CHAPTER X

Young at heart, but what about my body? Age and aesthetic labour in the hospitality and retail industries

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Introduction

In 1992 Michael Gottlieb, at the time the proprietor of a well-known London restaurant, wrote in a letter to the *Caterer and Hotelkeeper* that:

> I fail to understand why employers ought not to be able to discriminate about potential employees on the basis of age, at least for those who are in contact with the public. We are in a business where image counts as much as content. Of course, it is unfair to turn down older people with the required technical skills to do the job, but so what? It is not a perfect world (Gottlieb, 1992: 20).

These sentiments would seem to succinctly encapsulate the view that in industries with significant amounts of customer contact being young would seem to be an advantage in securing employment. The chapter will consider this point with a particular focus on the customer-facing industries of hospitality and retail. Concentration on hospitality and retail recognises that these industries are a key part of the economies of developed and, increasingly, emerging economies. For example, hospitality and retail combined provide around five million jobs in the UK economy - over 20 per cent of total employment in the UK - with retail being the largest private sector employer in the UK (Green, Aftfield,

Staniewicz, Baldauf & Adam, 2014; People 1st, 2013). In a European context, hospitality and retail are major employers providing over 36 million jobs in the 28 member states of the European Union (Ernst & Young, 2013; ILO, 2015). Similarly, within the US hospitality and retail provide over 28 million jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015a and b). Within an emerging economy context Otis (2008) and Hanser (2007) chart the growth of a rapidly expanding service sector and consumer economy in China such that hospitality and retail are now suggested as being the mainstay of new employment in urban centres such as Beijing.

In recognising the centrality of hospitality and retail employment to contemporary economies the chapter will engage with the manner in which organisations in these industries are placing an increasing emphasis on managing their employees' appearance, or what is often known as their 'aesthetic labour'. The term aesthetic labour emerged from research undertaken by what has been described as the 'Strathclyde group' (Karlsson, 2012). In a series of publications in the early 2000s, Dennis Nickson, Chris Warhurst and Anne Witz highlighted how service organisations increasingly hire employees' on the basis of their appearance as a means to match the employee with the brand image (Warhurst, Nickson, Witz & Cullen, 2000; Nickson, Warhurst, Witz & Cullen, 2001; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003). In this manner Davies and Chun (2012), writing from a services marketing perspective, note that 'employees can influence the associations that a customer makes with a corporate brand not only by what they do and how they do it, but by how they appear to the customer' (p. 663). Thus the chapter will initially begin by defining aesthetic labour and highlight the potential relationship between this concept and age. Having done this the chapter then moves on to consider how these issues play out within the hospitality and retail industries, industries which as suggested above often have an explicit focus on brand image. In this discussion, we are also cognisant of the impact of demographic change in many Western societies. On the

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one hand the changes are leading to a reduction in the availability of 'young labour' while, at the same time, creating increasing demand for caring skills that are in direct labour market competition with those sought in hospitality and retail. In considering these issues, the chapter aims to provide an insightful discussion on the aesthetics of ageing, examining the impact of aesthetic labour on 'young', 'middle aged' and 'older' workers and their employment outcomes drawing on a range of organisational examples both in the UK and internationally. In doing so, we are conscious that attitudes to age are temporally and culturally constructed (Vincent, 2006) so that what might have been considered 'old' in the past is no longer viewed as such today or that age and the attributes of age (grey hair) are seen in a very different light in different societies (Vincent, 2008). Our analysis is both contemporary and somewhat UK/western centric, reflecting the dearth of existing literature on this subject in other parts of the world. We acknowledge these aspects as a limitation, whilst also highlighting how they could inform a future research agenda which we discuss later in the chapter.

Defining aesthetic labour and the importance of 'looking the part'

The genesis of the concept of aesthetic labour lay in a job advert in the 1990s for bar staff at Whispers, a nightclub in the North of England. The advert suggested that experience was not necessary and instead that Whispers were seeking staff who were required to be 'attractive'. This requirement to look a certain way, whilst not a wholly new development (see Nickson et al., 2001), is one which is becoming ever more prevalent in the hospitality and retail industries. Many organisations in these industries are seeking to create a particular brand image and employees are increasingly expected to embody this brand image. Research undertaken in Glasgow in the late 1990s sought to assess how hospitality and retail employers were increasingly seeking a 'fit' between their brand image and their employees, something

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that to a large extent was determined by their physical appearance giving rise to the concept of aesthetic labour. The term aesthetic labour is analytically complex and a full working definition can be found in Warhurst et al. (2000). Here it is enough to note that companies employ people with certain capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers' visual or aural senses and which are sought through recruitment and selection processes and then, once employed, further developed through training and/or monitoring. In Warhurst et al. (2000) it is acknowledged that aesthetic labour is most apparent at the level of physical appearance, though in reality it was also recognised that the 'embodied capacities and attributes' which organisations were seeking went deeper than physical appearance alone and in reality aesthetic labour was conceptualised as encompassing elements such as class, gender, race, age and weight.

Since the emergence of the concept of aesthetic labour there has been further development of the concept by the so-called Strathclyde group as well as others, both in the UK and internationally (see for example, Hall and Van Den Broek, 2012; McIntyre Petersson, 2014; Nickson, Warhurt, Cullen & Watt, 2003, Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2005; Pettinger, 2004, 2005; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010). The initial pilot research reported in Nickson et al. (2001) had a particular focus on what they termed the 'style labour market', for example, up-market fashion retailers or boutique hotels, where it was suggested the aesthetic demands of employers was most pronounced. Indeed, as Williams and Connell (2010: 353) note with regard to upmarket retail outlets, 'what distinguishes upscale retail jobs is the weight that managers in these stores place on hiring people with the "right look" – to the exclusion of almost all other qualifications', with arguably this right look often been best embodied by younger workers. Beyond the style labour market though Nickson et al. (2001;

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2005) also found evidence of less style-driven organisations still having prescriptions around employee appearance in support of their brand image.

Consequently, and re-affirming our earlier point about 'fit' between the brand image and employee, Nickson et al. (2003: 190) suggest that, 'it is important to note that all organisations have an aesthetic appeal but the form of aesthetic being offered may vary from one type of service organisation to another'. For example, Williams and (2010) note the manner in which retailers seek to match their workers with the retail setting, noting how 'workers at J. Jill and Coldwater Creek look like the 30-something suburban white women in their catalogue … and those at Williams-Sonoma appear to be minions of Martha Stewart' (p. 357). Likewise, research by Gruys (2012) on a plus-size clothing store found that plus-sized women were preferred over standard-sized women for sales jobs in order to embody the brand image and for their ability to interact sensitively and empathetically with plus-sized customers[i]. On the more specific issue of age, Foster and Resnick (2013) cite research which shows that older consumers often liked to be served by older staff. Indeed, Davies and Chun (2012: 677) drawing on 'self-concept theory', recognise 'that customers tend to prefer products or services that are congruent with one or more aspects of actual self-concept', and consequently suggest that 'employing staff with a similar age to ones customers would be beneficial'. Thus, Foster and Renick's (2013) case study of a UK health and beauty retailer recognises the importance of age and gender in the service encounter such that customers seek to 'mirror' their own age/gender when approaching staff for help. As Foster and Resnick further note, 'staff who share the same appearance as customers, may, therefore, represent a competitive advantage for retailers and yet this represents an interesting dilemma for retailers' (p. 244). This dilemma acknowledges concerns around equality, a point which the chapter considers later in greater detail. It is also important to recognise the manner in

which a number of the elements noted above, such as class and gender, intersect with age in terms of the 'ideal worker' which service organisations are seeking. Consequently as MacDonald and Merrill (2009: 123) note in considering customer-facing service jobs, 'race, gender, class and age coalesce in different job settings to create a norm of the worker who will "look the part" given a particular service.' For example, depending on the desired brand image there might be an expectation that such a worker is young, white, female and physically attractive, young, male and middle class or older, male and looking like a tradesman and so on. In this way we can begin to appreciate that being young does not axiomatically bestow advantage in the service sector labour market. McDowell (2009), for example, points to the particular challenges facing young working class men in gaining employment in the interactive service sector, a point we return to later in the chapter.

As much of the discussion above has highlighted, aesthetic labour has led to concerns about equality and fairness with regard to who can access entry level, front-line jobs in hospitality and retail. In that sense a key feature of much of the research conducted by the Strathclyde group and others has been the way in which aesthetic labour can create exclusionary employment practices in terms of who is deemed to be appropriate to best represent a company's desired brand image, particularly when examining initial entry into organisations. Consequently, Warhurst et al. (2000: 11) note, 'in many respects it was in the area of recruitment and selection that the notion of aesthetic labour has the most resonance, as this process allows for the filtering out of "inappropriate" people'. In part, this filtering out of 'inappropriate' people is explicable by the continuing reliance in many hospitality and retail companies of informal recruitment methods. Thus, although the surveys of hospitality and retail employers reported in Nickson et al. (2005) and Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell & Cullen (2012) found evidence of formal recruitment methods, such as

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advertisements in the local press and use of job centres, they also found widespread use of more informal methods. For example, Nickson et al. (2005) found that two-thirds of employers used word of mouth/referrals and half recruited employees they met as casual callers. Part of the reason for the use of these informal methods, Nickson et al. suggest, is because such methods are inexpensive. Additionally, it is also argued that, beyond the cost factor, methods such as casual calling also allow for the filtering out of those who are deemed not to embody the brand image.

In a similar vein the work of Gatta (2011) and Williams and Connell (2010) examining high-end US retailers highlights the manner in which employers often make decisions about potential employees based on first impressions. For example, Williams and Connell recognise it is common for managers to approach people shopping in their store to ask them if they would like a job there, a practice that is particularly common in fashion retail. Gatta similarly reports how the fashion retailers she studied would often make 'blink' decisions when faced with hiring new employees. Gatta describes this 'blink moment' as the manner in which 'two second blink' decisions are made with limited information and evidence. In the context of recruitment and selection in fashion retail, Gatta recognises how this '"blink" moment was quite evident in hiring employers' hiring decisions and almost all employers reported that perspective workers had to pass a "first impressions" hurdle' (p. 59). The potential for such an approach to rely on obvious stereotypes, be prejudicial and biased is, suggests Gatta, obvious.

A further point to consider is what is being sought at the point of entry into the organisation. The surveys of hospitality and retail employers reported in Nickson et al. (2005; 2012) suggest that at the point of entry into organisations, 'soft' skills, encompassing both the

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attitude and appearance of employees, are far more important to hospitality and retail employers than qualifications or 'hard' technical skills. There is an obvious issue in terms of the potential subjectivity for judging these 'soft' skills and relatedly the extent to which they may be socially constructed as being about young employees. Weller (2007), for example, in noting the manner in which age-related exclusion to employment is likely to vary from occupation to occupation nevertheless, recognises that in interactive service occupations, such as those found in hospitality and retail, recruiting people based on ascribed skills, rather than technical skills is especially prevalent. Consequently, as she further notes the reliance on ascribed skills in the recruitment process in interactive service work suggests that often such skills will be 'based on a combination of physical attributes and youthful outlook' (p. 431) a point which we now consider in greater detail.

Age and aesthetic labour in the hospitality and retail industries

An obvious point to note in considering the age profile of hospitality and retail is that young people are prominent within these industries. For example, in hospitality just under half of the workforce is under 30, with 31 per cent of the workforce aged between 16-24 (People 1st, 2013). Younger workers are particularly likely to work in front-line positions with the average age of waiting and bar staff being 27, compared to back-of-house positions such as cooks (45) and room attendants (45). Only 13 per cent of the workforce are aged between 50 and 59 and only six per cent are over the age of 60 (People 1st, 2010). Similarly within the retail industry more than 30 per cent of employees are aged between 16 and 24 years old, compared to 13 per cent across the economy as a whole (Green et al., 2014). Again the vast majority of these younger workers work in front-line positions such as sales assistants and check out operators. Related to the discussion above is the important recognition that a significant part of the hospitality and retail workforce consists of students, who are an

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increasingly important segment of the labour market in these industries. Students are

prepared to work for low wages and be flexible in their working patterns (Canny, 2002),

creating what Curtis and Lucas (2001) describe as a 'coincidence of needs' between

employers and students. Thus, nearly three quarters of all students who are working are

employed in the retail and hospitality industries and the vast majority of students who are

working do so in front-line jobs such as sales assistants, waiters/waitresses and check out

operators (Canny, 2002; Curtis and Lucas, 2001). It is not just the flexibility of students

though that is welcomed by employers' and a number of studies have also pointed to them as

being 'good' employees in terms of offering appropriate 'soft' skills; including often having

the required aesthetic labour and, what Hochschild (1983: 95) has described as 'outgoing

middle class sociability', or more generally 'middle classness' demanded by employers

(Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010). The above discussion is useful

in recognising that, in part, the reliance of younger workers in hospitality and retail is simply

a structural one, reflecting the nature of the labour market for entry-level, front-line positions

in these industries. Beyond this point, though, it is also important to again re-affirm the

extent to which employers seek to recruit a particular age-profile as a result of seeking a 'fit'

between the brand image and the employees that represent that brand image.

Much of the above discussion highlights the manner in which implicitly and, often times

explicitly, many companies in the hospitality and retail sector make clear their preference for

younger workers to fit their brand image. Unsurprisingly then, the majority of research

which considers aesthetic labour has tended to highlight that employers in hospitality and

retail are particularly seeking young workers as a means to best reflect their desired brand

image. For example, within the hospitality industry in the style-driven hotel - Hotel Elba -

studied by Nickson et al. (2001) the hotel was seeking waiting staff that best fitted the hotel's

look. This look was described by the HR manager of the hotel as 'not an overly done up person … but neat and stylish … young, very friendly … people that look the part … fit in with the whole concept of the hotel' (cited on p. 180). More specifically, the hotel produced a job advert which contained a picture of a physically attractive young woman (in reality a model) who was felt to best represent the desired brand image and 'ideal' employee. Unsurprisingly then the desired employee for the hotel was described, for both men and women, as ideally a graduate aged between 19 and 25.

A further example from the hospitality industry can be found in Hooters, the American restaurant company, which serves as a good example to reflect the earlier point about how age will often intersect with other individual characteristics, in this case being female and 'good looking'. Thus the company has a very particular brand image which is premised on the recognition on its website that: 'Yes we have a pretty face. And sex appeal is part of our thing'. That face is embodied by the so-called 'Hooters Girls', or more prosaically the waitresses in the restaurants, who are expected to embody the 'Florida Beach Girl look' (Golding, 1998), which is the corporate image projected by the company. The company states that the Hooters Girls are 'the cornerstone of the Hooters concept'. Indeed, Golding notes how the company 'unashamedly uses nubile young waitresses dressed in skimpy tops to attract customers' (p. 7). The company has a uniform of short shorts, and a choice of a tight tank top, crop or tight T-shirt with the intent of projecting an image of 'sexy' waitresses. The company unashamedly recognises the maxim that 'sex sells'. It is also instructive to note that Hooters' corporate strategy has survived a challenge in the American courts, which upheld the company's right to promote itself on the basis of 'female sex appeal' (Prewitt, 2003) and thus to recruit only young, good looking women to be waiting staff.

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In the retail industry, again, there is much evidence of certain retail organisations specifically seeking younger workers. Pettinger (2004), in her work on aesthetic labour in high-end fashion retail found that 'workers at such stores are not only fashionably dressed, they are young, usually slim, with "attractive" faces' (p. 178). Similarly Gatta (2011) recognises how she was recruited to work as a 'Besty's Girl' in the eponymous dress boutique where she worked as she fitted with the company image being a young, white middle class girl who was friendly, energetic and would look good in the clothes sold in the shop. Perhaps the most famous retailer though for recruiting a particular aesthetic for their front-line staff is the American fashion retailer, Abercrombie & Fitch (hereafter A&F). The company has been well known for its overt approach to recruitment and selection, articulated in its 'looks policy', to ensure that their employees embody the desired brand image. This brand image is unashamedly about the creation of a look which is representative of a 'youthful All-American lifestyle' (Mohamedbhai, 2013). What is interesting is the manner in which the company, much like with the example of Hooters that we discussed above, has, until very recently, been unapologetic about this image. For example, in a newspaper profile the then CEO emphasised that the brand image was about, 'youth and sex, creating an idealised image of clean-cut, frat-boy hunks, and a conventional, cheerleader-type look for girls' (Saner, 2012). The consequences of such a look are nicely captured in the description by Williams and Connell (2010: 357) of the interior of an A&F store in which 'a well-toned and muscular young worker stands shirtless next to a huge poster that could be a photograph of his chest'.

What is interesting about A&F is the manner in which this look has been challenged as discriminatory in a number of ways, with the exception being any challenges based on age. For example, Fleener (2005) discusses how in 2004 the company agreed an approximately $50 million settlement with a number of plaintiffs from minority ethnic groupings, including

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African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. These plaintiffs either failed to get jobs or where excluded from sales floor positions as their natural physical features did not represent the company's conception of 'natural classic American style'. It was argued by the plaintiffs that the 'A&F look' was 'virtually all white' and as Corbett (2007: 155) notes 'these plaintiffs succeeded when the attractive look the employer was seeking was not just pretty, but pretty and *white*' (emphasis in original). In a similar vein in a UK store an employee with a prosthetic arm claimed that she had been forced to work in the store's stockroom because she did not fit the company's strict policy on appearance. Although the employment tribunal ruled that she did not suffer from disability discrimination, they did nevertheless award her £8,000 for unlawful harassment (Saner, 2012). Most recently the company has faced a number of claims of religious discrimination with regard to a number of young Muslim women who were either sacked or not hired due to them wearing hijab (Roberts, 2015). Clearly, then, A&F's adherence to such a strict 'looks policy' has contravened existing legislation around ethnicity, disability and religion. Given this situation it is might seem surprising that no cases have been brought forward under age discrimination. Indeed, as Mohamedbhai (2013) notes:

> Abercrombie's branding and marketing gives rise to an equally obvious and sinister age discrimination problem. If the company's employees are brand representatives, and the company's brand is clothing for the 'youthful All-American lifestyle,' then older workers will be naturally and predictably excluded.

To further emphasise this point, Mohamedbhai suggests that the company's 'potential for systematic age discrimination' is highlighted by internal company documents, including guidelines for appropriate clothing for front-line staff which is exclusively illustrated with

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noticeably young workers and by the wording of guidance provided to managers which suggests that they should only employ people who are 'energetic, dynamic, vigorous' and with 'a lively personality'. There is also an expectation that employees must be 'extroverted, fun, friendly, active, and social'. As Weller (2007) recognises what could be age-neutral recruitment criteria are often socially constructed to be associated with youth and arguably this description of the ideal employee in A&F could be seen as clearly describing younger employees.

As noted above, though, it has recently been reported that A&F intend to move away from their overt focus on looks and a letter sent to regional and district managers in the company noted that (Jung, 2015):

> Abercrombie & Fitch will recruit and hire the best associates whose focus will be on offering our customers an excellent in-store experience. We will not tolerate discrimination based on body type or physical attractiveness and will not tolerate discrimination in hiring based on any category protected under the law.

It remains to be seen what, in practice, the reality of these public pronouncements will be with regard to the company's approach to recruitment and selection. Indeed, there is some debate as to whether this decision reflects a sudden recognition of the ethical considerations of such a hiring policy or merely an attempt to reverse a decline in sales.

Notwithstanding the company's recent pronouncements, the longstanding marketing, branding and employment strategy of A&F would seem, on the face of it, to be contravening age discrimination legislation and unlike the aforementioned case of Hooters there would

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seem to be a greater chance of a legal challenge potentially being upheld. In that sense Hooters survived the challenge in the American courts by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) by arguing that the basis of the company brand is 'female sex appeal' and that this denotes a Bona Fide Occupational Qualification (BFOQ) (and see Malos, 2007). Indeed, it is important to recognise that organizations can prescribe the appearance of employees' if such prescriptions are based on the branding and marketing of the organization as part of its business plan and do not transgress existing discrimination legislation. Clearly then employers *do* have a legal right to set out aspects around appearance, either expressly or implied within a contract of employment, as long as this does not transgress the protected characteristics covered by employment law, which, of course, include age. Thus there would seem to be a potentially interesting argument to be had about the extent to which the likes of A&F and other retail or hospitality companies could claim that insistence on youthful front-line staff is a strong enough business argument or BFQO to effectively discriminate on the basis of age (and see Davis and Chun, 2012).

It is not just in the advanced economies though of the US and UK that many hospitality and retail organisations seemingly place a particular emphasis on employing young employees. Work by Hanser (2007) and Otis (2008) sheds light on how this process is equally pronounced in the emerging service economy in China, particularly in the hotels and retail outlets that are servicing the burgeoning numbers of wealthy Chinese customers and international travellers. For example, Hanser (2007) found very different expectations about the type of employee working in the retail industry in China depending on whether a department store was state owned or privately owned. The state owned store she studied largely catered to a working class clientele and accordingly was staffed by largely middle aged, working class women. By contrast the luxury store, which catered to the burgeoning

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and increasingly wealthy middle class Chinese and international customers, employed a workforce of young women, with most being under 30 (as the store only allowed young women to continue working as saleswomen up to the age of 30). In the latter store, Hanser notes how the rich, upwardly mobile customers were served by what are described as, 'an army of obedient, attractive young women' (p. 425). These prescriptions around age were explicit and at the point of recruitment workers 'had to meet strict requirements in terms of age (25 or younger at time of hire), education (high school or higher) and appearance' (p. 426). In a similar vein, Otis (2008) reports that within the two luxury hotels she studied most front-line workers were female high school graduates, who were aged from 17-28. Otis also notes how these young women were overtly sexualised by the company, by the use of sexualised uniforms, including French maid outfits and brocaded, thigh revealing, traditional Chinese dresses. She also recognises how unsuccessful applicants were rejected if they were 'too short', older than their late 20s or not deemed sufficiently attractive.

Given the preference for youthfulness and arguably 'middle classness' that is suggested by much of the research above it is worth briefly considering the case of young working class men. It is often suggested that their inability to secure and maintain service employment in the contemporary economy will often be related, to a large extent to their inappropriate embodiment. McDowell (2009) suggests for young working class men, whose fathers usually worked in manufacturing, their labour market opportunities will often be restricted to jobs in areas such as hospitality and retail. However, such working class men will often find that employers in these industries' find these, 'stroppy, macho, often awkward young men' (ibid.: 194) are less appealing than young women from the same class, working mothers, migrant workers, and increasingly, as we have noted above, middle class students of both genders. Thus, 'fit and healthy young [working class] men may now be counted among the

culturally oppressed, as their embodiment, their looks, their stance, their embodied hexis, seem threatening to potential employers and customers' (McDowell, 2009: 194). This is an interesting point in highlighting that being young does not axiomatically bestow advantage in the service labour market. It is not just young working class men though that would seem to be disadvantaged in securing work in the service sector.

The disadvantage that is faced by young working class men in accessing entry level service work is equally true to some extent for older employees, despite legislative attempts to address this issue. It is only relatively recently that in policy terms the UK Government has sought to encourage greater labour market participation by older workers through firstly the outlawing of age discrimination in 2006 and more recently by removing the default retirement age in 2011. Ostensibly such legislation would seem to suggest that organisations should adopt an age-neutral approach to the recruitment and selection of their employees. However, the attitudes expressed by Michael Gottlieb in the early 1990s, which we noted at the outset of the chapter, still seem to be prevalent at in large parts of the hospitality and retail industries, as much of our discussion above highlights. Additionally, a recent study by Metcalfe and Meadows (2010) found that awareness of age discrimination was lowest within hotels and restaurants, with the same study also finding that equal opportunities policies covering age were least common in the sector. Consequently they suggest that organizations in hospitality may need targeting to improve their age-related policies and practices. More generally the same study also found continuing illegal practices within recruitment. For example, two per cent of establishments normally included a preferred age range in their advertisements - something that is now illegal with age discrimination legislation - whilst 42 per cent sought information on age in the recruitment process and 28 per cent made age information available to recruiters. These findings perhaps reflect the negative views which

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have often been held towards older workers. Research on older workers has revealed that they are often perceived as not having relevant skills, being inflexible and reluctant to change, have low productivity, find it hard to adapt to new technology and have difficulties in keeping up with the speed of work (Jenkins and Poulston, 2014). Many of these perceptions the CIPD (2012) has recently suggested are 'myths', which are not substantiated by research evidence, but they still retain the ability to shape attitudes to older workers.

This prejudice and discrimination towards older workers seems surprising given the widespread recognition of demographic trends which suggest the challenges arising from an ageing population. For example, a recent report from the CIPD (2012) notes that the UK is running out of workers and although there are likely to be around 13.5 million job vacancies in the next ten years, only seven million young people will leave school/college. The most recent *Working Futures* report from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) recognises that the service sector will continue to be the main engine of jobs growth in the UK and that caring, personal and other service occupations and elementary occupations (occupational categories that cover front-line work in hospitality and retail) will continue to grow, whilst other occupational groups decline (Wilson, Beaven, May-Gillings, Hay & Stevens, 2014; and for a discussion of similar trends in the US see Hayutin, Beals & Borges, 2013). It seems reasonable to assume that within this context older people will be one, if not the, main source of currently untapped labour to potentially fill these jobs (see for example Altmann, 2015; People 1st, 2014). Indeed, it has recently been suggested that within the UK approximately 1.2 million people who are aged 50+, and are seeking employment, currently do not have a job (The Prince's Initiative for Mature Enterprise, 2014). For this resource though to be used it seems there is still some way to go to change attitudes about older workers who often still face outdated stereotypes when it comes to recruitment.

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Consequently the CIPD (2012) suggest that managing a healthy ageing workforce requires employers to move away from 'stereotypical thinking –both conscious and unconscious – about age and what people can or can't do' as such 'thinking influences the way people at work and managed and the way people themselves behave' (p. 6). Such prescriptions though remain challenging and as Jenkins and Poulston (2014) note age discrimination is arguably the least recognised and acknowledged prejudice in modern society. Indeed, writing in an Australian context Weller (2007) suggests that employer discrimination is the single most important factor for older workers not gaining employment. In the US, for example, recent research suggests that 64 per cent of workers aged 45-74 had experienced age discrimination, with workers in their 50s the most likely to experience discrimination (Grossman, 2013). In a similar vein age is the most widely experienced form of discrimination in Europe, with people over 50 feeling that employers will prefer to hire a person in their 20s rather than an older person (LRD, 2011). For older workers it can be especially difficult to gain a new job, especially once they are over 45. In that sense it is perhaps no great surprise that recent research in the UK found that people aged 50-64 are more likely to be long-term unemployed, with nearly half of those unemployed aged 50-64 having been unemployed for longer than one year, compared with 30.6 per cent of those under 50 (Metcalfe and Meadows, 2010).

Notwithstanding the challenges potentially facing older workers in securing employment in industries like hospitality and retail it is also important to consider research which highlights some of the more positive views of older workers in these industries. In this regard work undertaken by Qu and Cheng (1996) in Hong Kong and Magd (2003) in the UK is useful to appreciate how older workers can be seen in a positive light within hospitality workplaces. This research suggests that employers may see older workers in a more positive vein due to:

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low absenteeism, fewer accidents, low turnover rate, being motivated, hard-working and diligent, having a sense of responsibility, good communication skills and credibility with customers. Support for these points can also be seen in the examples of McDonalds and Wetherspoons, who have been highlighted for their willingness to employ older workers (DWP, 2013). For example, although McDonald's tended to be associated with a younger workforce they also employ older workers recognising the manner in which their social skills are highly appropriate for service operations. A survey of managers in the company found that they felt that older workers enhanced customer satisfaction due to their ability to empathise and connect with customers and their ability to go the extra mile to deliver good quality service. Indeed, it was found that levels of customer satisfaction were 20 per cent higher in stores that employed staff aged 60 and over as part of a mixed age workforce. Similarly, Wetherspoons is another company who are actively seeking older workers. The company stopped using a retirement age in 2006 and pub managers are trained to ensure that in recruiting staff they do not discriminate based on age. In recruiting older workers Wetherspoons see such workers as having valuable skills and experience which allows them to empathize with customers due to their broad range of experiences and often command greater respect from customers. The company also feels that it is important that having older workers allows it to reflect its customer base.

Within the retail industry again there is some evidence of employers having more positive views of older workers. For example, within the US retail is one of the industries identified as being most likely to employ workers aged 55+ (Hayutin et al., 2013). Indeed, within the US of the top 15 jobs held by those workers over 65 and those aged 55-64 retail sales people is, respectively for each group, third and eighth (Grossman, 2013). There is also evidence of companies seeking an older workforce demographic which fits their brand image. For

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example, although as we noted above, around a third of employees in the retail are aged from 16-24, the UK retailer Marks and Spencer, which arguably appeals to an older customer base, has over a third of its employees aged over 50 (DWP, 2013). In a similar vein the home improvement retailer, B&Q, has been widely acknowledged as proactively seeking to employ an older workforce. For example, Foster (2004) notes how the company found that older staff are more likely to own their own home and to have carried out home improvement so consequently are perceived by customers as being better placed to offer appropriate advice for home improvements. Indeed, Foster recognises how nearly a fifth of B&Q's workforce is over 50, with some stores being wholly staffed by over-50s (Public Health England, 2014). Foster (2004) recognises how many of the front-line staff in B&Q were retired ex-tradesmen who in addition to having a high degree of technical knowledge, were also felt to 'look the part'. Thus in her focus group research with customers it was found that older male staff were perceived to have more knowledge which enables them to offer trusted advice on home improvements.

Towards a future research agenda

Having examined the issue of aesthetic labour and age in the hospitality and retail industries this section of the chapter briefly considers a future research agenda as, to-date, there is a surprising lack of research which explicitly considers this issue. A key point in any future research agenda is the need to recognise the triadic nature of the service encounter which highlights the need to do research with managers, employees and customers. Indeed, it is interesting that of the limited amount of research which has specifically considered age and appearance in front-line service work the recent work by Davies and Chun (2012) on the influence of age stereotyping on customer evaluations of corporate brands in fashion retail and Foster and Resnick (2013) on age and gender in the service encounter in a health and

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beauty retailer both include customers in their research design. Both Davies and Chun and Foster and Resnick also make the important point about how certain service environments could arguably be seen as age neutral, offering the example of supermarkets as one such environment. This is an interesting point and would suggest that a fruitful way forward to begin to more explicitly consider age and aesthetic labour is consideration of the particular service environment. We would argue then that further research could usefully consider the extent to which discrimination may vary depending on the product being sold. Thus, when examining age discrimination in service workplaces, the impact of industry (e.g. retail and hospitality), sub-sectors within the industry (e.g. electrical retailer vs fashion retailer or style-driven boutique hotel vs a mid-market branded hotel), product market (e.g. high-end and low-end) and departmental differences (e.g. back-of-house jobs and front-line jobs) are all worthy of further exploration to further illuminate this issue. Additionally, the relationship between age and other personal attributes, such as gender and ethnicity, is worthy of further research with Davies and Chun (2012) highlighting that in the context of service businesses female employees are more likely to be affected by age stereotyping than male employees, for example. Furthermore as we noted in our introduction attitudes to age are culturally constructed and thus there is also considerable scope for further research to see how these issues play out within different institutional and cultural contexts. Although the chapter offered some limited evidence of a similar reliance on young women in the burgeoning up-market Chinese hospitality and retail industry clearly there is significant scope to examine attitudes to older workers in other emerging economies.

Demographic and economic change, particularly an ageing population in many developed countries are driving shifts in the composition of the workforce. This has resulted in a 'perfect storm' through the coalescence of, *inter alia*, a declining youth workforce available

to the service sector (Baum, 2010); increased demand for skills attendant on elder care as populations live longer; and, finally, the consequences of the pensions crisis (Casey, 2012) that has forced many people to remain in the workforce for longer. As a result, organisations historically able to select employees on the basis of aesthetic criteria may well be forced to modify their expectations and accommodate older workers within their teams. Systematic and longitudinal monitoring of such change will constitute an important and fruitful future research theme.

One final point to consider is, moving beyond more traditional research approaches, the potential use of visual methodologies in assessing views of employee age and aesthetic labour. In that regard the recent work of Harris and Small (2013) on obesity and aesthetic labour in the hotel industry provides a useful template for such research. In this work the authors analysed over 100 images in on-line promotional videos of hotel staff and found that none portrayed a person of a size considerably overweight or obese, and instead 91 percent had a slim build, with only nine percent being slightly larger. It is also noteworthy that of these slightly larger staff, almost all of them were older Caucasian men. It is easy to see how such an approach could also usefully shed light on how other hospitality and retail employers present their brand image through marketing and recruitment literature, as our earlier discussion of A&F highlights.

Conclusion

In spite of age legislation in the UK and elsewhere, there appears to be continuing discrimination facing older workers seeking employment. This chapter has examined this issue within the context of the hospitality and retail industries. In particular, the chapter has considered how the increasing emphasis placed by companies in these industries on their

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employees' appearance or aesthetic labour has the potential to exclude older workers from front-line positions. In part, as we acknowledged in the chapter the manifest reliance on younger workers is a function of the labour market for which companies draw for front-line positions. Over and above this point though there also appears to be evidence of a number of hospitality and retail companies deliberately seeking to employ younger workers in support of their brand image. Thus, it is clear that the bulk of extant research on aesthetic labour has highlighted a preference for younger workers to best embody the brand image in hospitality and retail, although we did also note a smaller number of examples in which companies were seeking older workers to best fit their brand image, most obviously B&Q. Equally, it is clear that there are a large number of age neutral service environments where, in theory, age should be of no consequence in the recruitment and selection process. Such a view would also recognise the business case for ensuring an appropriate range of employee ages to reflect a broad customer base. That said, in suggesting a future research agenda more research is required to examine this issue to better highlight the potential for unconscious bias towards older workers by hiring managers in the hospitality and retail industries and how this bias might be addressed (and see Altmann, 2015; Jenkins and Poulston, 2014). This research would seem essential in light of the discussion of the widespread use of informality and the 'blink' moment in recruitment and selection discussed in the chapter (Gatta, 2011).

What is clear though from our discussion is that older workers will become an ever more important part of the labour market in future years due to demographic changes. As the reduction in the availability of 'young labour' continues, hospitality and retail companies will find themselves competing for older workers with sectors like social care, who with an increasing demand for caring skills, are set for continuing growth (Wilson et al., 2014). Whilst such a scenario means that it is unlikely that the likes of A&F and other style-driven

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organisations will suddenly start recruiting older workers for many other hospitality and retail

companies, who are perhaps far less stringent in their looks policy, there may be an

increasing recognition of the necessity, and indeed the benefits, of employing older workers.

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[i] Plus-size in this context indicates those who are US sizes 14-28 (UK equivalent sizes would be 16-30).

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