

(self-) Seduction in the Manufacturing of Consent: Exploring
Emotional Exploitation in the Service Sector

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(Self-)seduction in the manufacturing of consent: exploring emotional exploitation in the service sector

James Frederick Green 

Worcester Business School, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

This article uncovers an underexplored phenomenon observed in managerial – employee exchanges within the service sector: *emotional exploitation*. Drawing on ethnographic insights from the public house industry, it explores how managers deploy emotion-inducing tactics to *seduce* lower-echelon workers into accepting unfavourable working conditions. Crucially, such consent is not always manufactured by management; processes of *self-seduction* – where workers consent through self-persuasion – also play a central role. Emotional exploitation, this paper argues, is a routine feature of pub work, shaped by fluctuating emotional intensities, surplus or shortages of staff, and the affective pull of collegial relationships. It further examines how low-paid workers both heed and resist the mechanisms of (self-)seduction. In doing so, it extends analysis of emotional labour within labour control strategies, adds to the theory of *manufacturing consent*, and deepens the understanding of the commodification of emotion under capitalism – highlighting how (self-)seduction further alienates workers from aspects of the self.

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Introduction

Exploitation is a concept subject to multiple interpretations, shaped through various lenses including philosophy, legal theory, Marxism, criminology, and labour process theory. In its most neutral and etymological sense, the term simply means ‘to employ to the greatest possible advantage’ (Bufacchi 2002, 2). However, once placed within the context of labour, exploitation rarely retains this neutral tone. Instead, it tends to signal malpractice, coercion, or structural inequality – often ‘rooted in the question of control’ (Crocker 1972, 204). From a Marxist perspective, exploitation is embedded in the structural dynamics of capitalism, where profit-wage disparities serve as an ‘exact expression of the degree of exploitation of labour power by capital, or of the labourer by the capitalist’ (Marx 1996 [1867]: 153). Here, surplus value is not an incidental outcome but the very mechanism through which capital maintains dominance. Labour process theory offers a complementary, though more granular, analysis. Scholars have defined exploitation as ‘the appropriation of the surplus labour by capital based on its ownership and control of

CONTACT James Frederick Green  james.green2@worc.ac.uk

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the means of production, and the separation of direct producers from those means' (Thompson 1990, 99–100).

The key concern for labour process theorists is not only that exploitation occurs, but how it is enacted – through what mechanisms, strategies, and managerial techniques surplus value is extracted. It is this emphasis on the *how* of exploitation that intersects productively with emerging debates in criminology – particularly through the concept of the *labour exploitation continuum* (Davies 2019; Skřivánková 2010). By integrating the analytical insights of labour process theory with criminological inquiry, we can begin to articulate a more nuanced understanding of daily or *routine* forms of *exploitation*. *Routine exploitation* refers to everyday, normalised practices of coercion and control that fall within legal boundaries but nevertheless erode worker autonomy and wellbeing (Davies 2019). Routine exploitation is rarely 'newsworthy', precisely because it is embedded in lawful yet coercive employment practices. These include the proliferation of non-standard contractual arrangements (e.g. flexible or zero-hour contracts), the denial of breaks, excessive workloads, and persistent performance pressures (Davies 2019). Accordingly, this paper explores a form of *routine exploitation* as a central feature of contemporary service sector work.

Investigations into routine exploitation were conducted within the corporate public house (pub, pubco) industry. This sector was selected due to its relatively niche and complex hierarchical structure. According to recent UK statistics, pubcos account for 29% of the market, while brewers own 21%, and independently owned pubs make up the remaining 50% (Foley 2021). In independently owned pubs, hierarchical control typically ends with the landlord or landlady. In contrast, pubco venues are often 'backed by international corporate financial houses' (Hollands and Chatterton 2003, 33) and are managed through multiple layers of corporate oversight. These include area managers, human resources personnel, and chief executive officers – many of whom are geographically distant from the pubs they manage and often operate out of a centralised head office.

Working in a pub rarely offers a sense of stability. Most front-of-house employees operate under conditions typically defined as 'low-skilled, often uncredentialed "generic labour," where workers of all genders perform under feminised conditions marked by job insecurity, poor pay, and the demand to meet consumer expectations' (McDowell 2009, 42). This research finds that contemporary bartenders in London navigate inconsistent shift patterns that deviate significantly from the standard Monday-to-Friday, 9-to-5 schedule, with service often extending late into the night. Employment contracts are frequently vague, offering little in the way of benefits: workers are paid low or minimum wages, receive minimal holiday allowance, are denied company sick pay, and are bound by clauses stating, for instance, that '... there is no obligation on the company to offer you work in any particular week' (fieldnotes). A notable part of a bartenders' role also includes navigating customer interactions that demand constant public forms of emotion management, from providing 'service with a smile' to rebuffing inappropriate advances (Green 2025; Hochschild 1983). Amid these pressures, managers seek to assert control – not only over workers' physical labour but also over their emotional and performative conduct – in order to maintain operational continuity. This paper focuses on the emotional and performative dimensions of exploitation and managerial control, aiming to expand the labour process literature by addressing emotional forms of labour exploitation (Jocoy 2003).

To briefly expand on the core requirement of emotional labour in bartending, this often involves, for example, ‘pouring happiness into people’s lives’ (fieldnotes; Green 2022; Hochschild 1983; Seymour and Sandiford 2005). While much of the literature on emotional labour focuses on the preparation, implementation, and management of emotion and bodily display during *customer* interactions (Bolton 2005; Green 2022; Hochschild 1983; Korczynski 2003; Leidner 1999; Seymour and Sandiford 2005) there is comparably little consideration towards managing display with *colleagues*, and managerial tactics ‘to gain consent’ of their employees in accepting precarious working conditions (Jocoy 2003, 52; Parush and Zaidman 2023; Theodosius et al. 2020; Townsend 2008). This paper views ‘emotional labour not just as the activity of carrying out displays of emotion prescribed by management but also as the mechanism through which owners and managers motivate employees to accept the conditions of capitalist work relations’ (Jocoy 2003, 68). It will outline the ways in which managers *emotionally exploit* their workers into consenting to unfavourable working conditions through the adoption of emotional labour tactics. Thus, the central research question this paper seeks to address is: *What emotional method(s) do manager(s) use to manufacture employee consent?*

The structure of this paper is organised in the following way. The ensuing two sections offer a review of the literature, beginning with a focus on the classical theories of labour control by Braverman (1974), Edwards (1979) and Micheal Burawoy (1979). This is followed by an introduction to Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotional labour, discussions on managerial control of emotional labour in *employee-customer* interactions, employee resistance to performing desirable emotional displays, and a focus on studies exploring managerial emotional labour as a mechanism of labour control. The methods section then examines the use of a *hybrid ethnography* (Seim 2021) conducted in a pub based in Central London, pseudonymised as Rita’s Public House and Dining (Rita’s). The fourth and fifth sections present the findings, revealing *emotional exploitation* enacted by managers and subsequently by workers themselves, and assess why workers conform to and resist *seductive* methods of control. The final section offers conclusive discussions, outlines limitations, and provides recommendations for further research.

Classical theories of labour control

The ‘need for efficient planning, organizing, influencing and controlling of all work activities’ (Pindur et al. 1995, 60) originates from activities rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Fast forward a few centuries, beginning in the US and subsequently being washed up on the shores of the UK and Europe, classical theories of labour control aided in the further transformation of the performances of work. Contemporary structural origins of the management and organisation of individual labour and tasks derive from the scientific management movement and Fordism. In short, this saw business leads striving for maximum prosperity via the ‘highest state of excellence’ and efficiency from their employees (Ford 1922; Pizzolato 2013; F. W. Taylor 1911, 9). For thinkers embroiled in industrial sociology like Braverman (1974), these influences alongside technological advancement saw the ‘destruction of craftsmanship’ (p. 94) while evoking imagery of ‘fast-moving assembly lines, armies of robotized workers, and standardized products’ (Pizzolato 2013, 19). Further to this, Braverman (1974) saw the dominance of capitalism as a destruction

of 'all other ways of living' with economic forces, corporations, and bargaining power functioning through '*manipulation* is primary and *coercion* is held in reserve' (p. 103–104).

The 1970s marked a pivotal decade in the development of labour process theory. While Braverman's (1974) seminal work was groundbreaking, it has been critiqued for downplaying worker agency. Subsequent contributions by Edwards (1979) and Burawoy (1979) helped to address this limitation by offering a more nuanced view of control dynamics within the workplace. According to Edwards (1979), 'hierarchy at work exists and persists because it is profitable. Employers are able to increase their profits when they have greater control over the labor process'. In this view, workplace hierarchy functions as a mechanism through which control is distributed unevenly, with individuals experiencing different degrees of autonomy or subordination depending on their position within organisational structures. Edwards defines control as 'the ability of capitalists and/or managers to obtain desired work behavior from workers' (1979, 17), however, such control is not always seamlessly enacted. Workers 'may use hidden or open resistance to protect themselves against the constant pressure for speed-up; on the other side, capitalists employ a variety of sophisticated or brutal devices for tipping the balance their way' (Edwards 1979, 16). In the context of bartending, expectations to 'speed-up' are certainly present; however, so too are pressures to '*stay on*' – to remain on shift despite prior scheduling – or to '*get off*' – to not attend work or leave early – with success dependent on emotionally engineered environments shaped by managerial strategies. Adherence and rejection towards a sophisticated, *emotionally exploitative* dimension of control will be examined in detail later in the paper.

In his book entitled *Manufacturing Consent*, Marxist sociologist Michael Burawoy, provides a theory towards labour control of the general, lower status, worker. He observed that capitalist control methods encompass forms of co-optation and subtle coercion disguised in the use of *games*, internal labour markets and collective bargaining – illusions of participation and choice – to manufacture workers' consent to capitalism. He sought to answer a series of questions while conducting an ethnography as a machine operator: 'Why do workers work as hard as they do? Why did himself, and other workers, routinely consent to their own exploitation?' (Burawoy 1979, xi). Amongst Burawoy's explanatory analysis came the concept of the game metaphor. Rather than resisting exploitation, workers or players competed in a game (e.g. piecework) – a game that was played every time they stepped onto the shop floor with an aim for pay maximisation. In these 'games', management control their production and have the authority to manipulate the rewards to encourage a highly productive culture. Burawoy argued that '... the labor process as a game contributes to the *obscuring and securing* of surplus labor' (ibid: 92, emphasis added) – however, these games did not always garner employee consent. This paper adopts the logic of the 'game' to explain some onsite, managerial staffs' *attempt to* control their lower echeloned workforce.

With the decline of industrial manufacturing and the rise of the service sector, managerial control had begun infiltrating the emotional dimensions of workers, penetrating individual agency through the commodification of emotion management (Hochschild 1983; Millward 1988). As a result, workers are not only increasingly distanced from the production process itself but, as Hochschild (1983, 7) argued, also 'alienated from an aspect of self.'

Emotional labour & managerial control

... capitalism has found a use for emotion management, and so it has organized it more efficiently and pushed it further. And perhaps it does take a capitalist sort of incentive system to connect emotional labor to competition and to go so far as to actually advertise a 'sincere' smile, train workers to produce such a smile, supervise their production of it, and then forge a link between this activity and corporate profit. (Hochschild 1983, 186)

Subsequent to the application of the theories of labour control which saw work being performed through assembly lines, efficient planning, and managerial oversight of the labour process, the 1980s saw the rise of another form of labour entering symbolic prominence – *emotional labour*. With the initial definition peddled as '... the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage ...' (ibid: 7), interdisciplinary scholars have developed the concept in a variety of ways that offer a more appropriate definition to how this work is done in the pub industry (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Bolton 2005; Morris and Feldman 1996). Concerning pub work, activity to perform satisfactory workplace performances – grinning while engaging with the alcohol seeking customer – can be broadly likened to psychologists Morris and Feldman's (1996) definition of emotional labour which sights 'the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions' (p. 987). Rather than the focus being on controlling individual feeling that impacts bodily presentation (Hochschild 1983), pub work requires an acceptable exhibition of emotional *display*, which may or may not be connected to the (mis)management of internal feelings (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Green 2022; Morris and Feldman 1996).

Engulfing the initial construction of emotional labour are the concepts of surface and deep acting (Hochschild 1983). While there was comparably limited evidence to suggest that (individual) *deep acting* was present in the conjuring of display, *surface acting* was profound for many bartenders when constructing and trying to maintain their workplace performances. Surface acting is presented through '... verbal and nonverbal cues – like proper facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice (Reyers and Matusitz 2012, 140). It is an act in which '... we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves ...' (Hochschild 1983, 33). Initially constructed to explain performances in employee-customer interactions, the concept has been developed to describe exchanges in collegial communications (Theodosius et al. 2020). This article will adopt *collegial surface acting* to explain resistance, and conformity, to the processes of emotional exploitation.

In *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild noted that jobs requiring emotional labour gift '... the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees' (1983, 147, emphasis added). Thinking of the practicalities, how do employers (attempt to) control the emotional performances of their workers? Control may begin during the recruitment phase with hiring managers implementing *emotion mining* - defined as 'the search for and development of potential emotional capital' - of candidates who may or may not express appropriate performative traits during initial interactions (Schweingruber and Berns 2005, 681, emphasis added). Once employed, new employees may be tasked with completing online or in person training that details, for example, organisational expectations for display and scripted tips and tricks for engaging with customers (Curley and Royle 2013; Leidner 1999; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Seymour and Sandiford 2005). While on the shop floor, managers might

observe the myriad interactions between the workforce and customers and, if appropriate, provide rule reminders to those who stray from expectations, as well as sanction or praise employees following positive or negative customer feedback (Fuller and Smith 1991; Hochschild 1983; Huang and Yeoh 2007). This paper, however, is not fully concerned with how managers *manage* their employees interacting with customers, rather it focuses on how bosses *manufacture consent* from their workers by employing emotional labour tactics of their own.

Although most interdisciplinary literature on emotional labour focuses on 'the act of managing emotions as a work task of employees who interact directly with customers in a face to face or voice to voice relationship' (Jocoy 2003, 68), some scholarship, mostly within labour process theory, explores a different angle. This body of work examines how managers use emotional labour to elicit consent from workers, often under precarious and exploitative employment conditions (Froyum 2013; Jocoy 2003; Kunda and Van Maanen 1999; Schweingruber and Berns 2005; Townsend 2008). According to Jocoy (2003), managers and owners do this by '... *obscure[ing]* and *reframe[ing]* capitalist work relations, thereby motivating employees to accommodate management's control over the labour process' (p. 53). In her study on a professional-based service firm in the US, Jocoy (2003) argues that there are multiple ways in which the 'CEO and managers use emotional labour to obscure and reframe the character of their control' (p. 60). These include *reworking relationships* with employees to augment the overarching workplace culture – for example, using friendship 'to promote a reciprocated loyalty between managers and employees' (ibid). Managerial staff *obscuring power relations* in the traditional set up of the 'service triangle' (Leidner 1999; Lopez 2010) where 'employees [were] instilled with the idea that management works to serve them and that management and labour work together to serve the customer' (Jocoy 2003, 62). Managers also engaged in *job enrichment discourse* to smooth tensions over flexible working patterns, narrowly defined job descriptions, and a precise division of labour. Moreover, and rather paradoxically, leaders *reframed the need to dismiss employees* by 'promote[ing] an ideology of commitment to employees, and most importantly, exert[ing] emotional labour to convince employees of that commitment' (ibid).

Winnowing through the literature, other scholars have also detailed managerial activity that appropriates workplace culture and conditions employees consent through, for example, the development of a unitarist culture or via a corporate culture that focuses 'on shaping employees' emotional labour towards displays of loyalty and commitment to their employer' (Kunda and Van Maanen 1999, 64; Townsend 2008). Furthermore, some have commented on managers reworking control by using emotional labour to *offer emotional purpose* to their employees. In this, workplace requirements for managing emotion and display are skewed to suggest benefits not only while in the workplace but also outside of it by creating '... a better self that can be carried into many future situations. These include becoming a "finisher" and a "professional" and developing a "positive mental attitude" ...' (Schweingruber and Berns 2005, 691). Others have also observed the promotion of '*deferential forms of emotional labour* which conjured feelings of "belonging" ... emotional release ... and devotion ...' amongst volunteers and workers (Froyum 2013, 1075) as well as enacting *motivational speeches* to inspire and reenergise employees (Schweingruber and Berns 2005). This study aims to develop this literature further by incorporating a contemporary example of how managerial emotional labour manufactures employees consent in accepting unfavourable employment conditions.

Understanding Resistance to Desirable Display

Much like Burawoy's (1979) analysis of the use of games to manufacture consent, and Edwards' (Edwards 1979) emphasis on workers' individual agency, control over performance is not always straightforward and may fail to elicit the desired level of participation from staff. Scholars from various fields have documented how workers develop 'sophisticated way of wresting back control when talking to customers' (P. Taylor and Bain 1999, 113), including refusing to smile, omitting detested parts of service scripts (Leidner 1999), moving from frontstage regions to backstage to momentarily relieve the service mask (Sturdy and Fineman 2001) and venting workplace issues with colleagues in order to *cope* (Korczyński 2003). Service sector employees have also been observed in undermining managerial control mechanisms by 'collective ridicule' and/or tacit collectivism (P. Taylor and Bain 1999, 113), and resenting the need to smile by '*faking in bad faith*' (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987, 32, emphasis in original). The findings section below will *explicitly detail* the ways in which pub workers manage *consent building* managerial mechanisms by providing context as to *why* they accept and resist such acts.

Methods

Inspired by Josh Seim's (2021) article on 'Participant Observation, Observant Participation, and Hybrid Ethnography', investigations into collegial activity in a pub took place by adopting a *hybrid ethnography*. Specifically, implementing participant observation, observant participation, and interviews. To explain the decision to conduct two types of observations, it is important to first distinguish the differences between these methods. Familiarly, participant observation is a qualitative method that 'takes place in a passing present' (Vidich 1955, 359) and 'enables the research worker to secure his data within the mediums, symbols, and experiential worlds which have meaning to his respondents. Its intent is to prevent imposing alien meanings upon the actions of the subjects' (ibid: 354). Whereas observant participation is a term that is commonly credited with Wacquant's (2004) study on pugilism and can be viewed as a *carnal* form of sociology. The objective of this method is 'to cautiously connect the ethnographer's embodiment as an active participant to others in the field while simultaneously recognising important dissimilarities in experience' (Seim 2021, 6). Unlike participant observation, observant participation requires a 'total "surrender" to the exigencies of the field' (Wacquant 2004, 11) that allows the researcher to 'embrace the view that our subjects are embodied just as we are, and like us, they relate to the world in passionately felt ways' (Mears 2013, 21). This does not mean that researchers implementing the observant participatory method 'assume they can just acquire the same exact experiences of those they study' (Seim 2021, 6). It can, however, be argued that researchers who adopt observant participation are more likely to embody the experiences of the social actors they study, enabling access to tacit knowledge that participant observation alone may overlook, misunderstand, or misinterpret. Thus, to address the research question posed in this paper - *What emotional method(s) do manager(s) use to manufacture employee consent?* - a combination of both observational methods and interviews was deemed necessary. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of workplace dynamics of control by capturing and documenting activity *through the eyes of the self and other*.

The research began in January 2022 and concluded in January 2023. The site of inquiry was a corporatised public house based in Central London pseudonymised as *Rita's Public House and Dining (Rita's)*. I participated in the field as a worker after obtaining employment as a bartender, working for around 20 hours per week. This opportunity arose due to my previous contacts within the industry (see Green 2021, 2022). By the end of the investigations, I had written fieldnotes – observing others as well as myself – based on the activity that occurred in 82 shifts. Interviews were conducted with 36 participants, 20 of which were held with workers not employed, but in similar venues to, Rita's to supplement findings. A handful of workers did reject my call for an interview due to the fear of managerial repercussions. However, those who rejected an interview at Rita's did allow for observations and the documentation of informal discussions while prescribing me with a nick name of 'fieldnotes'. Interviews with all types of *onsite* front-of-house workers were held, ranging from those in entry-level roles (e.g. bartenders) to management (e.g. supervisors, general managers). The ages of the participants ranged from 18–44 with 19 identifying as female and 17 as male.

Thematic analysis

Fieldnotes were recorded in abbreviated form during shifts, typically during moments when I *escaped* my organisationally prescribed emotional labour – such as in restrooms, the cellar, or during breaks. These jottings were subsequently expanded and written up either immediately after the shift or the following day, when recollection of events remained vivid. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data set – including fieldnotes and interview transcripts – was analysed thematically through a deductive, theory-informed approach using NVivo software (Braun and Clarke 2006). The initial stage involved immersive familiarisation with the data and the generation of preliminary codes. These early codes were largely descriptive, directly referencing specific phrases or actions noted during the fieldwork or interviews (e.g. 'don't wanna let managers down', 'I care', 'I lied'). As coding progressed, broader patterns were identified and refined into higher-order themes. This process culminated in the development of five interlinked themes: *workplace solidarities amongst colleagues, games initiated in the pub (with subcategories referring to 'hourly paid workers'¹ and 'managers')*, *seduction (with subcategories of the self and managerial²)*, and *resistance and consent to seduction*. These themes collectively inform and shape the conceptualisation of *emotional exploitation*.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by University College London's (UCL) Research Ethics Committee in early 2022. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct ethnographic fieldwork was obtained from the general manager of the research site – here referred to pseudonymously as *Sally* – who provided initial access to the field. However, this managerial approval did not substitute for the informed consent of individual participants. Each participant was verbally briefed on the research aims and procedures and provided with a written information sheet. Informed consent was obtained via signed physical consent forms, which were issued at either the interview or observation stage depending on the participant's

involvement. In cases where individuals declined to participate in interviews but agreed to be observed, consent was obtained specifically for the observational aspect of the study.

At the outset, the research was not anticipated to involve emotional distress. However, in one instance, a participant became visibly emotional during an interview when asked, 'What emotions do you feel at work?' The participant responded: 'Sometimes when I have to come to work, I don't have to think as much ... yeah ... I'm going to get really emotional now [starts crying] ...'. This moment induced a degree of emotional discomfort for both the participant and the researcher. Following a brief pause in the interview, appropriate emotional support was offered. As with all participants, this interviewee was offered support details containing relevant mental health and counselling resources. A verbal debrief was also conducted following each interview and observation session in line with ethical best practices (Kavanaugh and Ayres 1998; McNallie 2017).

This study adhered to the principle of confidentiality, understood as central to the respect for participant autonomy. As Wiles et al. (2008) argue, confidentiality not only requires anonymisation but also involves avoiding the inadvertent disclosure of identifiable information. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, and any personally identifiable information shared during either informal ethnographic encounters or formal interviews was withheld from other participants and carefully protected in this, and other, research outputs.

Behind the bar: reflections from the field

Although I produced an embodied form of ethnography, I am aware that my demographic characteristics (e.g. race, class, citizenship, gender) differed from my fellow colleagues at Rita's which unsurprisingly caused variations in workplace experiences. While there were many intricate differences, the most general, and overt, was that of managers allocating tasks based on descriptive and prescriptive gendered stereotyping (Heilman 2012). I, like many of my male colleagues, were mostly based behind the bar – deemed as a more 'masculine' role – and required to do the heavy lifting (e.g. moving beer kegs) whereas female workers were, in general, asked to *host* on the floor. Being a host required more '*intimate*' and '*caring*' interactions with customers as boundaryless table service was obligatory. Moreover, being embedded in the field, I was able to scratch the surface, and dive a little deeper, into the daily experiences of these low paid workers. I most certainly had my fair share of feeling authentic pub behaviour by, for example, becoming embroiled in jokes and banter with colleagues during a shift and drinking with them after closing hours (Sandiford and Seymour 2013; White 2000). There were also times, however, where I had to mediate irate customer behaviour which saw me *rejecting* the corporately prescribed emotional labour and unleashing my *true* angered self (see Green 2025):

... This prompted one of the male customers ... to mimic me and call me a 'poofta' ... I became unhinged, 'THIS is why we are stopping to serve you ... *fucking prick*' ... My all-out aggression prompted these complainants to move away from the bar ... After this frantic episode, I had 4 or 5 people of this group come up to me to apologise for their collective behaviour. After they left, there were three other male customers, unrelated to this group, who said that 'you can serve us, we will not give you abuse' ... (Fieldnote, shift 25)

The failure of a pub game

This section begins a tour through the findings of the hybrid ethnography, linking empirical insights with existing literature to deepen understanding of the emotional aspects of control and exploitation within the labour process. One particularly illuminating moment, which emerged with sudden clarity during fieldwork – like a flickering light turning to full beam – was the introduction of a ‘game’ by management. Much like Burawoy (1979), this (*actual*) game was designed to be enacted each time workers performed their roles on the pub floor:

Management are now introducing games to the pub. We are set to play a sort of ‘bingo’. According to [male assistant manager], they are ‘fun competition ... and who doesn’t like that?’ We have to do various forms of upselling (e.g., double shot instead of a single) and, if/when we complete a line, or mark off a ‘full house’, we win a (unstipulated) prize! (Fieldnote, shift 29)

While some workers seemed motivated to participate by sizing each other up and making claims that they’re ‘... going to win’, other more seasoned workers rolled their eyes and sat in silence suggesting that what they were proposing was ‘bullshit’ (fieldnotes). While the manufacturing of consent to the capitalist’s mechanisms of control and coercion proved somewhat affective with some staff, management’s half-hearted approach to increase profit and efficiency failed as quickly as it was introduced. After the meeting there was *no* mention of the game by management and collegial discussions around participating in ‘bingo’ had dissipated. Perhaps the collapse of the game was a result of another, more subtle, form of control being far more successful in recruiting players, that of *emotional exploitation*.

Discovering emotional exploitation

The findings of this ethnography show that there is an underexplored phenomenon situated within manager-employer conduct, which is guided by *seductive* processes, that can be classified under forms of ‘routine exploitation’ (Davies 2019; Skřivánková 2010) – that is ‘*emotional exploitation*’. Seduction, in this context, can be understood as a form of persuasion: compelling others, or the self, to act in ways that may be subtly or knowingly detrimental. In tandem, *emotional exploitation* can be defined as a result of specific workplace conditions that allows for the *manipulation of an employee’s heartstrings that seduces them into scenarios* where, for example, they feel obliged to ‘stay on’, ‘get off’, do tasks that they do not want to do, and to labour harder. It is a phenomenon that is produced not to build commitment to an organisation, but simply to make sure that the pub work *gets done*. To elaborate this concept, this section will be split into two subsections: *Managerial seduction* and *self-seduction*. The former refers to the precarious workplace conditions, which includes being understaffed or overstaffed, that prompts managers to tug on their workforces’ heartstrings to coerce them into accepting unsatisfactory working conditions. This form of control, however, is not only guided by managerial control mechanisms, but it is also steered by the self which can be viewed as a product of managerial and workplace conditioning. Thus, *self-seduction* describes the workers’ acknowledgement towards the state of the pub and, with the absence of overt or subtle managerial influence, commits to their own emotional exploitation.

Managerial Seduction

when you're younger it's so easy to be ... manipulated into things because it's ... the first job you've done ... have no idea what's right and what's wrong. (Nina, Bartender)

Nina's reflection highlights a critical dimension of managerial seduction: the role of age and tenure in shaping employees' susceptibility to emotional exploitation. While varying elements of *this managerial initiated game of emotions* were omnipresent for all front-of-house workers, those most susceptible to – and least equipped with strategies for resistance – were typically younger workers with a lack of experience in bartending. This observation prompts a broader question, why does managerial seduction take place?

A lack of planning, inadequate rostering, an incessant drive to complete tasks, absenteeism, and a tired or injured workforce were the main *internal* reasons for emotional exploitation to befall and persist during the data collection period. However, pub managers were not only battling internal issues, they also had to contend with factors that were outside of their sphere of influence including the consequences of Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, unexpected low or high customer turnout, and train or tube strikes (Kollewe 2022; Wadhera 2021). The aftermath of Brexit and the pandemic were particularly prominent issues for pub leaders as a substantial amount of prospective employees had left, or not ventured into, the sector leaving them finding it problematic, or unable, to fill vacancies (Evans 2021; Wadhera 2021). Rita's was not immune from such issues as Sally (General Manager) mentioned having to grapple with a diminished pool of potential candidates and concluded that there was an ongoing 'recruitment crisis ... last month I spent £500 trying to recruit and I got one applicant'. Therefore, Rita's was regularly deemed as being understaffed and as a result employees were scheduled to work consecutive double shifts (e.g. 12 hours, 4 days in a row) while providing service under fluctuating pressures. With a myriad of precarious workplace issues causing malfunctions in/to the labour process, what tactics did managerial staff use to *manufacture the consent* of their workforce?

Managerial staff operated both overt and subtle *verbalised* emotional labour tactics to seduce their staff into *feeling obliged to work for longer ('stay on'), not work at all ('get off'), do tasks that they do not want to do, and to labour harder*. The most poignant of which were managers *insinuating* help was needed during collegial interactions in the hope that it would induce a sense of guilt or duty of care into the other. For example, rattled managerial staff were witnessed to have murmured 'the close [of the pub] is going to be so shit ... nobody works here ...' (Svetlana, Supervisor), or sorrowfully expressing that '... there's only two people closing ...' (Ili, Supervisor), to convince the other to work harder or longer than planned without *explicitly* requesting them to do so. Overtly expressed tactics came in the form of questions, asking for favours, or statements like, 'do you mind *not* working?' (Male Assistant Manager), or 'can you *please* stay? We *need* your help' (Svetlana), and 'right, look, I am *desperate* ...' (Male Manager). There were also *nonverbalised pleas* for aid with managerial staff *contorting their bodily display or language* in ways that deviated from organisational expectations – 'pouring happiness into peoples' lives' (Warhurst and Nickson 2020). This was conveyed through walking either slowly or frantically, grimacing to display vulnerability, or momentarily dropping their service 'shield' to reveal an unguarded, often visibly bothered, presentation (fieldnotes).

These methods of manufacturing consent stemmed from managerial exploitation of a workplace culture shaped both by the inherent demands of the job and by (in)direct managerial efforts (Jocoy 2003; Kunda and Van Maanen 1999; Townsend 2008). The burden of this labour, especially for full-time employees, requires an arguably unconventional level of commitment from staff. As mentioned, working hours are usually outside of standard employment practices and often entail long and irregular shift patterns, late finishes and, to a lesser extent, early starts. This builds a communicative trap of some sorts between pub workers and those not embroiled in the pub world (e.g. friends and family). With the job consuming relational aspects of workers' private life, the observations and interviews from this study show there is much evidence to suggest the prominence of what Donna White (2000) deemed as 'fictive kinships'. These 'are not the classic bonds of family or kin stemming from blood relation. They are between individuals who would otherwise exist as strangers' (ibid: 65). At Rita's, workers discussed being 'drinking buddies' with colleagues when others were believed to not be conscious after they had finished work at 12:30 am on a Tuesday morning (cf. Sandiford and Seymour 2013), some were branded as a 'work wife' (Svetlana) or 'work husband' (Andrea, Supervisor) to those who they are closest to, and categorised as 'kids' (Sally) by senior management (fieldnotes). They have also been observed to financially aid one and other, helping each other cope in demanding service interactions (Korczynski 2003), bonding through solidarities towards experiences of irate customers and other colleagues, as well as engaging in romantic relationships (fieldnotes). Bartenders outside of Rita's also detailed similar experiences with their peers:

... [its] natural when you're spending so much time together and like there ... we were spending like Christmas Eve together ... because we were like *forced to* ... So, I think just kind of that natural everyone's flirty or ... everyone's drinking ... everyone's there together all the time. (Anna, Bartender)

Fictive kinship culture alongside feeling the ebb and flow of emotional and physical intensities while working in the 'socioemotional melting pot' of a pub has provided management an opportunity to capitalise on the bonds made by their employees 'and then forge a link between this activity and [managing] corporate profit' (Green 2025; Hochschild 1983, 186; Wacquant 2005, 469). For example, to save on labour costs during tube strikes managers have stated that they must 'reduce the rota significantly. Apologies for this but we're likely to be incredibly quiet so don't have much of an option!' (Sally, Message via WhatsApp). Staff on numerous occasions stayed longer or picked up extra shifts than originally scheduled to 'help out' during (un)expected busy periods or staff shortages – 'Hey bbz. Any chance at all you could do a 6[pm]-cl[ose] today? [male employee] has to go to hospital so we are in a little bit of do-do ...' (Sally, via WhatsApp). While they may (not) receive hourly pay and perhaps a 'thank you ... you're babe', management offer no substantive benefits other than 'taking one for the team' and being a part, not apart, from the struggle. Yet, managerial involvement in the seduction process may not always require actions or words to prompt a suggestive response – *self-seduction* may have already taken place.

Self-Seduction

Because we run things on like such tight labour, if someone doesn't show up it then like 'OK, well, I'm *gonna have to stay*' ... that sort of support when things get tough, or people are

ill. That's when it gets quite draining ... (Sacha, Assistant Manager)

As a consequence of the formation of a fictive kinship culture, the development of close-knit bonds with colleagues became apparent in Rita's and for interviewees' not employed in this venue. The intensity of these feelings and bonds were somewhat amplified for full time staff and marginally less so for part-time workers, arguably due to being present and interacting with colleagues on a more regular basis. Similar to Hochschild, this equated to 'the deeper the bond, the more emotion work ...' front of house staff contended with while engaging with colleagues (1983, 68). However, fictive bonds were conditional and enmeshed with workplace obligations including the need to have *at least* one manager or supervisor and one team member on shift. While corporately conditioned attachments with other colleagues thrived and managerial emotional exploitation persisted, in a variety of cases workers engaged in *their own game of emotions - pre-empting managerial seductive tactics* by tugging on their *own heartstrings* through *self-seduction*. To define, *self-seduction* is a result of a front-of-house employee acknowledging various workplace activity (e.g. high customer turnout) and debating whether their subjective actions will ensure a smoother running of the labour process and then acting accordingly. It is an internalised practice that is governed by innate deliberations that identify their positioning (e.g. extra pay but hindered work-life balance) while simultaneously recognising the circumstances of their colleagues (e.g. struggling to cope) in which they *usually* prioritise the latter. Examples of this form of *corporeal consent* have been documented in my fieldnotes:

After being *rammed* and *understaffed* on this busy quiz night shift, Jen (Supervisor), was meant to finish at 8 pm but ended up closing with us and finishing around 1230 am ... she seemed to have accepted it and just got on with it. I asked her why she stayed, and she replied with, 'I wouldn't leave you in this shit now, would I? It's not fair'. Middle managements lack of sufficient scheduling seemed to have provided her with two choices – stay and help out or leave and feel guilty that we would struggle during the closedown. (Fieldnote, shift 27)

Although managerial and self-seduction are split into two subsections, they are, however, somewhat intertwined. Through the beginning of employment, a 'newbie' will become acclimatised to either the *overt or covert* efforts of managerial seductive tactics (Edwards 1979). They may also come to a pub with knowledge of seductive processes from previous employment in hospitality industries. However, through time spent working in a pub combined with successful managerial conditioning (e.g. understaffing becomes the norm, constant requests to stay later), self-seduction becomes embedded in workplace performances that is ubiquitous and comes to the fore when the conditions are appropriate. However, this does not suggest that workers are always acquiescent to such processes as I have witnessed, through the *eyes of the self and other*, there were both resistance and substantive reasons why workers complied to seductive methods to manufacture consent.

Explaining consent & methods of resistance to emotional exploitation

In Leidner's (1999) research on heavily routinised jobs, she detailed expectations of finding 'a great deal of resistance, both practical and psychological ... However, the responses of the workers I met were considerably less negative and more varied than I had expected' (p. 91). While similar could be said for the results of this study, I, conversely, was surprised by the frequency in which emotional exploitation occurred –

the majority of shifts I worked on (fieldnotes). Implicitly highlighted in the previous section, emotional labour has been used by management, to which is supported by the self, as a '... workplace control strategy, but not in the traditional scenario of managers threatening workers or providing them with incentives to gain control of the labour process ... it is a method [used] for promoting the self-regulation of workers and *persuading* them to engage in the business objectives of management...' (Jocoy 2003, 56, emphasis added). More explicitly, then, why did workers consistently consent to their own emotional exploitation? How did workers' resist methods of emotional exploitation?

Explaining Consent to Emotional Exploitation

There are two intertwined reasons why many employees, including myself, participated in their own emotional exploitation, whether through self-seduction or managerial tactics of seduction: first, *fear* of disappointing senior colleagues, 'friends', or fictive kinships; and second, the *felt obligation* to respond to the collegial construction of care. The emotional involvement (un)willingly placed upon workers makes it challenging to reject forms of seduction. Many participants expressed affection for their senior team members during their interviews which ultimately led to performances that supports Hochschild's notion that '... when one person has higher status than another, it becomes acceptable to both parties for the bottom dog to contribute more ...' (1983, 84). Mirroring this in the pub sense, some bottom dogs aimed to please senior management by, for example, contributing more effort into their labour due to feelings of *fear* and *care* stimulated by a fictive kinship workplace culture (Kunda and Van Maanen 1999; Townsend 2008):

... I don't want them [senior management] to suffer because I've not done something properly or like I don't want them to get told off, for example. But I also don't want them to like ... have to pick up the slack kind of thing. So, I want ... to do as good a job as possible ... (Emma, Shift Supervisor)

Fear of being a disappointment, coupled with a desire to please the managerial team, opens the door to emotional exploitation and encourages workers to exceed the boundaries of their service, for example, by accepting sudden changes to their scheduled shifts – being required to either 'stay on' or 'get off' unexpectedly. Commitment to emotional exploitation, however, is not a harmonious process. Experiencing managerial seduction and the '*tugging on their own heart strings*' often induces feelings of frustration, anger, or ambivalence, but this is generally managed by a worker to secure workplace cohesion through collegial surface acting (Theodosius et al. 2020). For example, when asked if they 'feel different than your external appearance that you put on at work?', Tommy and Nicolai replied with:

yeah ... kinda hiding discontent ... If I am disappointed in the fact that I have to stay a bit later, like closing on a busy day and I was meant to finish at 10. (Tommy, Bartender)

... I act normal because ... especially at this work ... when you always work with the same people ... I think it's very important to keep a good relationship ... it's better to I would say not to go ... with your emotions ... (Nikolai, Bartender)

In sum, the corporately crafted conditions and subjective emotional state leads many pub workers being occasionally, sporadically, and/or frequently becoming *subtly or overtly*

emotionally exploited, further alienating them from aspects of the self (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979; Hochschild 1983).

Resisting Emotional Exploitation

The normalisation of consent to emotional exploitation was profound during the ethnography, however, activity was documented that saw employees subtly resist methods of seduction, particularly through *collegial surface acting* (Theodosius et al. 2020). The analysis revealed that as individuals became more competent within the workplace, they were increasingly able, at least at times, to resist the *games of emotions* imposed by managerial and self-practices. While there was limited evidence to suggest resistance towards requests to *'get off', labour harder, and do tasks they do not want to do*, many challenges to the seductive status quo appeared when workers were subtly or overtly *asked to 'stay on' longer or to pick up extra shifts* by managers (Edwards 1979). Tactics most commonly used were that of *amplifying the truth or lying* while simultaneously attempting to *manage colleagues' emotions*. For example, some lied about where they were located while displaying sympathy for their cause – after being asked to work an extra shift, I replied to Sally with 'I can't, I'm in Milton Keynes', even though this was *not the truth* (fieldnote, out of hours message via WhatsApp). Others amplified exhaustion from previous shifts by displaying bodily and/or facial failure (e.g. droopy eyelids, limping, neutral position of facial features) to stimulate a caring response in the managerial other, as well as overstating or making-up post-work plans to firmly cement their unavailability (fieldnotes). Regardless of the factual nature of workers' *subtle or covert displays of resistance*, management largely accepted, or did not question, these responses.

Conclusive discussion

Reflecting on the data presented in this article, the introduction of a pub-floor 'game' of bingo, intended to manufacture consent, ultimately failed to generate meaningful managerial investment or employee engagement. In contrast, emotional exploitation, particularly through (self-)seduction, emerged as a far more effective and affective means of securing adherence to the conditions of work. The nurturing of a fictive kinship culture – characterised by emotionally charged workplace bonds, tacit expectations of loyalty, and the manipulation of interpersonal care – enabled a system of control rooted in the strategic appropriation of emotion. Managerial efforts to engineer this culture, combined with the internalised pressures experienced by workers themselves, contributed to the normalisation of emotional exploitation within this sector. I argue, therefore, that managers in this service sector are *capitalising on raw human emotion*. In expression of Hochschild (1983), not only has capitalism '... found a use for emotion management, and so it has organized it more efficiently and pushed it further' (p. 186), but it has also *exploited and coerced raw human emotion to benefit organisational goals during uncertain, unstable, or unpredictable periods*.

These findings respond to Jocoy's (2003) call to investigate 'the role of emotions, and especially emotional labour, in the implementation of control strategies' (p. 68). What this research uncovers is a consistent yet underexplored dynamic at the heart of managerial-

employee relations: one that is arguably central to the functioning of contemporary pub work. The conditions of employment for low-paid pub workers are precarious from the outset – characterised by low wages, zero-hour contracts, and a lack of employment protections. This baseline instability is further compounded by the emotional demands generated by both managerial strategies and workers internalised ‘games of emotion,’ alongside broader performative workplace expectations. The dynamics embedded within these ‘games of emotion’ contribute to the conceptual development of the manufacturing of consent in ways not fully captured by earlier accounts. For Burawoy (1979), three central mechanisms facilitated the illusion of worker participation and choice: games, internal labour markets, and collective bargaining. However, this study suggests that not all aspects of the labour process can be reduced to illusions orchestrated by capital to ‘obscure and secure surplus labour’ (Burawoy 1979, 92), nor through the reframing of ‘... capitalist work relations, thereby motivating employees to accommodate management’s control’ (Jocoy 2003, 60). Rather, participation, consent, motivation, and securing surplus labour are also achieved through the *manipulation and exploitation* of emotional ties and the cultivation of interpersonal intimacies within a workplace.

Limitations and Future Research

From the initial step of securing employment to unlock access to the field, through navigating the maze of ethical approval and delicate negotiations with the gatekeeper, the research journey faced two major hurdles in data collection – barriers that ultimately constrained the study’s capacity to fully capture the complex nature of *emotional exploitation*: being positioned in an entry-level role and having restricted contact with head office staff. The occupation I sought to conduct the research was that of a low paid, non-managerial front of house employee to comprehend their lived experiences of workplace control. This position, however, restricted my access to senior work-related deliberations and tasks which included being barred from a managerial WhatsApp group, and deemed ‘unqualified’ from being involved in managerial decision making. Thus, this concept was coined through observations and (in)formal discussion with the participants rather than having insider ‘managerial’ knowledge, as well as being based upon the experiences of it, rather than comprehending *why* it was a preferred method of control. Additionally, contact with corporate, head office staff was constrained to a small number of interactions while they visited the pub floor and during pre-prescribed online or in-person training. This was not only due to my positionality but also grounded in the specific conditions that allowed for successful entry into the field. However, what was noted during this ethnography was that there were faint signs that emotional exploitation was being encouraged by these far-removed workers. For example, a ‘popup’ question organised by head office appeared every time a worker clocked in on the till stated, ‘do you feel that your *manager cares* about you?’. Unlike Jocoy (2003), senior managements’ part in the production of emotional exploitation could not be thoroughly investigated, leaving somewhat of a plot hole in understanding corporate influence over the emotional exploitation process.

Finally, the findings detailed in this article provide a snapshot of a method of control prevalent within the corporate pub industry. What it also implies is that doing emotional labour in a service sector is much more intricate than initially theorised, specifically concerning interactions with colleagues. For instance, ‘collective

emotional labour' is a concept that was introduced by Hochschild (1983) that specifies the importance of sustaining an 'emotional tone' between flight attendants as well as between passengers and colleagues (p. 115). While her thoughts on this concept are 'left as a sketch and is not developed into a full picture' (Korczynski 2003, 56), she does highlight some important characteristics of what 'collective emotional labour' entails: the reliance on co-workers for emotional support, upbeat banter to elicit a collective good feeling, and managers seeking to avoid workers communally discussing their resentment with some passengers. Since its conception, the literature has largely focused on customer – worker interactions, resulting in a somewhat fragmented and underdeveloped understanding of collective or collegial emotional labour (e.g. Jocoy 2003; Korczynski 2003; Parush and Zaidman 2023; Theodosius et al. 2020). Assessing the distinctions between collegial and customer-facing practices of emotion work and/or management would provide a valuable entry point for better understanding the intricate nuances of *collegial forms of emotional labour*.

Notes

1. Hourly paid employees encompassed both front-line bartenders and lower-tier managerial staff, such as supervisors.
2. Referring to both supervisors and senior on-site managers, including the assistant manager and general manager.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

James Frederick Green is an early-career researcher and Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Worcester. His doctoral thesis examined managerial control mechanisms and the individual and/or collective emotion management techniques employed by workers within the corporate public house (pub) industry. His research interests include emotional labour, labour exploitation, and performing ethnographic investigations in the workplace. James Frederick Green's research has been published in academic journals including *Sociological Research Online* and *Feminist Criminology*.

ORCID

James Frederick Green  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5386-6463>

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