

## **RELATIONS OVER THE COSMETIC COUNTER: A SPACE OF IDENTIFICATION, DISTANCE OR HOSTILITY?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The cosmetic floor is regarded as the centre stage of a department store. Premium beauty brands spread across the sales area in luxuriously designed cosmetic counters, and at the heart of all this glamour are the retail beauty workers. As aesthetic workers, their job is not limited to appearing impeccable; as service workers, too, their routine involves affective and emotional labour as well. However, working on the cosmetic floor is more than just looking good and sounding right. At times, retail beauty workers have to manage hostility that transpires at the very counters that are designed to provide beautiful experiences. The purpose of this article is to describe and explain the working conditions at the cosmetic counters which give rise to this hostility. To do this the research employed biographical research, fieldwork and unstructured interviews methods. The findings of this research reveal alienated relations and hostility on the cosmetic floor and it comes in the form of contradictory social exchanges between customers, retail beauty workers and the cosmetic floor.

**Keywords:** beauty workers, beauty, beauty mystique, cosmetic, hostility, retail

### **INTRODUCTION**

On the cosmetic floors of departmental stores, famous beauty brands spread as far as the customer can see; the marble and gold of the cosmetic counters glow; oversized photos of famous and beautiful women guarantee the effects of these products. This floor is designed to be a space where customers can purchase the hopes and dreams of different types of beauty (brands). Everything is within reach and at a budget that is much more attractive than that of cosmetic surgery.

Behind these cosmetic counters, stand the retail beauty workers who were recruited to be the face of their employers. Not only they are coached relentlessly on their service responsibilities and technical expertise, they are also required to be well groomed at all time. There are reasons for their impeccable grooming: first to reflect the style and vision of the beauty brand and, second, to encourage consumption in the store (see Pettinger, 2004). The cosmetic floor is where magic is expected, where retail beauty workers will work with customers in the quest for beauty.

However, a visit to the cosmetic counter is not a straightforward encounter. While it may bring excitement, it can also be a perplexing or even harrowing event. During fieldwork, I often heard of customers who felt overwhelmed in the cosmetics department; the atmosphere made them tense and they found that the cosmetic workers at the counter often seemed hostile. Later, after fieldwork, I found that sentiment reinforced in anecdote. A stylish and internationally famous Australian sociology

professor, for example, told me that she often had to rush through the cosmetics section when entering a department store, because the cosmetic workers made her feel anxious.

It appears, then, that in a space where beauty is being worshipped, in an atmosphere that is attentive and serene, there is also a sense of hostility at play, and that customers associate this with the retail beauty workers who are supposed to please and serve them. The unintended affective display of the workers creates a sense of ambiguity on the cosmetic floor. How are ugly encounters emerging from a place of beauty and from a service relation that is designed specifically for the customers' pleasure?

Karlsson's research on aesthetic labour (2012: 51) may help us. He brought to light the paradoxical judgement that can occur in aesthetical work, arguing that normative judgments about beauty carry in them judgments about ugliness. We cannot decipher beauty without taking into account the weight of its opposition. And we can delve further into the relation of beauty and hostility through Etkoff's enquiry into the nature of the former. Etkoff (1999, p. 67) argued that beauty has its disadvantages:

Women torture themselves about minor beauty flaws, and can't help but compare their looks with those of other women. When the other woman is more beautiful, they feel envious, and may subconsciously try to even the score (she must be dumb or shallow, a bitch or a bore) .... On the one hand, women admire beautiful women, copy their styles, and allow them top places on the female hierarchy. But they also envy these women, and the envy poisons the pleasure. Envy is hostility toward the very thing one desires.

This contradictory relationship is at play in the estrangement of the beauty engagement. Etkoff reveals that although women admire other women, they also consider them oppositional when it comes to aesthetic value, regardless of what other elements are involved. It is likely that this oppositional mirroring underlay the upset experienced both by customers whom I encountered in fieldwork and women, like the professor, to whom I have subsequently spoken. Indeed, as we will see, the retail beauty workers themselves experience a similar hostility in their relations with colleagues in the cosmetic industry. The fact that relations that are supposed to generate pleasure and beauty also generate hostility and moral ugliness seems to be intrinsic to the encounter at the cosmetic counter, and not an accidental and incidental event. The research objective is to investigate the condition of the cosmetic counter that generate for retail beauty workers and customers such a contradictory and paradoxical situation. To do this, we will have to understand more of the beauty industry and the high-end of the retail industry.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***A Brief Overview of Retail Beauty<sup>i</sup>***

Briot (2011) claims that the perfume business became an industry when a new generation of perfumers appeared as Europe began to emerge from war in the early nineteenth century. This was also the time when commercial awareness was being merged with prestige. Among the most creative figures at that time were Eugene Rimmel in London and François-Pascal Guerlain from Picardy.<sup>ii</sup> Rimmel was one of the first to publish illustrated mail-order catalogues and to place advertisements in theatre programmes.

Later in the nineteenth century there was a divergence in the distribution of perfume sales. Some perfumers preferred to maintain the highest prices and exclusivity by selling their products only in their own shops, whereas others sold them in department stores, which offered lower price and quicker turnover. Stores such as *Le Bon Marché*, *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre* and *Les Grands Magasins du Printemps* (see Briot, 2011) began to open in Paris in the 1850s and they were later emulated in New York and Chicago by stores such as Lord and Taylor, Macy's and Marshall Field's.

The success of the beauty business relied heavily on the department stores. Although they may not have been the largest distributors, the stores nevertheless instilled a broader social acceptance of cosmetics by giving the beauty industry an aura of luxury (Jeacle, 2006, p. 92). As the popularity of department stores soared, so did the competition between them. In order to have the edge over the competition, each store sought to offer an extravaganza of facilities and this in turn created a new form of consumer culture. By 1930, Jeacle (2006, p. 93) notes, the cosmetics division had moved from Harrods' 'Drug Department' to its own 'Perfumery and Toilet Department' as a consequence of its substantial success in the store. It was not long before the cosmetics department became the 'face' of the department stores.

Let us turn now to the present day, and the findings from the current research. Premium beauty products are sold in the major department stores in most countries of the world. For example, in Malaysia, these products are retailed in Parkson, Isetan and Aeon and in Australia they are retailed in Myer and David Jones.<sup>iii</sup> Among many others, some of the recognizable high-end beauty brands<sup>iv</sup> retailed in the departmental stores are Chanel, Dior, Estée Lauder and Mac. To get these products on their shelves, the department stores have to purchase them from the beauty manufacturing companies either through consignment or concession agreements. Although the beauty company may suggest the retail price for the products, the retail stores are not required to adhere to it. Nonetheless, as most stores sell the same lines of products, their prices become regulated. This point is made because it raises the key question: if every store is selling the same products, what competitive edge can each hope to achieve? The answer is: reputation, image, loyalty programmes, the ambience of the store and, of course, the services offered by the employees. These 'intangibles' are not nice extras, then, but are fundamental to the logic of the department store. Customers come to these shores not just to buy goods, but to partake in experiences of luxury and privilege.

When an agreement is signed between the store and the beauty company, the beauty company will offer retail support in the form of retail beauty workers.<sup>v</sup> This provision is what sets high-end and mass beauty retailing apart. Beauty products purchased in pharmacies and supermarkets can be bought off the shelf with minimal assistance, whereas in the high-end retail stores, there will usually be a retail beauty worker offering advice and assistance. The retail beauty worker is the bridge between customer and product, and this mediated service relationship is central to the exclusivity and luxury of the store and, by extension, the beauty brand and beauty product. Nonetheless, none of this retailing can occur without the space to do so. When an agreement is signed between the store and the beauty company, both of these parties also agree on the space in which the beauty brand will carry out its business and this space is the cosmetic counter.

The cosmetic counter is the 'office' or 'consulting room' of the retail beauty workers. It serves as their meeting point with customers who seek beauty. With their affective smile, poised display and friendly approach, the retail beauty workers welcome the customers at the counter. This is the ideal and expectation. Realistically, however, approaching the counter can often be a daunting experience and this

is something which is felt not only by the customers but also by those in the industry. When Bitner (1992) researched the service industry's landscape, she found that people respond cognitively, emotionally and physiologically to the service's landscape. More pertinently, she discovered that service organization controlled the dimensions of the physical environment to not only augment workers and customers' reaction but to confine them as well. Perhaps the hostility on the cosmetic floor is this focus on premium and luxury in a confined and highly semiotically-charged space. This paper shall investigate the hostility which can arise in the space where the dreams of beauty are being sold through a jar of hope.

### ***Affective and Emotional Labour***

Research into aesthetic labour has included many industries: fashion retail (Hall & Van den Broek, 2012; Pettinger, 2004, 2005; Williams & Connell, 2010), the media (Dean, 2005; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006), hospitality (Nickson et al., 2005; Sherman, 2006; Warhurt & Nickson, 2007), airlines (Spiess & Waring, 2005; Williams, 2003) and hairstyling (Chugh & Hancock, 2009; Sheane, 2012). However, there has been no research which has focused on the beauty industry and its store retailing except for the works of Black (2004), who studied beauty salons, Kang (2010) who researched nail salons and Pettinger (2004) who explored high-end fashion retail. These studies paid attention to the embodiment of the aesthetic worker, emotional labour, consumption work or aesthetic labour as a labour process but not the paradoxical situation that can be found in aesthetic work. There are however a few studies that focused on the contradictory issues in aesthetic work, such as the work of Korczynski and Ott (2004) that studied the contradicting sovereignty of customers. In Fredriksson (2011) study, she stressed that the relationships between fashion and retail are of oppositional but often seen as an allied union. Despite these studies, research on the contradictory implications that can arise from aesthetic labour were very limited.

Warhurst and Nickson (2007, p. 107) defined aesthetic labour as "the employment of workers with desired corporeal dispositions". Aesthetic workers are seen as the 'hardware' of the organization in which they have to embody the brands of the organization through their outward characteristics even though they are not hired specifically as models (Witz et al., 2003, p. 33). This form of aesthetic labour is not without controversy; issues such as sexism, racism and ageism have been raised and studied by Barry (2007), Weller (2007) and Williams (2003).

Mears (2014) believed that display work is an important element of aesthetic work but asserted that affective (Wissinger, 2007) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003) are equally important. According to Wissinger (2007), different from emotional labour, affective labour is when workers convey their emotional energies through their body to create an affection, much in the way that a bikini poster can create a need to diet, and although it creates affection it is not necessarily a form of emotional management. Hochschild (2003, p. 7) described emotional management as the effort to "... induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others ...". In short, it is the management of one's emotions so that they can present an acceptable front to others and in doing so can influence others' disposition. For example, a sales person might offer a cheerful emotional state in a tense sales negotiation in order to reduce the stress of the negotiation. Aesthetic workers are guided and trained by the employing organization to sway customers based on their affective labour and this coincides closely with their emotionally laden service work.

Emotional labour is not without its problems. The formative figure of emotional labour, Arlie

Hochschild (2003), showed that emotional labour can have its consequences. She suggested that service workers who suppress their emotions for the sake of their work can become estranged from their real emotions. She wrote, “When we succeed in lending our feelings to the organizational engineers of worker-customer relations – we may pay a cost in how we hear our feelings ourselves” (2003, p. 21). Macdonald and Sirianni (1996, p. 3) showed that this form of labour is not limited to service work but is also found among white-collar professionals, such as doctors, teachers and lawyers, and they commented that the emotional labour of these professionals is not as heavily supervised and managed compared with service workers in the retail industry. Further to this, if we take affective labour into consideration, workers also have to sustain an affective demeanour in order to sustain the appearance required by their employer even though at times they may not feel ‘luxurious’ at all. In summary, aesthetic workers have to offer a sunny disposition and an impeccable external display and must suppress their true emotions while simultaneously experiencing estrangement.

### ***The Mystique of Beauty***

Before we turn to the current research findings, we need to review the literature on the semiotic load of the cosmetic counter and, in particular, the oppositional discourses and relations associated with beauty. Previous research can help explaining the contradictory and paradoxical situations of the retail beauty worker. In his two-part article of ‘Truth and goodness, mirrors and masks: a sociology of beauty and the face’ (1989, 1990), Anthony Synnott offers a bifold approach to understanding beauty. He says,

The beauty mystique, in its simplest form, is the belief that the beautiful is good, and the ugly is evil; and conversely that the morally good is physically beautiful (or ‘good-looking’) and the evil is ugly (1989, p. 611).

According to Synnott, then, what is considered beautiful is morally saintly or righteous, and in opposition to the ugly, which is morally valued as sinful and wrong. This reflects the paradoxical relation that can be found in beauty narratives. Due to beauty’s affinity with goodness, people attempt to put their best face forward: to have an unsightly face is to reveal a ‘bad’ or unacceptable side of the self (see Synnott, 1990, p. 61). There is a moral pressure to put on a mask that is socially conventional. Clearly, beauty is not simply just about physical appearance but it has a significant connotation and it is affective.

How does one know, then, what form of beauty is socially accepted? By copying, says Synnott (1990, p. 62)

It is also the *particular* face we select from range of possible options, depending on our self-definition, the person we wish to project, our artistic skill and our interests in impression-management: make-up is mask.

Prior to adopting a *particular* face in which we wish to project, we will go through available options and choose a face that reflects the values we identified with. Efcoff was also alluding to this self-selective process when she says,



On the one hand, women admire beautiful women, copy their styles, and allow them top places on the female hierarchy. But they also envy these women, and the envy poisons the pleasure (1999).

With this idea of mimicry, we near a key idea in our explanation of the hostility at the counter. By desiring a certain face, a certain style, a certain appearance, we are idealising it, and mirroring it: i.e. seeing it as a reflection of ourselves.<sup>vi</sup> However, there are consequences in this mirroring attempt. As Etcoff observes, while women identified with the women they idealized, they were also jealous of them. This is because when we attempt to mirror a face that we are not, we reveal a hidden part of ourselves that we regard as lacking. In identifying with others, we are not seeing them as they are. We are seeing what they tell us about our desires, and, more especially, about the lacks we feel defined by and seek to overcome. While we may apparently look at others we admire, we are nevertheless just reflecting our own lacks through their faces. These mirrored faces show us both who we would ideally like to be and the lacks that come to represent what we *really* are.

To mirror beauty, then, is to be disengaged with the self and others. We reveal our lacks and expose our disconnection with others. It is an alienating process because we are distanced from each other. This mirroring process is essential to the discussion of paradoxes at the counter. Being at the counter, for the customers and for the retail beauty workers, involves a form of selfhood that wants to match the beauty presented in the advertising images and the beauty workers all around. This desire pulls people out of relation with the real world and into a purely internal and fantastic dialogue between contradictory aspects of the self. In mirroring the beauty portrayed we are only looking at ourselves, rather than being involved in open relations at the counter. We are self-centred, and dismissive of the potential and otherness and unique beauty both of the other and of our own lives.

If beauty reflects good, beauty exchanges should be characterised by an open and gracious meeting where we respect and value the uniqueness of others. But the beauty exchange based on mirroring, i.e. on idealisation and identification, is far from open and gracious. It is reductive, turning the unique qualities of others and of life into pros and cons, lacks and ideals. For every ideal that is identified, there are qualities that might have been seen as beautiful that have been turned, simply, into inadequacies to be overcome.

This explains the contradiction at the beauty counter. A beautiful and gracious encounter is expected, but it goes strangely missing when experiences at the counter are based on mirroring.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on a larger qualitative research project<sup>vii</sup> conducted in the retail beauty industry in Penang and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, and in Sydney in Australia. The study employed the biographical method, fieldwork and unstructured in-depth interviews as research methods. The biographical element involved the work journal which the author had written prior to the start of the research, when she was employed as a retail beauty worker. This impromptu and unofficial journal offered an unguided account of the daily life of a retail beauty worker. Using this account, it was possible to focus the research on repeated themes which the researcher could then use as a guide in the next step of the research, the fieldwork. To conduct the fieldwork, the author worked as a retail beauty worker for six months in Sydney. During the fieldwork, the author kept field notes of her participation and

observations in the industry by paying specific attention to the social relations in the industry. Following the analysis of these field notes, key issues and questions for the subsequent interviews were identified. For this research, nineteen retail beauty workers were invited for interview. The interviews were minimally structured to encourage the interviewees to share their experiences unreservedly. This resulted in lengthy texts which revealed tensions and reservations<sup>viii</sup> in the industry. For the purpose of this paper, these personal observations and experiences of hostile situations at the counter will be discussed and analysed.

## **RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

It is time to return to and more closely examine the experiences of customers visiting the cosmetic floor. The research found that, regardless of culture and locality, the unfriendly nature of the cosmetic floor can communicate itself to those who visit it or even just pass through it. It appears that there is an impenetrable force field which is felt once customers enter the cosmetics department of a store and that at the centre of this tension are the retail beauty workers. It should be noted that both the customers who told me of this tension, and the professor, had experienced this sense of being unwelcome before any actual interaction with the cosmetic workers. Just the prospect of the cosmetic counters and workers was enough of a trigger. This suggests that meaningful exchanges had happened even though particular physical interactions had not occurred. The problem is not this or that unwelcoming worker, but the very idea of cosmetic counters.

### ***Unease at the Counter***

The following is Norah's experience. Norah was a 28-year-old Chinese Malaysian retail beauty worker. Prior to her customer returning to Norah, the customer was found to be wandering the counter with a concerned look. She made a few enquiries with Norah and left the counter after Norah attended to her. Norah's interaction with her customer reveals a common encounter at the cosmetics counter.

*'She came back five minutes later and decided to buy the product which I had recommended. She told me that she felt uncomfortable initially standing in front of the counter because the girls at other beauty counters often make her feel unwelcome.'*

What prompted this customer's sense of unease in the cosmetic department? According to Foster and Resnick (2013), customers choose their salesperson based on how they see themselves in the salesperson. They argue that customers chose the salesperson based on their gender and in some case ethnicity and race. In this mirroring relation, satisfying relation are expected to occur when salesperson and customer were similar i.e. appearance, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status. This form of mirroring can be helpful as it aids the customer in fashioning an interaction that is familiar and manageable and affirming. It is a mirroring that the stores encourage, by selecting employees who, in gender and ethnicity, match the demographics of the customer base. But, of course, this sameness can also highlight a difference: if gender and ethnicity match, why is one person on the customer and the other person on the salesperson side of the counter? Why is one person in the position of modelling beauty and the other in the position of needing to buy a product to overcome what they otherwise lack?

What occurred for Norah's customer was that the customer had had to go through a mirroring process in her quest for beauty, but before she could decide which counter to approach, she had to identify<sup>ix</sup> many of the retail beauty workers on the floor who seemed closest to her need and she could only do that based on the front which they displayed. Although identification can be seen a form of admiration, the poise of the workers and the luxury front of the counter no doubt caused Norah's customer to become self-conscious and aware of her own insecurities. In seeing her ideals presented immaculately, she cannot avoid seeing herself as she fantasies that the ideal figure would see her. Is her hair perfect? Is her nose too big? Is her lipstick poorly applied? Is she ugly? Do they pity her? Suddenly, the questions of how she appears and who she is are in the hands of this untouchable model of beauty.

In the short span of time spent at the cosmetic counter, Norah's customer experienced an existential crisis which was caused by a carefully made-up display and which resulted in tensed relationships. Even though both the physical and the affective display of the worker and the counter were intended to create a prestige front in order to draw in the customers, by means of a mirroring process, this very desire also created an unintended sense of hostility for the customer.

In finalising the transaction with her customer, Norah was fortunate, because she had been informed of the customer's mental state and emotional vulnerability. Norah may have been an aesthetic worker but she was also a service worker. Knowing the condition that was presented to her, she would have been alert to the danger of confirming the existing fears that the customer had in relation to retail beauty workers. But usually, of course, workers are not forewarned. This is an important point. It is not that individual workers cause this sense of panic, through their high-handed behaviour; the presumption of high-handedness pre-exists their real-life encounters and often precludes the opportunity to meet customers, face-to-face, as real people. The workers have meanings projected on them, by customers, before they meet. And this is part of the basic marketing plan of the beauty companies and the department stores.

In other words, the retail beauty workers themselves also suffer from this unintended hostility. As real people, they go unseen by customers who cannot get past their presumptions about them. Often, the unsuspecting retail beauty workers have to bear the brunt of this tension when they were approached at the cosmetics counter because the customers might already have their defences up. In managing customers who are already tense, the workers must, no doubt, manage their own emotions as well as those of their customers. They too can feel unrecognised and overwhelmed.

### ***Beauty and Others***

This experience of hostility is not limited to customers alone; those in the industry can also feel this way. In one of the beauty meetings which the author attended in Malaysia, one of the higher-ranking managers encouraged the retail beauty workers to offer a friendlier affective composure. Sharing her own experience, she said, '*Generally people are intimidated to go to the store. Look at the girls from Chanel: they are so prim and proper, I'd be scared to go in.*'

Even though she was a senior manager who made decisions about the display and the services of the retail beauty workers, this manager felt precisely the same hostility as Norah's customer. Despite the fact that the manager approved of the prim and proper demeanour of the Chanel retail beauty workers, she also felt the conflict generated by this appearance, and she was drawing on her own ongoing experience as a customer when giving managerial advice to the retail beauty workers of her



organization<sup>x</sup>. Her advice, however, left the quandary for the workers to solve, even though its cause was systemic. Without appreciating how the basic logic of beauty marketing generates the problem, she leaves it to individual retail beauty workers to reverse this intimidating effect, though their affective and emotional labour.

This example highlights the way in which retail beauty workers have to work in a contradictory situation. They work in an industry that creates and sells beauty by generating in the customer a set of ideals and a matching set of lacks. These standards are meant to be awesome and overpowering and determinative, and they position workers in such a way that customers see them as symbols and not as people. And yet the workers are meant to be personable and caring and unthreatening. Retail beauty workers have to remain charming while selling in a setting that generates hostility.

The following account of is of Rosa. She is a 21 years old Vietnamese Australian university student working as a part-time retail beauty worker. She reveals her feeling working amongst the retail beauty workers on the cosmetic floor.

*'You know what they talk about? 'Oh, I bought a Chanel lip gloss just yesterday and I am thinking of buying a Dior one today.' It's like they are showing off. Aren't they superficial stuff? I am only a student, and to me that doesn't appeal to me. Not yet. I probably can't afford it being a student. But their conversations made me feel awkward. I felt left out and obviously I can't brag about buying a Sally Hansen nail polish last week. I'd feel like an idiot. All the time they will be talking about this superficial stuff. '*

One contradiction that can be observed in Rosa's narrative are her inconsistent views about branded items. Rosa was complaining about the superficiality that can come from having branded items while at the same time she indicated she might buy these products if she had more money. Rosa understood that having all these brands is not a trait equivalent to being virtuous, which was why she labelled them superficial, but yet she desired these brands. If we look further, what Rosa desired was perhaps not the brand itself but the social acceptability that she hoped would come via possession of these brands: it would give her the ticket to be accepted in the conversations from which she felt excluded. The only way for her to be accepted was to copy the beauty her colleagues were talking about at the cosmetic counter. Rosa's experience reminds us of Efcoff's discussion about women and beauty. In the process of emulating the object of their desire, Efcoff's women were, intentionally or not, deriding both the object and those who desire it. What is clear in Rosa's narrative is that her desire to belong to a group was, for her, a form of self-derision as well.

This article has previously highlighted that exclusion in a relation can come from the mirroring process. Rosa's attempt to mirror her colleagues had revealed her own lack. She did not feel she is a part of the team because she is missing a Chanel or Dior lipstick. She believed she could only join them by being like them. The consequence is, in the midst of this identification process, she excluded herself from the relationship. This is a paradoxical situation which leaves Rosa internal and externally disjointed; in desiring the approval of others, she is split from them and from our own sense of reality. She was not seeing herself nor was she seeing her colleagues at the counter. Relations were fractured in the mirror of fantasised beauty.

## CONCLUSION

A feeling of antagonism can come from the contradicting experience one encounters when visiting, or when working at, the cosmetic counter. This antagonism often translates to hostility on the cosmetic floor. It is an outcome from the idealised perception of ‘beauty’ on the floor. Beauty here is no longer limited to outward appearance but it has become subjective and moral.

A visit to the cosmetic floor is supposed to offer access to the hopes and dreams which are put forward by the beauty brands. If customers are convinced, they have already bought into these dreams. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in this paper, the trip to the cosmetic floor is an upsetting and antagonizing experience for some of the customers and for those who work in the industry, regardless of the individuals who participate in the exchanges. Although the cosmetic floor *can* offer a space for social encounter, it is often, consciously or unconsciously, a tense exchange. Norah’s customer shows how presumption, fantasy and projected ideals fracture real relations, both between people and ‘within’ both the customer and the worker. Rosa’s relationship with her colleagues and the high-rank manager’s feelings of intimidation on the floor reveal how working within the cosmetic floor can incur a feeling of hostility as well. It is clear that the felt antagonism on the cosmetic floor general: the cosmetic counter divides workers from customers, customers from other customers, workers from other workers, each customer from their real life process and each worker from their real life process. The cosmetic counter generates distance and antagonism because it is a mirror that splits who we are from the ideals with which we identify.

The beauty industry is intended to sell beauty, or at least the hope of it, but in doing so it reveals a contradictory side. The retail beauty workers’ job is to display themselves in the way that is required of them. Although this presentation of the self possibly makes them enviable, it also makes them unapproachable. There are paradoxes to be found on the cosmetic floor and it is linked to the idea of beauty. The cosmetic counter itself carries with it this paradox. While it is the place to fix the face, it is also *the* face that reminds you of your lack. Despite describing the polarity of beauty Synnott (1990, p. 69) argues that the oppositional theme is rarely so clearly defined in beauty. He asserts that beauty can be both ‘sacred or profane, or both, under different aspects.’ So to clearly dissect beauty between good and bad whether if it is intentional or not in the beauty industry is an attempt to pull apart the self that has a *combination* of both. This is what perhaps lead to the ambiguity and hostility in the industry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A portion of this paper is from the author’s doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of New South Wales in 2017. The author is thankful for Honorary Professor Andrew Metcalfe’s guidance and insightful comments in the course of this article.

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<sup>i</sup> The purpose of the few historical notes here is to offer a simple overview on how retail beauty comes into account.

<sup>ii</sup> Both of these brands, Rimmel and Guerlain, are still in operation today.

<sup>iii</sup> The name of the store is randomly selected for anonymity purposes.

<sup>iv</sup> Recently, some of these beauty brands have moved out from the department stores and into a retail space of their own.

<sup>v</sup> In Australia, the cost of the retail beauty workers is borne by both the department store and the beauty company. In Malaysia, it is fully met by the beauty company. Retail beauty workers report to the department stores and the beauty companies in both of these countries.

<sup>vi</sup> This point, and its relation to the work of Lacan (1977), is pursued in the PhD thesis submitted to the University of New South Wales (2017)

<sup>vii</sup> This research is a part of a larger study which has been submitted as a PhD thesis to University of New South Wales (2017).

<sup>viii</sup> The author would like to stress that this is not a representation of all retail beauty workers. Although this paper has revealed the hostility at the counter, they were also observed to experience other relationships at work, but those were not the focus of this paper.

<sup>ix</sup> At times, customers may have no choice if they have a specific brand in mind.

<sup>x</sup> This is a good example of how an organization manages the emotional and affective behaviour of its aesthetic workers.

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