



# City Research Online

## City St George's, University of London

**Citation:** Sharp, M., Farrugia, D., Coffey, J., Threadgold, S., Adkins, L. & Gill, R. (2022). Queer subjectivities in hospitality labor. *Gender, Work And Organisation*, 29(5), pp. 1511-1525. doi: 10.1111/gwao.12844

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/28264/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12844>

**Copyright and Reuse:** Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

# Queer subjectivities in hospitality labor

Megan Sharp<sup>1</sup>  | David Farrugia<sup>2</sup> | Julia Coffey<sup>2</sup>  |  
Steven Threadgold<sup>2</sup> | Lisa Adkins<sup>3</sup> | Rosalind Gill<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia

<sup>2</sup>The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, New South Wales, Australia

<sup>3</sup>The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

<sup>4</sup>City University of London, London, UK

## Correspondence

Megan Sharp, The University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Vic, Australia.

Email: [megan.sharp@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:megan.sharp@unimelb.edu.au)

## Funding information

Australian Research Council; University of Melbourne

Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Melbourne, as part of the Wiley - The University of Melbourne agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of queer workers in the service economy with a focus on hospitality labor. Studies of gender, sexuality and service labor approached mainstream service work as a scene of compulsory heterosexuality, while literature on the position of queer workers has tended to approach work in terms of structural inequalities that prevent queer workers from participating in the labor market, and has therefore focused on notions of diversity and inclusion as frameworks for understanding how the heteronormativity of service relationships can be overcome. This paper shifts focus to examine how queer subjectivities are enacted within the disciplinary requirements of service labor, and on the way that workers negotiate and contest their positioning at work. The paper situates the subjectivities and laboring practices of queer workers at the nexus of tensions between heteronormativity and the politics of diversity in service venues, and examines how workers negotiate and contest their positioning at work. We explore the normativities that shape permissible queer embodiment at work and show how biographical experiences specific to queer workers inform their laboring practices. The paper shows that queer workers in mainstream hospitality venues are enrolled into a specific mode of interactive service labor that capitalizes on their queer biographies, requires highly

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2022 The Authors. *Gender, Work & Organization* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

cultivated relational capacities, and repositions work as a site of political intervention.

**KEYWORDS**

gender, hospitality, labor, queer, work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the experiences of queer hospitality workers in the Australian interactive service economy where “labor in the bodily mode” (Hardt, 1999, p. 6) shapes interactions between staff, co-workers and consumers, generating the vibe of hospitality venues. Gender, sexuality, and service labor is usually approached through a focus on the politics of heterosexuality, including the requirement that women appear sexually available to men in the course of their labor through submissive or heterosexy modes of gendered embodiment (Adkins, 1991, 1995, 2000; Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018; Hochschild, 1983; Mcdowell, 2009). This means that the experiences of queer workers have received less theoretical attention in studies of service labor. Moreover, literature aiming to interrogate the position of queer workers has tended to approach work in terms of broad structural inequalities that prevent queer workers from participating fully in the labor market (Willis, 2009). As a result, queer people's working lives have generally been theorized using organizational models of what constitutes diversity and inclusion, including how to increase productivity and overcome exclusion (Willis, 2009). This has also led to the assumption that the transgression of heterosexual relations in service labor is limited to venues such as gay bars (Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2017). As a point of departure, our focus is not merely on how queer workers can equitably participate in employment, but how queer subjectivities are enacted within the disciplinary requirements of service labor, and on the way that workers negotiate and contest their positioning at work.

We also contribute to theoretical discussions about the nature of labor in immaterial or affective economies in which subjectivities, social relationships, symbols, and affects are the key product of work. Autonomist Marxist concepts of affective labor have emerged to theorize what is said to be a new relationship between subjectivity and value in an economy where immaterial forms of production proliferate (Hardt & Negri, 2005). Rather than an inner emotional life (Hochschild, 1983), the concept of affective labor captures forms of belonging, relationality, and politics practiced across the lines of employment relations, and suggests that these may facilitate value creation and the production of new worker solidarities. However, as raised in a series of critiques (Bolton, 2009; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Oksala, 2016) notions of affective labor have also developed in ways that are often over-generalized and ignore the concrete materialities of different forms of service labor. We follow these critiques to discuss the tensions between diversity, heteronormativity, and homonormativity in the service economy. Our analysis shows that labor is not simply a product of life itself as much as specific biographical experiences and relational capacities mobilized and enacted in unique ways that are often strategic and highly cultivated. In this way, embodied practices performed in gendered and sexualized ways are more than what a worker *brings into* the workplace (Adkins, 1995). Instead, they are curated labor; adaptive to the openings, constraints and overall vibe of a venue as well as the disposition of the worker themselves.

What follows is a theoretical outline of how gender and sexuality have been approached in studies of service work and the subsequent omission of queer orientations. Here, we map the assumed heterosexuality of both hospitality workers in the mainstream service sector, and of the hospitality industry itself. We turn then to the concept of homonormativity, where the subjectivities of queer workers are constrained by dominant politics of tolerance and respectability. This is particularly salient as diversity and inclusion are increasingly commercialized in urban, cosmopolitan leiscapes (Hartless, 2019). In light of our review of this literature, we attend to the ways in which queer hospitality workers negotiate their laboring practices in the service that they provide. These negotiations take the

form of contestation—where queer workers actively resist heterosexual and homonormative framings of acceptable service relations—and of enactment and assimilation—where gender and sexuality diversity are effortfully curated into respectable and appropriate queer expression. Moreover, queer hospitality workers are often subject to a both perceived and actual violence in the workplace as a result of their gender and sexuality. As such, the labor that they perform is situated within a broader nexus of homo-, bi- and transphobia.

## 1.1 | Heteronormativity and the service economy

A substantial body of feminist theorizing has explored the role of labor in enacting normative relationships between gender, sexuality, and embodiment, and has shown how service interactions require workers to negotiate the gendered and heterosexual politics that shapes the labor force (Adkins, 1995; Hochschild, 1983). As Adkins (1995) argued, heterosexuality is part of the social organization of work, operating not as a distinct realm that can be separated from employment but rather critical to the disciplinary requirements of labor and the nature of labor. Service labor has been central in studies of gender and sexuality at work, due in part to the historical over-representation of women in this form of employment and the significance of heterosexual power relations for the way that labor is enacted. Hospitality work is an example of interactive service labor, which tends to be low-wage, precarious and feminized work in which workers are required to produce pleasing interactions with consumers in the provision of a service or to facilitate a consumption experience. These have been discussed in relation to logics of heterosexuality that incorporate women into service labor through positioning them as submissive and sexually available. The need to provide emotionally pleasing relational performances while experiencing and contesting issues such as sexual harassment is also critical to Hochschild's concept of emotional labor and notions of feminized labor (Hochschild, 1983). In other words, normative gendered and sexualized relationships have been theorized as intrinsic to the way that service interactions are practiced, while modes of gendered and (hetero)sexualized embodiment have been recognized as critical to the nature of service work.

The arrangement of hospitality work around heterosexuality also shapes the service labor economy, and the register of affective and immaterial labor it produces. The concept of affective labor (Hardt, 1999) focuses on the production of affect as a transpersonal intensity that is captured and mobilized at work but that emerges from "life itself", enrolling capacities and subjectivities located both within and outside the formal employment relation into the production of value. Atmospheres of leisure and enjoyment are primary aims of any hospitality venue and workers play a pivotal role in generating convivial scenes and spaces. As is documented in previous research (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018), bar workers describe their value to a venue not merely in terms of their ability to serve drinks, but in terms of their ability to create atmospheres of enjoyment and leisure in their interactions with customers. Young cis women bar workers in Coffey et al.'s study (2018) describe dancing behind the bar and other similar embodied practices designed to create a fun "vibe" in a venue as critical to their work. In Irving's (2015) study of trans women's un(der)employment experiences, participants articulated that the nature of hospitality work as highly feminized precluded them from full participation in the labor market. Their visibility as trans women, and their lack of access to economic and social resources meant that employers were less likely to see value in the kinds of feminine performances that formed part of their labor. These examples suggest that gender and sexuality are configured in the interactions and relational performances that facilitate consumption experiences in hospitality venues. While the experiences of queer workers have not been central to this field thus far, their position within the broader service sector speaks to shifts in the normativities of sexuality in the service economy.

## 1.2 | Homonormativity and tolerant cosmopolitanism

In the fields of employment and organizational studies, research about queer workers has focused on either increasing diversity in the workplace (Lloren & Parini, 2017) or on critiques of organizational management structures which uphold heteronormative and cissexist workplace practices (Priola et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2018). Willis (2009, p: 6030) notes that literature on lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers follows a common storyline where “the workplace is represented as a site of social inequality founded on hierarchical divisions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual workers.” Researching the experiences of young, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) workers new to the Australian labor market, Willis (2009) found that LGBQ workers across a range of industries experience symbolic and material violence which reinforces heteronormativity. In their qualitative study, Willis explained that LGBQ workers internalized anxieties about publicly expressing their sexualities at work particularly in workplaces that were not overtly anti-homophobic. These workers were conscious of their sexuality not aligning with dominant heteronormative standards and struggled to “be themselves” for fear of perceived barriers to career progression or outright vilification and violence. These findings also reinforce the emergence of homonormativity in the workplace, where queer workers are expected—by managers, co-workers, and clientele—to align expressions of gender and sexuality with heterosexual values in order for acceptance (Ward, 2008).

Duggan (2002) argues that homonormativity operates to normalize expressions of queer desire, relationship formation, and productive citizenship among queer populations to increase full participation in neoliberal economies. In this way, queer people should expect acceptance into the labor market based on their adherence to heterosexual framings of “normal” queerness. For Williams and Giuffre (2011, p: 553), homonormativity has replaced the old logics of heteronormativity, “allowing gays and lesbians to succeed but only if they enact a narrowly circumscribed and conventional performance of gender, family, and politics in the workplace.” In order to be included, gay and lesbian workers must therefore be “normal”, just like heterosexuals. The framing of queer workers under homonormative terms means that queerness is regulated by a broader politics of respectability, where sexuality is permissible at work (and in the broader public) providing it is palatable. Respectability politics, even in reputedly queer organizations, belies the interests of poor and marginalized queer people (Ward, 2008). Ward's ethnography of diversity culture in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans organizations in the US suggests that class, race, and ethnicity are further minimized through homonormative repertoires of respectability, where the acceptable queer embodiment is the white and middle-class. Such a critique is undertaken by Ahmed in discussion of the politics of queer inclusion and citizenship. Queer subjectivities are often positioned as “guests in other people's homes” (2010, 106), required to perform “diversity labor” within regulatory norms of “appropriate” queerness.

At the same time, queer bodies are also increasingly visible in service venues. Recent research in geography and urban studies have highlighted the multitude of ways that neoliberalism and consumerism have impacted gay villages in the Global North, leading to the transformation of consumer landscapes and leisure spaces (Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2017) that complicate the assumed heterosexuality of the service economy (Irving, 2015; Willis, 2009). As climates of acceptance and so-called inclusion change, so too do assumptions of queer people living (and working) outside of “the closet” (Hartless, 2019). As tolerance of queerness has grown in the West, hospitality venue owners have begun to diversify services and amenities, bringing queer(ed) spaces, once existent mostly in marginalized and underdeveloped urban centers, into affluent neighborhoods (Collins, 2004). The gentrification of inner-urban areas takes place through a “bohemian” ethos which celebrates transgression of “mainstream values” in relation to heterosexuality (Lloyd, 2010). For example, Florida's (2005) “creative city” thesis posits queer workers as part of the highly valued “creative class”—cool, sexy, edgy young people carefully curated in spaces designed to pull in consumers who are chasing the vibe. These scholars argue that the physical, emotional, and relational expression of queer genders and sexualities in public, once limited to ostensibly queer venues have become increasingly acceptable in metropolitan cities (Hartless, 2019).

Yet, workers who do not conform to normative relationships between modes of gendered identity and bodily presentation constantly reach the limits of “tolerance” at work. For trans workers, whose experiences are under-explored

in contemporary research concerning labor and employment, the conditions of post-Fordism offer little reprieve from the confines of normative gender expression. In researching trans women's lived realities of employment in North America, Irving (2015) finds that for these women, their laboring practices were governed by an omnipresent adherence to the normative feminine subject. Irving follows Skeggs' (2011) "regimes of value" to suggest that trans women are misrecognized as value-less under post-Fordism. The weight of immaterial labor "dramatically underscores the co-constitutive relationship between employability and normatively feminine subjects" in a post-Fordist service economy, where even accessing service employment was hindered by normative framings of what constitutes a "competent femininity" (Irving, 2015, p: 51). As a result, trans women in Irving's study struggled to access service employment due to the rigidity of both heteronormative femininity and the value that it produces within a consumption experience.

This raises the question of the forms of queerness that are rendered acceptable or unacceptable within hospitality venues, and under what conditions. The ability to purchase the feeling of lunch with a gay best friend or a cocktail with a flamboyant bartender may have become possible in a post-Fordist economy, yet only within the confines of a respectable and convivial consumption experience. Moreover, certain queer aesthetics such as fashion, music, language, and bodily comportment are being enrolled to offer a form of consumption which is branded, differentiated, and valorized by the presence of bodies that are recognized and made intelligible as queer. This shift in urban consumption practices requires us to re-evaluate the assumption that queer people only work in hospitality spaces which are explicitly queer. Queer service workers can be found beyond the queer bar or café, yet not without political, social, and economic regulation which dictate the boundaries of publicly acceptable queer expression.

## 2 | METHODS

This paper draws on a project funded by the Australian Research Council examining the relationship between identity, labor, and value in the hospitality industry. The project included two research sites—the cities of Melbourne and Newcastle. Melbourne is the second largest city in Australia and is known for the size and heterogeneity of its service economy. Melbourne is also marketed internationally for alternative subcultures connected with artistic practices such as music or street art. It is popularly associated with relatively progressive politics, although this image is belied by the proliferation of precarious work and attendant social inequalities that shape industries such as hospitality. Newcastle is a regional city with an industrial history that in the last 3 decades has transitioned rapidly to a mixed economy. It now consists of a substantial service economy including tourism as well as surrounding primary industry and horticulture in the broader region.

Our data collection period is still ongoing at the time of writing this article and below we discuss the experiences of 19 participants from a cohort of 60. They were aged between 18 and 30, and identified themselves as queer, bisexual, gay or pansexual, trans, and/or non-binary. In this article, we use the term queer to describe the sexualities and gender identities of participants as this is how they described themselves. We follow Halberstam's (2005) conceptualization of "queer" as a term to encompass those identities which resist normative gender binaries and heterosexual associations. The roles they occupied were service oriented, ranging from waitstaff in cafés to bar managers in pubs and clubs, and most were experienced in the industry having worked at a diverse range of venues. All participants were white, a limitation that emerged despite a desire for diversity within the sample. This limitation must be emphasized especially given the paucity of research on racialization and hospitality labor, and given the theoretical work suggesting that whiteness is positioned as a desirable attribute for "front of house" workers alongside appropriate personal aesthetics (Farrugia, 2018; Mcdowell, 2009). Moreover, as we interrogate hetero- and homonormativity which register whiteness as a key capacity for how they have been conceptualized (Duggan, 2002; Ward, 2008), the findings below should be read with race and cultural diversity in mind. Queer workers, while reflexive about their own whiteness, were unlikely to speak to the ways that race defines respectability politics broadly.

We recruited hospitality workers as participants through industry contacts, social media advertisements, and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 min and 2 h took place face-to-face and online over a period of 18 months from late 2019 to mid-2021. In these interviews, participants discussed their employment histories, laboring practices and the sector generally, as well as their biographies and experiences of gender and sexuality broadly. Interview data were analyzed thematically and inductively, following qualitative analytic techniques. In what follows, we explore how queer hospitality workers negotiated and experienced queerness at work, how their labor as queer workers was valued in venues promoting a “diverse” image, and the additional labors and capacities queer workers deployed in navigating heterosexual socio-cultural norms.

## 2.1 | Doing queer in hospitality labor

Our analysis explores the way that workers negotiated and contested the dynamics of discrimination, diversity, and “inclusion” at work, highlighting the specific requirements that are placed on them within venues as queer service workers. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first documents the way that workers discern and navigate how they are positioned at work in the context of the threat of homo-, bi-, and transphobia, as well as the way that the queer sexualities are positioned within a broader landscape of homonormative “diversity” that is valued by certain mainstream venues. The second explores how queer workers navigated and contested the gendered and sexual dynamics enacted within their venues, both between staff and customers and amongst customers themselves. This section shows that queer workers deliberately intervened in the social relations of their venues to contest issues such as sexual harassment amongst patrons, and considered their own biographical experiences as queer people to be critical to their capacity to perform this kind of service labor. Our analysis therefore complicates narratives of diversity by highlighting the unique forms of labor demanded of queer workers through their inclusion within hospitality spaces.

## 2.2 | Experiencing discrimination and “welcoming” queer workplaces

Many participants recounted instances of homophobia and discrimination they had experienced directly while working in customer-facing, front of house roles. Homophobic slurs were the most common, and the terms that were used to vilify hospitality workers overlapped across participant experiences. Several workers in this project described sensing their workplaces as homophobic, or “unsafe” places to be “out”. Caleb, for example, who had previously worked in a daytime café described regularly hearing “homophobic slurs”, which meant he avoided telling anybody he was gay. Noah, a café worker in Melbourne, commented on his last encounter with homophobic customers, ‘I think the last one was [...] I put down something in front of a couple and one of them said to the other, while I was walking away, “what a faggot” or something like that, just classic’. Several of the cis male, queer participants recounted experiences like Noah’s, and often with a kind of dismissive exhaustion, describing them as “just classic”, a typical and unremarkable event. While Noah was employed in a management position at the time of the interview and was able to remove the customers, he was clear that it was his tenure as a long-serving hospitality worker which had afforded him that possibility. He later noted, “I spent years biting my tongue when I heard things like that, and I feel sad to think there are young queer workers experiencing that right now.” The regularity and frequency with which queer hospitality workers could recount these experiences of homophobia in the workplace, often listing several examples in a row, speaks to its prevalence in the industry.

However, importantly, workers’ capacity to contest homophobic slurs from customers varied from venue to venue. Workers were expected to navigate an aggressive and uncomfortable situation while also assessing the degree to which they would be supported by management in responding to this kind of homophobia. Unlike Noah, Ben, a trans man from Newcastle, was not in a management position and yearned for management to clearly designate “the

line” for what is “acceptable” or “unacceptable” behavior, rather than placing responsibility on the individual to “speak out”:

Yeah, where is that line and why is that line not standardised across venues? I feel like that line [calling out bad behavior] is dictated by your superiors and that sort of intersects with the way that you are expected to comport yourself at whatever venue that you're working at, and that will change depending on the venue. But yeah I think having to negotiate the way that you are expected to comport yourself and that kind of bullshit bigotry. For us [queer workers] - those two things don't necessarily intersect in a good place.

Participants' descriptions of homophobia align with the experiences of queer workers in other industries (Irving, 2015; Willis, 2009). The potential for homophobia was described as “the norm” in most hospitality venues. In this context, many of our participants were relatively experienced hospitality workers and after years in the industry they had sought out and secured work in venues that they felt valued “diversity” and which offered a safer working environment. However, the experiences of these participants speak not to a straightforward narrative of diversity and inclusion, but rather to new normativities that shape how queer subjectivities are incorporated into the labor performed in these “diverse” venues.

In some venues, the principles of diversity were emphasized in hiring practices and in how venues cultivated a clientele. In these cases, queer workers felt that they had a greater capacity to feel safe, which was a key priority for our participants. For some venues, the geography and proximity of its location to other diverse businesses and organizations supported the practical application of a queer-friendly ethos. Jacqui described the café in which she worked as a comfortable space that was welcoming of queer workers and also as having a large queer clientele. She attributed this to its location in what is colloquially referred to as the “Bonsoy belt” of Melbourne. “Bonsoy” is a brand of soy milk, which in the following narrative represents modes of identity politics encompassed by a kind of progressive cosmopolitanism.

I feel like potentially something about the location. I guess it's kind of the environment. I feel like it's not a very intimidating space and I feel like it's very open and they've tried hard to create a place where everyone feels welcome. I think that having a lot of vegan options is probably maybe potentially a contributor. Queers and vegans, you know, in the Bonsoy belt, I guess communities just work that way. A few people start going and they go, hey, this place is really great. Then their friends will start coming. (Jacqui, Melbourne)

Jacqui's narrative raises notions of diversity and locates her venue within a broader terrain of identity politics and consumption, in which queer workers and consumers are positioned alongside vegans as representing the progressive politics of Melbourne's inner-urban areas. The location of venues like Jacqui's, set amongst other businesses and organization which foreground principles of social justice as an element of their venue's image, generates an atmosphere of inclusion—“a community” as Jacqui describes. Felicity, a bisexual cis woman, worked in and managed a bar in Newcastle, while not a “gay bar” was known to be a place where queer people could work and hang out. Like Jacqui at the café, Felicity outlined the tone of her bar as welcoming, safe, and approachable for the queer community; a general ambience.

We make sure everyone feels welcome, we're safe. Especially with the queer community, we're an unofficially recognised kind of safe space. The staff are all very lovely and approachable. So it's just the general ambience of it all. We're not going kick somebody out if they're in drag or wearing a dress when they should be wearing pants and stuff like that.

Felicity is describing the queer care labor that goes into generating a safe space in a rhetorically non-gay bar. The intersection of queer subjectivities and the venue's uplifting of diversity as a key component of their everyday business provides Felicity, other queer staff and patrons, the opportunity to enact gender and sexuality in ways that transgress normative codes of performativity. Indeed, in Felicity's narrative the presence of queer workers and clientele is part of the "general ambiance" of the venue, or the kinds of affective atmospheres on offer to clientele in the venue. In this sense, the inclusion of queer workers is made into part of the venue's brand, and the forms of queer embodiment that are permissible within the venue facilitate the unique position that this consumption space occupies within Newcastle's night-time economy.

In this context these new normativities are made visible, which shape how queerness is configured within the broader dynamics of interactive service work as a form of affective labor. Queer workers also discussed wanting to work in venues that allowed them to feel a sense of belonging, which they often contrasted to widespread experiences of discrimination or at least discomfort in other venues. However, feeling a sense of comfort and belonging at work also facilitated modes of homonormative performativity that are an important part of the way that hospitality labor produces value. As is documented in previous research (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018), bar workers describe their value to a venue not merely in terms of their ability to serve drinks, but in terms of their ability to create atmospheres of enjoyment and leisure in their interactions with customers. Young women bar workers in Coffey et al.'s study (2018) describe dancing behind the bar and other similar embodied practices designed to create a fun atmosphere in a venue as critical to their work. Chris, a bisexual cis man in Melbourne, described similar practices as facilitated by the image of diversity and the employment of other queer staff by a previous employer:

In my previous venue there was a lot more queer diversity...one thing I do behind the bar a lot, I dance behind the bar. Just get up and get in the groove. I feel like I'm just working quicker and everything's just going well when I just get a rhythm going. It's like "Oh Chris you make such a good fag..." Yeah, again I'm comfortable in my skin. I have no problem working a lot with pretty much every member of staff basically because that's kind of...you get your rocks off at work...I do think that's actually a pretty common thing in bar work as well. I think most people... a lot of them can feel at odds with themselves. I've never seen people more comfortable with their orientations, with their sexuality, with their specific gender roles as they do in something like hospitality.

Here, Chris suggests that feeling "comfortable in his skin" allowed him to work more effectively, relating to other staff in an easy manner and serving drinks in a way that was fun and relatable. Chris suggests that he is a better worker when he feels comfortable to perform in this way. He also suggests that hospitality labor requires and encourages workers to be extraverted and open about themselves and their identities. In this, an emphasis on diversity in his venue allows Chris to perform the sense of spontaneity and authenticity that the airline workers in Hochschild's (1983) work were also encouraged to convey to customers. However, Hochschild's participants were resentful at having to "really" smile through experiences of routine incivility and sexual harassment, and were cynical about their employer's constant provocations to "really feel it". In contrast, Chris suggests that in the right hospitality venue—one that is diverse and welcoming of queer staff and clientele—he can "really feel it", allowing him to enact a fun and convivial atmosphere in a way that appears natural. Given the premium placed on authenticity in customer service relationships, the comfort that Chris describes also means that he can more effectively produce the atmosphere of leisure and fun that is so critical to consumption in the hospitality industry.

This example also reflects the complex and shifting normativities that shape what counts as an intelligible "good fag" is also part of an ironic and reflexive citation of norms of flamboyant extraversion popularly associated with gay masculinity. Unlike Noah's experience of being vilified through homophobic slurs at work, Chris's experience of belonging and comfort is intertwined with normative modes of queer embodiment that contribute to the effects of enjoyment for Chris, his co-workers, and the clientele of the venue. This tension is heightened by the nature of hospitality labor, which requires Chris to be "fun" at work and therefore to avoid overly transgressive performances

that may make clientele uncomfortable. An atmosphere of leisure and enjoyment is produced and valorized through relational practices that both facilitate queer belonging and produce value through positioning venues as spaces of cosmopolitan diversity within homonormative definitions of permissible queer embodiment. Yet not all participants found enacting a fun and frivolous comportment so accessible. For Ben, the expectation of this kind of laboring practice by his employer felt exhausting, and to do so he needed to “put on a different suit” at work:

If you're like an overt queer, people love that. Employers love that because you're bringing energy and life into a place. But that can be another stressful thing and a massive undertaking in itself. I don't wake up that way ever. I'm like, subversively flamboyant but I don't necessarily want to express that outwardly to other people. Sometimes I feel like you're probably expected to do that. I'm sure that's the case for a lot of other people. They're expected to bring their gender identity to the role. That has to be the case. I think if you were working at a place that really thrives on getting diversity in, you would have to play that up somehow... Like if you think of that stereotypical – like flaming homosexual. They're not flaming all the time. There has to be a time when they're just at home having a cuppa. But you'd be expected to really play that up all the time. (Ben, Newcastle)

The distinction that Ben makes between venues that thrive on diversity and those which do not reinforces the utilization of tolerant cosmopolitanism in the service industry. For those venues where diversity is marketed as part of a venue's everyday business, staff became visible barometers of inclusion and safety through their queer subjectivities. This is despite the overwhelming whiteness of our sample and of the hospitality staff in these mainstream venues in general. Nevertheless, in Newcastle, one participant suggested that the presence of “authentically” queer staff contributed to the venue's image in the city as a whole, where it was regarded as an “alternative” space and a key venue for local music scenes and bands of an eclectic style who may not have been able to play in other venues.

We have always had a very loyal queer customer base simply because we are so open and accepting. We don't give a shit, money is all the same color and as long as you behave the way that we ask you to, don't care. Totally irrelevant. (Felicity, Newcastle)

The presence of queer workers and clientele was an important marker of diversity that this venue cultivated in its position in the night-time economy of the city. Felicity's labor enacts a series of tensions introduced above: the desire to facilitate safe spaces for the performance of queer identities is here intertwined with the commodification of “diversity” amidst the broader competitive dynamics of the city's night-time economy. The consumption practices taking place within the venue are in this sense facilitated by modes of embodiment and relationality that are performed and made intelligible as queer within the venue.

### 2.3 | Contesting heterosexuality in hospitality work

For queer hospitality workers, challenging normative heterosexuality, sexual harassment, and homophobia at work were described as significant aspects of queer participants' working lives. The embodiment of a queer(ed) subjectivity in hospitality work also required particular skills and capacities in order to navigate the normative gendered and sexual politics enacted within hospitality venues. In the same way that queer workers felt oriented toward creating safe spaces in the venues they worked, they also understood themselves to be attuned to particular workplace tensions which, in their experience, may not be as acutely felt by heterosexual or cisgender workers. Ryan, a gay cis man from Melbourne described this attunement as a constant state of being in question particularly with other staff at the upscale restaurant he worked at as a bartender. When asked about his sexuality at work he says,

Being a gay man, I feel like I've got better social awareness just because I've spent so long introverted in my own head that I'm able to read situations better and read people's body language a bit better. I don't mean that in an arrogant way, I think it just is what it is. Sometimes I find that with staff it can be a bit difficult because I'm gay, [working with] with a couple of straight guys. I don't know if that's in my own head because I'm thinking, what have I done to this person? I'm like, is it purely just because I'm gay? Is that why they're acting up?

For Ryan, being “in his own head” produced a kind of intuition for him in relation to sexuality, gender expression and by extension, masculinity. On one hand, his attunement toward others, being able to “read situations and people's body language better [than heterosexual men]” offered him scope for intervening in potentially dangerous or violent situations in the bar. It also enabled him to feel when customers and co-workers were uncomfortable or in tension with each other. On the other hand, Ryan suggested that such an intuition could also be turned inward. He sometimes felt he was not taken seriously, for example, when he made suggestions concerning workplace efficiency. He wondered if his sexuality contravened normative, heterosexual masculinity and as such, positioned him as less authoritative than his co-workers. Ryan's experience highlights the duality of queer hospitality labor, at once claiming spaces of inclusion (intervening in tense situations) and marginalized by the omnipresence of homophobia in the workplace. The relationally intensive and embodied nature of hospitality labor means that workers were often forced to reflect on and negotiate how their bodies were made intelligible to others as they worked.

Like Ryan, most queer participants suggested that they were particularly attuned to the possibilities for sexual harassment, homophobia, and violence within venues. One evocative example of this is the following narrative from Ben, a queer trans man who had worked at a variety of venues including a suburban café in an area that he described as relatively conservative. During the interview Ben described how visible changes to his body were observed by regular patrons of the café in which he worked:

So you can't do anything privately, so I have transitioned basically in public. It's really interesting working in a café in [this area] ...and transitioning because people still need the thing that you're providing. They need it. They need it to get to their work. But they need it from a trans person which they're not comfortable with. So there's a weird jarring thing that goes on which I actually quite like from a social experiment point of view. If you were thin skinned that would probably break you. That'd break you. So I've actually just infiltrated this whole sphere because they needed something from me and they knew me...I was working there for probably a year before I started transitioning. Just showed up to work one day and by the way, you will call me Ben. It's always gradual still but it's like – you can't do it privately. You can't just take your time with it because it's there and you've still got to show up to your job. Your job is like meeting and being hospitable to hundreds of people every day.

For Ben, his public transition became enrolled in his everyday laboring practices. Rather than simply making coffee, he was making coffee in transition. Ben's example describes his transitioning body as becoming expansive, occupying space in a new way through transgressing normative heterosexual and cis-bodily boundaries. The intelligibility of his body as “becoming trans” made him feel vulnerable to potential abuse; he sensed his body “jarred” with others and described needing to be “thick-skinned”. However, he also described this as a “social experiment”, and discussed the enjoyment he got from the fact that those who were made uncomfortable by his changing embodiment were also dependent on him for their morning coffees. In this sense, Ben's transitioning body was felt by him—and sensed by others—as an overt and physical challenge to both the private domain of sex and sexuality broadly, and to hetero- and homonormativity within the public space of the café.

Ash, like a number of queer workers, described being particularly attuned to register the potential for violence or harassment in their venue. Ash, a non-binary bar worker, described that their gender expression often rendered

them unintelligible to patrons. Yet, at times being misread as a woman could be “beneficial”, providing a “platform” for intervening in situations that may lead to sexual harassment:

I think I tend to use it as a platform to make sure that men are behaving themselves when they're around the bar. I often do this thing if I notice that there's a man talking to women at the bar or something I keep a very close eye on him and I'll make it very blatant that I am staring at this guy for like 30 minutes just watching him. They'll know because they know women know what weird shit looks like and so they know when a woman's looking at them that they're not looking at them for any other reason than I know exactly what you're fucking doing - step away.

Participants such as Ash described that being queer gave them a specific disposition, attunement or scope to these relational dynamics which gave them a unique ability to see and intervene in situations. In this sense, their capacity to perform this labor is an aspect of themselves, cultivated and enacted differently within the relational dynamics of hospitality venues and the requirements of service labor. Participants described themselves as particularly attuned to particular workplace tensions which, in their experience, may not be as acutely felt by heterosexual or cisgender workers. These tended to include the possibility of sexual harassment or otherwise problematic gendered relations enacted in bars between customers and bar staff or other customers. Participants suggested that they had an enhanced capacity to recognize and intervene in these because they were queer, which Olivia, a café and bar worker in Melbourne, describes as a “scope” for recognizing and intervening in problematic situations; “Being a person who's attuned to queer politics, it's going to be a lot harder on you. Yeah, you've got a broader scope.”

However, participants note that these orientations toward tension result in feelings of excess—“work” “exhaustion” and “inescapable”—an effortful and emotionally draining practice that they nevertheless felt compelled to perform. Ryan suggested that his experience reflecting on how he is perceived by others and responding to the possibility of homophobia and violence in his own life meant that he was more able to interpret the bodily comportment of others in order to respond to the possibility of gendered or sexualized harassment and violence at work. Ryan's ability to read body language to assess potential problems at work is described here as an outcome of moments of reflexivity necessitated by his position as a gay man, in which he is required to assess how he is read by others in different moments. This capacity is part of his history of queer embodiment, and the reflexivity that this has demanded about his interactions with others. Like Olivia, Ryan referred to his capacity to observe and intervene in potential problems in his venue as having a broader scope for analyzing social dynamics that came from his history. This included feelings of vulnerability that he sometimes experienced in his day-to-day life, as well as a broader understanding of the politics of gender and sexuality.

Despite this, interactive service workers are expected to be open to interactions with customers, and as the experiences of women working in these industries demonstrate, these expectations go beyond those required to facilitate consumption. For trans and non-binary workers particularly, this meant often being approached as signifiers of contemporary gender politics more broadly. Co-workers and clientele approached these participants to discuss the complexities of their own genders and sexualities, and those of people within their families and social networks. Ben recounted an instance of a customer asking him about social constructions of gender and sexuality while he was making their coffee order,

They do feel invested in you at some point. Also that they have the right to know details about you. So yeah, there is probably some ownership there. It's like, well, you've been making my coffee and you remember my order so there's something here...I have had customers come to me as well to try and like counsel them through—yeah, the whole non-binary, the whole gender spectrum. It's cool but it's also beyond my role. You don't know how much you can actually do. It's like, “look, this is great, Greg, that you're starting to explore this and accept your own son, but this is a very public forum and

I feel like you're probably not ready for this conversation with 10 people listening." It's just really—it's interesting, let's just put it that way.

Ash discussed a similar experience where a customer attempted to engage them in a conversation about queer politics which they were on a shift.

One guy [...] comes up to the bar and I'd just started my shift and he was just kind of staring at me. I was like "are you right? Like what's going on?" He was like "sorry, I'm just looking at you because I thought maybe you were a lesbian." I just laughed. I was like "oh okay, all right. You don't want to expand on that?" He was like "no, no. I'm a queer man myself and I just want to talk to you about..." - and then he just started slamming all these queer politics on to me. I was just like oh my God. I did not sign up for this.

These instances illustrate how queer, trans, and non-binary hospitality workers were in a unique political space at work. On one hand, participants expressed accountability for raising issues related to diversity at work, calling out bad behavior and generating safe spaces. On the other, the visibility of their queer subjectivities at work makes it possible for customers and other staff to attempt to engage in conversations beyond the scope of their hospitality role, constituting another interactive task that workers must manage amidst the demands of their shift.

### 3 | DISCUSSION

Hospitality labor makes unique demands upon queer workers, some of which are precisely because of their inclusion in the interactive service economy. Atmospheres of leisure and enjoyment are primary aims of any hospitality venue of which workers play a pivotal role in generating. As is documented in previous research (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018), bar workers describe their value to a venue not merely in terms of their ability to serve drinks, but in terms of their ability to create atmospheres of enjoyment and leisure in their interactions with customers. As our research shows, these ethereal *vibes* are not merely carried to the venue through the bodies of workers. They are carefully and effortfully curated by queer hospitality workers whose biographies have necessitated an accumulation of knowledge that facilitates safety, empathy, conviviality, and hospitality (Adkins, 1995). For some queer workers, the venues that they labored within enrolled politics of diversity and inclusion into their consumption offering. These venues were usually in inner-urban areas where tolerant cosmopolitanism was part of the socio-cultural landscape, such as the so-called "Bosoy Belt" of Melbourne's northern suburbs. In other venues, inclusion was predicated on assimilation, where queer workers were expected to be indistinguishable from the heterosexual and cisgender workers in order to avoid discrimination and harassment.

We have approached this tension in terms of shifting dynamics in the way queer subjectivities are positioned within the dynamics of affective labor. Affective labor creates value here not from "life itself", but from how queer workers enact and contest heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the politics of diversity and inclusion in their interactions with co-workers and with customers. Their capacity to do this, and the consequences of this for the social relations of their venues, emerge from an interaction between their own biographies, and the demands of interactive service labor which require them to facilitate consumption experiences through their relationships with consumers and other workers. According to Ahmed (2010), this is a kind of affective politics where queer people draw from the well of their own happiness (and unhappiness) to mediate interactions with and between others. In pulling from embodied archives of feeling, coupled with increasing visibility in public consumption spaces, queer hospitality workers are positioned as signifiers of queer politics in general by consumers and co-workers who regard them as available for discussions about their own gender and sexual identity. Moreover, how queer workers notice, manage, and intervene in potential violence is brought about through their embodiment as queer citizens. Being "included" is

therefore more than simply overcoming homophobia or being treated equally to heterosexual and cisgender workers in an organizational sense, it enrolls workers specific biographical experiences as queer people into the labor they perform. This process demonstrates new forms of normativity and transgression as part of the gendered and sexual politics of interactive service work and highlights the critical role that queer workers can play in the relational dynamics of mainstream hospitality venues.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

In this paper we show how queer workers in mainstream venues negotiate and respond to hetero- and homonormativity, and explore the multiple subjectivities enacted in the practice of hospitality labor in a post-Fordist service economy. Our participants described the assumed heterosexuality of hospitality spaces, as well as the limits of homonormative performance, showing how transgressive forms of gendered and sexualized embodiment become visible and intelligible. For some queer workers, the venues that they labored within enrolled politics of diversity and inclusion into their consumption offering. These venues were usually in inner-urban areas where tolerant cosmopolitanism was part of the socio-cultural landscape, such as the Bonsoy Belt of Melbourne's northern suburbs and Newcastle's inner-city night-time economy. In these places, the pressure to be appropriately flamboyant is a part of affective and immaterial labor practices that offer the kind of consumption experience customers anticipate within a venue that includes the presence of queer workers. Moreover, those who are employed in venues that value diversity and who take an explicit stance against homophobia must also contend with the different forms of queer performativity that are permissible and celebrated at work.

In recent years there has been an increasing concern to theorize how the socially located and embodied subjectivities of workers contribute to theories of affective labor, which have failed to properly capture how axes of inequality and difference such as class, gender, and sexuality shape how workers subjectivities are enrolled into the creation of value. Given the limitations of our sample especially in relation to ethnicity, future research should consider the way that the notions of diversity and inclusion are challenged by the inclusion of queer members who are members of marginalized groups, and the way that this varies as part of the dynamics of different local service economies. In turning toward differentiation in the creation of value, we suggest that future studies of service labor also attend to the unique experiences of queer people of color, migrant workers, First Nations people, and people with disabilities—as well as those whose identities intersect and compound marginalization. Such research would add to an emerging body of literature oriented to the meanings of value, diversity, and inclusion and how they are translated through the labor of marginalized workers. Moreover, research should consider the uptake and impact of diversity and inclusion as it is understood in urban areas in the dynamics of different local service economies, such as in rural and regional areas, and in non-Western cities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research for this publication was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Melbourne, as part of the Wiley - The University of Melbourne agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Megan Sharp  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2722-9708>

Julia Coffey  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7388-6592>

## REFERENCES

- Adkins, Lisa. 1991. "Sexual Work and the Employment of Women in the Service Industries." *The Sociological Review* 39(1 suppl): 207-228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.1991.tb03361.x>.
- Adkins, Lisa. 1995. *Gendered Work. Sexuality, Family and the Labour Market*. Bristol PA: Open University Press.
- Adkins, Lisa. 2000. "Mobile Desire: Aesthetics, Sexuality and the 'Lesbian' at Work." *Sexualities* 3(2): 201-218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136346000003002006>.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bolton, Sharon C. 2009. "The Lady Vanishes: Women's Work and Affective Labour." *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion* 3(1): 72-80. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijwoe.2009.025400>.
- Coffey, Julia, David Farrugia, Lisa Adkins, and Steven Threadgold. 2018. "Gender, Sexuality, and Risk in the Practice of Affective Labour for Young Women in Bar Work." *Sociological Research Online* 23(4): 728-743. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418780059>.
- Collins, Alan. 2004. "Sexual Dissidence, Enterprise and Assimilation: Bedfellows in Urban Regeneration." *Urban Studies* 41(9): 1789-1806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098042000243156>.
- Duggan, Lisa. 2002. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Castronovo Russ and Dana D. Nelson. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Farrugia, David. 2018. "Youthfulness and Immaterial Labour in the New Economy." *The Sociological Review* 66(3): 511-526. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026117731657>.
- Farrugia, David, Steven Threadgold, and Julia Coffey. 2018. "Young Subjectivities and Affective Labour in the Service Economy." *Journal of Youth Studies* 21(3): 272-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1366015>.
- Florida, Richard L. 2005. *Cities and The Creative Class*. New York: Routledge.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Andy Pratt. 2008. "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(7-8): 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794>.
- Gorman-Murray, Andrew, and Catherine Nash. 2017. "Transformations in LGBT Consumer Landscapes and Leisure Spaces in the Neoliberal City." *Urban Studies* 54(3): 786-805. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016674893>.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2005. *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press (Sexual cultures).
- Hardt, Michael. 1999. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26(2): 89-100.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2005. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hartless, Jaime. 2019. "Questionably Queer: Understanding Straight Presence in the Post-Gay Bar." *Journal of Homosexuality* 66(8): 1035-1057. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1491707>.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Irving, Dan. 2015. "Performance Anxieties." *Australian Feminist Studies* 30(83): 50-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.998455>.
- Lloren, Anouk, and Lorena Parini. 2017. "How LGBT-Supportive Workplace Policies Shape the Experience of Lesbian, Gay Men, and Bisexual Employees." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 14(3): 289-299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-016-0253-x>.
- Lloyd, Richard. 2010. *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Post-Industrial City*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Mcdowell, Linda. 2009. *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*. West Sussex: Blackwell.
- Oksala, Johanna. 2016. "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41(2): 281-303. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682920>.
- Priola, Vincenza, Diego Lasio, Silvia De Simone, and Francesco Serri. 2014. "The Sound of Silence. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Discrimination in 'Inclusive Organizations.'" *British Journal of Management* 25(3): 488-502. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12043>.
- Skeggs, Beverley. 2011. "Imagining Personhood Differently: Person Value and Autonomist Working-Class Value Practices." *The Sociological Review* 59(3): 496-513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2011.02018.x>.
- Ward, Jane. 2008. *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Webster, Jennica R, Gary A. Adams, Cheryl L. Maranto, Katina Sawyer, and Christina Thoroughgood. 2018. "Workplace Contextual Supports for LGBT Employees: A Review, Meta-Analysis, and Agenda for Future Research." *Human Resource Management* 57(1): 193-210. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21873>.
- Williams, Christine, and Patti Giuffre. 2011. "From Organizational Sexuality to Queer Organizations: Research on Homosexuality and the Workplace." *Sociology Compass* 5(7): 551-563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00392.x>.

Willis, Paul. 2009. "From Exclusion to Inclusion: Young Queer Workers' Negotiations of Sexually Exclusive and Inclusive Spaces in Australian Workplaces." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12(6): 629-651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260902902689>.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Megan Sharp**, Megan.sharp@unimelb.edu.au, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, AUS, 3010.

**David Farrugia**, david.m.farrugia@newcastle.edu.au, School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, AUS, 2308.

**Julia Coffey**, julia.coffey@newcastle.edu.au, School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, AUS, 2308.

**Steven Threadgold**, steven.threadgold@newcastle.edu.au, School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, AUS, 2308.

**Lisa Adkins**, lisa.adkins@sydney.edu.au, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, AUS, 2006.

**Rosalind Gill**, rosaland.gill.2@city.ac.uk, School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University of London, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom.

**How to cite this article:** Sharp, Megan, David Farrugia, Julia Coffey, Steven Threadgold, Lisa Adkins, and Rosalind Gill. 2022. "Queer subjectivities in hospitality labor." *Gender, Work & Organization* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12844>.