

# Beauty Retail Workers: *Consumerized and Alienated*

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**Abstract:** There is this popular notion of Hochschild (1983) that suggests estrangement occur when the private management of workers' emotion is taken over by the organization for business purposes. This paper proposes that estrangement can occur in the service industry without the interference of the organizations. To explore this idea, this paper will study the work of beauty retail workers that is based in department stores in Malaysia and Sydney through participant observations and interviews. As there are many dimensions of service work, this paper will focus on the idea of consumerized workers. It seeks to understand if beauty retail workers are made to be consumers through their private consumption experience for business purposes and if this consumerization process alienates the workers. The results from this study suggest that workers can be consumerized at work but this process does not necessary alienates the beauty retail workers. This report proposes that estrangement can also be derived from the way the beauty retail workers manage their own emotion.

**Keywords:** Beauty Retail Workers, Consumption, Consumerization, Emotional Labour, Alienation

## 1. Introduction

The most important encounter in the service industry transpires when the service workers are in a face-to-face or voice to voice meeting with the customers. It is important because this encounter have the capacity to influence the outcome of the business. Due to the importance of their position, Babin and Boles (1996, 58) believe the workers' employers would often try to influence their work attitude and behavior by manipulating work settings. There is this popular notion of Hochschild (1983) that suggests estrangement can occur when private management of workers' emotion is taken over by the organization for business purposes. This paper proposes that estrangement can occur in the service industry even without the intervention of organizations. To explore this idea, this paper will study the work of beauty retail workers that is based in department stores, in particular those that sell prestige beauty products. As there are many areas of service work, this paper will focus on the idea of consumerized workers. In her article, Pettinger (2004) discovers that retail workers can affect the consumption of customers by wearing the clothing of the company they are working for and in the process they become consumers themselves. Similarly, this article will seek to understand if the beauty retail workers are made to be consumers through their private consumption experience for business purposes as well. Nevertheless, instead of focusing on this aspect alone, this article will also investigate if this consumerization process alienates the workers.

The beauty retail industry is essentially a service based industry. Their business is not limited to selling beauty products but some of these brands also provide services such as make over and facials as well. Even in selling the beauty products itself, beauty retail workers are often involved in intricate customer service regime that is created by the beauty company to ensure smooth service delivery. This however is not the only job of the beauty retail workers at the counter. They also have other roles and responsibilities behind the scene where it is usually unobservable from the public. For example, they have to preserve the counter, maintain ideal stock level and achieve sales target while ensuring they work well with their team members. Despite their many tasks, these workers main role is still to sell and to serve thus leaving them at a vital position in the beauty retail industry. As such, akin to other service industry (see Van Maanen and Kunda

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1989; Leidner 1991; Warhust and Nickson 2007), their organization would definitely play a heavy part in shaping these beauty retail workers' attitude and behavior.

## 2. Methodology

To discover and portray the beauty retail workers consumerization process, this paper will draw on ethnographic research conducted via participation observation in different retail stores both in Malaysia and Sydney. The main sample focus of this study is the beauty retail workers. Their feelings and disclosures gained from the observations and interviews will be studied and analyzed to explain the purpose of this article. For the participation observation, I spent subsequent period of time working as beauty retail worker in six retail stores with two of the stores were based in Kuala Lumpur, one in Penang (Malaysia) and another three in Sydney (Australia). This article will also draw on selected empirical data from 19 interviews conducted through snowball sampling to gauge and analyze their response. The joint research approach, both the observation and interviews in this study is an ideal combination not only because they can yield in depth accounts of this consumerization occurrence but it also allows for me to collect the data from observations and compare its consistency through the interviews.

## 3. The Consumerization Process

To understand if the beauty retail workers are consumerized at work, it is indispensable to distinguish the different ways they can become consumers of the brands<sup>1</sup> they are working for. It is observed that the workers can become consumerized in three main ways.

Firstly, the workers can become consumerized through the compulsory training they have to attend. Out of the 19 interviewed, 18 of the workers were given brands and products training. During these trainings, they were trained on brand concepts, ingredients and the benefits of the products they sell. The possibility of the workers becoming consumerized in this process largely depends on the impact of the training provided. Secondly, as most of the beauty workers are provided with products for personal usage and samples to try, they too can be consumerized through this usage. Such provision would in a way encourage consumption among the beauty workers simply because it is free or it is at a discounted price. Lastly, the workers can also be consumerized by the request of the company. All the workers who work for makeup and fragrance house other than some skin care brands are required by contract to use in house products when they are working at the counter. This is not done primarily to consumerize the workers but it is a form of aesthetic labour so that the company can use the workers' body as display component for customers.

It is important to note that the beauty retail workers were never forced to purchase the products they are selling and to display it on themselves at work for business purposes. If the workers are required to display the products that they are not provided with, they are often advised<sup>2</sup> to arrive work 15 minutes prior to their shift to put them on. Since the data collected on the company training regimes is limited, given the confidentiality of these sessions, this paper will focus only on the second and third point of this consumerization process.

### 3.1. Product Allowances

One of the ways the beauty retail workers can be consumerized at work is through their product allowances provided by the beauty company. Out of the 19 interviews, 14 of the beauty retail workers were given quarterly personal usage allowances, or product incentives and staff discounts. This group of workers usually has a full time, part time or casual permanent<sup>3</sup> positions in the company. They are entitled to product allowances worth in between \$300 to \$500 per quarter<sup>4</sup>. As for these allowances, the beauty retail workers

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<sup>1</sup>Most of these workers were already exposed to beauty brands prior to joining the beauty industry through media, personal usage or/and sharing by relatives or/and friends. In fact, it would be one of the factors they choose to work in the beauty retail industry.

<sup>2</sup>Not every worker will adhere to this rule because they considered the products (testers) at the counter as unhygienic. Besides, these workers believe they have the right to refuse such request, as they are not paid to be at the counter 15 minutes prior to the start of the shift. It is highly possible that the makeup on their skin can be of other brands.

<sup>3</sup>There is no part time or casual permanent positions in Malaysia. Product incentives are given on a case-to-case basis to part time and casual employees in Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup>Personal usage/product incentives are based at retail price that are sold by the beauty company.

have the freedom to decide which product they would like to claim without any interference from their company. The interviews and observation reveal that beauty retail workers often express excitement when it comes to receiving their product incentives and new products. Most of the workers would immediately use the products they were given in order to test out these products' efficiency or to maintain their current beauty regime. They were never asked to provide feedback by the beauty company regarding these products and what they do with the products they receive is left to their own discretion (though they are prohibited from selling them). Besides, the organization had no ways to investigate the usage of these product allowances by the workers. In short, through beauty allowances, the beauty company plays a role in *consumerizing* the workers but not to the extent of using their private consumption experience for business purposes.

### **3.2. Bound in Contract**

The other way the workers can be consumerized at work is through their contract requirements and this is especially important for those that retail fragrance and makeup. These requirements necessitate the beauty workers to use the latest colour of the season (makeup) or fragrances the company is currently promoting. During one of the orientations for new recruits, I witnessed a sales manager of a fragrance company strongly advising her beauty workers to use only their house's fragrance. The sales manager explained that it would be unacceptable if they did otherwise as the company does not want the perfume of another fragrance house on their employees. It would reflect badly on their own company and its products. From this perspective, the beauty workers are required to use beauty products for the benefit of the company and therefore in this process they become consumerized.

## **4. Willing Consumers**

One of the aims for this paper is to investigate if the beauty retail workers feel alienated through this *consumerization* process. According to the beauty workers I interviewed and worked with, they have no qualms about being advised to use the latest lip colour or mascara at the counter. In fact, these workers do not have to be told to do so, as they would try these products immediately on their own accord. To try out these new products, or even the current products is actually one of the reasons these beauty workers chose to work in this industry. Their passion for the industry and their desire to look beautiful automatically predisposes them to become willing consumers for these beauty products. For example, Annie adores the industry ever since her schooling years. Her reason was, 'I like to look made up and pretty.'

As for Cindy, she started out in her working life as a personal assistant but she always kept her interest in beauty as a hobby. She eventually turned this hobby into a business in her home country before she became a beauty retail consultant in Sydney. Her passion for beauty is the same as Annie. She said she like the industry because 'I like to look beautiful (laugh) all the time...I just like everything about beauty.'

## **5. Making Public of Private Consumption**

There appears to be no issue when the workers are asked to use the products. In fact, the workers are willing to do so as long as they are provided with the products. However, problems ensued when the workers do *not* have access to the products they are selling, and this usually happens among the travellers<sup>5</sup>. This will direct the attention of this paper to a group of workers that are not given product incentives. This group may also represent the sentiments of permanent position beauty workers who are provided with quarterly incentives but who were not given new product samples to try. It also includes those that are allergic to the products they are selling. To understand this conflict, we will return to these beauty workers.

One traveller, Susan, believes that it is a problem when she does not get to try the products she is selling because it hinders her capacity to sell the product effectively. She asks how could she possibly claim the products she is selling are great when she has never used them.

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<sup>5</sup> A traveller in Sydney is known as a part timer in Malaysia. The counter manager in Malaysia is accountable for recruiting these part timers and the beauty company will pay the cost of these part timers. Part timers in this region are individuals that have no contract commitments with any party. Meanwhile, in Sydney, travellers are supplied by predisposed agencies. As for the cost of the travellers, the beauty company and departmental store share the cost for the travellers. Similar to the permanent staff, travellers or part timers' roles are to promote and sell the brand for which they are hired for.

I really want to be involved in the product I'm selling and I want to know what they do for you and I'm not really one that will sell something I don't believe in but to believe in it you have to try it and if they really work then I feel more confident in selling the product. If I didn't like the product, then I wouldn't be working for that house.

Furthermore, through these beauty workers' experience, they find they are expected to use the products they are selling. As consumers themselves, these workers find it hard to buy from beauty workers that do not use the products or have a serious skin problem. Often, they are asked by customers, 'Are you using this?' If the answer is 'no', it will reflect badly on the workers as they would be contradicting themselves and it would also show the workers are being untrustworthy to the brand they are working for.

The dilemma is well expressed by another traveller, Wanita:

I'm sorry...but how are you going to sell it, how are you going to convince the customer? Cause all the customers assume people that work for the brand are using the brand. So if your skin is bad, your customer is not going to be convinced of the products. They'll think what's going to happen to my face (am I going to get the same bad skin as you are)?

This is not only the argument of travellers with no product allowances. Permanent staff with full product allowances feels the same. As Ginger puts it, 'I wouldn't want to buy it from zit face.'

According to the workers, then, it is imperative that they consume the product they sell. This is partly because the consumption would allow them to display the advertised results on their own skin. It gives them not only the physical evidence but as well as the needed confidence to honestly express the effectiveness of the products. Moreover, these workers argue, consumption is important for their job because of their role as consumers. Customers expect the workers to use the products they are selling, and as consumers themselves, these workers believe it is a deceptive transaction if they do not. They would not only be dishonest to the customers but to themselves.

With this in mind, the workers who are not provided with product support, or who found themselves not suited to the products they sell, are in a quandary. How can the workers approach the customers without contradicting themselves in this situation? Even if the customers do not know the truth, the workers appear to be affected by this idea. This is Cynthia's response when asked about some of the products she may not like but has to promote at the counter, 'I have to try to accept it. I feel that no matter what brands you are in, you have to try to accept the product. If you are not interested then you won't be able to sell it and you can't perform your job.'

As for Connie, who is allergic to the brand she was working for feels almost the same.

I am a traveller now so I have to work with different brand sometimes. For example, brand XXX: I can't work with XXX because they have fragrance inside their products so most probably I can't use them. I reckon the product doesn't really work as well because every product of theirs that touches my skin makes it feels itchy and so it's really hard for me to sell. But I still have to do it. It's harder to sell because you don't have confidence in the product. I probably get used to it already since I've been working in the retail for so long. So I become numb with it.

## **6. Emotional Labour and Alienation**

The source of misplacement experienced by these consumerized beauty retail workers lies in the discrepancy between their roles as consumer and worker. As a worker they know they have to sell the product no matter what they personally think about them. It does not matter whether they are using it or not, whether if they are allergic to it or not; what matters to their company is the workers' product knowledge and the fact that they follow the service guidelines provided by the company. In the meantime, as a consumer, they find it hard to face the customer honestly if they have never tried the product or if they do not use it. This is because as consumers they find it hard to trust beauty workers who do not use a product they sell, or who have bad skin that fails to demonstrate the efficiency of the product. This clearly is a form of emotional labour (see Hochschild 1983, 7) because the workers have to hide their true feelings from the customers with regards to the products they sell and at the same time they must provide a front that is both acceptable for the company and customers. There is no doubt alienation exists here but it is not because of their private

consumption experiences are being managed by their organization. It can be observed that the workers' private consumption experience is being used for business purposes, however it is not because of the manipulation of the organization but due to the workers' own decisions to use their experience to convince the customers.

The beauty retail workers' estrangement happens when they have to put on a 'consumer' face as they communicate with customers. This proves harder when they never had the opportunity or it was impossible to try all the products at the counter since beauty products are very extensive. Nevertheless, these workers are aware that the best way to get close to and convince the customers is to mirror the consumers themselves because it is always better to connect from the same role rather from the opposite 'buy-sell' role. The reason because through their own experience as customers, they believe the 'sellers' just want the customers to buy and not because they were really concerned of the customers as a person. If the workers can convince the customers that they are the 'same', the customers would become less defensive and more open to their approach. There is an invisible struggle that persist from this and it is in the essence of Hegel's master and slave argument. Kojève (1969: 4 – 9) sees this struggle as the outcome of the fact that people see each other through their desires. This means, in a way, the workers are seeing the customers as a means to their ends. Even in sharing their personal experience, the workers end up objectifying the customers in order to become the identity or in this case the role of beauty retail worker that is assigned to them.

As consumers, workers personally hated the idea of being patronized as such they also dislike the idea of being called a fraud. This is why these workers try so hard to 'accept'<sup>6</sup> the brands, so that they appear 'authentic' to customers. In doing this, it makes them feel better, because it would seem like they are being truthful to themselves. With this, they also avoid the risk of being called a fraud or feeling like a fake themselves. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the brand against their own struggle and the 'authentic' feeling they try to feel does not guarantee they do not feel estranged in the long run. For example, like Connie, it leads her to feeling blasé in the end. This condition happens due to the constant surface and deep acting which compel these workers' emotion to becoming thinner and veiled and as a result, they also become less sincere and phonier (Hochschild 1983, 21).

This is not the only effect of alienation because this stress can also haunt them in their conscience even after their encounter with customers. For example, Tina who is a casual permanent worker that is given product incentives explained that she often worries about giving the wrong advice to customers. She worries they will come back to reprimand her for suggesting the wrong products and accuse her as being unprofessional, or, even more seriously, a person who is selfishly concerned about her own sales target only. The odd thing is, Tina should not be anxious because her consumption experience that she shared with her customers were truly what she has experienced unlike the workers that have to make believe what they were selling. The question is, why is she, even though her situation is more honest than the workers that have to make believe with what they sell? There is then, in the nature of the work, a fundamental contradiction that makes an unalienated existence impossible. What frustrates these workers further is that they cannot really pin their distancing at work on the organizations that employ them because they were the one who uses their own consumption experience at work.

## 7. Summary

In their line of duty, the beauty retail workers are indirectly consumerized at work through the personal use of products provided by the company and from their contract requirements. These processes do not require the workers to sell their private consumption experience to their company. There was also no trace from interviews and participation observation that the beauty company was managing this beauty retail workers private consumption experience or emotions for business purposes. Hochschild implies that alienation occurs when private emotions of workers are strategically managed by organizations and yet, as described, alienation is presents here even without such management. Rather, alienation occurs because the

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<sup>6</sup>According to Hochschild (1983, 36 – 38) this is a form of deep acting. Deep acting involves the conscious mental and emotional work of the actor in which the actor works to conjure up the required feeling by using stored feelings that are available to the actor. There are two ways to perform deep acting, first, by directly exhorting or encouraging feeling and secondly, by making indirect use of a trained imagination.

workers were managing their own feeling and this can be witnessed through the manipulation of the beauty workers' consumer-customer role.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

The limitation of this research is its small sample; as such it may not provide a perfect presentation of the beauty retail workers. Nevertheless, it does open up the possibility that alienation can happen with or without the interference of company in service work. This paper suggests that future study should be done on a larger group to obtain a more generalised view of these beauty retail workers. On top of that, this paper would like to propose that an appropriate investigation should be performed on groups of workers that are willing to be consumerized, to understand if these workers can be alienated in such 'ideal' working conditions.

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