of supply and demand for service is conditioned by wider understandings of gender in consumer culture. This insight into consumers' attitudes and behaviours can then feed into understanding how customers in other contexts extract enchantment from service workers.

Most research into commercial sex addresses the women who make up the majority of paid sex workers. Customers tend to appear from the viewpoint of the sex workers, who may judge on appearance, ethnicity and age (Sanders, 2005a: 57–9), and who seek signs of trust, such as consistency and compliance with the worker's instructions, with regulars favoured for having proved their trustworthiness (Sanders, 2005a: 66–70; Kong, 2006). Although increasingly common (e.g. Davidson, 1998; Earle and Sharpe, 2007), research into customers' opinions of the sexual services is under-developed (Sanders, 2008: 7).

McKeganey and Barnard suggest five dimensions to the appeal of paid-for sex: willingness to do specific sex acts, the attraction of different women, the physical characteristics of the women (especially youth), the limited form of contact and the clandestine nature of the encounter (1996: 50–3). Campbell adds to this men who are lonely and have been unable to form other relationships, and the convenience of fitting paid for sex into everyday life (1998: 164–5). Sanders (2008) provides a more detailed and nuanced

understanding of punters' behaviours and attitudes, arguing that, far from fleeing from intimacy, men who pay for sex may look to the market for intimacy, building relationships with sex workers (2008: 91–3). What remains absent even from Sanders' extensive account is a story about what counts as good service in a market context. How do customers experience paying for sex, judge and talk about it? What does this tell us about work in consumer culture? This paper stresses men's judgements of their experiences.

The stated purpose of Punternet is 'to promote better understanding between customers and ladies in hopes that everyone may benefit, with less stressful, more enjoyable and mutually respectful visits' (<http://www.punternet.com/index1.html>, accessed 06/06/08), and hence to reduce the risks associated with paying for sex. This is comparable to other consumer activities: '[C]onsumers . . . adopt risk-reducing strategies, drawing upon formal and informal information about products, brand loyalty, the image of the store from which it was bought, price, promotions and advice from sales assistants' (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 27). The internet may offer customers new power in their relationship to products and producers, by giving consumers a voice in a service economy where 'social space is anxious space' (Watkins, 1993: 46). Watkins argues that the consumer in consumer advice literature is constructed as a player in a conflict, and that consumer advice is intended to supply performative strategies (1993: 65–6). In a similar way to other trust-making features of commercial internet life, such as eBay and Amazon, Punternet operates on the micro-exchange between persons, with customer reviews presented to other potential customers as a source of information about products they may consider. Trust in the accuracy of reports is encouraged by the process of moderation before publication (Sanders, 2008: 66). Punternet thus provides information and behavioural guides to its audience of (potential) customers.

This paper contextualises commercial sex work as part of an upfront sexualised consumer culture (McNair, 2002), whilst acknowledging the complex socio-legal and organisational context. I argue that punters understand the norms of consumer sovereignty and apply these to their storytelling in order to make sense of their purchase of the commodified body of the sex worker. The stress of this piece is not on what sex workers do, but how customers read this, and I argue that customers only partly recognise the specificity of the 'sex work' industry. I suggest that customers simultaneously recognise the specificity of their purchase (that sexual services are not directly substitutable for other consumer products, and that this woman is different to that woman), but also read their hobby within other (gendered) consumer norms – about their rights and their legitimacy in extracting enchantment.

## **Methodology**

Punternet is one of several customer review websites used by buyers of commercial sex, and offers a useful resource for understanding sex customers

(Earle and Sharpe, 2007; Sanders, 2008). It covers Britain's indoor sex market i.e., brothels, massage parlours and independent workers. Content is user-generated, comprised of 'field reports' (FR) of paid-for sex written by customers. All authors say they are male and report on encounters with one or more female workers (usually referred to as 'working girls' (WG)), but usually offer very little further information about their age, class, experience in the field and such like, making standard sociological analysis difficult. Field reports contain the WG's location and contact details, and information about price and type of organisation. There is space for punters to describe the physical appearance of the worker (and often also an account of their personality) and then to describe the sex encounter. At the end of the form, punters are asked to say if they would return and if they recommend the woman. The imagined audience of the site is the other (potential) customer.

I constructed a sample of reports from a frame created by listing all report authors. On 12-02-07, when the sample was taken, there were 40,632 reports by 16,590 named authors. Sixty one per cent of the authors had only written 1 report; of the rest, 3.3% had written 10 or more. The largest number of reports by one author was 135. A 1% random sample of authors was taken using SPSS 'select cases function'. This produced 166 usable authors (those writing about sex parties were excluded), who had collectively written 421 reports. In the extracts presented I have indicated how many reports each author had written, and where relevant indicated how this report compares to the author's other accounts. It is not possible to know whether any authors have other pseudonyms, nor the extent to which they read the other field reports, nor if they participate on the forum (see Sanders, 2008 for further discussion of Punternet users).

The ethics of internet research is a contested territory. I have given pseudonyms to the (already pseudonymised) reports used here. I treat the accounts as authored, culturally produced text (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002) and contend that the public visibility of the reports legitimates their use in social science research, subject to care being taken not to misrepresent. A narrative analysis strategy was used to reflect the impossibility of seeing the reviews as objective accounts. This placed questions about how the story is put together and why, as well as what is being said, at the centre of analysis (Riessman, 1993: 2), as well as who the reader is imagined to be: here, other punters. In offering men's accounts unmediated by researcher intervention, Punternet gives a different insight to interview data, as, in my narrative framing, it captures stories that are explicitly constructed as interventions in the market by customers. The stories reveal something of men's experiences of prostitution and desire to speak of this to other men and therefore indicate how male customers participate in producing the field of commercial sex. Writing and having others read the accounts may give erotic pleasure (Earle and Sharpe, 2007: 13), and may be a way of communicating with the sex worker (Sanders, 2008: 68). Accounts are not neutral, but part of the storytelling which constructs sexual identity (Plummer, 1995; Sanders, 2008: 68–70), and – crucially – a gendered

consumer identity. The analysis which follows treats field reports as illustrating ideas about good and bad service, although I recognise that other readings are possible: Earle and Sharpe suggest the reports involve doing masculinity (2007: 14) and Sanders points out how the reports are grounded in 'real life' encounters and a community of punters and sex workers (2008: 73).

I move on now to explore how the features which dominate the study of service work are viewed by customers, that is, how customers assess and represent erotic labour, aesthetic labour and emotional labour as dimensions of good and bad service. The first of these themes represents the 'specialness' of sex work.

## **Erotic labour**

Sexual performances are an obvious part of the labour of sex work. Sexuality is not absent from structures of production (Brewis and Linstead, 2000), nor from consumer culture (McNair, 2002). Boyle (2007) discusses the 'erotic labour' of bar workers, arguing that emotional and aesthetic labour have a distinctly sexualised component, involving flirtation and banter. In sex work, erotic labour comprises embodied skills and the embodied material form of workers operating on customers' bodies.

A customer's orgasm may be accomplished through a range of sexual practices (each of which might have a different price), but orgasm is not the only signifier of good service. A range of erotic embodied practices are part of a 'good' service encounter, including kissing, masturbation using hands or breasts, oral, vaginal and possibly anal sex, and these are often read as skills by customers.

'John G' (1 report, recommends WG)

Kissing is not the only oral skill at which Danni excels . . .

She is a Grand Mistress of the ancient and honourable art of fellatio.

Whilst other body labourers (beauty therapists, hairdressers and such like) work intimately on the customer's body (Wolkowitz, 2006), the customer does not in turn touch the worker's body, unlike in sex work. The sex worker's body is commodified and consumed. Whilst sex workers set formal boundaries around what they will and will not do, there may be a negotiation over what sorts of sex acts will be performed, depending on what the customer will pay for, what the sex worker is offering, and the interaction and understanding between the two individuals (Sanders, 2008: 89–90). I discuss the gendering of negotiations, below.

Punters pay not only for erotic labour to be performed on their bodies, but for an erotic performance by the sex worker. This often includes willingness to appear sexually satisfied and gratitude for customers' gifts of pleasure: such an

erotic performance is part of the exchange and may serve to hide the market transaction. Reciprocal sexual satisfaction is often a punter's ideal, and they can be fearful of women faking sexual pleasure. This informs their detailed observation of women's physical and verbal responses:

Sed25 (3 reports. Recommends WG)

... no faking, unless the buckling legs were part of the act!

Where women do seem to be faking their pleasure, customers may complain or intervene. 'Genuine' enjoyment is important to customers' judgements about the authenticity of the encounter and hence whether they experience it as good or bad service, and whether they believe the worker to be committed to their job. This close reading of women's bodies by customers tends to elide the 'good worker' and the 'good woman'; the good service worker produces an authentically female performance for the market. This is present also in the emotional and aesthetic labour customers demand. Customers conflate biological femaleness with femininity, and commercial sex is thus infused with judgements about sex/gender in the marketplace.

## **Aesthetic labour**

Aesthetic labour is a dimension of the body work of front-line service workers, who work on their own bodies to produce acceptable gendered performances. Aesthetic labour is created through and for consumer culture. Research into aesthetic labour has focused on what workers are expected to do to (and, to some extent, with) their bodies in order to get and keep employment (Witz *et al.*, 2003), exploring the relationships of aesthetics to gender (Pettinger, 2005) and 'personality' (Entwistle and Wissenger, 2006). Sanders (2005b) describes the creation of prostitute aesthetics as part of the development of a prostitute identity. Here I discuss customer assessments of 'prostitute' aesthetics which entail the performance of clichéd femininity.

A physical description of the worker was present in every report studied as the worker's commodified body is central to customers' judgements. Descriptions consider body size, shape, appearance and cleanliness, and reflections on clothing, hair and make-up, with judgements tending to ascribe a restrictive idea of femininity. Bodily attributes such as height, size and shape and facial features are discussed in tandem with external adornment. Bodies are examined in detail, some parts (primary and secondary sex organs) more than others.

'dave\_30' (6 reports, recommends WG)

Was described on phone as ex-glamour model and this is true. She is actually quite old but good looking girl and nice body and (probably fake) tits.<sup>1</sup>

The extract from dave\_30 presents themes that are significant in other accounts: truth, authenticity and the weighing up of 'goods' and 'bads' (here, youth versus age). Customers observe and judge sex workers' bodies. For example, they often note the difference between natural breasts and cosmetically altered ones. They tend to prefer the former because they presume the sex worker gets better sensations (and men self-identify as givers of pleasure), as long as they are not 'saggy' (often indicating a sex worker who is 'too old'). In contrast, customers tend not to want pubic hair to be presented naturally, preferring it to be trimmed and waxed. Customers say this enhances access to the vagina, both visually and physically, making 'reverse oral'<sup>2</sup> easier, perhaps also reflecting a desire for a neat and tamed femininity. Customers prefer bodies that conform to dominant feminine aesthetics within contemporary consumer culture, so that the good worker incorporates feminine norms of consumption into their work (see Jantzen *et al.* (2006) on femininity and lingerie consumption).

The choice which is at the heart of marketised consumer culture (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 2–3) is here focused on the embodiment and personality of the sex workers, commodified into conventional feminine performances. Where the woman may not be what the customer deems to be conventionally attractive, she can 'overcome' this with personality:

'Xavier' (1 report, recommends WG)

BBBW size 16 mature around 50. Very fat girl big tits that sag and belly that hangs over her mish.<sup>3</sup> Best asset is her big round sexy arse. Nice friendly personality that makes up for not being in peak of fitness . . . I had been thinking of a session with a big girl for a while so decided to take the chance with her after reading all the favourable FRs.

The 'BBW' (big, beautiful woman) is a common consumer choice amongst punters, many of whom include a defence of their preference (against an imagined critical reception by fellow Punternet readers). They draw on a discourse, logic and practice of consumer choice, with punters 'shopping around' between women, whose contrasting embodiment (of size, ethnicity, age and such like) offers different consumption experiences. Customers often relate embodiment to personality, but sometimes see them as unconnected, as when a 'babe'<sup>4</sup> does not have the 'right' personality. Customers' expectations about bodies inform their judgements about good service, and failure to have the right body may contribute to a perceived failure of the service, even when, as for mellon1, the erotic services were acceptable:

'mellon1' (2 reports, Does not recommend WG)

However Mel just didn't do it for me looks wise so I was struggling to get aroused . . .

I can't however fault her performance in the bedroom – a number of services . . . were performed with gusto.

Judgements about embodiment encompass the clothed as well as naked body. Customers prefer conventionally feminine lingerie and costume (especially the 'sexy schoolgirl'). A transaction may be labelled as bad service if a costume isn't 'sexy' enough or is removed too soon. WorkingMan's account reflects several dimensions of how aesthetic labour is significant in judging good service. The sex worker is not beautiful, but 'normal' and hence non-threatening and he imagines the possibility of an intimate relationship beyond the market. Her non-threatening appearance is related to her personality which suggest to him she is what many customers look for, 'that special someone'. Her looks are enhanced 'in school uniform', a performance of knowingly innocent and youthful femininity.

WorkingMan (1 report, recommends WG)

Well what can I say I've punting for approx 2 years and have been desparate to find that special someone I want to write about and HOORAY I found her. I'm not going to lie and say she's model material but she is lovely proper girl next door type that you could easily fall in love with. . . .

Please treat her with respect, she is genuinely lovely.

. . . Oh and she looks great in School uniform. . . .

Judgements of women's bodies are thus central to customers' perceptions of the success or failure of a service encounter, both in terms of the erotic labour performed and the way the body looks. WorkingMan hints at a further dimension of good service, that of emotional labour and intimacy.

## **Emotional labour**

The negotiations and performances of pleasure discussed above reflect the emotional labour of sex, the third dimension to customers' assessment of the service encounter. I discuss three elements – professionalism, affection and resistance – which contribute to understanding what sorts of gendered intimacy are on offer in the market for sex. Reading customers' accounts of this adds context to existing understandings of emotional labour by revealing what customers expect and notice.

### *i. 'Professionalism'*

Contemporary work is marked by the transformation of personality traits into virtual commodities (Adkins and Lury, 1999). Punternet accounts suggest that a worker's personality is closely related to their professionalism. 'Personality'

is an ability and willingness to play how the customer wants, to contribute to pushing the sex work encounter beyond a financial exchange, towards something which customers see both parties getting rewards from. The customer is extracting enchantment (Korczynski, 2005). For example, women may be commended for their ability to converse well:

Bigbear1965 (1 report, recommends WG)

Kerry met me at my hotel room, we chatted for a while as it was my first punt and I was a little nervous. One thing you soon realise is how intelligent she actually is, she can talk about anything in depth.

Bigbear1965 is not unusual in revealing vulnerability and commends Kerry's emotional labour for helping him. Chatting is generally taken as an indicator of being a good worker (and therefore a good person) because it makes the transaction feel more than the exchange of cash for sex. However, chat should not detract from the erotic exchange (by including too much personal information about the worker's family) as this denies the customer his enchantment. Corleone sets an opposition between work and self-expression, where to be only a worker is not enough for 'good' service. He is unhappy with Amanda's failure to do the right emotional labour, and to deliver herself, as well as her services:

Corleone (120 reports, does not recommend WG)

Amanda is a slim sexy woman who sees her work as strictly work and this reflects in her personality and prevents her from giving her full whack into the service. I'm afraid she didn't do enough to earn herself a recommendation from me.

Although Amanda is attractive, she is not woman enough to offer more than the exchange of money for services. Corleone was the most prolific author in the sample, and the most critical of the sex workers (often using emotive, aggressive gendered language). He presented himself as a wealthy and attractive man/customer and therefore deserving of good service.

'Professional' was elsewhere used as a signifier of good service:

'Polpot' (2 reports, recommends WG)

Lovely girl, knows how to please a man. Carla said she was new to the scene, but she was a professional, and I can't wait to see her again.

Having the wrong personality for the job may be equated with a lack of professionalism, that is, a failure to do sufficient emotional labour to present a

prostitute identity. Customers expect the prostitute identity to be a reflection of a 'true' self, so that service is envisioned by customers as a vocation based on a desire to give.

ii. *The Girlfriend Experience (GFE)*

The fullest expression of emotional labour is the 'Girlfriend Experience' (GFE). For some customers, this is the superior form of punting: an intimate experience which positions commercial sex in the context of emotion and care, through kissing, cuddling, and conversation to make the customer feel special. The GFE might involve the sorts of activities the punter feels a partner would do, such as shopping:

Ned (1 report, recommends WG)

Tori is a very charming girl, with that Bridgitte Bardot 'knowing innocence' quality that I always find incredibly endearing. . . .

We went out for a meal, talked over some drinks, danced in a night club and went back to the hotel room for some great sex. The following day we went to the Pleasure Beach and she helped me choose some new shoes.

Treat Tori with respect . . . and she'll reward you with a true girlfriend experience for the kind of money you'd usually pay in Moscow.

Ned has hired a feminine companion as well as sex partner, with intimacy a supplement to sex. This account indicates that value matters in the quest for good consumption experiences in consumer culture: Tori is a cheap temporary 'girlfriend'. The GFE is a special consumer experience, as suggested by Horny6:

Horny6 (1 report, recommends WG)

It is quite a GFE, by a GF who really gives a great BBBJ (as most GFs in real life dont) and is happy to allow CIM.<sup>5</sup> . . . – all provided with a smile – me and her! She said I had left her in a good mood after a truly fine Fu\*k – the feeling was mutual!

Horny6 wants something he sees that only the market can provide (better sex than a girlfriend would offer) but also wants more than the exchange of money for service (her personal satisfaction and approval of his prowess). Emotional labour is never distinct from other features of the paid for sex; it is embodied by the worker and demanded by the customer. The tension between what is expected by customers and what is transacted in the market is at the heart of emotional labour in consumer culture, and a significant part of this tension is about male customers' expectations of female service providers. Customers have strong expectations about what commitment to service they deserve.

*iii. Emotional resistance*

Customers note and are angered by workers' refusal to meet their expectations and rarely consider the reasons for this. The manner, as well as the outcome, of negotiations over what acts they will and will not do are weighed up in customers' assessments of service. Men are least happy with limits set on kissing as this is seen to indicate a lack of commitment to fully embodied service provision. The boundaries sex workers may set around personal intimacy are often interpreted by punters as signs of an unprofessional worker unprepared to provide market intimacies demanded by sovereign male customers.

Punters vary in how they assess a worker as 'good'; they do not all like the same emotional or erotic labour. Whilst some authors complain if the sex worker is too passive, Ronaldo, below, appears angered – as man, and as customer – by losing control of the encounter. He describes his disappointment at the woman's failures on the levels of embodiment, emotional labour and the market. He compares her to two 'better' workers, women who demonstrate enjoyment and hence commit themselves to the service.

Ronaldo (2 reports, does not recommend WG)

i paid £80 for 40 mins and cum twice. well i've never felt this ripped off at a massage parlour before today. got undressed after being TOLD to remove my clothing and lay down. told her to lay down while i take control(as im the paying customer).

tried kissing her but she then said only on the lips, by this time i knew this was gonna be a bad punt. . . . so on with the condom and told her i want to fuck her doggy (so i didn't have to see her face).

this was even too much for her aswell she just did not want to be here so i just closed my eyes and went real fast. done my load. . . . waste of my time and my well earned money.

AVOID LIKE THE PLAGUE!!!!. what ever happened to the services ILARIA and ANYA provided, they were fantastic at there jobs and loved being there . . .

Ronaldo's account illustrates how resistance is most strongly felt by customers: as the worker was not fully participating in the implicit contract that she is to service him in the way he desires. She is seen as a bad worker for not delivering herself fully to the job. Men writing on Punternet see it, in part, as a disciplining mechanism in a consumer culture. Reporting bad service is intended to protect other men from the risk of a bad encounter and wasted money.

## **Discussion: good service and feminised professionalism**

My analysis of Punternet authors' accounts suggests that good service is seen by customers as expressed in the worker's appearance, personality, behaviour and the sexual acts she will perform. Punters frame their preferences for different types of feminine embodied service as legitimate expressions of consumer choice, whereby good service involves the female worker transcending the transaction through committing themselves to the job. To achieve this, customers expect performances of erotic, aesthetic and emotional labour to appear genuine. Each form of labour is connected to the others, whether as equal contributors to a good service experience, or in a trade off when a 'good' body makes up for badly performed erotic labour. Customers demand a sense of the worker as giving more of themselves than just doing a job, whilst also setting limits – often labelled as 'professionalism' – on how much 'self' the worker should deliver. The feminine performance is desired, not the woman.

Customers manage and influence the service encounter, and expect good service. Through the field reports they talk to each other and this contributes to the construction of what counts as good service in the field, and influences future transactions. Sanders (2008) discusses how the forum part of Punternet provides a further point of contact between customers and some workers. Customers feel they deserve service, which I suggest is a claim for the legitimacy of being a desiring male customer in consumer culture. They pay attention to whether they get good service, weighing up dimensions of service provision and looking for indicators of an authentic interaction (e.g. assessing workers' sexual responsiveness).

Customers' own participation in the service encounter is often only implicit in their accounts. His feelings about prostitution, his tiredness, enthusiasm and fears, and his tastes and preferences and the depth of his pocket might influence his assessment. Whilst he may present himself as an objective and straightforward arbiter, he brings his particular preferences and prejudices to the encounter (as in the case of Corleone) and so workers may have to second guess what different customers will class as good service. Websites like Punternet make intimate judgements public, drawing on and contributing to understandings of good service.

## **Conclusion**

Full understanding of service work in consumer culture demands acknowledgement of how consumption processes and the behaviours of customers might influence work. Moral discourses around sex work may mean it does not seem like a typical form of service work. But nor is it atypical: it shares elements of the labour process with other forms of service work. It therefore

provides a useful case for exploring how customers understand service work and what counts for them as good service. This paper uses publicly available customer service reviews to show how male heterosexual customers construct and judge service encounters, as a way of exploring what customers look for from service workers and how they construct norms around service based on their readings of how women ought to behave. These accounts can reveal little of the context in which the service took place, nor why and how they have come to be written up as they have, but I have argued that we can read in customers' accounts an expectation that service workers offer their full, embodied gendered subjectivity to the market transaction through their corporeal commitment to work as *professional*.

This exploration offers some insights for other forms of service work. Work in consumer culture draws on the subjectivities of workers, and this is because customers themselves demand this from workers (it is not only a demand by management). 'Good workers' are labelled professional precisely when they do more than just the job, in offering gifts beyond the market. Customers may expect workers to know what their desires are without these being fully verbalised. This reflects customers' implicit presumption of their own sovereignty and belief that they are themselves straightforward. It is awkward for workers who must second-guess their desires. A second expression of sovereignty is seen in the expectation that the customer's own gifts will be received positively by the worker. In this case the gift is his desire to give pleasure, in other contexts a waitress might be expected to respond to banter. This shows how service encounters are managed by customers as well as workers and management, and that customers' judgements, which draw on gendered norms, affect market practices.

The sociology of work should consider the customer and listen to their accounts. It needs to recognise that service work occurs in a consumer culture, and that this influences the behaviours and expectations of all participants. Customers, in their interactions with service providers, are demanding and judgemental, and 'make' the encounter. We cannot understand the experience of service work without knowing this. Customers matter to customer service work.

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## Notes

- 1 All quotations retain the grammar, syntax and spelling of the original.
- 2 cunnilingus
- 3 pudenda
- 4 a physically attractive young woman
- 5 BBBJ = Oral sex without condom; CIM = he ejaculates into her mouth.

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