



Research Paper

Worker body-art in upper-market hotels: Neither accepted, nor prohibited

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ABSTRACT

In line with previous research in the field of aesthetic labour, this article explores the tensions generated in upper market hotels by the increasing popularity of body-art. Using the findings of personal interviews with general managers, the research reveals how worker body-art is manifested in this highly aesthetic form of organisation and what the managerial responses are. Unlike previous studies, this article argues that aesthetic requirements in this type of hotels are the same at both the front and back of the house. Unexpectedly, most of the hotels participating in the study have employees with visible tattoos and piercings on their payroll. This is attributed to external social and labour-related forces that induce managers to bypass or soften up aesthetic standards.

1. Introduction

On *stapaw.com*, a website dedicated to supporting tattooed and pierced employees worldwide, a prominently placed maxim reads, ‘my body is not my resume’. This motto summarises in a few words a transformation in the perceptions, needs, wants and attitudes about body-art over the last two decades or so (Timming, 2017; Timming, 2015; Sanders and Vail, 2008; Kang and Jones 2007; Atkinson, 2003). Central to this social change is the shift of body-art from a form of deviance and anti-sociality to a voluntary form of self-expression (Jefferys, 2000). From a marker of criminality, tattoos and piercings have evolved into a symbol displaying one’s individuality, self-efficacy, self-mastery and the construction of the self. Within this transition lies a notion suggesting that the body is no longer ontologically static, but on the contrary, a ‘limitless frontier of exploration and invention’ through self-fashioning and self-construction (Pitts, 2003,17).

At the same time, this motto reflects the tensions and restrictions that tattooed and pierced individuals face in their working lives. It is known that companies involving ‘person-to-person’ interaction often filter their applicants through aesthetic standards, both at the point of entry in the organisation and with regard to job retention and advancement. Thus, the inspiration for this article stems from the increasing popularity of body-art such as tattoos and piercings, and an emerging corpus of research investigating the impact of this mass phenomenon in various workplaces.

Unlike the established literature, this article is important in four ways: first, there are currently no studies examining body-art and its impact on the upper market hotel sector. While several researchers have examined tattooing and piercing in the hospitality and wider food

and beverage industries, they have adopted a generalized approach to fieldwork and sampling selection. For example, some refer to restaurants without distinguishing their type (Brallier et al., 2011), others use the term ‘hospitality’ without distinguishing sectors (e.g. Warhurst et al., 2000; Swanger, 2006; Timming, 2015) and others put hotels and airlines in one basket and treat them as ‘hospitality’ (e.g. Tsaour and Tang, 2013). This approach raises some questions. Can we assume that all types of hotels have the same aesthetic standards for body-art? Can aesthetic labour in an airline, a quick-service restaurant and a five-star hotel be considered the same? The term ‘upper market hotels’ in the particular tourist resort (Larnaca, Cyprus) refers to deluxe, four- and five-star hotels, catering predominantly to a growing package holiday market.

With regard to employment conditions, the complete collapse of the Cyprus economy in 2013 (Efthymiou and Michael, 2016) caused significant structural changes that make the sector unattractive among the local labour market. Half of the hotels participating in the research are no longer unionized, reflecting the overall downturn in union membership in Cyprus, which is estimated at around 50% (Eurofound, 2017). Also, the sector is characterised by pronounced seasonality, which is among the highest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2017). As a result, employees work minimum hours in winter months whereas summer shifts become long, hot and exhausting. As with hospitality in other parts of Europe (Nickson et al., 2003), the sector is now characterized by irregular working hours, low wages and casual workers with simple employment contracts and fewer benefits. These conditions have a significant impact on labour supply as local workers flee from the hospitality industry in search of employment elsewhere.

Yet, tourist arrivals are growing at a record-breaking pace (CAN,

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2017). More upper market hotels are being built in the particular resort of Larnaca (Chrysostomou, 2017), new jobs are created and labour demand exceeds labour supply. Oxymoronically, unfilled vacancies and high unemployment exist simultaneously. To fill the bottlenecks, hoteliers resort to cheaper labour pools from abroad, mainly EU citizens from Greece and eastern European countries. The percentage of foreign workers in the Cypriot hospitality industry is 50% but it often reaches 60% of the total workforce (Browne, 2014). Following the pattern in other European countries, migrant workers are often perceived as being willing to work for rates of pay and under working conditions that would not be acceptable to native-born workers (Lucas and Mansfield, 2008). Given the current structural circumstances, it would be interesting to explore how the particular hotel settings have responded to the increasingly popular phenomenon of tattooing and piercing.

Secondly, the article explores and challenges the distinction between aesthetic standards utilized at the front and back of the house. A number of studies suggest that while front-of-house employees with tattoos and piercings have lower employment chances (Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2015; Swanger, 2006), the negative implications associated with body-art are reduced significantly when individuals apply for non-customer-facing positions (Timming et al., 2015). The hotel sector, however, includes a wide range of offerings, varying from motels and guest houses to five-star hotels and luxury spa resorts. The supposition in this article is that the difference in terms of aesthetic requirements between front- and back-of-house employees in upper market hotels may not be as significant as widely supposed. Therefore, the article examines whether and how back- and front-of-house employees are subject to the same or different aesthetic filtering at the stages of recruitment, selection and job retention.

Thirdly, in addition to aesthetic requirements at the point of recruitment and selection, this article concentrates on the continuous managerial expectations enabling existing employees to preserve and perform their roles on a more permanent basis. Assuming in advance that the lifestyles of all workers entering the hotel sector (regardless of their age, gender and cultural background) remain unchanged until their retirement is an overgeneralized and problematic assumption. Therefore, following the so called 'tattoo renaissance' (Rubin, 1988; Velliquette et al., 1998; Kosut, 2006) and the wider acceptance of body art in society, the article explores changing body-art patterns among existing workers and what the managerial responses are.

Finally, the increasing use of feedback-analytics in the hotel and hospitality sector is an interesting phenomenon that needs to be examined in relation to aesthetic reporting, control and disciplining. Control is central in Aesthetic Labour as it often includes filtering upon recruitment and selection as well as a constant effort to manage, monitor and further develop employees through training (Nickson and Warhurst, 2007, 156; Mears, 2014). As with other industries and sectors, contemporary control in hotels is driven by online customer feedback and measurement to improve employee performance. The question is, are data-driven processes and software applications capable of pointing to, and changing, hotels' aesthetic employment practices? What are managers' responses to this feedback? How detailed can this feedback be? Do the scores produced by the software include criteria for aesthetic appearance and body-art?

To address these questions, the analysis draws on the findings of 12 personal interviews with general managers in the same number of hotels in Larnaca, Cyprus. The sample comprises the entirety of upscale full service hotels in the Larnaca region. All remaining classes of accommodation (three-, two- and one-star hotels, hotel apartments, tourist apartments, traditional houses, youth hostels and others) were excluded.

The rest of this article is divided into four parts. The following section presents a brief overview of aesthetic labour and past studies analysing the tensions between the increasingly popular phenomenon of body-art and aesthetic standards in the hospitality industry. It also conceptualizes the difference in requirements between back- and front-

of-house employees. The research process and methods are then discussed prior to presenting and discussing the fieldwork's findings. The final section summarises the article's main points and makes suggestions for future research.

2. Overview of past empirical research

Although aesthetic requirements were central in organisations for decades, it was the theory of aesthetic labour that enabled a more organised and thorough examination of their impact on employment. Since the development of the aesthetic labour theory by Chris Warhurst, Dennis Nickson and Anne Witz about twenty years ago, a body of literature has developed, suggesting that worker embodiment is increasingly being utilised in interactive service work in a manner that is becoming systematic and institutionalized.

In essence, aesthetic labour includes using worker appearance and demeanour in governing labour processes, forming organisational core competencies and/or developing a competitive advantage. Some workplaces restrict excessive hair styles, jewellery, nails, tattoos, piercings and makeup (Edwards, 2003). But while restricted in a particular context, those same elements may be desired in another (Timming, 2017) as the human body appears to be an effective means through which to convey a particular 'branded' image (Nickson et al., 2001; Pettinger, 2004; Nickson and Warhurst, 2007) or the actual product itself (Bitner, 1990; Crang, 1997; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Witz et al., 2003). Employees' appearance can be a major determinant of customer satisfaction (Adelman et al., 1994; Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991) whereby customer preferences are shaped by various elements, including age, gender, ethnic and race differences (Baumann and Setogawa, 2015; Baumann et al., 2016; Karlsson, 2012; Dean, 2010).

Aesthetic Labour means more than merely looking nice (Gottfried, 1994; Van Maanen, 1991). Appearance should be complemented by an emotional disposition where employees are expected to suppress their feelings and project the appropriate mood, friendliness, cheerfulness and socialise with guests. Hochschild's influential work, 'The Managed Heart', (1983) is widely accepted as the greatest contribution to emotional labour (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Van Maanen, 1991; Sturdy, 1998) – one that ignited a great interest in the field of emotions in organisations ever since. However, while the "management of feelings is to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display ... sold for a wage" (Hochschild, 1983, 7), it seems that worker embodiment received little attention within emotional labour research (Witz et al., 2003). Empirical and theoretical studies on aesthetic labour, thus, have moved the boundary of emotional labour towards a wide spectrum of disciplinary areas relating to embodied dimensions of service work.

Aesthetic-related specifics have been examined through studies in various sectors, including retail and hospitality (Knang, 2005; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001, 2007a; Nickson et al., 2003; Witz et al., 2003), restaurants (Luoh and Tsaur, 2009; Korczynski and Ott, 2004; Tsaur and Luoh, 2015), museums (Karagianni, 2015), airlines (Xiaoni, 2017; Kotoky, 2014; Zeveloff, 2011; Hancock and Tyler, 2000; Spiess and Waring, 2005), theme parks (Van Maanen, 1991), financial services (Warhurst and Nickson, 2003); fashion modelling (Entwistle, 2002; Wissinger, 2007; Pounders et al., 2015) and marketing services (Ligos, 2001), to mention just a few. Most studies explain how aesthetic filtering takes place at the point of entry into the organization through recruitment and selection, whereby job retention has to do with being capable of keeping a job through maintaining the aesthetic qualities and standards of the organisation (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Entwistle, 2002; Wissinger, 2007; Nickson et al., 2003).

However, despite the considerable body of literature exploring the complex, informal and often hidden processes of aesthetic labour, only a few studies focus on the impact of worker body-art in hotels. A review of previous research reveals that managers perceive worker body-art negatively while the employment chances of tattooed and pierced workers are reduced. Swanger (2006), for instance, suggests that 87 per

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