

# Service with(out) a smile: The reproduction of gendered consumer violence

Marketing Theory  
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–19  
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/14705931241249624  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/mtq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mtq)



**Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk** 

Mälardalen University, Sweden

Karlstad University, Sweden

**Markus Fellesson** 

Karlstad University, Sweden

## Abstract

This paper critically examines consumer violations of employees in the Nordic retail sector. In bringing these violations to light, we analyse how employees become subjectified by the ideals of consumer sovereignty, and how service work is discursively and practically aligned with the notion of the sovereign consumer. We demonstrate how the discourse of consumer sovereignty intersects with gendered service work and the expectations of feminine sexual availability, and how this alignment reproduces gender and power inequalities. Drawing on studies of consumer violence and misbehaviour and feminist research on service work, we argue that the patterns of subjugation and consumer abuse are intrinsically embedded both in the ideal of consumer sovereignty itself and in the strategies that employees use to constitute themselves within prevailing market and gender orders. The study provides a critical understanding of how consumer sovereignty operates in tandem with gender structures to form subjugating practices that both enable and normalise consumer violations.

## Keywords

Consumer sovereignty, consumer violations, gender, marketing, power, service work

## Introduction

How come that consumers seem to be allowed to violate service employees and get away with such behaviours? This article analyses the undesirable aspects of service work in the form of consumer and market violence (McVey et al., 2021; Firat, 2018; Varman, 2018; Varman et al., 2021; Zwick,

---

### Corresponding author:

Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk, School of Society, Business and Engineering, Mälardalen University, Box 883, 721 23 Västerås, Sweden.

Email: [anna.yngfalk@mdu.se](mailto:anna.yngfalk@mdu.se)

2018; see also, e.g. Carrington, 2022). Consumer violence refers to a spectrum of abuse and transgressions of norms, ranging from rudeness to sexual violence (cf. Kelly, 1991) that are directed at service-providing personnel (see, e.g. Hadjisolomou, 2021). Essentially, such behaviours serve as manifestations of the structural power of the consumer in neoliberal capitalistic markets. To scrutinise how consumer violence is structurally enabled, we draw on the notion of consumer sovereignty (Korczynski and Ott, 2004; Schwarzkopf, 2011), a cornerstone for the reproduction of power in contemporary markets (cf. Bhatnagar et al., 2023; Tadajewski, 2018).

Consumer sovereignty explicates the consumer's status and position by linking consumerism to neoliberal notions of free choice as a morally desirable end (cf. Bauman, 2007; Gabriel and Lang, 2015; Zwick, 2018). Consumer sovereignty is thus essential for the expansion of contemporary markets and their organisation (Tadajewski, 2018), but, as will be discussed, it also brings with it the risk of proliferating destructive market interactions. These interactions may occur directly, for instance, as consumers exercise power over service workers through, for instance, abusive actions (e.g. Yagil, 2008, 2017), or indirectly by framing service workers as consumer-centric and responsible for pleasing the consumer at all costs. The dark side of this wide-ranging contemporary promotion of the consumer is reflected in service employees' everyday work experiences (Bhatnagar et al., 2023). Recent reports on the Nordic retail work environment, the empirical setting of the present study, have found that many workers, particularly females, have reported distress and discomfort due to frequent consumer violations, in situations where they had to adhere to expectations of customer service and professional service work (e.g. Hasson et al., 2021; Karlsson and Ström, 2019). The empirical salience of consumer violations was also highlighted by the #MeToo movements in both the United States and Europe, wherein employee exposure to such practices was found to be prevalent in many consumer-oriented commercial contexts, such as restaurants, retail stores, and hotels.

Previous research has investigated customer misbehaviour and abuse in relation to both their contingent conditions (e.g. Daunt and Harris, 2012; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009) and their psychological causes and consequences (Gong et al., 2014; Goussinsky, 2012). Links have also been established between the commercial framing of customer–employee interactions and customer misbehaviour (Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Korczynski and Evans, 2013), including the occurrence of sexual harassment (Good and Cooper, 2016; Yagil, 2008). Hochschild (1983) seminal work on emotional labour provides an important point of departure for this research, as do more recent studies that highlight the power-laden structure of interactive service work (e.g. Leidner, 1991, 1999; Sherman, 2007). Such scholarship shows how customer domination and employee subjugation are reproduced, negotiated, and (sometimes) even contested within a multitude of intersecting structures, including market forces, gender identity, race relations, and class. This body of literature also brings into view the complex processes through which violations become a part of employees' roles and identities (Sherman, 2007; see also Varman et al., 2021).

From within academic marketing research, calls have been made for further reflection on the role and function of marketing research and practice, for example, in reproducing gendered stereotypes and oppressive power structures in contemporary markets (Hearn and Hein, 2016; Prothero and Tadajewski, 2021). Such self-reflection includes acknowledging the negative impact of marketing discourse on consumers (McVey et al., 2021; Tadajewski, 2018), as well as employees (Fougère and Skålén, 2013; Skålén, 2009; see also Prothero and Tadajewski, 2021). The present research takes the latter impact as its focus and investigates how marketing practices reproduce gender inequalities when performed in conjunction with neoliberal (and gendered) consumption ideals that frame consumers' and employees' interactions. In taking this approach, we pay particular attention to how contemporary consumer market violations become further legitimised and supported by organisational practices and conduct related to marketing work.

The overall aim of the present study is to examine how consumer sovereignty, as a central tenet of contemporary marketing discourse, frames service interactions and service employee practices in a way that normalises consumer violations in everyday retail service interactions. More specifically, we will examine how the norms and conduct of consumer sovereignty are actualised in contemporary service work in the Nordic contexts of the supermarket, the fashion retailer, and the consumer electronics store. As we will argue, the actualisation of these norms may enable violations, as the interactions are framed and restrained by the gendered power positions of the superior consumer and the subordinated employee (see, e.g. Skålén, 2010; Varman et al., 2021), positions that come along with the very notion of consumer sovereignty.

Through the concept of consumer sovereignty (Korczyński and Ott, 2004), we problematise the reproduction of the consumer's omnipotent status, as well as how it has come to govern the work of service employees (Arnould and Cayla, 2015; Bhatnagar et al., 2023). Consumer sovereignty builds on the idea of the consumer having the role of the 'ruler,' not only in the market but also in relation to an organisation and its employees (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Korczyński and Ott, 2004; Sturdy et al., 2001), as organisations seek to accommodate the choices and desires of their customers through their overall business strategies and by governing the labour process of frontline service employees (e.g. Arnould and Cayla, 2015; Sturdy et al., 2001; Tadajewski and Jones, 2016). This establishes a structure of hierarchical relations and interactions (Good and Cooper, 2016) that runs the risk of allowing for violence while preserving the stereotyped gender-biased behaviours that are commonly expected in service work (e.g. Varman et al., 2021; Weeks, 2007). In our paper, we seek to further highlight this destructive intersection of market-related ideals and organisational practices (see also Prothero and Tadajewski, 2021).

As our main contribution, we illuminate how the consumer sovereignty discourse connects to the power and gender norms of service work, and how this relationship frames mundane service interactions through organisational strategies, consumer/market demands, and a number of practices that both promote the consumer and shape employee subjectivities. By combining the concept of consumer sovereignty with a structural power perspective and an explicit gender lens, we highlight the intricate way in which the consumer sovereignty discourse operates, and how it reproduces a sexualised marketplace through mundane service interactions and consumption. Through this approach, we contribute to the ongoing critical discussion on the implications of marketing discourse (e.g. Hearn and Hein, 2016; Prothero and Tadajewski, 2021) and the reproduction of market violence (McVey et al., 2021; Varman et al., 2021) including gender-based violence (Gurrieri et al., 2016).

## Literature review

How marketing discourse and practice may lead to the experiences of vulnerability and exploitation among women has been increasingly stressed by feminist voices in marketing research (see, e.g. Arsel et al., 2015; Bettany et al., 2010; Fischer, 2015; Maclaran, 2015). A main argument in this body of literature is that marketing discourses, and the gendered consumption practices they foster, easily intersect with other complex social power arrangements and male-dominant orders (e.g. hierarchies or class), which risks reproducing patriarchies (see, e.g. Hearn and Hein, 2016) and the objectification and subjugation of women (or other marginalised groups) in contemporary markets (cf. Prothero and Tadajewski, 2021; Rome and Lambert, 2020). Hochschild's work on emotional labour (1983) and the research stream it has spurred (e.g. Brook, 2009; Grandey and Gabriel, 2015) have generated further ideas about how marketing and consumption come to unintentionally sanction male dominance and the exploitation of women, as the market tends to privilege the consuming subject (i.e. men) at the cost of servicing the (female) subject (Varman et al., 2021).

These ideas are also related to theories of gendered organisations and gendered and sexualised service work (Acker, 1990, 2006; Good and Cooper, 2016; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), as well as to enquiries into the consumption society and the (Western) capitalist system as such (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Shamir, 2008).

Patriarchal principles permeate market interactions in many, if not all, service contexts, and this has been well established from several theoretical standpoints. This permeation is also evident empirically, especially in the prevailing gender stereotypes and heteronormatively-driven expectations of customer service work, such as upholding feminine service conduct (e.g. Pettinger, 2005) or demonstrating female docility (e.g. Grossman, 2012). To live up to expectations, service workers must adjust their behaviours, appearances, and bodies and thus make use of their own emotional and aesthetic resources (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1999; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). This results in processes of subjectification whereby the very constitution of being a service worker becomes based on notions of subjugation, docility, and sensitivity to consumer (Fougère and Skålén, 2013; Skålén, 2009). The need to be ‘friendly’ toward the consumer becomes internalised by the employee; workers are expected to act in accordance with the patriarchal standards of dominance and female subjugation, which are construed as conventions of ‘normal’ service work (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Pettinger, 2005).

The adjustments and alignments of workers do not, however, *only* include being regulated into submissive positions, wherein the performance of gender refers to traditional expectations of feminine docility. As stressed by Sullivan and Delaney (2017) and Gill and Scharff (2013), among others, the constitution of service workers is additionally aligned with how they, as individual professionals, also internalise current (commonly neoliberal) ideals of work. This includes how they come to embrace the behavioural standards of individual agency, self-control, and productivity, such as acting purely professionally in the face of misbehaving consumers. Such competences are valued and rewarded in the neoliberal professional work context, even when they come at the expense of, for example, dignity, equality, and justice (cf. Campbell, 2013).

The interconnectedness of submissive norms vis-à-vis customers and the neoliberal ideas of self-governance with respect to professional service work are highly typical of the Nordic retail context of the present study (e.g. Skålén, 2009). The far-reaching delegation of responsibilities to frontline staff, paired with the explicit ideals of customer-centeredness and adaptability to customer needs, is fundamental to Nordic managerial ideals of service provision (e.g. Grönroos et al., 2015). Such an approach also resonates with the prevailing Protestant ethics in other contexts, wherein work is considered central to identity formation and constitutes a main arena for self-fulfilment (Inglehart, 2018). Market/customer expectations and organisational/societal principles of work thus reinforce each other in a way that, as we will show here, enables the operation of patriarchal power structures within service interactions.

### *Consumer sovereignty and the constitution of service workers*

Consumer sovereignty constitutes a discursive nodal point (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) that aligns neoliberal market interests with managerial and organisational ideals through the ascription of subjectivities for both consumers and employees (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). The notion of consumer sovereignty is, for example, associated with both the marketing concept and the ideal view of markets as efficient tools for creating well-being and happiness through consumption and ‘free’ market choice (Tadajewski, 2018). Marketing (and, on a larger scale, the profit-seeking company and the capitalist system as such) is hereby legitimised as a productive societal tool serving the greater good of both wealth and democracy (cf. Schwarzkopf,

2011; Tadajewski, 2018), and a social order is thus established wherein employee and organisational interests are merged in a common quest to satisfy consumer needs (Tadajewski and Jones, 2016).

Although the actual sovereignty of the customer may be more mythical than real (Korczynski and Ott, 2004), this does not preclude the idea from having powerful effects on the relationship between customers and service staff. As part of a market-based system of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977; Skålén et al., 2008), this idea provides subjectivities for both the customer/sovereign and the organisational staff. The concept thereby structures the relationship between employees and consumers (Gabriel et al., 2015) and makes their interactions unfold within an arena in which consumer dominance is upheld and played out through power-inflicted practices.

Fundamentally, the relationship between a sovereign consumer and a serving organisation and its employees is structured by the notion of choice (Arnould and Cayla, 2015; Bowen, 2016; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). What this means is that one of the parties, the consumer, makes the choices (including the choice to opt out), and the other party is the chosen object. Being chosen constitutes the very *raison d'être* of the commercial organisation in a market economy and might be even more important for the individual employee, who is also subject to managerial pressures, professional norms, and the social expectations inherent in direct customer interactions (Sliter et al., 2010; Yagil, 2017). The context of choice and consumer supremacy promotes a fundamental imbalance in the relationship between customers and employees – an imbalance that is also further strengthened by other structures within and outside the organisation, such as situations in which consumer sovereignty and the norms of male superiority interact (cf. Gill and Scharff, 2013; Sullivan and Delany, 2017).

Furthermore, frontline employees are expected not only to accept the sovereign status of the customer but also to actively sustain and nurture it by confirming the latter's role as a free chooser, 'king', or 'boss' (cf. Tadajewski and Jones, 2016) during service interactions. This is crucial for concealing other aspects of the relationship with the customer, such as profit interest or the need to subjugate the customer to the technological and/or bureaucratic aspects of organisation and production that are of a more controlling and subjugating nature (Fellesson and Salomonson, 2016; Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Unlike these other aspects of contemporary rationalised service production and provision, which are hard to reconcile with the notion of consumer sovereignty, the interactions between customers and service employees are inherently more flexible (Fellesson and Salomonson, 2016). Within these interactions, professional service workers are therefore expected to adapt to customer wishes and demands (Bowen and Schneider, 2014) and to refrain from showing negative emotions towards the customer (Hochschild, 1983), even in situations where such emotions might be warranted (e.g. Yagil, 2017).

At a concrete level, sustaining the image of the consumer as king within the realm of consumer–firm interactions in the way outlined above also becomes directly performative: the concessions made and the approval sought have interactional power effects and establish and confirm the hierarchical relationship. The comparably low social status of customer work (and workers), and the fact that the employees have fewer alternatives and are more dependent on maintaining the service relationship than the customers (Yagil, 2017), further strengthen these power effects (see also Varman et al., 2021). Thus, confirming consumer sovereignty within the structural setting of service encounters and interactions clearly subjugates frontline employees.

Additionally, within the settings of contemporary markets and organisations, subsuming to the ideals of customer sovereignty constitutes the main means available to staff for promoting the 'free', professional, individualised, and enterprising self-characteristics of neoliberal society (cf. Du Gay, 1996). In other words, the avenue for self-development and fulfilment offered to the employee runs through the satisfaction of the customer and the delivery of favourable service experiences. Subjugation to consumer sovereignty becomes a part (or even a cornerstone) of service employee

subjectivity and an integrated aspect of employee identity regulation and identity work (Alvesson, 2003; Ybema et al., 2009). Satisfying customer needs and providing the desired customer service is hence not merely a contextual requirement in service organisations, as it can also take on an almost existential dimension for the professional service worker and guide both action and self-reflection/evaluation (Foucault, 1977; Skålén, 2009; Skålén et al., 2008).

The multitude of mechanisms, imbalances, and power structures intrinsic to the relationship between consumers and service employees outlined above explain how consumer sovereignty enables violating behaviour, as consumers and employees act on and conform to the notion of the superior consumer. As we will demonstrate, virtually any kind of action generated from the consumer's position (including violent actions) can be justified and strengthened within these structures. This is especially the case for ongoing, everyday violations of a subtle nature that tend to become naturalised as inevitable aspects of service work (Good and Cooper, 2016; cf. Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009).

## Case and method

To investigate how consumer sovereignty frames and governs the interactions between consumers and service workers, we have used a discourse analysis (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002) of our empirical case. Approaching discourses is central to understanding how regimes of truth are created (Foucault, 1977; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; see also Varman and Vijay, 2018) and, in this context, how customer service ideas and consumer sovereignty can function as such truth regimes under contemporary consumerism (Skålén et al., 2008). The Nordic service and retail context, the setting of our study, is an illustrative context for examining the implications of such regimes, as the Nordic countries are highly characterised by the neoliberal consumerist ideals of self-fulfilment through consumption (for the consumer) and service work supportive of this self-fulfilment (for the service employees). These ideals are in line with the long-standing traditions of individual autonomy and independence within the so-called Nordic societal model (cf. Martin et al., 2019) and are also reflected in the Nordic traditions of leadership and service marketing (e.g. Grönroos et al., 2015; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006; Smith et al., 2003). Accordingly, in the Nordic context, both consumers and service workers are typically ascribed a moral position of individual self-fulfilment that structurally situates them within a space of individualistic rather than collective action. This individualism (noted, e.g. by Inglehart, 2018) is congruent with the neoliberal ideals of 'free' individuals exercising their independence, albeit in the Nordic case, within a highly rationalised and organised market system (cf. Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010).

In our analysis, we directed our attention to the content, form, and *power* of the discourse within the market system, a focus that corresponds well with how previous studies have analysed how people become subjected to marketing discourses (e.g. Skålén et al., 2008; Varman and Vijay, 2018; Yngfalk and Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2015). This further entailed that we approach the actions of consumers and service workers not as neutral, but as framed and aligned with discourses. Moreover, we sought to shed light on the processes of subjectification (Foucault 1977) and how service employees come to govern themselves by internalising the discourse and its associated practices within their professional identities and their individual action repertoires. Accordingly, such internalisation effectively reproduces customer service ideals (Arnould and Cayla, 2015; Fougère and Skålén, 2013).

For our study, we have analysed #MeToo data published by the Swedish Commercial Employees' Union in an official report (Karlsson and Ström, 2019) regarding events that occurred in the retail sector in 2017 (under the hashtag #obekvämarbetsid, which translates to #uncomfortableworkinghours). The statements posted under the hashtag illustrated both situations of



explicit sexual violence and everyday narratives of how retail workers were systematically exposed to actions of harassment from the ‘ruling’ consumer on a day-to-day basis. We analysed approximately 60 statements (25 pages in printed format) containing narratives of harassment on the part of consumers submitted by service employees. As in the official report from which we drew this data, all citations presented in our findings are anonymous to protect the integrity of the sources.

We also conducted 35 interviews (each lasting between 30 and 75 min) with frontline staff at three Swedish multi-outlet retailers as part of a larger, long-term, ongoing research programme examining consumer sovereignty, the consequences of the attention paid to consumers, and their right to entitlement. These retailers included one of the major supermarket chains in Sweden, a consumer electronics chain, and a fast fashion retail chain. During the interviews, questions were asked about their service work, how they approached and interacted with consumers, and how they dealt with misbehaving consumers (which may have involved anything from rudeness to sexual harassment).

The retail fields were selected because they represent typical large-scale retail settings (and are thus at the heart of contemporary consumerist society) and include organisations that have an explicit and highly institutionalised customer-oriented approach (e.g. Fellesson and Salomonson, 2016). These industries, like the retail sector as a whole, have a high proportion of comparably young, part-time employees working on short-term contracts and a high frequency of reported incidents of consumer abuse (Karlsson and Ström, 2019). Following our focus on the power of discourses, the narratives of the service workers have been analysed as *discursive practices* that are not merely reflective but also constitutive of reality (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Furthermore, the respondents’ narratives and practices were *not* viewed as independent or individually determined; rather, they were interpreted as expressing the discourses that also shape them (including the dominating norms of service servility). Accordingly, discourse analysis supported us in improving our understanding of the structural framing of market interactions and practices – that is, how a particular regime of truth is established (Foucault, 1977; Varman and Vijay, 2018), rather than limiting our focus to only individual experiences as such.

We started our analysis by identifying the relevant units of data in the empirical texts and working with categorisations, abstractions, and comparisons (Spiggle, 1994). This cold reading allowed for the commonly expressed concepts and themes characterising contemporary retail work to emerge, with selective attention paid to expressions of service discourse, power, and violence. This work resulted in empirical examples of how service ideals are practiced in professional day-to-day retail work with consumers. We then moved on to how employees specifically enact notions of consumer sovereignty by confirming and promoting the consumer subject position in direct service interactions. At this stage, we also attended to how the enactment of these practices intersects with patriarchal structures that allow for the execution of power, exploitation, and violence in these interactions. Here, we identified the connections between the testimonies from the respondents in the interviews and the #MeToo data on the one hand and broader sets of societal structures on the other. This was achieved by directing our attention to how concrete articulations of capitalist service discourse (e.g. Korczynski and Ott, 2004) are intermingled with gender stereotypes and gender power orders in the service setting (Hearn and Hein, 2016; Varman and Vijay, 2018).

In the final stage of our analysis, we delved deeper into the intersectional framing of the gender, power, and violence articulations we identified. We accomplished this by focussing on how the discursive framing of the situations contributed to their normalisation, by positioning both employee subjectivity and situational meaning according to hegemonic capitalist, neoliberal, and patriarchal principles (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this case, we drew on the work of scholars who have investigated power, violence, and sexual harassment in market situations (e.g. Good and Cooper,

2016; Joy et al., 2015; Rome and Lambert, 2020). The findings presented in the next section follow the various stages of the discourse analysis outlined above and are structured into four thematic areas: (i) how employees performed customer-centric service work, (ii) how they enacted practices to sustain and promote the consumers' status, (iii) how gender and gender violence emerged within these practices, and (iv) how transgressions were normalised as a 'natural' element of service work.

## Service with(out) a smile

The Nordic service workers in the study reported a number of discursive practices for providing good professional customer service that enacted the ideals of consumer sovereignty. These practices included those that not only accepted but also actively confirmed and strengthened the superior position of the sovereign consumer. These discursive actions and practices of being 'customer friendly' were, as will be shown, far from neutral. Instead, they constituted the service workers' subjectivities along with promoting a marked service genderism (Bernauer et al., 2023; Good and Cooper, 2016). Specifically, in order to be considered truly customer friendly, the service workers were expected to enact practices that expressed their femininity, subjugation and heteronormativity (Adkins, 1995; see also Bernauer et al., 2023).

### *Enacting ideals of service work and consumer sovereignty*

The ideal service worker should have the personal capacities and skills to know how to deliver the most for the consumer. These expectations and ideals, which are commonly adopted and explicitly expressed by service organisations, effectively generate a customer-controlled framing of service workers' professional subjectivities (Fougère and Skålén, 2013). One expression of this ideal is that employees are socially expected and trained to follow customer service guidelines to generate customer satisfaction. The informants in our study described how they were expected to follow a particular set of guidelines in their daily work. For instance, one worker reported, 'We have something that we call "Say Hi, Acknowledge, and Smile." This means that you should say hello to each customer, look at and recognise him/her, and then smile and be friendly'. Another similar program that was mentioned during our interviews was called 'The Smile' and was used in the consumer electronics chain. This was explained by one of the store managers:

The guidelines [The Smile] say that we should always be happy and respond to the customer in the right way. I've told everyone [*all employees on the floor*] that it's so important to have satisfied customers, because any store can have low prices, so you have to be able to offer something extra. Customers should come here because they feel they're being engaged by staff who are happy and pleasant and who know what they're talking about. (Respondent, manager, consumer electronics)

These programs explicate fairly standardised behavioural instructions and emotional display rules, some of which are obviously related to the gendered and sexualised aspects of service work (i.e. 'smiling' and 'being pleasant'; cf. Hochschild, 1983; Pettinger, 2005). As a form of surface acting and aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), the practices of these programmes are intended to create a desired atmosphere and ensure a positive customer experience by regulating the direct impact of the employees on the service encounter.

However, the programmes are also illustrative of how customer service discourse comes to govern employees' practices, approaches, and identities at a more profound level (Fougère and Skålén, 2013). 'The Smile' guidelines, for example, were not only about being happy and



smiling at customers, but, more importantly, also about *having the right approach*, to have the personal capacity to know how to do the best for the customer. To live up to the expectations of being a professional, customer-centric service worker, employees were therefore expected to embrace a confirmative approach vis-à-vis the customer that moved beyond the mere ‘Smile’ and involved processes of recognising and accepting the customer’s needs and wishes. Notably, it was the employee, rather than the organisation, who was expected to accommodate the customer’s requirements and handle the situation. The general market relationship between company supply and customer demand was thus personalised and transformed into an individualised responsibility.

Individualised responsabilisation reflects the centrality attached to employees in the service management discourse, where notions like the ‘moment of truth’ and employees serving as ‘part-time marketers’ are emphasised (Bowen and Schneider, 2014; Gummesson and Grönroos, 2012). However, this responsabilisation was also driven by general leadership and management ideals in the Nordic context under study, where decentralisation and autonomy in the service frontline were emphasised, and managerial supervision (and support) was limited (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006; Smith et al., 2003). While providing excellent customer service might constitute a corporate strategy and even a cultural ‘core value’, the exact way in which it was to be executed within existing organisational constraints and in a concrete situation was often up to the employee to ‘just work out’.

The tension in service work between customer service ideals and the goals of rationalised production, brought forward in concepts such as the service triangle (Lopez, 2010) and the customer-oriented bureaucracy (Korczynski, 2001), is often framed as a personal employee responsibility (cf. Skälén, 2009). As retail service operations are in and of themselves often highly rationalised and inflexible (due to technical resource limitations, administrative systems, etc.), personal interactions with the consumer become crucial for providing an excellent service experience and upholding the myth of consumer sovereignty (Fellesson et al., 2013; Fellesson and Salomonson, 2016).

### *Consumer confirmation in practice*

Employees are expected not only to satisfy consumer needs, but also to confirm the role of the consumer and sustain the impression of consumer sovereignty (Korczynski and Ott, 2004). This becomes especially noticeable when employees handle abusive and violating behaviours on the part of consumers (Good and Cooper, 2016; Korczynski and Evans, 2013; Reynolds and Harris, 2006). The service workers we interviewed described how they had become skilled in finding ways to manoeuvre situations that might escalate into consumer aggression and abuse. Several of them described how they had invented practices to keep calm and cope with the consumer and to play down the situation, including consciously overlooking customer misconduct in a ‘pleasing’ manner, which might even have involved being particularly pleasant to rude customers:

I try to be extra nice to the rudest customers, as it is my job to make customers happy [...] I have no choice but to provide good service. (Respondent, supermarket)

Such strategies for approaching the consumer involved the service worker taking a submissive position, being willing to deliver good service, and meeting the consumer’s demands despite unpleasant or rude behaviour. These practices were considered essential as they did not challenge the sovereignty of the consumer (Korczynski and Evans, 2013).

As pointed out by [Adkins \(1995\)](#) and [Good and Cooper \(2016\)](#), among others, subjugation is often associated with, or even expected to be part of, professional service work. Accordingly, a submissive position can also be deliberately drawn upon by employees as a resource to handle the situation and guide the actions taken. The very positioning of the customer as superior and in charge can, in itself, be an effective way to make sure that the situation is handled professionally and according to expectations:

If the customer is upset or angry, I can ask, ‘How do you want us to solve this? It usually reduces anger; it usually works. (Respondent, fashion)

The practices of employees continuing to ‘pamper’ and confirm the angry or even misbehaving customers meant that employees had to regulate their behaviours and emotions, as illustrated in the following quote:

I listen to the customer and what he has to say [...] The *most important thing of all* is that no matter how angry I get myself, I still represent the company. Then, it’s important to just keep going and make the best of the situation, so that the customer is satisfied. (Respondent, supermarket, emphasis added)

The respondents adopted a stance of being amenable and (overly) flexible towards consumers to avoid any disturbances or conflicts that could jeopardise the success of the interaction. The actualisation of consumer sovereignty was thus largely dependent upon the employees’ repression of their feelings and emotions (cf. [Hochschild, 1983](#)), something that seemed to be especially essential when dealing with troublesome consumers:

It’s about the customer wanting to be right, so if a customer claims that you’re rude, ignorant, or indifferent, or whatever it might be that the customer thinks of you, you should let the customer be right—always. (Respondent, supermarket)

The respondent in this case further explained how, in order to keep the consumer happy, she had come to accept being called names (e.g. ‘idiot’) by the ‘loyal’ regular customer who sometimes, and without provocation, reacted strongly to how she arranged things in the store.

### *Gender and gendered violence in retail service work*

Both the overall framing of consumer relationships in the retail sector and the concrete practices of retail work described above illuminate the gendered nature of service work, wherein docile female employees are expected to provide services to privileged male consumers (cf. [Grossman, 2012](#); [Pettinger, 2005](#); [Varman et al., 2021](#); [Warhurst and Nickson, 2009](#)). This provides a backdrop for understanding how female service workers navigate within such contexts and perform their gendered roles. It also brings to light the complex interplay between gender, power and sexual violations/exploitation that were explicated in the empirical material.

Some service workers deliberately draw on their appearances in reference to traditional masculine and feminine traits, as when female service workers play on the notion of being ‘heterosexually available’ ([Adkins, 1995](#); [Pettinger, 2005](#); see also [Rome and Lambert, 2020](#)). One of the

female respondents described how, on occasion, she was extra friendly and flirted with the older male customers:

I try to be nice and smile—trying to flirt a little bit extra with my eyes. As a female employee, this can make it easier to tackle older male customers in particular and be extra charming to ‘old grandpa.’ Then you can say, ‘Yes, I’m sorry that there’s another price online, but there’s nothing I can do about it.’ Then, they soften up a little bit. Laughing sweetly and being charming often work. (Respondent, consumer electronics)

In this example, the female service worker reported using her ‘female charm’ to avoid potential conflicts without conceding to the consumer’s demand (note that, in the example, he does not get the lower online price). Rather than being indicative of the respondent’s personal desires or preferences, this behaviour reflects the performative aspect of service work and the gendered expectations that come with it.

The tactic described above is also an illustrative example of how it is possible to gain control of a situation by drawing on the (hetero-)sexual notions imbued in the context (Pettinger, 2005). However, the control is conditional, as it is dependent on the general acceptance of sexual appropriation in service situations (cf. Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). Employee flirtation thus works as a strategy for gaining situational control only in particular contexts, as it is considered ‘part of the game’ (Sherman, 2007). As Sherman (2007) notes, this means that the resulting sense of control and autonomy is gained through and within the prevailing unequal order, rather than by its contestation. The patriarchal order and the sexualised domination of the service workplace are thereby reproduced and normalised.

The service interactions in our empirical material often followed heterosexual and heteronormative patterns and could therefore be considered patriarchal arrangements, especially when it came to actions aimed at customer confirmation. These actions are also supported by the consumer sovereignty discourse, which in itself privileges gender-stereotyped practices that are believed to lead to increased consumer confirmation and satisfaction (cf. Good and Cooper, 2016; Leidner, 1999). An illustration of such practices can be found in the example of a female service employee who found herself laughing at an inappropriate sexual comment just to deal with the customer in a service- and customer-oriented manner:

The customer asked me to demonstrate some eco-labeled products. When we got to the department selling yarn, I showed him a yarn that I liked to use. Then, he asked if it was because I got sexual feelings from it. I felt uncomfortable and just tried to laugh it off. Then, I continued to help him for another 20 minutes. (Retail #MeToo statement)

Another similar but even more extreme example of the patriarchal framing of the service interaction was evident in the case of a female employee being sexually violated by the consumer, but remaining polite and continuing to serve and recognise the offending individual rather than putting up a fight against the offense:

In the store, a customer pulled me into the fitting room. He pushed me into a corner and tried to kiss me. I fended him off, but tried to be polite, so he’d still be happy with the service I was giving. (Retail #MeToo statement)

This example illustrates the interconnectedness between the consumer sovereignty discourse and the patriarchal nature of the service setting, as well as the destructive consequences that follow: the

service employees are expected to act professionally and service-minded under a situation of physical or sexual abuse and are thus more concerned about providing good service rather than protecting their integrity, body, and personal well-being (cf. McDowell, 2011).

### *Normalising consumer violations*

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the diffusion of consumer violations of employees in service interactions has been addressed before (see, e.g. Varman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is striking how the service employees in our empirical material, despite Nordic settings allegedly being characterised by high standards of social equality, were recurrently exposed to this type of harassment and abuse.

Customers' behaviours that, by normal (non-commercial) standards, would be considered to be out of line, abusive, or outright violent were expected to be seen as 'part of the job,' thus requiring professional service responses from the employee (see Yagil, 2017). Or, as expressed by one of the respondents:

Several times a month, male customers would touch my body and move my arms to get a closer look at my tattoos, without asking. A regular customer recently leaned over the counter and said that I had beautiful eyes. I've lost count of how many times I've been called inappropriate things. (Respondent, fashion)

As stated in this example, the service worker expected consumer transgressions to take place and almost assumed frequent incidents of consumer abuse to be part of daily working life, as indicated when saying, 'I've lost count'.

This lack of recollection points to the normalisation of consumer transgressions and violations, wherein abuse is considered a natural, albeit unfortunate, element of service work, and taking care of and coming to terms with sexualised transgressive behaviours from consumers is considered necessary. Such acceptance might even be informally acknowledged when first introduced to the job:

I work in a grocery store and was told quite early on, when I started 15 years ago, that some men who are regulars can 'try it on, but it's not that bad, so don't take it too seriously. It's just how they [*the customers*] are.' (Respondent, supermarket)

Thus, certain informal expectations are placed upon employees to downplay and accept consumer violations. Consumer violations are hereby rendered 'unnoticeable' (Varman et al., 2021; see also Hadjisolomou, 2021), or as something that just comes with the job.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Based on our theoretical discussion, it can be concluded that the overall governance of service employees is characterised by a discursive necessity to be constantly chosen by satisfied consumers (Hyken, 2009; Slater and Narver, 1995 see also Bhatnagar et al., 2023), a necessity that is aligned with and enforced by managerial interests in the organisation. Developing such subjectivity, to a substantial degree, becomes a personal responsibility for the individual employee within the identity work of being a professional, autonomous service worker (Skålen, 2009, 2010). This tendency is even further fuelled by the specific Nordic culture and organisational context of the present study,

which we found to be characterised by a combination of far-reaching delegation and a pronounced customer focus.

Under these conditions, the patriarchal principles of service provision (cf. Hochschild, 1983), which are manifested in expectations of heteronormative conduct to satisfy the consumer (Pettinger, 2005), become not only a matter of subordinating oneself to the consumer and confirming their desires by exhibiting ‘female’ behaviour and docility (cf. Good and Cooper, 2016; Grossman, 2012) but also a defining component of identity work. The resulting gendered subjectivity and subjugation to the consumer also define and structure situations of consumer violations and harassment (see also Varman et al., 2021).

When employees are exposed to consumer violations, it becomes a personal responsibility to work *with* the consumer by using employee professionalism based on gendered service work to handle the situation. This results in a paradox, whereby employees see themselves as competent and autonomous, yet in their work practices, they are constrained to regulate their behaviour, feelings, and appearances to accommodate consumer sovereignty and patriarchy in their interactions with consumers. Rather than contesting the consumer and thereby also the structural order (Shamir, 2008), the employees continue ‘playing the game’ (Sherman, 2007) to gain momentary relief in the stressful situation and to confirm their professional identities as competent service workers (cf. Gill and Schraff, 2013). This form of neoliberal governance (Dean 1999) explains why employees accept the necessity of remaining subjugated in a gender-biased way in situations of consumer violation. From the standpoint of the professional service worker, contesting the situations becomes ‘impossible,’ as this would entail deconstructing the idea of professional identity. Instead, violations and harassment become normalised as unfortunate but intrinsic and natural aspects of service work.

Our focus on gender-related violence has allowed us to add an explicit power dimension to the relationship established by the sovereign status of the consumer. This contribution builds upon previous research on consumer sovereignty (Korczyński, 2003; Korczyński and Evans, 2013 see also Bhatnagar et al., 2023) as well as work on consumer misbehaviour and market violence (Daunt and Harris, 2012; Formbelle, 2020; McVey et al., 2021; Varman et al., 2021). The implications of this contribution are twofold. First, the interplay between sovereignty and other structures of power in society points to the intersectional nature of the subjectivities available in contemporary markets (see also Weeks 2007). In our retail setting, patriarchal structures embodied in expectations about emotional labour, female docility, and woman as serving and caring. Second, our study illustrates how the sovereignty of the consumer, in its interaction with patriarchal structures, systematically contributes to the reproduction of sexualised stereotypes. This means that consumer sovereignty is far from being gender neutral in its enactment; rather, it is entrenched in norms of heteronormativity and established gender roles. Both aspects should be addressed in future research on consumer sovereignty to expand our understanding of how power, violence, and gender inequalities are reproduced in and through markets.

Drawing attention to the production of violence also means that we echo earlier feminist voices who have explained how gender inequalities are reproduced in and through contemporary marketing practices (Fischer, 2015; Hearn and Hein, 2016; Prothero and Tadjewski, 2021). More specifically, our study provides insights into the reproduction of a sexualised and violent marketplace and how people’s identities and subjectivities are shaped in relation to not only norms of conduct regarding consumption (Rome and Lambert, 2020), but also the norm of heterosexualised subjugation being a fundamental part of service professionalism and marketing work (see also Acker 2006; Bernauer et al., 2023).

We also draw attention to the ambiguous role of marketing discourse: while violence is omnipresent in society and thus also in the market, it is also essentially, albeit partially, a product of marketing practice itself. Through notions such as consumer service, customer focus, and market orientation, the unfortunate result is that inequalities, harassment, and violence are integrated and reproduced in everyday market life. Within the marketing framework, violence runs the risk of being overlooked as an 'external' factor or even accepted as a 'productive' commercial element of the market (see also [Dubreuil et al., 2023](#); [Zwick, 2018](#)). Violence is framed as something that can be handled professionally and even tweaked a bit to achieve customer satisfaction and 'sovereign approval'. This complex function of marketing discourse in relation to normative violence (cf. [Butler, 1990](#)) warrants further attention in marketing theory and research.

In an attempt to balance this rather bleak picture of contemporary customer work and working conditions, the #MeToo movement has shown the possibility of resistance and how change might actually be achievable. The workers in our study were not dehumanised or precluded from resistance in the same totalising way as those in some of the capitalist cultural systems studied in previous research ([McVey et al., 2021](#); [Varman et al., 2021](#)). Ultimately, the rise of the #MeToo movement has shown that the naturalisation of the discursive hegemony is also being questioned and contested on a collective level. This points to growing awareness and increasing resistance to the prevailing order, which might ultimately build sufficient momentum to enact concrete changes in the structural conditions that we have studied.

To inspire such activism and to inform the development of effective forms of resistance, further research is needed that examines how sexualised and violent marketplaces become directly and indirectly supported by the intersection between consumption norms and marketing work/practice. For this, more detailed empirical studies are needed to uncover occasions of violence, revealing when, where, and how often violations occur and how they are perceived (or not) by victims, perpetrators, and bystanders/witnesses.

There is also a need to further explore the consumer role in contemporary society and its influence on transgressive behaviours. Research should attend to the socially sanctioned motivations, processes, and individual differences that drive consumers to engage in such actions. In particular, we believe that the focus should be on unveiling the often-overlooked forms of violence and harassment that occur in everyday service interactions. By identifying subtle and mundane manifestations, scholars can gain insights into the deeper mechanisms and power dynamics at play, which would productively move beyond the more obvious cases.

Finally, the responsabilisation of employees in situations of consumer violence also merits additional study. Research on how discourse and organisational practice place the burden on frontline employees in managing and addressing these issues, as well as the impact of such encounters on employee well-being and job satisfaction, can inform the development of more effective countermeasures and a better distribution of responsibilities. As long as a violating consumer is still seen as a customer (i.e. a sovereign one), such measures remain in need of attention.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare the Nordic council Ministers, Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK)

## ORCID iDs

Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8057-9865>

Markus Felleson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1419-2667>

## References

- Acker, J (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society* 4(2): 139–158.
- Acker, J (2006) Inequality regimes: gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society* 20(4): 441–464.
- Adkins, L (1995) *Gendered Work. Sexuality, Family and the Labour Market*. Bristol: Open University Press.
- Alvesson, M (2003) Managing managerial identities: organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations* 56(10): 1163–1193.
- Arnould, EJ and Cayla, J (2015) Consumer fetish: commercial ethnography and the sovereign consumer. *Organization Studies* 36: 1361–1386.
- Arsel, Z, Eräranta, K, and Moisander, J (2015) Introduction: theorising gender and gendering theory in marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(15-16): 1553–1558.
- Bauman, Z (2007) *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berggren, H and Trägårdh, L (2010) Pippi Longstocking: the autonomous child and the moral logic of the Swedish welfare state. In: H Mattsson and SO Wallenstein (eds). *Swedish Modernism: Architecture, Consumption and the Welfare State* London. London: Black Dog Publishing, 50–65.
- Bernauer, VS, Sieben, B, and Haunschild, A (2023) You can call me Susan!’ Doing gendered class work in luxury service encounters. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 42(4): 494–511.
- Bettany, S, Dobscha, S, O’Malley, L, et al. (2010) Moving beyond binary opposition: exploring the tapestry of gender in consumer research and marketing. *Marketing Theory* 10(1): 3–28.
- Bhatnagar, K, Cayla, J, Dion, D, et al. (2023) Consumer sovereignty and the ethics of recognition. *Journal of Business Ethics* 160(1): 1–19.
- Bourdieu, P (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bowen, DE (2016) The changing role of employees in service theory and practice: an interdisciplinary view. *Human Resource Management Review* 26(1): 4–13.
- Bowen, DE and Schneider, B (2014) A service climate synthesis and future research agenda. *Journal of Service Research* 17(1): 5–22.
- Brook, P (2009) The alienated heart: Hochschild’s ‘emotional labour’ thesis and the anticapitalist politics of alienation. *Capital & Class* 33(2): 7–31.
- Butler, J (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, B (2013) *End of Equality*. London: Seagull.
- Carrington, MJ (2022) Sacrifice and violence in the marketplace. *Marketing Theory* 22(4): 601–621.
- Daunt, KL and Harris, LC (2012) Exploring the forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour: a study of differences in servicescape and customer disaffection with service. *Journal of Marketing Management* 28(1-2): 129–153.
- Dean, M (1999) *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London, UK: Sage.

- Du Gay, P (1996) *Consumption and identity at work*. London: Sage.
- Du Gay, P and Salaman, G (1992) The cult [ure] of the customer. *Journal of Management Studies* 29: 615–633.
- Dubreuil, C, Dion, D, and Borraz, S (2023) For the love of the game: moral ambivalence and justification work in consuming violence. *Journal of Business Ethics* 186(3): 675–694.
- Fellesson, M and Salomonson, N (2016) The expected retail customer: value co-creator, co- producer or disturbance? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 30: 204–211.
- Fellesson, M, Salomonson, N, and Åberg, A (2013) Troublesome travellers – the service system as a trigger of customer misbehaviour. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences* 5(3): 256–274.
- Firat, AF (2018) Violence in/by the market. *Journal of Marketing Management* 34(11-12): 1015–1022.
- Fischer, E (2015) Towards more marketing research on gender inequality. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31: 1718–1722.
- Formbelle, P W, et al. (2020) Customer deviance: A framework, prevention strategies and opportunities for future research. *Journal of Business Research* 116: 387–400.
- Foucault, M (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.
- Fougère, M and Skålén, P (2013) Extension in the subjectifying power of marketing ideology in organizations: a Foucauldian analysis of academic marketing. *Journal of Macromarketing* 33: 13–28.
- Fullerton, RA and Punj, G (2004) Repercussions of promoting an ideology of consumption: consumer misbehavior. *Journal of Business Research* 57(11): 1239–1249.
- Gabriel, Y and Lang, T (2015) *The Unmanageable Consumer*. London: Sage.
- Gabriel, Y, Korczynski, M, and Rieder, K (2015) Organizations and their consumers: bridging work and consumption. *Organization* 22(5): 629–643.
- Gill, R and Scharff, C (2013) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gong, T, Yi, Y, and Choi, JN (2014) Helping employees to deal with dysfunctional customers: The underlying employee perceived justice mechanism. *Journal of Service Research* 17(1): 102–116.
- Good, L and Cooper, R (2016) But it's your job to be friendly': employees coping with and contesting sexual harassment from customers in the service sector. *Gender, Work and Organization* 23(5): 447–469.
- Goussinsky, R (2012) Coping with customer aggression. *Journal of Service Management* 23(2): 170–196.
- Grandey, AA and Gabriel, AS (2015) Emotional labor at a crossroads: where do we go from here. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 2(1): 323–349.
- Grönroos, C, Von Koskull, C, and Gummerus, J (2015) The essence of the Nordic School. In: J Gummerus and C Von Koskull (eds). *The Nordic School. Service marketing and management for the future*. Helsinki: CERS Hanken School of Economics.
- Grossman, B (2012) The feminised service sector: from micro to macro analysis. *Work, Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* 6(1): 63–79.
- Gummesson, E and Grönroos, C (2012) The emergence of the new service marketing: Nordic School perspectives. *Journal of Service Management* 23(4): 479–497.
- Gurrieri, L, Brace-Govan, J, and Cherrier, H (2016) Controversial advertising: transgressing the taboo of gender-based violence. *European Journal of Marketing* 50(7-8): 1448–1469.
- Hadjisolomou, A (2021) Doing and negotiating transgender on the front line: customer abuse, transphobia and stigma in the food retail sector. *Work, Employment & Society* 35(5): 979–988.

- Hasson, D, Villaume, K, and Berlin, C (2021) Lite vanligt hyfs skadar inte, en heltäckande kartläggning om förekomsten av respektlöst beteende samt identifiering av goda exempel på hantering [Eng: Please some more decency wouldn't harm... A comprehensive survey of occurrences of disrespectful behaviour and identification of good handling strategies.]. *Der Handel* 2021(5). Available at: [https://handelsradet.se/app/uploads/2021/10/Rapport-2021\\_54.pdf](https://handelsradet.se/app/uploads/2021/10/Rapport-2021_54.pdf)
- Hearn, J and Hein, W (2016) Reframing gender and feminist knowledge construction in marketing and consumer research: missing feminisms and the case of men and masculinities. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(15-16): 1626–1651.
- Hochschild, AR (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holmberg, I and Åkerblom, S (2006) Modelling leadership—implicit leadership theories in Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 22(4): 307–329.
- Hyken, S (2009) *The Cult of the Consumer: Create an Amazing Consumer Experience that Turns Satisfied Consumers into Consumer Evangelists*. New York: Wiley.
- Inglehart, R (2018) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jorgensen, M and Phillips, L (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage.
- Joy, A, Belk, R, and Bhardwaj, R (2015) Judith Butler on performativity and precarity: exploratory thoughts on gender and violence in India. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(15-16): 1739–1745.
- Karlsson, M and Ström, G (2019) *MeToo in the Retail Sector, Report*. Svensk Handels. Available at: <https://handels.se/globalassets/centralt/aktuellt/rapport-obekvamarbetstid.pdf>.
- Kelly, L (1991) *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Korczynski, M (2001) The contradictions of service work: call centre as customer-oriented bureaucracy. In: A Sturdy, I Grugulis, and H Willmott (eds) *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Korczynski, M (2003) Communities of coping: collective emotional labour in service work. *Organization* 10(1): 55–79.
- Korczynski, M and Evans, C (2013) Customer abuse to service workers: an analysis of its social creation within the service economy. *Work, Employment & Society* 27(5): 768–784.
- Korczynski, M and Ott, U (2004) When production and consumption meet: cultural contradictions and the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty. *Journal of Management Studies* 41(4): 575–599.
- Laclau, E and Mouffe, C (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd edition. New York: Verso.
- Leidner, R (1991) Serving hamburgers and selling insurance: gender, work, and identity in interactive service jobs. *Gender & Society* 5(2): 154–177.
- Leidner, R (1999) Emotional labor in service work. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561(1): 81–95.
- Lopez, SH (2010) Workers, managers, and customers: triangles of power in work communities. *Work and Occupations* 37(3): 251–271.
- Maclaran, P (2015) Feminism's fourth wave: a research agenda for marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(15-16): 1732–1738.
- Martin, DM, Lindberg, F, and Fitchett, J (2019) Why can't they behave? Theorizing consumer misbehavior as regime misfit between neoliberal and Nordic welfare models. In: S Askegaard and J Östberg (eds) *Nordic Consumer Culture*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 71–94.
- McCull-Kennedy, JR, Patterson, PG, Smith, AK, et al. (2009) Customer rage episodes: emotions, expressions and behaviors. *Journal of Retailing* 85(2): 222–237.

- McDowell, L (2011) *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- McVey, L, Gurrieri, L, and Tyler, M (2021) The structural oppression of women by markets: the continuum of sexual violence and the online pornography market. *Journal of Marketing Management* 37(1-2): 40–67.
- Pettinger, L (2005) Gendered work meets gendered goods: selling and service in clothing retail. *Gender, Work and Organization* 12(5): 460–478.
- Prothero, A and Tadjewski, M (2021) #MeToo and beyond: inequality and injustice in marketing practice and academia. *Journal of Marketing Management* 37(1-2): 1–20.
- Reynolds, KL and Harris, LC (2006) Deviant customer behavior: an exploration of frontline employee tactics. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 14(2): 95–111.
- Rome, AS and Lambert, A (2020) (Wo)men on top? Postfeminist contradictions in young women’s sexual narratives. *Marketing Theory* 20(4): 501–525.
- Schwarzkopf, S (2011) The consumer as “voter”, “judge” and “jury”: historical origins and political consequences of a marketing myth. *Journal of Macromarketing* 31(1): 8–18.
- Shamir, R (2008) The age of responsabilization: on market-embedded morality. *Economy and Society* 37(1): 1–19.
- Sherman, R (2007) *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Skålén, P (2009) Service marketing and subjectivity: the shaping of customer-oriented employees. *Journal of Marketing Management* 25(7-8): 795–809.
- Skålén, P (2010) *Managing Service Firms: The Power of Managerial Marketing*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Skålén, P, Fellesson, M, and Fougère, M (2008) *Marketing Discourse: A Critical Perspective*. Abingdon. Oxon: Routledge.
- Slater, SF and Narver, JC (1995) Market orientation and the learning organization. *Journal of Marketing* 59(3): 63–74.
- Sliter, M, Jex, S, Wolford, K, et al. (2010) How rude! Emotional labor as a mediator between customer incivility and employee outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 15(4): 468–481.
- Smith, PB, Andersen, JA, Ekelund, B, et al. (2003) In search of Nordic management styles. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 19(4): 491–507.
- Spiggle, S (1994) Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3): 491–503.
- Sturdy, A, Grugulis, I, and Willmott, H (2001) *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. Lonon: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sullivan, KR and Delaney, H (2017) A femininity that ‘giveth and taketh away’: the prosperity gospel and postfeminism in the neoliberal economy. *Human Relations* 70(7): 836–859.
- Tadjewski, M (2018) Critical reflections on the marketing concept and consumer sovereignty. In: M Tadjewski, M Higgins, J Denegri-Knott, et al. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Critical Marketing Studies*. London: Routledge, 196–224.
- Tadjewski, M and Jones, DB (2016) Hyper-power, the marketing concept and consumer as ‘boss’. *Marketing Theory* 16(4): 513–531.
- Varman, R (2018) Violence, markets and marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management* 34(11-12): 903–912.
- Varman, R and Vijay, D (2018) Dispossessing vulnerable consumers: derealization, desubjectification, and violence. *Marketing Theory* 18(3): 307–326.
- Varman, R, Skålén, P, Belk, RW, et al. (2021) Normative violence in domestic service: a study of exploitation, status, and grievability. *Journal of Business Ethics* 171: 645–665.

- Warhurst, C and Nickson, D (2009) Who's got the look?' Emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour in interactive services. *Gender, Work and Organization* 16(3): 385–404.
- Weeks, K (2007) Life within and against work: affective labor, feminist critique, and post- Fordist politics. *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization* 7(1): 233–249.
- Yagil, D (2008) When the customer is wrong: a review of research on aggression and sexual harassment in service encounters. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 13(2): 141–152.
- Yagil, D (2017) There is no dark side of customer aggression— It's all dark. *Journal of Marketing Management* 33(15-16): 1413–1420.
- Ybema, S, Keenoy, T, Osrick, C, et al. (2009) Articulating identities. *Human Relations* 62(3): 299–322.
- Yngfalk, C and Fyrberg Yngfalk, A (2015) Creating the cautious consumer: marketing managerialism and bio-power in health consumption. *Journal of Macromarketing* 35(4): 435–447.
- Zwick, D (2018) No longer violent enough? Creative destruction, innovation and the ossification of neoliberal capitalism. *Journal of Marketing Management* 34(11-12): 913–931.

**Anna Fyrberg Yngfalk** is an associate professor of marketing at School of Business, Society and Engineering, Mälardalen University, and Karlstad Business School, Karlstad University. She has previously published on how marketization shapes organizational conduct. Her most recent research is about how power and gender inequalities are reproduced in consumer society.

**Markus Fellesson** is an associate professor of management at Karlstad Business School and the Service Research Center - CTF at Karlstad University, Sweden. His research interests include material dimensions of value creation, conditions of service work and critical perspectives on marketing in contemporary organizations and societies.