

# **The Role of the Sexualized Environment of the Restaurant on Female Wait Staff and Bartenders**

*Julia Kuziomko and Laura Tretter*

*May 2008*

## **Abstract**

*There is lack of research regarding the dating behaviors, partnerships with men, and interactions with customers among female wait staff. This research was done to gain more knowledge on the subculture of the restaurant industry and how it affects these aspects of the lives of women who work in the restaurant environment. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with female bartenders, ages 21-30. The results revealed that their partnerships with men were affected as a result of their employment in the restaurant industry.*

## **Introduction**

To the general public restaurants are viewed as establishments that allow people from all walks of life to come in, sit down at a designated table, choose their desired meal, and be served their food and drink by a member of the wait staff. A large number of the customers who enter into a restaurant hope to have a nice evening with friends or family, tip the server and be on their way. What these customers may not realize while they are sipping their martinis and picking at their garden salads, is that they are in the midst of one of the most dynamic and sexually charged industries. Behind the door that reads “employees only” exists a culture all its own: the restaurant.

The restaurant industry encompasses a very interesting and dynamic subculture of people. Within the restaurant itself, there tends to be a highly sexualized work environment that exists between co-workers and patrons. Previous research has shown that sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances are commonplace in the restaurant. What we hoped to uncover through our research is if the women who work within

restaurants believe, and agree, with the negative connotation of previous research. It is also possible that women view these behaviors and their sexualized environment as some sort of catalyst for power and self-confidence. Does it have any effect on their relationships within their social networks? Primarily, we wanted to explore if this dynamic environment had any effect on their relationships with men. Does the highly sexualized environment of the restaurant help or inhibit women in regards to how they interact with men? Is it a more generalized impact on their relationships with people? Does it have any effect at all? Are the women who work in restaurants there because it complements their personality?

The purpose of our research is to examine how the highly sexualized work environment of restaurants influences the waitress' responses to flirtatious comments, passes, sexual advances, and the length of partnerships with men outside of the workplace. The work environment of restaurants is clouded with sexual innuendos, groping, and banter between customers as well as coworkers. As many studies have shown, the attitude of the majority of female wait staff in such environments reflects the acceptance and enjoyment of such behavior. What is unknown here is whether the acceptance of these behaviors influences the relationships that exist outside of the workplace.

## **Key Words**

*Highly Sexualized Environment*- The product of the behaviors and interactions between employees and their customers, as well as among coworkers. These behaviors include: flirting, flirtatious comments, groping, and sexual conversation.

*Partnerships*- Any behaviors involving physical or emotional attachment to men, in any varying length of time.

## Literature Review

The highly sexualized environment of the restaurant industry is a product of the behaviors and interactions between employees and their customers, as well as among coworkers. According to Giuffre and Williams (1994: 760) “sexualized comments and behaviors are a common, a well-known feature of restaurant work”. In compliance with this Anders (1993: 48) illustrates that “restaurants...are about as informal a workplace as there is, so much so as to actually encourage-or at least tolerate- sexual banter”. As previous research has shown sexualized banter and behavior is not only something that employees within the restaurant industry tolerate and partake in, it is something that has become a natural, expected aspect of the job. Sexual attractiveness and flirtation have become institutionalized parts of the waitress’ job description (Giuffre and Williams 1994). “People sexualize interactions for reasons often unrelated to expressing desire, interest, or without intentions of moving beyond the current encounter,” (Van Leuven 1998: 4). This is a common behavior among waitresses. Customers, as well as staff, work to sexualize their interactions as well as environments using resources around them (Van Leuven 1998).

Although the restaurant is a very sexualized atmosphere, the employees, particularly the waitresses, don’t label the flirtatious comments, overly friendliness, and unnecessary touching from customers and coworkers as a form of sexual harassment. Quick phrases, winks, and so that occur in the workplace for waitresses are based in an undercurrent of sexual innuendo and flirtation, which is made both more thrilling and less serious due to the highly public display (Van Leuven 1998). According to Giuffre and Williams (1994) many men and women experience some sexual behaviors in the

workplace as pleasurable, and in fact many people find this dimension of sexual exploitation of their job appealing. Those who work in highly sexualized environments, a restaurant or bar for example, are often less likely to label offensive behaviors as “sexual harassment” (Gutek 1985; Konrad and Gutek 1986). The majority of waitresses realize the type of environment they work in, so, are used to the sexual behaviors that go on and usually not only expect it, but also participate in it.

Previous studies have show that coworker sexual harassment is potentially the most common type of sexual harassment (Pryor 1987; Schneider 1982). Considering the “high degree of interaction among the wait staff” it seems there is ample opportunity for coworker sexual harassment to occur (Giuffre et al. 1994: 381). To contradict these statements it seems the majority of waitresses in no way feel offended by the sexual interactions among themselves and other workers. Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger (1999) found that both women and men could interpret their sexual interactions with coworkers as a form of camaraderie. Similarly, Lerum (2004) discovered that sexualized banter between coworkers could assist in a process of heightened moral and worker camaraderie. In a waitress’ job it appears that heightened morale and a good sense of camaraderie with coworkers can only create a more positive environment and work experience.

The waitress works in an environment that is very interdependent. All of the workers in the restaurant depend on each other to get their individual tasks accomplished. It seems that a relationship that includes some forms of sexual banter enables employees to work together more quickly and efficiently, and most likely more comfortably, because of the good faith in the team effort (Lerum 2004). Although coworker sexual harassment

is a large issue, research in the restaurant industry has shown that “workplace sexualization can help can help maintain co-worker loyalties and camaraderie (Lerum 2004: 772).

Worker camaraderie, heightened morale, and a more positive work experience are not all that come out of the sexualized interactions within the restaurant. The waitress uses sexual interactions and flirtatious behavior as a sort of tool while doing her job. One function of this tool is to help increase financial profits. “Many women find pleasure in this recognition of their sexual attractiveness, and some profit from it” (Williams et al. 1999: 90). Another positive function of this flirtatious and sexual tool is that the waitress is able to control the interaction. By being aware of the sexual interaction between herself and her customer the waitress can decide how far she wants the flirting to go, and to what point she feels comfortable continuing this type of interaction. “Some studies have described women using sexual banter as a means of achieving interactional power over their customer” (Lerum 2004: 756). Many waitresses also use sexual interactions and flirtatious behaviors, mostly with their coworkers, to get things other than just a financial profit. According to Yelvington (1996: 328) “women flirt to ‘engage [men’s] attentions for instrumental purposes.” These instrumental purposes can vary from things such as getting a man to do some sort of physical work for her, to having him make sure she gets home safely. Lerum (2004) states that, some sexualized interactions among coworkers are also a demonstration of a personal resource strategy. This illustrates the point that waitresses view their coworkers as a resource to help them get their tasks done, and they use sexual behaviors as a means to get to this resource.

The restaurant industry is without a doubt a sexualized industry. Research has shown that the sexual behaviors and interactions that go on between the employees and customers within the restaurant are not viewed as sexual harassment. These behaviors are an exception to the rules of sexual harassment because of the environment in which they take place. It has been stated that these sexual interactions among coworkers actually positively influence the work experience for the waitress. The sexual and flirtatious behavior between a waitress and her customer seems to be financially beneficial, and controlled by her when concerning the extent to which she will allow the behavior to go. The unknown is how these sexual behaviors and attitudes of the waitress and her environment influence her attitudes towards, and partnerships with, men in her personal life.

## **Methods**

### **Hypothesis**

Hypothesis stated that the highly sexualized environment of the restaurant will shorten female wait staff's partnerships with men outside of the workplace. Assumptions were made that this environment will increase or decrease the defensiveness and intensity of the female wait staff's responses to sexual advances outside of her workplace.

Another hypothesis was made that the highly sexualized environment of the restaurant is not related to the responses to sexual advances and partnerships with men outside of the waitress' workplace.

It was assumed that a correlation between female wait staff and the length of their relationships with men would be found, specifically that they would have more frequent

and short-lasting partnerships based on the hours they work and the constant change of people they come into contact with.

### **Sample**

The target population for this research consisted of women ages 21 to 30 who currently work in the restaurant industry, with a focus on waitresses and bartenders. The goal was to get respondents who worked in variety of types of restaurants. These types ranging from family- run and operated, to fine dining, to corporate chains.

### **Sampling Method and Limitations**

Potential respondents were randomly selected by approaching them in the workplace. They were informed of the nature of the research, and left with an informed consent that further explained the subject areas of interest. Response rates were limited with 2 out of the 10 women approached agreeing to participate in the study.

This method had various limitations that restricted the amount of data that was able to be collected. The first of which includes the small amount of only 2 respondents interviewed. The small sample size provided limited data. Another limitation to this sampling method was the convenience of the sample. We spoke with waitresses based on our ability to get in touch with them, and also on their availability of time, which was another limitation. The short amount of time did not allow for a large number of subjects to be collected. The time constraints also left us with incomplete transcriptions and unanalyzed data. Another limitation was the non-diverse types of restaurants our subjects were employed at. Because of the low response rate there was no option to choose the

waitress to interview based on the type of restaurant she worked in. This limitation was also a result of the location, which was limited to one area in Portsmouth, NH. With limited time and low response rates it was difficult to get women who worked in restaurants that were located in other places within the seacoast area.

### **Research Methods**

A qualitative approach was made to this research because of the in-depth nature of the topic and the target population being studied. The original method was to use focus groups as a means of communicating with the respondents, while they could also communicate with each other. This approach was thought to allow a better connection and understanding of the women, while at the same time allow them to feel safer and more comfortable responding to the topic of discussion because of the presence of their peers. The conclusion was made that these focus groups would actually hinder the respondents' candidness and ability to take the research seriously. Another potential negative effect of the focus groups was the lack of privacy of responses, and the possibility of the subjects inhibiting their responses due to an unknown audience. The subjects would have had their own interpretations of the questions being asked which could potentially alter the other women's responses.

The research method that was decided on was to conduct individual, semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was created and referred to throughout each interview. These guides contained subject areas of interest, specific questions and also probe questions. Each interview was recorded, then transcribed. The transcriptions were used to analyze the data collected.

The interviews were conducted outside of the respondents' workplace to avoid any conflict of interest with the work environment, or other employees. Both researchers conducted each interview with the respondent. Originally this method was thought to be ineffective because the two on one approach could potentially cause intimidation, pressure, and a stressful environment.

A trial interview was conducted with the two on one approach and found to be extremely effective and in no way negative or intimidating. This method was found to create a relaxed and candid environment that helped to generate an informal, but informative, conversation instead of a formal interview. We proceeded, and will continue, to use this method in conducting the future interviews.

## **Results**

The findings from the two interviews conducted partially supported the hypothesis that women's partnerships with men would be shortened as a result of their employment in the restaurant industry. One respondent's partnerships with men do not exist at all outside of the workplace, only within. The relationships are still shortened as a result of the work environment. Findings did not support the hypothesis made regarding increased or decreased defensiveness and intensity in response to sexual advances outside of her workplace.

### **Interview 1- Melissa**

The first interview was conducted with Melissa, a 21-year old bartender who works in Portsmouth, NH. She believes her personality and lifestyle is what attracted her to this particular line of work, and she describes herself as a very outgoing person who

has never been characterized as timid, and views her role within the restaurant as a life-long career.

### **Highly Sexualized Environment**

Melissa views her work environment as very sexualized. She uses her personality to attain specific goods and services with her co-workers and her patrons. When asked if she viewed her work environment as being a highly sexualized one, she replied:

“Definitely (laughs) um, yeah, every single place I’ve worked has been like that. Um, especially with the cooks, cause I feel like if you want to get along with the cooks, you want to get your stuff out on time, you have to flirt with the cooks. You have to be nice to them. If they like you, your life is going to be a lot easier, so you put up with a lot of stuff that normally outside of that scenario I would not put up with. Like, I laugh it off. Like ha-ha funny, but yeah, um (laughs) definitely some borderline sexual harassment stuff going on. But it’s all like, good fun, nothing too serious.”

### **Interactions with Customers**

Melissa’s position as a bartender puts her directly in front of her customers on a daily basis. She understands that her interactions with customers directly influence how much money will be in her pocket at the end of her shift, and uses that as a means of motivation. When she was asked whether or not she is willing to put up with the same types of behaviors as she would with co-workers, but coming from customers, she responded:

“ I feel like I am pretty sarcastic about it. I don’t feel like I am very (laughs) sensitive to the customers sometimes. I mean it depends on like, who they are too. If its some like 40 year old business man in a suit I am probably not going to treat him the same way I would if it was like a 28 year old guy who just got like of a construction job or something. I definitely talk to

them differently, but I feel like I know what I can get away with.”

Melissa felt as though she could control her interactions with her customers, because she knew in the end it would benefit her. Even if this meant putting up with some behaviors that in another setting she would classify as inappropriate.

### **Partnerships with Men**

Melissa sticks to the rule of not dating the patrons who come into her bar. When she was asked whether or not she would accept the offer of a date from a customer her immediate response was “no”. This “no” response seemed typical of many servers and bartenders, but her reason as to why was interesting:

**JK:** “ Is that just something that you have a stipulation about dating anybody, or patrons that come into your work? Or is it more that you have this persona that you have when you are at work and its not necessarily something you want people to pick up on in terms of asking you out?”

**M:** “ I feel like its more of like, I’m serving you, I’m giving you drinks, I’m giving you food. You’re paying me for it. If I start dating you, and you’re paying me for stuff, so like, that seems like a very sketchy...”

She alludes to feeling somewhat like a prostitute if she were to accept any offers while a customer was willing to pay for their food, drinks, etc. Although she is not interested in dating anyone she serves, most of her dating partners have been within her workplace.

**M:** “I’m actually dating someone that I work with. He works in the kitchen. I feel like that happens a lot. (Laughs).”

**JK:** “Has that happened before? Have you dated other people you have worked with?”

**M:** (giggling) “Yeah. I seem to fall into that pattern a lot. It’s probably a really bad idea. It actually never really ends well. The type of guys I look for and the type I end up dating are two really different things (giggling). I have made really stupid mistakes with the guys I end up dating. But, I feel like as a server or a bartender, you make a lot of concessions, like ‘ok well,’ I don’t really have time to go out and find some guy with a great job like, this that and the other thing. I’m always here and it’s tough to date customers. Like, if I worked in an office, and I met some guy when I was working at this great job, that would be one thing, but I feel like we’re kind of just like, we’ll date him until we find the guy with the good job. And I feel like we have had to do that a lot. Just like fill gaps in time, but it turns out to be this long relationship that you were never intending.”

Melissa uses her work environment as a way to develop partnerships with men, but only with her coworkers, even though she knows this will most likely lead to an unsuccessful relationship. She believes it is important to keep a solid boundary between herself and her customers.

### **Interview 2- Kate**

The second interview was conducted with a 29-year-old bartender named Kate. She has been working in the restaurant industry since she was 14, when she started waitressing. Since then she has always held a job within the industry, including an internship as a bartender while in college. Kate currently owns and manages the bar in which she works in, and realizes that her role within the restaurant industry has definitely changed in many ways since she first began. Kate described how the restaurant industry is not only her career, but also a large part of her life.

“I’ve always done it. I’ve done it since I was 14 and I can’t imagine not being in this industry in one way or another, so even, I mean even with all the crap I deal with as an owner, the nights that I bartend it’s kind of like an escape for me, a time to like talk to me regulars you know? Kind of cut back a little bit, have fun, and remind myself why I bought the bar.”

### **Highly Sexualized Environment**

When asked whether she agreed or not that the restaurant was a highly sexualized environment Kate was quick to agree.

“I think any situation that you’re going to involve the same group of people meeting up on a regular basis, at night, with alcohol, there’s going to be sexual tension. I mean that’s, 90% of relationships in general, in their 20’s especially.”

She agreed that there were a lot of flirtatious behaviors that went on among coworkers, as well as between the staff and their customers. Kate believed that this behavior was a result of the time the people spent together, and the laid back social atmosphere that the restaurant provides. She felt that being in a place where people go out to drink and have a good time, as well meet other people definitely had an effect on how the wait staff and other employees performed their job.

Kate also felt like the people who gravitate towards working in the restaurant industry do so because they are looking for this sexualized environment to work in. She believes that the people who seek out these jobs are, for the most part, attractive and love the attention and sexual tension that environment of the restaurant provides.

“Plus the fact that the majority of people, I wouldn’t say majority but, a good amount of people in the hospitality industry that are working are good looking people... my bartenders, they’re all good looking

people. That's it... They like attention, like you're working in a service oriented area for a reason, you like interaction and getting attention from people.”

Kate's overall point of view of the restaurant as a sexualized environment was supportive as it was defined. She believed that it was the types of social, attractive people who gravitate towards the restaurant industry, combined with the social atmosphere that created this highly sexualized environment.

### **Interactions with Customers**

Kate believed her interactions with customers were very relaxed. She embraced her regular customers especially and was willing to interact with them very much outside of her place of work. Sometimes she even went as far as to bring them home to meet her family, but this was not intended to be a romantic relationship in any way. Kate also felt like she had control of how her interactions with her customers went. She felt that when situations went beyond a certain comfort level and her employees, or her self, felt violated in any way, emotionally, physically, or mentally, that she was very quick to step in and handle the situation.

Kate also felt like she was in control of cutting her customers off from drinking. She felt she had no problem stepping in when she felt they were being inappropriate, even when she knew the customers' responses would be negative, hostile, and sometimes very personal. She believed that these responses differed in an extreme way when coming from men versus women.

“Surprisingly I think behind the bar, like if I cut a guy off you know, sometimes they argue he'll be like you know 'what do you mean?!' (Deeper voice). Guys will try and be like the 'I'm not drunk or whatever' girls

will get nasty! Way more than guys. Women will attack you much more on a personal front, than men will. Like, women will go right for (snaps), like attacking you physically, attacking you like 'you're just a stupid bartender' like they're very degrading and they're very quick to do it..."

Kate felt that even though customers can be very inappropriate, and at times, very mean that she was in control of how the interaction was going to end. She recognized that how customers treated her was very different based on their sex, but she tried to treat customers the same regardless of being male or female.

### **Partnerships with Men**

When it came to the topic of partnerships with men and dating behaviors Kate felt that both of these were a challenge for her as a result of her job.

"I've never dated a guy from the bar, like the majority of my friendships with men have come from the bar but the majority of my friendships with women are completely separate, so I guess that's the biggest difference. I've never dated a guy that eventually didn't have a problem with the hours that I keep or like the attention from behind the bar... even when they've said like 'oh I'll be fine with it' like its always been an issue."

Kate never dated customers that came into her bar, and she also tried not to date men she worked with. She felt that dating was challenging because the hours made it difficult for her to maintain a relationship, and the men were quick to get frustrated with this as well. Kate also found that men whom she was dating did not like how she interacted with male customers on the job, so jealousy always seem to be another issue that led to the end of the relationship

Kate had strong feelings against dating men that she worked with. As Kate said, “I’ve tried to date a guy that I’ve worked with. It was miserable.” She described that it made work extremely unpleasant for both people involved in the relationship. She felt that inner work relationships had a very negative effect on the work environment for everyone. Kate also believed that this would not make the relationship anymore successful than dating somebody out side of work.

“I have a waitress and a bartender that date right now, I hate it...but like I never let them work together, because it’s a disaster every time they do.”

Even with these really negative feelings about dating, and getting involved with people that she works with, Kate believes it is inevitable that this will happen.

“I think anyone who tells you it’s not a part of the industry is full of crap. It’s definitely there, it’s in every restaurant that I’ve worked at.”

## **Discussion**

Findings revealed that the highly sexualized environment of the restaurant industry had a large effect on female wait staff’s partnerships with men. The interviews conducted revealed that there were varying views regarding female wait staff’s preferences for partnerships with men. Melissa viewed her only option for dating existed within the restaurant that she works in, Kate did not view her work environment as a place to seek out partnerships with men. Both women believed that the length of their partnerships with men have been significantly affected by their employment in the restaurant industry.

Respondents had some conflicting views regarding preferences for dating behaviors, but they also had a similar understanding of why maintaining partnerships

with men was so challenging. The difference in dating preferences of the respondents could be due to the 8-year age gap between them. Melissa is 21 and still very much involved in the social nightlife of people in their early twenties. Kate is 29 and realizing that she is no longer attracted to the bartending scene of the weekend nightlife. It is possible that the longer a woman works in the restaurant industry what attracts her to this job changes over time.

Even with the age gap both respondents agreed that dating customers was not appropriate. They also both had problems maintaining partnerships with men because of their jobs, and admitted that their dating lives had been negatively affected by the hours they work and their interactions with customers.

Another commonality between both respondents was that they viewed their roles in the restaurant industry as a life-long career. Both women saw themselves as professionals within the business, and had no intentions of leaving the industry because they were completely content with their jobs, and felt as though they were a large part of their lives.

These findings are valuable, even with the lack of respondents, because it is very possible, especially with further research, that these women's feelings and attitudes towards their roles in their jobs, partnerships with men, and interactions with customers are generalizable to other female wait staff. Waitresses include a large population of women, and it is important to understand the subculture of the environment of the restaurant when it influences these important aspects of these women's lives.

**Weaknesses and Shortcomings**

The lack of research done on the sexual attitudes and lives of waitresses has displayed merely assumptions regarding any behaviors of these women outside of their work environment. According to research done by Mgalla and Pool (1997:411) on Tanzanian bartenders “a common assumption exists that all bar workers have a large number of casual sexual partners.” This illustrates the point that assumptions are made that bartenders and waitresses take on the behaviors that are associated with their work environments without any firm knowledge if this is truly the case. Similarly, Hearn and Stoll (1975: 110) found that people assumed working in a restaurant provided waitresses with easy access to drinking, promiscuous sexual behaviors, and “too many opportunities to get into trouble.” Again, the unknown is whether the waitresses actually take advantage of their access to these things.

**Appendix B**

Name	Sex	Age	Education	Marital Status	Race
Melissa	Female	21	College Degree	Single	White
Kate	Female	29	College Degree	Single	White

## REFERENCES

- Anders, K. T., 1993. "Bad Sex: Who's harassing whom in restaurants?" *Restaurant Business* 20: 46-54.
- Dellinger, Kirsten, Patti A. Giuffre, Christine L. Williams. 1999. "Sexuality in the Workplace: Organizational Control, Sexual Harassment, and the Pursuit of Pleasure." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 73-93.
- Giuffe, Patti A., Williams, Christine L. 1994. "Boundary Lines: Labeling Sexual Harassment in Restaurants." *Gender and Society* 8: 378-401.
- Gutek, Barbara A. 1985. *Sex and the Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lerum, Kari. 2004. "Sexuality, Power, and Camaraderie in Service Work." *Gender and Society* 18: 756-776.
- Mgalla, Z., R. Pool. 1997. "Sexual Relationships, Condom Use and Risk Perception Among Female Bar Workers in North West Tanzania." *AIDS Care* 9: 407-417
- Pryor, John B., 1987. "Sexual Harassment Proclivities in Men." *Sex Roles* 17: 269-290.
- Schneider, Beth E. 1982. "Consciousness About Sexual Harassment Among Heterosexual and Lesbian Women Workers." *Journal of Science Issues* 38: 75-98.
- Van Leuven, Linda. 1998. "I Need a Screw": Workplace Sexualization as an Interactional Achievement.
- Yelvington, K.A. 1996. "Flirting in the Factory." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2: 313-334.