

Magdalena Petersson McIntyre, Associate Professor, PhD in Ethnology

Centre for Consumer Science

University of Gothenburg

Sweden

Passion for work in retail

This paper presents a study of work in retail environments in Sweden. Based on participant observations and interviews with workers in fashion, perfume, electronics and diy-stores the commodification of bodies and affect is explored as an affective identification with relations on the neoliberal work market.

The paper builds on an ethnographic study of workers in retail. Participant observations in stores as well as interviews with workers in different segments of retail such as fashion, perfume, electronics and diy- building stores have been conducted. The chosen spheres are gendered in different ways. In total 30 interviews have been made. Retail is a part of the service economy that is signified of short-term employments and precarity on the one hand and on the other of a high degree of demands on skills that involve and commodify the bodies, dispositions and emotions of the individual workers. Workers had to embody particular styles and looks, they were expected to be enchanted by products, or to embody expertise related to technology and building.

The workers were generally very understanding towards such informal, and often unspoken, demands. They made sense to them as reflections of relations on the labour market which were understood as both “natural” and “taken for granted”. Workers neither wanted any changes in these work relations, nor did they think that anything should be changed. Rather, to invest one’s body, interests and emotions in work was described as something that has to be, as a capitalist model that cannot be changed. The only option available for workers who did not comply was, they thought, to find another job.

Building on a combination of theories of affective belonging (Berlant 2011) and of the agency of passions (Cooren 2010) the paper discusses these sense-making processes in terms of a commodification of passion as an increasing demand on the labour market.

The purpose of the paper is to understand the work that workers in retail do with their bodies with special emphasis on the work clothes, how they understand demands on appearances and how it can be interpreted in relation to intersectional perspectives on gender in the labour market. Workers in retail are subjected to specific demands that regulate their appearances. These are techniques aimed at persuading customers to shop with the use of dressed bodies as communication. However, work clothes also constitute a large part of the social interactions that go on at work and where categories such as gender, age and ethnicity matter in the everyday encounters between workers, managers and customers.

The spheres show how work clothes become relevant, not just as an aspect of selling, but for how workers make sense of their work place and the practices involved in retailing.

Clothes mark belonging and signal expectations of gender and behavior. In fashion stores workers have to dress in the clothes sold in the stores and show that they understand fashion. In perfume stores workers are expected to consume the products for private use. Workers in this sphere wore private clothes; they had to embody the brand and knowledge about fashion. They were in general expected to conform to contemporary ideals of beauty and fashion. Many of them, both men and women, spoke of how much they love fashion and perfumes.

In home improvement stores workers were expected to embody skill and confidence. Expertise was clearly connected with masculinity and female workers felt out of place and were often questioned by customers. Women had to struggle to “look the part”. Both men and women wanted work clothes that resembled clothes worn on construction sites. Women disliked the feminine cuts of the provided women’s line and chose men’s trousers. They particularly disliked clothing that associated to service work.

In electronic stores workers wore pants, shirt (tie) and shiny shoes, which are masculine dress in management style. The interviewed workers generally liked the style of the clothes although they questioned the practicality of them. Work in electronic stores is signified by aggressive sales techniques, masculine risk taking and “pretty girls” in the check-out counters.

References

- Berlant, Laurent 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Cooren, Francois 2010. *Action and agency in dialogue*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.