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*of* ADELAIDE

Gender and Sexuality in Frontline Service Work:  
Understanding Service Actors' Approaches and  
Responses to Workplace Diversity

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## THESIS DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis contributes to the rejuvenation of literature on the role of frontline employee (FLE) gender in business-to-consumer (B2C) service interactions and to the emerging field of FLE sexuality in these interactions. Three related papers provide insight into service actors' interpretations of and responses to gender and sexuality diversity in frontline service work, especially in gendered service roles.

The first paper in the thesis examines customers' responses to gendered service failure, including empathy, forgiveness and post-purchase intentions. Applying a quantitative approach across two experiments, the paper compares customer responses to male and female FLEs failing in masculine and feminine service roles. Findings suggest that customers empathise more with female FLEs than male FLEs, with these increased empathy responses improving customer forgiveness processes towards female FLEs following service failure. The results also highlight the relationship between decisional/emotional forgiveness and post-purchase outcomes, with decisional forgiveness being a better predictor of repurchase intention following a service failure and emotional forgiveness (or lack thereof) being a better predictor of intention to spread negative word-of-mouth.

The second paper extends the first by addressing the role that FLE sexuality and different presentations of sexuality play in determining customer responses to service delivery in gendered service roles. A pair of experiments examine customer responses to non-heterosexual male FLEs (compared to heterosexual male FLEs) and to feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male FLEs (compared to masculine-presenting non-heterosexual male FLEs) in both masculine and feminine service roles. Results suggest that female customers demonstrate more favourable post-purchase responses to non-heterosexual FLEs, with male customers demonstrating no difference in responses to non-heterosexual or heterosexual FLEs. However,

male customers respond more poorly to feminine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs than masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs.

Extending on the findings of Paper 2 that an FLE's non-heterosexuality has mixed effects on customer responses, the final paper investigates FLEs' own understandings of the impacts of their sexuality in service exchanges and their approaches to stigma management in their roles. Adopting a qualitative design and employing convergent interviewing techniques, this final paper explores non-heterosexual FLEs' perspectives and approaches to customer service. Results reveal that FLEs rely on the closet to manage their self-presentations in interactions with customers. FLEs will seek to improve customer outcomes through behavioural controls that either conceal or reveal their sexual orientation depending on service contexts, with customers, colleagues, organisation and industry exerting influence on these decisions. Findings also suggest the presence of a value-creation paradox where non-heterosexual FLEs will reduce customer-focused, value-creating behaviours that are otherwise important contributors to the co-creation process (e.g. maintaining eye contact, engaging in helping behaviour) in effort to reduce customer discomfort and paradoxically improve customer outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the papers combine to rejuvenate gender discourse in frontline service literature and extend the perspective from FLE gender to the much lesser established area of FLE sexuality. It provides support to the relevance of stigma theory and role congruity theory in contemporary service environments today, and empirically applies implicit inversion theory and the stereotype content model—both previously sparsely examined perspectives in the area of gendered frontline service work. The findings of these papers provide practical implications for service managers as they navigate the complex and evolving field of gender and sexuality in customer service work, including recruitment and hiring, facilitating employee

support and engaging post-service customer action to maximise favourable outcomes for service firms.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In Australia, approximately 1 in 10 nurses are men and only 1 in 100 electricians are women (National Skills Commission, 2021). This asymmetry in gender distribution of the country's workforce holds many implications for service workers who 'cross the divide' and work in a role that is traditionally held by members of the opposite gender. According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), it is expected that these male nurses and female electricians, as gender deviants in their respective roles, will experience prejudice in the market stemming from a perceived incompetence in fulfilling the requirements of the roles (Matthews & Rao Hill 2019). While gender equality is gradually improving (World Economic Forum, 2022), gendered associations in certain industries and occupations endure, causing prolonged difficulty for employees in incongruent positions as they navigate their professional lives and the service organisations that employ them.

Consider the case of the male flight attendant: while the very first flight attendants were young men, it wasn't until 1930 when the first female flight attendants were recruited on board, and when the perception of flight attendance shifted to one of a long-lasting "glamorised femininity" (Smith et al., 2023, p. 2). When men began returning to the cabin, they were faced with homophobic rhetoric from customers that was, from the early 1980s, intensified through the HIV/AIDS crisis (Tiemeyer, 2013). To this day, male cabin crew struggle against assumptions of non-heterosexuality (Whitelegg, 2007), with the role itself noted as one that attracts many gay employees (Tilcsik et al., 2015). However, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual crewmembers seek to construct and embody masculinity within a role that is still perceived as feminine (Ferguson & Ayuttacorn, 2019), despite an increasing number of men joining the profession (National Skills Commission, 2021).

While the role of the flight attendant is not explored specifically in this thesis, it serves as an example of other heavily gendered industries and roles that are examined—from floristry to internet technics, professional cleaning to automechanics—and gives scope to the overall context of the thesis through the lens of role congruity. The case of the male flight attendant speaks to the heart of this research, inspiring an examination of service actors' responses to diversity at the intersection of role gender, employee gender and employee sexuality. Through this, the thesis examines the cases where, much like the male flight attendant, shifting trends and attitudes toward gender and sexuality at a societal level may impact the market's responses to particular frontline employees (FLEs; workers who directly interact with customers or clients as part of their work), and in turn, FLEs' responses to the market.

This thesis offers a much needed rejuvenation to some 20-year-old literature around the role of gender in frontline service interactions. It expands on this stream of research by considering the impact that diverse presentations of sexuality have on informing service actors' approaches and responses to service delivery. Thus, the thesis addresses calls for a more concentrated effort at documenting a contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality in organisational research (Martinez et al., 2017), while also providing relevant managerial considerations for service practitioners operating in a diverse world: a labour market that is marked by an increasing diversity (Wilson et al., 2020), and a consumer market that demonstrates unprecedented expectations of and preference for brands that champion diversity (Accenture, 2019; Herring, 2009).

## **1.1 Research Background**

### *Services Employees and Gender*

Gender has become so pervasive in society that it is not only assigned to individuals, but to occupational roles, too (Melancon et al., 2015). Role genderisation is a complex process,

however the predominant gender of employees working in a given role can substantially impact the establishment of the gender of the role itself (Madichie, 2013). Occupational roles that have traditionally been dominated by a particular gender of employee tend to become heavily gendered, with the service role adopting the gender of the predominant employee. Through repeated exposure, service customers may begin to perceive a particular gender as being able to better accomplish the duties in the role (Clarke, 2020) in line with deeply rooted gender stereotypes.

Frontline service employees have been shown to play a substantial role in customers' evaluations of service delivery across a myriad of service types. Research has identified the significant role that an employee's personal characteristics such as age (Luoh & Tsaur, 2011), accent (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011; Rao Hill & Tombs, 2022), weight (Coward & Brady, 2014) or physical attractiveness (Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Söderlund & Julander, 2009) can have on customer evaluations of service delivery and their subsequent responses post-service. Extant research has also revealed the significant role that FLEs, and their characteristics, contribute to the co-creation of value for service customers (Chathoth et al., 2020; Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010).

Presented gender, as one of the most salient characteristics of an FLE at first sight, has also been thoroughly investigated in services literature as a potential determining factor in customer evaluations of service delivery. Initial approaches looked towards the concept of homophily, hypothesising that customers respond better to FLEs with whom they share the same gender (Fischer et al., 1997; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). Later investigations into the impact of FLE gender in service exchanges also began considering the effects of role gender and role congruity on responses to service delivery.

Role congruity occurs when a target FLE characteristic aligns with that of the role, and in the case of gender, occurs when FLE gender aligns with role gender (Melancon et al., 2015). For example, women achieve role congruity when they work in feminine roles, and men in masculine roles. Examining role congruity holds great practical value as customer backlash is a likely outcome when congruity is not achieved. Eagly and Karau (2002) highlight two prejudicial outcomes of role incongruity: 1) incongruent actors are perceived less favourably than congruent actors as potential occupants in the role, and 2) successful behaviour is evaluated by customers less favourably when performed by an incongruent actor, compared to a congruent one.

While initially applied to the case of women in managerial positions, the theory has since been applied to certain customer service roles with mixed results. Older studies have found that customers have a tendency to negatively evaluate an FLE when they are working in a role that is incongruent with the FLE's presented gender (Fischer et al. 1997; Mohr & Henson, 1996) but, given their age, may not have practically relevant implications today. Likewise, cross-cultural studies investigating the issue of role congruity (eg. Pinar et al., 2017) provide some insight into a contemporary understanding of the effects of role congruity on customer responses to service delivery, however these findings may not be particularly sound as they conflate role gender and role status in their analysis.

Taking a role congruity approach to the issue of gender presents the challenge of timeliness to the relevance of findings. Given the constant evolution of gender roles and the stereotypes attached to these, gender research must be constantly updated to maintain theoretical and practical relevance. Likewise, with gender stereotypes being socially established and culturally-bound, findings are limited in applicability to specific cultural contexts. Only very recently has the topic of role congruity been revitalised in relevant literature (Kim et al., 2021;



Otterbring et al., 2021), addressing the need for services marketing theory and practice to be updated to better reflect any changes in gender roles and stereotypes in almost two decades. While these more contemporary studies bring a much-needed modernity to the issue of role congruity, the underlying outcomes of congruity, including the responses that mediate the relationship between congruity and customer behavioural responses, remain unclear.

### *Services and Sexuality*

Compared to relevant examinations of gender, FLE sexuality has been given very little consideration in services literature as a substantial consideration in customers' evaluations of service delivery. For the purposes of this thesis, the World Health Organisation's (2006) definition of sexuality as "a central aspect of being human throughout life [that] encompasses sex, gender identities and roles [and] sexual orientation" is adopted, encompassing an FLE's sexual orientation as well as the performances of their gender identity and sexual orientation in their day-to-day lives.

Just as the concept of role congruity is a prevalent issue in gender with regards to the suitability of men and women to masculine and feminine roles, evidence suggests that sexuality is also prescriptive to workers and industries too. In recruitment and hiring, for example, gay men are less likely to be considered for traditionally masculine roles like an automotive mechanic (Ahmed et al., 2013). Gay-sounding men are also viewed as less competent for leadership positions (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020), with leadership and management roles typically viewed as requiring more masculine, agentic traits for success. Alternatively, gay men are viewed as more suitable in feminine roles. Gay men face less hiring discrimination when applying for traditionally feminine than traditionally masculine roles (Flage, 2019). They are also more likely to be hired in feminine roles, such as an aesthetician, compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Clarke & Arnold, 2018). While the effects of these congruity perceptions are

more clearly established in management literature with regards to recruitment, they have yet to be examined in a services domain with specific attention placed on customer perceptions of competency.

Indeed, the examination of the role that FLE sexuality plays in customer perceptions of service staff and subsequent responses to service delivery is in its relative infancy. Initial theoretical conceptualisations (Rosenbaum et al., 2015) first established an understanding of straight women's preference for interacting with gay male FLEs in service contexts. Since then, empirical work has supported the presence of this preference, with findings suggesting that women are more comfortable being served by gay male FLEs in the retail of cosmetics or apparel (Rosenbaum et al., 2017) and trust these FLEs' product recommendations more than a heterosexual FLE's recommendations when shopping for appearance-enhancing products (Russell et al., 2021). The findings that gay men are valued more in categories that are traditionally feminine (Hancock et al., 2020) supports the application of a role congruity lens to gendered service contexts with non-heterosexual FLEs, but presents the opportunity to explore different roles and industries beyond retailing.

While gay men are assumed to possess traits similar to women, the actual spectrum of gay self-presentation is much more varied with some gay men presenting in more masculine or more feminine ways (Calder, 2020). Li et al.'s (2020) examination of gendered presentation (comparing masculine and feminine self-presentations) found that customers are less satisfied with service delivery from feminine-presenting men compared to more masculine-presenting men in the context of a hotel receptionist role. This study is a recent example of the backlash that gender non-conforming men face at a societal level. However, the inherent relationship between gender and sexual orientation in sexuality research and discourse implies that any investigation into customer responses to an employee's gender should also consider customer

perceptions of FLE sexuality. This thesis fulfils a more intersectional approach to extend the current literature.

## **1.2 Justification of Research**

This thesis is justified by emerging social trends and the requirement for services research to remain relevant in the face of changing actor responses to diversity. As a direct response to calls for a more concentrated research effort towards gender and sexuality diversity in organisational literature (Martinez et al., 2017), the focus of this thesis is to provide a greater understanding of service actor approaches and responses to gender and sexuality diversity in service contexts.

With the growing diversity of the labour force, a greater call for organisational diversity and affirmative action informing many recruitment policies, the traditional face of service work is evolving. While prescriptive gender roles are becoming increasingly blurred at a broader societal level (World Economic Forum, 2022), the gender of particular service industries and roles endure (Melancon et al., 2015). Notably, the rate at which different occupational roles tend towards a more equal gender representation is not consistent across industries (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2019), leading to diminished attitudes towards only some stereotyped FLEs and their performance in service work (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, it is important that research examining the impact of gender in service environments seeks to expand into a variety of service industries to more fully chart the role of gender in informing customer responses to service delivery in diverse contexts.

This thesis' focus on non-heterosexual FLEs is also justified through emerging social trends that make the research particularly relevant in contemporary labour markets. The number of

people identifying as non-heterosexual is growing, with increasing amounts of young people reporting a sexual minority identity (Wilson et al., 2020), likely due to a higher level of social acceptance for non-heterosexual people today (Perales & Campbell, 2018). Likewise, frontline service work continues to be a popular pathway for non-heterosexual individuals (Tilcsik et al., 2015). Indeed, non-heterosexual FLEs' growing presence in service spaces implies an imperative for service research to invest in understanding the significance of these employees in delivering services and improving organisational outcomes.

The investigation of sexuality in frontline service work, and indeed in any context, is inseparable from matters of gender (World Health Organisation, 2006). This intrinsic link with gender as a construct requires that an intersectional perspective be taken where gender and sexuality are investigated together. For example, gay men, but not gay women, show a preference for occupations that are traditionally feminine (Tilcsik et al., 2015). The inseparability of gender from sexuality in this area requires that examination of one also considers the other, an important consideration in intersectional research (Woods, Benschop & van den Brink, 2022). Where sexuality has been examined previously in the literature, sexuality effects have been explored independently of several aspects of gender that also pervade a service environment (Li et al., 2020). This thesis examines sexual diversity with consideration for the impact of employee and role gender, providing a more relevant insight into modern-day service firms that is currently lacking in the literature.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

Given the research background and the review of relevant literature, there is a need for a more updated understanding of the ways that gender and sexuality diversity affect actor approaches and responses to service delivery. In light of this issue, this thesis answers the following research question:

*How does FLE gender and sexuality diversity impact actor approaches and responses in service interactions?*

In order to address this research question, the thesis fulfils the following research objectives across three papers:

- 1) to examine the impact of an FLE's gender and sexuality on customers' post-service responses;
- 2) to determine how service role gender impacts customers' perceptions of and responses to diverse FLEs;
- 3) to explore how non-heterosexual FLEs employ the closet through the course of their work;
- 4) to examine how non-heterosexual FLEs' stigma management behaviours affect value co-creation.

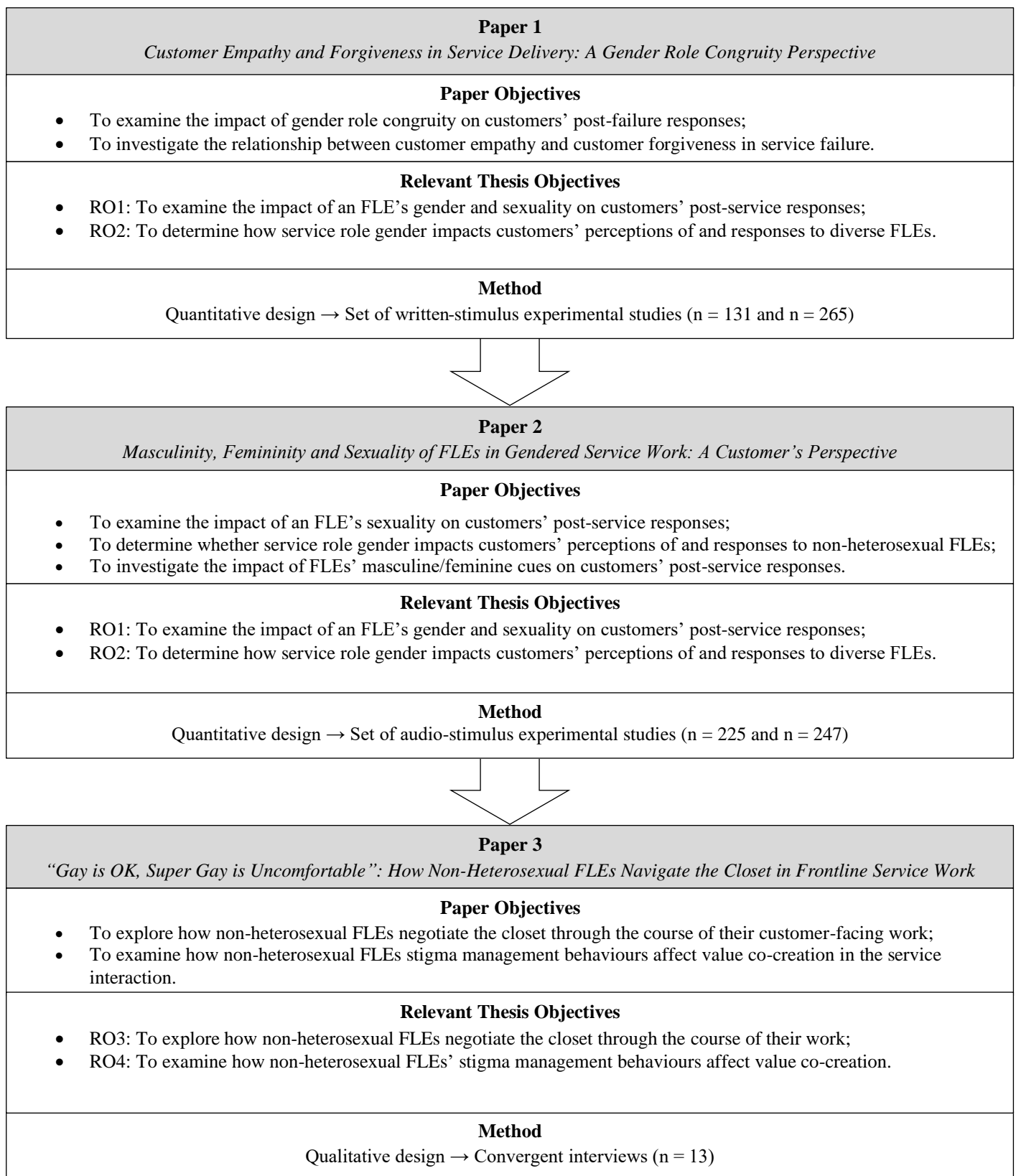
These objectives combine to present a more robust understanding of the impact that gender and sexuality diversity play in customer service interactions. By addressing these objectives, this thesis makes several contributions to services marketing theory and practice, holding implications for service researchers and practitioners and enabling them to approach FLE diversity in socially relevant ways. The aims of each paper and a discussion of how each paper addresses the research objectives is continued in the next section.

#### **1.4 Research Framework**

This thesis details three papers that seek to contribute to frontline services literature within the context of gender and sexuality diversity. The first paper examines the intersection of FLE and role gender. The second paper examines customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs in gendered service contexts. Finally, the third paper explores non-heterosexual FLEs'

understanding of and approaches to service delivery through the lens of the services closet. The overall structure of the thesis is illustrated in Figure 1.1 and their linkages are detailed below.

Figure 1.1: Summary of research objectives



Paper 1 provides a contemporary perspective on customers' responses to the different elements of gender that exist in a service interaction, focusing on that of employee gender congruity. This paper uses the lens of role congruity in the context of service failure and applies the empathy model of forgiveness to examine the way that gender congruity impacts customer responses to service failure. The paper details two experimental studies, exploring service failure in masculine and feminine hospitality roles (hotel porter/hotel cleaner) and then in a personal consumption situation (internet technician/domestic cleaner). Conclusions from the paper yield important considerations for service practitioners operating in gendered service industries and provide commentary on the application of role congruity theory in frontline service environments.

The second paper extends on the first by examining the effects of sexuality congruity and congruity of sexuality displays on customer responses to non-heterosexual male FLEs. The paper builds on traditional conceptualisations of role congruity theory as applied in Paper 1 by addressing congruity effects of sexuality, rather than gender, in gendered service roles by drawing on implicit inversion theory (IIT) and the stereotype content model (SCM). The paper adopts an experimental design across two studies that assesses the extent that sexuality congruity plays in customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs operating in masculine (automechanic) and feminine (florist) roles. The paper concludes with a discussion around the applicability of role congruity theory and SCM in this context, and remarks on the ways that service practitioners should seek to manage sexuality displays among non-heterosexual FLEs to maximise service outcomes.

Finally, given the dyadic nature of customer-employee service interactions, the third paper shifts refocuses from the service customer to the service employee. Building on the findings from Paper 2 with regards to how customers respond to non-heterosexual male FLEs, the paper



draws on stigma theory to explore the ways that these employees negotiate the closet to manage aspects of their sexual identity in their customer interactions. Through convergent interviews and thematic analysis of responses, the paper contributes to developing an understanding of the ways FLEs manage their stigmatised sexualities to co-create value with customers in line with a service-dominant (S-D) perspective. The paper's conclusion details a co-creation paradox among non-heterosexual FLEs and, interestingly in combination with Paper 2, the asymmetric perceptions of sexuality displays between employees and customers in service encounters that hold useful strategic implications for service managers.

### **1.5 Research Contributions**

Paper 1 seeks to rejuvenate decades-old literature examining the role of FLE gender congruity in customers' behavioural responses to service delivery (eg. Fischer et al., 1997; Mohr & Henson 1996). Addressing the context of service failure, the paper also contributes to the current literature by emphasising the role that customer empathy plays in customer forgiveness processes, extending on work that examines the role of forgiveness in explaining customer responses to failure (eg. Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012). The paper highlights the relationship between FLE gender and gendered service roles to explain how customer expectations and stereotypes inform empathetic responses to transgressing employees. Thus, the paper not only contributes to extending services literature with regards to customer processes post-failure, but also extends psychological and counselling literatures by highlighting novel antecedents to empathetic processes in actor networks (McCullough et al., 1997).

Paper 2 addresses the impact that an FLE's sexuality has on customers' post-service responses. The paper expands retailing literature that highlights the relationship between gay male FLEs and straight female customers as particularly advantageous (eg. Rosenbaum et al., 2017) by exploring male customers' and non-heterosexual customers' responses to non-heterosexual

male FLEs. The paper also expands on similar studies by predicting the impact that a non-heterosexual male FLE has on customers' post-service responses such as repurchase intention and intention to spread word-of-mouth.

Lastly, Paper 3 broadens previous research that identifies the key role that FLEs play in the value co-creation process by exploring the ways that non-heterosexual FLEs navigate presentations of their sexualities as value-creating agents. The paper also contributes to services theory and practice by extending conceptualisations of the 'corporate closet' in other organisational research and applying it to customer interactions. Through this, the paper brings light to the perceptions and customer-oriented behaviours of non-heterosexual FLEs, highlighting the contexts in which service delivery can positively or negatively impact value co-creation.

Across the three papers, the thesis updates relevant literature to reflect a more current perspective of how gender and sexuality diversity is perceived in service contexts by both customers and frontline employees. This thesis synthesises role congruity theory, implicit inversion theory and stigma theory and applies them to different practical service settings. Through empirical application of these theories, the practical relevance and predictive power of the theoretical framework are extended to the novel environment of gendered service contexts. Findings across the three papers suggest support to these theoretical foundations in certain contexts, but not in others, demonstrating the practical nuances of customer service interactions compared to other settings where these theories have been applied more consistently, or to where the application of these theories have become outdated by emerging social trends.

Overall, the three papers contribute to an updated understanding of approaches and responses to gender and sexuality diversity in a service context. This thesis considers role gender as a

crucial element of service environments that impacts the way that service actors perform and perceive gender and sexuality in the service exchange (Melancon et al., 2015). The papers combine to illustrate the convergence between customer and FLE understandings of gender and sexuality in service interactions and provide timely commentary on how these perceptions and their inconsistencies impact effective service delivery and value co-creation.

## CHAPTER 2 CUSTOMER EMPATHY AND FORGIVENESS IN SERVICE DELIVERY: A GENDER ROLE CONGRUITY PERSPECTIVE

The first paper in this thesis, **Customer Empathy and Forgiveness in Service Delivery: A Gender Role Congruity Perspective**, presents two experimental studies that examine the effects of gender role congruity on customer responses to service failure including empathy and forgiveness.

Occupational gender roles are shifting rapidly, however descriptive and prescriptive expectations on men and women in traditionally masculine and feminine roles remain prevalent. The paper examines the intersection of role gender and FLE gender, exploring customer responses to FLEs who operate in roles that are not typical for their gender. Given the changes observed in the Australian workforce with regards to gendered representation across a variety of industries, previous research that has examined the role that gender plays in service interactions may be outdated as customers' attitudes towards gender evolve. This paper rejuvenates services literature with a more contemporary understanding of the role of gender in service settings. Likewise, the paper contributes by introducing the empathy model of forgiveness to the examination of service failure, extending the model to a previously unexamined non-personal consumer context.

The paper concludes that customers are less able to empathise with transgressing men (compared to transgressing women) in both masculine and feminine service roles with this lack of empathy impeding forgiveness processes as posited in the empathy model of forgiveness. Findings also suggest that lack of forgiveness impacts both intention to repurchase and intention to spread negative word-of-mouth, but in different ways.

This paper is presented in journal article format and is being targeted for submission in the Journal of Consumer Psychology. Tables and figures have been inserted into the paper for the purposes of readability in this thesis format. Per the Journal of Consumer Psychology's guidelines, the paper is presented in Standard American English. This study spawned papers that were presented at EMAC 2018 and ANZMAC 2019.

## Statement of Authorship

# Statement of Authorship

Title of Paper	Customer Empathy and Forgiveness in Service Delivery: A Gender Role Congruity Perspective
Publication Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Published <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted for Publication <input type="checkbox"/> Submitted for Publication <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unpublished and Unsubmitted work written in manuscript style
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## **2.1 Abstract**

Traditional gender roles are becoming much more blurred particularly with the greater inclusion of women in the labor force. However, gender-role stereotyping endures. According to role congruity theory, gender deviants are liable to societal backlash as punishment for non-conformance to gender norms, but it is not clear how this backlash is manifested in service failure situations. A pair of studies reported in this paper aim to examine the extent to which gender-role congruity impacts customer responses to service failure in gendered services. Results from two experimental studies suggest that male FLEs in both masculine and feminine service roles are more difficult to empathize with, with this lack of empathy impeding customer forgiveness processes. Findings also highlight the relationship between decisional/emotional forgiveness and subsequent customer outcomes, indicating that emotional forgiveness (or lack thereof) is a better predictor of intention to spread negative word of mouth while decisional forgiveness is a better predictor of repurchase intention following service failure.

## **Keywords**

Employee gender, role congruity, role gender, empathy, forgiveness

## 2.2 Introduction

Interactions between customers and service employees often form part of service encounters and significantly impact customers' perception of their experience, service outcomes and reactive responses. The heterogeneous nature of service delivery and the variability of customer expectations and experiences means that service failures are a common occurrence and often have significant repercussions in service encounters.

The service landscape has undergone substantial transformation over the past 40 years, with women entering the service workforce en masse as a result of the feminist movement (Fortin, 2015). As a consequence, many service roles that were once traditionally filled by men have become slightly more feminized over time. In Australia, for example, while some of these roles have tended towards gender neutrality (such as management and professional services), others have resisted and are still dominated by workers of a particular gender (such as community and personal services for women or laboring and machine operation for men) (National Skills Commission, 2021). Indeed, these sorts of service roles have maintain their gendered perception through the consistent and visible reinforcement of a dominant gender of employee working in the role (Melancon et al., 2015). However, the feminized workforce means that it is very likely that customers, at some stage, will experience service delivery by a frontline employee (FLE) who possesses low levels of role congruity (a female FLE in a masculine role, or male FLE in a feminine role).

In light of the role that gender plays in service interactions, research has been directed towards exploring the ways that the interactions of different gendered elements of service interactions (including customer gender, employee gender and role gender) has on subsequent customer behavior. Foundational studies in this area have highlighted significant relationships between role gender, employee gender and customer evaluations of the service employee and their



delivery (eg. Fischer et al., 1997; Mohr & Henson, 1996). However, these studies are largely outdated and, given the rate at which societal gender roles are changing and have changed since the mid-90s (World Economic Forum, 2022), may not reflect customers' contemporary attitudes towards and perceptions of gender. More recent attempts at addressing gender variables in service contexts focus almost exclusively on initial service delivery perceptions and overlook the impacts in service failure (Andrzejewski & Mooney, 2016; Asadullah et al., 2021), focus only on customer gender (Cao & Kim, 2015), do not consider the genderization of the focal service type as a relevant factor in the service exchange (Wei & Ran, 2019), or are limited in their exploration of the relationship between failure and subsequent customer responses (Kim et al., 2021). Thus, the true extent of the impact of gender role congruity in service failure from a contemporary perspective remains unclear.

Relevant to explorations of service failure and witnessing an increase in research attention is the concept of customer forgiveness. Traditionally, the study of forgiveness has been constrained to psychological and counselling literatures, however service researchers are becoming increasingly interested in forgiveness processes that customers engage with towards brands and service organizations in the event of failure. A greater amount of extant research suggests that customer traits, such as customers' religiosity (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012) or attachment style (Alnawas et. al., 2022), can impact their likelihood to forgive transgressing brands, but less research examines the degree to which service context (such as employee gender and gender congruity) impacts customers' forgiveness processes. Likewise, while counselling literature suggests that empathy is a powerful predictor of forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997), it is unclear whether these effects are observable in customer-employee relationships that are generally marked by a much less personally intimate relationship.

In response to this paucity of understanding in services literature, this paper seeks to address the following research objectives: 1) to examine the impact of gender role congruity on customers' post-failure responses, and 2) to investigate the relationship between customer empathy and customer forgiveness in service failure. To do so, two experiments are conducted. The first and baseline study examines customers' forgiveness responses to gender (in)congruities in service failure. The second study expands on the findings of the first to examine the role of customer empathy in predicting forgiveness and additional subsequent behavioral outcomes for customers when faced with (in)congruent service employees. Through this investigation, we make several contributions.

The paper contributes to services research by revitalizing the literature examining gender in service work, particularly in updating the body of work which documents the effects of role congruity on customer service perceptions. The findings provide support for role congruity theory, but also challenge the theory in certain service contexts. These contemporary examinations of forgiveness in service failure are extended by incorporating the concept of empathy as a driver of customer behavior, exploring the impact that a customer's ability to empathize with a failing employee has on the key service outcomes of repurchase intention and intention to spread negative word-of-mouth.

### **2.3 Literature review**

#### *Gendered Service Work and Role Congruity*

Initially, role congruity theory was applied to explain the societal prejudices held against female leaders based on incongruent perceptions of femininity and leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002), with application of the theory remaining most prolific in leadership research (eg. Hoyt & Burnette, 2013). Role congruity theory hypothesizes that an individual who inhabits an occupational role that is incongruent with their stereotyped characteristics are liable to societal

prejudice ('backlash'). Since its inception, the theory has been further applied to examine societal backlash against a range of incongruent individuals, with conflicting findings depending on whether the gender deviants were female or male.

Exploratory studies into the experiences of women working in traditionally masculine roles have included examinations of female engineers (Poleacovschi et al., 2021), sports journalists (Mudrick & Lin, 2017) and clergywomen (Ferguson, 2018). These studies document, in at least one way, the backlash that women working in these male-dominated fields experience from the perspective of role congruity theory. Women working as engineers are disadvantaged as they are viewed as possessing less expertise than their male counterparts. Clergywomen, on the other hand, benefit in the typically male-dominated field from role congruity in part due to the stereotypically communal nature of pastoral care. However, women working in this field experience backlash when they employ a more agentic (traditionally masculine) approach to their work.

Alternatively, it is not uncommon for men working in traditionally female-dominated professions to find success in their roles due to their minority status (Evans, 1997; Williams, 1992). This well-documented phenomenon is known as the glass escalator effect and is a combination of the invisible pressures and structural advantages that propel them in their careers in non-traditional roles (Williams, 1992) and may extend to customers' evaluations of men working in frontline service work. While seemingly paradoxical and inconsistent with role congruity theory, this effect is largely observed at intra-organizational or intra-industry levels. That is to say, despite facing little discrimination from intra-organizational or intra-industry members like colleagues and management, these men do still experience substantial backlash from members outside their profession such as customers and other stakeholders. Investigations into prejudices held against male employees working in feminine service roles

have highlighted the discriminatory perceptions of these men as wimpy, inadequate losers (Heilman & Wallen, 2010), spanning across more traditionally feminine industries such as nursing (Ekstrom, 1999) and primary education (Kim & Weseley, 2017).

This prejudice predicted in role congruity theory has been partially examined through the perspective of a customer, with customers demonstrating a tendency to negatively evaluate a service employee working in a role that is incongruent with their gender (Mohr & Henson, 1996). In their cross-cultural study, Pinar et al. (2017) found that customers perceived higher service delivery quality from men in both masculine and feminine roles. However, the study compared 'high status' masculine roles such as doctors or dentists and 'low status' feminine roles such as bank tellers or café workers. In this case, categorisation of these roles as either masculine or feminine are culturally bound and may not be applicable to an Australian context, in which for example doctors and dentists are largely gender-neutral with regards to workforce participation (National Skills Commission, 2021). The cultural valence and strength of gender prescriptions along with their development and changes over time calls for the constant reassessment of customer perceptions of all aspects of gendered service delivery (Fischer et al., 1997), including service failure.

### *Failure and forgiveness*

Service failure can be defined as a service performance that fails to meet a customer's expectations, leading to dissatisfaction (Michel et al., 2009; Pranić & Roehl, 2013). Customer responses following service failure are not limited to dissatisfaction; customer defection (Pranić & Roehl, 2013), negative word of mouth (Mattila, 2001) and diminished levels of customer trust (Bejou & Palmer, 1998; Weun et al., 2004) can also be attributed to service failure. It is widely acknowledged that understanding the ways in which customers respond to service failures is vital to recover and develop retention strategies for firms. Although the

literature has examined the various customer responses to service failure such as complaint behavior (Hocutt et al., 1997; Tyrrell & Woods, 2005), switching (Jang et al., 2013) and negative word-of-mouth (Mattila, 2001; Swanson & Hsu, 2009), there remains a lack of empirical evidence focusing on forgiveness and the role it plays in a business context, particularly in firm-customer relationships.

Forgiveness has become a heavily researched area particularly in the fields of psychology and clinical studies. As a psychological construct, it has been proposed as multidimensional, with its dimensions still debated among researchers. At its very core, it is generally understood that forgiveness is “a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender” (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 5). This is, however, where the consensus ends. Following a transgression, it is likely that an individual would be left with feelings of anger, contempt and sadness (American Psychological Association, 2008). What remains unclear is the extent to which forgiveness involves reduction of these negative emotions or replacement of them with positive emotions such as compassion and benevolence. Some scholars argue that forgiveness is merely a diminishment of negative attitudes towards a transgressor rather than a replacement with positive emotions (Kaminer et al., 2000). Whether negative emotions are replaced with positive emotions during forgiveness or are merely reduced, what has been established is the point that interpersonal forgiveness is vital to the perpetuation of relationships between parties (Mullet et al., 2004) including service providers and their customers.

Researchers have also differentiated between decisional and emotional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness is “the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions” (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007, 291) and is marked by psychophysiological changes in a transgressed individual towards their transgressor with regards to emotion and cognition.

Alternatively, decisional forgiveness is “a behavioral intention to resist an unforgiving stance and to respond differently toward a transgressor” (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007, 291). It involves the transgressed individual making the decision to treat a transgressor as if the transgression had never happened (Worthington & Scherer, 2004, 386), resulting in the restoration of positive behaviour towards an offender. Notably, these aspects of forgiveness and their outcomes are different. Both forms of forgiveness have been found to result in different benefits for a victim. Emotional forgiveness is more closely linked with overcoming negative affect and reducing stress responses towards a transgressor, while decisional forgiveness may reduce hostility towards a transgressor and support the improvement of relationships by facilitating reconciliatory processes (Worthington Jr., 2007).

Often conflated with forgiveness, reconciliation is the attempt of a victim to extend goodwill towards a transgressor in an effort to re-establish a relationship between the parties (McCullough et al., 1998). While the two are related, scholars have differentiated between forgiveness and reconciliation in a theoretical sense. For example, Tripp et al. (2007) assert that it is indeed possible for forgiveness to occur without reconciliation, and reconciliation to occur without forgiveness. While research exploring forgiveness and its application in an organizational domain is scarce, scant research has suggested that the process through which customers forgive a transgressing business is similar to the process through which interpersonal forgiveness occurs, following a pattern of appraisal, response, reframing, and resolution (Denton & Martin, 1998; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011).

Customers also tend to differentiate between the firm and its employees when considering forgiveness (Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2006). While the process through which customers forgive transgressing firms may hold some similarities, it has been argued that not all services failures will result in customers forgiveness (Joireman et al., 2016), therefore nullifying the need for

forgiveness processes to even occur in certain failure circumstances. What is clear is that individuals demonstrate differences in forgiveness processes between familiar and unfamiliar transgressors (family members versus strangers, for example) (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). With the customer-employee relationship generally being discontinuous, particularly in many low-involvement service types, the processes through which customer forgive an unfamiliar service employee will be unique to a service context. Thus, the following studies are presented to further expand services marketing, and service failure, literature.

## **2.4 Study 1**

### **2.4.1 Hypothesis Development**

Although early research in the context of the service encounter suggested that employee gender matters to customers, its impact is not clear as it is masked by complex interactions with a variety of factors including service quality, relationship duration (Yagil & Luria, 2016) and the gender of the customer (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). Research over the last few decades shows that gender-role expectations affect perceived job performance and that customers evaluate service employees more positively when they perform congruent rather than incongruent jobs (Mohr & Henson, 1996). Similarly, in the situation of a service failure encounter, role congruity is likely to take effect as direct employee-customer interaction makes employee gender more salient as a basis for evaluation. In line with role congruity theory, employees working in highly incongruent roles and violating gender norms may be perceived as uncivil and morally questionable (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). When interacting with low-congruity FLEs who commit a service failure, backlash may be more severe as customer seek to reprimand the deviant employee (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). As a result, it is expected that:

*H1: Following a service failure, customers will exhibit lower levels of a) emotional forgiveness and b) decisional forgiveness towards the service provider when the service employee has low role congruity.*

One of the key constructs to measure successful recovery is repurchase intention (RPI). Although research into the relationship between forgiveness and RPI in a business context is limited, application of forgiveness literature would suggest that higher levels of forgiveness following a transgression would result in a greater likelihood of reconciliation in the form of repeat purchase behavior (Freedman, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005). With this said, it is hypothesized that:

*H2: a) Emotional forgiveness and b) decisional forgiveness towards the service provider is positively associated with re-purchase intention.*

Further investigation of the parallels drawn in literature between the concepts of reconciliation and repeat purchase behavior can aid in the understanding of transgression in customer-firm relationships (Tripp et al., 2007). With decisional forgiveness being the behavioral intent to treat a transgressor in a manner similar to that as prior to a transgression, it is proposed that extending decisional forgiveness to a transgressing firm would result in higher repeat purchase intention as opposed to extending emotional forgiveness. As decisional forgiveness is much more of a conscious choice, whereas emotional forgiveness is a more delayed, subconscious process (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011), it may be the case that decisional forgiveness is a better predictor of customer repeat purchase intention than emotional forgiveness. Likewise, Davis et al. (2015) argue that while emotional forgiveness leads to an individual's physical and mental recovery from a transgression, decisional forgiveness results in heightened relational recovery between parties. In light of this, it is hypothesized that:



*H3: Decisional forgiveness is a better predictor of customer repeat purchase intention than emotional forgiveness following a transgression.*

## **2.4.2 Method**

### *Design and Participants*

To address these hypotheses, an experimental design was employed using employee role congruity as a manipulated factor. A 2 (masculine vs feminine service role)  $\times$  2 (male vs female) between-subjects design was used to achieve both high-congruity and low-congruity service scenarios.

The sample was composed of 131 second year business students at a large public university in Australia. The gender distribution of respondents was roughly even with 47% being female and the remaining 53% being male. Additional descriptive statistics of participants in Study 1 and Study 2 are provided in Table 2.1. Participants completed the online experiment in the computer lab using Qualtrics software.

Table 2.1: Summary of sample descriptives across both studies in Paper 1

	Study 1 (n = 131)		Study 2 (n = 265)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Age				
18-24	131	100	49	18.5
25-34	-	-	72	27.2
35-44	-	-	57	21.5
45-54	-	-	21	7.9
55-64	-	-	31	11.7
65-74	-	-	35	13.2
Gender				
Woman	62	47.3	135	50.9
Man	69	52.6	129	48.7
Non-conforming	-	-	1	<1
Gender fluid	-	-	-	-
Education				
Less than Year 12 or equivalent	-	-	45	17
Year 12 or equivalent	131	100	97	36.6
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	-	-	99	37.4
Postgraduate degree	-	-	24	9.1
Sexual Orientation	Not collected in Study 1			
Straight/heterosexual			213	80.4
Lesbian/gay/homosexual			11	4.2
Bisexual			23	8.7
Other			3	1.1
Prefer not to say			15	5.7

During the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 4 experimental conditions which had 25-30 subjects each. Each participant read the experiment instructions and a service scenario. Sample scenarios are provided in Appendix A. Participants then responded to questions on customer forgiveness and intention to repurchase before providing some demographic information.

#### *Stimulus development and manipulation check*

The context of Study 1 was hotel services with room cleaning as a feminine service and porter service as the masculine service. Before the main study, role congruity was pretested and confirmed through a small sample of participants who were given a list of job titles (including

bar attendant, chef, café waiting staff, hotel porter, beauty therapist, hotel cleaner) and then asked to rate these role's gender congruity. Results from the pretesting indicated that the role of hotel porter was masculine and congruent with male employees, while the role of hotel cleaner was feminine and congruent with female employees.

Respondents in Study 1 were required to indicate the degree to which they believed the role of hotel cleaner was masculine or feminine, and the degree to which the role of hotel porter was masculine or feminine. First, one-way t-tests were conducted to determine if the manipulations of role congruity were successful. Results indicated that for a hotel porter, participants rated the role's gender as significantly more masculine ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) than gender neutral, along a 1-7 scale (very masculine to very feminine, with 4 representing gender neutrality),  $t(130) = -14.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants also identified the role of a hotel cleaner as being significantly more feminine ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than gender neutral ( $t(130) = 12.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results indicated that the manipulations of role congruity were successful. All assumptions for relevant parametric tests, including normality and homogeneity of variance in each test variable, were deemed suitably met.

### *Measures*

All measures utilized in the survey were founded in previous studies and were either taken directly or adapted slightly to better suit the context of this study. Seven-point scales were used for all measures. Four items were used to measure emotional forgiveness ( $\alpha = .76$ ) (eg. "I will continue to think how much I hate this service provider"), adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012). One item was removed from the emotional forgiveness scale during CFA ("I will hold onto the hurt and anger I feel towards this service provider") due to poor factor loading, .63. Two items were used to measure decisional forgiveness ( $\alpha = .81$ ) (eg. "I will make an effort to be friendly in my future interactions with this service provider"), also adapted from Tsarenko

and Tojib (2012). One item was also removed from the decisional forgiveness scale through the CFA process (“I will cut off this relationship with this service provider”) due to poor factor loading, 0.43. The direct and emotive nature of the term “cut off” in this item may have conflicted with less direct terms in other items such as “I will make an effort to be friendly,” hence the item was removed. Three items adopted from Grewal et al. (1998) were used to measure repurchase intent. A sample item was, “The probability that I would consider staying at this hotel again is high.” ( $\alpha = .88$ ). A summary of scale descriptions and measurements is provided in Appendix B.

### **2.4.3 Results**

H1a and H1b proposed that customers exhibit lower levels of forgiveness to service employees with lower role congruity than they do to service employees with higher role congruity. To test these hypotheses, an ANOVA was conducted on emotional forgiveness and decisional forgiveness, while controlling for participant gender.

Employee role congruity had significant effects on emotional forgiveness ( $F(1, 129) = 2.82, p < .05$ ) and decisional forgiveness ( $F(1, 129) = 2.61, p < .05$ ). The results indicate that customers exhibit higher levels of emotional forgiveness towards service employees with high role congruity ( $M = 5.17, SD = 0.99$ ) compared to low role congruity ( $M = 4.72, SD = 0.83, d = 0.45$ ) following service failure, hence H1a is rejected. Likewise, the results also indicate that customers are willing to offer higher levels of decisional forgiveness to transgressing employees with low role congruity ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.15$ ) compared to high role congruity ( $M = 3.11, SD = 1.12, d = 0.45$ ), rejecting H1b.

H2a and H2b hypothesize that forgiveness drives future behavioral intentions. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to estimate repurchase intention from emotional and decisional forgiveness. These variables statistically significantly predicted repurchase intention

$F(1, 129) = 24.65, p < .001, r^2 = 0.27$ . Thus H2a and H2b are supported. The results also suggest that decisional forgiveness (standardized  $\beta_{\text{decforg}} = 0.34, p < .001$ ) plays a more substantial role than emotional forgiveness (standardized  $\beta_{\text{emoforg}} = 0.3, p < .001$ ) in determining whether a consumer demonstrates an intention to repeat purchase from the transgressing firm in the future. Of the two components of customer forgiveness, decisional forgiveness makes the stronger contribution to explaining repeat purchase intention compared to emotional forgiveness. Hence H3 is supported.

#### **2.4.4 Discussion**

Overall, the findings from Study 1 suggest that gender stereotypes endure within hospitality service roles, furthering an understanding of customer perceptions of gendered services. In particular, the results support Heilman's (2012) argument that gender norms play a substantial role in the perceptions of service staff and firms. The role congruity of a frontline service employee is sufficient to influence levels of customer forgiveness shown towards a transgressing staff member. Both emotional and decisional forgiveness are offered more willingly to FLEs in low-congruity roles. This finding dissents from role congruity theory as hypothesised however may be a result of customers' expectation disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980).

Customers may hold lower expectations of transgressing staff with low role congruity, and therefore offer more forgiveness in the event of failure. More specifically, forgiveness responses to low-congruity FLEs who customers have lower expectations of may be more positive as diminished expectations are merely confirmed in that FLEs failure, enabling customers to forgive more freely as failures are perceived as less substantial. Customers in these types of failure scenario may also be demonstrating forgiveness so as not to appear discriminatory or prejudiced against the low role congruity group. By responding to the failure

in an exaggeratedly positive way, customers may be seeking to reinforce their perceived tolerance of stigmatized groups to either themselves or their peers (Crocker et al., 1991).

In line with findings in psychological studies that decisional forgiveness typically results in reconciliation and reunion between two parties (McCullough et al., 1998), this study found that emotional forgiveness does also contribute to future behavioral intentions, but not as strongly as decisional forgiveness. The more forgiving (both emotional and decisional) a customer is towards a transgressing firm, the more likely they are to purchase from that firm again, with decisional forgiveness being found to be a stronger predictor of RPI than emotional forgiveness.

In light of the findings in Study 1, and in order to test the replicability of these findings, an additional study which utilized a more representative sample and examined the effects of role congruity in a different service role context was conducted. The study extends Study 1 to include the potential role that empathy plays in facilitating forgiveness in consumers.

## **2.5 Study 2**

### **2.5.1 Hypothesis Development**

The concept of empathy is commonly placed in the context of interpersonal relationships in social psychology, with a contentious history of conceptualization. Earlier conceptualizations of empathy identified it as a purely cognitive task whereby an individual is able to adopt a perspective-taking approach to understanding and interpreting somebody else's mind (Bernstein & Davis, 1982; Deutsch & Madle, 1975). Alternatively, some adopted the position that empathy is an emotional reaction and represents an affective process through which individuals respond to another person's emotional state (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). A more updated understanding conceptualizes empathy as a multifaceted response, possessing both

cognitive and affective elements (Smith, 2006; Tan et al., 2019; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). For this study, Wieseke, Geigenmüller, and Kraus' (2012) understanding of customer empathy is adopted as a customer's ability to take an employee's perspective during a service encounter and extend it to include the customer's ability to identify with and feel compassion for a service employee (Archer et al., 1981).

The presence of empathy in interpersonal relationships is advantageous and is documented to increase incidences of prosocial behavior between parties. When parties are able to empathize with one another, relationships benefit from enhanced communicative responsiveness (Stiff et al., 1988), volunteerism (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998), sharing behavior and helping behavior (Roberts & Strayer, 1996). These positive outcomes of empathy between parties are also reflected in customer service contexts. The ability for an FLE to empathize with a customer has been linked to positive customer-oriented behaviors by enhancing FLE-customer communication and strengthening customer trust, resulting in higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Bahadur et al., 2020; Delpechitre et al., 2018).

Examples of empathy being examined in service failure contexts conceptualize empathy as a trait possessed or a state experienced by customers. Trait empathy (or dispositional empathy) is defined as a tendency to react to other people's observed experiences (Davis, 1983). An individual with higher dispositional empathy will generally demonstrate more empathetic responses to others. Neuropsychological research has suggested that empathy is also malleable, with flexibility in the strength and direction of empathy from the empathizer to the other based on contextual factors such as the environment and relationship between the two parties (Singer & Lamm, 2009).

In the context of FLE-customer interactions, research aimed at priming empathy in respondents supports the notion that customer empathy is variable and, regardless of an individual's

underlying tendencies towards the trait, can differ on a case-by-case basis (Batson et al., 2007; Graziano et al., 2007). Likewise in her seminal work, Stein (1964) argued that while empathy cannot be forced, it can be facilitated. While service organizations may have no control over trait empathy of customers, they may be able to facilitate state empathy to improve customer outcomes.

With this in mind, a key question is raised of how an FLEs' role congruity may influence the likelihood of customers empathizing with them. Contemporary research suggests that similarity between parties is a driver of empathy. More specifically, individuals may be more easily able to empathize with individuals who are, in some way, relatable to them (Chismar, 1988; Glynn & Sen, 2015). In line with role congruity theory, any backlash resulting from perceptions of employee deviancy (Matta & Folkes, 2005) may increase social distance between parties and impede the empathy process in the event of service failure. Thus, in keeping with the previous discussion on role congruity and based on the findings in Study 1:

*H1: Higher levels of FLE role congruity in a) feminine service roles and b) masculine service roles will result in higher levels of customer empathy with the service employee.*

Psychological and counselling literatures provide us with a foundational understanding of the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. The empathy model of forgiveness proposed by McCullough et al. (1997) was the first to establish an empirical link between the two concepts, demonstrating a significantly impactful effect of empathy on forgiveness. However, despite the examination of these two concepts in more personal relationships (McCullough et al., 1998), it is still unclear exactly how empathy and forgiveness interact in service contexts, particularly in cases where interactions between transgressor (employee) and victim (customer) are usually short-term and once-off in such cases as a service failure.



While psychological and counselling literatures provide a frame to understanding the relationship between empathy and forgiveness in personal and close relationship contexts, services literature has not adequately integrated these social concepts into the development of marketing theory, with few exceptions. For example, higher observed levels of customer empathy reduce the likelihood that customers leave negative online reviews in the event of service failure (Pera et al., 2019). Based on McCullough et al.'s (1997) empathy model of forgiveness, it is argued that the forgiveness of a transgressing FLE in service failure is facilitated by empathy. This is because the empathy experience promotes care for others according to the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson & Oleson, 1991) and stimulates the altruism capacity which encourages people to assist others, even complete strangers as in the service encounter context. Empathy may cause customers to care that the transgressing service employee may be punished due to the mistakes they make. More specifically, empathy seems to be developed via both affective and cognitive routes, with one reinforcing the other. Thus, it is not unreasonable to argue that empathy leads to both affective and decisional forgiveness and so it is hypothesized that:

*H2: Customer empathy with a service employee is positively related to a) emotional forgiveness and b) decisional forgiveness in the event of service failure.*

The findings in Study 1 support the position that decisional forgiveness is a behavioral intent to treat a transgressor in a manner similar to that as prior to a transgression. Another important outcome variable that is of particular interest to marketing scholars and professional alike relates to a customer's intention to spread word-of-mouth (Berger, 2014). When examining service failure in particular, negative word-of-mouth is a common occurrence for customers who are motivated to share social information and assist other consumers with the ultimate goal of affirming the self (Alexandrov et al., 2013). The spreading of negative word-of-mouth

may have some adverse outcomes for service firms, including a damaged organizational reputation (Williams et al., 2012) and diluted brand equity (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011).

It is hypothesized that the same decisional processes that inform repurchase intention are present for a customer's intention to spread negative word-of-mouth. Decisional forgiveness is a behavioral process and is associated with the treatment of a transgressor as if the transgression never happened (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). Thus, it is expected that higher levels of decisional forgiveness following service failure, rather than emotional forgiveness, will result in more positive outcomes for word-of-mouth intention, such that:

*H3: Decisional forgiveness is a better predictor of a) intention to spread negative word-of-mouth and b) repurchase intention than emotional forgiveness following a transgression.*

## **2.5.2 Method**

### *Design and Participants*

An experimental design with employee role congruity as a manipulated factor and gender as a measured variable was again employed using a 2 (masculine vs feminine service role) × 2 (male vs female) between-subjects design. An online survey panel yielded 265 usable responses from Australian customers. 51 percent of respondents identified as women, 48 percent as men and less than 1 percent as gender fluid (self-described). During the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 4 experimental conditions which had approximately 65 subjects each.

### *Stimulus development*

Again, the experimental stimuli that participants were asked to respond to was in the form of short, written scenarios that depicted a service failure in either masculine or feminine service

roles. Based on Australian employment figures, the masculine service role of IT support and feminine service role of domestic cleaner were chosen. In Australia, 80% of IT support technicians are men and 77% of domestic cleaners are women (National Skills Commission, 2021).

Each of the four scenarios began by providing some background context of the service situation. Failing FLEs were either depicted as men or women based on the respective pronouns used to describe their actions in the scenarios. Each respondent was asked to take on the role of the customer in the service scenario before responding to the measures. Examples of the scenarios (both masculine and feminine) are provided in Appendix A.

The realism of the scenarios was tested in the survey using two items (for example, “I can imagine a scenario like this happening in real life”) along a 7-point scale. The mean score for the items was significantly different from neutral ( $t(264) = 20.51, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the realism of the test scenarios. Respondents were asked to indicate the gender of the FLE in their allocated scenario to ensure that employee gender was communicated effectively through gendered pronouns. All respondents reading scenarios with he/him/his pronouns identified the FLE as a man, and all respondents reading scenarios with she/her pronouns identified the FLE as a woman, confirming that the manipulations were successful.

### *Measures*

In addition to the scales used in Study 1 which measured decisional forgiveness (three items,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ), emotional forgiveness (five items,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and repurchase intention (three items,  $\alpha = 0.95$ ), state empathy was assessed using an adapted version of Powell and Roberts’ (2017) nine-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Two items were removed from the empathy scale during CFA (“I understood how the service employee was feeling” and “I know what the service employee felt emotionally”) due to poor factor loading, 0.64 and 0.63 respectively. The measure for

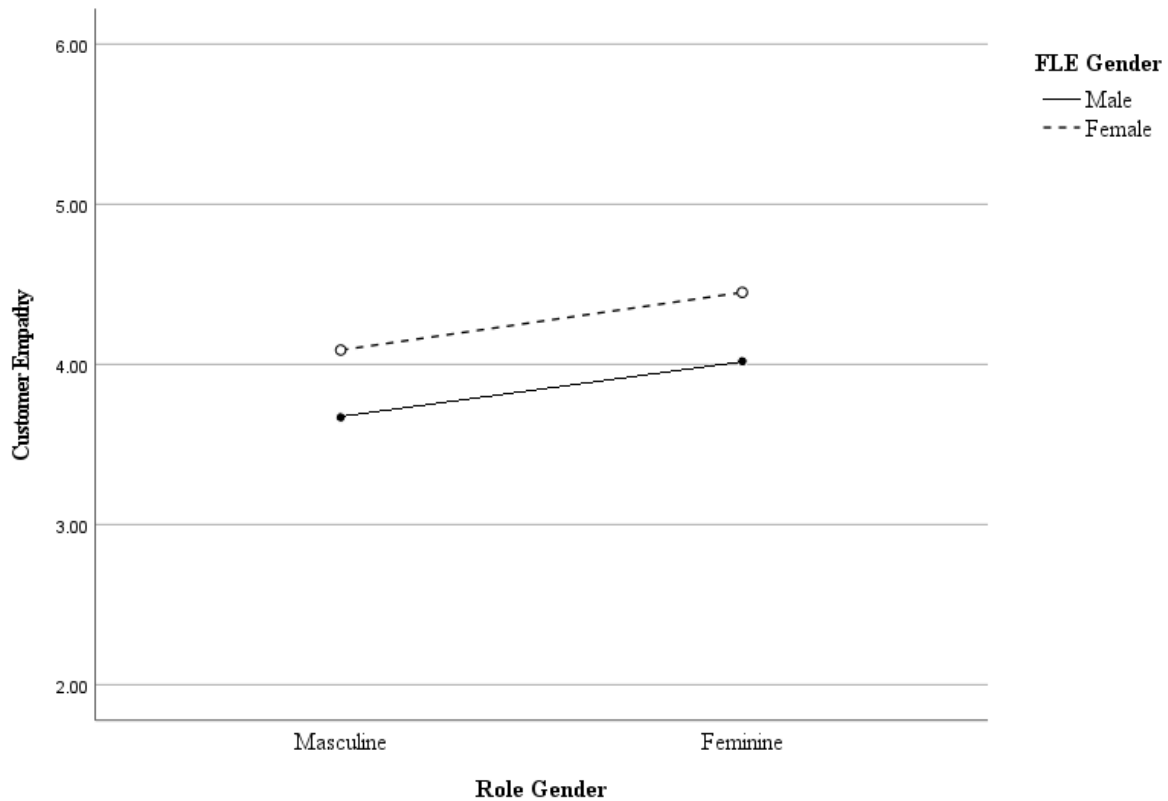
respondents' intention to spread negative word of mouth was sourced from Grégoire et al.'s (2009) study (three items,  $\alpha = 0.89$ ). All reliability scores for our measures were considered acceptable when compared to their previous applications. A summary of scale descriptions and measurements is provided in Appendix C. After responding to all the measures, participants were then asked to provide some demographic information and respond to the manipulation confirmation questions. Again, all assumptions for relevant parametric tests, including normality and homogeneity of variance in each test variable, were deemed suitably met.

### **2.5.3 Results**

H1a and H1b relate to the relationship between an employee's role congruity and the ability for customers to empathize with that employee in the event of a service transgression. To test these hypotheses, two sets of independent-samples t-tests were conducted using SPSS 25.0. Firstly, for the feminine service condition in H1a, the analysis demonstrated a significant difference between empathy scores across the high- ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) and low-congruity ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $t(126) = 2.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.48$ ) groups, with higher empathy scores in the high-congruity group. Thus, H1a is supported.

The analysis for the independent-samples t-test comparing empathy scores across the masculine service condition also demonstrated a significant difference across empathy scores for the high- ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and low-congruity ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $t(135) = -2.57$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.39$ ) groups, however with higher empathy scores observed in the low-congruity group. With this finding, H1b is not supported. Figure 2.1 shows the differences in mean average scores across H1a and H1b.

Figure 2.1: Differences in mean empathy scores towards female and male FLEs in feminine and masculine roles



H2a and H2b examined the relationship between observed customer empathy and customer forgiveness following a service transgression. To test both H2a and H2b, a pair of simple linear regressions were conducted. For H1a testing the relationship between empathy and emotional forgiveness, the regression was not significant ( $r^2 = 0.00$ ,  $F(1, 263) = 0.119$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), with empathy not significantly predicting emotional forgiveness ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), thus H2a is rejected. An additional regression analysis for testing the relationship between empathy and decisional forgiveness in H2b ( $r^2 = 0.09$ ,  $F(1, 263) = 24.61$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with empathy significantly predicting decisional forgiveness ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, H2b was supported.

Next, to supplement our findings in Study 1, H3a and H3b proposed that decisional forgiveness is a more substantial predictor of customer intention to repurchase and intention to spread negative word of mouth than emotional forgiveness. Multiple regression analyses were

conducted to estimate repurchase intention and intention to spread negative word of mouth from emotional and decisional forgiveness. Both decisional and emotional forgiveness significantly predicted intention to spread negative word of mouth  $F(2, 262) = 78.67, r^2 = 0.37, p < 0.001$ . However, contrary to the initial hypothesis, the beta value of emotional forgiveness ( $\beta_{\text{emoforg}} = -0.42, p < .001$ ) was lower than that of decisional forgiveness ( $\beta_{\text{decforg}} = -0.38, p < .001$ ). From this, it is deduced that emotional forgiveness is a better predictor of intention to spread negative word of mouth than decisional forgiveness, so H3a is rejected. Addressing repurchase intention, only decisional forgiveness ( $\beta_{\text{decforg}} = 0.62, p < .001$ ) but not emotional forgiveness ( $\beta_{\text{emoforg}} = 0.06, p > 0.05$ ) significantly predicted repurchase intention  $F(2, 262) = 92.53, r^2 = 0.41, p < 0.001$ . Thus, H3b is supported.

#### **2.5.4 Discussion**

Perhaps most importantly, our analysis concludes that there exists a significant congruity effect on customer empathy in the event of service failure, with this effect functioning differently in masculine and feminine service roles. This finding means that customers demonstrate less empathy towards male FLEs transgressing in both masculine and feminine roles than female FLEs. Explanations for this discrepancy are partially explained by role congruity theory, with other explanations nestled in gender literature and as a result of several cultural factors.

First, in examining the finding of men receiving less empathy than women in feminine roles aligns with common descriptions of backlash against men working in feminine roles (eg. Moss-Racusin, 2014). Males working in a feminine role may represent a substantial gender violation, so backlash is a likely result. This finding provides evidence that the backlash associated with gender incongruity creates social distance which impedes empathy between parties in the service exchange. This finding aligns with role congruity theory and also supplements Heilman

and Wallen's (2010) work which explored backlash against men working in feminine service roles.

The finding that women receive more empathy than men in masculine roles seems to dissent from role congruity theory, however the result is not unexpected as there may be other sociological phenomena at play in the FLE-customer exchange. It may be the case that expectations are lower for women in masculine roles when customers' concepts of womanhood and masculine work are schematically distinct, in line with gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). If this is the case, customers may form the perception that a female employee is 'out of place' in a masculine role and may make concessions regarding the employee and their work in the event that a transgression occurs—including extending compassion as an empathetic response.

This finding may be an example of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This phenomenon includes the explicit and implicit beliefs and judgements that women are "beautiful and pure, yet delicate and precious, and therefore in need of protection" (Mastari et al., 2019, 2). This cultural bias to protect women may impact customers' responses to service failure, especially where the employee is perceived as being incongruous with the masculine work. Where a female FLE fails in a masculine service role, customers may view the employee as misplaced and in need of assistance, triggering empathetic and prosocial responses. Cases of benevolent sexism have been explored in other organizational settings such as recruitment and hiring (Good & Rudman, 2010), however have not yet been examined in the context of the FLE-customer interaction.

The finding that empathy is positively associated with decisional forgiveness, but not emotional forgiveness, supports those previous studies which categorize empathy as a cognitive function rather than a purely emotional process. This finding provides evidence that in more temporary customer encounters, mental perspective-taking is the more likely path of empathy taken over

more affective forms such as vicarious emotional sharing. Due to the transient nature of certain service encounters, customers may not have the resources nor ability to engage in the deep sharing of emotions with service employees. As a result, the more common path of mental perspective taking may lead to a greater likelihood to exhibit decisional forgiveness as customers seek to create mental statements to reconcile transgressions in their minds.

The finding that forgiveness leads to positive repurchase intentions supports previous research examining the roles of decisional and emotional forgiveness in predicting customer responses to failure (Smith & Bolton, 1998; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012). The finding that customer repurchase intention is more strongly predicted by decisional forgiveness supports the initial argument that repurchase in a consumption context is similar to reconciliation in an interpersonal context, thus mimicking the cognitive antecedents to reconciliation. However, the finding that emotional forgiveness is the stronger predictor of intention to spread negative word of mouth dissents slightly from previous studies which identified decisional forgiveness as the stronger predictor (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012). It may be the case that the act of spreading negative word of mouth represents a form of consumer revenge and acts as an emotional coping mechanism where emotional forgiveness is not possible due to lack of consumer resources or restrictive contexts which inhibit forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Additional research may be needed in this area to clarify these conflicting findings.

## **2.6 General Discussion**

Study 1 establishes the underlying relationship between gender congruity and customers' forgiveness responses to service failure. Study 2 expanded on these findings by specifically examining the difference in responses towards men and women in high- and low-congruity roles. We show that a customer's ability to empathise with an FLE increases their likelihood



to engage in decisional forgiveness, but not emotional forgiveness, with the FLE. Findings revealed gender-bending men face negative responses in both success and failure.

Both studies show support for the relationship between forgiveness and key customer variables such as intention to repurchase and intention to spread negative word-of-mouth. However, where Study 1 supported the positive relationship between emotional forgiveness and repurchase intention, Study 2 found that emotional forgiveness did not significantly predict repurchase intention. The source of this discrepancy may lie in the different focal roles between studies, across hospitality and personal services. Alternatively, the language used in written vignettes across studies may have evoked a greater emotional response in participants that impacted the scoring of emotional forgiveness. This may represent an unforeseen emotional prime that impacts customers' responses to failure (Tombs & Rao Hill, 2014).

### **2.6.1 Theoretical Implications**

First, our findings largely challenge role congruity theory and suggest the existence of other factors that may muddy the predicted backlash against incongruent FLEs. Our findings suggest that an FLEs confirmation of customer expectations may be one of these factors. Responses to low-congruity FLEs who customers expect are 'destined to fail' may be less severe as diminished expectations are merely confirmed in that FLEs failure, enabling customers to forgive more freely as failures are perceived as less substantial. In addition to confirmation of customer expectations, our paper also finds support for other mechanisms such as benevolent sexism that may reduce backlash specifically against female FLEs working in masculine roles. While our findings dissent from role congruity theory, the paper can be taken as an expansion to the theory as it highlights potential cases where expected instances of backlash are less likely to occur. By integrating other mechanisms like expectation (dis)confirmation and benevolent sexism into our understanding of role congruity theory, the theory gains practical relevance

and an expanded predictive power for determining the cases where backlash is more or less likely to occur.

Secondly, the paper contributes by revitalizing the literature around gender in service work, particularly in updating the body of work that documents customer responses to role congruity, but also more broadly to the current status of gender roles in the workforce. Notably, cultural perceptions of masculinity have not been as dynamic as those of femininity (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006), with men's roles in contemporary society deviating less from their traditional roles than women. It may be the case then that while the concepts of women and men's work have become less schematically distinct, the concepts of men and women's work remain disjointed from one another. As a result, gender norms are more rigid for and strictly adhered to by men than women (Bosson et al., 2006).

Finally, we expand the growing body of literature around forgiveness in service failure by examining the construct of customer empathy and its role in predicting forgiveness. The relationship between empathy and forgiveness has not been fully examined in the context of service transgressions which are generally characterised by a greater emotional distance between parties and a less enduring temporal setting, extending the empathy model of forgiveness to non-personal relationship contexts. The presence of impactful empathy in a service encounter that is demonstrably flexible based on employee variables is significant to the body of work documenting the drivers of empathy. With a large proportion of studies examining forgiveness and empathy limited to familial (eg. Hill, 2010) or collegial relationships (eg. Ran et al., 2021), our paper provides empirical evidence to both the presence and antecedents of empathy in these shorter-term relationships.

### **2.6.2 Managerial Implications**

Service firms, particularly those with roles that are perceived as particularly gendered, must be aware of the potential influence that FLE gender has on customers' failure perceptions and responses. While a kneejerk solution to this issue would be to avoid recruiting and hiring men in both masculine and feminine service roles due to lower observed rates of empathy observed in the findings, the ethical, legal and social implications of such a response would be challenging to overcome. Instead, service managers must balance the greater need for gender diversity in the workforce (Herring, 2009; Roberge & Van Dick, 2010) with the need for operational success. Previously it was discussed that adequate representation can reduce customer backlash against women working in masculine roles. Along the same line, in order to reduce the discrepancy in treatment towards men and women in gendered work at a macro-level and in the long-term, a more sustainable solution may paradoxically lie in hiring more, not less, men in feminine service roles and women in masculine service roles to neutralize any congruity effects.

In the short term, service managers must ensure that pathways are in place to enable customers to quickly achieve both emotional and decisional forgiveness following failure. With the findings suggesting that key customer outcomes of intention to repurchase and intention to spread negative word-of-mouth are more significantly predicted by the different forms of forgiveness, service firms should focus on ensuring both are achievable through appropriate channels. Depending on an organization's context, one of these outcome variables may be more important than the other (such as with once-off exchanges where an organization relies less on repatronage and more on positive word-of-mouth). In this case, recovery strategies should be focused to achieve either emotional or decisional forgiveness to achieve more improved levels of intention to spread positive word-of-mouth or repurchase intention respectively.

### **2.6.3 Directions for Future Research**

Future research should be directed towards exploring the nature of customer responses to gendered service failures in service industries and service types beyond the scope of this paper. This paper also establishes a foundation for future research into the impacts of role congruity in other aspects of the service interaction (such as FLE sexuality) that may also yield a greater understanding of congruity effects in customer responses.

Likewise, where the focus of the present studies was on short-term services, future research could examine service relationships that are more enduring. Psychological literature has demonstrated that responses to transgressions (including forgiveness, reconciliation and sabotage) differ based on the interdependence level between a transgressor and victim (McCullough et al., 2013). The severity of the transgression during the service encounter and the subsequent outcomes of customer empathy and forgiveness in more long-term service relationships may provide an alternate perspective to the findings of this paper.

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## **2.8 Appendices**

### *Appendix A: Experimental Stimuli (Study 1 & Study 2)*

#### **Study 1 Sample Scenarios:**

##### **Feminine congruent (incongruent) condition**

You and your friend are sharing a hotel room on a weekend away. On waking up after your first night's stay, you decide to go down to the hotel restaurant for a breakfast. After breakfast, you return to your room as a female (male) cleaner is closing your door and preparing to move on to the next room. As you and your friend open the door to your room, you notice that both beds have not been made. Likewise, your towels have not been changed and the room's bin has not been emptied.

##### **Masculine congruent (incongruent) condition**

You and your friend are sharing a hotel room on a weekend away. After checking in at the front desk, a male (female) porter approaches you and offers to take your luggage up to your room for you. You accept, and he/she takes your bags. You decide to get some lunch at the hotel restaurant. When you arrive at your room, you see both of your bags sitting in the hallway next to your room door. On opening your bag, you discover that the contents have been disturbed as if the luggage had been dropped or thrown around a lot.

## **Study 2 Sample Scenarios:**

### **Feminine congruent (incongruent) condition**

You decide to call a cleaner to come to your house and do some general cleaning. On the day of your booking, the cleaner arrives and introduces herself (himself) before you explain what needs to be done. She (He) tells you that she (he) understands and that she (he) will get to work immediately. While working, she (he) is very personable and friendly. Once she (he) leaves, however, you notice that there are several areas in your house that are still dusty and unclean.

### **Masculine congruent (incongruent) condition**

You have recently purchased a new modem and internet plan. You decide to call a technician to come to your house and install the modem to get your internet running. On the day of your appointment, the technician arrives and introduces himself (herself) before you explain what needs to be done. He (She) tells you that he (she) understands and that he (she) will get to work immediately. While working, he (she) is very personable and friendly. Once he (she) leaves, however, you notice that your internet is not connecting properly and is falling in and out.

Appendix B: Scale descriptions and measurement (Study 1)

Construct and Source	Measurement Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha$
<i>Emotional Forgiveness</i> – adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012)	EFORG1 - I will hold on to the hurt and anger I feel towards this service provider. (R)	0.62*	0.76
	EFORG2 - I want to see this service provider hurt and miserable. (R)	0.73	
	EFORG3 - I will continue to think how much I hate this service provider. (R)	0.81	
	EFORG4 - I am going to get even with this service provider. (R)	0.71	
	EFORG5 - I am not letting go of my negative emotions towards this service provider. (R)	0.82	
<i>Decisional Forgiveness</i> – adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012)	DFORG1 - I will continue my relationships with this service provider.	0.92	0.81
	DFORG2 - I will make an effort to be friendly in my future interactions with this service provider.	0.92	
	DFORG3 - I will cut off this relationship with this service provider. (R)	0.43*	
<i>Repurchase Intention</i> – adapted from Grewal et al. (1998)	RPI1 – If I needed a hotel to stay at in the future, there is a high probability that I would choose to stay at this hotel.	0.87	0.88
	RPI2 – The likelihood that I would <i>consider</i> staying at this hotel again is high.	0.91	
	RPI3 – The likelihood that I would <i>actually</i> stay at this hotel again is high.	0.92	

(R) Reverse-coded for analysis

\* Removed from analysis due to poor factor loading

Appendix C: Scale descriptions and measurement (Study 2)

Construct and Source	Measurement Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha$
<i>State Empathy</i> – adapted from Powell and Roberts (2017)	EMP1 - I understood how the service employee was feeling.	0.64*	0.89
	EMP2 - I felt a sense of compassion for the service employee.	0.77	
	EMP3 - The service employee's feelings transferred to me.	0.73	
	EMP4 - I knew what the service employee felt emotionally.	0.63*	
	EMP5 - I experienced feelings of sympathy towards the service employee.	0.83	
	EMP6 - I felt the same way as the service employee.	0.82	
	EMP7 - I could identify the feelings the service employee was having.	0.72	
	EMP8 - I had feelings of concern for the employee.	0.74	
	EMP9 - I experienced the same emotions as the service employee.	0.77	
<i>Emotional Forgiveness</i> – adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012)	EFORG1 - I will hold on to the hurt and anger I feel towards this service provider. (R)	0.73	0.86
	EFORG2 - I want to see this service provider hurt and miserable. (R)	0.83	
	EFORG3 - I will continue to think how much I hate this service provider. (R)	0.89	
	EFORG4 - I am going to get even with this service provider. (R)	0.80	
	EFORG5 - I am not letting go of my negative emotions towards this service provider. (R)	0.78	
<i>Decisional Forgiveness</i> – adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012)	DFORG1 - I will continue my relationships with this service provider.	0.89	0.81
	DFORG2 - I will make an effort to be friendly in my future interactions with this service provider.	0.77	
	DFORG3 - I will cut off this relationship with this service provider. (R)	0.88	
<i>Repurchase Intention</i> – adapted from Grewal et al. (1998)	RPI1 - If I needed my home cleaned (a modem installed) in the future, there is a high probability that I would choose this cleaning (installation) service again.	0.95	0.95
	RPI2 - The likelihood that I would <i>consider</i> having my home cleaned (modem installed) by this service provider again is high.	0.95	
	RPI3 - The likelihood that I would <i>actually</i> have my home cleaned (modem installed) by this service provider again is high.	0.97	
<i>Intention to Spread Negative Word-of-Mouth</i> – adapted from Grégoire et al. (2009)	NWOM1 - I will spread negative word-of-mouth about the cleaning (installation) service.	0.89	0.89
	NWOM2 - I will bad-mouth this cleaning (installation) service to my friends.	0.92	
	NWOM3 - If my friends are looking for a cleaning (installation) service, I will tell them not to buy from this service provider.	0.91	

(R) Reverse-coded for analysis

\* Removed from analysis due to poor factor loading

## **CHAPTER 3 MASCULINITY, FEMININITY AND SEXUALITY OF FLES IN GENDERED SERVICE WORK: A CUSTOMER'S PERSPECTIVE**

The second paper in this thesis, **Masculinity, Femininity and Sexuality of FLEs in Gendered Service Work: A Customer's Perspective**, details two experimental studies that examine the impacts of employee sexuality, masculinity and femininity on customer perceptions of and behavioural responses to non-heterosexual male FLEs. This paper serves as an expansion of Paper 1 by extending on the application of role congruity theory to gendered service roles. Recognising the limited support for gender-based role congruity in the previous paper, this paper focuses on the potential effect that sexuality-based congruity can play in service contexts featuring non-heterosexual service employees. Here, sexuality-based congruity differs from gender-based congruity as congruity judgements are based on implicit inversion assumptions—where non-heterosexual people are congruous with inversed sex-typed roles. Implicit inversion theory provides theoretical justification for additional investigation beyond FLE gender as in Paper 1.

While non-heterosexual people are overrepresented in frontline service work, only very recently has a greater research effort been directed towards understanding what role sexuality plays in service interactions. With this body of research still in its infancy, this paper contributes by expanding the application of role congruity theory and implicit inversion theory to a services context, thereby providing empirical evidence of these theories' relevance and predictive power in the context of FLE sexuality.

Findings from the paper suggest that female customers show a much greater preference for non-heterosexual rather than heterosexual FLEs, where male customers show no preference towards either FLE regardless of role gender. Findings also suggest that while feminine- and

masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs are viewed as equally competent in both feminine and masculine roles, male customers respond more poorly to feminine-presenting FLEs.

The paper is presented in a journal article format, targeted to the Journal of Service Research. However, tables and figures have been inserted into the paper as required for readability. Per the Journal of Service Research's guidelines, the paper is presented in Standard American English.

## Statement of Authorship

# Statement of Authorship

Title of Paper	Masculinity, Femininity and Sexuality of FLEs in Gendered Service Work: A Customer's Perspective
Publication Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Published <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted for Publication <input type="checkbox"/> Submitted for Publication <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unpublished and Unsubmitted work written in manuscript style
Publication Details	This manuscript will be submitted to the Journal of Service Research.

### Principal Author

Name of Principal Author (Candidate)	David Matthews			
Contribution to the Paper	Literature review, conceptual development, method design, data analysis and manuscript preparation.			
Overall percentage (%)	70%			
Certification:	This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature and is not subject to any obligations or contractual agreements with a third party that would constrain its inclusion in this thesis. I am the primary author of this paper.			
Signature	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 80%;"></td> <td>Date</td> <td>01/03/2023</td> </tr> </table>		Date	01/03/2023
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### Co-Author Contributions

By signing the Statement of Authorship, each author certifies that:

- i. the candidate's stated contribution to the publication is accurate (as detailed above);
- ii. permission is granted for the candidate to include the publication in the thesis; and
- iii. the sum of all co-author contributions is equal to 100% less the candidate's stated contribution.

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Name of Co-Author	Alastair Tombs			
Contribution to the Paper	Co-supervision; conceptual and methodological development and manuscript revision.			
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### **3.1 Abstract**

Extant research suggests that frontline employee (FLE) sexuality matters to customers in service exchanges, but the direct impact of FLE sexuality on customers' behavioral responses to service delivery is unclear. Two experimental studies draw on the concepts of role congruity and implicit inversion to examine customers' responses to non-heterosexual male frontline employees in gendered service work. The study utilizes the service roles of floristry as a traditionally feminine setting and automechanics as a traditionally masculine setting. Study 1 finds that female customers demonstrate more favorable post-service responses after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE compared to a heterosexual FLE in both masculine and feminine service types, while male customers show no difference between non-heterosexual and heterosexual FLEs in either service type. Study 2 extends these findings and reveals that while masculine- and feminine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs are viewed as equally competent in masculine and feminine service roles, male customers respond more poorly to feminine-presenting (compared to masculine-presenting) FLEs. Findings from both studies indicate the organizational benefits that can come from encouraging non-heterosexual FLEs to present their authentic selves in their service work, revealing that customers generally respond positively or neutrally to non-heterosexual FLEs with adverse responses only occurring when the FLE presents in a way that is especially feminine.

### **Keywords**

Non-heterosexual employees, role congruity, role gender, customer sexuality



### **3.2 Introduction**

Previous studies have identified gay people's attraction to and success in customer-focused work due to their preference for task-independence and social perceptiveness (Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight 2015). Gay men (compared to straight men) show a preference for typically feminine service roles like nursing and beauty services (Ellis, Ratnasingam, and Wheeler 2012; Chung and Harmon 1994). In light of their disproportionate presence in particular roles, there have been calls for more focused research to examine how gay people operate in different organizational roles and industries (Martinez, Sawyer, and Wilson 2017), especially considering that the number of people identifying as non-heterosexual is growing (Wilson et al. 2020).

Prior research has documented the negative experiences that gay men, as well as lesbian women, bisexual people and other non-heterosexual individuals, have encountered in their professional lives at work. In recruitment and hiring, gay men are discriminated against when applying for masculine roles, as are gay women for feminine roles (Ahmed, Andersson, and Hammarstedt 2013) which has contributed to the prominence of gay men and women working in gender atypical roles (Ueno, Roach, and Peña-Talamantes 2013). Evidence supports that hiring gay men may be perceived by employers as being risky based on a higher perceived variance in productivity of minority groups (Baert 2018), with risk-averse employers less likely to employ gay candidates. Narratives of non-heterosexual individuals reveal experiences of discursive violence from co-workers (Willis 2012) and reports of earnings gaps between heterosexual and non-heterosexual people are common (eg. Aksoy, Carpenter, and Frank 2018; Waite and Denier 2015). In the context of frontline services research, however, our understanding of non-heterosexual frontline employees (FLEs) and their interactions with customers is in its infancy.

Researchers have recently begun addressing this dearth of empirical investigation, focusing first on exploring particular customer groups and service types. For example, Rosenbaum, Russell, and Russell-Bennett (2017) identify the service contexts in which female customers prefer working with gay male FLEs, citing preference for gay FLEs in the provision of services which require a mandate of privacy (or access to intimate parts of women's bodies). However, as this study addressed the relationship between gay FLEs and female customers, additional research is required to examine a more diverse customer base's behavioral responses to these employees beyond women in certain industries. Likewise, while evidence suggests that customers' satisfaction with an FLE may differ based on how masculine/feminine they are (Yizhi Li et al. 2020), it is unclear how these employee traits impact customer response variables beyond satisfaction, or how these masculinity/femininity effects arise in and interact with gendered service roles.

Thus, we seek to address the following research objectives: 1) to examine the impact of an FLE's sexual orientation on customers' post-service responses, 2) to determine whether service role gender impacts customers' perceptions of and responses to non-heterosexual FLEs, and 3) to investigate the impact of FLEs' masculine/feminine cues on customers' post-service behavioral responses. In addressing these objectives, we make several contributions.

First, we extend implicit inversion theory and role congruity theory into a frontline services context, providing empirical evidence of the predictive power that these theories hold in studying marginalized groups in contemporary service environments. Second, we extend the growing body of literature examining customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs, particularly by focusing on the interactions between an FLE's sexuality and service role gender. Finally, findings from both studies combine to provide service managers with a greater understanding of how their customers respond to non-heterosexual male FLEs (compared to

straight male FLEs), and how their non-heterosexual employees' self-presentations impact customers' post-service responses. The remainder of this paper starts with a review of literature in the services marketing and gender spheres. We then outline Study 1 and Study 2 individually, then conclude with a general discussion about their combined implications for service theory and practice.

### **3.3 Study 1**

#### **3.3.1 Literature Review**

##### *Sexuality, Implicit Inversion Theory & Role Congruity Theory*

Gender is a prominent aspect of society that permeates the working lives of service employees. Work roles that have traditionally been dominated by a particular gender of employee tend to become heavily associated with that gender. In course, society (including service customers) begin to perceive that role as better suited to workers of that gender (Clarke 2020). Occupations such as nursing and primary teaching, for example, are considered feminine as they have traditionally been filled by women and are perceived to require feminine, communal traits such as warmth and compassion (Heilman 1983). While the landscape of service work has shifted since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as women entered the workforce en masse (Strachan 2010), gendered associations with some roles still exist as asymmetrical gender participation persists. For example, in 2001 91% of Australian nurses were women. By 2021, the number had seen a shift of only 3%, with 88% of nurses being women (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia 2021), explaining the lingering association between women, femininity and nursing even after 20 years.

This genderization of work roles has proven to be restrictive, with individuals who attempt to “cross” these established lines into roles that are incongruent with their own gender being

exposed to societal backlash as a response. Men who assume roles in traditionally feminine work are perceived as being wimpy and undeserving of respect (Heilman and Wallen 2010). There is a greater likelihood for these men to be perceived as gay (Fingerhut and Peplau 2006) including nurses, librarians, primary school teachers and flight attendants (Moss-Racusin and Johnson 2016; Simpson 2004). As a theoretical foundation to these assumptions and to guide the present study, implicit inversion theory (IIT) asserts that homosexual people are perceived or assumed as possessing similar traits as a respective opposite-sex heterosexual. Essentially, IIT posits a worldview that gay men are similar to heterosexual women, exhibiting high levels of femininity; and gay women are similar to heterosexual men, exhibiting high levels of masculinity. This theoretical approach provides context to the experiences of men who work in traditionally feminine occupations.

Since its conception, IIT has been applied in a variety of disciplines to explain perceptions of and the lived experiences of homosexual people. In the work domain, for example, recruiters show a preference towards gay men rather than straight men when hiring a prospective employee for a feminine role (Clarke and Arnold 2018). Gay men in managerial positions are also perceived to possess managerial traits that are typically associated with heterosexual women rather than with heterosexual men (Lieberman and Golom 2015). These examples of IIT suggest that the societal backlash that men working in feminine roles experience is lessened when those men are gay.

This backlash as a result of implicit inversion effects can be further expanded through role congruity theory. Initially, role congruity theory was applied to examine and explain the societal prejudices held against female leaders based on incongruent perceptions of femininity and leadership (Eagly and Karau 2002). Since then, the theory has been further applied to examine societal prejudice against a range of incongruent individuals, including female sports

journalists (Mudrick and Lin 2017), male primary teachers (Y. Kim and Weseley 2017) and clergywomen (Ferguson 2018), with all these cases documenting experiences of prejudice working in their incongruent roles.

Since gay men are perceived as being similar to heterosexual women, and with the stereotype that women possess communal traits, gay men may appear to be less congruent in masculine work. As a result, customers may hold prejudice against non-heterosexual men for their perceived incongruity in certain masculine roles, in addition to prejudice based on their sexual orientation. However, extant research has failed to address customer perceptions of non-heterosexual FLEs in masculine/feminine roles, and whether patterns predicted by IIT and role congruity theory are relevant to a queer services marketing context.

Study 1 aims to test customer responses to heterosexual or non-heterosexual FLEs and the contexts in which the interactions with a heterosexual or non-heterosexual FLE results in more positive customer outcomes. Given the scarcity of literature in the services marketing domain relating to non-heterosexual FLEs, hypotheses for this study were founded largely in gender and sexuality literature and were supported by implicit inversion theory.

### **3.3.2 Hypothesis Development**

Earlier studies have identified congruity effects in perceptions of service delivery in gendered industries. Specifically, those individuals who work in roles that are atypical for their gender have been reported to experience backlash (Clarke 2020). Because backlash is a response to gender deviance and a resistance against the disruption of gender roles, individuals behaving in a gender typical way (such as working in a role “appropriate” for their gender) do not experience gender-based backlash. As non-heterosexual men are perceived as possessing similar traits to heterosexual women (Kite and Deaux 1987), it is likely they may experience

backlash for working in a masculine role, just as a heterosexual woman would. Considering this, it is hypothesized that:

*H1: Customers will be more likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about a heterosexual male FLE, rather than a non-heterosexual male FLE, working in a masculine role.*

Alternatively, this very association between gay men and heterosexual women may have an opposite effect in feminine roles. With more modern studies highlighting associations between gay men and communal traits such as sociability (Kranz, Pröbstle, and Evidis 2017), it may be the case that non-heterosexual men (compared to heterosexual men) are more welcomed in feminine roles as their ascribed stereotypes align better within customers' schema of feminine work. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

*H2: Customers will be more likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about a non-heterosexual male FLE, rather than a heterosexual male FLE, working in a feminine role.*

When addressing the gender of customers in the service exchange, there is a multitude of evidence that suggests women, more than men, possess positive attitudes towards non-heterosexual people. Demographic analyses have consistently reported women as possessing more favorable, less hostile attitudes towards gay men (Herek and Glunt 1993; Ratcliff et al. 2006). Findings also demonstrate that women are more comfortable being around and willing to interact with gay men than with heterosexual men (Russell, Ickes, and Ta 2018). Even in recruitment, female employers show preference for gay male candidates over straight male candidates (Everly, Unzueta, and Shih 2016). Given this demonstrated favor, it is hypothesized that:

*H3: Female customers will be more likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about a non-heterosexual male FLE rather than male customers.*

Next, in line with social identity theory, individuals are likely to show preference to members of their in-group (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008). In the case of a non-heterosexual customer (compared to a heterosexual customer) interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE, customers may seek to reinforce positive in-group and self-identity attitudes and reflect more positive behavioral outcomes following a service exchange with a non-heterosexual FLE, such that:

*H4: Non-heterosexual customers will be more likely to (a) repurchase from and (b) spread positive word-of-mouth about a non-heterosexual male FLE than straight customers.*

Finally, gender and sexuality literature detail repeated examples of avoidance and aggression towards non-heterosexual people. In a recent meta-analysis of studies examining anti-gay attitudes, it was established that societally there remains a lingering desire to avoid non-heterosexual people (Kite et al. 2021). More specifically, individuals with higher levels of sexual prejudice tend to express a greater desire to avoid interactions with gay/lesbian people (Buck et al. 2013). Higher homonegative attitudes have also been linked to avoidance behavior such as voting against a gay mayoral candidate (Morrison and Morrison 2011) or choosing not to sign a petition advocating for LGBT employment rights protections (Swank, Woodford, and Lim 2013). Extending these findings to the employee-customer interaction, it is hypothesized that:

*H5: Customer homonegativity negatively predicts a) repurchase intention and b) intention to spread positive word-of-mouth after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE.*

*H6: Customers who hold more homonegative views will be less likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about a non-heterosexual FLE rather than a heterosexual FLE.*

### **3.3.3 Method**

#### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 225 participants who were recruited through a marketing research company's consumer panel. Of the sample, 114 identified as women (50.7%), 109 as men, 1 as gender non-conforming and 1 as gender fluid. 198 respondents identified as heterosexual (88%) and the remaining 27 identified as non-heterosexual. To ensure the effectiveness of our survey stimuli, all respondents were fluent in English and were living in Australia. Additional descriptive statistics of participants in Study 1 and Study 2 are included in Table 3.1.



Table 3.1: Summary of sample descriptives across both studies in Paper 2

	Study 1 (n = 225)		Study 2 (n = 247)	
	Count	%	Count	%
<b>Age</b>				
<i>18-24</i>	49	21.8	41	16.6
<i>25-34</i>	50	22.2	58	23.5
<i>35-44</i>	34	15.1	45	18.2
<i>45-54</i>	22	9.8	29	11.7
<i>55-64</i>	38	16.9	39	15.8
<i>65-74</i>	32	14.2	35	14.2
<b>Gender</b>				
<i>Woman</i>	114	50.7	129	52.2
<i>Man</i>	109	48.4	118	47.8
<i>Non-conforming</i>	1	<1	-	-
<i>Gender fluid</i>	1	<1	-	-
<b>Education</b>				
<i>Less than Year 12 or equivalent</i>	21	9.3	20	8.1
<i>Year 12 or equivalent</i>	89	39.6	98	39.7
<i>Bachelor's degree or equivalent</i>	94	41.8	101	40.9
<i>Postgraduate degree</i>	21	9.3	28	11.3
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
<i>Straight/heterosexual</i>	198	88	213	86.2
<i>Lesbian/gay/homosexual</i>	15	6.7	13	5.3
<i>Bisexual</i>	11	4.9	20	8.1
<i>Other</i>	1	<1	1	<1
<b>Childhood Country</b>				
<i>Australia</i>	197	87.6	217	87.9
<i>England</i>	6	2.7	6	2.4
<i>New Zealand</i>	5	2.2	6	2.4
<i>Philippines</i>	4	1.8	3	1.2
<i>Other</i>	13	5.8	15	6.1

### *Stimulus design*

The study employed a 2 (occupational role: feminine or masculine) x 2 (employee sexual orientation: non-heterosexual or heterosexual) experimental design. Cell sizes ranged from 44–68 respondents per treatment. Based on current Australian employment figures, it was determined that the service roles of a florist and a car mechanic would be used to represent the feminine and masculine roles respectively. In 2021, more than 98% of car mechanics were men

and 95% of florists were women (National Skills Commission 2021). Given the substantial skew towards a particular gender in both roles, we established that they were heavily gendered in the Australian market. In addition, both are commonly encountered throughout the life of an average consumer and serve as a familiar setting for the research stimuli.

In all treatment groups, the primary stimulus was an audio recording of an actor playing the role of a car mechanic or a florist in a customer service interaction. As a visual aid, a photograph of a model dressed as and standing in the relevant service setting was provided alongside the audio vignette. The same model was used in both roles to avoid extraneous factors such as the liking or disliking of the appearance of the employee impacting the comparability of findings across the roles. Audio recordings were each approximately 30 seconds long and included a greeting, description of service fulfillment and a farewell.

The sexual orientation of the FLE was manipulated using gendered terms when the actor referred to his spouse as either his husband (implying that the FLE was non-heterosexual) or wife (implying that the FLE was heterosexual). Across treatments in the same role (car mechanic or florist), identical voice recordings were used for stimuli except for the changes in the spouses' gender which were edited in post-recording.

Across roles, care was taken to ensure consistency and eliminate as much variance as possible in the vignettes for the car mechanic and the florist. The voice actor was instructed to speak in an identical way when recording both scenes, with the only changes in the scripts being those that were necessary to suit the service context and keep the vignettes realistic. By maintaining this consistency in an experimental sense, data comparison across roles becomes more appropriate and any findings drawn from these comparisons are more reliable. Samples of the audio script and accompanying photo of the service employee are provided in Appendix A.

### *Measurement and procedure*

All measures used in this study were taken directly or slightly adapted from pre-existing scales in relevant literature. Before commencing with collecting responses for our dependent measures and to establish our manipulations, respondents were required to identify the gender of the service employee (binary scale, man/woman) and the gender of the service employee's partner (binary scale, man/woman).

Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they had used the services of a florist or car mechanic (respectively) within the past five years. Respondents who had not used the relevant service within that period were screened out. Next, a set of three-item, seven-point (strongly disagree – strongly agree) Likert-type scales were used to capture repurchase intention (eg. “I intend to use this florist the next time I need fresh flowers”,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ) and intention to spread positive word-of-mouth (eg. “If my friends were looking to purchase fresh flowers, I would tell them to try this florist”,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ) (Maxham III 2001).

After providing responses for our dependent measures, our participants were asked to complete the short version of the Modern Homonegativity Scale (13 items, eg. “Many gay men use their sexual orientation so they can obtain special privileges”,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ) that was completed using a five-point Likert-type scale for each item (strongly disagree – strongly agree) (Morrison and Morrison 2011). Four items were removed from the scale due to poor factor loading (eg. “Gay men seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals and ignore the ways in which they are the same”, 0.54). More information on scale measurement and items are provided in Appendix B. Finally, respondents were asked to provide some demographic information including age, gender, education and sexual orientation.

### 3.3.4 Results

#### *Manipulation testing*

The realism of the scenarios was tested in the survey using two items (for example, “I can imagine a scenario like this happening in real life”,  $\alpha = 0.85$ ) along a 7-point scale. The mean score for the items was significantly higher than neutral ( $t(224) = 16.92, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the realism of the experimental scenarios. In determining the success of the selected gendered service roles, the role of florist was perceived as significantly more feminine ( $M = 3.02, SD = 1.06$ ) than gender neutral ( $t(93) = -8.98, p < 0.001$ ) and the role of auto mechanic was perceived as significantly more masculine ( $M = 5.32, SD = 1.13$ ) than gender neutral ( $t(130) = 13.44, p < 0.001$ ). Finally, all respondents correctly identified the gender of the FLE and the gender of the FLE’s partner through the stimuli manipulations, correctly identifying the FLE as either heterosexual or non-heterosexual depending on their treatment group. Our manipulations were thus deemed successful for the purposes of analysis. All assumptions for relevant parametric tests, including normality and homogeneity of variance in each test variable, were deemed suitably met.

#### *Hypothesis testing*

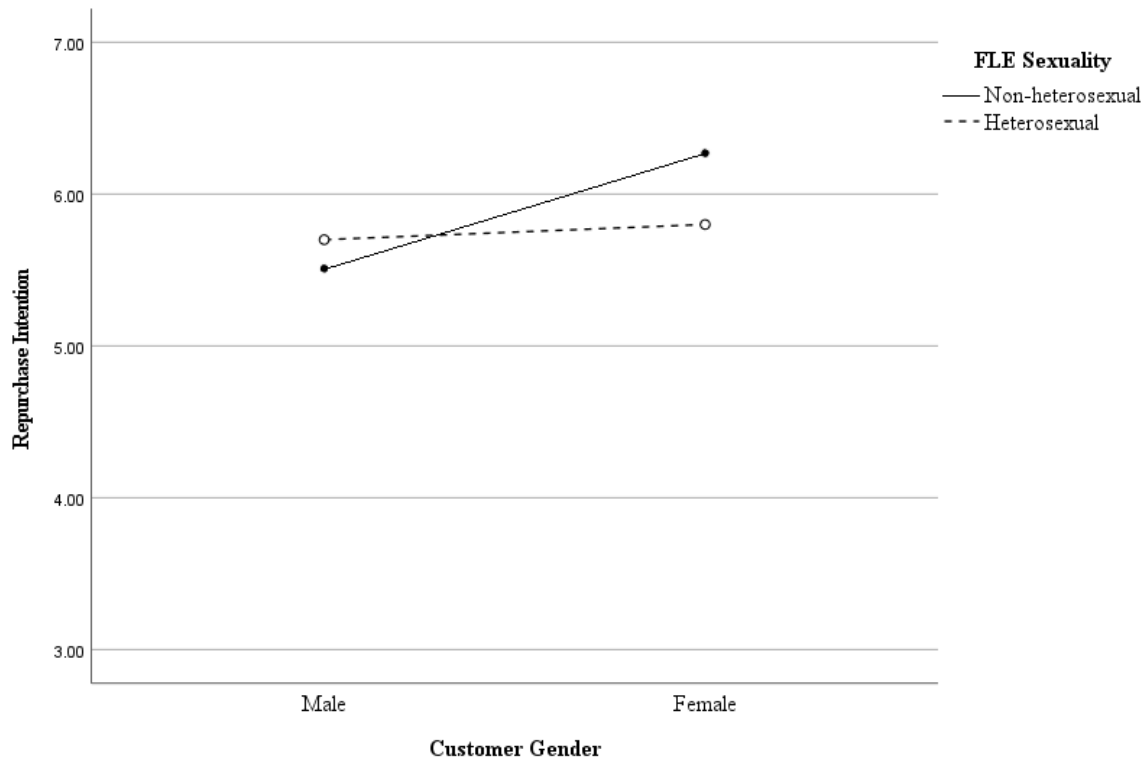
H1a and H1b relate to the relationship between an employee’s sexual orientation and customer outcomes following a service encounter in a masculine role. To test these hypotheses, two sets of independent-sample t-tests were conducted using SPSS 25.0. Examining repurchase intention in H1a, the analysis demonstrated no significant difference between repurchase intention scores across the heterosexual ( $M = 5.82, SD = 1.13$ ) and non-heterosexual ( $M = 5.96, SD = 1.2, t(129) = 0.78, p > 0.05, d = 0.12$ ) groups. Thus, H1a is rejected. Addressing H1b, there was also no significant difference in intention to spread word-of-mouth scores

between heterosexual ( $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 5.9$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ,  $t(129) = 0.96$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.19$ ), so H1b is also rejected.

In addressing H2a, an independent-sample t-test comparing repurchase intention across the feminine service condition also suggests an insignificant difference across heterosexual ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) and non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ,  $t(92) = 0.17$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.04$ ). With this finding, H2a is rejected. Turning our attention to intention to spread word-of-mouth, there is also no significant difference observed between heterosexual ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) and non-heterosexual ( $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ,  $t(92) = 0.09$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.02$ ) FLE conditions. Thus, we also reject H2b.

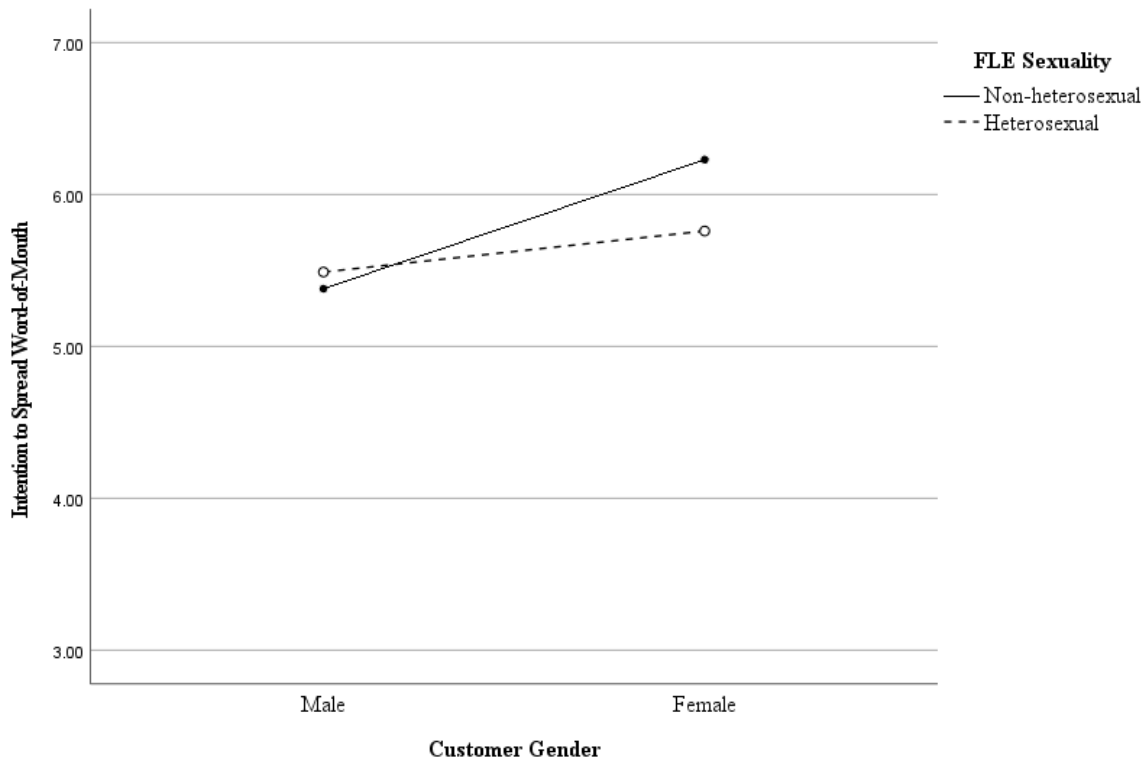
To address H3a and H3b, we conducted a set of independent-sample t-tests examining the difference in respondent scores towards non-heterosexual FLEs for repurchase intention and intention to spread word-of-mouth between customer genders. For H3a, addressing a customer's intention to repurchase from an organization after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE, there was a significant difference between the scores for women ( $M = 6.27$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) and men ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ,  $t(116) = 3.38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = 0.68$ ), supporting the hypothesis. To further unpack this finding, we then conducted an independent-sample t-test to ascertain whether there was a significant difference between male and female customers towards heterosexual FLEs. Analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between men ( $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) and women ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $t(103) = 0.47$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.09$ ) with regards to repurchase intention after interacting with a heterosexual FLE. This comparison is presented in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Differences in male and female customers' repurchase intention after a service interaction with a (non-)heterosexual FLE



Accordingly, to address H3b, women ( $M = 6.23$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) were significantly more likely than men ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) to intend to spread positive word-of-mouth about an organization when they were served by a non-heterosexual service employee ( $t(116) = 3.75$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.64$ ). Thus, H3b is also supported. Again, further comparative analysis of intention to spread positive word-of-mouth scores between men ( $M = 5.49$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) and women who were served by a heterosexual FLE ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) showed an insignificant difference ( $t(103) = 1.23$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.25$ ). This comparison is presented in Figure 3.2. Given these findings, we can conclude that the difference in scores between men and women after being served by a non-heterosexual FLE is a result of women's more favorable responses to non-heterosexual FLEs rather than a result of men's unfavorable responses.

Figure 3.2: Differences in male and female customers' intention to spread positive word-of-mouth after a service interaction with a (non-)heterosexual FLE



To test H4a, we conducted an independent-sample t-test comparing repurchase intention towards a non-heterosexual FLE between heterosexual and non-heterosexual respondents. Non-heterosexual respondents ( $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) were significantly more likely to repurchase from an organization after being served by a non-heterosexual FLE than heterosexual customers ( $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ,  $t(116) = -1.84$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.45$ ), in support of H4a. An additional independent-sample t-test also indicated that non-heterosexual customers ( $M = 6.28$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) were significantly more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth about an organization after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE than heterosexual customers ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $t(116) = -1.8$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.44$ ). H4b is also supported.

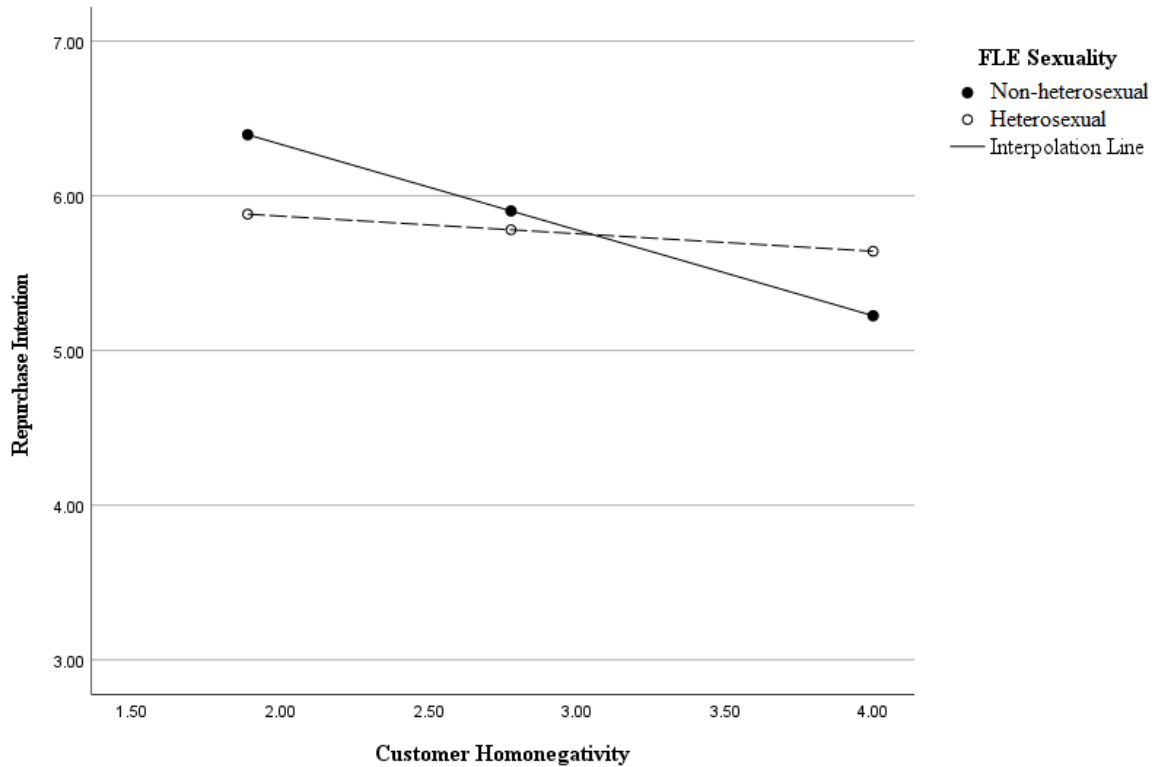
H5a and H5b sought to examine the impact that a customer's homonegativity has on their post-interaction outcomes. First, to address H5a, we conducted a set of simple linear regression

analyses to identify the impact of homonegativity on intention to repurchase when interacting with non-heterosexual FLEs. As hypothesized, the relationship was statistically significant ( $r^2 = 0.18$ ,  $F(1, 116) = 26.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) with homonegativity negatively predicting customer repurchase intention, supporting H5a. Next, we ran a similar linear regression examining intention to spread positive word-of-mouth as the dependent factor. Results demonstrated that there is a significant negative relationship between homonegativity and intention to spread word-of-mouth after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE ( $r^2 = 0.22$ ,  $F(1, 116) = 32.91$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H5b.

Finally, to investigate H6a, moderation analysis was performed using PROCESS, with FLE sexual orientation as the independent variable, repurchase intention as the dependent variable, and customer homonegativity as a potential moderator variable. The interaction between FLE sexual orientation and customer homonegativity was found to be statistically significant ( $B = 0.44$ , C.I. [0.14, 0.75],  $p < 0.05$ ). The conditional effect of FLE sexual orientation on repurchase intention showed mixed results. When customer homonegativity is high (conditional effect = 0.42, C.I. [-0.4, 0.87],  $p > 0.05$ ) or mid-range (conditional effect = -0.12, C.I. [-0.43, 0.19],  $p > 0.05$ ), there is no significant moderation effect on the relationship between FLE sexual orientation and repurchase intention. However, when homonegativity is low (conditional effect = -0.51, C.I. [-0.95, -0.08],  $p < 0.05$ ), the relationship is significantly moderated. These results indicate customer homonegativity significantly negatively moderates the relationship between FLE sexual orientation and repurchase intention, but only when customer homonegativity is low. Thus, H6a is partially supported. The simple slopes for this mediative effect are depicted in Figure 3.3.



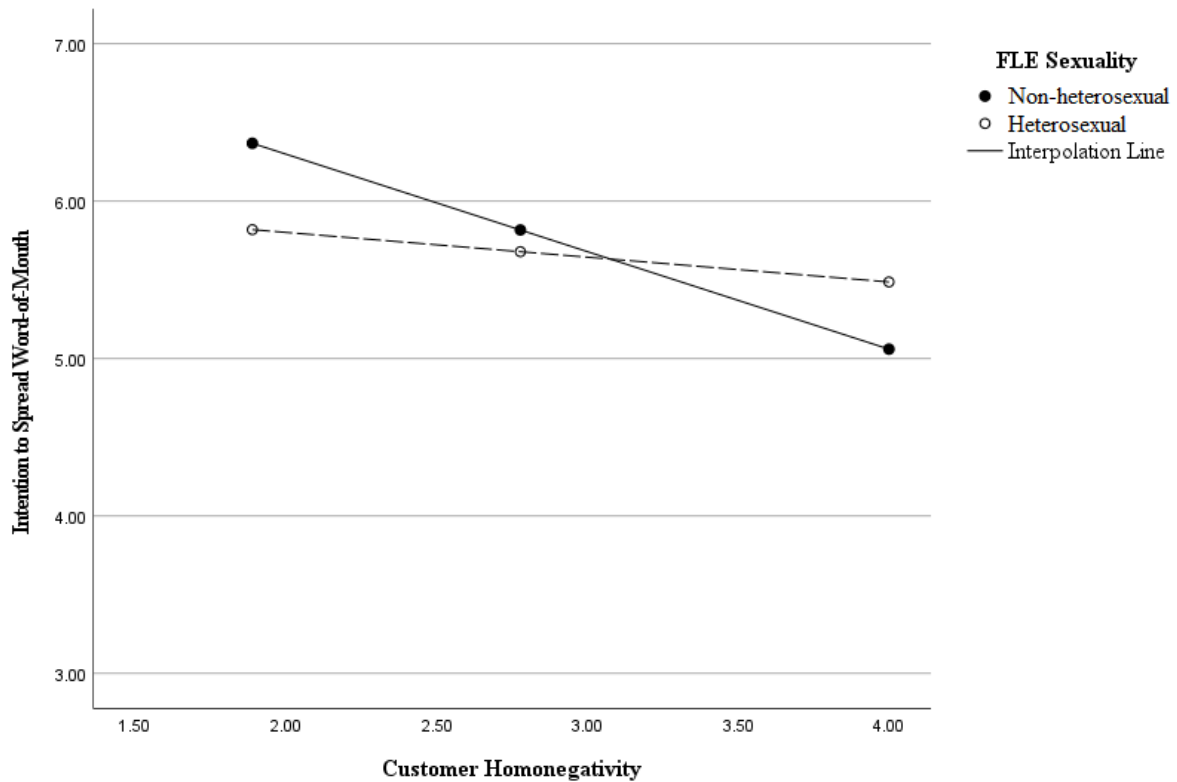
Figure 3.3: Simple slopes for the moderation effect of customer homonegativity on the relationship between FLE sexuality and repurchase intention



In addressing H6b, we conducted a similar moderation analysis but with intention to spread positive word-of-mouth as the dependent variable. The interaction between FLE sexuality and customer homonegativity was found to be statistically significant ( $B = 0.46$ , C.I. [0.16, 0.76],  $p < 0.05$ ). The conditional effect of FLE sexual orientation on word-of-mouth intention again showed mixed results. When customer homonegativity is high (conditional effect = 0.43, C.I. [-0.2, 0.88],  $p > 0.05$ ) or mid-range (conditional effect = -0.14, C.I. [-0.43, 0.17],  $p > 0.05$ ), there is no significant moderation effect on the relationship between FLE sexual orientation and intention to spread word-of-mouth. However, when homonegativity is low (conditional effect = -0.55, C.I. [-0.98, -0.12],  $p < 0.05$ ), the relationship is significantly moderated. These results indicate customer homonegativity significantly negatively moderates the relationship between FLE sexual orientation and word-of-mouth intention, but again only when customer

homonegativity is low. Thus, H6b is partially supported. The simple slopes for this mediative effect are depicted in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Simple slopes for the moderation effect of customer homonegativity on the relationship between FLE sexuality and intention to spread positive word-of-mouth



### 3.3.5 Discussion

Our findings in Study 1 provide many insights into customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs compared to their heterosexual counterparts in the Australian market. First, we find that role gender does not affect customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs. That is, customers are not more nor less likely to have positive post-service responses when the non-heterosexual FLE works in a feminine or masculine role, contrary to our initial hypotheses. This finding is especially relevant to role congruity theory as it opposes the theory in this particular context. It could be the case that the non-heterosexual FLE was not perceived as similar to a woman (contradicting our assumption under implicit inversion theory) and therefore the non-

heterosexual FLE, just like the heterosexual FLE, would be perceived as incongruous with feminine work resulting in similar post-service responses from customers. Alternatively, the feminisation of the Australian workforce en masse may mean that the country is shifting away from heavily gendered roles to a more neutralized perspective where “men’s work” and “women’s work” no longer exist. If this is the case, any impact of role gender would be neutralized as men (whether heterosexual or not) would be perceived as congruent in any role.

We have identified a difference in responses to non-heterosexual FLEs between male and female customers in the service interaction. Our analysis suggests that this difference is not a result of impaired service outcomes for men, but actually heightened service outcomes for women with findings suggesting that women respond more favorably to being served by a non-heterosexual FLE than a straight one. We originally hypothesized that the reason for this difference would relate to men’s generally lower acceptance of non-heterosexual men, however the finding that the difference is actually caused by women’s preference for gay men is also consistent with the literature. The finding expands on foundational research by Rosenbaum, Russell, and Russell-Bennett (2017) that highlighted initial preferences of heterosexual women to interact with gay male FLEs, based on the assumption that their interactions with them are characterized by the absence of sexual interest, self-acceptance and unconventional masculinity (Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, and Drennan 2015).

Finally, our finding that customer homonegativity negatively predicts service outcomes when a customer interacts with a non-heterosexual FLE was expected but is slightly nuanced. Our analysis specifically revealed that homonegativity only significantly impacts a customer’s response to a non-heterosexual FLE when their homonegativity levels are low. High levels of customer homonegativity do not appear to negatively impact post-service responses by a customer after interacting with a non-heterosexual FLE, so a homonegative customer will

respond in similar ways post-service regardless of whether they interact with a non-heterosexual or a heterosexual FLE. Instead, the findings suggest that a customer who holds less homonegative attitudes will demonstrate much more positive post-service responses when being served by a non-heterosexual FLE than by a heterosexual FLE. These findings depict a hopeful situation for service firms; nothing to lose in interacting with homonegative customers, but plenty to gain from interacting with homopositive ones.

### **3.4 Study 2**

The results of Study 1 show mixed support for the hypotheses, suggesting that role gender has little impact of customers' responses to non-heterosexual FLEs. However, the self-presentations of non-heterosexual men are much more nuanced in reality and may show much greater variation than what was initially investigated in Study 1 (Calder 2020). With this considered, Study 2 aims to extend the findings of Study 1 and more closely examine customer responses to different presentations of FLEs' non-heterosexuality: masculine- versus feminine-presentations in service interactions. Evidence suggests that service delivery by masculine- and feminine-presenting male FLEs may be evaluated differently by customers in a hospitality setting (Yizhi Li et al. 2020). We seek to test whether this finding extends to key customer responses relevant to service practitioners, and whether role gender will impact these responses to masculine- or feminine-presenting FLEs, especially when the target FLE is explicitly non-heterosexual. To extend on the findings in Study 1, the stereotype content model was adopted to further test the variations in perceptions and outcomes of service delivery by non-heterosexual men.

Specifically, we seek to test whether customers would view masculine-presenting or feminine-presenting FLEs as more or less competent or warm than one another, in line with the stereotype content model. In addition, we aim to provide additional support to the growing

body of services literature that documents the impacts of perceived FLE competency and warmth on the customer outcomes of repurchase intention and intention to spread positive word-of-mouth.

### **3.4.1 Literature Review**

#### *Stereotype Content Model and FLEs*

The stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske et al. 2002) is a bi-dimensional model which maintains that all stereotypes towards a particular group of people can be measured and mapped along the universal dimensions of warmth (consisting of traits such as tolerance, sincerity and openness) and competency (consisting of traits such as intelligence, competitiveness and independence). Warmth is defined as the potential harm or benefit of the target group's goals; ie. whether the group's goals are benevolent or malevolent. Competency is defined as the degree to which the group can effectively enact those goals; a measure of resources and ability to direct those resources to meet their goals (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007).

When combined, perceptions of groups can take the form of (1) high in warmth and competency (examples in its original cultural context including Christians and middle-class citizens), (2) low in warmth but high in competency (Jews, Asians and the rich), (3) high in warmth but low in competency (the elderly and the disabled) or (4) low in competency and warmth (the poor and the homeless) (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007). Application of SCM enables a more specific analysis of stereotypes as opposed to merely measuring stereotype valence, evidenced in cases where stereotypes are evaluated as positive or negative which in turn lead to affective judgement about the target group ("goodness" or "badness"). Instead, SCM measures traits found to be universal in their application (Cuddy et al. 2009) and lends itself to greater comparative power when assessing stereotyped groups.

SCM is particularly relevant to FLEs as the perceived warmth and competence of service employees may lead to subsequent customer responses. Service organizations aim to maximize perceptions of warmth and competency to achieve customer admiration and avoid customer contempt. Accordingly, SCM has recently been employed in services research to examine and understand customer responses to stigmatized frontline employees. Findings show that warmth and competence perceptions do indeed impact perceptions of service delivery (Yaoqi Li et al. 2021). For example, heavier women, but not heavier men, are perceived by customers as being more warm than their less heavy counterparts (Smith, Martinez, and Sabat 2016). This greater perception of warmth partially mediates the relationship between weight, gender and customer satisfaction.

#### *Gay Men, Subcultures and SCM*

Perceptions of gay men have also been examined using SCM. In their original work, Fiske et al. (2002) find that gay men score in the middle-range for both dimensions, being perceived as neither especially competent nor incompetent, warm nor cold. However, contemporary research has identified the prominence of gay subcultures (Rubin 2002), with gay men using these subcultures to aid in their identity development. Examining the diversity of these subcultures has yielded some interesting differences away from the mid-range scores for ‘gay men’ in general: leather gays are perceived as incompetent and cold; artistic gays as competent and warm. Flamboyant gays are perceived as incompetent but warm, while hyper-masculine gays are competent yet cold (Clasell and Fiske 2005).

The varied scores for gay men belonging to different subcultures may cancel each other out (such as cold leather gays and warm flamboyant gays) and neutralize to a mid-range score observed in previous literature that describes ‘gay men’ in general (Fiske et al. 2002). With this in mind, it is important that research examining perceptions of gay men differentiate and

account for these smaller subcultures, and presentations of non-heterosexual sexualities, in order to produce practically relevant research. Extant literature supports the proposition that gay men are perceived differently based on their self-presentations: when examining perceptions of television characters, effeminate gay characters score higher perceived warmth scores and lower perceived competency scores among viewers than do masculine gay characters (Sink, Mastro, and Dragojevic 2018). These differences, while observed in perceptions of characters in the media for example, have not yet been explored in the context of service FLEs.

### **3.4.2 Hypothesis Development**

Combining IIT with Clausell & Fiske's (2005) foundational study on stereotyped gay subcultures, we argue that feminine-presenting employees will be more strongly associated with traditionally feminine traits. Given the connection between femininity and warmth (March, van Dick & Hernandez Bark 2016) and applying IIT, we hypothesize that feminine-presenting employees will be perceived as aligning more strongly with the SCM dimension of warmth such that:

*H1: Customers will perceive feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees as more warm than masculine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees.*

In a similar sense, we argue that an FLE's presentation of masculinity/femininity can impact customers' perceptions of their competency in a traditionally gendered role. During a service interaction, FLEs are ascribed certain traits in the form of stereotypes that are attached to salient aspects of their self-presentations (Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor 1997). We predict that perceived competency will be improved when the FLE is operating in a role that better aligns with these stereotypes. Stereotypes attached to a feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male are likely to align better within customers' schema of competency in feminine work, as with a

masculine-presenting non-heterosexual man to masculine work. To this extent, we hypothesize that:

*H2: Feminine-presenting (masculine-presenting) non-heterosexual male employees will be perceived as more competent when working in feminine (masculine) roles than in masculine (feminine) roles.*

The feminisation of other men can decrease heterosexual men's positive attitudes towards homosexuality because of their increased motivation to psychologically differentiate heterosexual men from non-heterosexual men. In order to restore ingroup distinctiveness (Iacoviello et al. 2020), men will show favor to masculine attitudes and behaviors to affirm their own masculinity (Konopka et al. 2021) in a way that women will not. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H3: Male customers will be less likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees than masculine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees.*

*H4: Male customers will be less likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees compared to women.*

Finally, to extend on our examination of post-purchase responses in Study 1, we seek to examine the impacts of homonegativity on feminine- and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs. Given that feminine-presenting non-heterosexual men represent a greater deviance from the gender binary, we hypothesize that backlash against feminine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs will be greater than backlash against masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs when a customer possesses more homonegative views, such that:



*H5: Customers who hold more homonegative views will be less likely to a) repurchase from and b) spread positive word of mouth about feminine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees compared to masculine-presenting non-heterosexual male employees.*

### **3.4.3 Method**

#### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 247 participants of whom 129 identified as women (52.2%) and the remaining 118 as men. 213 respondents identified as heterosexual (86.2%) and the remaining 34 identified as non-heterosexual. To ensure the effectiveness of our survey stimuli, all respondents were fluent in English and were living in Australia. As in Study 1, respondents were recruited through an Australian consumer panel. Demographic information about the sample are provided in Table 1.

#### *Stimulus design*

The study employed a 2 (occupational role: masculine or feminine) x 2 (employee sexual orientation: non-heterosexual (masculine-presenting) or non-heterosexual (feminine-presenting)) experimental design. Treatment groups ranged in size from 50–68 respondents per cell.

When recording the stimuli, we instructed the voice actor to manipulate their voice in a way that was more masculine or feminine. Stereotyping and discrimination can be triggered through hearing a voice alone (Fasoli and Maass 2018), and individuals make inferences about a speaker's sexual orientation based on the sound of their voice (Kachel, Simpson, and Steffens 2018; Tracy, Bainter, and Satariano 2015) with more gender typical voices (in the case of gay men, masculine voices) being perceived as more likely straight and atypical voices (feminine voices) being perceived as more likely gay. With this established in the literature, and with

speech being a very salient part of many face-to-face service interactions, we relied on vocal manipulations to signal masculinity/femininity. Accordingly, the voice actor recorded each script with changes in vocal pitch, breathiness and speed to create either masculine-presenting or feminine-presenting treatments (Suire et al. 2020).

### *Measurement and procedure*

Before commencing with collecting responses for our dependent measures, we began by asking respondents to identify the gender of the service employee (binary scale, man or woman) and the gender of the service employee's partner (binary scale, man or woman). As in Study 1, respondents were screened out of the survey if they had not used the relevant service within the past five years.

Next, the survey measured participants' perceptions of employee competency (five items, eg. "independent",  $\alpha = 0.87$ ), with one item ("competitive", 0.58) removed due to poor factor loading during CFA. The survey also measured the perceived warmth of the FLE (four items, eg. "sincere",  $\alpha = 0.89$ ) at the conclusion of the service encounter (Fiske et al. 2002). Both constructs were measured using five-point Likert-type scales for each item (strongly disagree – strongly agree). Repurchase intention ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and intention to spread positive word-of-mouth ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) were measured in the same way as in Study 1. Similarly to Study 1, respondents were then prompted to respond to the short version of the Modern Homophobia Scale ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). The same four items as Study 1 were removed due to poor factor loading during CFA. A summary of scale descriptions and measurement is provided in Appendix C. Finally, respondents were asked to provide some demographic information including age, gender, education and sexual orientation.

### 3.4.4 Results

#### *Manipulation testing*

Realism of the scenarios was tested using the same two-item scale as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The mean score again suggested that the scenarios were realistic ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $t(247) = 16.53$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Again, floristry was perceived as being significantly more feminine ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) than gender neutral ( $t(112) = -9.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and auto mechanics was perceived as significantly more masculine ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than gender neutral ( $t(133) = 11.8$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The masculine- and feminine-presenting speech manipulations were also deemed successful. For the florist treatment, the feminine-presenting FLE ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) was perceived as being significantly more feminine than the masculine-presenting FLE ( $M = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $t(111) = -6.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 1.36$ ). Likewise, for the auto mechanic treatment, the masculine-presenting FLE ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) was perceived as being significantly more masculine than the feminine-presenting FLE ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ,  $t(132) = -5.31$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 1.07$ ).

Just as in Study 1, all respondents were able to correctly identify the gender of the FLE and their partner after listening to the audio stimuli, confirming the sexual orientation of the FLE. We proceeded with data analysis confident that our manipulations were successful. The assumptions for parametric testing were also deemed suitably met for each test variable.

#### *Hypothesis testing*

First, to address H1, an independent-sample t-test revealed that the difference in perceptions of warmth of feminine-presenting ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and masculine-presenting ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) FLEs was insignificant ( $t(245) = 1.52$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.17$ ). With this, H1 is rejected.

In fulfillment of H2a, an independent-sample t-test demonstrated that there was no significant difference in perceptions of competency for feminine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ,  $t(127) = 1.27$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.21$ ) working in a feminine role. H2a is rejected. Likewise, there was no difference in competency perceptions identified between feminine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $t(118) = -0.48$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.09$ ) in a masculine role. Thus, H2b is rejected.

To address H3a and H3b, two additional sets of independent-sample t-tests were conducted. The testing shows that there is a significant difference between male customers' intention to repurchase from an organization after being served by a feminine-presenting ( $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) and masculine-presenting FLE ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $t(164) = -1.91$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.32$ ). Thus, H3a is supported. However, there was not a significant difference between intention to spread word-of-mouth scores after interacting with a feminine-presenting ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) or masculine-presenting FLE ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $t(164) = -1.47$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.25$ ), so we reject H3b.

To address H4a and H4b, two sets of independent-sample t-tests were conducted. Our analysis revealed that women ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) are significantly more likely than men ( $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $t(127) = 4.02$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.65$ ) to repurchase from an organization after being served by a feminine-presenting FLE. Likewise, it was concluded that women ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) are significantly more likely than men ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ,  $t(127) = 4.45$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.69$ ) to spread word-of-mouth about a firm after interacting with a feminine-presenting FLE.

Finally, to investigate H5a, moderation analysis was performed using PROCESS, with FLE voice as the independent variable, repurchase intention as the dependent variable, and customer

homonegativity as a potential moderator variable. The interaction between FLE voice and customer homonegativity was not found to be statistically significant ( $B = 0.11$ , C.I.  $[-0.18, 0.39]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). When customer homonegativity is high (conditional effect = 0.31, C.I.  $[-0.11, 0.74]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), mid-range (conditional effect = 0.2, C.I.  $[-0.09, 0.48]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), or low (conditional effect = 0.08, C.I.  $[-0.36, 0.51]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) there is no significant moderation effect on the relationship between FLE voice and repurchase intention. Thus, H5a is rejected.

An additional moderation analysis was then performed examining intention to spread positive word-of-mouth as the dependent variable, addressing H5b. Again, the interaction between FLE voice and customer homonegativity was statistically insignificant ( $B = 0.04$ , C.I.  $[-0.25, 0.32]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Customer homonegativity does not significantly moderate the relationship between FLE voice and intention to spread word-of-mouth at high (conditional effect = 0.18, C.I.  $[-0.23, 0.6]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), mid-range (conditional effect = 0.14, C.I.  $[-0.14, 0.43]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or low (conditional effect = 0.1, C.I.  $[-0.33, 0.54]$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) levels. With this, H5b is also rejected.

### **3.4.5 Discussion**

Overall, we find no evidence to suggest that masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting non-heterosexual men are perceived as more or less competent or warm than one another in service delivery. These results conflict with previous findings that different subcultures of gay men who culturally perform gayness through more masculine- or more feminine self-presentations (Calder 2020) have different competency and warmth perceptions at a societal level (Clausell and Fiske 2005).

The disconnect between our findings could be explained in multiple ways. First, it could be that societal attitudes towards masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting non-heterosexual men have neutralized to the point where the two groups of men are perceived as being equally competent and warm as one another in the last two decades. Alternatively, the brevity of the

service encounter depicted in our experiment (and indeed of many service interactions in practice) may not allow for customers to make nuanced assumptions around the competency and warmth of FLEs. The minute attitudinal differences towards masculine- and feminine-presenting non-heterosexual men may not be able to manifest after such a short interaction. Instead, it may be the case that different presentations of ‘gayness’ inform customer responses more strongly when service interactions are more enduring and customers are able to interpret those presentations more clearly.

The finding that women express a higher likelihood of repurchasing from a service firm after interacting with a feminine-presenting FLE than men is consistent with theory and with our findings in Study 1. Specifically, these findings extend the literature around women’s responses to non-heterosexual FLEs, expanding them to address responses to different presentations of non-heterosexuality. Hyper-feminine presentations likely infer an even greater absence of sexual interest and greater self-acceptance of the FLE (Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, and Drennan 2015), improving women’s responses to these FLEs compared to their masculine-presenting counterparts.

The finding that male customers are less likely to express their intention to repurchase from a service firm after interacting with a feminine-presenting FLE compared to a masculine-presenting one is in line with our hypothesis but doesn’t appear to relate to perceptions of the FLE’s warmth nor competency in the role. Instead, we conclude that feminine-presenting men represent a gender violation that is perceived to be more severe by men than women (Herek 2002) regardless of how warm or competent the FLE is perceived as being.

Finally, unlike in Study 1, we found no moderative effect of customer homonegativity on the relationship between a non-heterosexual FLE’s presentation and a customer’s intention to repurchase or spread word-of-mouth. In other words, homonegative customers demonstrated

similar responses to non-heterosexual FLEs regardless of their presented masculinity/femininity. This suggests that customers perceive little schematic difference between a feminine-presenting and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLE, leaving little room for homonegative sentiment to impact their comparative responses in interacting with either type of non-heterosexual FLE.

### **3.5 General Discussion**

#### **3.5.1 Theoretical Implications**

Study 1 established the underlying relationship between a service FLE's sexual orientation and customers' responses post-service. Study 2 expanded on these findings by specifically examining the difference in responses towards feminine- and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual FLEs.

These studies combine to provide much greater insight into customer responses to non-heterosexual FLEs. Most importantly, our findings across both studies have suggested that it is merely the FLE's gayness, and only to a lesser extent the nature of the presentation of their gayness, that affects customer responses to them. It is likely that the schematic distance between straight men and non-heterosexual men is much larger than that of feminine-presenting and masculine-presenting non-heterosexual men, hence our observations of fewer response discrepancies between the latter groups in Study 2. With this, our findings suggest that the stereotype content model may not be of great value when examining nuanced performances of gay men given the insignificant differences in perceptions of masculine- and feminine-presenting individuals, at least in a service context.

Our findings largely challenge role congruity theory and implicit inversion theory. We find no evidence that supports the proposition that gay men, when viewed as schematically similar to

women, succeed more in feminine service roles and less in masculine service roles. The studies here provide empirical evidence that highlight the boundaries for the application of the theories in consumer-focused research, suggesting that they may not hold as much predictive relevance in relation to non-heterosexual individuals or in short-term customer interactions.

The present studies demonstrate that the preference women have in collaborating with gay FLEs exists beyond the retail of gendered products, being also found in the provision of other services, both masculine and feminine. Our findings also extend Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) study and provide commentary on the significance that a mandate of privacy plays in determining female responses to gay FLEs. Our findings challenge the conclusion that the preference for working with non-heterosexual FLEs (vs straight FLEs) is found only in product categories that involve non-sexual intimacy, with our studies showing that the preference extends to services that do not imply the provision of a mandate of privacy.

Our studies contribute to a growing body of literature around the discrimination that FLEs experience from customers in their service work. Despite operating in what remains a heteronormative culture and context, our findings paint a hopeful picture for non-heterosexual FLEs. While there are no directly comparable studies in the literature on which to base any longitudinal comparisons, our studies suggests that non-heterosexual men are not held in any negative regard compared to straight men when working in either masculine or feminine roles in Australia. Instead, it is feminine-presenting non-heterosexual men (when compared to masculine-presenting non-heterosexual men) who may suffer from male customers' less egalitarian attitudes towards gay men (Davis and Greenstein 2009).

### **3.5.2 Managerial Implications**

Australian service firms should be aware of the impact that employing non-heterosexual FLEs has on customers' responses to the service encounter and recognize the strategic role of non-



heterosexual FLEs in service delivery. Encouraging and empowering FLEs to disclose their sexual orientation to customers may be advantageous for service organizations. Responses from male customers will not change when an FLE discloses their sexual orientation, while female customers will respond in more positive ways following the interaction than if the same FLE was straight. Service firms whose customer bases are largely made up of women will find much more success in hiring and empowering non-heterosexual FLEs to be open about their sexual orientation with customers.

In these cases, disclosure is important as heterosexuality is otherwise assumed in a heteronormative culture. Previous literature supports the conclusion that organizations should create inclusive cultures that empower non-heterosexual employees to bring their authentic selves to work, citing that “out” employees are more satisfied in their roles and suffer less work-home conflict (Day and Schoenrade 1997). Our findings support the organizational value that can come from encouraging non-heterosexual FLEs to present their authentic selves to work, revealing many positive responses to non-heterosexual FLEs and only few adverse responses, at least in an Australian context. Service practitioners can promote this beneficial disclosure by implementing written non-discrimination policies and including queer issues in diversity training (Griffith and Hebl 2002).

Finally, while homonegativity is not a physically observable trait, service managers may be able to foresee which customers will be less homonegative through homonegativity’s association with more visible customer traits. For example, given that homonegativity is predicted by an individual’s gender (Watt and Elliot 2019) and age (Salvati et al. 2019; Manalastas et al. 2017; Sloopmaeckers and Lievens 2014), service practitioners can direct non-heterosexual FLEs to engage with customers that are younger or female to benefit from the moderation effect of homopositivity on customers’ behavioral responses.

### **3.5.3 Directions for Further Research**

In this article, we have focused on non-heterosexual male FLEs exclusively. However, the non-heterosexual community consists of many more groups besides non-heterosexual men—groups who are subjected to forms of customer stereotyping and evaluation that may differ to what we have addressed currently. For example, with evidence suggesting that heterosexual women, rather than heterosexual men, express greater desire to avoid lesbian women (Kite et al. 2021), further research is needed to examine customer responses to a wider variety of non-heterosexual FLEs beyond men.

In addition, attitudes towards non-heterosexual people are culturally-bound, with countries and cultures across the world holding vastly different attitudes towards non-heterosexual people (Jäckle and Wenzelburger 2015). This study was conducted among Australian customers who, despite only relatively recently voting to legalize same-sex marriage, possess relatively less homonegative views compared to the rest of the world (Jäckle and Wenzelburger 2015). Replication of this paper in countries with nationally lower (eg. Denmark) and higher (eg. Lithuania) homonegative attitudes may result in different outcomes that hold relevance for international and cross-cultural marketing efforts.

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### 3.7 Appendices

#### *Appendix A: Experimental stimuli (Study 1 & Study 2)*

##### **Feminine service type image and script:**



“Thanks for waiting. So today we have your order for a bunch of carnations. Those are my husband’s (wife’s) favourite. I’ll just head about back and grab those for you now. The good news is that these have been prepaid for so there’s no charge for you today. I recommend that you put these in water as soon as you can and keep them in a dry, cool spot to help them last. If you do have any issues just let us know. Have a good afternoon.”

**Masculine service type image and script:**



“Thanks for waiting. So today we had your booked in for a simple service of your Toyota. That’s the same car my husband (wife) drives. I’ll just head out back and grab your keys for you now. The good news is that today’s service is all covered by your insurance, so there’s no charge for you today. I recommend that you keep the car running for about 15 minutes or so just to make sure everything is running smoothly. If you do have any issues just let us know. Have a good afternoon.”

Appendix B: Scale descriptions and measurement (Study 1)

Construct and Source	Measurement Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha$
<i>Repurchase Intention</i> – adapted from Maxham III (2001)	RPI1 - I will continue using this florist (mechanic) for purchasing fresh flowers (servicing my car).	0.91	0.93
	RPI2 - I intend to use this florist (mechanic) the next time I need fresh flowers (my car serviced).	0.96	
	RPI3 - How likely are you to purchase your next bunch of fresh flowers (have your next car service) from this florist (mechanic)?	0.95	
<i>Intention to Spread Positive Word-of-Mouth</i> – adapted from Maxham III (2001)	WOM1 - I would recommend this florist (mechanic) to my friends.	0.95	0.93
	WOM2 - If my friends were looking for fresh flowers (to have their car serviced), I would tell them to try this florist (mechanic).	0.96	
	WOM3 - How likely are you to spread positive word-of-mouth about this florist (mechanic)?	0.92	
<i>Modern Homonegativity Scale (Short)</i> – adapted from Morrison and Morrison (2011)	MHS1 - Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges.	0.64*	0.92
	MHS2 - Gay men seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals, and ignore the ways in which they are the same.	0.54*	
	MHS3 - Gay men do not have all the rights they need. (R)	0.63*	
	MHS4 - Celebrations such as “Gay Pride Day” are important because they assume that an individual’s sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride. (R)	0.74	
	MHS5 - Gay men still need to protest for equal rights. (R)	0.74	
	MHS6 - The media doesn't devote enough attention to the topic of homosexuality. (R)	0.77	
	MHS7 - Gay men who are “out of the closet” should be admired for their courage. (R)	0.62*	
	MHS8 - Gay men should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people’s throats.	0.81	
	MHS9 - Gay men should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society, and simply get on with their lives.	0.78	
	MHS10 - Australians’ tax dollars should be used to support gay men’s organisations. (R)	0.71	
	MHS11 - Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights.	0.81	
	MHS12 - If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality and culture.	0.81	
	MHS13 - Universities providing students with undergraduate degrees in Gay and Lesbian studies is important. (R)	0.74	

(R) Reverse-coded for analysis

\* Removed from analysis due to poor factor loading

Appendix C: Scale descriptions and measurement (Study 2)

Construct and Source	Measurement Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha$
<i>Perceived Employee Competency</i> – adapted from Fiske et al. (2002)	SCMCOMP1 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Competent	0.84	0.87
	SCMCOMP2 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Confident	0.85	
	SCMCOMP3 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Independent	0.83	
	SCMCOMP4 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Competitive	0.58*	
	SCMCOMP5 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Intelligent	0.84	
<i>Perceived Employee Warmth</i> – adapted from Fiske et al. (2002)	SCMWARM1 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Tolerant	0.75	0.89
	SCMWARM2 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Warm	0.88	
	SCMWARM3 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Good-natured	0.93	
	SCMWARM4 - When you think about the employee, to what extent do you think the following traits describe him? Sincere	0.89	
<i>Repurchase Intention</i> – adapted from Maxham III (2001)	RPI1 - I will continue using this florist (mechanic) for purchasing fresh flowers (servicing my car).	0.93	0.94
	RPI2 - I intend to use this florist (mechanic) the next time I need fresh flowers (my car serviced).	0.96	
	RPI3 - How likely are you to purchase your next bunch of fresh flowers (have your next car service) from this florist (mechanic)?	0.95	
<i>Intention to Spread Positive Word-of-Mouth</i> – adapted from Maxham III (2001)	WOM1 - I would recommend this florist (mechanic) to my friends.	0.95	0.93
	WOM2 - If my friends were looking for fresh flowers (to have their car serviced), I would tell them to try this florist (mechanic).	0.95	
	WOM3 - How likely are you to spread positive word-of-mouth about this florist (mechanic)?	0.92	
<i>Modern Homonegativity Scale (Short)</i> – adapted from Morrison and Morrison (2011)	MHS1 - Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges.	0.65*	0.92
	MHS2 - Gay men seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals, and ignore the ways in which they are the same.	0.63*	
	MHS3 - Gay men do not have all the rights they need. (R)	0.56*	
	MHS4 - Celebrations such as “Gay Pride Day” are important because they assume that an individual’s sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride. (R)	0.72	
	MHS5 - Gay men still need to protest for equal rights. (R)	0.73	
	MHS6 - The media doesn't devote enough attention to the topic of homosexuality. (R)	0.76	
	MHS7 - Gay men who are “out of the closet” should be admired for their courage. (R)	0.62*	
	MHS8 - Gay men should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people’s throats.	0.82	
	MHS9 - Gay men should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society, and simply get on with their lives.	0.82	
	MHS10 - Australians’ tax dollars should be used to support gay men’s organisations. (R)	0.73	
	MHS11 - Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights.	0.79	
	MHS12 - If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality and culture.	0.83	
	MHS13 - Universities providing students with undergraduate degrees in Gay and Lesbian studies is important. (R)	0.74	

(R) Reverse-coded for analysis

\* Removed from analysis due to poor factor loading

**CHAPTER 4 “GAY IS OK, SUPER GAY IS UNCOMFORTABLE”: HOW NON-HETEROSEXUAL FLEs NAVIGATE THE CLOSET IN FRONTLINE SERVICE WORK**

The final paper in this thesis, **“Gay is OK, Super Gay is Uncomfortable”: How Non-Heterosexual FLEs Navigate the Closet in Frontline Service Work**, examines the way that non-heterosexual male FLEs manage their self-presentations in their customer-facing work. In Paper 2, it was established that customers respond positively or neutrally towards non-heterosexual FLEs, except when these FLEs present themselves in particularly feminine ways. Given the finding that non-heterosexual FLEs’ gendered performances can negatively impact customer responses to service delivery, this paper builds on Paper 2 by investigating FLEs’ own understanding of the impacts of their sexuality in service exchange and their approaches to stigma management in their roles. In doing so, this paper uncovers the motivations that underlie these gendered performances, and thus begins to unearth the impact that these performances have on the co-creation of value between employees and customers.

While recent studies have explored how non-heterosexual FLEs in particular industries (such as teachers or nurses) conceal their sexual orientations at work, they neglect a key component of service delivery from a marketing perspective: the imperative of value co-creation. As co-creation agents, FLEs must integrate their resources with the resources of their customers—a process that may be complicated by the management of a stigmatised identity. This paper thus contributes to services literature by applying S-D logic to the case of non-heterosexual FLEs’ service delivery, providing insight into the way that FLEs’ sexuality (or concealment of their sexuality) impacts service delivery and, in the process, value co-creation. The paper also addresses the popular conceptualisation of the *corporate closet*, extending this literature



through providing empirical evidence of the existence of the *services closet*: the space where FLEs conceal their non-heterosexuality specifically from customers.

Adopting a qualitative approach, this paper finds that FLEs engage the services closet to manage their self-presentations in front of customers, with FLEs relying on behavioural controls to conceal or reveal their sexuality when deemed contextually appropriate. The paper finds that FLEs' behaviours contribute to the co-creation process, however FLEs' interpretations of customer perceptions result in the paradoxical reduction of traditional value-creating behaviours.

This paper is presented in a journal article format, to be submitted to the Journal of Service Research. While the paper presented here is in submission format, tables have been inserted into the body of the paper where appropriate to enhance readability. Per the Journal of Service Research's guidelines, the paper is presented in Standard American English. This study spawned a conference paper that was accepted to be presented at WMC 2020 but was postponed due to COVID 19.

## Statement of Authorship

# Statement of Authorship

Title of Paper	"Gay is OK, Super Gay is Uncomfortable": How Non-Heterosexual FLEs Navigate the Closet in Frontline Service Work
Publication Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Published <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted for Publication <input type="checkbox"/> Submitted for Publication <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unpublished and Unsubmitted work written in manuscript style
Publication Details	This manuscript will be submitted to the Journal of Service Research.

### Principal Author

Name of Principal Author (Candidate)	David Matthews		
Contribution to the Paper	Literature review, conceptual development, method design, data analysis and manuscript preparation.		
Overall percentage (%)	70%		
Certification:	This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature and is not subject to any obligations or contractual agreements with a third party that would constrain its inclusion in this thesis. I am the primary author of this paper.		
Signature		Date	01/03/2023

### Co-Author Contributions

By signing the Statement of Authorship, each author certifies that:

- i. the candidate's stated contribution to the publication is accurate (as detailed above);
- ii. permission is granted for the candidate to include the publication in the thesis; and
- iii. the sum of all co-author contributions is equal to 100% less the candidate's stated contribution.

Name of Co-Author	Sally Rao Hill		
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Signature		Date	14/03/2023

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Contribution to the Paper	Co-supervision; conceptual and methodological development and manuscript revision.		
Signature		Date	19/03/2023

Please cut and paste additional co-author panels here as required.

## **4.1 Abstract**

Previous research highlights differences in customer responses to non-heterosexual frontline employees, yet it is unclear how these employees negotiate their stigmatized identities to deliver quality service and co-create value in their customer interactions. We apply the concept of the closet and aim to explore how non-heterosexual male FLEs manage the presentations of their sexualities in their customer-facing work and their motivations for doing so. Findings from a qualitative study differentiate the services closet from previous conceptualizations of the corporate closet, marked by the imperative of co-creation and many more frequent visits in and out of the closet, resulting in frequent behavioral changes among FLEs that may compromise service consistency. Findings also highlight the presence of a value-creation paradox where FLEs reduce commonly cited pro-customer behaviors to improve a customer's experience, with these pro-customer behaviors being perceived as indicative of their non-heterosexual identity and therefore a perceived source of discomfort for customers. We discuss the implications of these findings for services theory and practice.

## **Keywords**

Identity concealment, non-heterosexual employees, the closet, value co-creation, stigma theory

## 4.2 Introduction

Conservative estimates suggest that at least 3.5% of the Australian population identify as non-heterosexual, with this number on the rise (Wilson et al. 2020). While general attitudes towards non-heterosexual people are becoming more favorable with time (Watt and Elliot 2019), non-heterosexual people still report being victim to sexuality-based discrimination (Casey et al. 2019), including harassment (Liyanage and Adikaram 2019), violence (Bell and Perry 2015) and microaggression (Munro, Travers, and Woodford 2019). Not surprisingly, these examples of discrimination are also found in individuals' work lives as heterosexist sentiment bleeds into occupational contexts (Corrington et al. 2019; Suen, Chan, and Badgett 2021).

In response to these narratives of discrimination, many studies have been directed towards exploring the ways that non-heterosexual people conceal their sexual orientation in the workplace, largely focusing on intra-organizational relationships such as those between co-workers (Anderson et al. 2001; Liyanage and Adikaram 2019; Ragins 2004). Additional literature has sought to bring a voice to the experiences of non-heterosexual frontline employees (FLEs) as they interact with customers in their roles, of which many focus on gay men in service work. Interestingly, the majority of research in this area focuses on the industries of education (eg. Bennett, Hill, and Jones 2015; McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, and Rudnick 2015; Rothmann 2016) and nursing (Eliason et al. 2011; Rödahl, Innala, and Carlsson 2007), perhaps a result of the heavy implications of communality in both industries and the stereotypical association between gay men and communality (Barrantes and Eaton 2018). These studies highlight that for many service employees, the management of their stigmatized non-heterosexual identities through stigma concealment, for example, is a substantial point of consideration in their navigation of their roles and their work. These studies bring value in highlighting the experiences of minority service employees when interacting with their respective students or patients by focusing on the effects that these relationships, interactions

and concealment behaviors have on employee wellbeing. We seek to extend this literature in ways that better inform marketing theory and service practice to maximize firm outcomes, specifically through the lens of value co-creation.

All FLEs, including non-heterosexual FLEs, play a key role in the value co-creation process which is highlighted in service-dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004). As the first point-of-contact for customers, FLEs have the power to facilitate co-creation through the allocation of their (and their representing organization's) resources (Bowen 2016). Generally speaking, if an FLE can successfully integrate their resources into an exchange with a customer, value is created—if they fail to do so, value can be destroyed (Plé and Cáceres 2010). Given the significant role that FLEs play in the co-creation process, greater research efforts have been directed towards examining employee behaviors that support co-creation through interactions, such as service adaptability (Le, Pham, and Pham 2022), service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (Lee, Hsiao, and Chen 2017) and empathetic displays (Chathoth et al. 2020). However, when an FLE is actively attempting to conceal a stigmatized identity, these co-creation behaviors may be threatened.

Extant literature suggests that the concealment of a stigmatized identity such as an FLE's non-heterosexuality may have significant repercussions on that FLE's ability to successfully co-create value in their exchanges with customers. Evidence points to the immediate positive/negative impact that stigma management behaviors can have on employees' moods (Mohr et al. 2019) which may subsequently determine their ability to successfully co-create value (Plé 2016). The labor associated with stigma management drains individuals of their emotional resources (Hatzenbuehler 2009), potentially reducing the availability of these resources to be integrated into the service exchange. Thus, an FLE's sexuality becomes a point of interest for investigation especially when considering the negative impacts that stigmatized

identity concealment has on interpersonal interactions (Newheiser and Barreto 2014) and the importance of interaction and transparency in the successful co-creation of value (González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, and Serra-Cantallops 2019).

To date, little marketing research has examined non-heterosexual FLEs' approaches to service delivery, especially in heteronormative environments where sexuality-based stigma may be a prominent feature. As an exception, Mills and Owens (2021) take a labor control perspective to highlight the abuse and aggression that LGBT FLEs experience from customers through their service work, and partially explore FLE behaviors and responses to this mistreatment. Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) find that non-heterosexual FLEs may show preferential treatment to non-heterosexual customers as a form of service nepotism, suggesting that non-heterosexual FLEs' approaches to service delivery are highly contextual, with their own sexuality being an important consideration in their service approaches. However, many questions still remain regarding FLEs' approaches to service work as value co-creators. The paucity of research in this area is especially surprising given the tendency for non-heterosexual people to fill service roles due to the task independence and social perceptiveness that is characteristic of service work (Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight 2015).

In light of this, and in response to calls for additional research examining how gay men operate in different occupational industries (Martinez, Sawyer, and Wilson 2017), our paper contributes more directly to organizational literature by specifically exploring non-heterosexual stigma management in the FLE-customer relationship and its implications for value co-creation. With this study being the first to examine non-heterosexual FLEs from this perspective (to the best of our knowledge), we choose to open our investigation to a range of service roles and include a variety of industries. Through this investigation, we fulfil the following research aims: 1) to explore how non-heterosexual FLEs negotiate the closet through

the course of their customer-facing work, and 2) to examine how non-heterosexual FLEs' stigma management behaviors affect value co-creation in the service interaction.

The paper begins with a discussion of the research background, including a review of the relevant literature with theoretical and conceptual relevance. We then outline our approach to data collection and analysis, before reporting our findings. We conclude with a discussion of these findings and their implications for services theory and practice.

### **4.3 Research Background**

#### *Stigma and the Closet*

A stigma can be defined as a socially undesirable, discrediting trait of an individual that differentiates them from others and spoils or otherwise devalues their social identity (Goffman 1963). Unlike unconcealable stigma which are usually readily observable by society such as skin color, accent or physical deformations, the stigma attached to minority sexual identities that don't meet the cultural norm of heterosexuality is categorized as concealable (Newheiser and Barreto 2014). Individuals who possess a stigmatized sexual orientation typically have more discretion in determining who becomes privy to their stigmatized status through the acts of passing or disclosing (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005). Whether an individual chooses to disclose or to pass is related to their perception of felt stigma (Sattler and Lemke 2019).

Many non-heterosexual individuals perceive that their sexuality exposes them to discrimination or negative regard in a heteronormative society (Herek 2009). This is the essence of felt stigma, defined as "a person's level of consciousness about being stigmatized and devalued [by society]" (Krueger et al. 2020, 191). A non-heterosexual individual who perceives higher levels of felt stigma in a particular situation may be more likely to engage in passing behavior as they perceive a higher risk of prejudice (MacCharles and Melton 2021). Felt stigma is a minority

stress process that is conditional and, depending on a non-heterosexual person's situation and environment, may vary in intensity. For example, lesbian women experience significantly more felt stigma than gay men in the context of applying for a job (from potential employers) but not in the context of providing childcare (from parents of children in childcare) (Herek 2009).

Scholars have drawn connections between the management of stigma and the popular cultural metaphor of the closet. The metaphor has become so prominent in many English-speaking cultures that to 'be in the closet' or 'closeted' is synonymous with concealment of a non-heterosexual identity as outlined in stigma theory, where a non-heterosexual individual masks their identity and presents themselves as a heterosexual one. Today, our conceptualization of the closet is largely founded in Sedgwick's (1990) seminal work, wherein she describes the closet as "a fundamental feature of [gay] social life" that has "given an overarching consistency to gay culture and identity" for decades (p. 68). The symbol of the closet is one that exists in many narratives of sexuality and gender diverse people, representing the grey space between the heterosexual/non-heterosexual dichotomy. This commentary has become more common in the context of the workplace recently (coined as the 'corporate closet'), with stigma theory being more popularly applied to organizational research focusing on queer issues in the past 20 years (Ragins and Cornwell 2001; Sawyer, Thoroughgood, and Ladge 2017).

Notably, it is agreed that 'coming out' of the closet (or in Goffman's terms, disclosing) is not an all-or-nothing pursuit. Instead, it is more commonly the case that non-heterosexual individuals curate their "outness" across multiple domains, selectively disclosing their identity to some, but passing among others (Day and Schoenrade 1997; Lance, Anderson, and Croteau 2010). Depending on context and perceptions of felt stigma, non-heterosexual individuals (including non-heterosexual FLEs) will adapt their disclosure to suit their environment (Mosher 2001). In this way, FLEs are constantly negotiating the invisible boundaries of the



closet throughout their day (by either withdrawing into or emerging from the closet) to appropriately manage their stigma (Sedgwick 1990; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Saguy 2014).

The corporate closet, the metaphorical space that non-heterosexual FLEs navigate while at work in order to function among heterosexuals in corporate life (Woods and Lucas 1993), has some notable differences to other conceptualizations of the closet that individuals may negotiate in their personal lives. The corporate closet stands separate from the original conceptualization of the closet as professional workplaces are characterized by strict heterosexist assumptions (McNaught 1995) and generally adopt traditional organizational models where ‘blending in’ is the ideal and where ‘standing out’ can threaten advancement prospects (Orzechowicz 2016; Fleming 2009). It is because of these differences in the nature of workplace relationships that the corporate closet, especially as it pertains to service relationships with organizational customers, warrants additional research as the strategies individuals use to navigate these spaces are likely to differ. Indeed, we suggest that the application of the corporate closet may not fully apply when examining customer-focused relationships and interactions for the following reasons:

- 1) FLEs will interact with a greater number of people through their service work (ie. customers) than they would in their personal or collegial lives (Zhaoyang et al. 2018);
- 2) Most service relationships are less enduring than personal or even collegial relationships and are constrained to particular work hours or service tasks;
- 3) FLEs are called to co-create and deliver value through their interactions with customers, unlike in personal or collegial relationships (Plé 2016).

Specifically, we focus on the final distinction relating to the inherent responsibility of FLEs to act as value co-creation agents in their customer service work in this paper.

*Value co-creation and the Closet*

Value-in-use (hereon referred to as ‘value’) is defined under S-D logic as an improvement in a service system’s wellbeing (Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008). From a customer’s perspective, value is a result of a customer’s beneficial application of a service actor’s (usually employee’s) resources with their own to achieve a particular aim (Payne, Storbacka, and Frow 2008). Resources can be categorized as either operand (eg. tangible goods, supplies and equipment) or operant (eg. human skills, competencies and relationships)—indeed, S-D logic generally focuses on the importance of operant resources in the co-creation of value, a deviation from the emphasis on operand resources under G-D (goods-dominant) logic (Lusch and Vargo 2014). Under the S-D paradigm, service firms cannot create nor determine value themselves. Instead, value is co-created by the integration of customer resources with other actors’ resources in a service interaction (Vargo and Lusch 2004). FLEs, as representatives of the service firm and notable actors in the joint service sphere, have the power to impact value creation through their interaction with customers (Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010). In essence, by successfully integrating their resources with a customer, co-creation is performed and value is achieved, improving service actors’ wellbeing.

While non-heterosexual FLEs have not been studied explicitly through the lens of value co-creation and as value co-creators, extant research provides insights that suggest an FLE’s non-heterosexuality is relevant to the integration of resources that is characteristic of value co-creation. For example, research has revealed the exclusive relational benefits that gay FLEs offer to gay customers, including operant resources such as customer care and the provision of extra product, brand and service knowledge (Rosenbaum and Walsh 2012). This suggests that FLEs, at the very least, consider their own non-heterosexuality in their interactions with customers as it has been shown to impact their behaviors towards in-group customers.

Regardless of FLE sexuality, what value looks like to customers and the specific processes between actors to co-create it are highly subjective, with actors' personal and situational factors influencing the way they contribute to co-creation processes (Chathoth et al. 2020). Evidence suggests that an FLE's ability to deep act in their interactions with customers facilitates co-creation as emotion regulation facilitates more genuine interactions in customer-employee interactions (Phuoc, Hau, and Thuy 2022). Extant research also supports the positive effects that FLEs' service adaptability (Le, Pham, and Pham 2022), service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (Lee, Hsiao, and Chen 2017) and empathetic displays (Chathoth et al. 2020) have on facilitating co-creation in service dyads. The relational nature of each of these qualities speaks to the conclusion that co-creation is facilitated best when the FLE-customer relationship creates dialogue, interactivity and transparency (González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, and Serra-Cantalops 2019).

This presents a unique challenge for non-heterosexual FLEs as the very concept of identity concealment implies a lack of transparency. Research demonstrates the reservations that many non-heterosexuals have when interacting with heterosexual people, often linked back to experiences of discrimination in formative years (Haldeman 2006). Gay men may express reluctance in interacting with straight men as they anticipate negative reactions to the point where they may opt to avoid interacting with straight men altogether (Davis and Mehta 2022). Examples of avoidance like these contrast with the recognized benefit of interaction in employee-customer dyads when seeking to co-create value. In service relationships where positive co-creation behaviors are expected and where profitability and customer satisfaction are prioritized over non-heterosexual FLEs' wellbeing (Mills and Owens 2021), it remains unclear how non-heterosexual FLEs actually approach their frontline service work as (stigmatized) value co-creators, and how operant resource integration functions in the face of felt stigma.

In sum, the literature on co-creation firmly establishes the significance of interaction for the purpose of resource integration in improving service outcomes (Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008). However, the value co-creation role of an FLE may be complicated when the FLE is actively managing their stigma in a service interaction. As each interaction with a new customer is accompanied by the potential presumption of heterosexuality (Sedgwick 1990), FLEs must execute their own understandings of value co-creation through their service delivery in a system where their authentic selves are inherently challenged. Despite these FLEs being overrepresented in customer service work (Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight 2015), the impact that stigma management behaviors relating to a non-heterosexual identity has on FLEs' integration of (especially operant) resources is unclear and has yet to be addressed in service literature.

#### **4.4 Methods**

In order to address the research objectives established for this study, we conducted a qualitative study employing convergent interviews to collect data from non-heterosexual respondents with experience working in frontline service roles. As is common in studies exploring the experiences of gay men in organization (eg. O'Brien and Kerrigan 2020; Speice 2020), we relied on a snowballing approach to source respondents. In total, 13 individuals with experience working in frontline customer service work were interviewed. Due to the general trend towards casualization of the service workforce, customer service work is skewed towards younger workers (Campbell and Burgess 2018). This is reflected in our sample with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 31 years old, with each respondents' characteristics and descriptives presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Profile of respondents

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>	<b>Sexual orientation</b>	<b>Current occupation</b>
Harvey	28	Australia	Gay man	Fast food manager
John	28	Australia	Gay man	Travel agent
Clay	24	New Zealand	Gay man	Public servant
Gary	22	Australia	Gay man	Retail assistant
Jerry	24	Australia	Gay man	Accountant
Jesse	28	Australia	Gay man	Call centre representative (sales)
Robert	26	Australia	Gay man	Car detailer
Ari	21	New Zealand	Bisexual man	Barista
Anderson	21	New Zealand	Gay man	Retail assistant
Will	28	Australia	Gay man	Children's camp coordinator
Braydon	25	New Zealand	Gay man	Librarian
Peter	27	Australia	Gay man	Retail assistant
Emilio	31	Australia	Gay man	Digital marketing team leader

\*Respondents have been allocated pseudonyms to support their anonymity.

Using a convergent approach to interviewing provides unique benefits, particularly when exploring research topics where the research outcomes are unclear or uncertain but where there is already some theoretical foundation. Convergent interviews are cyclical and therefore enable a continuous refinement of research questions and issues, narrowing down a broad research area to more focused one (Riege and Nair 2004). As a result, each successive interview is strengthened based on the knowledge and understanding of the research topic gained from all previous interviews. Our initial interview guide was based on a few initial propositions that were founded in parent literature around the corporate closet and identity concealment at work. Many of these conversations naturally transitioned to a focus of customer service. Others were prompted to share their experiences directly through a semi-structured interview guide.

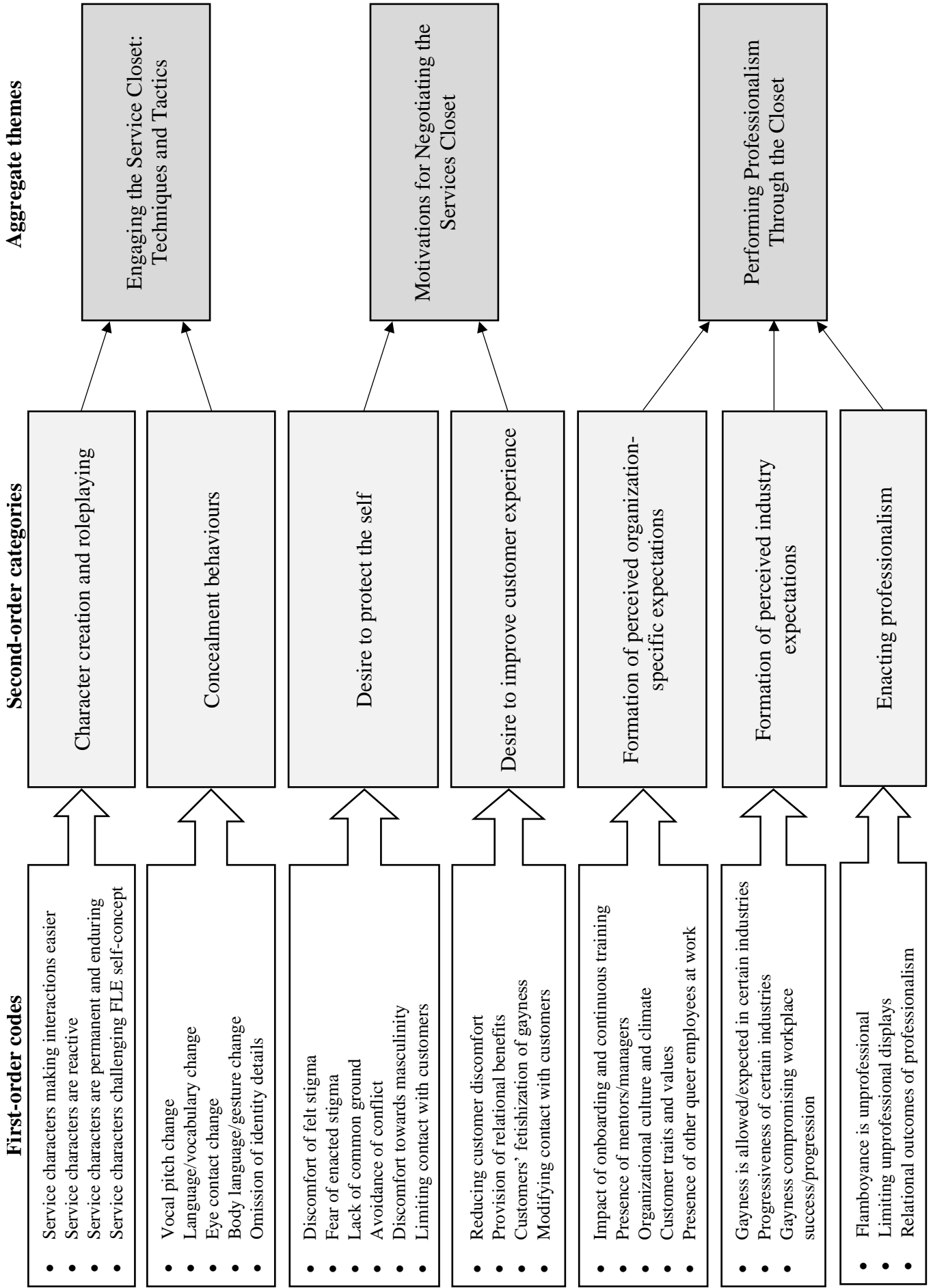
During the data collection process and through interviewing successive respondents, previously hidden concepts, ideas and behaviors were uncovered that had not previously been considered in the development of the study and the interview guide. In the reflective period after each successive interview, we consulted the relevant literature and sought to either validate, or indeed challenge, what we uncovered in the interview (Dick 1990). We have integrated some of these points of support and contention between emergent themes and current literature into our discussion of findings.

In line with convergent interviewing techniques, additional question and probes were added to each successive interview that were designed to address these unfamiliar or inconsistent ideas that arose in the literature, as well as through all earlier interviews. These additional questions and probes were used to test the conditionality of agreements among respondents, but also to seek explanations for apparent disagreements. This cyclical process provides benefit to research outcomes as we are able to more accurately gauge the applicability of our findings to specific cases rather than overestimating the generalisability of findings (Dick 1990; Rao and Perry 2003). By adopting a convergent interview method, our interviews became longer as the study progressed; the first interview in this study took approximately 45 minutes whereas later interviews reached up to 2 hours. A strength of convergent interviews lies in researchers' identification of data stability through this iterative approach. When agreement among respondents is achieved (and disagreement explained sufficiently through subsequent interviews or through consultation with relevant literature), stability is reached (Rao and Perry 2003).

The same researcher from the research team conducted all the interviews to ensure consistency in data collection. Each interview was voice recorded and then transcribed verbatim in preparation for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis adopted the hybrid method put forward

by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) and involved stages of both deductive and inductive coding, an approach that has been successfully applied in other examples of organizational research examining the experiences of frontline employees (e.g. Fisk & Neville 2011; Kiffin-Petersen, Murphy & Soutar 2012). Given the already established body of knowledge of the corporate closet, our analysis drew on codes that were based on existing findings in organizational literature. Following this initial deductive stage, consecutive analysis of the interview data made way for inductive codes and themes that were not supported by extant literature to emerge. These inductive codes were either completely separate from *a priori* codes or expanded upon these codes in novel ways (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Finally, codes were connected and clustered under thematic headings that related in some way to the research questions. Figure 4.1 depicts the data structure and the aggregation of themes identified through our analysis. These overarching themes are presented below and reflect the stories of our respondents as they navigate the services closet in their customer-facing roles.

Figure 4.1: Data structure





## 4.5 Findings

Here, we detail the strategies that non-heterosexual FLEs employ to occupy the services closet and conceal their stigmatized sexual identities from customers, discuss their motivations for doing so through a value co-creation lens, and finally explore the oppressive force of professionalism on FLEs' interactions with customers. Most notably, every non-heterosexual FLE in our sample reported the concealment of their sexuality in one way or another. This commonality across all informants suggests that their sexuality is, at the very least, a consideration in the delivery of services and permeates our discussion of each subsequent theme.

### **Engaging the Services Closet: Techniques and Tactics**

The first theme that was revealed through our analysis related to specific behavioral changes that marked FLEs' negotiation of the closet. Our examination of this theme demonstrates that these changes are employed tactically when seeking to conceal their sexuality from customers.

Nearly all our respondents shared the ways that they rely on different forms of roleplay to hide their authentic selves when occupying the services closet. Commonly, respondents detailed their experiences of employing reactive tactics in creating and presenting certain characters in their work with customers. In these situations, employees work on shaping their character on a case-by-case basis, where the presented character "matches" the customer. In illustrating this, Harvey, fittingly an amateur actor outside of his full-time service role, detailed this approach to managing his sexual identity in unfamiliar customer interactions:

*"I have this tactic I use with customers. I adapt to their personality. And it's the one good thing I got from four years of acting training. I just adapt to the person I'm serving. And I*

*think I've always done that, like a protection mechanism in high school. But now, it makes my life a little bit easier.” Harvey, 28*

His approach to service delivery and stigma management was consistent with many of our respondents and aligns with previous literature in services marketing around the concept of behavioral mimicry where one party in a service exchange matches the nonverbal behaviors of the other including imitation of body language, gestures and speech patterns (Jacob et al. 2011). With this behavioral mimicry being a significant contributor to the development of rapport between a customer and service employee (Lin and Lin 2017), it can be an asset to an organization's performance in terms of sales and post-purchase evaluations. However, this adaptive approach to customer service, particularly in the concealment of a non-heterosexual identity, speaks to the additional labor that non-heterosexual FLEs will take on through the course of their usual work. The cognitive labor involved in predicting a customer's attitudes and then donning an “appropriate” self-presentation often weighed heavily on FLEs.

When occupying the services closet, FLEs engage in behavioral management and seek to stifle any cues that may hint to a non-heterosexual identity. Respondents felt that the greatest “tells” of their non-heterosexuality to customers largely revolved around voice, speech and language. These respondents highlighted their vocal pitch and patterns as especially telling, and shared examples of times they had attempted to manipulate their speech in customer interactions:

*“I don't talk how I normally would. I lower my voice, I talker slower, my voice is very gay-sounding, so I get rid of that.” Jesse, 28*

By deepening one's voice and speaking at a slower pace, non-heterosexual FLEs aim to align their speech with the gender typical stereotypes of men and masculinity, effectively minimizing their gender atypical behavior to appear heterosexual. These changes in voice also indicate that

FLEs seek the accrual of masculine capital, a form of “social power afforded by the display of traits and behaviors associated with orthodox, ‘hegemonic’ masculinity” (Ravenhill and de Visser 2017, 208). Additionally, respondents reported the ways they would remove vocabulary from interactions with customers (“gay slang”), employ particular vocabulary that they perceive as characteristic of heterosexual men, or avoid making references or innuendos in interactions that they felt would otherwise expose their sexuality.

In addition to manipulating their speech and language patterns with customers, respondents revealed other behavioral controls they employ when attempting to retreat into the services closet in customer interactions. For example, while some select colleagues of Robert’s were privy to his non-heterosexuality, the nature of his industry (car detailing) meant that customers were often masculine men who he felt uncomfortable around. This discomfort, as explored earlier, resulted in Robert frequently occupying the services closet when interacting with customers and engaging in behavioral controls associated with his hands and gesturing:

*“The hands. I make a lot of gestures. I’m usually very expressive, very dramatic with my hands. My friends know me for my double wrist flick. Yeah, I never do that at work.”*

Robert, 26

Robert, like others, associates his expressive, dramatic body movements with his sexuality and feels that these types of gestures are indicative of a non-heterosexual identity as they are commonly associated with femininity. Indeed, hand gestures and other forms of body movement are important non-verbal cues that signal one’s non-heterosexuality to other in-group members (Nicholas 2004), so it makes sense that FLEs would attempt to limit these behaviors when engaging the services closet. In addition to body movement and gestures, respondents also noted the significance of eye contact when occupying the services closet:

*“I catch myself looking down a lot. I won’t make eye contact with [customers]. It keeps the mirage alive. The windows are the eyes to the soul, so if I look at them in the eye they’ll know I’m lying.” Harvey, 28*

For FLEs, the avoidance of eye contact isn’t necessarily part of achieving a more heterosexual self-presentation, but rather is viewed as a tool to ensure that the other behaviors enacted through the services closet are effective.

While in many cases our respondents felt that they were able to somewhat stifle their “tells” to conceal their sexuality from customers, there were some unique cases where employees felt there were no avenues available to them to conceal.

*“I always just assume they know so there’s just no point in changing the way I interact with them. I’m just very feminine—the voice is a giveaway, the way I act is a giveaway, how I am is a giveaway.” John, 28*

In John’s case, for example, the feminine behaviors that he feels highlight his sexuality completely diminish his motivations to engage in concealment whatsoever. His association between his physical behavior and his sexuality means that he is less inclined to engage in behavioral concealment out of resignation that any attempt to conceal would be in vain. Even with this attitude, he still reported times when he would attempt to conceal his sexuality through behavioral controls despite recognizing that they were likely ineffective.

## **Motivations for Negotiating the Services Closet**

The second theme that emerged from our data explores the motivations that drive FLEs in frontline service work to retreat into (or indeed emerge from) the services closet in their customer interactions. Our analysis reveals that these motivations are both self-focused and customer-focused with FLEs considering the ways that the services closet benefits themselves and customers in their exchanges.

### *Self-focused motivations*

Respondents described the ways that their identity concealment provided benefits through a sense of comfort or security in their service work. The uncertainty of not knowing how a customer will respond to authentic behavioral cues was a source of discomfort for non-heterosexual FLEs. Perhaps most importantly, framing the rest of our findings and discussion, each respondent in the study highlighted the significance of customer gender in regard to the management of their non-heterosexual identities. Specifically, all but one respondent reported a greater tendency to engage in passing behavior when interacting with male, rather than female, customers. Clay (24), a public servant working in his local council office, justified this through a frame of his own experiences with bullying and discrimination through his life. He reflected that in his experience, “men are more homophobic or more likely to verbally point out and mock stereotypically gay mannerisms than women are.” This uncertainty around interacting with male customers is justified in the literature, with men holding significantly more homonegative attitudes than women (Herek and Glunt 1993; Ratcliff et al. 2006; Watt and Elliot 2019; Herek 1988).

The negative experiences that Clay and our other respondents have had with men in their personal lives bleeds into their interactions with male customers, resulting in discomfort and a

greater motivation to retreat into the services closet when acting opposite them in service interactions. Some respondents shared that they would engage the services closet as a response to feeling uncomfortable or awkward when interacting with male customers in their work:

*“I do it more when I’m interacting with [male customers]. It’s a bit more awkward for me I think. Because I’m just so used to being surrounded by women and other gay people. I’m just less comfortable around them [...] It’s not as natural, it’s not as easy for me.”* Anderson, 19

Anderson, a retail worker in a local gift store, reflected on his insecurity when serving male customers. Here, Anderson suggests that his concealment behaviors are a response to the discomfort associated with interacting with male customers that are informed by his interactions in his personal life. With his personal social circles consisting of only women and gay men, his struggle revolves largely around finding common ground when interacting with male customers.

Beyond feelings of personal discomfort, respondents were also conscious of how their sexuality could expose them to judgement, discrimination or even abuse from customers in their service work. This perceived threat was also observed to be sufficient in motivating FLEs to engage in concealment behavior:

*“I won’t prance around or things like that because I’m not comfortable with what [customers] might be thinking. I’m always scared that someone will say something... That thought in the back of my head, if I get into a disagreement with a customer or I’m trying to explain something to a customer and they’re not understanding me that they’ll just turn around and say, “oh, he’s such a fairy,” or a “fag,” or something. I fear it happening.”*

Braydon, 25

For Braydon, a librarian at his local council library, the uncertainty of how a stranger could interpret his authentic behavior and negatively react motivates him to retreat to the services closet in some customer interactions. By retreating into the services closet in these interactions, FLEs also seek to protect themselves from enacted stigma, including customer harassment or abuse. Thus, the services closet is perceived as a safe space that FLEs take respite in and benefit from.

Notably, there was only one respondent who had been explicitly harassed by customers over their sexuality, recalling being subjected to homophobic slurs from customers on multiple occasions. Rather, concerns around experiencing enacted stigma from customers for the majority of our respondents are based on their experiences outside of work, where enacted stigma is more common (including homophobic taunts, bullying and assault). Based on these experiences in their personal lives, they perceive higher levels of felt stigma in their work lives, prompting them to retreat into the services closet accordingly.

#### *Customer-focused motivations*

Respondents shared the way their expressions of their sexuality intersected with their ideas of what constitutes good customer service. The stories of our respondents reflected reservations around the delivery of good customer service in their roles and revealed that non-heterosexual FLEs may also occupy the services closet when they believe it will improve the customer experience.

Ari's perspective sheds light on FLEs' perception of their authentic expression and its value in customer service work and reflects a common sentiment held by many of our respondents; that their authentic expression is perceived as potentially discomfoting for certain customers:

*“Most of the time [men] seem uncomfortable interacting with me anyway. If I can tell they’re out of their element, the best way of providing good customer service is to just run through my script as smoothly and painlessly as possible.” Ari, 21*

Ari’s reflection here also speaks to the unique imperative to the customer interaction of value co-creation. Our respondents were very aware of the expectation on them to provide “good” customer service as part of their work. Ari’s understanding here is commonly held among our respondents, where decidedly ‘gay’ displays are deemed counter-productive to the delivery of good customer service in interactions with particular customers (in these experiences, always male). When faced with a customer who he feels is uncomfortable (or “pained”) with his more authentic presentation, his response is to strip back the interaction to its foundations to ‘survive’ the encounter and improve the comfort of customers.

As a more extreme response to customers who are perceived to be uncomfortable in interacting with our non-heterosexual informants, some shared how they would completely circumvent expected customer service processes such as steps in a prescribed service script. In cases where an FLE perceives that a customer will find their authentic behavioral cues unfavorable, they may sacrifice particular elements of the service interaction to improve the overall experience for the customer:

*“If it’s a straight dude and I can just tell that they want the interaction to be over, I’ll leave certain bits out. I’m going to make my sentences short, I’m going to skip my steps and, you know, I’m not going to be as helpful. That’s a big thing. I’ll be flat and straight with them...pardon the pun.” Jesse, 28*

Forgoing particular elements of the service interaction compromises the co-creation of value that may occur through the service exchange. The omission of these types of behaviors reflects



a conscious misintegration of FLEs' resources, and more specifically an unwillingness to integrate resources (Laud et al. 2019) such as product knowledge or relational resources. This circumvention of these elements was acknowledged to be detrimental to the customer and to the service organization, with respondents sharing that they would be reprimanded by management if they were found to be skirting these expected behaviors. However, in these cases, the intention of keeping customers comfortable by engaging the services closet was prioritized over adhering to the firm's expectations of service behavior.

While respondents highlighted situations where their non-heterosexuality represented a barrier to the delivery of customer service, they also demonstrated awareness of occasions when their sexuality benefitted them in the service encounter. A handful of respondents shared examples of times when their sexuality and expression provided unique advantages to them in service interactions, that their heterosexual (or heterosexual-presenting) colleagues would not have access to. FLEs find that their non-heterosexual self-presentations can be a foundation for comfort leading to genuine actor engagement in service interactions:

*“[My sexuality] is definitely advantageous. I can lean into my femininity. Especially if customers are a little nervous, it can help put them at ease. It comes off as less calculated, less rehearsed. It's a genuine moment of human interaction, rather than one person doing their job and spitting out lines that they've memorized [...] It would be weird for a straight guy to be like that. It's not just interpreted as friendly, it's interpreted as an advance.”*

Ari, 21

In these cases, an FLE's non-heterosexuality represents a 'pass' to interact with customers in ways that might otherwise be deemed as inappropriate in the heteronormative service exchange. This prerogative to be effeminate, granted by and demonstrated through the

performance of non-heterosexuality, enables FLEs to engage in more relational behaviors in service delivery that FLEs view as comforting to certain customers.

When an FLE detects that their partner feels at ease with their more “gayed” self-presentations, they feel empowered to engage in pro-social helping behavior towards the customer through the provision of relational benefits and resources. Jesse shared how he behaves towards those customers who seem “charmed” by his flamboyancy:

*“If I get somebody who wants a bit of a kiki [friendly chit-chat, especially in gay social culture], I’ll add a lot of extra stuff in and go the extra mile [...] stuff that will end up actually saving them money”* Jesse, 28

This finding is in stark contrast to FLEs’ tendency to skip steps and withhold information from customers in an attempt to minimize contact with those who they might find discomforted in the interaction. Instead, FLEs engage in extra-role, pro-social behaviors that, if executed appropriately, are likely to result in additional value being created in the exchange (Chen and Hu 2010). This provision of these sorts of bonuses, perks or extra information represents the transfer of exclusive relational resources that have previously been found to have been offered to long-term customers (Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998) or, in the case of marginalized minorities, to other in-group members (Rosenbaum and Walsh 2012). These behaviors reflect the integration of additional operant resources (such as employee knowledge) into the service exchange. Most importantly, the integration of these operant resources is likely to contribute to co-creation, with co-creation outcomes likely being more positive after their integration (Gummesson and Mele 2010).

## Performing Professionalism through the Closet

The final theme we identified through our analysis speaks to the omnipresence of professionalism in occupational spaces and the considerations that non-heterosexual FLEs make as they attempt to operate in their roles as value co-creators within these spaces. This theme is an expression of the way that organizational, industrial and cultural expectations of professionalism act as additional drivers for concealment (or non-concealment). Many of our respondents recall experiencing conflict in their role brought on by the perceived opposition between their authentic expression of their sexual identity and expectations put upon them in their organization and industry.

*“I’m naturally a very flamboyant person and I’m not really allowed to be like that with customers [...] it sometimes feels like who I am and that sense of professionalism aren’t really compatible so I end up sacrificing one for the other.” Harvey, 28*

Harvey expresses reservations that his authentic displays do not align with the behaviors he is expected to present in his customer-focused work. In fact, he views his own flamboyance as the antithesis of professionalism, such that one cannot exist in the same space as the other. The belief that professionalism and flamboyance are incompatible at work and the impression that respondents are not “allowed” to engage with customers in effeminate ways did not appear to be rooted in any direct training or managerial instruction across our sample of respondents. Instead, this sense of dissonance could be traced back to organizational culture and normative beliefs, and seemed more prevalent in cases where participants were involved in “white collar” professional work:

*“It’s not appropriate. At the end of the day I’m there to do a job and I represent the company, and if I’m my overtly flamboyant, over-the-top self, that isn’t a desirable trait [...] I*

*knew where the line was and so I didn't cross it. So, I remained professional which is how I got up in the ranks so quickly.” Jerry, 24*

Jerry's association between the careful management of the tells of his sexuality and his success in his professional role further highlights two key points. First, it underscores the perceived incompatibility between authentic displays of non-heterosexual people and professionalism. Second, it reinforces the perspective that one's non-heterosexuality is 'undesirable' in professional customer-based settings, representing a liability that must be overcome to achieve success. In cases like these, the services closet is viewed as a valuable space to hide aspects of the self in the pursuit of progression in FLEs' careers. The experiences shared by our respondents are echoed in previous literature which explores non-heterosexual constructions of professionalism, with flamboyant behavior perceived as inconsistent with the ideals of employee competence. With competence being a significant consideration in customers' evaluations of service employees (Güntürkün, Haumann, and Mikolon 2020), flamboyance therefore serves as a disruption to the "appropriate" delivery of services (Rumens and Kerfoot 2009).

This perceived conflict between an FLE's authentic expression and expectations of professionalism has an impact on interactions with customers. When a non-heterosexual FLE views their authentic expression as contrary to the expected standards of professionalism held by an organization, they seek to create distance through their interactions with customers. This is evidenced in Clay's testimony when reflecting on his overall approach to concealing his sexuality in the workplace:

*“You numb down aspects of your personality [...] you're not as friendly, open, thoughtful.*

*You don't let yourself be vulnerable so your relationships [with clients] are more professional and less personal.” Clay, 24*

Clay's reflection here speaks to the commonly cited outcomes of the pursuit of professionalism among our pool of informants and indicates the qualities that are lost when retreating into the services closet to achieve a professional self-presentation. FLEs are not merely concealing their sexuality, but also seek to conceal those traits of themselves that they hold inseparable to their sexuality like friendliness, thoughtfulness and vulnerability. These sorts of traits are notably associated with communality and, in men, homosexuality (Barrantes and Eaton 2018), but are also highly valued by customers in their interactions with service employees (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990).

While our findings paint a negative light on the role of organization in FLEs' authentic expression at work, this was not the case for all respondents. Other respondents in less formal industries, or industries that they perceived as being more welcoming of non-heterosexual people, are not exposed to such homonegative expectations of professionalism and so do not rely as heavily on the services closet. Emilio, currently a team leader in digital marketing, feels the industry attracts certain people as co-workers and establishes a more liberal expectation of his work and engagement with stakeholders and clients:

*"[My sexuality] is a completely natural, normal way of life in my role. There's an openness in the team. I think that being in a digital role, the industry is very forward-thinking because it has to be. I think that if you want to be successful, you have to think about the world in a way that's progressive. And what it means to be alive today. Anyone who's actually aware of reality is not going to be really discriminating against anyone for any reason."* Emilio, 31

Emilio's experiences in his current role contrast substantially when comparing his experiences in his previous role in professional writing: "I felt like [my sexuality] was a novelty for people. I felt weird in that role. They were old-school, just more traditionally-valued. I think they were very set in their ways." Emilio's experiences here depict the impact that organizational culture

can have on FLEs' comfort in a role and subsequent implications for stigma management, specifically with regard to the differences in the nature of organizations and industries. More conservative or formalized industries and cultures impress the perception that identity concealment is expected, while more progressive or informal industries empower employees to rely less on identity concealment. This sentiment is also felt by barista, Ari, whose experience speaks to the freedom that industry expectations can provide:

*“There’s the stereotype of the gay barista. It’s a commonly accepted thing. I feel like a lot of cafes that I’ve been to have at least one gay barista. And at [XYZ café] in particular, a lot of staff are queer. So it’s a lot more comfortable of an environment.” Ari, 21*

Ari’s reflection here demonstrates that not every organizational context prompts non-heterosexual FLEs to mask their authentic expression. The perception that his role, the barista, is commonly thought of and accepted as ‘being gay’, combined with the presence of other queer employees on his team, means that he is not exposed to this conflict as strongly as other respondents in our study. Like Emilio, the work setting inspires a sense of comfort in authentic expression rather than one of conflict. In all, the finding of this theme suggests that perception of felt stigma and fear of enacted stigma are contextually linked to organization and industry, with felt stigma exasperated in highly professional or masculine service roles (Collins and Callahan 2012) and eased otherwise.

#### **4.6 Discussion**

In this paper, we have sought to examine the ways non-heterosexual FLEs perceive and frame their stigmatized sexual identities in their service work while identifying their approaches to negotiating the closet. Ultimately, the stories from our respondents affirm the utility of the services closet in their roles as frontline employees, specifically in relation to the framing of the value of their sexual identities when working in certain contexts and with certain customers.

The presentations that FLEs put forward are malleable and able to be curated based on the customer they are interacting with. FLEs assess the service context, including customer traits, and a decision is made whether to retreat into the closet or not. If the context is viewed as favorable, FLEs can quickly retreat from the closet donning their most fabulous garments and personas. If the context is viewed as unfavorable, FLEs can just as quickly re-enter into the closet to protect themselves and avoid discomfort, to improve customer experience, or to maintain a visage of professionalism.

While some non-heterosexual FLEs will choose to venture outside the services closet in their interactions with customers, others will not. The pursuit of self-preservation and the avoidance of felt or enacted stigma may override an FLE's desire to leave the services closet, even if it may afford them benefits in certain customer interactions (Rosenbaum, Russell, and Russell-Bennett 2017; Russell et al. 2021) and potentially contribute to value co-creation. Likewise, in those industries demanding professionalism, FLEs may never have the opportunity to present their authentic expression as organizational expectations impede FLEs from ever leaving the services closet in their customer-facing work. This is consistent with other studies examining constructions of professionalism (Rumens and Kerfoot 2009), with our findings implying that these restrictive descriptions of what does and does not constitute 'professionalism' are also felt heavily in customer-employee relationships.

We have found that non-heterosexual employees are motivated to engage with customers in ways that 1) align with the expectations set upon them by their organization and industry, 2) align with their perception of the attitudes and expectations of the customer(s) and, 3) protect themselves from felt and/or enacted stigma. As we found in our study, these motivations may often conflict with one another, such as when an FLE behaves in an exaggeratedly masculine way to conform with a customer (aligning with perceived attitudes of the customer and of the

motivation to protect the self), and in so doing skipping elements of or diverting from the prescribed service script (misaligning with expectations of the organization).

FLEs are aware of their implied role as value co-creators, seeking to deliver quality service that is considerate of customers' expectations and attitudes, and are also aware of how their own inputs into a service interaction may actually impair co-creation (through reducing perceived service quality). Non-heterosexual FLEs consider their "gayed" presentation as a significant element in the delivery of quality service through which customers are either engaged and comforted or, in other cases, unsettled and offended.

In these latter cases, we have discovered the presence of a value-creation paradox. In situations when non-heterosexual FLEs interact with customers that they perceive will be uncomfortable with their authentic "gayed" presentation, FLEs will engage in less, not more, role-related and extra-role customer service behaviors to avoid the destruction of value. Our findings suggest that FLEs perceive these pro-social behaviors such as maintaining eye contact or carrying long dialogue increase the chance that a customer will detect their non-heterosexual identity. FLEs will seek to eliminate these sorts of behaviors to reduce any discomfort felt by the customer in engaging with a non-heterosexual FLE. This is paradoxical because value is generally created when FLEs engage in more, not less, role-related and extra-role behaviors (Chathoth et al. 2020; Waseem, Biggemann, and Garry 2018). However, as FLEs seek to improve the experience and maximize value for these customers by obfuscating their authentic identities, they run the risk of diminishing value in other ways. Employees who reduce role-related behaviors as they attempt to conceal their non-heterosexual identity through the methods we identified in this study (such as avoiding eye contact or intentionally shortening service interactions) limit their opportunities to successfully integrate operant resources into the exchange. These concealment behaviors may also be perceived by customers as rude,



indifferent or apathetic, potentially damaging their perceptions of value following their service interactions (Zhang et al. 2018).

While value co-creation is highly subjective for customers and is closely linked to their needs, expectations and inputs, co-creation is facilitated best when the FLE-customer relationship creates dialogue, interactivity and transparency (González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, and Serra-Cantalops 2019). By eliminating these relational elements of their service delivery to comfort themselves and the customer, they actually further compromise the communicational requisites of co-creation and so threaten its fulfilment. This is unsurprising given that customer perceptions of value-in-use and service quality are largely indistinguishable (Medberg and Grönroos 2020), with any FLE behaviors that threaten perceptions of service quality also threatening value-in-use for customers.

#### **4.6.1 Theoretical Implications**

This paper advances our understanding of diverse FLEs' approaches to service delivery through the services closet, and in doing so also takes the first steps to more fully understanding the implications of FLE non-heterosexuality in value co-creation.

First, our paper extends stigma theory in its application to customer-based research. This more nuanced angle provides insights that other applications in organizational research have not based on the different nature of collegial and customer-employee relationships. Our findings also support conclusions that stigma is highly situational, with stigma being felt differently by the stigmatized in different settings, extending even to frontline employees in the professional sphere. Specifically to an organizational context, service organizations and industries that FLEs perceive as more tolerant or befitting of non-heterosexual employees experience less felt stigma and thus are less motivated to conceal their stigma among customers. This supports previous findings which show that perceived organizational climate (with regards to an

organization's affirmation/non-affirmation of non-heterosexual identities) legitimize non-heterosexual identities and thus promote identity disclosure between co-workers (Chrobot-Mason, Button, and DiClementi 2001). Our findings suggest that a similar process and awareness of organizational and industry support promotes FLE authenticity and disclosure behavior towards customers.

We extend the literature exploring how FLEs approach value co-creation and further this discussion by detailing the impact that stigma has on co-creation processes. Studies that have previously addressed the processes and outcomes of managing one's stigmatized sexual identity in service work do not consider the inherent role of service employee as value co-creator. As we have found in this paper, the expectation of an FLE to be a value co-creator for an organization adds an additional layer of complexity to the delivery of services that non-heterosexual FLEs' heterosexual counterparts do not have to consider—a layer that we have explored to address this lack of knowledge in services marketing theory. We have also identified the paradoxical process through which FLEs will eliminate established co-creational behaviors to avoid revealing stigma to certain customers and threatening value destruction. This holds important theoretical consideration to S-D scholars as they continue to explore how value is co-created, particularly in diverse actor networks.

We have expanded the concept of the closet and have applied it to a service setting in which customer interaction and the co-creation of value is imperative. The findings of this paper affirm previous conceptualizations of the closet such as the corporate closet but note some marked differences that differentiate the services closet specifically. The extent of conflict that FLEs experience in their navigation of the services closet in a highly visible service context demonstrate the instability of the closet in sustaining invisibility (Willis 2011), but also deviate from other traditional conceptualizations of the closet in work contexts that focus only on

relationships between internal stakeholders (Lucas and Kaplan 1994). Compared to the less transient nature of the corporate closet in which employees have less flexibility in moving in and out of the closet at will (Smith and McCarthy 2017), our respondents' stories around roleplaying as characters in service encounters and adopting dynamic behavioral controls based on customer traits suggests that the services closet is much more frequently and repeatedly engaged than the corporate closet. By examining the boundaries of the corporate closet and expanding this theoretical concept into other organizational settings, this paper contributes to discussions that seek to conceptualize other instances of the closet in organizational research (Orzechowicz 2016).

Finally, we have begun to identify a typology of behaviors that are utilized by non-heterosexual FLEs to conceal aspects of their non-heterosexual identities in the customer-facing work. While some of these are consistent with previous literature in personal and corporate spheres including controlling their voice (Daniele et al. 2020) and gesticulation (Clarke and Smith 2015; Willis 2011), some of these behaviors are slightly more nuanced in customer contexts, such as the avoidance of eye contact which may only be viable in short-term interactions as between an FLE and customer. This paper highlights these behaviors in support of concealment literature, while also providing insight into their distinctions in organizational contexts that have been previously underexamined.

#### **4.6.2 Managerial Implications**

Services organizations must be aware of the impact that non-heterosexual FLEs' negotiations of the closet may have on service delivery. We have identified that engaging the services closet results in inconsistent and unstandardized service delivery between customers. Service practitioners should be aware that felt stigma motivates FLEs to engage in behavioral concealment, but that this behavioral concealment will vary based on situational factors such

as perceived industry/organizational norms and customer traits. Thus, practitioners should consider the strategic implications of these inconsistencies as it relates to their own industry norms, organizational cultures and customer bases.

Anecdotal evidence from our respondents and conclusions drawn from relevant studies (eg. Kelly, Carathers, and Kade 2021; Williams and Giuffre 2011) suggest that the key to reducing these inconsistencies may lay in establishing an organizational culture of acceptance, where professionalism and non-heterosexuality are able to coexist in the same space. The utilization of contextual cues in the workplace that signify a commitment to diversity and equality may also signal FLEs to behave more authentically (Rosenbaum 2005), reducing discrepancies in service delivery.

#### **4.6.3 Directions for Future Research**

This paper takes the first steps in differentiating the services closet from previous conceptualizations of the corporate closet. Future research should seek to further conceptualize the services closet, including defining its prevalence, features and utility in service environments. With sexuality being only one of many concealable stigmas, service researchers may wish to explore the services closet through the lens of other stigma such as accent, gender identity, mental illness, and some disabilities.

Secondly, while our paper takes the first steps to exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual FLEs from the perspective of value co-creation, we recognize that the experiences of non-heterosexual men will differ from those of other non-heterosexual individuals like gay women. There is great scope to push further into this area of research with a focus on these other non-heterosexual groups to identify if identity concealment is approached in a different way, and what this concealment looks like—especially considering that men and women take different approaches to customer service before even considering any additional impacts of identity

concealment (Mathies and Burford 2011). Likewise, taking an intersectional approach and examining the ways other stigmatized identities interact with a stigmatized sexuality (such as gender identity or skin color) may also provide insights that we have been unable to address here.

Thirdly, our exploration of the service closet and its relevance to value co-creation has been restrained specifically to an Australian and New Zealand perspective. Considering the significance that national/regional culture has on informing actors' attitudes towards and responses to issues relating to sexuality (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015), the findings of this paper may not be relevant in cultures that are more, or less, accepting of non-heterosexuality. Additional research could investigate the services closet in different global cultures to provide richer insight into the experiences of non-heterosexual FLEs working in more or less tolerant cultural contexts.

Finally, as our sample consisted of FLEs who are relatively new to the workforce, additional studies with a focus on more mature or established non-heterosexual FLEs would be a great support to our paper. Older non-heterosexual people, being raised and undergoing crucial stages of identity development in an era marked with much less societal tolerance and acceptance (Morrow 2014; Peacock 2000), may have completely different approaches to identity concealment and the services closet as we have detailed in this paper.

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## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

### 5.1 General Conclusions and Remarks

The face of customer service is changing, with gender and sexuality diversity becoming a prominent feature of service environments. The three papers in this thesis serve as a rejuvenation of decades of literature examining the role of gender and sexuality diversity in frontline service interactions. More specifically, the papers presented here combine to provide a more robust understanding of the interactions between FLE gender, FLE sexuality and role gender, ultimately reporting on the impact that these elements of a service environment have on actor responses to service interactions. The three empirical papers comprising this thesis are justified through the current services literature and fulfil the research objectives in line with the overarching research question.

Paper 1 and Paper 2 combine to address RO1 and RO2 by examining how FLE gender and sexuality in combination with role gender impacts customers' post-service behavioural responses. Adopting a quantitative approach, pairs of experiments in each paper conclude that an FLEs' gender and sexuality are significant predictors of customers' post-service responses, with role gender only partially determining the response that customers will have towards diverse (rather than traditional or expected) FLEs.

Paper 3 then fulfills RO3 and RO4 by exploring the ways that FLEs manage their sexual identities in their service work and the ways that this behavioural management affects value co-creation. A qualitative study employing convergent interviews demonstrates that FLEs, as value co-creation agents, will engage in stigma management techniques with customers to maximise actor comfort and facilitate value co-creation in interactions. This final paper also

finds however that these stigma management behaviours may threaten value co-creation in certain circumstances.

## **5.2 Theoretical Implications**

This thesis draws on many theoretical perspectives in its examination of the relevant research issues including role congruity theory, stigma theory, implicit inversion theory and the stereotype content model. Across three empirical papers, this thesis demonstrates varying levels of support for each theory in its application to the context of FLE gender and sexuality diversity in frontline service work. Through the empirical evaluation of these theories, this thesis offers several theoretical contributions.

Findings from Paper 1 largely challenge role congruity theory, suggesting that its relevance to short-term customer service interactions is muddled by other social mechanisms. Specifically, customers' formation and (dis)confirmation of expectations based on gender or customers' tendency to engage in benevolent sexism may override role congruity effects in service interactions. The justification of these sorts of confounding mechanisms supplement role congruity theory for further application in services research by highlighting additional considerations that must be accounted for when conceptualising the presence of gender in service environments and service interactions. The paper also contributes to the growing body of literature around forgiveness in service failure (eg. Hur & Jang, 2019; Joireman et al., 2016; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011) by examining the impact of customer empathy in informing forgiveness responses in short-term customer interactions. Through the research, the empathy model of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997) is extended to organisational research beyond its more common application in examining personal relationships. Findings in this paper also illustrate that gender, specifically at the intersection of service and FLE gender, inspires

empathetic responses in customers which further contributes to extending the empathy model in both personal and non-personal contexts.

In response to calls to more closely examine sexuality in organisational research (Martinez et al., 2017), Paper 2 contributes to the emerging body of literature exploring the role that FLE sexual orientation and sexuality displays play in customer perceptions and responses to service delivery. The paper is the first of its kind to empirically examine customer responses to gay FLEs through the lens of role congruity, branching from the more commonly applied context of recruitment and hiring (Clarke & Arnold, 2013; Clarke & Arnold, 2018). Extending on Paper 1, Paper 2 also largely refutes role congruity theory but instead in the context of sexuality and sexual orientation.

The limited support for many of the predominant theories that underpin past investigations into gender and sexuality diversity of service actors in Paper 1 and Paper 2 (including role congruity theory, implicit inversion theory and the stereotype content model) are significant for services theory and research moving forward. Ultimately, these theories are based on assumptions that gender and sexuality stereotypes are commonly held at a societal level. In combination with Paper 1, Paper 2 shows that the theories may not hold as much relevance when examining the ways that customers perceive and respond to employee diversity in relationships that are customer-employee based as in comparable earlier studies (Mohr & Henson, 1996). The reason for the diminished relevance of these theories to customer-focused research could be a result of shifting social trends. As new customers with less strict gender ideologies enter and age within the market (Perales et al., 2019), the stereotypes that are assumed in role congruity theory or implicit inversion theory are less commonly held and so these theories become less suitable in examining and predicting customer evaluations and responses in diverse service research.

Paper 3 extends stigma theory beyond its previous applications in exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual people (eg. Ragins et al., 2007) into the more services-relevant domain of frontline service work. Findings support stigma theory in this context, concluding that FLEs seek to conceal their non-heterosexual identities when they perceive that market backlash is a likely response to their authentic selves. The paper extends the concept of the corporate closet and applies it to customer-facing organisational work, finding that the conceptualisation of the corporate closet does not fully apply to customer-facing employees given the imperative of value creation in customer service work. Thus, the paper introduces the services closet as a new conceptualisation of the space where non-heterosexual FLEs manage their self-presentations in their frontline work. The paper also furthers the application of S-D logic by examining the case of non-heterosexual service employees and explores the way that the management of a non-heterosexual identity can contribute to value co-creation in customer interactions. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature reporting on how co-creation behaviours are enacted by service employees, specifically through a queer lens.

Given the limited support for role congruity theory and implicit inversion theory in this thesis, it is unsurprising that role gender seems to play a lesser role in a customer's evaluation of a service employee and suggesting that role gender itself is not as much of a salient factor of the service environment for customers as it once was (Mohr & Henson, 1996). However, findings from Paper 3 have indicated that role identity may still be a significant factor for service employees when they consider their customer service approaches. These findings do not necessarily speak to the *gender* of a service role, but rather to the *sexuality* of the service role—where gay FLEs are not just tolerated by customers but are expected as service providers given the stereotyped nature of the work itself (Hancock et al., 2020). Paper 3 contributes theoretically to this growing discourse around these occupational roles that are characterised by the prominence of gay men and women working in them (Tilcsik et al., 2015), providing an

empirical examination of the impact that working in these sorts of “gay friendly” (and indeed in the not so friendly) has on FLEs’ approaches to customer service and value co-creation.

Finally, when taken together, the findings from Paper 2 and Paper 3 have some interesting theoretical implications for Parasuraman et al.’s (1985) gap model of service quality. Combined, the papers’ findings reflect a discrepancy between FLEs’ perceptions of customers’ service delivery expectations and customers’ actual service delivery expectations. These sorts of discrepancies between FLEs’ and customers’ perspectives are well-documented (Julien & Tsoni, 2013; Peiro et al., 2005) and have been positioned as an extension to the initial gap model (Luk & Layton, 2002). Integrating findings from Paper 2 and Paper 3 suggest that this gap is quite large in service interactions featuring non-heterosexual male FLEs. Paper 3 details how these FLEs perceive their sexuality as potentially damaging to customers’ perceptions of service delivery, where findings from Paper 2 suggest that FLE sexuality may have only marginal negative effects on customers and only in specific service contexts. Taken together, these papers extend the gap model twofold: by further empirically demonstrating the presence of an additional gap not proposed in the initial model that exists between customer and FLE expectations, and by showing that this gap can be observed through novel elements to the service environment such as FLE sexuality.

### **5.3 Managerial Implications**

Service managers are currently operating in a labour market where gender and sexuality diversity is growing (Wilson et al., 2020) and a consumer market where consideration for societal diversity is becoming increasingly expected and demanded (Accenture, 2019; Herring, 2009). This thesis provides several practical considerations that guide service practitioners as they navigate the constantly evolving domains of gender and sexuality in their approaches to service management and delivery.

First, in the event of service failure, service managers should seek to facilitate forgiveness in customers differently based on their desired behavioural response from customers. For service types and firms that rely on repeat patronage, decisional forgiveness should be emphasised to encourage repurchase intention. For those firms that rely largely on word-of-mouth for customer acquisition, achieving emotional forgiveness should be the primary focus in the event of service failure.

Second, while role congruity theory was found to only apply under limited circumstances in frontline service work in both Paper 1 and Paper 2, service practitioners should be aware of these nuanced ways that gender and sexuality do interact with role gender in service environments to impact customer responses. Practitioners should attempt to foresee the effects that gender and sexuality congruity will have on customer responses to such as empathy, forgiveness, repurchase intention and intention to spread word-of-mouth, opting to capitalise on these responses when congruity effects are favourable and seeking to mitigate negative effects when congruity conditions are less favourable.

Third, service practitioners should be aware of the strategic value found in the beneficial responses that women have towards non-heterosexual FLEs, particularly in service organisations whose customer bases are predominantly female. Service managers should also be aware of the services closet and its implications for customer interactions and co-creation behaviours. The discomfort that non-heterosexual FLEs can feel in interacting with particular customers (especially male customers or clients) can prompt them to disengage with relational elements of service delivery, potentially negatively impacting value co-creation and subsequent service outcomes. Alternatively, value co-creation can be improved when these FLEs interact with customers around who they feel more at ease with, as operant resources are more comfortably integrated into the exchange.



Finally, while our findings in Paper 2 suggest that male customers respond less favourably to feminine- rather than masculine-presenting gay FLEs, subsequent findings in Study 3 presents the damaging conflict that FLEs experience as they attempt to conceal their more flamboyant, feminine traits to better align with their perceived expectations of their role. Service organisations face a choice: to empower feminine-presenting employees and support occupational wellbeing (Huffman et al., 2008) at the risk of some diminished customer responses, or allow employees to suffer in silence (Willis, 2011) and encourage inauthentic displays to slightly improve customer responses in the short-term. Firms must be led by their values and a best-practice approach to human resource management to navigate this decision, while considering the long-term value that workplace diversity can have for firms (Hossain et al., 2020).

#### **5.4 Avenues for Further Research**

Overall, this thesis finds limited support for the application of role congruity theory, implicit inversion theory and the stereotype content model in frontline service work with regards to gender and sexuality diversity. However, these theories have been supported in a service context with other stigma as a focus (such as an employee's weight (eg. Smith et al., 2016) or accent (eg. Hideg et al., 2022)). Additional research into the boundaries of applicability of these theoretical frameworks will be crucial as diversity in service industries become even more common (Wilson et al., 2020). Service researchers should continue to apply these theoretical lenses to more novel issues in services marketing as they arise, strengthening the overall value that these perspectives have in research settings and thus in managerial applications.

While this thesis takes some considerable steps towards developing a greater understanding of the impact that diverse sexual expressions play in frontline service work, the focus is placed entirely on the expressions of non-heterosexual men. However, the spectrum of sexuality

diversity includes women, non-binary and gender fluid individuals, identifying with a range of sexualities such as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual or asexual. The difference in lived experiences and exposure to stigma across these groups (Dewaele et al., 2014; Herek, 1988, 2009; Zurbrugg & Miner, 2016) is such that findings may not be entirely transferable to different groups of non-heterosexual individuals. Thus, greater research attention should be directed towards exploring the impacts of these other diverse identities in frontline service work. It should also be noted that Papers 1 and 2 utilise an entirely Australian sample and Paper 3 utilises an Australian and New Zealand sample. Given the importance of culture on guiding people's attitudes towards gender and sexuality issues (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015), the findings of this thesis may not be applicable in countries that differ culturally from Australia and New Zealand. Additional research could be conducted in countries or regions in which gender and sexuality equality movements have progressed further, or not as far, to contribute to the conclusions of this thesis.

This thesis has focused almost exclusively on service interactions that are marked by a very short duration. However, many customer-employee relationships are more enduring as they are characterised by frequent repurchase or a more regular interactions during the course of service provision (Roy, 2018). The relationships formed between a customer and a service FLE in these sorts of service types may be different with regards to identity disclosure patterns and may also impact the reliance that customers may have on stereotyping when evaluating employees. Thus, further service research into customer responses and FLE approaches to diversity should seek to explore how relationship duration could extend the findings of this thesis. Likewise, this thesis considers only service delivery that occurs face-to-face, while service delivery is becoming increasingly digitised and direct FLE touchpoints are becoming fewer (Sklyar et al., 2019). Additional research into the prevalence of service digitisation and

its impacts on stigmatisation processes and outcomes may be required to keep service literature up-to-date as service technology continues to advance.

Finally, this thesis provides a glimpse into the contemporary evaluations of and responses to diverse frontline employees by service actors. However, societal opinion on gender roles and the equality of non-heterosexual people will evolve rapidly. This pace necessitates a consistent research effort to ensure that findings are practically relevant and that reflect current customer attitudes. Thus, future research should continue to document customer trends associated with gender and sexuality diversity, especially in a service context.

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