

## Doing and Negotiating Transgender on the Front Line: Customer Abuse, Transphobia and Stigma in the Food Retail Sector

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### Abstract

Despite growing research on LGBT+ populations, few studies have examined transgender individuals' specific workplace experiences, whose voice is often subsumed in a wider category. This article presents the story of Kathrine, a female transgender food retail worker, and discusses the abusive, discriminatory and transphobic behaviour of customers, which has received limited attention in the sociology of service work literature. The article reveals the stigmatization of transgender employees by customers, which is expressed through micro-aggressions, such as mis-gendering, mocking and harassing, and is often neglected and/or tolerated by management. Kathrine discusses the coping strategies she utilizes to reduce the negative consequences of the stigma, and to negotiate and protect her gender identity. These include confronting and/or refusing to serve transphobic customers, reflecting her resilience towards discrimination and abuse. The article calls for further research to understand transgender service employees' experiences and the complexity and diversity of coping strategies used by stigmatized workers.

### Keywords

customer abuse, LGBT+, service work, stigma, transgender, transphobia

### Introduction

Despite the increasing presence of transgender individuals in media, and the growing research on LGBT+ populations (Law et al., 2011), few studies have examined the specific workplace experience of transgender employees (Thoroughgood et al., 2017). This 'On the Front Line' article presents Kathrine's story, who works as a food retail worker,

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while transitioning from male to female, as told in June 2019. Kathrine is in her mid-40s; she started transitioning in 2015. She works on the self-checkouts area in one of the leading food retailers in the UK, assisting and serving customers. Kathrine started and continues her transition within the same organization and even within the same store, which is located in a small city in the UK. According to the participant, this is a megastore attracting hundreds of customers per day, many of them being students, older-aged regular customers, and individuals with an alcohol addiction. As she commented, there are daily incidences of customer abuse in the store, while its location often drives negative attitudes towards transgender individuals such as herself.

The term ‘transgender’ is used, here, as ‘an umbrella term describing individuals whose identity and/or gender expression doesn’t reflect the societal gender norms associated with the sex assigned at birth’ (Dietert and Dentice, 2009: 122). This puts transgender individuals, who deviate from these social norms, in conflict with societal institutions, including the workplace (Dietert and Dentice, 2009). As Robinson et al. (2017: 301) highlight: ‘because of their perceived gender incongruity, transgender individuals face significant challenges and discrimination in the workplace’. Research shows that the transgender population is the most targeted minority group in terms of physical and psychological violence, while the majority of transgender and gender non-conforming employees have experienced hate crime, discrimination and mistreatment in the workplace (Beauregard et al., 2018).

Kathrine’s account reflects the pervasiveness of mistreatment in service work. Her discussion starts with a wider recognition of the embedded customer abuse in food retailing, followed by her personal experience as a transgender employee who is subject to abuse from customers. As she describes it, customer abuse is part of retail work, yet in her case, this includes elements of stigmatization and transphobia. Kathrine’s account sheds light on the experiences of transgender employees in the UK service sector and the coping strategies adopted within interactions with transphobic customers. This is an important contribution to the sociology of work literature, giving voice to a neglected group of employees.

The article starts by underlining the underdeveloped transgender employee research agenda. This is followed by discussions on customer transphobic abuse, the stigmatization of transgender individuals in service work and coping strategies utilized by the latter. The article closes presenting Kathrine’s story and her experiences on the front line.

## **The (underdeveloped) transgender employee research agenda**

Scholars have recently started showing a growing interest in studying the unique work experiences of transgender individuals (Sawyer et al., 2016). There remain, however, large gaps in our empirical and theoretical understanding of how this minority experience work and the challenges they face due to the visibility of gender, especially when transgender identities come into conflict with normative societal expectations (Robinson et al., 2017). The current binary-driven schemata of gender in our society creates confusion around the concept of transgender, which is often conflated with sexuality (Robinson

et al., 2017). Indeed, scholars critically report that the transgender group is often clustered with 'LGB' (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual) employees, assuming that gender identity is similar or even identical to sexual orientation (Beauregard et al., 2018). This becomes problematic as the experiences, issues and voice of transgender employees are subsumed, and potentially lost, in a wider broad category (McFadden and Crowley-Henry, 2018). Importantly, although sexuality, gender and sex are connected (Robinson et al., 2017), the experiences of the 'LGB' and transgender employees are categorically different (Sawyer and Thoroughgood, 2017). Therefore, transgender individuals 'deserve to be studied in their own right' (Law et al., 2011: 710).

Real-life scenarios reported in research (see Robinson et al., 2017: 304), as well as academic accounts, such as O'Shea's (2017) auto-ethnography and Barclay and Scott's (2006) discussion on Susan's (a transgender female employee) story, clearly illustrate the unique challenges transgender individuals face in life and the workplace. As Mizock et al. (2017) note, and O'Shea's (2017) story shows, transgender individuals face abuse and stigma from both the general public and co-workers. Worryingly, as Kathrine's account also highlights, they are often described as mentally ill, dishonest, confused, or fake men, women and non-binary individuals (Robinson et al., 2017: 303). This widespread stigmatization of transgender people needs to be further acknowledged, particularly when discussing transgender service employees' experiences, whose voice remains unheard in scholarship. Kathrine's story adds to this practical and theoretical lacuna, illustrating how transgender discrimination and abuse is a wider societal issue, especially for employees who are on the front line serving the public. The connections between work and society generate challenges for transgender employees (Sawyer et al., 2016), who may face both co-worker and employer discrimination, as well as customer violence as an outcome of their transition.

## **Customer abuse, transphobia and stigma on the front line**

Ozturk and Tatli (2016) note that discriminatory experiences for transgender employees are often occupation- and industry-specific. Kathrine's account mirrors this argument, highlighting how customer sovereignty in the service sector, driven by 'the customer is always right' cultures, leads to gender- and transphobic behaviours. It remains true that customer abuse is common across this industry. Korczynski and Evans (2013: 769) define it as forms of behaviour perceived by workers as aggressive, intimidating or insulting to themselves. The same authors further highlight how tensions on the shop floor are more likely to occur in cultures that emphasize the 'customer is King' mantra. Customer abuse stems from the failure by organizations to deliver on the 'enchanted myth of sovereignty' (Korczynski and Evans, 2013). The myth depicts the customer as authoritative, possessing relational superiority over workers. Recent reports show that there is a growing problem of violence and abuse in the retail sector which, worryingly, is accepted as part of the job (Taylor, 2019). Kathrine's story confirms data suggesting the embeddedness of customer abuse in retail. In this case, however, according to Kathrine's experience, customer abuse includes elements of transphobia.

Transphobia is defined by Robinson et al. (2017: 301) as 'emotional disgust or revulsion towards individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations', and

refers to stigma and discrimination towards transgender and non-gender-conforming individuals (Mizock et al., 2017). Stigma includes the undervaluation of individuals based on differentiating characteristics (Nath, 2011). Transgender employees are being stigmatized due to the large-scale societal discomfort with the view that gender is not a fixed construct, but fluid (Beauregard et al., 2018). Beauregard et al. (2018), using the term ‘Cisnormativity’, refer to the, mistaken, assumption that all people are cisgender and argue that this assumption characterizes most if not all societal institutions. Robinson et al. (2017: 303) similarly note that cisnormativity denotes the compulsory nature of the gender binary and suggests that ‘transgender people do not exist, and even if they do, their numbers are so miniscule that the average binary person does not need to know about their existence’. This is a disturbingly misleading idea, which generates negative and transphobic attitudes towards transgender individuals. These attitudes are often expressed through micro-aggressions, as also evident in Kathrine’s story, including problematic language, stereotyped assumptions, mis-gendering, mocking, disapproving, denying, threatening and harassing (Mizock et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017).

The stigmatization of transgender individuals resembles other marginalized groups. Johnston and Nadal’s (2010) work on the micro-aggressions towards multi-racial individuals is similar to transgender employees’ experiences in showing ‘how being questioned as to one’s authenticity serves as a mechanism of exclusion’ (cited in Beauregard et al., 2018: 863). Similarly, Nath’s (2011) work in Indian call centres shows how stigmatization of national identity becomes the target of discredit and abuse and explains how workers experience the stigma of nationality through the institutionalized demands of accent modification and name and location masking to gain the customer’s approval and minimize customer abuse. Importantly, employees were required to manage their emotions and suppress their genuineness during customer interaction to enchant customers while, as concluded, the individual’s identity during service work occupies a position of subordination (Nath, 2011). This is similar to Kathrine’s experiences where, in a context within which the customer ‘is King’, Kathrine’s gender identity becomes the target of abuse, while she is expected to suppress her feelings and to display emotions considered desirable by management (Nath, 2011). Such displays of ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) contribute to a sense of humiliation experienced by stigmatized workers facing customer abuse because of their inability to challenge their abusers. Ominously, the targets of stigma can suffer from emotional exhaustion and low self-esteem, leading to anxiety and depression (Mizock et al., 2017).

Mizock et al. (2017: 286) provide a useful and informative analysis of the coping strategies used by transgender individuals in the workplace to reduce the negative consequences of stigma. These include gender-presentation strategies (e.g. modifying appearance), gender detachment (e.g. concealing gender identity), relationship navigating and resource utilization (e.g. seeking peer/organizational support), enhanced job performance, structural and maladaptive coping strategies (e.g. leaving the workplace) and power-acquisition strategies (e.g. pursuing leadership roles to influence policy and culture). Kathrine’s account reflects several coping strategies towards abusive transphobic customers, including high job performance and seeking managerial support, as well as confronting and/or refusing to serve customers. Although Kathrine’s strategies are not always effective, as management interventions might ally with the customer, Kathrine

has, evidently, developed mechanisms to protect her identity, which reflects her resilience in the face of hardship and discrimination (Mizock et al., 2017).

Research has recognized the necessity for supportive managerial practices for transgender individuals in the workplace and the development of organizational policies and gender equality training, across organizational levels, to address discrimination (Dietert and Dentice, 2009). A critical question remains, however, on how organizations manage and deal with customer-based discrimination (Madera et al., 2017). As Kathrine's story reveals, her employer has developed policies regarding internal social relations to avoid discrimination and she has received support from management during her transition. Nevertheless, discrimination and gender-related violence from customers were often ignored or tolerated by management, overlooking the stigmatization of Kathrine's gender identity. This approach could be explained as the outcome of the sector's intense competition, the customer-oriented cultures in service organizations and, consequently, the power imbalance within the triadic service employment relationship (Korczyński and Evans, 2013). Crucially, as Beauregard et al. (2018: 864) suggest, and as is confirmed in this study, 'this power imbalance is intensified for transgender employees whose marginalised status in society affords them even less power than the average non-managerial worker'. Customer abuse remains a central and highly problematic issue in the sector, one that contributes to the stigmatization and mistreatment of marginalized service workers.

Kathrine's story adds to debates of gender identity negotiations by discussing the neglected role of customers who do not accept societal deviations of gender. The article highlights the embedded customer abuse in food retailing and shows that this includes elements of transphobia and stigmatization. Additionally, it shows that due to limited managerial support, Kathrine has developed coping strategies to negotiate her gender on the front line and remain resilient towards customer discrimination. Further research is necessary to fully understand the experience of stigmatized front-line employees and the complexity and diversity of coping strategies used by the latter and, in this case, by those who do not conform to societal cisnormative assumptions. This is necessary to allow scholars, employers and policy-makers to promote inclusion and equality in the workplace, protect transgender individuals from any type of violence and help them enjoy the 'right to work in an environment free from societal gender normative institutions, harassment, fear and discrimination' (Dietert and Dianne, 2009: 138).

## **Kathrine's story**

### *Customer abuse: part of the job*

It is not uncommon in retail to get someone who is not happy with their service. You get the ones who are bad-tempered or short-tempered. You can usually tell that they're having a bad day and everything that goes wrong makes their day even worse, even the smallest meaningless things. For example, the self-scan machine sometimes doesn't work and then you can see them massively over-reacting to things. You have to be careful how to approach them, and I'm always a bit more mindful of the fact and I just try to be more calming and extra polite to them. I try to show them that I'm trying to help, maybe

I'll joke about the issue, but not demeaning the issue to them. Yet, at the same time, you let them know it's not that big of an issue, it's just a checkout that isn't working properly. Worse things have happened in the world.

I would say some people have bad days, some people have good days, and some people are always in a bad mood. Maybe some customers feel as if we haven't given them the full service. Then it's within their right, obviously, to make a complaint against us. I've had a gentleman before who felt as if I was very dismissive of his comment that it wasn't very clear how to move into the self-scan area. We have a little sign that says 'Queue this way', so you would think you start there and queue. But no, he didn't understand that sign. So, I was trying to explain to him and he responded that he still didn't think it's very clear. I said: 'I'm sorry, I always felt as if it was rather clear'. He, however, made a complaint about it because he believed I was very dismissive about his point.

Most people, unfortunately, just see the retail worker as a second-class citizen. You do get the feeling as if they've never worked in any sort of service industry and they're just maybe a bit richer or feel as if they're a bit richer. There was one of my colleagues who got told by a customer that he was better than her because he worked as a lecturer. This was straight out the blue, just told her that he was better than her, even though she is studying at the university and she is a very intelligent lassie. But he never even considered that. So where is that arrogance coming from? Their attitude is mainly based on the idea of 'I'm the customer, you're serving me and, therefore, I can say whatever I want'. Just because there is a service involved and it's a service industry, it's lower on the totem pole of jobs. It's not as well-paid, so some people just equate payment to actually being better, which is very wrong. It doesn't mean you're a better person and it doesn't give you the right to come in and abuse us. But they still do.

I've been verbally abused and I've been threatened. This is frequently alcohol-related. For example, often, if customers are trying to get alcohol and they're visibly drunk, we're not allowed to serve them. But at that stage, then, it can get a bit more verbal and they say all sorts of things – they're going to do this and that and threaten that they will wait for you when you finish your shift. Some people, especially if you refuse them alcohol or other restricted items, can get a bit abusive just because you're just doing your job and you're following procedures. You try to explain that to them, but they don't understand it; because that one bottle of beer that they're not getting is so important to them. We just have to try and keep treating them with respect and, hopefully, they will do the same. We get it all the time. There was a young lad in quite recently, he was trying to buy energy drinks, and he didn't look 16. Energy drinks are restricted to age 16, and he had a female friend with him and she looked even younger. Obviously, I asked them both for identity, as I'm supposed to do. They started abusing me and shouting at me. They used swear words and offensive language, which they shouldn't be coming out with, especially at their age. I'm not going to repeat them, but it was deeply upsetting to listen to those swear words, targeting my gender transition, and having them being abusive towards me. I did, however, keep doing my job and these customers definitely didn't get served the drink, no matter how abusive, racist and gender-phobic their comments were.

## *Coping with transphobic customers*

If you have someone shouting in your face you're just supposed to just try and keep calm yourself. If you feel as if you can handle it yourself, fine; if not, contact a manager. We're not paid just to stand there and take abuse. It's not very pleasant. It can ruin your whole day and really put you on edge. We've had situations where some of my colleagues have been in absolute tears because of the abuse that you get thrown at you for no reason. You're just doing your job. It was especially upsetting when abuse and attack from customers had to do with my transgenderism. Although this has made me a stronger person, it's still something that shouldn't be happening. There was a customer, for instance, who for months kept using male pronouns for me and one day I politely asked him: 'Please can you stop because I'm not a man'. His response was, 'No, I can't, you were born that way, I'll always treat you that way', and kept going, saying, 'You've got this between your legs'. At that point, my team support had to come over. She tried to calm him down because he has no right to stand there and tell me how my gender identity is. I was being perfectly respectful and polite to him; I'm just simply asking him to please not use those terms. Eventually, he said that I was oppressing him. I had finished serving him by that point anyway, but the manager was very supportive, telling him just to keep his opinion to himself. I said to both of them that I'll refuse to serve this customer from this point on. We're allowed to refuse to serve, although he was shouting to me, 'You can't do this'. I said, 'Yes, I can. I'm not there to sit and get abuse from someone who doesn't respect me as a person', and from that point on I wouldn't serve this customer. He wasn't banned from the store, he still does come in, but he doesn't come to me. And if he did, I would just walk away. I can do that because I'm mainly working on the self-checkouts, so I have the freedom to move around that area. If I'm sitting on the till, however, it's a little bit harder, but I can always buzz and get someone and say, 'I'm not serving this customer'. They all know anyway, so the managers are supportive in cases of abuse – most of the time anyway.

This is deeply upsetting for me and it is something that happens more often than one might expect. I don't recall any of these men being there when I was born, standing there watching, and they have no right whatsoever to have an opinion on my gender. This is me; I'm myself and I'm proud of it. However, when you work in retail and you expose your real self to the public then it's a challenge. Personally speaking, because I'm transgender, sometimes I'll get people asking over-personal questions which I really don't want to answer. They ask me if I've gone all the way through my transition, although they won't use that word often, so it's essentially asking about my body and what it entails and what isn't there or is there. This isn't really a question you would normally ask anyone just in the street that you've never seen before but, apparently, it's got to be public knowledge. So, they ask. Generally, it's just a sort of curiosity-type way; sometimes it's a bit nasty, and some people are just generally friendly about it and wishing me well. But it is still a subject that I don't really want to broach with a stranger. Working on the front line of the store I interact with the public daily. I'm, however, quite open about who I am. Yet, again, you get those who make sort of snide comments or giggle and laugh at me, but that doesn't impact on me. I try to rise above it, just hold my head up high because I'm proud of who I am.

Saying that, however, while such incidences are frequent, and line managers are supportive to step in and defuse the situation, they have never asked customers to apologize or leave the store, until recently. In this case, I was working on the night shift. My store remains open until 12 p.m. every day and after 10 p.m. is when we get many of the 'difficult' customers. We had three tills open and the self-checkouts where I was working. On the night shift, we usually have one manager on duty that is responsible for the store, plus one team leader. The store was quiet that night. Just a few customers in and the self-checkouts were empty. This is when this customer, who was served from one of the younger girls on the tills, let's say, lost his temper. I'm still unsure what the problem was that triggered his behaviour. He started shouting at the young lassie and calling her names. The team leader was, thankfully, close and stepped in. She sent the young girl, who was in tears by that time, to the staff room to calm down and she escorted the man out of the store. The self-checkouts, where I was working, are located close to the store exit. The man escorted to the exit passed next to me, looked at me, and shouted: 'Well I'll just go to shop in CompanyX who don't employ transgender'. I was about to answer back but the manager nodded to me to close my mouth and keep silent, rather than ask this man to apologize. I would have liked the store manager to have him, and any other abusive and transphobic customers, banned from the store, because staff should be respected for who they are. But that hasn't happened, and I'll dare to say that it'll never happen. Customers are just too valuable to the company.

I have often felt uncomfortable around a customer, especially those who comment on my gender. There are a few of those and I don't like it because they're too personal towards me. They're asking too many personal questions, which I don't want to answer and, indeed, don't feel comfortable answering. They're just generally a bit creepy, as in lecherous, or trying to flirt with you and you don't want them to. They're just a customer and I have no interest; I have shown no interest. We keep being polite and serve them, maybe smile at them, but that doesn't mean that we're flirting back. I think if they push it too much then the security guard, who doesn't exist anymore, would have stepped in. He occasionally had to step in and ask men not to do that and say to them 'the girl isn't interested, please stop hassling her'. This has happened to many of the girls on the checkouts, especially to the younger ones by older men. I'm more confident than a lot of the younger girls. I'm 40, I have children and I had to go through a lot just to be who I am, so I won't be fussed by some guy. I have developed a thick skin. I do get a lot of comments and a lot of looks. I generally just blank them out. I get strange looks and comments on my gender but I've developed a rhino-thick skin because you just have to. You have to develop your defensive mechanism and learn that it's just another day and people, some people, are like that, maybe they're having a bad day. It still doesn't give them the right to do that, but it still happens.

I don't feel, however, as if dangerous things are lurking around every corner which can possibly do me injury. There is, however, the potential for it. Potentially, people can get massively abusive and start physically attacking you. I haven't been physically abused, but it has happened to others. Customers can become physically violent and no-one can assure me that the guy who refuses to accept my gender, or any other transphobic individual in this small town, will not just come in and attack me, especially now that the company decided to remove the security guard from this store. This was an extra level of

you feeling safe. I work until midnight sometimes so there is only myself and one other colleague on the checkouts. The night shift is on duty but they're busy down the aisles doing their own thing, so sometimes if we do get an abusive customer it's just us having to deal with it. We do have a phone to call the duty manager, but that still might take too long, like three or four minutes to get there. It's not particularly safe without the security guard anymore. I don't feel safe anymore. I feel extremely unprotected at the moment, especially listening to the stories and experiences of other people in the store. One of my colleagues, a few months ago, she had a guy who ended up flashing his private parts at her. I think he was a bit drunk and she had to speak to the police about the incident.

I want to close this by highlighting that we need to understand that the customer isn't always right. This is probably accepted in theory. However, saying that the customer is always right is a very old phrase and policy which I don't think quite fits in so much these days. Finally, customers should look at the skeletons in their own cupboard before accusing me of dealing with mine, because everyone has them. Everyone has issues that they're not dealing with, within their own life, and yet they have a go at me and abuse me for being open about mine, dealing with them, moving on, and being who I should be. This is not acceptable. Think about that.

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