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In pursuit of looking good: Thai women office workers and everyday consumption practices at work

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In Pursuit of Looking Good:

Thai Women Office Workers and Everyday Consumption Practices at Work

By

Kosum Omphornuwat

A Doctoral Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon my eleven-month ethnographic fieldwork in two business organisations in Bangkok, Thailand, this thesis explores Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work. What emerges from this thesis is that a claim to beauty as a reason for which women are engaged in the consumption of makeup and clothes is not always valid. Grounded in theoretical discussions and empirical findings, I argue that the women's consumption of makeup and clothes is not always in the pursuit of beauty, but rather the pursuit of looking good. While beauty is perceived as an innate quality of the body, looking good entails the materialisation of the outer body through consumption practices in an attempt to achieve an ideal look. I introduce a concept of 'looking good practices'. Looking good practices demonstrate the ways in which women office workers exert agency in mobilising their outer bodies to achieve an 'appropriate' appearance at work. I argue that looking good practices entail a process of social learning. The women office workers learn to 'look good' through the process by which they look at other women, participate in the practices shared amongst themselves, negotiate the meanings of appropriateness and reify such meanings through their consumption of makeup and clothes. By sharing meanings and practices, the women office workers inevitably participate in looking good practices, which, I argue, are social practices. My research also demonstrates how, through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes, the women office workers aestheticise their bodies to be situated in the aesthetic workplace.

Keywords: consumption practices, everyday practices, beauty practices, looking good practices, ethnography, Thailand, makeup, clothes, workplace, aesthetics

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Thai Women Office Workers and Everyday Consumption Practices

If I were rich, I'd show you how beautiful I could be.
And I can guarantee that I'd be as glamorous as Miss Thailand.
Aren't I beautiful? Doctor, please fix me.
Give me a makeover. Make me look like an ad girl.
Is my face wrinkled? Give me a facelift. Smooth and soothe my skin.
Nose job, eye job, eyebrow tattoo.
Aren't I slender? I'd go under the knife.
Sauna, chemical peel, braces.
All girls want to be pretty.
But rich girls and poor girls aren't treated equally.
Girls with money can be completely fulfilled.
A poor girl like me dares not to compare.
I'm not rich. My beauty is hidden.
No matter how hard I try, I always look dull.
But if you want me, please look at my heart.
And you may well find the innermost beauty in me.

When the Thai country singer Looknok Supaporn vocalises her unconventional love song *If I Were Rich*, not only does she challenge tensions between classes, genders and economic disparities, but also cunningly criticises the advent of Thailand's consumerism and craze for beauty. The exhaustive list of cosmetic procedures mimics cultural expectations on Thai women's body beautiful. Female bodies have been vigorously scrutinised. Beauty queens and the imageries of women portrayed in advertisements have been praised as ideals. To achieve such ideal beauty, women require a means of consumption. Economic capital determines physical capital through consumption. With both capitals inaccessible to her, Looknok bemoans her destiny. Nevertheless, she negotiates with the dominant ideology of beauty and appeals to her beloved man, and perhaps Thai society, to overlook the outer shell. In closing her rendition, Looknok humbly hymns – beauty, after all, is only skin deep.

BrandAge, a Thai-born glossy marketing magazine, has evidently captured this preoccupation with beauty amongst women consumers and altered it into a marketing opportunity. The magazine launched its first issue in May 2000 amidst

Thailand's economic turmoil. Under the bold title 'Women in the Brand War', it ran full coverage on 'must read' articles including 'Women Rule the World: 50,000 Million Baht of Poisonous Sweetness', 'Women Buying Brands: A Market Survey', 'Targeting Women on Websites', 'Imported Cosmetics to Pamper Asian Girls', and 'Working Women's New Trends'. Insisting that marketers must be eager to target women consumers, its first editorial cover story announces, 'In the midst of economic crisis, marketing insiders agree that bringing any products to the market is a daunting task, ... except to one, a market for women. The women's market is the last resort. Women make quick decisions when buying anything related to beauty...because beauty is women's basic need' (BrandAge, 2000: 69).

'Appearance matters', writes Penny Van Esterik, an eminent anthropologist in the field of Thai studies (2000: 129). 'Beautiful appearances matter even more. In Thailand, beauty can override family connections, money or class, as well as other ascribed and achieved attributes of women, and to a lesser degree, men. ... The potential of ranking individuals on the basis of their physical appearance is very strong in Thai society'. (2000: 129) Van Esterik's observation affirms the significance of beauty. *BrandAge's* marketing strategy and Looknok's social aspiration of being rich and beautiful also reflects many Thai women's preoccupation with feminine beauty and that consumption is a means to achieve it. All of these three commentaries on beauty in Thai consumer society indicate that there is a dominant discourse assuming that Thai women are pursuing beauty through their consumption practices.

This thesis questions the preoccupation with feminine beauty in Thai consumer society. It problematises women's everyday consumption practices in relation to their bodies. Particular attention is given to a case study of Thai women office workers and their consumption of makeup and clothes at work. Departing from my keen interest in the body beautiful, the thesis initially focused on Thai women's experiences of 'beauty practices' in the workplace context. In so doing, I had spent 11 months between 2005 and 2006 in Bangkok, Thailand, carrying out participant observation, photographic research and in-depth interviews with 32 women employed by two business companies, CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation¹. As the fieldwork began to unfold, the notion of 'beauty' appeared to be less relevant. Evidence emerging from my ethnographic fieldwork

¹ CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation are pseudonyms.

pointed to a significance of the notion of 'looking good'. Whilst dissociating themselves from 'beauty', the women repeatedly referred to 'looking good' when describing the aspiration driving their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes. This initial finding has shaped the focus of the thesis. The concept of and the assumptions made about beauty need to be interrogated, as they do not correspond with the research findings. I argue that Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work is not always in the pursuit of 'beauty', but rather in the pursuit of 'looking good'. By asking how we can understand women's consumption of makeup and clothes, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which Thai women office workers incorporate looking good practices into their everyday consumption at work, where their roles as producers and consumers intersect.

Thai Women as Producers

Thailand's "economic miracle" has been built largely on the backs of women. It is built on a foundation of capitalist patriarchy: a development model which employs the exploitation of women for rapid economic growth.

(Bell 1997: 55)

In his contribution to the volume of *Women, Gender Relations and Development in Thai Society* (1997), Peter F. Bell, of the New York State Council on Economic Education, severely criticises Thailand's economic development model. The export-oriented growth model, that Thailand has adopted under the World Bank's recommendation since the 1980s, creates conditions which, according to Bell, have subjected a vast number of Thai women to unpaid agricultural and household labour, low-waged industrial work and commercial sex work in the tourism industry (1997: 57, 65).

Bell's criticism is supported by the outcomes of the National Statistical Office's *Thai Labour Force Survey* (2009). Although the number of women and men of the working age 15 years and over is relatively equal, more women than men have been recorded as 'not being in the labour force' (see Appendix B, Table 1.1). Moreover, nearly one third of the women in the labour force are 'unpaid family workers' (see Table 1.3). More women than men work as clerks and service workers, whereas more men than women are craftsmen and machine operators (see Table 1.4). However, the majority of both women and men are farmers (see Table 1.5). Regarding the employment status, more men than women are

employers and work in the positions of legislators, senior officers and managers. However, slightly more women than men are classified as professionals (see Table 1.2 and 1.4).

On the one hand, the *Thai Labour Force Survey* (2009) celebrates the impressive outlook of Thai women being almost equal participants in the labour force and highly visible in the economic sector. On the other hand, it reveals that a large number of women remain inflicted by labour exploitation. In her analysis of changing gender relations in Thailand, Darunee Tantiwiranond (1997) raises the issue of severe socio-economic disparities between urban educated and rural poor Thai women. Although the rapid process of industrialisation and urbanisation has generated more varieties of white-collar and blue-collar jobs which demand an expansion of the labour market and draw women into the labour force, the economic acceleration has worsened the disparities amongst Thai women. While urban educated women have taken advantage of the new found opportunities and professional positions, rural poor women have struggled to survive in low-skilled and low-paid jobs.

This thesis recognises the varieties of roles and statuses of Thai women and it proposes to focus on urban women office workers who live and work in the capital city of Thailand, Bangkok. Thai women office workers are highly visible in the economic sector. However, thorough studies of their lived experiences remain limited. The thesis does not aim to investigate Thai women office workers' activities in the mode of production, but rather seeks to explore their engagement in the act of consumption. Their involvement in making an economic contribution allows them incomes and a means of consumption. This thesis wishes to offer scholarly understandings to consumption experiences of Thai women office workers through the exploration of their everyday consumption practices at work.

Thai Women as Consumers

Women's relationship with consumption may be contradictory, troubling and at times traumatic, but one thing is certain: it is unavoidable. ... [C]onsumption in a variety of forms is part of many women's everyday life. ... Indeed, it is a sphere where femininity is performed, where versions of femininity are legitimated and negotiated, or contested and rejected.

(Andrews and Talbot 2000: 1)

Consumption has been generally defined as related to women and as opposed to production (Bocock 1993; Firet 1994). A process that produces valuable outcomes

is named production, whereas a process that is rather profane, involving in 'pure use, devouring and destruction' is called consumption (Firat 1994: 206). The dichotomy of production and consumption is strongly gendered in that valuable production is often associated with men while profane consumption is associated with women (Bocock 1993: 95). Not only is this dichotomy defined through gender categorisation, but also cuts across a binary of public and private domains. A public domain, such as a workplace, is reserved for production, which is important, useful, creative and value-producing activity. In contrast, a private domain, or home, is for recreation, leisure and consumption. In a private domain, an individual does not work but rather performs profane activities that do not require expertise or knowledge. Roles attributed to public and private domains are also constructed around the gender category that reinforces a separation between women occupying a private domain and men a public domain (Firat 1994: 207 – 209).

Explaining consumption and production through the opposing binary categories is problematic and highly criticised (Firat 1994; Auslander 1996; Lury 1996). Firstly, it fosters gender inequality by privileging masculinity with superior qualities whilst subjugating femininity with the inferior ones (Firat 1994: 209). Secondly, the dichotomy of production and consumption that ascribes a social identity of producers to men and consumers to women is misleading (Auslander 1996). In her study of consumer practices in nineteenth-century France, Leora Auslander (1996) argues that 'bourgeoisie of both genders were casted as consumers, albeit consuming to different ends. All acts of consumption were also acts of production, but some kinds of consumption produced things defined as feminine and others produced things defined as masculine' (1996: 79). That is both men and women are both consumers and producers. Thirdly, the dichotomy of production and consumption is inappropriate to study the dynamism of consumption in everyday life. This thesis focuses on women office workers' everyday consumption of makeup and clothes at work. The women office workers are producers who engage in value producing activities and contribute to economic accumulation. Their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes takes place in the public domain, namely their workplace. Moreover, their act of consumption is highly interrelated and reciprocal to the act of production. Concurrently, the women perform two active tasks. They are both consumers and producers at work. The binary opposition that explains consumption as opposed to

production is, thus, inapplicable to an exploration of Thai women office workers' consumption experiences and practices.

Mary Beth Mills' study of the mobility of young rural Thai women (1999) and Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan's study of 'consumption symbolism' (2000) reveal the intersection between the roles of consumers and producers amongst Thai consumers. Mary Beth Mills (1999) conducted ethnographic research on the mobility of young rural Thai women. She examined the process and consequences of the rural-urban labour migration taking place in the Bangkok metropolis and in a rural village of the Northeastern part of the country. For many young women migrants, one of the most valued aspects of their experiences in the city was to participate in Bangkok's mass-market consumer culture. In spite of the economic constraints they were facing, young women migrants actively engaged in the consumption of material goods and leisure activities. Not only did they use consumption practices as an accessible means to deter their attention from day-to-day hardship of being urban wage labourers, but also as a vehicle for incorporating 'dominant images of a truly "modern" lifestyle in their own lives' (1999: 132). 'Migrants' actions as consumers – not only as producers – reveal the complex dilemmas of women's urban employment and highlight a powerful avenue by which many labour migrants hope to express their new sense of autonomy and agency, and to construct socially satisfying and valued identities', Mills concludes (1999: 128).

In her study on 'consumption symbolism', Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan (2000) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Bangkok with four distinctive groups of informants – a group of male-to-female transgenders, a group of young nouveau riches, a group of young extremist Buddhists and a group of young provincial women. She sought to explore how the friendship groups employed everyday consumption symbolically in the creation of their gendered, nouveaux riche, religious and urbanised selves. In order to re-create their aspired gendered identities, the transgender informants appropriated symbolic meanings of female imagery drawn from mediated experiences and interlaced them with lived experiences through their consumption of products for women. The nouveau riches informants engaged in luxury-brand consumption, so as to gain symbolic resources for the creation of glamorous selves. Luxury-brand consumption was also recontextualised as the young nouveau riches' rite of passage to adulthood. The extremist Buddhist informants refrained themselves from any forms of hedonic

consumption, but sought to consume particular products and exercise particular rituals which symbolised what they believed to be associated with a good Buddhist. Provincial young women informants endeavoured to urbanise themselves whilst preserving the ties to their provincial roots. They used various forms of symbolic consumption to create, express, negotiate and harmonise their multifaceted selves. Mills's and Wattanasuwan's ethnographic works are amongst a few research studies that offer insightful examinations to consumption practices and experiences of Thai consumers in the consumer society of Bangkok. This thesis wishes to offer another contribution to the understanding of the experiences of Thai women in relation to their bodies and everyday consumption practices.

Thesis Structure

In understanding women's consumption of makeup and clothes at work, this thesis seeks to explore the ways in which Thai women office workers incorporate looking good practices into their everyday consumption. The thesis is composed of eight chapters. Chapter 1, *Introduction*, addresses the background of the thesis, clarifies research questions, objectives and arguments, and outlines the structure of the thesis. Chapter 2, *Understanding 'Looking Good Practices'*, discusses the conceptual framework applied in this thesis. A critical review of the relevant literature unfolds two interrelated theoretical streams that help define the concept of 'looking good practices' and the context in which looking good practices have been examined. In defining the concept of looking good practices, I draw upon feminist literature on beauty practices to differentiate 'looking good practices' from 'beauty practices'. I also establish a link between a process of social learning, consumption practices and identity formation processes by referring to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's 'theory of situated learning' and concept of 'community of practices' (1991) and Cristina Grasseni's concept of 'skilled visions' (2007). In defining the context in which looking good practices are examined, I focus on Thailand and the workplace. I revisit literature on consumer society and observe the changes in the political economy that instigated the formation of consumerism in Thailand. I characterise the workplace as a site of aestheticisation and redefine the concept of workplace by drawing upon a phenomenological approach to place. Furthermore, I look at how the employees' bodies have been aestheticised in the workplace by discussing the implications of Ann Witz et al.'s concept of 'aesthetic

labour' (2003) and Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler's concept of 'organisational bodies' (2000).

Chapter 3, *Doing Ethnography with Thai Women Office Workers*, discusses the methodological approach employed in this thesis. The chapter is primarily the reflections of my experiences in doing ethnographic fieldwork with Thai women office workers at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation. I reflect upon how I gained access to the organisations, how the access shaped my roles in the fields, how I negotiated my fieldwork roles and relationships and how 'friendships' had developed. I also highlight the ethical dilemmas that I had encountered throughout the process of my fieldwork, especially those regarding the uses of photography and fieldwork relations. Furthermore, I introduce a debate on 'embodied ethnography' and discuss how my body and embodied experiences should inform the conduct of my fieldwork, data analysis and the writing of ethnography.

In Chapter 4, *From 'Formal' to 'Smart Casual' and 'Freestyle'*, I observe the changes of corporate dress codes that informed the women office workers' consumption practices at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation. I argue that in order to situate themselves in the organisations and in the complex hierarchical structure of Thai society, it is necessary for the women office workers to negotiate the meanings of the dress codes and produce 'appropriate' looks for work. The chapter provides an overview of the corporate dress culture and practices that enable a more insightful understanding to the women's engagement in consumption practices.

In Chapter 5, *In Pursuit of Looking Good*, I explore the meanings of beauty and looking good as understood by Thai women office workers. I argue that Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes are not always concerning 'beauty', but rather 'looking good'. I question the uses of the term 'beauty practices' and introduce the concept of 'looking good practices'. I also argue that looking good practices are a form of 'oppressive agency' in that the women are both subjects and objects when they engage in the act of consumption.

Chapter 6, *Learning to Look Good*, aims to explore how Thai women office workers learn to look good through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes. I argue that the significant part of looking good practices involves learning. I draw upon Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning (1991) and propose to view learning as a process of social participation taking

place in the context of every lived experiences. Whilst interpreting the women's accounts and experiences, I reflect upon my own consumption experiences and practices as a newcomer to the social community. I explore how by participating in the practices of wearing 'appropriate' dress, I had learnt to become one of the members of the organisation.

Chapter 7, *The Making of the Looking Good Workplace*, aims to explore how Thai women office workers incorporate looking good practices into their everyday lives. I argue that by engaging in looking good practices, woman office workers exert their agency in negotiating with the demands of their work. Also, I will demonstrate how through the consumption of makeup and clothes, they produce the looking good bodies to be situated in the looking good workplace. Finally, to conclude the thesis, in Chapter 8, I reflect upon the knowledge that has been produced through conducting of ethnography with Thai women office workers in organisations. I conceptualise and propose the concept of looking good practices and discuss the contributions of this thesis to the existing knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

Understanding ‘Looking Good Practices’: A Conceptual Framework

Introduction

In understanding Thai women office workers’ everyday consumption practices, I propose a concept of ‘looking good practices’ as a framework for examining women’s consumption of makeup and clothes at work. This chapter aims to define the concept of ‘looking good practices’ and the context in which looking good practices have been examined. In conceptualising looking good practices, firstly, I question the term ‘beauty practices’ and differentiate ‘looking good practices’ from ‘beauty practices’. Secondly, by appraising the existing feminist literature on beauty practices, I argue that the concept of looking good practices demonstrates a tension between opposing strands of feminist approaches and that women’s engagement in looking good practices is a form of ‘oppressive agency’. Thirdly, I propose to view looking good practices as involving the practices of learning. By referring to Cristina Grasseni’s concept of ‘skilled visions’ (2007) and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s ‘theory of situated learning’ and concept of ‘community of practices’ (1991), I establish a link between a process of social learning, the practices of looking and women’s consumption in an identity formation process. Through their engagement in the practices of looking and learning, I argue for a potency of women’s active looking. I also argue that looking good practices are social practices.

A concept of looking good practices has emerged from my ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Thai women office workers in business organisations in Bangkok, Thailand. In a broad sense, I identify Thailand and the workplace as the context in which looking good practices have been examined. Firstly, I characterise Thailand as a consumer society. I will revisit literature on consumer society and outline Thailand’s changes in politics and the economy which instigated the formation of consumerism in Thai society. The implications of the changes

from the king's monopoly to 'authoritarian capitalism' (Callahan 1998) and to 'consumer capitalism' (Ockey 1999) provide a historical context to better our understandings of Thai women office workers' consumption practices in the contemporary consumer culture in Thailand. Secondly, I propose to view the workplace as a site of aestheticisation. I question an uncritical use of the term 'workplace' and draw upon a phenomenological approach to place in order to redefine workplace. I argue for a significance of the body in the making of the workplace. Ann Witz et al.'s concept of 'aesthetic labour' (2003) and Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler's concept of 'organisational bodies' (2000) discuss the ways in which employees' bodies have been aestheticised in the workplace by the employers. I propose to shift a focus from the managerial strategies to the employees' agentic capacity in the aestheticisation of their own bodies. I argue that through the consumption of makeup and clothes not only do women office workers aestheticise their bodies, but also produce the aesthetic workplace. That is looking good practices entail the aestheticisation of the female body to be situated in the aesthetic workplace.

Defining Looking Good Practices

In the following discussion, I will introduce and define the concept of looking good practices. Three aspects of looking good practices will be discussed: looking good practices are not beauty practices; looking good practices demonstrate a tension between opposing strands of feminist approaches; and looking good practices involve learning.

Looking Good Practices Are Not Beauty Practices.

In literature relating to beauty and women's consumption practices, the term 'beauty practices' has been taken for granted and under theorised. Beauty practices are simply used as a generic term to refer to any practices associated with the female body, including makeup, cosmetic surgery, fashion, shaving, high-heels, salon, self-starvation, hair straightening and dieting. (e.g., Grogan 1999: 57; Taylor 2000: 62; Adrian 2003: 150; Blum 2003: 60; Black 2004: 4; Jeffreys 2005: 1). Moreover, it has been assumed that beauty is an aspiration for women to engage in what is understood to be beauty practices. In her book *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005), Sheila Jeffreys explores existing feminist critiques on beauty.

While questioning 'the extent to which beauty practices represent women's subordinate status or can be seen as the expression of women's choice or agency', Jeffreys disregards a conceptualisation of the term 'beauty practices' itself (2005: 5). She simply equates beauty practices to 'the broad range of practices that women must engage in to meet the dictates of beauty' (2005: 7).

A number of empirical studies which examine women's embodied practices in various cultural contexts, including this thesis, however, reveal that a claim to beauty as a reason by which women are engaged in an alteration, manipulation, modification and decoration of their bodies may not always be valid. Kirsten Dellinger and Christine L. Williams' study of women's use of makeup in the workplace illustrates that 'appropriate makeup use is strongly associated with assumptions about health, heterosexuality and credibility in the workplace' (1997: 151). Beauty has not been quoted in their answers to the question why women wear makeup to work. In her book *The Beauty Industry* (2004), Paula Black attempts to understand women's use of beauty salons. Black reveals that, 'None of the women were in the salon for reasons of beauty. ... Instead each client is aiming to achieve a level of bodily performance in accordance with appropriate standards of looking and being' (2004: 51). To affirm her point she concludes at the end her book, 'The world of the beauty salon is not about beauty' (2004: 190). Similarly, analysing a situation of cosmetic surgery practices in the Netherlands, Kathy Davis argues that 'cosmetic surgery may have less to do with beauty and more to do with being ordinary, taking one's life into one's own hands, and determining how much suffering is fair' (1991: 21). Davis also adds that, 'This opens several avenues of inquiry, making it clear that beauty may not, after all, be the best place to begin in the effort to understand why women wish to alter their bodies by surgical means' (1991: 23).

As evident from my ethnographic fieldwork, 'beauty' was not a preferable term amongst Thai women office workers who participated in this thesis. They repeatedly quoted 'looking good' as a reason for which they wore makeup and dressed up for work. The term 'looking good' deserves an intensive interrogation. Instead of embarking on the term 'beauty practices' without questioning, in this chapter a concept of 'looking good practices' will be conceptualised in an attempt to understand Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work. I argue that looking good practices are not beauty practices. Nevertheless both beauty practices and looking good practices need to be investigated as

situated practices. In the following chapters, I will explore the cultural specificity of Thai understandings of beauty and looking good in the workplace context.

Looking Good Practices Demonstrate the Tension between Opposing Strands of Feminist Approaches.

In literature relating to women's consumption and beauty practices, opposing strands of feminist approaches are always presented (Jefferys 2005; Lury 1996; Davis 1991). One is a radical feminist approach which interprets beauty practices as oppression against women. Beauty practices are the outcomes of gender inequality that objectify and place women in a subordinate position. However, with a growing awareness that the subject of beauty should not be simplified as 'male domination and female oppression' (Davis 1991: 26), the radical feminist approach has been challenged. Liberal feminists and postmodern feminists offer a rather different perspective. They view beauty practices as a means for women to express agency and to gain pleasure and gratification.

From the radical feminist perspective, Sheila Jeffreys (2005) labels Western beauty practices as 'harmful cultural practices' which induce harmful effects on women physically and mentally. Referring to Andrea Dworkin's analysis of 'woman-hating culture' (1974), Jefferys asserts that beauty practices are damaging to women's bodies and lives, 'time wasting, expensive and painful to self-esteem', but are still cultivated as necessity in a male supremacist culture 'so that the sexes can be told apart, so that the dominant sex class can be differentiated from the subordinate one' (2005: 6 – 7). On women's oppression, Jeffreys also refers to a radical feminist Sandra Bartky. Bartky develops an explanation of how women can be 'oppressed psychologically' by the 'fashion-beauty complex' (1990 cited in Jeffreys 2005: 8). According to Bartky, the fashion-beauty complex fostered by the fashion and beauty industries takes over the role of the family and church in defining and regulating femininity. 'The fashion-beauty complex promotes itself to women as seeking to, "glorify the female body and to provide opportunities for narcissistic indulgence" but in fact its aim is to "depreciate women's body and deal a blow to her narcissism" so that she will buy more products. The result is that a woman feels constantly deficient and that her body requires either alteration or else heroic measures merely to conserve it' (Bartkey 1990: 39 cited in Jeffreys 2005: 8). Wendy Chapkis also frames beauty as women's oppression. In her book *Beauty*

Secrets (1986), Chapkis reveals that women battled everyday with their 'hated bodily features' and went through 'expensive and painful rituals' for the sake of achieving an acceptable femininity (Chapkis 1986 cited in Davis 1991: 27). For Chapkis, 'women are obsessed with controlling their bodies. Beauty is a way to keep women in line, lulling them with the promise of control over at least one part of their life' (1986 cited in Davis 1991: 27).

Radical feminists label the subject of beauty as women's oppression. However, for the new strands of feminist approaches, beauty practices have been reappraised as an opportunity for women's agency and empowerment. Kathy Davis, for example, writes, 'Women are not merely the victims of the terrors visited upon them by the "fashion-beauty complex". On the contrary, they ongoingly partake in its delights as well. The link between beauty and femininity cannot be described strictly in terms of repression. The gratifying, positive, and even exciting dimensions of beauty need to be taken into account as well' (1991: 33). In a similar vein, Celia Lury (1996) discusses the 'pleasure of femininity' deriving from beauty practices and consumption practices. According to Lury, women as consumers 'do not simply passively adopt the versions of femininity which they are encouraged to emulate, but actively seek to redefine the meaning of these femininities. ... [It] is argued that women have subverted the idea that beauty is something that can be achieved, put on and taken off, and have developed ways of seeing femininity as a *masquerade*, a performance, in ways which enable them to play with their personal identity, and take pleasure in the adoption of roles and masks' (1996: 144, author's italics).

From my point of view, these opposing strands of feminist approaches inevitably foster binary categories that underpin a framework of how beauty practices should be analysed and defined. Women become either objects or subjects. They either experience oppression or express agency (Jeffreys 2005). They either are suppressed through the sexual objectification or enjoy the pleasure of being feminine (Lury 1996). However, drawing upon my empirical study, I argue that the categories are not opposing but rather paradoxically concurring. In theoretical terms, it may be possible to draw a distinctive line between approaches in examining women's consumption practices. However, in their everyday lived experiences, the women office workers' engagement in consumption practices offer them pleasure but at the same time objectify them. That is the women office workers can be subjects who make choices and express agency, yet concurrently

become objects to be looked at and valued. In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate that the women office workers' engagement in looking good practices through their consumption of makeup and clothes can serve well as an example of how their experiences of being both objects and subjects, of oppression and agency, and of sexual objectification and pleasure of femininity coincide.

Looking Good Practices Involve Learning.

Another way to approach women's looking good practices in the workplace, I propose, is to view looking good practices as 'learning practices' – a process of social learning, in particular, by which women learn through participating in the practices of looking at other women. I refer to two relevant theoretical approaches to learning, Cristina Grasseni's concept of 'skilled visions' (2004, 2007) and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory of 'situated learning' and concept of 'community of practices' (1991). Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and concept of community of practices help explain how women office workers continually learn to engage in looking good practices in the workplace and how through the consumption of makeup and clothes the women constitute identities to become part of the community of practices. Influenced by Lave and Wenger's concept of community of practices (1991), Grasseni's concept of skilled visions (2004, 2007) proposes looking as a way of learning in a professional conduct which in part helps formulate a professional identity. By adopting the concept of skilled visions which focuses on 'the process of visual enskilment' (2004, 2007), I explore the ways in which women office workers look at other women in a particular workplace, construct their perception towards an ideal and 'appropriate' appearance and inscribe their outer bodies through the consumption of makeup and clothes in order to constitute 'appropriate' identities at work. This theoretical discussion will focus on how the concept of skilled visions and situated learning theory help characterise looking good practices as involving the practice of learning. It also offers a critical rethinking of existing ideas about women's looking.

Theorising Women's Looking

One of the most prevalent themes to emerge from my ethnographic fieldwork is a relationship between the practice of looking and the female body. Women look at their bodies. Women look at other women's bodies. Women compare their bodies to other women's bodies. Women prepare their bodies to be looked at. This

omnipresence of women's engagement in the practice of looking has captured my attention.

Existing theories of looking are mainly in the field of film studies, exploring either looking at representation or looking in representation (see Mulvey 1975; Doane 1991; Pollock 1992). One of the most influential theoretical explanations that links the practice of looking with gender and sexuality is Laura Mulvey's 'theory of visual pleasure' (1975). Grounded in psychoanalysis adopted from Freud and Lacan, the theory of visual pleasure is associated with Freud's scopophilia. Scopophilia explains the pleasure of looking and, likewise, the pleasure of being looked at. The pleasure of looking is a voyeuristic form of looking in which one takes 'other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (1975: 8). The pleasure of being looked at, on the contrary, involves the process by which one identifies oneself with an image, develops narcissism and constitutes the ego (1975: 10). Mulvey explains further that such a pleasure is structured in a patriarchal order in that looking has been split between a dichotomy of passivity and activity, presumably a male active spectator and female passive spectacle. 'The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (1975: 11).

Mulvey's initial critique on visual pleasure, however, is problematic as it formulates an argument that ignores the potency of women's active looking and reinforces a dominant system of asymmetric sexual differentiation in which a male supremacy is presumed (Nash 1996: 156). As illustrated in John Berger's statement, 'Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (1972: 45). What if women appropriate the gaze? What if women engage in 'active looking'?

In feminist film criticism, Linda Williams (1984 cited in Doane 1991: 27) illustrates that in the horror film genre women's active looking will ultimately lead to punishment. Mary Ann Doane (1991: 27) also points out that women's looking in classic Hollywood films is often associated with taboos. In the world of art, Griselda Pollock decodes Edgar Degas's painting *Woman with a Lorgnette*, and suggests that a woman's excessive looking is represented as monstrous. 'A woman's face partly obliterated by the mechanical aggression of the binocular protruding like the eyes of a monstrous bug' (Pollock 1992: 106). According to

Doane, when a woman shifts her position from being a spectacle to being a spectator, she 'poses a threat to an entire system of representation' (Doane 1991: 27). These illustrations of women's active looking represented in films and paintings demonstrate that the visual imagery of women has been produced not only for the pleasure and empowerment of men, but also for the construction of appropriate femininity (Nash 1996: 157). If one of the mechanisms of social control over women is to codify women's active looking in a representational system as, for example, punishment, taboos and being a monster, I shall reiterate Pollock, 'Is a woman looking, therefore, *ipso facto* a transgression?' (Pollock 1992: 106, author's italics)

Are there any possibilities for women's active looking? How can women's practice of looking be theorised? One of the attempts to theorise women's looking is found in Doane's work on 'female spectatorship' (1991). Grounding her argument in a psychoanalytic perspective and feminist film studies, Doane conceptualises female spectatorship in terms of 'spatial proximity' by shifting a focus from Mulvey's dichotomy of activity and passivity to a dichotomy of proximity and distance between a female spectator and image (Doane 1991: 21 – 23). Doane explains that a difficulty that hinders the potency of female spectatorship is 'over-identification' (1991: 24). Over-identification represents the 'closeness' between the female spectator and the female spectacle. A woman as the spectator over-identifies with the spectacle, an image of the woman she sees on the screen. 'For the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image – she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism' (Doane 1991: 21, author's italics). For Doane, to resolve this problem of closeness that gives the woman either an over-identification with the image or narcissism with one own object of desire, the potency of female spectatorship lies in an ability to create a necessary distance. One way of projecting the distance is that the female spectator oscillates between the feminine and the masculine positions. 'Given the structures of cinematic narrative, the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain "masculinisation" of spectatorship' (Mulvey 1981 cited in Doane 1991: 24). The process of oscillation between the feminine and masculine positions is, according to Doane, 'the metaphor of the transvestite' (1991: 24). The woman masquerades 'to

manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the women' (1991: 31 – 32). For some commentators, Doane's conceptualisation of the female spectatorship as the female masquerade in the male viewing position offers a potency of women's active looking. It also invokes a form of resistance to a dominant idea that views women as passive objects of the male gaze (Nash 1996: 158).

Although the existing psychoanalytic theories of looking such as Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure (1975) and Doane's conceptualisation of female spectatorship (1991) help establish a link between looking, gender and sexuality, they raise a number of questions. They mainly discuss active men looking at passive women and when women look, it involves narcissism and transvestism. Moreover, these theories of looking are contextualised in an analysis of visual representations, undermining other aspects of looking in everyday lived experiences.

Far from being confined to an analysis of visual representations, in more recent studies, the practice of looking has been conceptualised and analysed as part of everyday practices. Ethnographic and ethnomethodological studies of 'vision' by Charles Goodwin (1994), Yasuko Kawatoko (2000), Aug Aug Nishizaka (2000), Lucy Suchman (2000), Naoki Ueno (2000) and Cristina Grasseni (2004, 2007), for example, offer different ways to approach the practices of looking, especially in the everyday and professional context. In this thesis, particular attention will be given to Cristina Grasseni's concept of 'skilled visions' (2007). Although in conceptualising the concept of skilled visions, Grasseni (2004, 2007) has not raised any discussions on the practice of looking in relation to gender, she adopted Lave and Wenger's concept of community of practices (1991) and proposes an interesting demonstration of how the practice of looking can be connected to the practice of learning in an identity formation process. By explaining the women office workers' looking good practices at work through an interrelationship between the practices of looking, learning and identity formation as introduced by Grasseni's concept of skilled visions, I argue for the potency of women's active looking in everyday life.

Grasseni argues for vision that is neither a psychoanalytic nor a panoptic gaze, but rather 'a way of looking at the world' (2004: 41). More importantly, vision as a way of looking at the world is indifferent from other senses in that it can be trained and educated. Grasseni terms this 'capacity to look in a certain way as a

result of training', 'skilled visions' (2004: 41). Skilled visions, she emphasises, need to be considered as multi-sensory practices in which looking cannot be detached from other senses but rather has to be coordinated with them (Grasseni 2007a: 1, 4, 5). According to Grasseni, vision is 'an enskilled sense' that not only can be trained, but also can be shared across a community, allowing vision to function as 'a ductile situated, contested and politically fraught means of situating oneself in a community of practice' (2007a: 1, 6).

'Skilled vision' is not a metaphor for *knowledge tout court*, nor a synonym for *observation*, nor an invitation to exercise critical analysis of particular visual *representations*. The aim is to show how there is no neutral and detached gaze, but rather that there are different practices of *looking*, and that learning some 'good looking' (Stafford 1996) is inevitably part (and a necessary precondition) of insight into such practices. Far from being exercises in neutral observation, then, skilled visions can be analysed in terms of practical routines, social and ideological *belonging* as well as of aesthetic *longing*. Moreover, skilled visions are not necessarily related to image-making processes, so that studying skilled visions does not necessarily mean conducting a critical reading of visual artifacts. To sum up, skilled visions are the result of concrete processes of education of attention, within situated practices.

(Grasseni 2007a: 6 – 7, author's italics)

Skilled visions involve 'a process of visual enskilment'. Engaging in this very process of visual enskilment, an apprentice learns to formulate her/his professional identities to become part of the community of practices. From her ethnographic fieldwork with cattle breeders and breed experts in the northern part of Italy, Grasseni (2004, 2007) explores an actual process of visual enskilment and demonstrates how professional identities are shaped through this process.

To be recognised as highly skilled and dedicated herders in the community of practices, cattle breeders must possess necessary visual skills that enable them to distinguish their cattle at sight and to assess the beauty of their cattle. A technique of looking at cows is appropriated through a process of visual enskilment. This process of visual enskilment takes place from a very young age. Breeders' children, for example, familiarise themselves with detailed cows' shapes through toys and games. They play with plastic toy cows, exact miniature models of champion cows. They play games such as cow-spotting and role play pretending to be an expert herder managing a farm. Cattle breeders themselves gain expertise by constantly comparing and updating standards of excellence of ideal beautiful cows. These standards of excellence which function as criteria for breed selection and for animal evaluation are not static but change over time,

requiring the breeders' ongoing engagement in the process of enskilment. The cattle breeders always discuss the beauty of their cattle with other breeders, collect and exchange any visual materials related to cattle fairs and champion cows, frequently participate in cattle fairs, regularly visit their neighbours' herds and daily attend their cows. All of these practices help structure the breeders' perception towards ideals of animal beauty, enabling them to claim specialised knowledge and skilled judgement for assessing cows. Having specialised knowledge and skilled judgement on a good form of animal beauty becomes a marker of the breeders' professional identity. 'The beauty of animals becomes the focus of statements of identity: a critical appraisal of a neighbour's herd tacitly implies putting at stake, for reciprocal evaluation, strategic choices about how to invest one's expertise and capital, and how to see one's work as meaningful' (Grasseni 2004: 42 – 45).

Grasseni's ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates the training of vision amongst the cattle breeders in their everyday conduct. This involves an active search for information from the environment and how one makes a reference to it. The cattle breeders' way of looking has been trained to detect specific features in cows that inform standards of beauty. Grasseni terms this form of skilled capacity, 'skilled visions'. In Chapter 6, by focusing on women's learning, I will demonstrate how the concept of skilled visions can be adopted to analyse a gendered way of looking in the workplace. The women office workers are required to learn standards of appropriateness of a particular workplace they wish to be situated in. The concept of skilled visions offers a framework to look at how through participating in the practices shared by other women, the women office workers form a perception of 'appropriateness' that informs their consumption of makeup and clothes at work.

Theorising Situated Learning

Situated learning theory offers a shift in an analytical viewpoint on learning. Proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), the situated learning theory questions a conventional perspective that views learning as an individual process of internalisation. That is a learner as an individual internalises, absorbs and assimilates knowledge given and transmitted to her/him. Learning in this sense is an outcome of teaching implemented in a separate environment which is detached from other everyday activities (Lave and Wenger 1991: 47; Wenger 1998: 3). Instead Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning is based on an assumption

that a learner is a social being who acquires tacit knowledge by actively and continually engaging in a social situation. Learning is then a process of social participation taking place in a context of everyday lived experience. Social participation is a key definition of situated learning. Wenger explains further that:

Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities ... Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do.
(1998: 4, author's italics)

In other words, situated learning does not concern a process of internalisation, but rather a process of 'increasing participation in communities of practices' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 49). A community of practice is a specific kind of community that is defined by 'a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98). 'To be able to do their job and have a satisfying experience at work' (Wenger 2001: 47), practitioners as members of the community of practice 'develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice' (Wenger, 2007). A community of practice is, therefore, constituted by a shared practice amongst its members (Wenger 2001: 47).

Lave and Wenger (1991) term a learning process which is situated in a community of practice 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Legitimate peripheral participation involves participation as a way of learning. Lave and Wenger argue that a learner or an apprentice becomes a full practitioner in a community of knowledge and practice not simply through 'observation and imitation' but through 'participation in ongoing practice as the legitimate source of learning opportunities' (1991: 96 – 97). It is crucial to note that through this participatory process of learning, a learner engages in not only an acquisition of knowledge which facilitates her/him to master new practices, but also a formation of identity which allows her/him to evolve as a full member of the socio-cultural community she/he participates in. That is learners 'do not simply learn *about*; they also learn ..., *to be*' (Bruner 1996 cited in Brown and Duguid 2001: 200, authors' italics). From this perspective, Lave and Wenger argue, 'learning and a sense of identity are inseparable' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 113).

As a learner develops her/his identity by moving from being a peripheral participant towards becoming a full participant, a reproduction and transformation of the community of practice occurs. This reciprocal relation between a learner and practice means that:

[T]he move of learners toward full participation in a community of practice does not take place in a static context. The practice itself is in motion. Since activity and the participation of individuals involved in it, their knowledge, and their perspectives are mutually constitutive, change is a fundamental property of communities of practice and their activities. ... [E]veryone can to some degree be considered a "newcomer" to the future of a changing community.

(Lave and Wenger 1991: 116 – 117)

To explore learning within a framework of legitimate peripheral participation in the community of practice, therefore, means to analyse 'the reproduction cycles of the communities' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98) and 'the changing forms of participation and identity of persons who engage in sustained participation in a community of practice: from entrance as a newcomer, through becoming an old-timer with respect to new comers, to a point when those newcomers themselves become old-timers' (1991 56).

The theory of situated learning provides an analytical framework to understand women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes in relation to their identity formation process at work. To be accepted as part of the organisation, the women office workers are required to possess not only skills and knowledge necessary for performing their work, but also an ability to develop a certain standard of 'appropriate identity' which enables them to move from being a peripheral participant to become a member of the community of practice. Under an assumption that identities are embodied, I argue that the women office workers can achieve an 'appropriate identity' through their everyday practices in the form of makeup and clothes consumption. Incorporating a concept of skilled visions to a theory of situated learning and community of practice, I propose to conceptualise looking good practices as women's active engagement in a process of social learning (see Chapter 6). That is the women office workers learn to 'look good' through the process by which they look at other women, participate in the practices shared amongst themselves, negotiate the meaning of appropriateness and reify such meanings through their consumption of makeup and clothes. By sharing the meanings and practices with other women in the community of practices, the women office workers inevitably participate in social practices. In Chapter 6 and

Chapter 7, I will explore further how looking good practices entail social practices amongst the women office workers.

Defining the Context of Looking Good Practices

In this section, I will explore further the context of my research. The concept of looking good practices has emerged from my ethnographic fieldwork, conducted with Thai women office workers in business organisations in Bangkok, Thailand. In a broad sense, I identify Thailand and the workplace as the context of looking good practices. Firstly, I characterise Thailand as a consumer society and will outline the changes in the political economy that gave rise to consumerism in Thai society. Secondly, I conceptualise the workplace as a site of aestheticisation, emphasising the significance of women office workers' bodies in the making of the aesthetic workplace.

Thailand as Consumer Society

Defining Consumer Society

In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (2006), Alan Warde explains the term consumer society. 'This is an ill-defined, but nonetheless popular, concept gesturing towards the enhanced societal importance of the purchase of commodities and their cultural meanings and significance, it implies a comparatively greater role for consumption – in contrast with work and employment, religion, family, investment, or politics – in determining economic organisation, cultural institutions, and personal motivations and experience' (Warde 2006: 88). Warde's observation is comparable to those of many commentators on consumer society in that they all accentuate the role of consumption in the light of hedonistic pursuit as the driving force of social organisation and integration (see also Edwards 2000; Clarke 2003 and O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002). In other words, the centrality of consumer society dwells on the practice of consumption which surpasses the satisfaction of necessity. Amongst these commentators, Tim Edwards expounds a concept of consumer society.

Consumer society is, most simply, defined as society which is importantly, and in all likelihood also increasingly, organised around the concept and practice of consumption. Thus, in essence, people are seen to spend more time and more money consuming, whether at the level of leisure activities from the arts and sports to holidays and dining out, or more

directly in terms of shopping and purchasing goods and services to suit various aspects of their lives. Moreover, and somewhat more contentiously, one may also assert that this also interlinks with the wider construction of personal and social identities around consumption practices, from assertions of status through adoptions of certain styles, or through using various modes of consumption, from shopping to playing sport, as primary mechanisms through which social relationships are formed and maintained.

(Edwards 2000: 167)

In theoretical terms, to clarify a concept of consumer society, Edwards (2000) distinguishes 'consumer society' from 'consumer culture' by considering two differing interpretations of the practice of consumption. 'An analysis of consumer practices as matters of style, taste and identity formation or maintenance often informs a more poststructural analysis of consumer culture' (2000: 3). Mike Featherstone's *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991, 2007), Celia Lury's *Consumer Culture* (1996), Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987) and Don Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997) are amongst studies on consumption cited by Edwards to illustrate the analyses of consumer culture. Furthermore, 'a consideration of the more historical or economic underpinnings of consumer practices or their more overtly political implications tends to inform a wider analysis of consumer society' (Edwards 2000: 3). Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and John Harold Plumb's *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982), for example, emphasises the more historical and economic aspects of consumption (Edwards 2000: 34 – 35). Nevertheless, Edwards acknowledges that these two interpretations of the practice of consumption are not completely separated, but emphasise to a different extent 'a more contemporary matter of aesthetic style' or 'a more historical development in industrial capitalism' (2000: 3, 166).

This thesis explores Thai women office workers' consumption practices in relation to an identity formation process in a contemporary workplace. To a greater extent, the thesis entails the analysis of consumption practices as informed by the Thai consumer culture. However, it remains useful to render a brief historical background of how consumer society has developed in Thailand. The analysis of Thai consumer society is important as it provides a more insightful understanding for the empirical investigation. In the following section, I will outline some significant changes in Thailand's economic, political and cultural systems which contributed to the rise of consumerism in Thai society.

Consumer Society in Thai Modern History

It was not until the mid nineteenth century when *Sakdina*, Siam's feudal system in which a social hierarchy was ranked by the control of land and labour, began to change (Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1997: 90). Striving to avoid western colonisation and to retain its sovereignty, Siam (the former name of Thailand) under the rule of King Rama IV (1850 – 1868) signed the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1855. The Treaty ensured trading and extraterritorial rights to British citizens. Following the Bowring Treaty, Siam also signed similar treaties with other western countries. As a result, Siam was forced to open its economy to the world market and adopt a western capitalist economic system. The king's monopoly was replaced by the new export economy. Feudal peasants were released from a compulsory labour service and became independent owner-cultivators (Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1997: 90; Girling 1981 cited in Witayasakpan 1992: 44). Western luxury goods were imported alongside a new ideology of 'hedonism, leisure activity, and the idea of purchase-for-self', to be consumed exclusively by members of the nobility and aristocracy (Chaisingkananont 1999: 2). Chinese merchants populated the capital and became affluent commoners who competed with the nobility (Girling 1981 cited in Witayasakpan 1992: 44). Siam's economy gradually transformed from subsistence to commercial (Witayasakpan 1992: 44; Tantiwiranond 1997: 90; Suwanlaong 2006: 104).

The growth of western influences during the reigns of King Rama V (1868 – 1910) and King Rama VI (1910 – 1925) led to the elite's aspiration to modernise Siam. Economic, educational and political systems were radically reformed. There was an increasing centralisation of the bureaucracy. The administrative system was strengthened. A new group of officials were recruited from both members of the nobility and commoners. They earned a salary with an income to spend on goods and luxuries. It was during this period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century that the middle-class which encompassed 'merchants, bureaucrats and intellectuals', was believed to emerge (Witayasakpan 1992: 43). The middle-class who emerged from this new educational and economic system started to question traditional values. The social strata ascribed by birth had been challenged (Chaisingkananont 1999: 2).

The spread of democratic ideology and the world economic depression after the First World War brought about the political revolution in 1932. The bloodless coup d'état led by *Khana Ratsadon*, a small group of highly educated militants and bureaucrats, forced change in the mode of government from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy (Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1997: 91). In Somrak Chaisingkananont's view, 'the decline of the economic power of royal families and noblemen after the political [revolution] in 1932 was the important factor to encourage the new lifestyle. Ideology of liberty and equality was promoted by the new government and had been widespread among educated people. ... The boundary of social hierarchical discrimination by patina objects and dressing between high class and middle class had been blurred' (1999: 3). Since the loss of their power and financial resources, members of the nobility were compelled to sell their 'status-claimer' possessions and dismiss their domestic servants (McCracken 1988: 35 cited in Chaisingkananont 1999: 3). Royal chefs, dressmakers and servants left the palaces and opened their own business, making the 'courtly model' goods available for the public to purchase and consume (Chaisingkananont 1999: 3).

Although their political power was in decline, the nobility's cultural knowledge remained influential. Their etiquettes, clothing and other cultural practices were exploited as a model of consumption in the wake of 'hypernationalism' (Callahan 1998: 30) during the regimes of Field Marshal Phibul Songkram (1938-1944 and 1948-1960)² (Chaisingkananont 1999: 3). Phibul changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand in 1939 to reflect the nationalistic stance (Pongsapich 2001: 91). His government introduced the policy of nationalism known as *Rathaniyom*, a cultural mandate that aimed to 'civilise' the nation and uplift the Thais' standard of living via the military enforcement of cultural and educational programmes (Chaisingkananont 1999: 4). The idea that one could become a noblewoman or nobleman (*phoo-di* – a refined lady or gentleman) by virtue of consumption rather than birth was invented. The cultural mandate on dress, for example, outlined the national dress code for women and men (Callahan 1998: 34). To be 'civilised', Thais 'should dress properly according to the categories of sex, age, time and place following the criteria of the elite' (Chaisingkananont 1999: 4). Ironically, while the government promoted proper

² For a full list of Prime Ministers of Thailand (from 1932 to present) see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Prime_Ministers_of_Thailand.

dress and aristocratic etiquettes, pornography, violent films and romantic novels were prevalent. Theatres, dance halls and beauty contests were popular (Landon 1939 cited in Tantiwiranond 1997: 181; Callahan 1998). Those who avoided outright resistance sought to escape from the tyranny by exercising 'their freedom in the imaginary world of consumption' (Chaisingkananont 1999: 5).

After the Second World War, Thailand suffered from both internal conflicts and external interference. The Cold War and the Vietnam War significantly affected the country. The US set Thailand as a strategic location for the fight against communism in Indochina and, as a result, the US government injected a great amount of military and financial support into the country. In return, the Thai government allowed the US to build a military base on Thai soil (Tantiwiranond 1997: 181). Fear of communism was employed to justify and strengthen 'authoritarian capitalism' during the military rules of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and his successor Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (Callahan 1998: 36). The ideology of 'development' was promulgated (Baker and Pongpaichit 2005: 140). Under the guidance of the World Bank and the US government, the Office of the National Economic Development Board³ was established to direct the country's economic development and in 1961 the first five-year National Economic Development Plan was implemented. The plan dramatically geared the country towards a more urban and export oriented strategy (Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1997: 91). However, 'Thai-US cooperation militarily and economically generated a series of mixed blessings for the Thai economy...', Darunee Tantiwiranond comments (1997: 185). 'In terms of the economy, the gross national product rose by 7 per cent annually during the 1960s, while socio economic disparities became more severe, widening gaps between the rich and the poor, urban and rural and among the four geographical regions (the central plains, north, northeast and south). This trend of inequality still continues...' (Bertrand 1983; Meesook 1979; Turton 1978 cited in Tantiwiranond 1997: 185).

One of Sarit's popular slogans – 'Work is money. Money is work. This brings happiness.' – encapsulates a work ethic that had been propagated

³ The Office of the National Economic Development Board later changed the name to the Office of National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). In close to five decades, Thailand produced ten national economic and social development plans. The current plan is the tenth (2007 – 2011). For full details of the national economic and social development plans, see <http://www.nesdb.go.th/Default.aspx?tabid=62> (Thai language only).

alongside a hedonistic pursuit of consumerism in the 1960s. The government promoted entertainment and recreational activities as well as encouraged Thais 'to satisfy their freedom in consumption as the ideal of life' (Chaisingkananont 1999: 5). However, the deluded 'freedom' of consumption could not deter the military suppression, their 'monopoly of power, intensity of corruption, and denial of political rights' (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002: 338). The student uprisings in October 1973 and October 1976 led to a new phase of revolution in Thai politics. The upsurges overthrew Thanom's government and brought about a transformation from military rule to civilian rule, preparing the way to the ascent of new 'consumer capitalism' (Ockey 1999:242) (See Baker and Phongpaichit 2005).

The departure of the US from Indochina at the close of the Vietnam War in 1975 marked the end of the US's economic patronage of Thailand. Nevertheless, Thailand remained committed to a liberal market economy and adjusted itself to a new economic force led by Japan and the East Asian countries. Over the 1980s, Japan had become one of Thailand's largest foreign investors. Seeking access to low-cost Thai labour, Japan and the East Asian countries moved their export-oriented manufacturing to Thailand. Meanwhile, the tourism industry was promoted and grew considerably. Foreign capital flew in, accelerating the growth of the Thai economy. Between 1985 and 1995, Thailand's economic growth rate was higher than 8 percent, ranking the highest in the world at the time (Tantiwiranond 1997: 185). (See Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 199 – 202; Phongpaichit and Baker 2002: 248.)

The growth of the Thai economy gave rise to 'the new rich' or 'those who become wealthy through self-earn accomplishment' (Costa and Belk 1990 cited in Wattanasuwan 2003: 65). The new rich have added new characteristics to the complex structure of the Thai middle classes. They have been described as a 'new middle class', while 'petty bourgeoisie, technocrats, bureaucrats, managers or white-collar [workers]' are labelled 'the old and the marginal middle classes' (Jumbala and Banpasirichot 2001: 281; Ockey 1999: 230). Seen as keen consumers and lifestyle buyers, the middle class, in general, favour the market economy (Jumbala and Banpasirichot 2001: 281). The middle class generate the growth of 'consumer capitalism', and, likewise, consumerism defines the middle-class lifestyle (Ockey 1999: 240). The media, television in particular, popularise a middle-class lifestyle by depicting ideal commodities and ways of life (1999: 240). Advertisements are aimed at middle-class consumers. Department stores and

shopping malls have burgeoned in Bangkok and other urban cities, becoming 'the epitome of middle-class consumerism' (Subpaithoon 2002 cited in Chanrungmaneekul 2009: 54; Ockey 1999: 240). Present-day Thailand, or Bangkok in particular, is permeated by consumerism where people's daily lives and social relations are made meaningful through the act of consumption. In this regard, I consider Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, an interesting site for a study of women's consumption practices.

Workplace as a Site of Aestheticisation

In much of the literature relating to the workplace in sociological enquiries, a concept of workplace has not been questioned and theorised. The term 'workplace' has been simply used to refer to a location where people perform their work and subsequently a location where researchers conduct their studies. Gile Valentine (2002), for example, studies food consumption *within* workplaces (a hospital, a restaurant, a mining site, an accounting company and a bank). Giuliana Comisso (2006) analyses resistance *in* the contemporary workplaces (the Integrated Factory of Fiat in Melfi, Italy and the Nissan Factory in Sunderland, England). Fleming (2007) investigates sexuality, power and resistance *in* the workplace (an American-owned call centre service company). Bronwyn Davies et al. (2005) discuss neoliberalism *in* workplaces (higher educational institutions). Blake E. Ashforth and Ronald H. Humphrey (1995) appraise emotion *in* the workplace. Vern Baxter and Steve Kroll-Smith (2005) examine the normalisation of the workplace nap. These empirical enquiries are studies of 'something' *in* the workplace rather than studies of 'something' *in relation to* the workplace.

This thesis examines a relationship between the workplace and women office workers' consumption practices. That is, it attempts to explain how by being in a particular workplace the women's consumption practices are shaped and regulated, and, likewise, how by engaging in consumption practices the women office workers constitute the workplace. In conceptualising the term workplace, I will draw upon a concept of 'place' to demonstrate the role of the body in the making of the workplace. Then I will focus on the aesthetics and the aestheticisation of the women office workers' bodies to be situated in the workplace.

Defining Workplace: Workplace as 'Place'

In understanding a relationship between consumption practices and the workplace, I conceptualise workplace as 'place'. Similar to the term workplace, place stands in a paradoxical position in that it is simple but at the same time complicated (Cresswell 2004: 1). As a common word used in an everyday language, the concept of place seems to be understood by a commonsense and assumed unproblematic, making it difficult to develop the concept in a more critical way beyond its familiarity (Cresswell 2004; Rodman 2003).

Place in its most straightforward definition, according to Tim Cresswell, is 'space which people have made meaningful' (2004: 7). It is 'space people are attached to one way or another' (2004: 7). Cresswell gives a number of examples of 'place-making activities' engaged in by various groups of people to demonstrate how by exerting their identities or making the space say something about them, people have turned space into place. Place in this sense is 'a meaningful location' (2004: 7). However, 'the treatment of place as simply *derivative* of space' (Malpas 1998: 22) or as 'something *posterior to space*' or 'even *made from space*' (Casey 1996: 14, author's italics) has been criticised as it offers 'no explication of place as a concept in its own right' (Malpas 1998: 32).

Phenomenology offers a way to understand and appreciate place as a central concept. 'Rather than asking what this place or that place is like, the phenomenological approach to place asks what makes a place a place?' (Cresswell 2004: 23). The phenomenological approach views place as 'a way of being-in-the-world' (2004: 20). It discusses a concept of place in relation to 'aspects of human existence and experience' (Malpas 1998: 33). In *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Edward Relph argues for a significance of place to 'human existence and experience' (Cresswell 2004: 21). That is 'to be human is to be in place' (1976 cited in Cresswell 2004: 23). To Relph, place is more than a location as he writes:

The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial or mundane experiences... The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence.
(1976: 43 cited in Cresswell, 2004: 23)

What makes a place a place? Edward S. Casey points out the role of perception as a crucial matter of place (1996: 17). 'There is no knowing or sensing

a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it', Casey writes (1996: 18). The experience of perceiving place, according to Casey (1996), requires both 'a lived body' and a place itself. A lived body is 'a corporeal subject who lives *in* a place *through* perception' (1996: 22, author's italics). In this sense, a lived body is neither 'a body as a physical object', 'a fleshly monolith punctually located at a given position in space' or 'an inert, non self-moving entity submitting to the law of gravitation and motion', but rather a 'body-subject' who is 'fully inscribed by what Merleau-Ponty calls "corporeal intentionality"' (Casey 1996: 21 – 22). Through corporeal intentionality, a lived body as a body subject moves, situates, remembers and integrates itself with place (1996: 22). Not only a lived body, but also a place is required in the experience of perceiving place. Similar to a lived body which has 'corporeal intentionality', a place has 'operative intentionality' (1996: 22). Through operative intentionality, a place 'responds to the corporeal intentionality of the perceiving subject', and 'extends its own influence back onto this subject' (1996: 22). Place, Casey affirms, 'integrates with body as much as body with place' (1996: 22).

[T]he living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: *lived bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them.... By the same token, however, *places belong to lived bodies* and depend on them.... Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse... Bodies and places are connatural terms. They interanimate each other.
(Casey 1996: 24, author's italics)

A significant contribution Casey offers to the conceptualisation of place is that by emphasising the 'interanimation' between a lived body and a place, he recognises the role of lived body as 'an active ingredient of emplacement' (1996: 44).

A workplace is often referred to as 'the work setting in general' or 'a place, such as an office or factory, where people are employed'⁴. The definition identifies functions of the location where work is central. I recognise the materiality of the physical location and its function-related contents in defining workplace. However, in this thesis, I propose to extend the conceptualisation of the workplace by drawing upon a phenomenological approach to place to enunciate the role of the lived body in the making of the workplace and define workplace as a place made by the lived bodies of the women office workers through their everyday

⁴ workplace. (n.d.). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Retrieved July 29, 2009, from Dictionary.com website:
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/workplace>

consumption practices. By being in a particular workplace, the ways in which the women office workers engage in looking good practices may be shaped and regulated. However, I argue that the women's engagement in looking good practices, itself, also constitutes workplace. This interanimated relation between the women office workers' bodies, everyday consumption practices and the making of the workplace will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Situating the Aesthetic Workplace

In their analysis of interactive service work, Anne Witz et al. (2003), Dennis Nickson et al. (2003) and Chris Warhurst et al. (2000) develop a concept of 'aesthetic labour'. As 'a vital element in the production or materialization of the aesthetics of a service organisation' (Witz et al. 2003: 34), aesthetic labour is 'employees with particular embodied capacities and attributes that appeal to the senses of customers' (Warhurst and Nickson 2007: 103).

The concept of aesthetic labour is a critical response to Arlie Hochschild's concept of 'emotional labour' (1979, 1983). Hochschild conceptualises emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild 1983: 7 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 36). The conceptualisation marks a separation between 'surface' acting and 'inner' feeling. For Hochschild, inner feeling is more substantial than surface acting. In this respect, Hochschild criticises Goffman's 'impression management' as acting at a surface level. That is 'actors manage outer impressions rather than inner feelings' (Hochschild 1979: 557 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 36). Hochschild's emotional labour is the management of inner feelings. A bodily display and facial expressions are only used for expressing feelings. It is the pretence at an inner level. Because Hochschild focuses only on inner feelings, Witz et al. (2003) question an absence of the corporeal dimension in an analysis of emotional labour. They point out that 'the concept of emotional labour foregrounds the worker as a mindful, feelingful self, but loses a secure conceptual grip on the worker as an embodied self' (2003: 36). Aesthetic labour, on the contrary, valorises workers' physicality.

Witz et al. define aesthetic labour as 'the mobilisation, development and commodification of embodied "dispositions"' (Bourdieu 1984 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 37). Such embodied dispositions encompass 'durable ways of standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu 1990: 69 – 70 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 40). Embodied dispositions can be conceptualised in terms of

'physical capital' (Shilling, 1993 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 40). The physical capital is not fixed and, thus, can be mobilised and developed. In Witz et al.'s analysis, those who mobilise and develop the physical capital, however, are not employees but rather organisations and employers (see also Nickson et al. 2001; Warhurst et al. 2000).

We define "aesthetic labour" as a supply of "embodied capacities and attributes" possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. Employers then mobilise, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into "competencies" or "skills" which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a "style" of service encounter. By "aesthetically geared" we mean deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way.

(Warhurst et al. 2000: 4)

The concept of aesthetic labour is, therefore, significant to an analysis of embodied practices in the workplace because it 'opens up the possibility of seeing how, through the embodied performance of interactive service work, the physical capital of employees is valorised and converted into economic capital by and for organisations' (Witz et al. 2003: 40 – 41).

Why do employers invest their resources and efforts in the processes of recruitment, selection and training in order to remake, manufacture and make up 'aesthetic labour'? In explaining the relationship between the aesthetics and organisation, Witz et al. point out that the aesthetics *of* organisation is a form of corporate identity portrayed and expressed through the materiality of the 'hardware' of organisation (2003: 41 – 42). The hardware, an inanimate element of the organisation, includes 'marketing material, product design and the physical environment of workplaces' (Olins 1991; Ottensmeyer 1996; Schmitt and Simonson 1997 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 42). The aesthetics *of* organisation is a crucial investment for corporate benefit as through the manipulation of symbols and artefacts the aesthetics of organisation offers an opportunity to influence customers' sensory experiences, add value to the organisation and create organisational distinctiveness for competitive advantages (Olins 1991 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 42). However, Witz et al. (2003) argue that the aesthetic 'hardware' alone cannot function efficiently to foster the corporate identity. It has to be complemented by the 'software', the physicality of the employees who have been made into 'aesthetic labour' or 'the aesthetics *in* organisation' (2003: 42). Emphasising the employees' embodiment, Witz et al. argue that, 'If the literature on aesthetics of organisation indicates how organisations desire to express and

portray themselves through their hardware for corporate benefit, there is now a conflation of this “hardware” and “software”....[E]mployees, as software, have become human hardware as they are configured by organisations both as part of the surplus-producing process of the organisation and in order to be the *embodiment* of the organisation’s identity’ (2003: 43, authors’ italics).

In a similar vein, Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler’s concept of ‘organisational bodies’ (2000) offers a framework to examine a relationship between the aesthetics and organisation. The concept of ‘organisational bodies’ is developed from Hancock and Tyler’s empirical study of female flight attendants. As organisational bodies, the ‘bodies [of female flight attendants] were constituted and presented in line with organisational directives both by themselves and through the mutual observation and regulation of their colleagues and, as such, seemed to represent the materialized expression of an organisational cultural ideal to which they all contributed and, as such, mutually regulated’ (Hancock and Tyler 2000: 117).

In explaining how the organisational bodies function in the organisation, Hancock and Tyler (2000) adopt Pasquale Gagliardi’s concept of ‘organisational artefacts’ (1996). Gagliardi (1996) views organisational artefacts not only as ‘an externalised product of human agency’ but also as ‘a physical entity to be perceived by the senses’ (Hancock and Tyler 2000: 112). Gagliardi argues that the organisational artefacts of which aesthetic quality is strategically manipulated by the management can function as ‘communicative objects’ in that the organisational artefacts as communicative objects play ‘a unique role in the structuring of organisational action and the shaping of members’ beliefs and cultural values’ in order to ‘express desired feelings or pathos of collective organisational identity’ (Gagliardi 1996 cited in Hancock and Tyler 2000: 112).

Drawing upon Gagliardi’s concept of ‘organisational artefacts’, Hancock and Tyler suggest that the organisational bodies of the female flight attendants which are carefully manufactured through the processes of recruitment, training and supervision, in this sense, become ‘the aesthetic artefacts’ (2000: 117) in which the corporately desired aesthetic codes are internalised and inscribed on the lived body in order to express ‘an idealized self-image of beautiful service and corporate perfection’ (2000: 120 – 121). The organisational bodies that become embodied artefacts, therefore, aesthetically function similarly to the way in which ‘the corporate logos or the designs of the aircraft interiors do’ (2000: 120). They all

serve 'to form and communicate a collective organisational identity both amongst its members and to its paying clients' (2000: 120).

Witz et al.'s concept of 'aesthetic labour' (2003) and Hancock and Tyler's concept of 'organisational bodies' (2000) share a commonality in that both provide an analytical framework to examine how the management or the employers endeavour to aestheticise the bodies of the employees, in particular those of female employees engaging in the interactive service work, in order to develop the ideal working bodies who are capable of aesthetically representing the corporate identity. Their concepts seek to explain how through an ongoing process of recruitment, training and monitoring, the employees' bodies are objectified and commodified. However, Witz et al.'s and Hancock and Tyler's discussions disregard a potency of the employees' agentic capacity – in spite of being in a subordinate position, how the employees may exert their agency, act as subjects and negotiate with the aestheticisation.

In her study on organisational aesthetics, Samantha Warren explores 'employees' perspectives on a programme of workplace aestheticisation' (2002; 2008: 565). She asked members of a web-design department (Department X) to take photographs to 'show [her] how it felt to work at the Department X' (2008: 570). The Department X was part of a global IT company located in a rural area in the South of England. The management initiated a programme of workplace aestheticisation and relocated members of the Department X to a new 'aesthetically designed' office. By placing employees to work within 'a creative environment', the management aimed to increase employees' 'innovative output and ultimately productivity' (2002: 231). However, Warren clearly points out: 'my interest in the aestheticization of Department X was not managerialist – that is, aimed at evaluating whether the initiative "worked" in the sense that the aforementioned objectives had been met. Instead, I explored how it felt to be an employee who was "required" to play at work, executing her/his duties in an environment where fun was explicitly encouraged' (2008: 567).

Warren's work contributes to a shift of research focus from managerial strategies to employees' perspectives on workplace aestheticisation. Although her analysis does not discuss the aestheticisation of the body in the same way as those of Witz et al. and Hancock and Tyler, it offers a different analytical and methodological approach to researching the 'aesthetic dimensions of organisational life' (Warren 2008: 559). In this thesis, I question the aestheticisation of the female

bodies at work. Instead of asking how the management or employers foster the aesthetics *of/in* the organisation through the mobilisation, development and commodification of the employees' bodily capital, I explore how the women office workers, themselves, aestheticise their bodies through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes. I argue that looking good practices entail the aestheticisation of the women office workers' bodies to be situated in the workplace and through this process of aestheticisation the aesthetic workplace has been made. This approach will be discussed and developed further in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed the concept of looking good practices as a framework to explore Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work. Firstly, I argue that looking good practices are not beauty practices. I distinguish the concept of looking good practices from that of beauty practices and argue that beauty is not always a reason for which women engage in consumption that leads to an alteration, manipulation, modification and decoration of their bodies. Secondly, looking good practices demonstrate a tension between opposing strands of feminist approaches. The concept of looking good practices questions the way in which opposing strands of feminist approaches make a binary opposition framework of how women's consumption experiences in relation to their bodies should be discussed and analysed. Consumption practices offer women pleasure but at the same time objectify them. Women can be subjects who choose and express their agency, yet concurrently become objects to be looked at and valued. Thirdly, the concept of looking good practices offers a potency to explore women's active looking in that women are not merely objects of the male gazes but rather subjects who look and learn. As such, I argue that looking good practices involve learning. The women office workers participate in the process of social learning by which they learn to form appropriate identities in becoming part of the community of practice. They share practices amongst themselves. They look at other women, negotiate meanings of appropriateness, and reify such meanings through their consumption of makeup and clothes. In this sense, looking good practices are social practices.

Furthermore, I discuss the context in which looking good practices are examined. As a consumer society where consumption is deemed significant and

meaningful in defining people's identities and social relations, Thailand is an interesting country in which to explore women's consumption practices. Also, as the concept of looking good practices has emerged from my ethnographic fieldwork conducted with women office workers in business organisations, I propose to view their workplace as a site of aestheticisation where looking good practices take place. On one hand, I recognise that by being in a particular workplace, women engage in the consumption of makeup and clothes in a particular way. That is their engagement in looking good practices is shaped and regulated by an immediate workplace context in which they are situated. On the other hand, I argue for women's agency in defining workplace. I conceptualise workplace as a place made by the lived bodies of the women office workers. Whilst aestheticising their bodies through their engagement in looking good practices, the women office workers constitute their workplace through the interrelation between their lived bodies and the place.

CHAPTER 3

Doing Ethnography with Thai Women Office Workers

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how I 'did' ethnography with Thai women office workers in organisations by reflecting upon my experiences during my fieldwork at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation in Bangkok, Thailand. The chapter proceeds in five parts. Firstly, I discuss the issue of doing ethnography in organisations. Secondly, I highlight the significance of access and fieldwork roles in doing ethnography in organisations. My fieldwork experiences at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation demonstrate that how I gained access to the organisations determined and shaped my roles in the field. At CAIMEA, I found myself gradually become a secretary and was close to 'going native' (see O'Reilly 2009: 87 – 91). At Multivital, my role as a researcher was so prominent that I strove to establish trust with members of the organisation. One of the most difficult tasks was how I should manage my fieldwork roles.

Thirdly, I reflect upon how I developed friendships and relationships with the women office workers who participated in my research. I discuss how these relationships enabled me to learn as an ethnographer. I then raise an unsolvable question regarding an ethical dilemma that arose as I did participant observation with my informants with whom I became friends. Fourthly, I reflexively discuss how I introduced photography into my ethnographic research by recounting my experiences of taking and collecting photographs of the women office workers from the two organisations. I also highlight the ethical concerns which inform the uses and usefulness of photographs in my thesis. Finally, I introduce a debate on 'embodied ethnography' and argue for the recognition and insertion of my body in the research process and ethnographic representations. I discuss how my body and embodied experiences should inform the conduct of my fieldwork, analysis and writing of the ethnography.

Doing Ethnography in Organisations

Rather than a method of the collection of data, ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced.

(Pink 2007: 22)

Commentators on ethnography have acknowledged the values of the methodology (see O'Reilly 2005; Berg 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Pink 2007). I too acknowledge ethnography as a methodology that enables a problematisation of taken-for-granted social phenomena to be comprehended in a great depth. This thesis aims to explore the everyday lived experiences of Thai women office workers in relation to their consumption of makeup and clothes at work. In experiencing, interpreting and representing women's consumption experiences and everyday practices, I did ethnography in organisations. Doing ethnography in organisations is sometimes referred to as 'organisational ethnography' (Rosen 1991; Schwartzman 1993; Bell 1999; Kostera 2007; Neyland 2008). As 'a methodology used for researching the human networks of actions we call organisations' (Kostera 2007: 15), organisational ethnography is understood to be substantially different from 'ethnographic studies of whole (and largely foreign) societies' (Rosen 1991: 1). According to Michael Rosen, 'the goal of ethnography in general is to decode, translate, and interpret the behaviours and attached meaning systems of those occupying and creating the social system being studied' (1991: 12). Given that 'the social system being studied' is an organisation in particular, a principal aim of organisational ethnography is 'to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation' (Van Maanen 1979: 540 cited in Rosen 1991: 11 – 12).

Referring to Brian Spooner (1983), Rosen explains that 'most ethnography is written about *general* forms of organisation' in which "particular people behave and think in their everyday lives without being consciously "organised" for a specific objective" (Spooner 1983: 4 cited in Rosen 1991: 3, author's italics). In contrast, organisational ethnography explores 'social relations coalesced around a subset of goal-oriented activities' (Rosen 1991: 3). All relationships within 'formal'

organisations are rationalised to achieve specific goals. Every individual member of the organisation is subscribed to 'formal, explicit status and roles' and 'interacts with each other according to these statuses' (1991: 4). If the individuals are to meet in different circumstances other than in the organisation, they are likely to interact with each other in a different way (1991: 4). This means that the rules, strategies and meanings which operate within the structure of the formal working organisation are different from those operating in other areas of everyday life. An ethnographic interpretation of forms of behaviour and thought in the organisation is, thus, to be different from those enacted in 'general' society (1991: 4).

Having conducted my fieldwork in business organisations, I share with Rosen that an organisation is a particular social system operated to achieve a specific goal. Members of the organisation are governed by rules and subscribe to explicit roles and statuses that, in effect, inform the ways in which they manage their day-to-day situation and interact with people around them in such a particular work setting (Rosen 1991). Nevertheless, I am reluctant to classify my study of Thai women office workers' consumption practicess at work as embarking on 'organisational ethnography'. In his book *Organizational Ethnography*, Daniel Neyland (2008) raises a distinction 'between ethnography *of* and ethnography *for* organisations' (2008: 9, author's italics). He points out that 'the former relates to scholarly studies of an organisation, the latter refers to research carried out for (or on behalf of) an organisation' (2008: 9). Neyland also suggests potential advantages of the hybridisation between the two. However, what I wish to emphasise here is that neither is this thesis 'ethnography *of* organisation' nor 'ethnography *for* organisation', but rather 'ethnography of Thai women office workers'. The thesis does not entail 'organisational ethnography' in that it seeks to understand women's consumption experiences and practices rather than to investigate how the organisations work. I explore some aspects of the organisations, so as to understand the contexts in which women's consumption practices take place. My approach, therefore, differs from that of organisational ethnography as the subject of my study is Thai women office workers rather than the organisations.

Negotiating Access and Fieldwork Roles

Negotiating access was my major concern when I first planned for my fieldwork. At first glance such practical issues as how I should gain access to the field, how I should select my field site and where my ethnographic location should be seem to be straightforward questions. However, these practical questions regarding location and access can be significant to the contribution of knowledge deriving from the ethnographic fieldwork. That is how the field is selected and accessed can shape the ways in which the ethnographer conducts her/his fieldwork and, subsequently, the claims she/he is going to make as a result of that study (Neyland 2008: 62).

Initially, I identified business organisations located in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand as the field for my study. I hoped to be granted a placement in an organisation for at least four months, working alongside my potential informants, getting to know them, learning about their experiences, observing their everyday lives and participating in their daily activities in their own world. I wanted to understand what it felt like to be an office worker working for their organisation which may inform the ways in which they engaged in the consumption of makeup and clothes. In seeking such cooperation, I contacted any of my friends and relatives in Thailand who might have a connection with those in charge of any organisations based in Bangkok. Six organisations, namely a private university, an advertisement agency, a government agency, a music production company, a banking corporation and a consumer product company, were interested in taking part in my thesis.

As I reckoned that doing ethnographic fieldwork in only one organisation might not be able to provide me with sufficient perspectives to understand the women office workers' experiences, I selected two organisations from the potential six. My first selection was CAIMEA Banking Corporation. The other was a consumer product company called Multivital Corporation. I selected CAIMEA Banking Corporation and then Multivital Corporation because the two organisations shared some similar characteristics. Both of them were reputable large international corporations with the proven long establishment in Thailand. The private university and government agency were not selected because the aim of the thesis is to study women office workers in a business environment. The advertisement agency was considerably small in terms of the size of the business.

There were less than 20 employees working for the agency. The music production company was large in its number of employees but was highly involved in the media industry, manufacturing pop stars and singers. Its characteristics might differ from those of business organisations in general.

My placements at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation were granted after my contact wrote an introductory letter and forwarded my research information sheet and curriculum vitae to some 30 members of his business network. Most of them were foreign executives who were in charge of international companies in Thailand. The Chief Executive Officer of CAIMEA Banking Corporation was interested in my thesis. I had a meeting with her Personal Assistant in June 2005 and was granted permission to conduct my fieldwork at CAIMEA Banking Corporation for the period of four months from July to October 2005. The Chief Finance Officer of Multivital Corporation was also interested in my proposal but my placement at Multivital Corporation was not officially granted until December 2005. My fieldwork at Multivital Corporation was within the period from January to March 2006.

CAIMEA is an international banking corporation with more than 700 branches in 58 countries worldwide. The bank operates 34 branches in Thailand and employs more than 2100 employees. My fieldwork was conducted at the bank's head office located in one of the major commercial districts in central Bangkok. The business precinct is fully occupied by skyscrapers and corporate offices, especially those of banking corporations and financial institutions. It is also connected to shopping and entertainment hubs overpopulated by shops, department stores, shopping malls, cinemas, restaurants, pubs and bars. The building complex where the bank is situated is within walking distance from an open-air, pedestrianised street renowned for being a lunchtime shopping heaven for office workers. This street became a major site where I spent time with my informants, having lunch, shopping, and hanging out with them.

Multivital Corporation is one of the best-known consumer product companies, operating in 150 countries worldwide. In Thailand, the company employs more than 3000 employees working at three major sites; a head office in Bangkok and two manufacturing plants in industrial estates outside Bangkok. My fieldwork was conducted at Multivital Corporation's head office located in the north Bangkok business district. The area is a mixture of residential housing and commercial buildings. The building complex where Multivital's head office is

located is quite isolated from other commercial buildings, but open-air markets and shopping malls are within 10-20 minutes reach by car. The building complex comprises four buildings. Multivital Corporation occupies one of the buildings. The other three buildings in the complex house the head office of another corporation and are rented out as office spaces to smaller companies. There are also some restaurants, cafés, boutiques, gift shops and bookstores open for business on the ground floor of the building complex. Apart from 'hanging out' in the company premises, I accompanied my informants to lunch and various shopping venues located in the neighbouring area.

Becoming a Secretary?

Negotiating My Roles at CAIMEA Banking Corporation

I began my fieldwork at CAIMEA Banking Corporation at the beginning of July 2005. The arrangement for my placement was formal and I signed a four-month contract with the bank as a temporary employee. My official title was 'conference coordinator'. Most of the bank's employees were not required to clock in or clock out but normal working hours suggested in the *Employee Handbook* were from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm, Monday to Friday, with one hour lunch break from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm. I strictly followed the bank's office hour requirement and was at work for a minimum of 40 hours per week. I was stationed at the CEO's Office and reported to Khun⁵ Lux, the PA to the CEO. I was given a small workstation in front of Lux's desk in her office compartment. All of the management and secretaries working at the CEO's Office were informed that I was a research student who was going to be with their organisation temporarily in order to collect data for writing a thesis.

Similar to other employees, I was provided with office supplies, a workstation, a personal computer, a direct telephone line, a work email address and an employee ID card. I was permitted and/or invited to take part in activities and events available for the bank's employees. During my early weeks at the bank, I attended a three-day compulsory induction programme for new employees. I also participated in evening activities to promote employees' good health and

⁵ Thais usually do not address those who are older or higher in social position by name. *Khun* is a formal word in Thai and may be equivalent to the pronoun 'you' in English. When *Khun* is placed before a name, it functions as 'Mr,' 'Miss,' or 'Mrs'. An addresser uses *Khun* to display an honour to an addressee. All of the top executives at the bank, both Thai and non-Thai, were called *khun* followed by their first names.

well-being, day trips for secretaries, charity and fund raising events, conferences, training, and parties. By attending these activities and events, I had a chance to meet the bank's employees from various departments at all levels. I observed the ways in which CAIMEA's employees dressed for work and produced an overall picture of the organisation's dress culture.

As I mentioned earlier, the arrangement for my placement was rather formal. My role at CAIMEA Banking Corporation was not simply as a research student who hung out in the organisation observing people and their activities. I was assigned job responsibilities and worked as if I was one of the bank's employees. Taking a role as a secretary and conference coordinator, I worked with a conference organisation team under the close supervision of Lux, the Thailand team leader. My work mainly involved attending conference calls and team meetings, writing minutes and reports, updating conference task lists, facilitating visa applications for conference delegates, and preparing documents and welcome packs. Most of the tasks required English proficiency because all of the reports, emails and documents needed to be written in the English language. I also helped organise staff liaison activities, took part in producing the bank's in-house newsletter, translated documents from Thai into English and English into Thai, and answered and screened telephone calls for the CEO's Office.

'I would like to see how an academic from an ivory tower is going to survive in this competitive business world.' Lux commented as she reviewed my CV in our first meeting. I felt as if Lux, who was going to be my superintendent for four months, could anticipate my fear. I was relatively concerned to take the job responsibilities in exchange for my placement and access to the organisation. 'Working knowledge' is one of the practical concerns which the ethnographer should take into account when planning to adopt a position of 'direct participant' in the organisation, Michael Rosen comments (1991: 6). Holding a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts majoring in English and a Master's Degree in Journalism Studies, I had never obtained any formal training in secretarial work. Moreover, I had limited work experience in a business environment prior to my placement at CAIMEA Banking Corporation. As it was clearly stated in my CV, I was a sale coordinator for a machine tool dealer company for three months and a journalist for an English language newspaper in Bangkok for four months in 1997. After that I was a researcher working for a private university from 1998 to 2001 and from 2003 to 2004 before leaving Thailand to further my studies in England. My lack of

secretarial skills and limited work experience in a business environment made me reluctant to take the work role but somehow, I reckoned, this hindrance was advantageous to my role as a fieldworker who was about to enter a 'strange' research setting. Daniel Neyland suggests that 'treating the setting as strange is an important feature of ethnographic fieldwork, ensuring that nothing is taken for granted or left unanalysed as simply being the way it is' (2008: 85). I may conduct fieldwork at 'home' and mingle with people from my own culture, but the unfamiliarity of the research setting allowed me a detached perspective and to take an observational role.

'The direct participant hopes that by *being* what the members of the organisation are, he or she will be able to give a more incisive account of organisational social processes and structure than by being merely an observer,' writes Rosen (1991: 6, author's italics). As an opportunity was opened to me at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I took a chance to be a 'direct participant' by working at the CEO's Office. Nevertheless, my attempt to become an insider by being a member of the organisation raised a number of questions relating to ethical concerns and the ways in which I managed my roles and fieldwork relationships at CAIMEA Banking Corporation. (Ethical issues will be discussed further in the latter part of the chapter.)

I entered the organisation with a firm purpose which was to collect data for my thesis. I simply thought that by managing the fieldwork relationships through the formula of '*getting in* to the organisation, *getting on* with collecting the data, and *getting out* of the research site, whilst still maintaining the possibility of *getting back* into the organisation, should the need to continue data collection arise' as suggested in standard research method textbooks, I would be able to achieve my goal (Buchanan et al. 1988 cited in Bell 1999: 18, author's italics). However, I have found that the most difficult aspect of my fieldwork management at CAIMEA Banking Corporation was how I should maintain a balance and oscillate between being an insider and an outsider, being an organisation member and a researcher.

In doing ethnographic fieldwork, Buford H. Junker suggests that there are four possible types of position an ethnographer may adopt, from being 'complete participant, through participant as observer, observer as participant, to complete observer' (1960 cited in Neyland 2008: 80 – 81). Although I disagree with Junker's categorisation and have found that my position fluctuated and could not be distinctively classified into categories, I sometimes felt as if I gradually became a

'complete participant' when fully occupied by a secretarial role. I took full job responsibilities and was overwhelmed with the tasks assigned. I worked alongside my colleagues who were also my informants and became close to some of them as good friends. However, Neyland asserts that 'going native' by taking a position of the complete participant without any distance from the organisation will make a little contribution to the ethnographic knowledge the ethnographer wishes to produce (2008: 81). I consistently visited and spent time with my informants, kept a diary of activities I did with them, took note of the way they dressed to work, interviewed them, and wrote field note diaries. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I was exempt from any assignments and work obligations. I hung out in the organisation, observing people, visiting my informants in their offices, reading and writing my field notes, reflecting what I had been doing in the organisation. I was also cautious not to get involved with the office politics and the conflict of interests between any organisation members. I preserved secrets and confidential matters that came to my attention.

'Khun Dr'?

Striving for My Roles at Multivital Corporation

After six months of active correspondence via emails and telephone calls, I eventually had a meeting with Multivital Corporation's Human Resources Manager. My first visit to the company happened in October 2005. In the meeting I was asked to provide more details about my thesis and to clarify what sort of cooperation I was looking for from the company. However, after the meeting I did not hear from Multivital for another two months. It was not until December when the HR Manager contacted me and confirmed the arrangement for my placement at Multivital Corporation.

I began my fieldwork at Multivital Corporation at the beginning of January 2006. I provided the company with proof of my identity and signed a contract to specify an official period of my placement. I also signed a written statement to ensure that I would keep any information regarding Multivital's products that I may learn of strictly confidential. I was not offered any working role in the organisation. However, I was given a workstation and a pass card to enter the company's premises. As my placement at Multivital Corporation was granted through the approval of the company's CFO who was in charge of the Finance and IT

Department, the HR Department referred me to the Director of Finance whom I was to consult with if I had any further enquiries during the period of my fieldwork. I was not required to report to the Director of Finance. Due to lack of space at the Finance Department, I was then placed at the IT Department. I was not required to report to the IT Director either.

Emma Bell suggests that 'as with other forms for ethnography, organisation fieldwork involves "finding a place" (Warren 1988), partly so that respondents are able to assign the researcher to what they see as her proper place in the organisational hierarchy' (Bell 1999: 21). At Multivital Corporation, I may have been provided with a physical place, a workspace and office facilities, but throughout the period of my fieldwork I strove to find my place in the 'organisational hierarchy'. Without a substantive working role or a subscription to any working unit in the organisation, I had found that it was difficult to be perceived as one of the organisation members. As a result of this, the fieldwork strategies and methods of data collection I employed at Multivital Corporation were slightly different from those I applied with CAIMEA Banking Corporation. I relied more on gatekeepers and their networks in negotiating access to wider informants from various departments. This affirms Neyland's comment in that access can shape a fieldwork process and subsequently informs the ways in which a researcher interprets data and produces ethnographic knowledge (2008: 62).

There were approximately 50 operational staff members working for the IT Department and less than a quarter of them were female. Similar to other departments, the IT Department was an open-plan office filled with clusters of cubicles. Each work unit was designated by rows of partitions. The director, senior managers and managers did not have private offices. Their desks were mixed with operational staffs' but with the luxury of a little bit more space and a window view. I was given a workstation in one of the corners in the IT Department, isolated from other staff members. But after a few days of very little interaction with anyone, I made a request to have my workstation moved. My new desk was in a 'User Corner' behind the IT Helpdesk Unit. The User Corner was an ideal location for meeting with Multivital's employees from various departments. It was an open service area where staff members came to use computers. I sat next to one of the IT Helpdesk specialists who later introduced me to other Multivital's employees and helped recruit informants for my interviews.

In her book *Ethnography in Organisations*, Helen B. Schwartzman asserts that 'stepping into a setting for the first time is probably the most significant phase of the entire ethnographic process. ... The surprises, differences, misunderstandings, and such that occur in these encounters may foreshadow major research concerns and issues' (1993: 48). She explains further that the problems of access and the experience of first encounters should not simply be regarded as 'noise' that hinders the research process, but rather valuable data in their own right (1993: 48). My first few days at the IT Department appeared to be an awkward and imponderable beginning. I was not sure where I should begin, what I should do or who I should talk to. I did not know what information about me was given to staff members in the IT Department prior to my arrival. On my first day one of the IT staff members referred to me as '*Khun Dr*'. Hearing that, I quickly introduced my name and asked her not to call me *Khun Dr*. *Khun* in juxtaposition with *Dr* is an unusual use of an extreme form of formal language. *Khun Dr* may be equivalent to 'Miss Dr' in English. Being called *Khun Dr* by an organisation member upon my arrival truly worried me. It implied an unequal power relation between an addresser and an addressee. It foreshadowed difficulties I encountered when managing fieldwork relationships at Multivital Corporation. One of the biggest difficulties I had found was how I should establish trust between organisation members and me and gain incisive accounts as an insider.

For many ethnographers a less than fully participative research role is negotiated, the researcher defining for himself a "hybrid status" (Watson 1994) appropriate to the particular organisational setting. The fieldworker may enter into the research situation with a conscious strategy for impression management, trying to negotiate a "working role" for him or herself, such as "student-companion" or "good secretary", that is culturally meaningful to the studied. Without such a role, informants are likely to remain unclear as to what the researcher wants from them or how to relate to them in any way beyond the perfunctory. It is only in adopting a particular dramaturgical role within the organisational setting that such behavioural expectations can be met.

(Bell 1999: 24)

I agree with Bell (1999) that without a working role at Multivital Corporation, some of the IT staff members did not know how to relate to me. They were sceptical of my existence in their department. It was unusual that a stranger could just 'hang out' in their organisation without any function. Some were of the opinion that I had been sent to their department by the management to evaluate their performance. Others thought that I had a personal connection with the CFO. The doubts resolved with time, after I explained a lengthy process of how I gained

access to Multivital Corporation. Also, I started to talk about my thesis to affirm that I 'hung out' in their organisation for a reason but it was not to inspect them. Without a working role in the organisation, my fieldwork role as a research student became prominent.

As I mentioned earlier, by taking a working role as a secretary at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I sometimes found myself in a position of complete participant and needed to withdraw from my involvement with the organisation. My situation at Multivital Corporation seemed to be the opposite. With my prominent role as a research student, I was an observer who endeavoured to participate in and gain insights into the organisation's life. I adopted a different approach to the fieldwork process and data gathering. At Multivital Corporation, it was unlikely that I would be perceived and treated as an organisation member but at least I wanted to be a researcher whom could be trusted. I hoped that organisation members would feel comfortable enough to have me around at work and to take part in their leisure activities surrounding work.

Doing 'Friendship' and Fieldwork Relationships

Working at the CEO's Office

Work defined my roles and fieldwork relationships at CAIMEA Banking Corporation. I worked closely with Lux. Literally, my desk was right in front of hers. Lux was the PA to the CEO. In her mid-40s, she was amongst the longest-serving CAIMEA's employees. Having served four of the bank's CEOs during her 10-year tenure, Lux nicknamed her dedicated duty after a popular Thai television drama, 'Four Reigns' [*Si Pandin*]. As her 'boss' was the biggest boss, automatically but unofficially, Lux was a leader of all secretaries at CAIMEA. She also held the title Employee Relations Manager and published a monthly in-house newsletter featuring news, announcements and activities for CAIMEA's employees. She took part in the bank's community projects and became an award-winning trainer for the bank's global, health-awareness campaigns. With her 'can-do' personality, she was renowned in the organisation as being tough, strict and paying ample attention to minute details. She aimed for flawless work performances and her mottos included, 'The sky is the limit' and 'Go the extra mile'.

The CEO's Office was spacious. It accommodated workspaces for 5 members of the organisation, the CEO, the Vice President, the PA to the CEO and two secretaries. Kratae was one of the two secretaries working at the CEO's Office. She identified herself as Lux's assistant. Kratae had been with CAIMEA for nearly a year when I met her. In our early-30s, Kratae and I were in the same age. She graduated from the university where I used to work and later I learnt that she was also a friend of my former colleague. Apart from working together, Kratae and I hung out in cafés, restaurants, shopping malls and temples after work and at the weekends. Kratae was brand conscious and well versed in beauty products and designer goods. She took me shopping and helped me choose clothes and makeup. We talked a lot and exchanged personal life stories. We became friends in a short period of time.

Paan was also a secretary who was stationed at the CEO's Office. She worked on a one-year contract as a secretary to the VP. Although she was new to the organisation, Paan in her mid-50s had a number of good years of experience working for foreign executives in the field of finance and banking. Paan and I graduated from the same university but I am 20 years her junior. Paan was very kind and on a number of occasions saved me from office equipment disasters. Paan also introduced me to Ploy, a secretary from a credit department. They knew each other through an in-house training programme. They had lunch together once or twice a week and I accompanied them. From my observation, Ploy was conscious about her body image and felt uncomfortable when her colleagues made comments on her appearance. She always complained about her weight and sometimes took extreme measures to master it. Ploy always dressed well and loved to accessorise her outfits with coordinated earrings, shoes, handbags and brooches. Ploy was very interested in my thesis and keen to be a research participant.

Mint was another secretary from CAIMEA who took part in my thesis. She was my long lost friend. Mint and I went to university together for 4 years but lost touch after we graduated. It was a surprise reunion for us at CAIMEA. When she first joined the bank, Mint was Lux's assistant serving the CEO's Office for 2 years. Mint moved to another department and Kratae replaced her. Mint was very health-conscious and was on a macrobiotic diet. Similar to Kratae, Mint had been dubbed by her colleagues a 'lifestyle guru'. She was well equipped with a stock of information on the best restaurants, cafés, shopping places, catering services,

hotels, dressmakers, event organisers etc. Apart from having lunch and enjoying lunchtime shopping together, I accompanied Mint to temples, orphanages, spa, trade fairs, and shopping malls. I also visited Mint's apartment and went on holiday with her in the northern part of Thailand for one week.

In addition to her routine work at the CEO's Office, Lux took part in coordinating the bank's community projects and health awareness training programmes. She worked with a team of trainers from an in-house training agency known as Organisational Learning. When the Head of OL was away on a three-month assignment, Lux was an acting manager. As I took assignments from Lux, parts of my work involved coordinating with the OL team. Lux introduced me to the team and four of the team members eventually agreed to take part in my thesis. In her early-30s, Pupae had been Training Manager for more than a year. She preferred to dress in a comfortable work outfit but was particularly well groomed when supervising a training session. She dressed in a formal business suit and had her hair styled in a local salon. Pupae emphasised credibility which she projected through her dress and appearance. She encouraged her team to dress well and pay attention to the image they projected to training participants and other organisation members.

Fon, Pomme and Jay were training coordinators. All of them were in their mid-20s and worked for CAIMEA for nearly 2 years. Unlike training managers who led a training sessions, training coordinators handled course enrolment, prepared training materials and co-led games and activities. Fon and Jay were soon to be promoted to the role of junior trainer. Junior trainers were only involved in soft skills training while training managers designed professional development programmes and shared knowledge about the bank's products and services. The OL team normally worked in two distinctive locations; in their shared office and in training rooms. With a strong sense of teamwork, they always had lunch together and socialised after work. I visited their office quite often, only partly because of work. However, it was Kratae who brought me closer to the OL department and invited me to join in their leisure activities. I accompanied Kratae to their lunches and occasionally on nights out to pubs, clubs, Karaoke bars and restaurants. I rarely had a chance to have a one-to-one conversation with Pupae, Fon, Pomme or Jay. I interviewed each of them twice and saw them regularly through work and Kratae.

'Hanging Out' at the IT Department

At the IT Department, I was stationed in the User Corner next to the IT Helpdesk. This enabled me to meet the team of IT helpdesk operators who later became my key informants at Multivital Corporation. Most of the IT staff members were men but nearly all of those who worked for the IT Helpdesk were women. As my thesis focuses on women's consumption practices, I was particularly interested in the IT Helpdesk. There were four female operators, Umim, Nong, Aum and Fern, working for the IT Helpdesk. Their main function was to answer telephone enquiries and provide initial technical support to Multivital's employees whom they called 'users'. Similar to other Multivital's employees, IT helpdesk operators were not required to clock in or clock out but their working hours were set from 7:30 am to 4:30 pm with a one-hour lunch break from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm. The helpdesk operators also took turns to cover evening shifts from 4:30 pm to 7:30 pm. Normally, they worked from Monday to Friday but occasionally were required to work overtime during weekends. I synchronised my fieldwork hours with the helpdesk's working hours. During the period of my fieldwork, I 'hung out' in Multivital Corporation for at least 40 hours a week, Monday to Friday, from 7:30 am to 4:30 pm and sometimes from 7:30 am to 7:30 pm. Although I did not have any 'real' function in the IT Helpdesk Unit, I found that by persistently following the helpdesk's practices, I gradually gained acceptance from the helpdesk operators as part of their network. I regularly had lunch and went shopping with them during lunch breaks. They let me hang out with them and join in their conversations. They also introduced me to their colleagues from the IT Department as well as from other departments.

The IT helpdesk operators whom I spent most of my time with were Umim, Nong, Aum and Fern. They were close to Kaan who was a secretary to the IT Director. When Kaan had first joined Multivital Corporation 10 years previously, she worked for the IT Helpdesk for 2 years. She was then reappointed to take a secretarial role. Kaan was 37 years old, married with two children. Nong, a 37-year-old mother of two, was also a long-serving Multivital employee. She had 10 years of work experience with the organisation. Nong was an operator before joining the IT Helpdesk where she had been for 8 years. Umim was another committed member of the IT Helpdesk. She started her career with Multivital Corporation when she was 26 years old and had been working with the IT

Helpdesk for 8 years. Umim was 34 years. Aum and Fern were the youngest and the newest members of the group. Both of them were 24 years old and had worked for the IT Helpdesk for 2 years. Umim, Aum and Fern were single and had never been married.

The five women, Umim, Nong, Aum, Fern and Kaan, made an interesting group of friends at work. Some of them had been working together for more than 8 years and some were new to the organisation. Their ages were varied, ranging from 24 to 37 years old. From my observation, in spite of the differences between their ages and levels of work experience, they identified themselves and were identified by colleagues as a friendship group. They worked together and sat side by side with one another. Apart from Kaan who was a secretary, the rest of the group took quite similar work roles. They had lunch together daily. They shared snacks, foods and sometimes makeup. However, they rarely did any activities together outside work. Nong and Kaan were married and, according to them, had a family obligation. Umim and Fern did part-time courses for their Master's Degrees. Aum had a boyfriend and spent time with him.

From my observation, lunch functioned as an everyday bonding practice amongst the office workers. More importantly, who has lunch with whom indicates closeness, distance, hierarchy and political polarisation within the department and the organisation. This is also applicable to the five women from the IT Helpdesk friendship group. They had the option to have lunch in two different canteens as well as restaurants available in the building complex where they worked. They also enjoyed taking short excursions to department stores, open-air markets, food markets or restaurants in the neighbouring area. Within one hour, they efficiently managed to have lunch, look around shops for snacks, clothes, shoes, makeup etc. Lunchtime was the only legitimate time of the day that they were free to talk about things – problems at work, office gossip, bosses, children, beauty, clothes, study, and so on. To me, lunchtime was critical to my data collection approach. Lunchtime chats and shopping excursions allowed me an opportunity to spend time with the IT helpdesk operators. I also met other Multivital's employees through this lunchtime networking.

Umim and Aum were my first key informants at Multivital Corporation. Eventually, all five members of the Helpdesk friendship group agreed to take part in my study. I interviewed each of them twice. With their consent, I took their photographs and kept a photo diary of how they dressed for work. I also kept a

diary of the activities I did with them and other informants. Apart from the five women from the IT Helpdesk, I interviewed four more female employees from the IT Department. Two of them were managers. The other two were staff members at an operational level. I had another four informants from the Finance Department. As I mentioned earlier, my workstation was in the User Corner area. I met a number of staff members at the User Corner. Some of my informants were regular 'users' of the User Corner. They also introduced me to their colleagues for the interviews.

At Multivital Corporation there were 23 female employees from 10 different departments participating in my study. Their ages ranged from 22 years old to 50 years old. Most of them were 24 years old. Two thirds of them were single. Some were new to the organisation with less than one year of work experience but some had been serving the company for 10 years or more. Two of them had been with the company for more than 25 years. The five IT helpdesk friends were my main informants whom I spent most of my time with during my fieldwork at Multivital Corporation. However, I met some informants only once or twice for the interviews. The others were familiar faces that I saw regularly at the IT Department and on company premises. (See Appendix C: Summary of Informants' Profiles.)

Reflecting upon Fieldwork Relationships

One of the peculiarities of participant observation as ethnographic fieldwork is the way in which the researcher and his/her personal relationships serve as primary vehicles for eliciting findings and insight. ... This onus towards comradeship, however incompletely and sporadically achieved, provides a vantage point imbued at once with significant analytical advantages as well as poignant dilemmas of ethics and social location. On the one hand, it encourages ethnographers to see people as rounded individuals, as multifaceted social beings with involvements, experiences and stories reaching far beyond the limited purview of any research project. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, for fieldworkers to regard the people with whom they are conducting research merely as one-dimensional research subjects. Hence the discomfiture many anthropologists have with using terms such as informant, respondent or research subject as textual references for people they have known as friends, neighbours, advisers, etc. Nonetheless, opting instead for the latter terms of reference may not resolve the problem that however sincere and nuanced the attachment they express, ethnographic fieldworkers are still also exploiting this intimacy as an investigative tool.

(Amit 2000, 2 – 3)

The issue of power relations between researchers and research participants in ethnographic research has been addressed and researchers are often seen as those 'in a powerful position' (O'Reilly 2009: 59). 'They choose the topic, direct the

research, decide what to record and how, decide what to ignore and overlook, and determine what is written and where it is published', O'Reilly suggests (2009: 60). As a researcher, I was aware of my authority when doing ethnography. However, as a secretary at the CEO's Office, I inevitably succumbed to the organisational hierarchy. Lux was my line manager and I was her subordinate. I was dedicated to the work I was assigned, hoping that if I could 'go the extra mile' and share a belief that 'the sky is the limit', I would succeed in establishing a 'rapport' with Lux. Cynical as it seemed, I saw myself gradually become one of her assistants. On a number of occasions, I was stationed at the CEO's Office on my own, covering for other secretaries. Once I was assigned to be a secret auditor to evaluate staff's telephone demeanours. In a meeting, I sat by Lux jotting down minutes and updating agendas. Some colleagues called me for information before approaching her. Before I left the bank, Lux asked if I was interested in pursuing a career at CAIMEA in the long run. My dedication to the bank was neither for a career embarkation in banking nor for remuneration. Rather, I wished for a facilitation of my fieldwork process. Lux was my key informant and important gatekeeper. Endorsed by her authority, I gained access to significant activities and events which enabled me to gain an insightful understanding of the organisation's life. Working with her allowed me a glimpse of the experience of what it was like to be a secretary at the CEO's Office.

The issue is no longer a matter of power relations. Instead, I question an exploitation of friendships/relationships forged during the fieldwork. 'Are you hanging out with me because we're friends or because you want to do your research?' Kratae once probed me with this question while we were having coffee together in a café. I could not recall how I answered her. Until now I remain reluctant to reply. Kratae was my key informant with whom I became friends. I saw her daily at work and spent most of my time in the field 'shadowing' her. Apart from Kratae, Mint was also a friend/informant whom I shared a lot of activities with. Mint was my long lost friend. My friendship with her was also an ambivalent one. I visited Mint at home. I travelled with her. I went to a temple with Mint and her mother. Coffey suggests that 'we can characterize the relations of fieldwork as a balance between reality and falsehood. Field relations usually begin as "false" in that they are artificially contrived by the researcher for the purposes of data collection. ... The initial impetus for relationships in the field is usually that of the researcher, but this does not mean that this initiation nor the resultant relationship

is not genuine. The researcher is genuinely interested in forging ties. The participant social actors may seek and gain genuine understanding, respect and ultimately friendship. But the situated context of these relations may in itself be artificial. It will almost certainly be in the interests of the fieldworker to maintain relations during fieldwork,...' (1999: 54 – 55). Coffey's discussion helps me answer Kratae's question. I left the field some years ago, but have remained friends with both of Kratae and Mint.

If my friendships with some informants from CAIMEA should be labelled 'over-rapport', my relationships with informants from Multivital resided at the opposite. Trust is important as O'Reilly highlights. 'It is crucial that ethnographers build mutually trusting relationships, both for ethical reasons as well as to ensure the quality of the ethnography. We have no reason to trust the ethnography produced by someone with whom the respondents remained suspicious or distant, any more than we can admire or value an ethnography that has been fleetingly constructed out of superficial relationships' (2009: 175). As I mentioned earlier, IT staff members were very sceptical of my presence in their department and I could only hope that Uim, Aum, Nong, Fern and Kaan from the IT Helpdesk would feel comfortable enough to have me around and trust me enough to talk with me about their lives. Persistence had paid off somehow. I was always present at their work unit and adopted their working hours and routine. I adapted the way I dressed. I was eager to try different foods that they introduced to me and I began to talk more and more about my study. I shall not claim the extent to which my informants trusted me which may subsequently implicate the trustworthiness of the ethnography I produce. Nevertheless, I enjoyed following them to lunch and shopping places and secretly hoped they did not mind to be followed.

Taking and Using Photographs

Taking photographs or having photographs taken was not uncommon amongst my informants from CAIMEA Banking Corporation. Indeed, most of the secretaries and trainers owned a compact digital camera or a mobile phone that could also function to capture, store and send photographs. Lux kept a camera in her drawer at the CEO's Office. The OL team had a communal camera, which belonged to their department. Mint and Ploy brought cameras with them when going on secretary day trips. Kratae and Pupae carried camera phones. Special occasions,

ranging from corporate events to dinner parties with friends, always included a photographic session. After a party, a thoughtful photographer would forward image files via an email to her colleagues who appeared in the photographs. Taking and sharing photographs was part of their bonding activities and photographs resembled tokens of the memorable event. Working in a 'local photographic culture' (Pink 2007: 65) where people were familiar with the production and uses of photographs, I presumed that it would be appropriate and advantageous for the ethnographer to introduce photography into ethnographic research. However, once I started taking photographs of my informants, there mounted an ethical dilemma and a question of the appropriate use of photographs in my thesis upon which I have continually reflected.

After my informants from CAIMEA Banking Corporation agreed to take part in my thesis, I asked if I could take their photographs within their immediate working environment. Apart from Ploy and Kratae, I took a couple of photographs of each of my informants posing smartly for *my* camera at their desks while they were on duty. Kratae refused to have photographs taken at her desk. She said she did not like the location of her desk as it misled people into assuming that she was a receptionist. Instead, we had photographs taken in the reception area next to her desk. I did not ask Ploy if I could take her photograph at her desk as I felt it was inappropriate. I visited Ploy's office occasionally but could not help feeling a tension imbued by her crowded open-plan office. Seeking a glimpse of privacy, Ploy always directed me to a foyer outside her department for a chat. Mint's office was similar to Ploy's, albeit larger. It accommodated workspaces for up to 40 employees. To take Mint's photographs and her desk, I was asked to wait until her manager was away and Mint called me. I used a compact digital camera which did not require any complicated setup. It took only a few minutes to capture Mint's pictures, yet I noticed a slight disruption to a normality as her colleagues looked at us and we both felt uncomfortable. However, it was not awkward to take Lux's and Paan's photographs. They seemed to have a certain extent of authority within their own working environment. Pupae, Jay, Fon and Pomme shared an office that was private and filled with an amiable atmosphere (light music, snacks, personalised workspaces, a display of their photographs, friendly chats etc.). They posed comfortably as I took a couple of photographs. They selected the photographs they liked the most.

On the one hand, taking photographs of my informants at work allowed me to reflect upon my relationships with them. Narratives surrounding the act of producing photographs also revealed my informants' relationships with their colleagues, their work, and working environment, which, in part, bettered my understanding of their daily working lives. On the other hand, by taking photographs, I established my authority as an ethnographer, reminding them that not only was I their colleague but also a researcher who wished to learn more about them. Furthermore, this set of photographs which represented what my informants and their immediate working environments looked like, somehow, affirmed the authenticity of my research. As Sarah Pink notes, 'photographs have been used to support ethnographers' strategic claims of authenticity and authority to speak as a person with first-hand experience of the ethnographic situation, and as a source of privileged knowledge' (2007: 149). To be more specific, 'photographic portraits have been used to represent "evidence" of "considerable trust between subject and photographer" and to contribute "to the authenticity of the anthropological study"' (Brandes 1997: 10 cited in Pink 2007: 149). These photographs may not tell much about how my informants dressed for work. They were simply the images of CAIMEA's female employees wearing 'smart casual' dress, sitting behind a busy desk. Retrospectively, the photographs comforted and reassured me that I had some 'ethnographic evidence' to bring back from the field.

I continued to take photographs, mainly at my informants' leisure. When attending an event or a party, I took photographs of my informants, their colleagues and activities they did together. I used my camera. Sometimes they handed me their cameras and asked me to take photographs for them. They also took my pictures. Other times we had photographs taken together. On a number of occasions, my informants gave me the photographs they took. Towards the end of my fieldwork at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I had compiled hundreds of photographs produced either by me or by my informants. Taking and sharing photographs had immersed me in their 'local photographic culture'. When I took photographs of my informants posing at their desks, it was clear that the photographs would be used for a research purpose and my informants were fully informed and aware of this agenda. Unlike the photographs of my informants at their desks, the latter collections of special occasion photographs were produced or given to me while my subject position was blurred. I was a researcher who became their friend. It was not clear to them how I might use these photographs.

Pink suggests that ‘no visual image or practice is essentially ethnographic by nature. Accordingly, the ethnographicness of photography is determined by discourse and content’ (2007 66 – 67). Referring to Elizabeth Edwards, Pink further comments that “an anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information” (Edwards 1992: 13). She [Edwards] emphasized how viewers subjectively determine when or if a photograph is anthropological, pointing out that “[t]he defining essence of an anthropological photograph is not the subject-matter as such, but the consumer’s classification of that knowledge or “reality” which the photographic appears to convey” (Edwards 1992: 13 cited in Pink 2007: 67). In writing my thesis, I have found that many of the photographs I gathered during my fieldwork serve well as ‘useful, meaningful visual information’. In Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, I have reflexively written ethnography to represent the daily life experiences of the women office workers by referring to these photographs. I attest that the photographs are ‘anthropological’ in this respect. However, this has left me with an ethical dilemma regarding the ownership of the photographs and the possibility of exploiting the friendship and trust my informants gave to me.

At Multivital Corporation, I employed a different approach to photography. I produced a ‘photo diary’ of eight of my informants. Five of them included Kaan, Umim, Nong, Aum and Fern from the IT helpdesk friendship group. The others were two staff members from the IT Department and a secretary from another department. My initial plan was to take their photographs for five working days, aiming to capture and illustrate how women office workers dressed for work. I also planned to use photographs produced through this process to probe questions and initiate conversations in the interviews.

Once my informants agreed to participate in the photo diary activity, I started to take their photographs. Naively, I thought of the activity as a straightforward task, but changed my view after encountering a number of unprecedented ‘difficulties’ throughout the process. Taking photographs of an employee in a workplace setting was an act of disruption. It was not part of any activities listed in my informants’ working day. Having photographs taken by a researcher who was an outsider to their organisation was unusual. Some of my informants were conscious of their colleagues’ curious gazes. Some did not want their managers to witness that they were involved in any activity irrelevant to work.

I was also aware of unparallel power relation between a researcher as a photographer and an informant as a photographic subject. I opted for a more collaborative approach where it was possible. My informants usually selected times and locations to make them feel most comfortable whilst having photographs taken. Most of them preferred an early morning when they arrived or during a lunch break when there were few people present in the office. They chose to have photographs taken at their desks or in an area that was not far from their desks. Num, a secretary from the Regulatory Department, was fully cooperative. She suggested various locations. I took photographs of her at her desk, in a meeting room, in a recreation room, and in a garden in front of the building complex. She also styled her own poses and later brought her own camera. I took photographs at her request and she sent me the photographs via email.

Although my informants agreed to take part in the photo diary activity, it did not mean that they felt comfortable to have photographs taken on a daily basis. It took me approximately five weeks rather than five days to gather photographs for each individual diary. Maew, a midlevel IT manager, was the only informant whose dress style was consistent throughout the week. She always appeared in a company promotional t-shirt, a pair of dark-coloured trousers and comfortable black shoes. She let me take her photographs on any day. The rest of my informants dressed for work in a variety of styles. They agreed to have photographs taken only on the days that they felt satisfied with their looks. Kaan, for example, said she had not dressed well enough or did not look good enough to have photographs taken. On those days I would instead take notes on how she dressed and how she talked about her appearance. Nevertheless, my informants did not dress up for my photographs any more than they normally would for work. They selected the looks that they perceived as 'appropriate' to be recorded on camera. The photo diary, therefore, did not represent an actual record of their dress during the course of five consecutive days. Rather, the photo diary represented what my informants perceived as an appropriate look for work.

With a realist approach, I might fail to collect a systematic record of ethnographic evidence which is expected to be an objective representation of my informants. However, reflecting upon the process of producing the photo diary during my fieldwork at Multivital Corporation, I realised that what I first understood to be 'difficulties' that might hinder the success of this activity was actually valuable data in their own right. Contrasting to a realist approach, a reflexive approach to

photography focuses not only on 'the content of images', but also 'the context of image production' as well as 'the meanings that different individuals give to those images in different contexts' (Pink 2007: 123). Photographs as the products of the photo diary activity may appear to be explicit ethnographic texts and obvious data for analysis. However, narratives, accounts, and conversations emerging throughout the process of producing the photo diary were fruitful towards providing an understanding of my informants' experiences and consumption practices at work.

The photo diary activity was helpful in initiating conversations and interactions. I used the photo diary to pose questions during the second interviews. Seeing their own images, my informants made comments about their makeup, faces, bodies, dress, and appearance in general. However, most of them did not like the images produced for the photo diary and the comments were likely to be negative. Ann, an administrator from the IT Department, brought her own photographs taken at home and while on holidays to show me her favourite looks and how she wanted to be represented in the photographs.

My major concern is an issue of anonymity. As I have vowed to protect my informants' identity and respect their rights to anonymity, in this thesis I use pseudonyms to disguise their and their organisations' identities and shall not publish any of my informants' photographs.

Doing 'Embodied Ethnography'

Recent theoretical and methodological literature looking at ethnographic fieldwork has highlighted a significance of the ethnographer's body in conducting participant observation and has called for an intensive investigation to identify the roles and implications of the ethnographer's embodied experiences that potentially contribute to a production of ethnographic knowledge (Coffey 1999; Turner 2000; Bain and Nash 2006; Monaghan 2006; Okely 2007). Commentators such as Amanda Coffey (1999) and Judith Okely (2007) criticise the way in which the ethnographer's use of her/his body in experiencing fieldwork has been taken for granted and omitted from the writings and understandings of ethnography. Coffey affirms that 'all fieldwork can be conceptualized in terms of the body' (1999: 68). At the very least, ethnographic fieldwork entails the physical presence of the ethnographer in the field. In gaining access to CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation,

for example, my initial task was to negotiate the spatial location of my body to be co-present with the women office workers in the organisations.

However, the ethnographer's body is not simply located in the field, but carries with it physical characteristics and appearances that have been documented to have an impact on the conduct of fieldwork (Coffey 1999: 68; Monaghan 2006: 230; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 73 – 75). Providing examples of anthropological studies in non-western cultural settings, Okely (2007) addresses an issue of the ethnographer's sexed and racialised body that can be perceived as 'other' in the eyes of indigenous people. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) also note the implications of gender, age and race that can either restrict or facilitate the ethnographer's access to certain settings, situations and activities.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the ethnographer can be present without participating in the events and practices of people in the field (Turner 2000: 52 – 53). Not only does the fieldwork involve the ethnographer's physical presence and physical characteristics, it also involves interactions and the use of the ethnographer's body in everyday life (Coffey 1999: 68). This in turn leads to recognition of the ethnographer's body with its potential to facilitate field roles and fieldwork relationships in the achievement of successful fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Coffey points out that 'the body is implicated in the roles and relationships of fieldwork both in terms of how our body becomes part of our experience of the field and in the necessity (albeit often implicit) for the ethnographer to learn the skills and rules of embodiment in the particular social setting' (1999: 72). Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson address the issue of 'impression management' that it is necessary for the ethnographer to strategically use her/his 'personal appearance' in order to construct identity and negotiate roles during the fieldwork (2007: 66 – 67). In many cases, the ethnographer opts to dress in a similar way to people she/he wishes to study.

For example, in his covert ethnographic research on a Glasgow gang, Patrick recalls his attempt to dress himself in a convincing midnight-blue suit, hoping to 'pass' as a gang member (1973 cited in Coffey 1999: 65). Wolf conducted research on 'outlaw bikers' and appeared with 'shoulder-length hair and heavy beard, leather jacket and studded leather wrist bands, and a cut-off denim jacket' (1991 cited in Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 66). Conducting participant observation as a student at a police academy, Van Maanen did not actually wear a police uniform but dressed in plainclothes that gave him a 'coplike appearance'

(1991 cited in Coffey 1999: 65). Reciting her fieldwork experiences in an accountancy firm, Coffey was conscious of producing an acceptable body (1993 cited in Coffey, 1999: 65). In her attempt to dress 'like an accountant', Coffey appeared in a black interview business suit, straight skirt, fitted jacket, pale blouse and heeled shoes.

Similar to Coffey, visiting CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation for the first time, I was conscious of having the appropriate look for meetings with the PA to the CEO and the HR Manager. Without any prior knowledge to the organisations' dress culture, I based my choice of dress on my understanding of the 'appropriate' dress for a Thai woman in a business environment and followed that norm. I appeared in a formal, black, business suit with a matching pair of trousers. I wore a pale cream blouse and heeled shoes. My long hair was neatly tied and I wore light makeup. After the first meetings, I did not dress in a business suit for work at Multivital Corporation again, but occasionally at CAIMEA Banking Corporation. During the period of my fieldwork, my wardrobe had been completely revamped and I began to develop two distinctive sets of dress styles to suit the particular organisations.

Also, at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I always displayed my employee ID card and even wore corporate wristbands to support the bank's charity projects. The employee ID card played a significant role in facilitating my mobility and visibility in the organisation. The bank's premises were operated under high security control. It was compulsory for all employees to wear their ID cards at all times. Visitors were also required to wear visitor tags and a security guard could stop them if the tag was not put on display. I used the employee ID card not only as an electronic pass card to enter the CEO's Office, but also as an explicit visual sign to communicate to other employees that I was part of their organisation. To be identified as one of the bank's employees by displaying the employee ID card allowed me the privilege of being seen as an insider. I felt comfortable in initiating conversations. I was able to walk in and out of the bank's premises and visit my informants and colleagues in their offices. The privilege of being visually identified as the bank's employee, however, ended after I finished my four-month placement and returned the employee ID card. I visited the bank on a number of occasions but wore a visitor tag which allowed me access to the reception area only. My status was shifted to a visitor and I was seen as an outsider to the organisation.

The issue of impression management through the strategic use of the ethnographer's body is deemed to be important as it offers a greater possibility to the success of the fieldwork. However, the issue of impression management touches only 'the surface of the embodied fieldwork perspective', Coffey comments (1999: 75). 'Both the physical body and the symbolic, cultural significance it has are central, rather than peripheral, aspects of ethnographic fieldwork' (Coffey 1999: 75). An examination of the embodied experiences and practices in the ethnographic fieldwork treats the body as central to the analysis. Nevertheless, it has generally focused on observing, analysing and interpreting the uses of 'other' bodies rather than the ethnographer's (Coffey 1999: 75; Turner 2000: 53, 55).

More recent ethnographic studies argue for recognition of the ethnographer's body in a research process (see Turner 2000; Bain and Nash 2006 and Mognahan 2006). Aaron Turner (2000) calls for an insertion of the ethnographer's visibility into research processes and ethnographic representations. Turner questions an epistemological ground that views knowledge as being objective, value-free, pre-existing and discovered. He asserts that the ethnographer 'can no longer be seen as an observer recording social facts and processes, but must be seen as an active, situated, participant in the construction of accounts and representations' (2000: 51). That is the ethnographer has to be considered as an embodied participant whose physical visibility plays a part in the development of a research process (2000: 52). This can be done through a process of reflexivity. 'Critical reflexivity offers the researcher a way of engaging with questions and issues by thinking about personal beliefs, judgements, perceptions and multiple subject positions in a self-consciously critical manner and integrating these into the research process' (England 2002; Moss 2002 cited in Bain and Nash 2006: 100). As an embodied participant, the ethnographer has to reflexively interrogate the implications of her/his physical presence that contributes to a construction of ethnographic knowledge and representations. In this sense, a process of reflexivity enables an opportunity to problematise the ethnographer's own embodied experiences as a serious object of analysis (Turner 2000: 55).

To further demonstrate his argument on 'embodied ethnography', Turner (2000) examines the implications of his own embodiment in the fieldwork that he conducted with young white men in an area of West London. Turner was actively involved in the daily lives of these young men and became a significant participant in their leisure activities and the games they played together. He noticed that

these games were usually structured around competition and winning. It came to his surprise that initially he just wanted to play along with the games, but later things intensified and he actively engaged in the competition. Turner cited one of the incidents where he played football with the young men. At first, he played casually and occasionally missed the ball. Hearing a comment and a laugh from one of the men, he became more and more serious with the way he played and tried to display his competence. He writes, 'the incident shows more than me learning their value of competence; it shows me embodying it, legitimating and promoting it in a bid to develop my ability to persevere in the field' (2000: 56).

Referring to his embodied ethnography on doorwork, violence and risk, Lee F. Monaghan (2006) demonstrates how he used his body as a resource for researching 'other bodies' in a risky environment. Monaghan undertook participant observation in seven licensed premises in southwest Britain. By becoming a working doorman and being bodily co-present with other doormen in social situations where he was subject himself to physical, emotional and social risks (e.g. being physically injured or arrested by the police), Monaghan (2006) claimed for firsthand experiences that allowed him a grounded understanding of the doormen's social world. Nevertheless, he questioned to what extent the ethnographer should risk the act of violence and bodily injury. He recounted one particular violent incident where three doormen 'transgressed occupational boundaries' and were involved in physical violence with six rejected customers outside the licensed premises (2006: 236). Monaghan narrowly escaped being hit by a beer bottle thrown with extreme force, which had been directed at his face. Reflecting upon his emotional experience of such an incident, he concludes that 'regarding methodology, I would stress how my own bodily co-presence and emotional involvement during fieldwork was intimately linked to the sociological task of making sense of (illicit) social action. ... By risking my own body in combative situations, by experiencing the physical and emotional vicissitudes of this dangerous yet largely monotonous trade, I was able to appreciate why violent crime is seductive for people in certain contexts' (2006: 237).

In their paper on embodiment and sexuality at a queer bathhouse event, Alison L. Bain and Catherine J. Nash (2006) examine how the researcher's body – their own bodies – can be used as an 'ethnographic research tool'. Bain and Nash undertook participant observation at Pussy Palace, a queer women's bi-annual bathhouse event in Toronto, Canada. Identifying themselves as lesbian women,

they reflected upon their embodiment and the meanings of their lesbian bodies being placed in a pre-organised sexualised public space. Through a discussion of how they prepared their bodies for the event, how they positioned their bodies at the bathhouse and how they interacted with their bodies during the event, Bain and Nash reveal tensions, discontinuities and ambiguities arising from their experiences as 'insiders and outsiders, participants and researchers, covert and overt ethnographers, and sexualised and non-sexualised beings in a queer women's bathhouse event' (2006: 99, 100, 105).

Paul Stoller (1997) writes his chapter 'The Sorcerer's Body' to argue that 'one learns about Songhay sorcery not through the assimilation of texts, but through the mastery of the body – through the vicissitudes of pain and illness' (1997: xvi). The body, the apprentice's body, that Stoller uses for demonstrating such learning is his own body. By eating his first batch of *kusu* (magic cake) prepared by his late teacher in 1977, Stoller's apprenticeship of Songhay sorcery of West Africa began. In 1979 his body became temporarily paralysed concurrently with one of his rival sorcerers' relative after he performed a ritual act to demonstrate a progress of his apprenticeship. Stoller was given power objects by his teacher and wore them. He was told the objects must touch his body to complete the power. After one week of his research trip to Niger in 1990, he developed a symptom of *wenya*, a 'hot' illness with heavy legs and back pain, got a bruise on his forehead from a minor car accident and then fell ill with malaria. He left by the end of week three. He was believed to be a victim of a sorcerous attack, *sambeli*, as his rivals wanted to test their power on his body. 'For Songhay practitioners, sorcery is not merely a set of beliefs; rather, it carries with it real consequences – body consequences', Stoller recounts (1997: 14). 'For ethnographers embodiment is more than the realisation that our bodily experience gives metaphoric meaning to our experience; it is rather the realisation that, like Songhay sorcerers, we too are consumed by the sensual world, that ethnographic things capture us through bodies, that profound lessons are learnt when sharp pains streak up our legs in the middle of the night' (1997: 23).

Turner's study of daily lives of young white men (2000), Monaghan's study of doormen's social world in a risky environment (2006), Bain and Nash's study of embodiment and sexuality at a queer bathhouse event (2006) and Stoller's study of his apprenticeship in Songhay sorcery (1997) are amongst ethnographic studies that place the ethnographers' bodies as central to the research process and

analysis. The ethnographers demonstrated how they reflexively examined the implications of their bodily presence and their own embodied experiences which contributed to an understanding of the experiences and social world of the people they wished to study. Central to this thesis is an attempt to understand Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work. It entails a study of the body in everyday life in which 'bodies are most obviously watched, analysed and noted' (Coffey 1999: 60). That is the female body informs the focus of my fieldwork and analysis. I observed and took notes on the clothed bodies of the women office workers. I listened to them talk about their bodies and other women's bodies. I questioned and analysed their relationships with their bodies.

However, what I wish to emphasise here is that not only were the women office workers' bodies watched, analysed and noted, but also the ethnographer's body, my own body, needed to be observed, scrutinised and understood. Working at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I tried to learn to dress in a similar way to the organisation members because I wished to gain an acceptance as part of the organisation. I was embraced by the organisation's dress culture and practices. I received a guideline of how I should dress for work at the CEO's Office. I observed my colleagues and learnt to dress 'appropriately'. I interpreted the corporate dress code and appropriated it to be my dress style at work. Retrospectively, I have found that how I dressed myself was beyond the practice of impression management which aimed to facilitate my fieldwork roles and relationships. I shared the practices with the organisation members to the extent to which I felt as if I became one of them and began to empathise with why they dressed the way they did in such a particular workplace situation.

At Multivital Corporation, the dress practice amongst the employees was said to be 'freestyle' and 'casual'. I attempted to participate in the organisation's dress culture and dressed more casually in order to fit in with organisation members with whom I socialised. I observed the ways they dressed for work and revamped my wardrobe accordingly. I learnt to 'mix and match' my clothes and accessories and had fun with everyday creativity rather than trying to respond to a necessity of forging the corporate image through dress. Not only did my engagement in looking good practices which I shared with the secretaries at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and IT staff members at Multivital Corporation help facilitate my fieldwork process, but also helped me understand the women office workers' consumption experiences in particular working environments. In this

thesis I, therefore, accentuate the work of ‘embodied ethnographers’ and argue for the visibility of my body and embodied experiences in the analysis and writing of ethnography.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reflexively examine how I did ‘embodied ethnography’ with Thai women office workers in organisations. In understanding the Thai women office workers’ consumption of makeup and clothes at work, I recognise ethnography as the most appropriate methodological approach for my thesis. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two business organisations in Bangkok, CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation. Although the two organisations share some characteristics, my fieldwork encounters and experiences with each of the individual organisations have proved to be unique. This affirms a particularity and significance of the research context which needs to be included as part of the analysis. Furthermore, how I negotiated access to the organisations as well as the ways in which I managed fieldwork roles and relationships have played a crucial role in shaping the entire research process. At CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I was stationed at the CEO’s Office and took a secretarial role. My informants from CAIMEA were mainly secretaries and trainers. At Multivital Corporation, I was exempt from any working role but persistently ‘hung out’ in the IT Department and ‘shadowed’ IT staff members from the IT Helpdesk Unit. In doing participant observation, I raise an issue of the ethical dilemma regarding the exploitation of my friendships and relationships with my informants. The ethical concerns also inform how I should include photography in my ethnographic research. Rather than seeking an objective and realist use of photographs, I adopt a reflexive approach to photography and emphasise the significance of accounts, narratives and contexts surrounding the act of producing photographs. Concerning my analytical approach, I highlight the implications of my bodily presence and embodied experiences and their contributions to an understanding of the Thai women office workers’ experiences. Drawing on the work of ‘embodied ethnographers’, I argue for an insertion of my body and experiences in the analysis and writing of ethnography of Thai women office workers.

CHAPTER 4

From ‘Formal’ to ‘Smart Casual’ and ‘Freestyle’: Observing the Corporate Dress Codes

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the dress culture and practices happening at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation. The women office workers were asked to recount their experiences and the ways in which they dressed for work. Three dress codes emerged from their accounts; ‘formal’ as a dress code in the past for employees from both organisations, ‘smart casual’ as a current dress code for employees from CAIMEA Banking Corporation and ‘freestyle’ as a current dress code for employees from Multivital Corporation. I argue that in order to situate themselves in the organisations and in the complex hierarchical structure of the Thai society, it was necessary for the women as female employees to negotiate meanings of the dress codes and produce ‘appropriate’ looks for work. That is their consumption of clothes at work was the product of their negotiation with the corporate dress codes and Thai cultural values on dress. In supporting my argument, the women’s understandings of these three dress codes will be discussed.

From ‘Formal’

Upon my first visit to Multivital Corporation for a meeting with a HR manager, I was directed to the company’s main reception lounge. At the reception, a comprehensive collection of Multivital’s products had carefully been put on display, juxtaposed with massive well-designed wall signage, which featured the corporation’s mission and vision statements. It was a place made for visitors. In spite of the immense effort that had been made to forge visitors’ impressions, it seemed to be that receptionists were not included as part of the stylisation of the place. Sitting behind a long crescent desk, three female receptionists were fully occupied with the answering and transferring of telephone calls. They represented

women with a wide range of dress styles. One appeared in a company t-shirt. One dressed in a uniform, which, I learnt later, belonged to an outsource security firm hired by the company. The other covered herself in a bulky fleece jacket.

The reception lounge was getting crowded. Sitting next to me was a group of people wearing some team t-shirts that clearly promoted one of Multivital's products. Some staff passed by. One of them looked casual in crop trousers and a beach-style, tunic top. Another looked humble in a simple blouse and trousers. I then met the HR manager. She appeared in a plain, crop-sleeved blouse and a pair of sombre tailored trousers. My first impression with Multivital Corporation was that their female employees dressed in a variety of dress styles.

All of the women office workers whom I interviewed labelled such variety of Multivital's dress styles as 'freestyle'⁶. 'Freestyle' was a new dress code at Multivital Corporation. The change was so subtle that none of the women office workers could recall when exactly the dress code had been shifted. They only knew it was new. However, having served the company for nearly a decade, the women recounted similar experiences. An emerging theme was that all of the long-serving employees tried to describe how the ways in which they dressed for work had changed through time.

We used to dress like office workers. We wore skirts, suit jackets, and long-sleeve blouses. It was a working woman style. In this company we used to wear suits. It wasn't freestyle. ... But lately after they [the company] allowed us to dress in smart casual outfits, our dress style has changed. We used to wear skirts but now we wear trousers sometimes with a t-shirt or a blouse.

(Umim, 34, IT helpdesk specialist)

Back then everyone had to wear blouses, matching suits and skirts. Men wore a necktie. But lately they [the company] don't mind how we dress. There was an announcement that we could wear smart casual clothes on Fridays. That's all I can remember. It was many years ago.

(Kaan, 37, secretary)

When I first worked here, although I was stationed in a control room, I had to dress appropriately [*reabroi*]⁷. ... At that time the company wasn't yet open to freestyle dressing. My clothes were very formal. I also wore chausses.

(Nong, 37, IT helpdesk operator)

⁶ I communicated with my informants in the Thai language. However, on a number of occasions, they directly quoted English words or phrases. They used the word 'freestyle' in English to refer to their organisation's overall dress code. The word 'freestyle' was not translated from Thai language.

⁷ *Reabroi* is one of the Thai cultural values related to dress and manner in general. The meaning of *reabroi* will be further discussed in the following section.

During my first five years here, the company didn't allow us to wear trousers at all. At that time everyone dressed in matching blouses, skirts and shoes. We had to wear stockings. Sack dresses were very popular. We wore sack dresses and suit jackets. I think around 1997 or 1998, the company let us wear trousers but only on Fridays. Since then everyone can wear trousers to work. About two years after that the company changed its policy and allowed us to wear smart casual outfits, then everyone dressed in freestyle [clothing].

(Mo, 32, IT manager)

Umin, an IT specialist who had more than eight years of work experience with Multivital Corporation, labelled her and her colleagues' past dress style, 'an office worker style' and 'a working woman style'. Nong, another long-serving IT staff member, also described the obsolete dress style as 'formal work clothes'. This implies that the ways in which the women currently dressed for work may not fall into a stereotypical category of how 'working women' should dress. A so-called formal 'working woman style' encompassed a combination of a matching blouse, skirt and shoes. Shoes had to be *chaussure*⁸. Suit jackets⁹ and sack dresses¹⁰ were popular. Before the change of the dress policy, female employees were not permitted to wear trousers at work.

The combination of matching suit jackets, blouses, skirts and *chaussures*, which was once a formal dress code for female employees at Multivital Corporation, resembled a description of the late 1970's power-dressing for career women in Western society. In her book *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2000), Joanne Entwistle discusses the 'dressed body' in the workplace. She demonstrates how a notion of 'power-dressing', femininity and sexuality are connected to define an 'appropriate' female body at work. According to Entwistle, the notion of power-dressing first appeared in the late 1970's in the United States. Power dressing is a sediment of a commonsense understanding in that how one looks can contribute to one's career success (2000: 187 – 188). Power-dressing is directed to professional and career women whose visibility has become increasingly prevalent in the male-dominated professional domain. Power-dressing articulates how women should present themselves at work in order

⁸ My informants mentioned the word '*chaussure*' as in its original language. I did not translate this word from Thai. The word '*chaussure*' is commonly used by Thai people to refer to a classic style of women's shoes that cover the heels and toes.

⁹ The word 'suit' as a jacket suit in English language is commonly used in Thai language. The informants referred to 'suit' as used in an English language.

¹⁰ I use the word 'sack dress' in English to refer to the word '*chud-sack*' in Thai language. '*Chud-sack*' is a mixed use of languages. *Chud* means dress. Sack means the same as sack in English. In the Thai language, *chud-sack* is commonly used to refer to a style of women's dress, normally a knee length dress.

to achieve authority, respect and power. Such presentation mainly involves the management of women's sexuality at work. Sexuality 'is closely linked to eroticism – to ideas, fantasies, desires, quite independent from the actual sex act or any imperative to reproduce' (Entwistle 2000: 183). Sexuality is, therefore, considered inappropriate and hindering a career success for women.

To further explain the implication of power-dressing, Entwistle (2000: 189) refers to John T. Molloy's *Women: Dress for Success* (1980). Molloy's book serves as one of the power-dressing manuals which lay a set of rules for career women who seek to take control over their bodies and gain authority through dress. Molloy regards authority as crucial to women's career success. According to Molloy, looking too sexy and looking too much like a secretary undermines authority at work. One of the most important rules of power-dressing for authority seeking women in a male-dominated professional domain, as suggested by Molloy, is to dress in clothing that makes sexuality of the female body invisible. That is career women should not appear too sexual. Another rule of power-dressing is that career women should not be either too feminine or too masculine. Pink colour and floral print, for example, should be avoided as they are too feminine and, therefore, undermine authority. Trousers should not be worn in the workplace as women may look too masculine and too threatening to men. Nevertheless, above all of these rules, career women must maintain their femininity. As a result of negotiating a balance between 'the need to diminish sexuality with the need to maintain femininity', the power-dressing 'uniform' for career women combines masculine dress accentuated by a feminine touch (Entwistle 2000: 189). Suit jackets and tailored skirts are well recommended by Molloy. Jackets symbolise professionalism whilst skirts represent women's commitment to femininity.

Similar to the uniform of power-dressing, the dress code formerly adopted by Thai women office workers diminished sexuality attached to the female body and gave a fine balance between being neither too feminine nor too masculine whilst preserving women's femininity. The new dress policies at both CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation made the formal dress code redundant. 'Smart casual' and 'freestyle' dress codes have been introduced to the contemporary Thai workplaces and replaced the obsolete, formal dress style. Nevertheless, the concealment of female sexuality, which is the main attribute of the formal dress code and the uniform of power-dressing, remains central to the negotiation of the meanings of the new dress codes. Not only does the issue of

female sexuality inform the appropriateness of women's dress at work, but also the 'appropriateness' as defined by the Thai cultural values on dress and the female body.

To 'Smart Casual'

A significant change in the women office workers' dress styles was recalled to be after the introduction of the new dress policy which permitted female employees to wear trousers at work for the first time. The corporate dress code in general had shifted from 'formal' to 'smart casual'¹¹. This change happened at both Multivital Corporation and CAIMEA Banking Corporation. Lux, one of the longest-serving senior managers from CAIMEA, explained that in order to survive her organisation had to be adaptive to a changing environment. They could no longer endure the old corporate culture. From the authorities' point of view, Lux said:

Therefore, two years ago, we initiated a guideline that allowed staff to wear smart casual dress on Fridays. ...umm, no three years ago ... no five years. ... umm, around three to five years ago, we allowed staff to dress in smart casual clothes on Fridays. After that we observed their behaviour. At the same time, we wanted to revamp our image. ... So we decided to launch a policy that encourages staff to wear smart casual clothes from Monday to Thursday and Friday is a casual day.

(Lux, 45, senior manager and PA to CEO)

The guideline to which Lux referred was CAIMEA's *Policy Document* under the *Discipline and Disciplinary Action Section* regarding *Dress*, dated September 2000 (see Figure 4.1). The *Policy Document* was published in both the Thai and English languages¹². According to the *Policy Document*, employees who did not wear a uniform should have observed a formal dress code from Monday to Thursday and a smart casual dress code on Friday. However, in practice a formal dress code was compulsory for rare special occasions and meetings with important customers. The everyday dress code for CAIMEA's employees was smart casual with a casual dress code for Fridays. It was known as 'dress-down Friday'.

¹¹ The informants referred to the word 'smart casual' in English. It was not translated from any Thai word.

¹² Most informants from CAIMEA mentioned this guideline. They acknowledged that the bank issued a written guideline on dress available somewhere but they could not recall detailed contents of this guideline. Some said they were given an employee manual during the new employee orientation. The guideline was included in that manual.

Figure 4.1

CAIMEA Banking Corporation: *Policy Document, Discipline and Disciplinary Action*
 Issued: September 2000

Dress

1. An employee must dress neatly and appropriately for the business environment.
2. An employee to whom the Bank provides a uniform must wear the uniform when performing his/her job duties.
3. The Bank's standard of dress for employees who do not wear uniforms is as follows.

Dress Code	When	Do's and Don'ts	
		Ladies	Men
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday to Thursday Meeting with external parties such as customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Skirt or dress with jacket mainly ✓ If wearing trousers and jacket, they should be in a matching set. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Matching suit mainly ✓ Must wear necktie.
Smart Casual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fridays Last working day of a week Training days 	<p>The followings are NOT encouraged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Round-neck t-shirt, jeans and sportswear × Sandals, clogs and sneakers × Flashy surfsiders, sport shoes × Leggings, hot pants, camisole, sleeveless blouse, and strappy top 	<p>The followings are NOT encouraged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Round-neck t-shirt, jeans and sportswear × Sneakers and sandals × Flashy surfsiders, sport shoes × Shorts

The *Policy Document* clearly defines how CAIMEA's employees, both female and male, should dress in order to comply with the formal dress code. Noticeably, the formal dress code for 'ladies' described in the policy is indifferent from the power-dressing uniform. However, the *Policy Document* only provides a vague guideline for a smart casual dress code. To a certain extent, this allows the bank's employees to interpret meanings of the smart casual dress code. As long as employees, especially female, do not wear the following clothing items; round-neck t-shirts, jeans, sports wear, sandals, clogs, sneakers, flashy surfsiders, sport shoes, leggings, hot pants, camisoles, sleeveless blouse, strappy tops, they comply with CAIMEA's definition of smart casual.

Lux's comments on the changes in CAIMEA's employees' dress codes as well as the existence of the written dress policy illustrate an exertion of the corporate authority on employees' dress practices at work. Ruth P. Rubinstein discusses the meanings of authority as being 'a beginner, creator and author of something', being in 'a position to grant permission' and having 'power over other

people' (2001: 83). According to Rubinstein, authority holders, therefore, 'represent a social entity: They are required to be concerned with production – the achievement of an organisation's goals – and as members of a hierarchy they are expected to relate differently to those below and those above' (2001: 83).

In this sense, CAIMEA Banking Corporation was an authority holder and active subject who set rules, initiated actions and chose to regulate or not to regulate employees' dress practices. The transformation of employees' dress styles was endorsed and authorised by their organisation through dress policy and dress codes. However, it should not be assumed that the organisation as an authority holder had absolute power over employees in defining a standard of 'appropriate look' in the workplace. Tensions between CAIMEA's authorities and their employees regarding the classification of the smart casual dress code and a definition of 'appropriate' dress could be observed from time to time. The following sections will discuss dress regulations and the negotiation of meanings of 'smart casual' dress code at CAIMEA Banking Corporation.

Regulating 'Smart Casual': Dress Surveillance at CAIMEA Banking Corporation

As I mentioned earlier, CAIMEA's *Policy Document* loosely defined the description of the smart casual dress code. How to dress to fit into the category of smart casual seemed to be relative, subjecting to an individual employee's judgement. In many cases, what individual employees understood to be 'smart casual' might not correspond with that expected by the management. Kratae, one of the secretaries from the CEO's Office, for example, sometimes went to work in a high-street, imported, cardigan top and tailored trousers. In Kratae's perception, she dressed properly [*reab-ro/*] and her selection of attire should have passed as smart casual dress. Her manager, Lux, however, made a remark about Kratae's cardigan top, saying that it was too casual and accentuated her body contours. It was not appropriate for wearing to the workplace of the bank's top executives.

Countless instances demonstrated the bank's attempts to regulate their employees' choices of dress. One of the attempts was an in-house fashion show organised in 2003. The event was an initiative driven by members of the top management after they received negative feedback concerning their employees' inappropriate dress from 'outsiders' – customers and government officers. Mint, a

secretary who worked at the CEO's Office during the time of the event, commented that, 'At that time our image, as reflected from outsiders, was that our dress didn't reach a good standard. Staff should dress in a more professional manner. ... It's a reputation risk.'

A rationale behind the fashion show, according to Mint and other employees who participated in the event, was that the management were eager to use 'a visual display' to demonstrate what CAIMEA's employees should and should not wear at work and 'what do's and don'ts should look like' (Pomme, 24, training coordinator). Reflecting from her work experience with the executives who supported the event, Mint commented further that, 'Communicating with words alone leaves room for interpretation. They [the management] thought that a visual display was clearer'. However, in Mint's opinion, the event was not deemed as a success. 'It may raise a certain extent of awareness but I think the fashion show wasn't clear. Although they used a visual display, it wasn't clear enough in showing the differences between smart casual and casual dress.'

From my observations, 'visual display' was a consistent theme throughout the bank's top-down internal communication from the management to employees. In every issue of the bank's monthly in-house newsletter, there was an excessive use of photographs capturing various employee activities. In promoting a reward scheme for employees with exceptional work performance, a series of photographs of outstanding employees and management were made into life-size cardboard cutouts. They were displayed at the foyers of every floor on banking premises. In encouraging employees to participate in the bank's annual charity sport event, photographs of employees looking energetic in bank-branded sportswears were custom made into life-size stickers adhered to the lift doors.

The fashion show was another visual approach which the management used for conveying their message to employees. Whether the use of visual display is an effective communicative act is not a concern of this thesis. The consistent use of visual display by the management implicates that the bank's authorities acknowledged and emphasised the significance of visual communication. This can be associated with their employees' dress practices, in that, how CAIMEA's employees dressed and looked could also be interpreted as visual communication. The bodies of the bank employees were objectified as a visual means which partly but importantly represented the bank's corporate image before the eyes of outsiders.

The fashion show illustrates one of the managerial attempts to reify a smart casual dress code, or in other words, to regulate the employees' dress practices. However, the event was only a one-shot approach and also viewed by some participants as a failure. More significant than this occasional event was the ongoing everyday practices where the management kept their employees under close surveillance.

We circulated emails to warn staff. We asked heads of departments to warn staff. We discussed it amongst the management during meetings and communicated our discussions to staff. I actually agree that we should not let loose about staff's dress. ... They don't think; "This is my organisation". "This is our corporate image." They just want their own convenience. ...Then there were incidents where staff did not dress properly. They dressed badly and went to see customers. For example, if they have a meeting with government officers but they don't dress properly, there will be a feedback from the government. Then the dress issue will be raised again. Warning emails will be circulated again.

(Lux, 45, senior manager)

From Lux's comment on dress surveillance in her organisation, it was, therefore, common to witness supervisors making remarks on their team members' dress if it was perceived to be improper. The remarks were made in both amiable and domineering manners. Pomme was a training coordinator who was new to the company. Her work involved handling routine administrative tasks in her office and facilitating activities and workshops in training rooms. On one occasion, Pomme's supervisor spotted her and other trainers' photographs posted on a notice board next to one of the trainers' desk. Everyone in the photographs looked casual in their dress-down Friday outfits. But Pomme's white t-shirt and short pale denim skirt looked prominent in the photographs and caught Lyn's attention. Lyn, head of the department, made a remark that Pomme's outfit was not appropriate to wear at work. Pomme was not present in the office. Lyn then asked other trainers to forward her message to Pomme and reminded her staff once again to dress appropriately.

Pomme was well aware that her personal choice of clothing mismatched her work role and her supervisor's expectation as she recounted:

I'm now trying to improve myself. I was given a warning. When I first worked here, I was being myself a bit too much. I wore what I liked and nobody said anything. But when I started working for the training department, they [head of the department and training manager] said I should improve the way I dress.

(Pomme, 24, training coordinator)

Fon was another training coordinator. She was soon to be promoted to junior trainer. Similar to her colleague, Fon's dress style seemed to raise an issue that needed to be rectified according to her supervisor. Fon said:

I follow my mood. I dress according to how I feel. Pi Lyn [head of the department] always comments that the way I dress isn't good enough. ... Actually, I like to wear a knitted cardigan and trousers but she said that I was going to be a trainer I would have to dress up, dress more like a professional. I was told I should wear suit or something like that.

(Fon, 24, training coordinator)

Not only was the dress surveillance evident at the training department, employees from other departments also experienced dress supervision. However, for Ploy, a 41-year-old secretary, who claimed that she followed the management's direction and expectation since day one, dress was not a problematic issue.

I've been told since my first day that I have to dress properly [*reabroi*]. I have to look good and look mature. Looking good is important here. ... During the [job] interview, my boss told me that I have to dress *reabroi*. I've hold on to that first order since. Looking good. When my boss is in the office, I should wear a skirt. If there is a visitor, I should wear a suit. I should look good. ... The way we dress reflects our company's image, my boss's image. Our department welcomes a lot of visitors, both internal and external. We have to respect our workplace. Right? If we dress well, we're in a winning situation. And I'm a secretary. I shouldn't appear scruffy. My boss dresses very well. He's very neat with his clothes. He's a well-dressed man.

(Ploy, 41, secretary)

Reflecting on Pomme's, Fon's and Ploy's accounts, two forms of dress surveillance could be observed. The training coordinators, Pomme and Fon, shared a similar experience of authorities' close surveillance on their dress, while Ploy internalised the authoritative surveillance and developed a practice of self-surveillance regarding her dress. Mint was another secretary who also embraced the practice of self-surveillance on her dress. She agreed with her manager that dress represented their corporate image. She repressed her personal dress preference and dressed herself in a corporate preferred style, which she thought could express her respect for her workplace and her manager. Mint commented:

My supervisor sees that dress is important. It's true. Though dress isn't directly related to our work, it reflects the bank's image. ... I don't want to dress for work in my own style. It's personal. Some of my clothes should not be worn at work. They aren't suitable for the workplace. I have to choose. When I go to work, I have to respect my workplace. I respect people I'm going to meet as well respecting my workplace. I also dress to honour my boss.

(Mint, 32, secretary)

Mint's account on dress as symbolic in representing a corporate image and for expressing her respect to her superiors, including customers, corresponded to Lux's account. Mint worked under Lux for two years at the CEO's Office.

Dress is very important to our corporate image. Dress is also the way in which we honour people we are interacting with. If you work in such a high profile organisation but dress in improper clothes to welcome customers and visitors, it's wrong. It shows that you don't respect customers.

(Lux, 45, senior manager)

All of the secretaries claimed to accept their subordinate roles to their superintendents. They made a reference to their managers and emphasised the practice of self-surveillance of their own dress. However, although all of the CAIMEA secretaries were women and most of the executives were men, the subordinate role performed by the secretaries should not be simply interpreted as an asymmetrical power relation between genders. The more complex issue of Thai social order should also be considered. Donald W. Hendon (2001) studies negotiation tactics between foreign and local executives in 21 countries including Thailand. From his observations of Thai business culture, he comments:

Thais have a strong sense of hierarchy in business and in family matters. Decision-making revolves around the hierarchical centralized nature of authority and the dependence of the inferior upon the superior. ... Since Thais are generally unassertive, the inferior unquestioningly obeys. A benevolent superior and respectful inferior is the Thai ideal.

(Hendon 2001: 46)

The practice of self-surveillance on dress amongst the secretaries as well as their use of dress to express respect to their superiors may confirm an ideal of harmonised hierarchical social order in the organisation. However, if Thai employees who held an inferior position were unassertive and unquestioningly obeying in general, why did the bank's authorities need to exert constant surveillance on their employees' dress? I argue that 'a strong sense of hierarchy in business matter' is not a natural characteristic of Thai employees, but rather has been produced and reproduced through regulations and discourses on professionalism and appropriateness. In the followings, I will discuss the notion of appropriateness as informed by the Thai cultural values of *reabroi* and *kalatesa*.

Observing Appropriateness: Reabroi and Kalatesa

Written in the *Policy Document*, the smart casual dress code for both female and male CAIMEA's employees is defined by a list of clothing items which 'are not encouraged' by the organisation (see Figure 4.1). Both female and male employees should avoid wearing 'round-neck t-shirts, jeans, sportswear, sneakers, sandals, flashy surfsiders, and sport shoes' – outfits that are commonly associated with leisure activities. However, exclusive to female employees, an additional list of items had been included – 'leggings, hot pants, camisoles, sleeveless blouses, and strappy tops' which are generally understood to accentuate the female body and can be associated with the flaunting of sexuality. As I mentioned earlier, according to the notion of power-dressing, it is necessary for career women to conceal their sexuality as the prevalence of sexuality diminishes authority and, hence, undermines a professional look (Entwistle, 2000). In this sense, female employees are expected to project a professional look by avoiding such outfits.

Not only is a repression of women's sexuality manifested through dress crucial to a formation of professional looks in the workplace, but also the Thai cultural values ascribed to Thai women. Nearly all of the women office workers mentioned the word *reabroi* when describing 'appropriate' dress. *Reabroi*, in general, means an 'expression of order' (Van Esterik 2000: 40). However, when *reabroi* is used for describing a woman, it means that the woman is well-behaved. She has good manners and preserves modesty. *Reabroi* is also used for describing an 'appropriate' way of dressing for an 'appropriate' Thai woman. In an institutionalised article on *Good Dress Manner* (2007) published by the Office of the National Culture Commission in the Ministry of Culture of Thailand¹³, *reabroi* is one of the most important practical rules for Thais' good dress manner.

One should dress appropriately [*reabroi*]. People from different societies subscribe to different standards of appropriateness [*reabroi*]. However, if one uses one's commonsense, one should know what is appropriate and what is not for Thai society. Inappropriate dress [*mai-reabroi*] includes, for example, wearing a vest t-shirt to a restaurant, wearing clothes that reveal parts of the body which should be reserved, wearing an outfit which is too tight, wearing a skirt or pants which are too short in order to expose or to emphasise certain parts of the body. If one dresses in such a manner to a

¹³ This short article, *Good Dress Manner* (2007), is written in the Thai language and published by the Office of the National Culture Commission in the Ministry of Culture of Thailand. It can be accessed online via <http://www.culture.go.th/study.php?&YY=2550&MM=3&DD=3> .

sacred place such as a religious place, temple, church, government office and educational institute, it is considered inappropriate [*mai-reabroi*].

(The Office of the National Culture Commission, 2007)

A repression of women's sexuality through dress is, therefore, important not only to the production of a professional look expected by the organisation, but also to the formation of an appropriate look for an appropriate Thai woman [*reabroi*] as expected by Thai society. Apart from *reabroi*, *kalatesa* is another word frequently used by the women office workers when describing 'appropriate' work clothes. Pomme, a training coordinator, for example, explained how she should dress differently in different situations, according to *kalatesa*.

I think dress is about *kalatesa* [time-place-interaction], which dress suits which situation. For example, when I come to work, my role is to work. I should dress for work. If I'm going to meet a visitor or customer, I have to dress up to look good, credible and trustworthy. When I'm on holiday, I have another role. I dress differently. How I should dress depends on whom I'm going to meet in that situation.

(Pomme, 24, training coordinator)

Kalatesa is one of the most important 'cultural strategies of interaction' amongst Thais, according to the anthropologist Penny Van Esterik (2000: 38). In her book *Materializing Thailand* (2000), Van Esterik explores the notion of *kalatesa* in relation to Thai cultural orders and gender relations in the Thai historical and cultural processes. *Kalatesa* is a noun deriving from the classical Indian languages, *Pali* and *Sanskrit*. Its denotative meaning given in a dictionary is 'proper, suitable or balanced' and its connotative meaning described by Van Esterik's Thai informants 'politeness, appropriateness or context' (2000: 36). *Kala* is a formal Thai word for time which means 'proper time, fate or destiny'. *Kala* is different from *wela*. *Wela* is 'measurable time such as day, hour, minute'. *Kala* is 'the quality of time particularly expressed as recurrent cycles'. *Tesa* is equivalent to 'space or locality'. *Kalatesa* then 'explains how events and persons come together appropriately in time and space' (2000: 36).

According to Van Esterik, *kalatesa* is different from the Western understanding of context (2000: 40). Context is 'a broad, static framing for text or practice' but *kalatesa* is 'the coming together of immediate circumstances in time and space in a certain fashion. ... Time and space come together to order appropriate social interaction in varying contexts depending on the social position of the actors and on their individual characteristics – *kalatesa*' (2000: 40). In Van Esterik's point of view, *kalatesa* is not gendered. It is a mechanism of social control

over the behaviours of both females and males. Thais regardless of genders are expected 'to conform to *kalatesa* in order to fit into a social hierarchy' (2000: 41)

For Thais, knowing *kalatesa* is very important for appropriate social interaction as it brings about 'orderliness in social relations, *Khawm riaproy*¹⁴' (Van Esterik 2000: 36). Knowledge of *kalatesa* is commonly demonstrated through language, manner and dress (2000: 39). Being able to dress appropriately means that a person has a good knowledge of *kalatesa*. According to the Ministry of Culture of Thailand's *Good Dress Manner* (2007), demonstrating knowledge of *kalatesa* through dress is strongly emphasised.

It is very important to dress appropriately, by observing the right *kalatesa*, for example:

1. One should dress appropriately to a social function where one attends. Black colours should be avoided when attending a wedding. Likewise, bright colourful clothing should not be worn to a funeral.
2. One should dress to show respect to a host. For example, one can dress casually to a friend's party. However, for a formal wedding reception, jeans and t-shirts are not acceptable as it shows that one does not give any honour to the host. ...
3. One particular mode of dress may be appropriate for one particular place but may not be so for another. For example, it is acceptable to wear sandals at home or when going out for a walk in a neighbourhood. However, wearing sandals to school or to the workplace is considered inappropriate. ...

A person who dresses well and dresses appropriately to *kalatesa* deserves a compliment from society and from people with whom one interacts. In contrast, a person who does not dress appropriately will be criticised by others. This will bring a bad reputation to oneself, to one's family and to an institution one is affiliated to. ...

(The Office of the National Culture Commission, 2007)

Kalatesa is, therefore, one of the social mechanisms, which dictate social interaction amongst Thais. In the workplace, *kalatesa* demands female employees to acknowledge their own social position as well as the social positions of those with whom they interact. Women are expected to respond appropriately in order to reaffirm such social positions in the hierarchical social order. That is women are expected to dress appropriately in relation to their social positions and use clothes symbolically to show their respect and bestow honour on their institutionalised workplace, customers, superintendents, the management and those who are

¹⁴ *Kwam riaproy* is a noun while *riaproy* is an adjective or adverb. Earlier, I discuss a word *reabroi*. Van Esterik's *riaproy* is the same Thai word as *reabroi* I use but they are spelt with different transliterating systems. In this thesis, I refer to a Thai-English transliterating system provided by *The Royal Institute of Thailand*, a government department responsible for formalising and standardising the use of Thai language. (<http://www.royin.go.th>)

perceived to be higher in the social hierarchy. Failing to conform to *kalatesa* or to demonstrate knowledge of ‘appropriateness’, women office workers jeopardise being accepted in the organisation. The ideal smart casual outfit for CAIMEA’s female employees, therefore, is a work outfit that reflects the image of a professional woman and of an appropriate Thai woman.

To Freestyle

While recounting their experiences at work, the women office workers from CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation revealed how the styles of their work outfits had changed since the introduction of the new dress codes. The major change was that female employees were permitted to wear trousers at work and their everyday dress practices were discharged from a ‘formal working woman style’. The fact that the women’s dress practices at work were determined by the corporate dress policy demonstrated an asymmetrical power relationship between the organisations as employers and the women as employees. While authorities from CAIMEA Banking Corporation made extensive attempts to regulate their employees’ dress practices through dress surveillance and discourses of professionalism demanding that employees projected a good corporate image through dress, at Multivital Corporation evidence of dress surveillance was rarely witnessed.

According to the women office workers from Multivital Corporation, employees were free to wear whatever they wanted, whatever they had and whatever they liked at work. They called the celebration of such liberation, ‘freestyle’.

Freestyle means that we can wear whatever we want as long as it suits our personality and preference.

(Jin, 42, accounting director)

Our company is Western and we are freestyle with our clothes. We can wear whatever we like as long as we can do our job.

(Nong, 37, IT Helpdesk operator)

I started to wear trousers since then. ... I always wear a company t-shirt.

(Maew, 48, IT support manager)

Everyone can wear trousers at work now. Our dress is freestyle.

(Mo, 32, IT manager)

HR isn't strict. We dress more and more casually. Now it's freestyle. Some people wear jeans everyday. More and more people wear trainers.
(Umim, 34, consumer support analyst)

However, 'freestyle' as being able to wear whatever they wanted, whatever they had and whatever they liked, I argue, implicates two significant meanings regarding dress practices amongst Multivital's female employees. First, a freestyle dress code redefines a form of corporate exertion of authority over its employees' bodies. Second, a freestyle dress code contests the boundary of 'appropriate' work clothes in the contemporary workplace.

Negotiating 'Freestyle': Between Authority and Autonomy at Multivital Corporation

Changes of the dress code at Multivital Corporation allowed employees a chance to choose dress styles which expressed their individuality. They had more autonomy over their dress practices at work. This resulted in a rich variety of dress styles being seen in their organisation. However, such autonomy was given by the organisation. It was bound to a corporate dress policy which authorised autonomy to employees. Unlike at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, dress surveillance at Multivital Corporation was rare. Moreover, managers and supervisors were ambivalent about exerting their authority in influencing the employees' dress practices as it was considered to be irrelevant to the corporate policy.

Tip was a senior IT manager whose position was ranked the second highest amongst the management from the IT Department. In her late forties, Tip had more than eight years of work experience with Multivital Corporation. She personally liked a modest dressing style. She did not like dazzling clothes and preferred to dress in sombre blue, grey and black colours. Tip made a clear division between the outfits she wore at work and outside work. She did not wear 'casual' clothes to work as she believed, 'Work is work. Relaxing is relaxing. If I wear casual dress, it doesn't look like I'm at work.' With her understanding of work clothes as clothes that 'look professional', Tip did not adopt casual freestyle dress in the same way that her staff did. 'For our company, freestyle dress is ok but it's not ok for me,' she said. Throughout the change of the overall dress style in her organisation, Tip learnt to compromise with her staff and understood that a dress style was a personal choice. As a senior manager, she did not explicitly exert any authority to influence her staff's dress practices and explained to herself that 'dress

style is an individual's choice'. She was reluctant to make any remark on her staff's dress when she felt it was 'inappropriate'. Tip said:

I think dress style is an individual's choice. It's difficult to give a warning to my staff. It's not practical here because if I give them a warning about their dress but staff from other departments aren't treated similarly, it might be awkward. I may just tell them, "Why are your clothes very revealing today? Why are you wearing jeans?" I might just mention it but will not give any formal warning or anything. ... If the company issued any substantive regulations, it might be ok to warn my staff but there are no rules here. I can't do anything. How can I exert my authority when the top authorities don't bother?

(Tip, 47, IT manager)

Prae, a senior manager from a supply chain department, had served the company for more than 25 years. She was well recognised amongst Multivital's employees as one of the best-dressed managers. Prae shared a similar view as Tip. Both of them did not entirely approve of some of their staff's 'inappropriate' dress. In the managers' point of view, inappropriate clothes were outfits that emphasised female sexuality, such as mini-skirts, tight tops, and jeans. Although Prae and Tip disagreed with some of their staffs' styles of dress, they could not exert their authority explicitly. Prae developed a strategy to communicate with her staff. Instead of giving an immediate order to disallow the outfits that, she thought, were inappropriate, Prae indirectly expressed her disapproval by teasing her staff. She said:

In my team, I try to tell my staff but not directly. I'll just tease them about why their top is very short. But I can't be direct. "Do not wear this top ever again." I only give a hint. Sometimes, I might pull their top down a little, like teasing them. At least I want them to know that I give warnings but I don't say it in words.

...

I think dress style is personal. It depends on the person. But if they [her staff] are going to have a meeting with suppliers, I would tell them to dress appropriately. If they don't have any meetings, it's up to them what they wear. But their dress shouldn't be horrible. Sometimes their tops are very tight and short and trousers are low cut. Frankly, I have to say that I don't like it at all. I understand that some of them are like teenagers. I used to be a teenager. I try to understand them. They may think they're trendy. I don't want to be fussy with them. As long as I can make sure that they deliver good work performance, I'm happy.

(Prae, 50, senior manager)

Unlike the management from CAIMEA Banking Corporation, who associated employees' dress with an expression of a professional look, the management from Multivital Corporation associated their employees' dress with individuality. 'I think dress style is an individual's choice' (Tip). 'I think dress style is personal' (Prae). Without the embrace of professionalism represented through

dress, a justification for the management to exercise dress surveillance over their employees' dress practices was absent. As a senior manager, Prae chose to exert her authority only when her staff were to meet with outsiders, namely suppliers.

This specific use of justification to regulate employees' dress practices at Multivital Corporation was also evident at the Regulatory Affairs Department. The Regulatory Affairs Department was a small working unit which comprised a team of six legal administrative staff working under one manager. Apart from the manager, all of the team members were female. As the main function of this department was to process product registrations and licensing, regulatory affairs staff members' main responsibility was to handle legal documents, visit government agencies and cooperate with government officers. The regulatory affairs manager, therefore, set a specific dress code applicable only to staff in this department. Mai and Bow, the youngest and the newest members, told similar stories of the specific dress code in their department.

The company isn't strict on our dress style. We can dress very casually. But for our department, we deal with government officers. We don't have to dress formally but we can't be too casual. We should look good. Our dress should look ok. ... We don't wear jeans either. Although the company allows us to wear jeans, it isn't applicable to our department. My boss sets the rules. Sometimes we might have an unexpected meeting or urgent assignment outside the company. If we wore jeans, it wouldn't be appropriate [*reabroi*].

(Mai, 23, regulatory affairs staff)

Our job involves meeting and dealing with a lot of people and we go out very often. The dress issue has often been raised in our staff meetings. We agree that dress is very important. It's necessary for us to dress well. We can't be scruffy. We represent Multivital. We can't dress poorly and go out to meet people. We're the company's representatives. We aren't allowed to wear jeans or anything too casual because we have to deal with government officers. Although we can dress in whatever we like, our dress should still be appropriate [*reabroi*].

(Bow, 23, regulatory affairs staff)

In general, Multivital's employees were free to dress to fit their preferences. However, in some particular situations where the employees were to interact with visitors, customers and government officers, the management would be able to exert their authority. For example, Prae would ask her staff to dress properly only when they had a meeting with suppliers. Mai and Bow were not allowed to wear jeans and needed to be cautious as to the appropriateness of their work outfits. In these specific circumstances, female employees might stay within the boundaries set by their superintendents as they were required to represent Multivital Corporation when encountering outsiders.

Contesting the Boundary of Work Clothes

As I discussed earlier, it was not Multivital Corporation's policy to regulate and standardise the ways in which its employees dressed for work. How employees dressed at work was not explicitly associated with a good corporate image. As such, dress surveillance by the management was rare. The management themselves were ambivalent about exerting their authority regarding dress supervision. However, whilst Multivital's employees enjoyed their claim to the freedom of the freestyle dress code, they did not totally discard the notion of 'appropriateness'. Many women said that their choices of dress were informed by the Thai cultural values of *reabroi* and *kalatesa*.

Well, freestyle is good. We can wear whatever we have. We can wear the same clothes for work as we do at the weekend or on any occasion. But sometimes it's too casual. ... I think trousers are all right with a blouse, but not a t-shirt. Some people wear t-shirts everyday. They should rotate their clothes and make themselves look good. They should dress more like they are at work. ... Some people don't know where the boundary lies of what is appropriate and what is not appropriate to wear to work.

(Nong, 37, IT helpdesk operator)

I think here we dress in a variety of styles. Work clothes don't need to be suits. I see some people wear crop trousers, jeans, sleeveless tops and things like that. But personally I think the way they dress is not ok. ... Crop jeans are not appropriate to wear to work. They are for wearing on holiday or at other times.

(Kaan, 37, secretary)

I like the way it is now. I like freestyle dress but [people] should not wear strappy tops, tank tops, crop trousers and jeans to work. Umm... jeans should be ok but only on Fridays. ... I think women in this company dress like they aren't at work. Ummm. I should say our clothes are very casual. ... It becomes more and more freestyle to the point where people start to wear strappy tops. I've seen some staff wearing them. They just cover their shoulders with a shawl. I feel that's very casual, too casual.

(Ann, 35, IT support administrator)

If I want to wear jeans at work, nobody cares. Nobody says anything. Sometimes I see people wear strappy tops. I think they don't respect our workplace. But when they get to their desk, they cover their shoulders. Well, it's ok. But it's not ok if they walk around in a strappy top.

(Maew, 48, IT support manager)

'Appropriateness' defines the boundary of what constitutes work clothes. However, what is appropriate and what is not appropriate to wear at work remains subjective. Jeans, crop trousers, t-shirts, strappy tops, tank tops and flip flops were prevalent at Multivital Corporation, as a result of the new corporate dress code. These outfits were commonly associated with leisure and the flaunting of

sexuality and were once prohibited in the organisation. In this respect, a freestyle dress code contests the boundary of work clothes. Multivital's employees' responses to the new dress code were varied. Nong, Kaan, and Ann favoured the freestyle dress code but disagreed with the wearing of 'too casual' dress to work. However, members of the long serving 'generation', such as Prae and Nok who had both served the company for more than two decades, revealed their abhorrence of the 'inappropriate' clothes which some female employees dressed at work.

I think staff these days don't know how to dress appropriately. Staff used to dress properly [*reabroi*]. The company gives them free t-shirts and they wear these t-shirts with jeans. Some people even wear flip flops in the office. I think it isn't appropriate [*mai-reabroi*]. ... Women these days wear trousers. Smart casual? I don't know how smart that is? Especially on Fridays, some staff wear jeans. They wear these things. I think it's inappropriate. [*mai-reabroi*].

(Prae, 50, senior manager)

Rubbish... they wear trousers. They wear jeans at work. Is that appropriate to wear at work? No, it isn't. When you go to work, you must respect your workplace. I think like that. Don't you look too casual for work? Are you here for work or for a holiday? I don't think they respect themselves either. ...A T-shirt and jeans are not appropriate. It's not my style. ... People should know what is appropriate and what is not, what they should do, what they shouldn't do.

...
I don't think the company issues any clear guidelines that say "do not wear jeans at work". I think HR should look after this matter. Some people even wear crop trousers. I'm surprised.... New generation, new people who work here don't know *kalatesa*. I don't know how their sense of *kalatesa* has gone. ... Maybe they are too confident and overlook these things. Or maybe they are too westernised. They don't care about anything. I think this affects their work. I don't think these people do their jobs well.

(Nok, 49, secretary)

On the contrary, members of the 'new' generation, such as Kib and Kitty, may also observe the notion of 'appropriateness', yet they were prepared to compromise and agree that work clothes 'can be a little bit sexy'.

Appropriate dress [*reabroi*] is an outfit that is neither too revealing nor too tight. For me work clothes shouldn't be too revealing but can be a little bit sexy. But a top shouldn't be open here and there.

(Kib, 24, supporting staff)

I choose clothes that, I think, are suitable for me. Work clothes should also be proper [*reabroi*] somehow They can be a little bit sexy but not too much... They should be appropriate for work.

(Kitty, 30, secretary)

The freestyle dress code did not always mean that Multivital's employees were able to wear whatever they wanted, whatever they liked and whatever they

had to work. The corporation granted the employees with autonomy regarding their dress. Nevertheless, the women office workers' dress practices remained influenced by the Thai cultural values of 'appropriateness'. The tension between the female employees regarding the interpretation of 'appropriate' work clothes illustrated a significance of the notions of *reabroi* and *kalatesa* which informed women's dress practices at work.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals the interface between Thai cultural values and organisational dress codes in the production of 'appropriateness' that informed Thai women office workers' consumption practices at work. It also highlights the significance of female sexuality in defining appropriateness. In the past years, the women office workers' dress styles at work had changed dramatically, in response to three corporate dress codes: 'formal', 'smart casual', and 'freestyle'. The formal dress code, which was described as a combination of a suit jacket, tailored skirt and chassures, used to be a compulsory dress code for female employees from both organisations. The introduction of the new dress policy led to new practices which allowed female employees to dress more casually and to wear trousers at work. While the women office workers from Multivital Corporation identified their overall organisation's new dress code as freestyle, the women from CAIMEA Banking Corporation's everyday dress practices were regulated by a smart casual dress code.

At CAIMEA Banking Corporation, a tension was observed between the management and female employees in defining 'appropriate' smart casual dress. Justified by discourses on professionalism, dress surveillance by the management was adopted in an attempt to forge a good corporate image represented through employees' dress. Furthermore, some women office workers adopted a self-surveillance approach. They claimed to be vigilant of their work outfit and dress to comply with a standard of appropriateness expected by the organisation. 'Appropriate' smart casual dress for CAIMEA's female employees comprises work outfits which conceal the prevalence of potential sexuality attached to the female body. Not only does the concealment of female sexuality contribute to the production of a professional look, but also a look for appropriate Thai women known as *reabroi*. CAIMEA's employees were also expected to observe the notion

of *kalatesa* which demanded them to dress appropriately according to their social positions and those of the people with whom they interacted.

At Multivital Corporation, the women office workers adopted a freestyle dress code. The freestyle dress code redefined a form of corporate exertion of authority over the employees' bodies and contested the boundary of what constitute 'appropriate' work clothes in the contemporary workplace. Dress surveillance by the management was uncommon. Managers and supervisors were reluctant to interfere with their staff's choices of dress although some outfits were perceived as 'inappropriate'. Only in the situation that staff were to interact with outsiders, would the management exert their authority in defining the appropriateness of their staff's work clothes. In general, Multivital's female employees claimed to enjoy their autonomy and favoured the new dress code. However, the freestyle dress code led to the tension between Multivital's female employees regarding how they and their colleagues should dress and interpret 'appropriateness'. Although all of the women claimed to observe the Thai cultural values, *reabroi* and *kalatesa*, some of them contested the boundary of appropriate work clothes through the negotiation of female sexuality.

CHAPTER 5

In Pursuit of Looking Good

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the meanings of beauty and looking good as understood by Thai women office workers and argue that women's engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes is not always in the pursuit of beauty, but rather in the pursuit of looking good. There emerges a distinction between 'beauty' and 'looking good'. Whilst beauty is perceived as an innate quality of the body, looking good entails the materialisation of the outer body in an attempt to achieve an ideal look. By questioning the term 'beauty practices', I introduce the concept of 'looking good practices' to affirm that looking good practices are not beauty practices. The significance of looking good practices is that the practices emphasise women's agentic capacity. The stories of Kitty and Kib, two young secretaries from Multivital Corporation, highlight women's ambivalent experiences whilst engaging in looking good practices. I argue that looking good practices are a form of 'oppressive agency' in that women are both subjects and objects of their own actions.

In Pursuit of Beauty?

You've come to the wrong place. Nobody is concerned about beauty here. We only work, work, work and work!

(Lux, 45, PA to CEO)

In late June 2005, I was granted an appointment with Lux, the PA to the CEO of CAIMEA Banking Corporation. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss my placement at the bank. In an attempt to explain the focus of my thesis, I cited two keywords, 'women office workers' and 'beauty practices'. Hearing my two keywords, Lux, who was in her mid forties at the time, gave me her whimsical view on them. 'You've come to the wrong place. Nobody is concerned about beauty here. We only work, work, work and work!'

I was stunned by Lux's comment as what I had just witnessed at the bank's reception area told a different story. Making my way to see Lux on the top floor, I had gone through a security formality at the reception on the ground floor. Two female receptionists were stationed. They looked perfectly groomed. Their faces were neatly made up. Their dark long hair was tidy and styled. Both of them dressed in tailor-made uniforms, the colours of which were coordinated with, what I learnt later, was the corporate branding colour scheme. What I witnessed upon my arrival at CAIMEA Banking Corporation was an emphasis on the body beautiful of the female workforce or on what Witz et al. (2003) refer to as 'aesthetic labour'. It gave me the impression that I had come to the right place.

Two weeks later in early July 2005, I began my placement at the CEO's Office, working under Lux. On my first day, Lux invited me for lunch with a team of trainers and training coordinators from the bank's in-house training agency called Organisational Learning or OL. Around twelve people joined that lunch. I had a chance to introduce myself and talk about my thesis with some women in the team. Again I quoted the two keywords, 'women office workers' and 'beauty practices'. Some of them smiled or even laughed. One of the trainers shared a similar view with Lux. She affirmed, 'Nobody cares about beauty here.' But I thought, 'Oh really? That can't be true.' What she said seemed contradictory to what I had seen. Every single woman who joined the lunch that day wore makeup. Their makeup might not have been highly visible but they definitely applied something; face powder, lipstick, eyebrow liner or blusher. My question was that if all of them wore makeup, why did they say they did not care for beauty?

During my first few weeks at CAIMEA, I began to talk with some women and eventually interviewed them. Nearly all of the women dissociated themselves from the word 'beauty'. They rarely mentioned 'beauty' when talking about themselves, but did so when referring to other women. Whenever they used the word 'beauty' to refer to themselves, it was expressed in a humorous sense. For example, one of the secretaries sometimes showed up and asked 'Am I beautiful today?' Then she burst into laughter. She was convinced that if anyone said to her that she was beautiful, they lied. Another secretary sometimes asked, 'Why doesn't a beautiful girl like me have a boyfriend?' Again, beauty was expressed ironically. When looking at their own photographs, the women also criticised how they looked, saying that they were not beautiful. Beauty in a positive sense was quoted when they tried to establish rapport amongst themselves. Some greeted

their colleagues by taking notice of and paying compliments to their colleagues' new hairstyles, lipstick, dresses, shoes, jewelleries and accessories.

During the interviews, Pupae and Fon showed me their makeup collections which they usually brought to work. Pupae, a 32-year-old training manager, dressed for work in a dark-grey trouser suit on the day she was in charge of training but a comfortable tunic and a pair of trousers on non-training days. Pupae opened her makeup bag for me. It was filled with high-priced, imported, designer makeup. Fon's makeup bag was also packed with foundation powder, lipsticks, eye shadow, eyebrow pencil and blotting paper. Fon, a 27-year-old junior trainer, admitted that she could not leave home without applying SPF sunscreen cream. Although both Pupae and Fon wore makeup at work and carried extra supplies for topping up during the day, they disagreed with the idea that their use of makeup was the pursuit of beauty.

Jigsaw¹⁵: Do you think wearing makeup has anything to do with beauty?

Pupae: Definitely, yes.

Jigsaw: If so, do you wear makeup to make yourself look beautiful?

Pupae: It's true for some women. They obviously look different when they wear makeup. But it's not for me. Wearing makeup doesn't make me look beautiful. umm. I just look... umm... My face just doesn't look dull. Makeup only makes my face look bright, a little bit brighter. That's all.

Jigsaw: Do you think that wearing makeup has anything to do with beauty?

Fon: Beauty? I don't know. I only know that I use makeup mainly to make myself look good, look better and to gain confidence. Is it about beauty? I don't know. Makeup makes me feel more confident. It depends on the person really. I apply powder whenever my face turns shiny. I blot my face and then dab with powder. My skin looks smoother. Umm then I look better. I have more confidence when meeting people. I don't want to walk out of this room with a shiny face.

A few months after finishing my four-month placement at the bank, I began my fieldwork at Multivital Corporation. The women from both organisations seemed to share a commonality in dissociating their consumption of makeup and clothes from beauty.

'No. No. I don't think I am beautiful. I dress up to look good, to boost my confidence. If people pick on my clothes, I won't feel confident,' cried out Nong, a

¹⁵ In an informal encounter, Thai people normally address each other by nicknames. Jigsaw is my nickname. My informants knew of me as Jigsaw. All of the pseudo names used in this thesis are also nicknames.

37-year-old IT helpdesk operator. Similarly, Prae, a 50-year-old senior manager, also associated her use of makeup with 'looking good'. Prae recounted,

I wear makeup at work because I feel that I need it. If I don't wear makeup, I'll look pale. I'll look as if I'm not well. I'll feel like I'm a different person. If I don't wear makeup, my facial look won't match the clothes I'm wearing and I won't look good. I won't be confident when I meet people. After lunch if I don't put on some lipstick, people may think that I'm not well or my face looks too pale. ... I wear makeup because I want to look good. Other people will see that I look good. Though I'm not beautiful, I look good. ... I think everybody likes to look at people who look good. They don't need to be beautiful.

Umim, a 34-year-old IT specialist, also said, 'I wear makeup because I want to look good. It's not for beauty'. Mo, a 32-year-old IT manger, shared a similar view that 'It isn't because I want to be beautiful. At work, I want to look good, just look-able'. So did Num, a 27-year-old secretary, 'I want to look good. I want to feel that I take a good care of myself'.

Empirical studies which examine women's embodied practices, such as those of Dellinger and Williams (1997), Davis (2001) and Black (2004), suggest that a claim to beauty as a reason for women engaging in the alteration, manipulation, modification and decoration of their bodies may not always be valid (see Chapter 2). Evidence emerging from my ethnographic fieldwork confirms the precedent empirical findings. The women office workers dissociated themselves from the word 'beauty'. It was 'looking good' rather than 'beauty' that had been repeatedly quoted as the reason for which the women office workers wore makeup and dressed up for work.

I entered the field in an attempt to study 'women office workers' and their 'beauty practices' through the specific case of makeup and clothes consumption, but left with what I learnt from my informants that women office workers may not always engage in so-called 'beauty practices' in the pursuit of 'beauty', but rather, in the pursuit of 'looking good'.

What Does Beauty Mean to Thai Women?

Ngam, Suay and Dudi

In her discussion on gender and development in Thailand, Van Esterik (1994) deconstructs the ideology of beauty which has been delineated in the Buddhist rationale. She writes,

[P]hysical beauty was a reflection of merit store, good deeds in past or present lives, and moral purity. Clarity of complexion, grace and serenity was reflections of moral goodness, one guide to knowing merit store. Ugliness, unfortunately, conveyed the opposite, although since all acts have karmic consequences, both evil and goodness may have to be worked out in one individual's life. That leaves potential for a beautiful person to become ugly, and ugly person to become beautiful, or ugly person to be morally good.

(Van Esterik 1994: 271)

Following this stream of reasoning, physical beauty pertains to moral goodness, and moral goodness transcends beauty. That is an appraisal of beauty should be judged upon the ground of virtues.

In a more earthly interpretation, the notion of beauty ascribed to Thai women is commonly explained in two senses: *suay* and *ngam* (Mullika Muttiko 2001). *Suay* represents the secular beauty of the body and *ngam* the spiritual beauty of the mind. In her study of Thai women and facial surgery as a means to reconstruct physical beauty, Mullika Muttiko (2001) reviews the historical context and social discourses on the notion of beauty. Referring to Somsri Sukumolanandana's *Think Like a Woman* (1974), an essay on (traditional) Thai women's beauty practices, Muttiko explains that *suay* means 'pretty face and body, clean and young complexion and desirable' and describes *ngam* as 'having good manners, good heart and proper behaviour' (2001: 14). *Suay* is often said in combination with *ngam*. *Suayngam* reflects the cultural expectation on an ideal 'proper' Thai woman who should possess both the inner and outer qualities of beauty.

Beauty of women is synonymous with a good manner and being a good wife, as well as good presentation of one's self-expressed in body decoration, ornamentation, cosmetic makeup, and taking good care of the skin.

(Muttiko 2001: 14)

Some of the women office workers mentioned *ngam*. They valued *ngam* as the ultimate form of beauty, 'the perfect beauty' which reflects the completion and harmony of 'internal' and 'external' beauty.

Ngam is profound. It means elegant. It means proper. It means everything that you call perfect beauty. It is inside and out. *Dudi* is an outer personality. It doesn't come from inside. *Ngam* shines from inside to outside.

(Nok, 49, secretary)

Ngam is long lasting. It reflects past, present and future. *Suay* is only present. I prefer *ngam* to *suay* because *ngam* is enduring.

(Ple, 24, accounting staff)

Ngam is abstract. It doesn't mean your face, appearance or outer personality. It means your mind, thought and you overall. *Dudi* is not *ngam*. *Dudi* is about personality.

(Fai, 24, accounting staff)

Ngam means both internal and external beauty. *Suay* is only about the surface – a beautiful face, a beautiful dress, a beautiful bag, a beautiful pair of shoes. That's it. *Ngam* is everything. It includes every good quality all together.

(Lux, 45, PA to CEO)

From the women office workers' accounts, the dichotomies of mind and body and of internal and external beauty emerge. *Ngam* represents the internal beauty of the mind while *suay* the external beauty of the body, mainly the face. *Dudi* was another word prominent during the conversations. *Dudi* is thought to be contemporary. It has been extensively quoted in the Thai media and popularly used amongst Thai consumers. *Dudi* is literally translated into English as 'looking good'. *Du* is equivalent to 'look' and *di* is 'good'. For those who value the internal beauty of the mind, an appraisal of *ngam* is made through the depreciation of *suay* as 'just a beautiful face' and *dudi* as 'just an outer personality'. However, the spiritual dimension of beauty referred to as *ngam* was rarely elaborated on by the women and deemed irrelevant to the application of makeup and clothes. In this thesis, the women's relationships with their bodies and bodily practices in terms of beauty (*suay*) and looking good (*dudi*) will be examined. How the Thai women office workers define beauty helps explain the significance of looking good in their everyday lives.

'Natural' Beauty / '(Wo)man-made' Looking Good

I don't think I'm beautiful at all. Every bit and piece of my face is unbearable to look at. What should I do then? Every time I put on my makeup, I ask why wasn't I born with beauty? Why can't I just add a little bit of makeup and look good? I feel that I have to dab everything on my face - my eyebrows, my short eyelashes, my pale lips. I need to wear makeup. I don't think that I'm naturally beautiful.

(Prae, a 50-year-old senior manager)

From the bottom of my heart, I always think that I'm not beautiful. I always think like that. My skin isn't white. My face isn't beautiful. But women who aren't beautiful can dress up and look good. Women who are beautiful may not need to dress up. They don't have to do much. But we may be able to look good. Dressing up can help.

(Kaan, 37, secretary)

Prae, a senior manager who followed an extensive body maintenance regime through daily workouts in a gym, 'appropriate' work clothes, makeup and

occasionally weight control diets, and Kaan, a secretary and a mother of two who was notorious for her concern over her changing body shape and perfecting hairdo, tended to explain beauty from an essentialist worldview. They perceived beauty as an innate quality of the face. For them, a beautiful woman meant a woman who possessed beautiful physiognomies. The face becomes an entity of the flesh which is a site for valuation. An aesthetic judgement on who is beautiful and who is not is made through the appreciation of the face entity.

Many of my informants shared a similar view with Prae and Kaan. For them, beauty meant a beautiful face, reducing a valuation of a woman's beauty to an appraisal of her physiognomies. They explained:

Beauty, in my opinion, is natural beauty. Natural beauty means that woman is beautiful with or without makeup. It's more to do with a face, a good combination of face features.

(Pomme, 24, training coordinator)

Beauty is different from looking good. A person who looks good may not be beautiful. [Ann referred to one of her colleagues] is beautiful. Her face is beautiful but does she look good? I don't think she looks good. Looking good, for me, means having a personality like an airhostess.

(Ann, 37, IT administrator)

I think beauty is different from looking good. I prefer looking good because it's more than just a face. Looking good means that an overall look is okay. It doesn't focus only on a face or a dress. Beauty pays more attention to the face, is more about facial features."

(Fern, 24, IT helpdesk operator)

Beauty is only in the face but looking good is an overall look. ... Everyone can look good and they don't need to be beautiful to do it.

(Mo, 32, IT manger)

I wear makeup because I want to look good, not to be beautiful. I think beauty relies on the nature of a person's face. Some women aren't beautiful but when they dress up, they look good. They look better than usual. They look better than when they're not dressed up. Some women, if they don't dress up at all, look absolutely hideous. Women with uneven facial skin can look good if they use makeup. That is why I invest in my makeup.

(Umim, 34, IT specialist)

Deriving from the Thai women office workers' accounts are categories of 'natural' and '(wo)man-made' beauty. A beautiful face is associated with a natural and innate quality. Nevertheless, women who feel the lack of such an innate quality 'can dress up and look good'. 'Beauty is different from looking good. A person who looks good may not be beautiful.' This implies a distinction between 'beauty' as natural and 'looking good' as (wo)man-made.

Beauty as understood by the women office workers can be related to what Medard Hilhorst (2002), an academic working in the field of medical ethics, terms 'physical looks', while looking good is close to 'artistic looks'. Hilhorst proposes seven features for evaluating a person's attractiveness. These seven features include 'physical looks (body, face, figure), artistic looks (clothes, make-up, perfume, hair), personal looks (appearance, impression, aura), performance (voice, attitude, behavior), personality (charm, charisma, appeal, allure), relational capacities (contactual skills, communicational competence), friendship abilities (reliable, nice, offbeat, love-able, companionable)' (2002: 12).

Making a clear distinction between physical looks and artistic looks, Hilhorst explains that physical looks or 'physical beauty is, first and foremost, conceived as something innate. One is endowed with it, or one is not. It is "given" beauty' (2001: 12). Artistic look or artistic beauty which reflects 'the importance of makeup, clothes, fashion and individual self-expression', on the contrary, refers to 'a beauty that is man-made' (2001: 12). According to Hilhorst, man-made beauty is artistic in two respects: First, 'it is clearly achieved by "cultural" means and reflects our present culture', and second, 'it expresses someone's personal choice and intentions. Its result is an *intentional* structuring from an *artistic* point of view: in short, artistic beauty' (2001: 12, author's italics).

Amongst his seven features, Hilhorst claims that 'physical beauty' is of the highest value. He argues that any practices to improve a person's attractiveness can be interpreted as mere compensation for a lack of physical beauty. 'A person who is not physically beautiful cannot simply *become* beautiful, no matter how he tries. He can improve himself at the *other* levels, but this can do no more than compensate for his definite lack of physical beauty: his physical deficiencies remain. ... Intervention in the body itself is often the only way out for those who want to be physically beautiful, and cosmetic or aesthetic surgery can be, at least for some people and to some extent, the option *par excellence*' (2001: 12, author's italics).

While Hilhorst acclaims the superiority of 'physical beauty' which is, in his words, 'given beauty' [either by nature or by surgeons], the women office workers valued (wo)man-made 'artistic beauty', which they called 'looking good'. The significance of looking good is that the women are performing the active task of being agents who can choose and make things happen for themselves by themselves. To reiterate, Kaan said, 'Women who aren't beautiful can dress up

and look good'. They use clothes and makeup as a means to achieve an ideal look in everyday life. This can be summed up by Mai's definition of looking good:

Looking good means that I dress up and I look good. Sometimes, clothes don't need to be expensive. I wear them and I can look good. It looks like this woman has a brain. She is creative and tasteful. Beauty is more about the clothes being beautiful. But to look good means that I am the one who thinks and makes things happen.

(Mai, 24, regulatory administrative staff)

'Looking Good Practice': An Oppressive Agency

Departing from my interest in the subject of beauty, I entered the field in an attempt to explore 'beauty practices' amongst Thai women office workers by focusing on their consumption of makeup and clothes at work. My first surprise was that nearly all of my informants dissociated their uses of makeup and clothes from beauty. It was not the pursuit of 'beauty' but rather the pursuit of 'looking good' which they cited as an aspiration for their engagement in makeup and clothes consumption. Thus, 'looking good' has become central to this thesis.

In Chapter 2, I questioned the uncritical use of the term 'beauty practices' which refers to any practices associated with the female body (see Davis 1991; Dellinger and Williams 1997; Black 2004). Also, I questioned opposing strands of feminist approaches and the ways in which they foster binary categories of how beauty practices should be analysed and defined. As a result, beauty practices have been framed as either oppression of women or the pleasure of femininity achieved through the exercising of women's agency (see Davis 1991; Lury 1996; Jeffrey 2005). I argue that the categories are not opposing but rather concurring. Evidence emerging from my ethnographic fieldwork suggests that the women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes are ambivalent experiences. Kitty and Kib, secretaries from Multivital Corporation, provided accounts of their everyday consumption of makeup and clothes at work. Their experiences demonstrate how by engaging in looking good practices, women gain pleasure from being active agents who choose to create their looks, yet concurrently have become the objects of scrutiny and valuation, leading to anxiety, ambivalence and alienation from their own bodies

Kitty: 'Colourfulness is my logo.'

'Colourfulness is my logo', Kitty said to me. It encapsulated her dressing style. I spotted Kitty a couple of times before I was introduced to her. I recognised Kitty by her smile, her lively chats with people and her bright cheerful 'sweet look' clothes. Kitty had been working as a secretary for a marketing department at Multivital Corporation for nearly a year. She 'looked after' marketing managers, brand managers and brand support managers. Two years earlier Kitty had left her administrative work with a small company near her house and launched a new career with the corporation. Whilst getting along with her changing lifestyle, Kitty gradually developed a new look. Kitty recounted her experiences.

My previous company was like a family business. I rarely dressed up for work because I didn't have to commute. My house wasn't far from the office. I left home in the morning, worked in the office all day and went back home in the evening. I rarely met anyone. But working here, I have met many more people. I felt that I should change my look. I want people to see me. I want people to think that I am credible. ... I used to dress quite blandly. But many things in this organisation make me feel that everyone is colourful and I want to add more colours to my life too.

Colourfulness was Kitty's new found or perhaps newly invented identity. Kitty was also a new nickname she gave to herself after she had become 'colourful'.

Kitty embarked on her style project by revitalising her wardrobe. Instead of buying plain clothes, Kitty looked for more colourful, flattering outfits. Her wardrobe was reloaded with fashionable blouses, t-shirts, skirts, dresses, trousers and accessories which she could mix and match to produce countless looks and styles. She carefully organised her wardrobe. She sorted her clothes by colours and dedicated a special corner to pink and purple. Kitty was also an earrings and shoes fanatic. She had more than one hundred pairs of earrings overfilling her dressing table's drawers. She also stored more than 30 pairs of shoes in the boot of her car and kept another 10 pairs at home.

Makeup was another means to achieve Kitty's colourful style. Being more attentive to makeup, Kitty secretly learnt to glam herself up. She observed makeup artists who were hired to style her managers for press conferences. She often asked her friends to appraise her looks. For Kitty, the colours, shades and tones of her makeup, clothes, earrings, shoes and handbags had to be well coordinated. It was what she called a 'concept'.

I strictly follow my concept. Colours should go together. Say no to red tops worn with green pants. I always follow this concept. If I wear a red blouse, it should go with a pair of white trousers, white shoes. And I'll

carry a red handbag. ... When I buy makeup, I have to think about my clothes – shade, tone and colour. Again I follow my concept. If I dress in pink, I should wear pink shoes with pink makeup. If my clothes are yellow or brown, I should wear makeup with an orange tone.

I could not help but noticed Kitty's sparkling eyes every time she talked about her clothes, her makeup and her earring collections. I could feel energy and hear enthusiasm in her voice. Kitty tirelessly talked about shopping.

Sometimes I'm exhausted from work. I feel that I should give myself a reward. I go shopping. I buy clothes. If I see anything nice or anything that matches my style, I buy it. I like sweet looking clothes. I choose clothes that I think suit my personality. ... I like shopping but I have to be wise about the cost of shopping. I shop for brands only when they are on sale. I normally don't care much about brands. ... I like shopping but give myself a limit. Last week I went shopping. I spent 1,300 baht and got one skirt, two t-shirts, one belt, one pair of shoes and one bottle of fragrance.

Jigsaw: Do you go shopping often?

Kitty: It depends on my mood. If I feel like spending money, I can just spend, spend, spend and spend. If I don't feel like it, I won't buy anything.

Jigsaw: Could you explain what you mean by a mood for shopping?

Kitty: I'm in the mood for shopping when I'm either very happy or extremely stressed. I want to go shopping to blow away my stress. I stroll around shops to relax. Sometimes, I don't do shopping. I just stay relaxed and have a nice meal with my friends. But most of the time, I go shopping when things are on sale. ... Last [name of the sale event], I bought seven pairs of shoes. My friends thought I was crazy. They asked me 'How can you wear them all?' I said, 'Of course I can. I like it. I'm happy'.

Revolving around clothes, makeup and shopping, Kitty engaged in what I term 'looking good practices'. Kitty believed that 'looking good' could be achieved through the right combination of colours, shades and tones of clothes, makeup and accessories. Her looking good practices were reflexive in that she was well aware of the looks she endeavoured to constitute. She sought knowledge and skills and appropriated them into practices. She acquired material objects via shopping and eventually coordinated and used them to produce her new looks.

Kitty's looking good practices were agentic. Although her agency did not have Anthony Giddens's 'transformative capacity' or 'the ability to act in ways that [were] unexpected and that [created] resistance and transformation' (1981 cited in Martin 2006: 259), or ways that were significant to a political change (Niranjana 2001: 88), Kitty's agentic capacity was fully ascribed by her intentions. It was what Sherry B. Ortner calls 'an agency of intentions – of projects, purposes, desires' (2001: 79).

It [the agency of intentions] is not about heroic actors or unique individuals, nor is it about bourgeois strategising, nor on the other hand is it entirely about routine everyday practices that proceed with little reflection. Rather, it is about (relatively ordinary) life organised in terms of culturally constituted projects, projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose. People seek to accomplish things within a framework of their own terms, their own categories of value.

(Ortner 2001: 79 – 80)

‘I want people to see me’, said Kitty. She intended to change her looks, from being an invisible, bland, administrative, staff member working behind a desk with piles of documents to being a visible lively and colourful secretary mingling with people at all levels in her organisation. She wanted to be seen as looking good or even looking better. Her new looks, which were the products of looking good practices, she believed, brought her a new found pleasure and pride.

- Jigsaw: Will people who haven't seen you for a long time be surprised by your new look if they see you now?
- Kitty: Some are very surprised actually. They say to me that I look much better than before. My style has been improved. I used to be like ... I didn't bother to take care of myself. I didn't know how to wear makeup. I never plucked my eyebrows. But now I do. Now I know how to dress up. They give me compliments. They said I look better
- Jigsaw: How do you feel about that?
- Kitty: I'm very proud. I'm happy about it. People appreciate me. They see that I look better.

Paradoxically, by using clothes, makeup and accessories as a means to gain ‘impact upon others’, to anticipate ‘the gaze’ and to construct ‘the individual in the eyes of others’ (Woodward 2006: 22), Kitty concurrently became a subject and an object. Her engagement in looking good practices allowed her to be a subject who thought, anticipated and took action but at the same time placed herself as an object to be looked at, scrutinised and judged by others.

One may further ask whether Kitty achieved what she intended to accomplish. Sophie Woodward (2006) argues that the ‘impact upon others’ anticipated by women may not be always successfully achieved. Based on ethnographic materials from her study of how women coordinated their clothes to constitute a personal aesthetic, Woodward (2006: 22) explains that:

Putting on clothing is a form by which one exposes one's ‘self’ to the outside world. The clothing becomes a conduit that allows other people's intentions to penetrate deeply into the intentions of the wearer. This often actually prevents the wearer of clothing from becoming the kind of self they would otherwise have wished to construct, let alone influence anyone else.

It was not apparent in my encounter with Kitty whether her intention was accomplished. However, from Kitty's own accounts she had gained what she aimed for. 'Right now, people around me think that I look better. ... They see that I look better.' The positive reflections from people around Kitty, both men and women, were significant to her identification. Liz Frost (1999) gave an analogy for women and their reflection. 'Women looking in shop-windows to catch their own reflection are looking for something far more profound than instant ego-boosting, and it connects to their overall definition of who they are' (1999: 123). To define who she was, Kitty looked at metaphorical mirrors and saw her own reflection through positive comments given by others. Kitty then gained 'identificatory pleasure' (Frost 1999: 130) as she said, 'I'm happy. I'm very proud. I'm happy about it.'

However, the pleasure Kitty gained from being seen as 'looking good' and 'looking better' was temporal. Identifying herself with a new colourful look, Kitty rarely left home without makeup. If she did so, she would feel that 'I am not confident at all. Before, I wouldn't mind. But now I feel that my face is always decorated with colours. I don't feel good when I don't have my makeup on. I feel that I don't look fresh, lively. My face looks worn out. I won't be happy'. In order to create, maintain and present her colourful looks, with the aim of being appreciated by herself and people around her, Kitty was in an enduring process of buying, using and coordinating her makeup and clothes.

Kib: 'I must look good before I leave home.'

Similar to Kitty, Kib also enjoyed 'identificatory pleasure' (Frost 1999: 130) derived from being recognised as a well-dressed woman. Kib was unique in her dress style which she had developed, negotiated and maintained through her 'looking good practices'. Kitty wanted to be perceived as a lively sweet young woman who got along well with everyone by using her liveliness and 'colourfulness' to help facilitate her workflow, requiring supports and cooperation from others. Kib, on the other hand, had forged the image of a young professional who could represent her superior and herself. They dressed for work with different styles, but shared similar pleasure and pride of being accepted in their workplace. The feeling of being recognised had been reflected throughout my talks with both of them.

Kib was a 'fashion leader', praised by her friends and colleagues. Some even sought inspiration from her to revamp their styles.

Do I deliberately dress up to capture people's attention? I'd like to say, "No, I don't". If you ask whether I dress up to make people take notice of me, I would say it may not be the case. But I feel that I'm the way I am and then other people like to look at me. I think they look at my good character. This woman is confident. This woman has a good personality. She looks confident. I agree. I think the way women dress can tell you whether they're confident, whether they're enthusiastic. Clothes are important.

Kib was an elegant young woman who believed that 'looking good plus competence equals perfection'. Kib was tall. She was slim. Her hair was neatly styled. Her makeup was flawlessly applied. She sometimes went to work in linen trousers. She wore either a trendy jacket or cardigan on top of a colour-coordinated vest. She had a collection of fashionable bead necklaces and floral brooches. She walked on high heels. That was what Kib described as her 'standard look' which she had been projecting to her colleagues at Multivital Corporation.

As young as 22, Kib was career oriented. Soon after being awarded with a degree in international business management, Kib joined Multivital Corporation as a secretary. For Kib being a secretary meant that 'I see myself as representing my boss. ... I'm a reflection of his image. The way I dress can say something about my boss's image.' Following such a transition from a university student to a secretary, Kib felt a need to develop her dress style and keep herself well groomed for her career.

Everyone tries one's best to look after oneself. It's an image. If there are five candidates applying for a secretarial job - four candidates don't dress up but one of them dresses well, the one who dresses up will look outstanding. I think any company prefers to recruit a candidate who dresses well because she suits the position more. ...In the wide world, everyone is highly competitive. We all face heavy competition. Only the best will be selected. Dressing well does help. Also, one has to communicate well and let their competence shine. Everything must come together.

Kib had been working as a secretary for nearly three years. By the time I met her, she was 25 years old and had just been reappointed to 'work behind the screen', preparing data, documents and artwork for sales and marketing executives. For her new working role, Kib said, 'Dressing up is not necessary'. Kib, however, carried on her style, explaining that 'It's my image. Throughout my three years here everyone recognises me from this image. I dress properly.' She added, 'I'm not high class. It's just my personality and the way I dress that make me look like I come from another social background. The way we dress can tell

who we are. It can say something about our personalities. Clothes help us fit into society. ... Some say I'm a fashion leader.'

Maintaining her image as a young professional who always looked good, Kib engaged in what Erving Goffman (1959) terms 'impression management'. One of her techniques of impression management was that she had to be well organised with her wardrobe in order to maintain her looks. Kib planned overnight what she was going to wear in the next morning. Her work clothes had to match well and did not appear repetitive. She also hung on to her standard colours and styles of makeup to prevent unwelcoming outcomes.

Jigsaw: How do you choose what to wear to work?

Kib: I think overnight. I don't have time in the morning to think about what I should wear or how I should mix and match things. I plan it before going to bed. I normally look through my wardrobe. If I wore this pair of trousers with this top last week, I should wear the trousers with another top. I try my best to mix and match.

Jigsaw: What will happen if you don't plan in advance?

Kib: It can be very stressful in the morning. I need to have shower and do my hair. I don't have enough time. It's really stressful. Once I was very tired and didn't prepare my outfits before going to bed. It was a disaster the next morning. I tried different clothes on so many times to get the right match. So I have to think in advance. I rarely repeat the same pair of trousers or skirt with the same top twice in one week. I rotate one item or another.

Jigsaw: How about makeup? How do you choose your makeup?

Kib: I wear whatever I want to wear actually. But I rarely change colours because I think it's complicated. If things go wrong, I may not feel confident. What I'm wearing now is already good. Everyone has a good perception of me. I once thought about changing my makeup colours to earth tone and trying a more mature style. But I thought if I wore those colours and got a negative comment, I wouldn't be confident. I don't want to look too old. I rarely change my cosmetic colours.

Moreover, resorting to maintain her looks and foster an impression before her 'audience' (Goffman, 1959), friends, colleagues, managers, and customers, Kib felt a fear of not appearing with her ideal look. 'When I'm home, I don't dress up. I don't do anything special at all. When I go to work, I feel that if I don't dress well, people may judge me. ... If I leave home with a feeling that I haven't dressed well enough, I lose my self-confidence. I really feel like that. I have to get changed.' If, on rare occasions, Kib failed to maintain her looks from home, she would procure any possible resources she had at work to restore her looks.

Jigsaw: Have you ever been at work without makeup?

Kib: Yes, I have. I just applied baby powder to my face. My colleagues asked why I looked so pallid that day. I only wore

baby powder because I was in a hurry. I got up late. I came to work with wet hair. No time. I just tied my hair up and dried it with a hand drier in a toilet. That was funny. But it rarely happens. I must look good before I leave home.

Home was like a sanctuary, a 'back region' (Goffman, 1959), where Kib was out of sight from her audience. She did not feel obliged to do anything special for her look. Her appearance at home seemed to be different from how she looked like at work which was subject to scrutiny and evaluation by herself and her audience. Home was also the first place where the appearance that signified Kib's professional look was forged. It was then significant in Kib's perception that 'I must look good before I leave home'.

Kib was not the only one who felt that 'I must look good before I leave home'. Similar to Kib, Kitty admitted that she felt uncomfortable leaving home without makeup. She was no longer used to being seen with a bare face and having a dull look. So did many women I talked with. Being asked whether they had ever been at work without makeup, they shared a similar feeling to Kitty's and Kib's:

If I didn't wear makeup, I would feel... I wouldn't be confident. At the least I have to apply some powder.

(Nong, 37, IT helpdesk operator)

If I don't wear makeup, I can't stand myself. My face looks pale, no colour. I'm afraid that when other people see me they may think I look like a ghost. A ghost is coming. Also, when I look at other women, if they aren't wearing makeup, I wonder why don't they look after themselves? I'm addicted to makeup. If I leave home without makeup, I get the feeling that I look very worn out.

(Uimim, 34, IT Helpdesk specialist)

I wear makeup everyday. But like today, I did not put makeup at home. I couldn't walk with my head held high. I just wanted to hide my face. I didn't want anyone to see me. I wasn't ready to meet people. I just wanted to cover my face. Once I got to my desk, I put makeup on and I'm ok now.

(Aum, 24, IT helpdesk operator)

I can't. I have to wear makeup. I don't feel confident without makeup. The only reason that I won't wear makeup for work is that I have some problems with my facial skin. Once I had a big spot on my face, a very, very, very big one. My doctor said I should not use any makeup. So I didn't. If I don't wear makeup, I'm afraid people might say that I'm not beautiful. Why do I let myself look dull? People may judge me. They may not want to talk to me. Well, I may be overreacting. I want them to see that I look good everyday. Though I don't wear heavy makeup, I want to look lively and welcoming. I'd like people to feel comfortable enough to come to talk to me.

(Nena, 30, manager)

I don't wear heavy makeup but I wear some everyday. It's my routine and everyone is used to my face with makeup. I usually apply face powder, lipstick, blusher and eye shadow. If I only wear baby powder and lip gloss, they [her colleagues] always ask me, "Are you ok, Ann?" [Without makeup] I look very pale and it isn't me. Actually, I don't want to wear makeup everyday but people are familiar with my made-up face. When I don't wear makeup, they think that I'm ill. I then have to wear makeup like this everyday.

(Ann, 35, administrator)

If I don't wear makeup, I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to meet people. I won't be in a good mood. When I have my makeup on, I'll be enthusiastic. I can go everywhere. Like today, I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to meet anyone. I just want to stay alone in peace. Makeup is very important to me. It's about my confidence. I feel lively from inside. I smile and want to talk to people.

(Bow, a 22-year-old regulatory affairs staff)

The women office workers shared a commonality in that they actively used/consumed makeup to constitute, negotiate and maintain certain ideal looks which they wished to present before the public. The women became subjects who took action by creating their ideal looks. However, concurrently they turned their faces and bodies into objects to be looked at and evaluated. Whilst enjoying the pleasures of being able to dictate the public gaze and being praised as 'looking good', they were inflicted by the fear and anxiety that they might not be able to maintain such ideal looks and that they would appear to be dull, worn out, pallid, ill and ghostlike.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that in order to identify themselves as being professional, competent, credible and 'proper', the Thai women office workers preferred to associate their consumption of makeup and clothes with an attempt to be seen as 'looking good' rather than 'being beautiful'. Beauty, according to the women office workers, means an innate quality of the face in that a beautiful woman is a woman who possesses beautiful physiognomies. In contrast, looking good is (wo)man-made. Looking good entails the fact that women dress up and wear makeup to look good. It implies women's agentic intentionality and capacity for making things happen for themselves. Women are active agents who use clothes and makeup to achieve their ideal looks.

'Looking good' has become central to my discussion in this chapter and subsequently this thesis. By questioning the term 'beauty practices', I introduced the concept of 'looking good practices'. Based on the Thai women office workers' accounts of their consumption experiences at work, I define looking good practices as the ways in which the women manipulate, materialise and present an ideal representation of their outer bodies through their consumption of makeup and clothes. By engaging in looking good practices, women gain pleasure from being active agents who choose to create their looks. However, concurrently they become the objects of scrutiny and evaluation which lead to anxiety, ambivalence and alienation from their own bodies. As such, I argue that looking good practices are a form of 'oppressive agency' as women prepare their looks in order to be looked at.

CHAPTER 6

Learning to Look Good

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore another approach to understanding Thai women office workers' looking good practices. By arguing that a significant part of looking good practices involves learning, this chapter aims to explain how, through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes, Thai women office workers learn to look good at work. Central to looking good practices, learning discussed here is different from a conventional approach which views learning as an individual process of internalisation in which a learner internalises, absorbs, and assimilates knowledge given and transmitted to her/him in a separate environment detached from other everyday activities (Lave and Wenger 1991: 47; Wenger 1998: 3). Referring to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory of situated learning (1991), I propose to view learning as the process of social participation which takes place in the context of everyday lived experiences. Through social participation, not only does a learner acquire tacit knowledge by actively and continually engaging in certain activities with certain people in local events, but also becomes an active participant in the practices of social communities and formulates an identity in relation to the communities she/he participates in (Lave and Wenger 1991: 47; Wenger 1998: 4; see Chapter 2). Learning, in this view, is an involvement in a process of identity formation as Lave and Wenger have argued 'learning and a sense of identity are inseparable' (1991: 113). Wenger explains that learning 'is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but also a process of becoming – to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person. ... We accumulate skills and information, not in the abstract as ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity. ... It is that learning – whatever form it takes – changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning. And this ability is configured socially

with respect to practices, communities, and economies of meaning where it shapes our identities' (1998: 214 – 215, 226).

One of the relevant themes to emerge from my ethnographic fieldwork was that Thai women office workers spoke of their ability or inability to select, acquire, apply, mix and match their makeup and clothes 'appropriately'. A notion of 'appropriateness' implies the women office workers' longing to belong to and to participate in social communities constructed in the context of their workplace situations. Inevitably, the women are learners who learn to develop their ability to negotiate meanings, to engage in the consumption of makeup and clothes, to share their looking good practices with other women and to form identities to be accepted as part of the social communities they wish to situate in. Lave and Wenger (1991) characterise relations between learning, social practices and identity as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Legitimate peripheral participation is 'an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning' (1991: 40) that explains the process by which newcomers move from peripheral toward full participation and become part of a community of practice through their engagement in situated learning (1991: 40, 29). However, it should not be assumed that there is a single core to be placed as central or full participation. Lave and Wenger emphasise that the term peripherality suggests 'there are multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged – and inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by community' (1991: 35).

Recounting their experiences as newcomers, some new secretaries, who had been working for Multivital Corporation for two years or less, detailed their very first days at work. Reifying their general understanding of appropriate work clothes into practices, the new secretaries showed up in formal business attire and suit jackets. Nevertheless, they felt out of place. When looking around, none of their colleagues dressed in business suits. The new secretaries changed their dress styles in order to fit in. One of them, Num, said she followed her organisation culture. Seeing a HR director well accessorised and groomed in a spandex top, crop jeans, high heels, fashionable necklace and statement belt, Num was certain that she should dress casually at work. Jay, a young training coordinator from CAIMEA Banking Corporation, gave an analogy of her dressing experience as learning to swim. She said one just looked at the tides, to the way in which they flowed. Jay looked up to her senior trainers who were always fully dressed in business suits when administering training sessions. Never having worn a formal

blouse and suit to work before, Jay then learnt to do so but mixed and matched them with her lively coloured, young fashionable clothes.

The experience of learning seems to be intensified and more visible amongst newcomers. However, not only do new members to social communities engage in learning, but also well-established members with years of experience. They negotiate and renegotiate the meanings of what is 'appropriate' and alter their looking good practices in relation to those of other members. The dynamism of an organisation life, social changes, organisational changes, and changes of the organisation policy instigate changes of practices amongst the women office workers in their workplace. IT staff members who had been working together for eight years or more talked about their so-called 'working woman' or 'office worker' outfits worn in their early years at Multivital Corporation. After the introduction of the new dress code that, according to the women, allowed employees to wear whatever they liked, whatever they wanted and whatever they had, the outfit of matching blouses, skirts, suit jackets, sack dresses and chaussures which was once necessary had become redundant (see Chapter 4).

Kaan, a secretary who had been working for the IT Department for more than eight years, told a story about her changing dress style. Kaan replaced her matching suit jacket and skirt with the mixed and matched combination of a casual top and trousers as a result of Multivital's new dress code. Leaving home in a new casual dress, Kaan said her neighbours misunderstood thinking that she had quit her job. Kaan recounted, 'Sometimes I want to dress up for work. I want to look good. If I dress well, people will treat me well. But when I dressed up, my colleagues would ask if there was something wrong with me. Why am I so dressy, what has happened? I think most women from IT aren't dressy. They wear simple clothes. I think I like it. If they were fashionable, it would be stressful for me. If they dressed up, I would have to dress up too. It's easier for me this way.' Appropriate dress defined by the community of practice where Kaan belonged was no longer that of a formal suit jacket and skirt, but rather a casual everyday outfit. Kaan might not articulate her experiences as learning. Nevertheless, she inevitably negotiated and renegotiated the meanings of appropriate dress, changed the ways in which she dressed and tried to formulate an identity shared by other women who worked with her.

Learning takes place through participation in everyday practices, Wenger emphasises (1998: 100). Amongst various forms of participation which allow

learners to become included in the community of practice, he suggests, 'observation can be useful, but only as a prelude to actual engagement' (1998: 100). To be able to select, acquire, apply, and mix and match their makeup and clothes appropriately to their workplace situations, the women office workers talked about how they looked at other women in their work units, departments and organisations and formed ideas as to what standard of appropriateness they should apply. Num and Jay, for example, observed senior members and adapted their dress styles.

Drawing upon Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and community of practices (1998), Cristina Grasseni (2004, 2007) introduces a concept of skilled visions. Grasseni's concept of skilled visions discusses the practices of looking as a way of learning through a process of visual enskilment in professional conduct. According to Grasseni, vision is 'an enskilled sense' (2007: 6) – 'a capacity to look in a certain way as a result of training' (2004: 41). Similar to other senses, vision can be trained and educated 'to detect certain specific features in objects that are commonly available to generalised perception' (2004: 49). Vision can be shared across a community and is 'a ductile situated, contested and politically fraught means of situating oneself in a community of practice' (2007: 1). Referring to the concept of skilled vision, I propose that Thai women office workers learn to look good through a social learning process by which they look at other women in their social communities, negotiate meanings of appropriateness, reify an ideal appearance by inscribing their outer bodies through the consumption of makeup and clothes and formulate identities necessary for becoming a member of the communities of practice. Following my earlier discussion in Chapter 2, existing theories that establish a link between looking, gender and sexuality mainly discuss active men looking at passive women (Berger 1972; Mulvey 1975), and when women look, it involves narcissism, transvestism and taboos (Doane 1991). By conceptualising the practices of looking in relation to learning amongst Thai women office workers, I argue for an empowerment of the women as subjects who look and learn.

In understanding and writing an ethnography of the Thai women office workers' looking good practices, I reflect upon the role of my body as an 'ethnographic research tool' (Bain and Nash 2006: 99, see Chapter 3). Much of the literature on doing ethnographic research documents how ethnographers use their bodies as tools for negotiating fieldwork roles and relations (see Coffey 1999: 72 –

73; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 66 – 72). Some emphasise a description of what ethnographers wore during their fieldwork in order to ‘blend in’ with people in their cultural settings (Coffey 1993 cited in Coffey 1999: 65; Patrick 1973, Delamont 1984; Sudarkasa, 1986; Henslin 1990; Wolf 1991; Van Maanen 1991; cited in Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 66 - 69). However, what I have found interesting is not what ethnographers wear to the field sites but rather how they come to know which form of embodied practices they should engage in. Therefore, in this chapter, I also reflect upon my own embodied experiences and practices during my fieldwork. I question how I participated in the process by which I learnt to dress myself ‘appropriately’ for the social communities I tried to participate in. In this sense, my embodied experiences function beyond a tool for establishing fieldwork relations. It is an important research tool that helped me understand how Thai women office workers learn to look good at work. The Thai women office worker’s embodied experiences as well as my own embodied experiences demonstrate that how we learn to look good is informed by our engagement in the practice of looking at other women.

A Question of Appropriateness

When asked how they learnt about makeup and clothes, most of the women office workers mentioned reading women’s magazines, browsing the internet, cruising around shops, taking makeup courses and asking friends for information. Mint, for example, had a scrapbook for collecting reviews, clips from magazines, leaflets, advertisements, business cards, discount coupons and vouchers. Kratae, who was well versed in makeup and high-end designer commodities, enjoyed chilling out in a café and skimming through a pile of fashion magazines. She liked to browse around websites, read reviews and forward emails on brand promotional events to friends. Similar to the women office workers who took part in my thesis, female entrepreneurs participating in Ann Gray’s study of roles of consumption in the construction of the ‘enterprising self’, attained skills in and knowledge of ‘self-presentation’, ‘care and maintenance of the body’ and ‘aestheticisation of everyday life’ through the work of consumption and the use of self-help media including women’s magazines, television programmes, books and videotapes (2003: 492). Likewise, women in managerial roles, interviewed by Anat Rafaeli et al. in their study of female administrative employees’ everyday use of dress at work, reported

that they learnt what constituted level-appropriate dress by 'reading articles on professional women's clothing and fashion in business magazines' and by 'transferring notions of appropriate dress from their prior corporate work experience' (1997: 25 - 26). However, women in clerical roles reported learning through 'a process of social learning ... by observing what others within their units wore for particular roles and events' (1997: 26).

Rafaeli et al. (1997) conducted their study by interviewing and observing female administrative employees who worked together at one particular workplace – a school of business administration in a large Midwestern American university. Although Rafaeli et al. (1997) did not focus on a concept of learning or explore the actual process of learning, their findings point to a significance of the notion of appropriateness which had been learnt and shared by the female administrative employees. To these female administrative employees, wearing appropriate dress was a means to enhance their role execution and performance (1997: 17). Especially, in the organisation where a formal dress code was absent, according to Rafaeli et al., employees informally acquired and shared complex knowledge about dress and about how to dress appropriately at work (1997: 21). 'Dress knowledge' shared by the female administrative employees encompasses 'a sense of clothing components (e.g., suits, jackets, skirts) that were appropriate to the role of organisation member and of the appropriate way of presenting oneself while wearing these components' (1997: 35). In this sense, the notion of appropriateness is a key definition of dress knowledge which informed the female administrative employees' use of dress in facilitating their role execution at one particular workplace. What they needed to learn was not only knowledge about dress in general, but also knowledge of how to dress appropriately to their roles in particular situations.

What I wish to emphasise here is that the notion of appropriateness was also prevalent and significant to the Thai women office workers in my thesis. Not only did the women office workers talk of their ability or inability to select, acquire, apply, mix and match their clothes and makeup appropriately, they criticised and commented on other women's ability or inability to comport with the standards of appropriateness they sustained. Mint, for example, recounted her experience when she first joined CAIMEA Banking Corporation:

I had never worked in an office environment before. In nearly all of my previous jobs, I had worn a uniform. ... I didn't have a reference point as to what would be appropriate for my workplace. I didn't really know how to

dress. At first I just picked and mixed, here and there, looking for a blouse, a sleeveless top or a vest and then covered it up with a jacket. Sometimes, I tried to adapt my own style, mixing casual clothes with work clothes. They didn't match well and looked out of place. I received negative feedback and gradually changed my style. I just had to know which style I should hang on to ... Many people who had seen me before the change said that I dressed much better subsequently. These comments gave me an idea about the standard that I should follow. It doesn't mean that I have to follow the way other people dress. I just want to know the standard and adopt a style that is right for me.

(Mint, 32, secretary)

A long-serving secretary, Nok, expressed her resentment towards the way in which 'new generations' at Multivital Corporation dressed to work. 'They wear jeans. Is it appropriate? No, it isn't. ... T-shirts and jeans aren't appropriate for the workplace. It's not my style. ... They should know what is appropriate, what is not, what they should and shouldn't do. Do people not have any judgements anymore these days? ... New generations, new people don't know *kalatesa*. Maybe they are too confident and overlook these things,' Nok complained.

Appropriateness and appropriate dress did not always mean 'dressing up'. Jan was an intern who had been granted a placement at Multivital Corporation for four months. Thinking that Multivital was a large reputable corporation, Jang went to work in tailored trousers, blouse and jacket but found that it was difficult to blend in with her senior colleagues. Jang felt a need to change her dress style. 'I thought it [a combination of trousers, blouse and jacket] was something I should wear to work in a big company. After a week or two, they [her senior colleagues] said to me, "Jang, you dress so formally everyday". Oh! I then went to *Jatujak*¹⁶ and bought a lot of new clothes. I bought some cute skirts. ... I dress with more colours. Sometimes I wear trousers. Sometimes I wear skirts. I've changed from wearing simple blouses to fashionable clothes. I really mean to change my style.'

Being and working at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I, myself, witnessed the omnipresence of the notion of appropriateness held firmly by some of the organisation members. During my very first meeting with Lux, the PA to the CEO, comments on the expected standard of dress was prompted in the conversation. 'Working here you have to dress appropriately [*reabroi*],' Lux verbalised her concern. Part of my responsibility at the CEO's Office was to answer and screen telephone calls. On a number of occasions incoming enquiries from the bank's management were to seek advice from the CEO's Office regarding appropriate

¹⁶ *Jatujak* weekend market is one of the most popular shopping places in Bangkok. For more details see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatuchak_weekend_market

dress codes for forthcoming corporate events and social functions. Anticipating how the CEO should look her best in the media and look appropriate in terms of Thai cultural expectations, a few weeks prior to an important corporate event Lux would prepare a choice of exquisite dresses for her western female CEO to select from. FYI (For Your Information) emails were circulated in advance amongst secretarial team members, suggesting an appropriate dress code for a particular meeting or function. At CAIMEA's grand ceremonial event where the British Ambassador, the CEO, top management, VIP guests, the media and hundreds of CAIMEA's employees were attended, one of the event coordinators who might have believed she worked behind the scenes was on duty in a white tracksuit while the rest of her team was fully dressed in a black business trouser suit. 'Did you see what [her name] was wearing that day?' became an opening line for clandestine conversations for weeks and the scandalous white tracksuit incident was cited from time to time as an extreme illustration of an inappropriate state of dress that no one should ever repeat.

I argue that appropriateness involves belonging and endeavouring to dress appropriately explicates longing to belong and to participate in the practices of relevant social communities. In the buying and wearing of more varieties of new clothes, Jang was determined to change her dress style in order to look the part as a member of her team. Mint was inexperienced with dressing for an office environment but strove to learn to dress herself in the way in which she would be accepted as one of the secretaries working at the CEO's Office. Compared with the lavish attires and black trouser suits donned by event attendees, the white tracksuit was perceived as signifying the coordinator's lack of effort in participating in the bank's most auspicious event and thus was deemed inappropriate.

Unlike Rafaeli et al.'s study (1997) that identifies wearing appropriate dress as a means to enhance organisational role execution, the evidence emerging from my fieldwork highlights the wearing of appropriate dress as a means to formulate an identity in order to be accepted as part of a community of practice. This implies that what the women office workers need to learn is not simply an ability to use a combination of clothing and makeup aesthetically, but also an ability to tailor themselves appropriately to any social situation in which they participate. Women's magazines, self-help literature, personality development courses and information from significant persons may be perceived as sources of knowledge about makeup and clothes. However, in developing an ability to dress themselves appropriately

and formulate an acceptable identity, learning through an actual engagement in the practices of members of the community, i.e. partaking in a negotiation and reification of the meanings of appropriateness, is essential. Reflecting upon my experiences as a newcomer to a social community, I wish to demonstrate how I learnt to become included in a community of practice of secretaries at the CEO's Office, CAIMEA Banking Corporation.

Situating the Community of Secretaries

A community of practice is not just an aggregate of people defined by some characteristics. The term is not a synonym for group, team, or network. Membership is not just a matter of social category, declaring allegiance, belonging to an organisation, having a title, or having personal relations with some people. A community of practice is not defined merely by who knows whom or who talks with whom in a network of interpersonal relations through which information flows. Neither is geographical proximity sufficient to develop a practice. ...

Wenger (1998: 73 – 74)

In understanding how Thai women office workers make sense of their consumption of makeup and clothes at work, I consider secretaries from the CEO's Office a community of practice. It is not simply because they work together in the same place. I characterise them as a community of practice because 'they sustain dense relations of mutual engagement organised around what they are there to do' (Wenger 1998: 74). Apart from developing local routines and inventing local ways of facilitating their daily work, the secretaries negotiated with one another as to what the meanings of appropriate dress were and how they should present themselves in their workplace.

Mint recounted her experiences as a secretary to the CEO's Office where she worked under Lux's supervision for two years before relocating to another department.

The CEO's Office isn't a general office. It's a top executive office. At the CEO's Office, wearing a vest with a knitted cardigan or even with a skirt is not acceptable. She [Lux] said it wasn't appropriate [*mai-reabroi*]. But it doesn't mean that the entire bank is like that. The bank's policy says dress can be semi-formal, smart casual. But at the CEO's Office, we don't really know with whom we are going to come into contact. Some visitors are higher than our CEO, like GCE members [Group Chief Executive members], customers, presidents, foreign investors. This floor also hosts executive meetings. Can you imagine that? Some visitors walk in and want to meet the CEO. Our image also reflects our CEO's image. I understand then the necessity of this point. When I worked for the CEO's Office, I had to dress

properly [*reabro*] all the time because I didn't really know who was going to walk in.

(Mint, 32, secretary)

Mint associated how she should dress with how she saw her workplace. She negotiated the meanings of her workplace in relation to a hierarchical order of social categories. To Mint, the CEO's Office was a place for 'top executives' where she expected interactions with outsiders whose social positions were higher. Through her dress she reified the meanings of her workplace, and through the wearing of appropriate dress she represented a good corporate image. Lux also associated the meanings of dress with the meanings of workplace. 'Dress is very important to our corporate image. Dress is also our way to honour the people we come into contact with. If you work in such a high profile organisation but dress improperly to welcome customers and visitors, it's wrong. It shows that you don't respect them,' Lux commented.

Paan and Kratae were another two secretaries working for the CEO's Office. Similar to Lux and Mint, they emphasised a necessity to dress appropriately. Paan said, 'I think the way I dress is appropriate for my workplace because this is a bank. A bank tends to be quite conservative. We aren't dazzling. ... Well, if possible everybody wants to dress casually to work but I know that my job is here. I can't be casual at work. I have to dress properly [*reabro*].' Likewise, Kratae talked about being a secretary. 'Secretaries meet both internal and external people. We have to look good. We represent our boss. If we look good, the company will look good too.' I then asked what Kratae meant by 'look good', to which she responded, 'We dress appropriately [*reabro*]'.

Affirming the significance of the notion of appropriateness, the secretaries accounted for their mutual engagement in the practices of wearing appropriate dress. None of them dressed for work in clothing such as t-shirts, jeans, sportswear, sandals, or revealing clothes – clothing officially discouraged by the bank's dress policy and commonly understood as inappropriate dress for a corporate environment. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the secretaries all dressed uniformly with conformity to one communal style.

Mint, who said 'appropriate [*reabro*] dress is the best style', always came to work in a matching dark-coloured, suit jacket and skirt. During my visit to her apartment, I was amazed when I saw her wardrobe. It was over-flowing with a variety of colourful and fashionable clothes from sexy strappy tops, cute Korean

mock-sleeved blouses to trendy knee-length hipsters. She explained, 'I don't want to go to work with my own style. It's personal. Some of my clothes shouldn't be worn to work. They aren't appropriate for the workplace. When I go to work, I have to respect my workplace, respect the people I'm going to meet'. On the other side of her wardrobe, I saw a huge stock of grey, dark grey and black suit jackets and skirts – Mint's reification of the appropriate dress for work.

Apart from a secretarial qualification from one of the foremost secretarial schools, Lux had a vocational certificate in dress-making and was very proud of a wedding dress she had made for her younger sister. Lux's best friend ran a fashion house and kept updating her on what the new trends were. Lux said that at home she only dressed in worn-out t-shirts and shabby clothes. But at work, most of her work clothes were tailor-made. She would dress in a matching business suit and skirt for important meetings and visits to business associates. For ordinary working days, she preferred a colour-coordinated blouse and skirt combination. I also noticed that whilst attending important corporate events, Lux always appeared dressed in exquisite silk garments, mainly in colours that resembled CAIMEA's branding colour schemes.

With years of service as a secretary to foreign executives in high profile banking corporations, Paan accumulated not only work experience and secretarial skills, but also a fine collection of tailor-made suits and business outfits. Paan said she preferred earth-tone, non-flashy clothes. Kratae's mixing and matching of her wardrobe was more diverse. Her favourite dark plum long-sleeved ballerina top was worn with a gray knee-length A-line skirt, a pair of black slacks or cream linen trousers. She also appeared in a light turquoise fitted short-sleeved polo-neck top or a purple, cardigan-wrap with black trousers. Sometimes, Kratae simply wore a pale long-sleeved or quarter-sleeved blouse with dark coloured trousers.

Mutual engagement in the practices of the wearing of appropriate dress is one of the examples that demonstrate a characteristic of the community of practice of the secretaries from the CEO's Office. They negotiated with one another the meanings of appropriateness, but reified such meanings differently and formulated distinctive dress styles that suited their individuality. Wenger explains that '[E]ach participant in a community of practice finds a unique place and gains a unique identity, which is both further integrated and further defined in the course of engagement in practice. These identities become interlocked and articulated with one another through mutual engagement, but they do not fuse' (1998: 75 – 76).

Longing to Belong: Learning to Look Good in the Community of Secretaries

After a few weeks of my placement at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, Kratae, one of the secretaries for the CEO's Office with whom I had lunch and went shopping regularly, asked me a very interesting question. 'Are you sure you are doing research on this topic?' 'This topic' as I had told people around me at the bank including Kratae was concerned with beauty, makeup and clothes. Upon hearing this question, I went silent for some time pondering the questions that it brought to mind. 'Why did she ask me such a question? What does she mean? What is she implying?' I initially responded with another question, 'Why?' She replied, 'you look *thammada*'. *Thammada* in this context may be equivalent to normal, ordinary and, above all, not standing out. As reported in some journalistic articles, two of the most popular cosmetic surgery procedures sought by Asian women are blepharoplasty for wider eyes and rhinoplasty for a longer nose (Cullen 2002). My small sleepy eyes and tiny flat nose do not seem to fit well with the Thai and Asian ideal of feminine beauty. With regard to my dress, I wore only plain clothes to the bank, generally a white or cream blouse with a pair of dark-coloured trousers. My dress may well have complied with the corporate dress code but failed to project my image as a style guru. Sometimes I showed up to work with the effect of uneven eye makeup, something that I had not even noticed but Kratae had done. One eye looked bigger than the other. I found it hard to keep my hand steady and draw a flawless symmetrical line on each of my eyelids. Kratae showed me how to 'do things properly' and gave me a life-saving tip for a sleepy-eyed girl. The end of each liner should be sharp, slim and pointing up to give an effect of cheerful wider-looking eyes.

Mint was a secretary from CAIMEA with whom I also became friends. Walking together along the shopping street near the bank, Mint and I enjoyed our lunchtime window-shopping, but it was an extremely hot Bangkok day. The foundation I had applied earlier did not survive the heat and my face literally started to melt. Mint saw tiny polka dots all over my nose and could not help but diagnose my condition. She prescribed for me a Korean brand of foundation, newly introduced to a Thai market with a sole distributor and only one outlet in Bangkok. I was intrigued by Mint's knowledge and, of course, I followed her suggestion.

Ploy was a secretary whose weight concerns were widely acknowledged amongst her colleagues. Out of the blue, she looked at me and gave me a compliment. She asked how I managed to stay so slim. Fon, who was a junior trainer at that time, was looking to buy some makeup and asked if I knew any good brands. She cited the name of one particular imported brand and asked to hear my opinion on it. During my interview with Nong, an IT helpdesk operator from Multivital Corporation, I asked for her opinion regarding the ways in which women in her organisation dressed at work. She said, 'In general, I think it's not quite ok. It's too casual. ... umm I think I look at you. I see how you dress. Trousers are fine but not with a t-shirt. You don't wear a t-shirt. ...'

When I entered the organisations, I wished to understand women office workers' experiences. Through participant observation, I thought I was the one who observed the women, looked at them, and looked at their bodies. Apparently I was not the only one who looked. They too looked at me and looked at my body. The women office workers and I inevitably participated in the practices of reciprocal looking. As I failed to demonstrate my competence in dressing myself flawlessly, some women treated me as a learner and were willing to part with their expertise. Yet some saw me as an expert who studied makeup and clothes and asked, therefore, for my know-how. Either way, the practices of looking imply an involvement in skills and knowledge that not only inform an ability to select, acquire and apply makeup and clothes, but also constitute our identity as learner, expert or both. These practices of reciprocal looking also affirm the significance of my body in conducting ethnographic fieldwork. I was not simply being physically present in the organisations, but interacting and participating in the practices of looking shared amongst the women office workers. As such, I agree with Aaron Turner (2000) that an ethnographer has to be considered as an embodied participant whose physical visibility plays a part in the development of the research process. I also argue for the insertion of my visibility and embodied experiences in the writing and understanding of the women office workers' looking good practices at work (see Chapter 3).

When looking at the photographs of me taken with colleagues from CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I began to see why Kratae had said I looked *thammada*. It was my third week with the CEO's Office. Lux hosted a dinner party for a secretarial team from the CEO's Office and a team of trainers from Organisation Learning. After the party, we had photographs taken together in front

of the restaurant. Unlike her young training coordinators who appeared in more casual high-street tops and trousers, the Head of OL was fully dressed in a well-fitted lilac suit jacket and skirt and accessorised with a pearl necklace and earrings. Amongst the secretaries from the CEO's Office Paan appeared in a dark-purple tailored short-sleeved jacket and matching skirt. Kratae was in her candy-striped quarter-sleeved blouse and black trousers. Lux looked bright in her light-pink and white floral silk blouse, which matched well with her white knee-length pencil skirt. Standing right behind Lux, I looked peculiarly humble in my neutral-coloured, plain, long-sleeved blouse and black trousers. The only accessory I had adorned myself with was a pair of wristbands in support of the bank's good causes and community projects.

A further set of photographs were some snapshots I took with Kratae during a lunch break. At the reception and entrance to the CEO's Office, we took turns to pose beside a massive glass wall inscribed with the bank's eye-catching logo and 'Welcome' sign. Both Kratae and I appeared in white blouses and dark-coloured trousers. A month later, I joined a farewell party for one of the training managers. Again, I was wearing a long-sleeved blouse, this time, pastel pink. Toward the end of my placement, with several dozen CAIMEA working teams involved in the bank's integration project I was invited to a thank you dinner party hosted by the project director. While we were enjoying a sumptuous Brazilian churrascaria grill, a professional photographer captured our smiles during this festive event. In one photograph I was pictured with Paan, Lux and the project's secretary. Lux was adorned in an elegant, dark-brown, long-sleeved Chinese silk blouse and Paan looked comfortable in her black business suit. The secretary from the other department looked more casual in her striped, v-neck, loose long-sleeved top. Unsurprisingly, I dressed in my favourite cream long-sleeved blouse and black trousers. Then it was my last day at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and I had a lot of photographs taken with my colleagues. In one of the photographs, I was standing with Paan by her office compartment at the CEO's Office. I wore a white short-sleeved blouse and a pair of black trousers. Paan was in her dark grey blouse and a matching black skirt.

Reflecting upon my experiences of working in the CEO's Office, it came as surprise to me that I reified meanings of 'appropriate dress' as a combination of a neutral-coloured, plain blouse and a pair of dark-coloured trousers. Before and at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was conscious of making 'appropriate' looks

through the ways in which I dressed as I simply wished to establish good field relations with gatekeepers and key informants. However, taking a role as one of Lux's assistants, I gradually became engaged in the experience world of the secretaries. The making of 'appropriate' looks through dress was no longer the intent of fieldwork facilitation, but became part of everyday practices I shared with the secretaries in the CEO's Office. I was involved in secretarial work and took responsibility for the tasks I was assigned. I attended meetings, wrote minutes and updated reports. I helped organise staff liaison activities, took part in producing in-house newsletters, translated documents, answered and screened telephone calls. I was somewhat overwhelmed by a consistent routine of detailed work that all demanded adherence to fixed deadlines. I was stationed at the CEO's Office from 8.30 in the morning to 5.30 in the evening at least. Two spacious reception areas located in the centre and at the entrance of the CEO's Office received visitors and customers daily. Meeting rooms were always fully occupied. I saw men in suits and women in business dress walking in and out. Back office operational staff may enjoy the 'mix and match' varieties of their momentary 'fashion' clothes, yet top management, both male and female, stabilised their styles with 'power dressing' and 'banker' looks. Paan's superintendent, the Vice President from CAIMEA's headquarters, always wore a neutral-coloured long-sleeved shirt and black suit and tie and Paan, herself, a tailored business dress.

Seeing a dark-blue, suit jacket hanging behind the door in a pantry room, I was surprised to learn that it belonged to Noon. Noon's main duty was to prepare and serve refreshments. On top of her spotless beige-coloured uniform, Noon was required to wear a suit jacket when waiting on the Board of Directors, VIP customers and high-ranking government officers. Despite being well groomed in terms of coordinating suit and skirt, Mint was in a hurry and had showed up at the CEO's Office with messy hair, loosely tied up with a pen and paper clip. She wanted to quickly hand in some documents and requested for the CEO's signature. Instead Mint received a warning from Lux regarding her untidy hair. Committed to the advocacy of a good corporate image, Lux was attentive not only to her own dress but also to those of her subordinates and other employees.

There had been a longstanding tension between Lux and Kratae regarding a discrepancy between their meanings of appropriate dress. It was not uncommon for her colleagues to witness kratae's resentment over Lux's strict dress surveillance and unfriendly criticism towards Kratae's work clothes. Although

Kratae appeared in well-coordinated non-revealing attire, Lux commented that the ways in which Kratae dressed to work was 'too casual'. The height of the tension was aggravated when Lux asked Kratae to wear a uniform but Kratae refused. Negotiation between the two resolved that Kratae would wear a suit jacket on top of her 'overly casual' work clothes. The white tracksuit incident truly irritated Lux. However, as her authority was unlikely to be extended beyond the confines of the CEO's Office, the only thing Lux could do was to complain to her colleagues. Those who wore jeans, mini-skirts, t-shirts, crop trousers, strappy tops, vests, trainers or sandals would avoid entering or even coming close to the CEO's Office. They may leave an enquiry with Kratae at the entrance to the Office.

'Dress is an issue here!' I jotted it down in my fieldwork diary in bold and underlined to remind myself of my very first experiences of being in and working at the CEO's Office. I took notice of how the secretaries and their colleagues dressed for work. I observed how they received praise and punishment as a consequence of their choice of dress. I shared with them in the advocacy of the notion of appropriateness and felt responsibility in the fostering of orderliness in the CEO's Office. I participated in the practices of wearing appropriate dress. Mint always said, 'Inappropriate dress is a reputation risk'. To reiterate her account, 'I understand then the necessity of this point. When I worked for the CEO's Office, I had to dress properly all the time'. Mint negotiated and reified a notion of appropriateness through her practices of wearing a suit jacket and matching sombre skirt. To Mint, a suit did not pronounce 'power dressing' but rather 'safe dressing'. 'I always wear a suit. It makes me look ... umm how do you say, work-ready. A suit makes me look professional. ... A suit is like a symbol for businesspeople, for executives. But that isn't to say that I wear a suit because I want to look important. I just want to comply with the regulations and look proper for my workplace. I gradually understood this. ... A suit is safe. It isn't risky. It covers my shoulders.'

In becoming included in a community of secretaries in the CEO's Office, I inevitably participated in the practices of wearing appropriate dress. I negotiated meanings of appropriateness and reified such meanings into my *thammada* look. The ensemble of my pale plain blouse and pair of dark-coloured trousers somehow shared a commonality with Mint's matching suit and skirt. It was the safest style as it complied with the bank's dress code and regulations. It was probably the most appropriate style for me to wear during my short-lived experience at the CEO's

Office. By the time I left the CEO's Office and CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I found myself having an 'emergency' suit jacket hanging somewhere behind my desk just like Lux, Noon and Kratae. Had my tenure been an extended period of four or even ten years, like Mint's and Lux's, rather than four months, I would have developed a more comprehensive wardrobe with a fine collection of suits, skirts and tailored business dress and no longer looked *thammada*.

Conclusion

A significant part of looking good practices involves learning. In this chapter, I have explored how Thai women office workers learnt to look good through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes at work. I propose to view learning as a process of social participation taking place in the context of everyday life. Through social participation, not only does a learner acquire tacit knowledge by actively and continually engaging in the practices of social community, but also formulates an identity necessary for becoming a member of the community of practices. In understanding learning through a process of social participation, I have argued for an insertion of my visibility and embodied experiences in the analysis and writing of women office workers' looking good practices at work. I have reflected upon my experience as a newcomer to a social community and explored how I had learnt to become included in the community of practices of secretaries at the CEO's Office through the practices of wearing 'appropriate' dress. Looking good entails looking 'appropriate'. Appropriateness involves belonging and endeavouring to dress oneself appropriately explicates a desire to belong and to participate in the practices of the social community. I learnt to look good, to look appropriate, through my engagement in the process by which I looked at other women, participated in the consumption practices of their local events, negotiated and reified meanings of appropriateness, and produced an identity necessary for becoming a member of the community of practices. Thai women office workers' consumption experiences, as well as my own, demonstrate that the ways in which we learn to look good are informed by our engagement in shared practices and meanings amongst ourselves in the community of practices. As such, I conclude that looking good practices are a form of social practices.

CHAPTER 7

The Making of the Look Good Workplace

Introduction

This chapter aims to explore how Thai women office workers incorporate consumption practices into their everyday life at work, by looking at the case of IT helpdesk operators' looking good practices. A review of literature on call centres' labour process helps better our understanding of IT helpdesk operators' workplace experiences. It highlights a tension between 'managerial regimes and workers' self-organisation' (Taylor and Bain 2003). The IT helpdesk operators' daily working lives had been shaped by labour process which demanded from them not only physical labour but also 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983). Drawing upon my ethnographic fieldwork, I will demonstrate how by engaging in looking good practices, the IT helpdesk operators exerted their agency in negotiating with the demand of work organisation and how through their act of consumption, they produced the looking good bodies to be situated in the looking good workplace. In this sense, the focus on women office workers' everyday consumption practices enables a new understanding of the workplace in relation to the female bodies.

Revisiting Call Centres: Labour Process, Work Organisation and Workplace Experience

Operating through the deployment of technology and mediated interactions between users and helpdesk operators, Multivital Corporation's IT Helpdesk Unit shares distinctive features with a call centre. A call centre is a unique working environment which is defined not only by its technological deterministic features but also by relevant work organisation that shapes the workplace experiences of the call centre operators (Holman 2003: 116). Call centre work is usually described as 'boring, demanding and stressful' (Holman 2003: 116). The contributing factors include a demanding labour process, intensive performance monitoring, the

intrinsic pressures of a highly repetitive job and a flat organisational structure which fails to offer career progression (Taylor and Bain 1999: 110; Belt 2002: 51; Holman 2003: 116). This leads to a stigmatisation of call centres as 'the new sweatshops' or 'the dark satanic mills of the twenty-first century' (Garson 1988; Incomes Data Services 1997; Metcalf and Fernie 1998 cited in Holman 2003: 116; Bain and Taylor 2000: 2; Townsend 2005: 55)

Influenced by a labour process theory (Braverman 1974; Sturdy et al. 1992 cited in Holman 2003; Thompson and Smith 2000 cited in Taylor and Bain 2003), studies on call centres mainly investigate a call centre labour process through an analysis of how call centre work is organised and how the work organisation is experienced by call centre operators (Taylor and Bain 1999; Holman, 2003). Central to the call centre work organisation is an exercise of the management's supervisory authority in a complex form of performance monitoring and surveillance (Bain and Taylor 2000; Holman 2003; Townsend 2005). Performance monitoring, which emphasises an assessment of call quality, includes a combination of monitoring methods such as 'direct observation, listening to calls, work sampling and customer surveys' (Holman 2003: 119). In addition to an assessment of call quality, an electronic form of performance monitoring generated by computer and telephone technologies has been used for collecting and measuring quantitative data such as 'call length, wrap-up time, time spent logged-off the system and number of sales' (2003: 119). Such intensity and pervasiveness of the practices of performance monitoring and electronic surveillance has led some academics to draw upon a Foucauldian framework and theorise the experience of the call centre work as akin to an 'electronic Panopticon'. (Fernie and Metcalf 1997 cited in Taylor and Bain 1999: 102; Bain and Taylor 2000; Townsend 2005). The illusion of the electronic Panopticon constructs a work environment where employees are manipulated to think that they might be constantly watched so that they will deliver a high standard of service quality as expected by the employers (Townsend 2005).

However, the understanding of call centres as the 'new sweatshops' where workers are 'entrapped by the electronic Panopticon' has been highly criticised (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Holman 2003; Townsend 2005). Phil Taylor and Peter Bain assert that such a pessimistic interpretation of Foucault's view diminishes and dismisses the importance of and the potential for call centre operators' resistance (Foucault 1977 cited in Taylor and Bain 1999: 103). Recent studies on the call centre labour process tend to focus on the emerging forms of

employee resistance as part of call centre operators' workplace experiences (Taylor and Bain 2003; Mulholland 2004; Townsend 2005). Taylor and Bain's study (1999) reveals that call centre operators resisted managerial control in various ways. For example, they pretended to be engaged on calls, deliberately disengaged from awaiting calls, cheated the IT system and threatened to leave during staff-shortages (1999: 112). In her study of workplace resistance in an Irish call centre, Kate Mulholland (2004) demonstrates that alongside a trade union, call centre workers were involved in various forms of resistance including sale-sabotage, cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation. Keith Townsend's study of employee resistance in an Australian call centre (2005) reveals that while the management organised employees into teams and strategically encouraged 'peer surveillance' amongst them, some employees cooperatively converted the availability of the team cohesiveness into a means to challenge the management's authority, to manipulate the technological system and to share the information with their team members.

All of these studies point to a conclusion that call centre operators do not passively surrender to the work organisation designed by the management, but rather actively participate in various forms of resistance in an attempt to better their working conditions. These acts of resistance manifest to counter the panoptic thesis in that 'even in the most regimented call centres, total control cannot be achieved' (Holman 2003: 128). Literature on call centre resistance (Bain and Taylor 2000; Taylor et. al 2002; Taylor and Bain 2003; Mulholland 2004; Townsend 2005) is fruitful to an understanding of call centre workers' workplace experiences as it argues for workers' agentic action in the restrained work circumstances. Nevertheless, by focusing on identifying emerging forms of resistance, other aspects of workplace experiences have been disregarded. My ethnographic fieldwork with the IT helpdesk operators reveals that the operators also worked in a regimented work environment and were faced with the demands of the interactive service work. They were expected to project positive, cheerful feelings whilst enduring stressful, repetitive and laborious work. However, how the IT helpdesk operators experienced their daily lives at work was evident to be complex. They neither docilely comply with nor outright resisted the management's exertion of control over their work. As the following anecdote of the IT helpdesk operators' daily lives will illustrate, they subversively negotiated with the work organisation in an attempt to get through the working day.

IT Helpdesk Operators' Everyday Lives

When it's not school holidays, I wake my kids up at 6. By 6.15, they must have been in the shower and be getting ready for school. I then get myself ready, go to work and come back home in the evening. We have dinner around 7. Everything is fixed in time, nothing exciting. My work is like this, exactly the same everyday, nothing glamorous. Once in a long while, there might be something different to do. Apart from that, everything is the same. So, I do whatever makes me happy ...

This morning I wasn't sure if I chose the right blouse. Today my hair is slightly curly. I thought the blouse would match better with straight hair, but I had already got dressed so I didn't bother to get changed. I looked at the mirror. Oh well, it wasn't that bad. The blouse matched quite well with my wavy hair. Looking at my dress is a kind of happiness, really. It reduces stress. Nong used to be quite stressed. I told her, "If you see anything you like, just buy it." A pair of hairclips or earrings is only 20 baht¹⁷. Then tomorrow we'll have a plan or something to think about. We're going to wear our new hairclips and new earrings. We can picture ourselves in a new dress and new accessories....

I used to think that if I couldn't afford the best, I wouldn't go for anything less. If I wanted a ring, I would only buy a real one. But I've changed completely. It takes a long time to save up money and buy new things. When I go shopping if I see a blouse for something like 1000 baht, I won't buy it. It may look beautiful but I don't want to save up and wait that long to get a new dress. When I have a new pair of shoes, I'll walk around in them and my colleagues will say "Wow, new shoes". I'll be very pleased. Ah, happy! Then next week, I'll get a new dress. I've just bought a new pair of shoes, and again I'm going to buy a new dress. It doesn't mean that I've spent a lot of money. It's a little token of happiness, really. I know when to stop. I won't exceed my budget of 500 baht. A blouse is around 190 baht. I can get two of them and still be under my budget. If I see any cute, inexpensive earrings, I'll buy them. I may wear them once or twice. It doesn't matter. I won't feel it's a waste. I always have new things for myself.

(Kaan, 37, secretary)

It was another morning on another working day but Kaan looked sparkling and displayed a glorious smile. Her long satiny dark Espresso hair was neatly styled, flaunting soft-shaped layers of subtle curls. She sported a solid black, pleated, sleeved blouse, a perfect complement to her chiffon, printed, coral-pink, flared skirt and a pair of black, patent, slim-striped, wedge sandals. Kaan glided across the room, from her desk passing row after row of identical workstations. She halted. Aum was the first who said hi, 'How are you today, Sis?' Nong who sat at the outer corner spotted something exciting. 'They're new, aren't they?' Nong pointed to Kaan's brand new pearl stiletto earrings. 'How cute!' Nearby Uim and Fern joined in. The Kaan's-new-pearl-stiletto-earrings applause conversation lasted for a few minutes before a phone rang. Another phone rang, and then another phone

¹⁷ During the period of my fieldwork in 2005 and 2006, £1 was approximately equivalent to 63 - 65 baht.

rang. The IT helpdesk operators concluded their early morning conversation and resumed their duties. Kaan walked back to her desk across the IT Department. Lingering in her glorious smile, Kaan started her office hours.

Kaan was a secretary to the IT Director. With a degree in accountancy, she had never obtained any formal secretarial training but was keen to ask around, observe secretaries from other departments and learn to do the job by herself. Kaan had been a secretary to the IT Director for more than eight years. She guarded his desk, answered telephone calls, scheduled meetings and appointments, handled travel arrangements and dealt with all sorts of administrative work for the IT Department. She saw herself as a mediator or someone who connected operational IT staff with the director and the director with people from outside the department. Kaan vowed her committed affiliation to the IT helpdesk where she had worked as a first-line operator for two years when she first joined Multivital Corporation. 'I'm not working for the helpdesk anymore but I still feel bonded. I really don't like it when people say bad things about the helpdesk.' Announcing with pride, Kaan was part of the first generation, one of the pioneering staff members of the IT helpdesk.

Kaan was close to Umim, another first generation of the IT helpdesk operators. Umim had been with the helpdesk for ten years. Soon after she graduated with a degree in IT and computer studies, a friend had suggested for her to apply for a job at the newly established IT unit at Multivital Corporation. It was the first and the only job she had ever pursued. Starting as a first-line operator, a few years later Umim was promoted to a second-line IT specialist. She was the only female in the second-line out of three. The other two second-lines were male whose main responsibility was to provide a fast-track IT service to the management and notebook users. Umim may have been second-line but her role was not much different from that of her first-line colleagues. She also abided to achieve a daily productivity target and answer ceaseless telephone calls. The only difference was that Umim handled more complicated cases.

Nong was another decade-long Multivital employee. She obtained a degree in hotel and tourism management and previously worked as a reservation agent for a travel agency company. With a sweet pleasant voice, at Multivital Corporation Nong was a telephone operator working in the control room for 5 years before being transferred to the IT helpdesk as a first-line operator. 'First-lines answer all incoming telephone enquiries and provide quick initial IT support to users. If the

cases are too complicated, we'll forward the calls to the second-lines, well to Umim actually,' said Nong summarising the work of helpdesk operators.

Aum and Fern were also first-lines. They were the youngest and the newest helpdesk operators. They had been with the helpdesk for two years and were always referred to as a new generation. Aum used to be a part-time sales representative and promotional girl for a mobile phone company. Her father who at the time worked for Multivital Corporation encouraged Aum to apply for a job at the company. 'At first I didn't want to work on the helpdesk. I mean I didn't plan to stay long but, well, I felt comfortable and people were friendly. I didn't bother to look for a new job,' Aum recounted. Fern was also a part-time promotional girl. She represented a variety of products in sales promotional events, after which she worked for a property development company. Fern was a marketing assistant for a year before joining Multivital Corporation. Like Umim, Fern had a degree in IT and computer studies and was doing her Master's degree in the same subject.

Overseen by the Infrastructure Manager, the IT Helpdesk Unit was part of the Infrastructure Division. The helpdesk team included the Head of the IT Helpdesk, three second-line IT specialists and three first-line operators. All of the first-line operators were female. Most of the female IT staff members who were not programmers launched their careers in the IT Department as first-line helpdesk operators and subsequently would be relocated to different work roles. 'Helpdesk may be the easiest place to start for operational staff. It doesn't require much knowhow. But for managers and supervisors we need someone with a good background in IT and computing,' commented the IT Infrastructure Manager who had been a first-line operator herself. 'When we first set up the Helpdesk, we didn't plan that helpdesk operators should be predominantly male or female. Whoever could do the job well would be fine. But later we preferred female operators and recruited Aum and Fern. Female helpdesks work better because of their soft tone and pleasant voice. We also think that users prefer to talk to women. We used to have male first-lines but they were not satisfactory. Maybe it was too much pressure for them. They were not patient enough to do the job. We want someone who can listen and then respond to the problems. We think women can do this job better.'

At the IT Department, men outnumbered women. Amongst some 50 operational IT staff members, less than a quarter were female. Having a cluster of women working and sitting together along two rows of adjacent workstations, the

helpdesk was a unique IT unit. Each of the helpdesk operators was provided with a computer, a telephone set and a desk mirror. They were instructed to look at the mirror from time to time. 'No, no. This mirror isn't for beauty. Pi Tong [Head of the Helpdesk] told us to check with the mirror if we smiled when we talked with users on the phone. If our face looks moody, it will show in our voice too,' Aum explained, while dabbing at her makeup and glancing in the mirror. The helpdesk operators also brought their own belongings, small artificial flowers, miniature ceramic ornament, gifts from colleagues, photographs, kids' artwork and cartoon stationery. With subtlety, they vivified the look of the solid black computers and surrounding areas in the machine-centric workplace.

At the centre of the helpdesk working area was what they called the 'island'. It consisted of three adjoining waist height filing cabinets where the Head of the Helpdesk could store folders of documents, office supplies and electronic equipment but the helpdesk operators cached cutlery, plates, bowls, an assortment of seasoning sauces, a full basket of nail polish and spare shoes. On top of the island was an array of snacks and sweets, the daily sustenance which helped keep them going. Next to the bulk of refreshments on the far edge of the island was a 24-inch LCD monitor. It displayed a large grid of digital counters. Each expediting digit indicated the productivity of individual helpdesk operators. Via this electronic monitoring device, the helpdesk operators' performance, in terms of the number of calls they received per day and the length of time they spent handling each call, was quantified and evaluated daily.

This exhibit of electronic surveillance scarcely intimidated the helpdesk operators as they always strove to achieve the daily productivity target. However, close supervision by the Head of the Helpdesk, who sat right by his subordinates, overseeing every movement in the open plan office provoked exasperation. Peer-to-peer surveillance by the two male second-lines had also proved to be irritating. On a number of occasions, lunchtime conversations amongst the helpdesk operators voiced their discontent over how the surveillance sabotaged the tranquillity of their day. The helpdesk operators were obliged to be stationed in front of their computers and telephone sets at all times, starting from 7.30 a.m. and finishing at 4.30 p.m. with a 60-minute lunch break from 12.00 p.m. to 1.00 p.m. They also took turns to take the evening shift from 4.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. Similar to other Multivital's employees, the helpdesk operators were not required to clock in or clock out. However, their attendances were closely observed by the Head of the

Helpdesk and the male second-lines. Tardiness and absenteeism from their workstations during the designated working hours could jeopardise an overall evaluation of their performance.

The IT helpdesk operators worked together and had lunch together. Some days which they labelled as 'boring', Kaan, Umim, Nong, Aum and Fern had a simple lunch at either canteen one or canteen two in the building complex where Multivital Corporation was situated. After a canteen lunch the helpdesk operators would stroll around shops for a while, buying some snacks and drinks for afternoon refreshments before returning to their desks. However, twice or three times a week they would cherish their midday break. With effective team cooperation, they managed to escape from the building complex and took an excursion to various shopping and lunch venues. To make the most of their sixty-minute break, together they executed an exhaustive escape plan.

- 12:00 p.m. Log off from the computer and rush to queue for the lift.
- 12:05 p.m. Aum: Get her car from the underground car park.
Umim, Nong, Fern, Kaan: Wait at the side entrance of the building.
- 12:15 p.m. Arrive in a restaurant, order food, have lunch and pay.
- 12:50 p.m. Drive back.
- 1:00 p.m. Arrive in the building complex.
Team 1: Aum: Park the car. Fern: Navigate and look for a parking space.
Team 2: Kaan: Get iced coffee and cold drinks for everyone.
Team 3: Umim & Nong: Be present in front of the computer and cover up for the missing operators.
- 1:05 p.m. Team 1, 2 & 3: Be present in front of the computer.

The plan could be slightly amended, depending on whatever venture they preferred. A mission of that day was to look for some new pairs of shoes. A gigantic shopping mall which was located a few blocks away seemed to be an ideal place for the lunchtime shopping.

- 12:00 p.m. Log off the computer and rush to queue for a lift.
- 12:05 p.m. Call a taxi and make sure that a driver knows the short-cut to the shopping mall.
- 12:12 p.m. Arrive in the shopping mall. Have a very quick lunch at the food court. Browse around the shoe shops. Buy something if possible.
- 12:50 p.m. Get afternoon drinks from the favourite milk teashop.
- 12:55 p.m. Take a taxi back.
- 1:00 p.m. Be present in front of the computer if lucky.
Or
- 1:05 p.m. Be present in front of the computer and cross their fingers that nobody will notice that they are five minutes late.

Lunchtime shopping may be hectic but it had proved to be a hedonic thrill. In the nick of thirty minutes, the helpdesk operators browsed around scores of shoe shops, tried a few pairs of shoes on, looked at the mirror, asked for one another's

opinions and tried another pair of shoes on. The clock was ticking but they had not yet found anything they fancied. 'Time's up.' Still lamenting their luck with the shoes, they headed back to the building complex. All of the helpdesk operators were stationed at their desks and resumed their duties. In front of the computers, they displayed endless smiles whilst answering one phone call after another. In less than three and a half hours, they would be able to leave this woman-machine work behind, shut down their computers and go home. They planned another lunchtime shopping trip for sometime later in the week. Ironically, the helpdesk operators surrendered to a routine of escaping from a routine.

The Making of the Looking Good Bodies

The helpdesk operators' daily lives at work appeared to be shaped by a labour process and work organisation which demanded from them not only physical labour but also 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983). Through strict monitoring of the helpdesk operators' attendance and productivity at work, their physical labour was extracted and intensified. They were obliged to be stationed at their desks in front of the computers and telephone sets at all times throughout their designated working hours. They were closely supervised by their superiors and remotely monitored by electronic devices. Their daily work entailed a routine of answering endless, repetitive telephone calls. On the phone, they were expected to speak with a soft tone and pleasant voice and were instructed to smile in spite of being invisible to their interlocutors. Being prescribed with such a stylisation of telephone demeanours, it can be said that the helpdesk operators inevitably rendered emotional labour. They were expected to manage their feelings in an attempt to cast positive emotions towards service recipients (Cameron 2000: 338 – 339), or 'users'.

Seemingly the work organisation that had been designed and monitored by the management cast the helpdesk operators' everyday practices and workplace experiences. However, evidence deriving from my ethnographic fieldwork suggests that the helpdesk operators also exercised their available though limited discretion as a resource for designing their own practices at work. Strict monitoring of the punctuality of their work attendance as well as the demand of their physical presence at their workstations meant a restriction on their freedom in terms of place and time. At midday the helpdesk operators were allotted with sixty minutes

at their own discretion, a lunch break. Being 'chained to a machine' throughout the working hours, they exhausted the sixty-minute break in full, so as to extend their field of mobility. Together they resorted to take a shopping excursion and spent their time concerned with the act of consumption. By partaking in the hectic yet hedonic lunchtime shopping trip, not only did the helpdesk operators attempt to escape from the boredom of the work routine, they collectively contested a boundary of place and time.

It was also evident that in extracting the IT helpdesk operators' emotional labour, the management had fostered an association between the helpdesk work and the work of femininity. It was through the recruitment process and the valorisation of the helpdesk operators' 'feminine qualities' (Bradley et al. 2000 cited in Belt et al. 2002: 20) that the IT helpdesk work had been feminised. Similar to the work organisation which was designed to extract labour from the helpdesk operators, the feminisation of the IT helpdesk work functioned to serve an aim to maximise productivity and service quality for the benefits of the corporation. In the following section I will demonstrate how by engaging in looking good practices, the IT helpdesk operators exerted their agency in negotiating with the demands of the work organisation manifested in the form of the feminisation of the IT helpdesk work.

Feminising the IT Helpdesk Work

In the IT Helpdesk Unit, it was observed that there was a feminisation of the IT helpdesk work. Feminisation occurring in the workplace refers not only to 'the rising rate of female participation in the paid labour force' (Fondas 1996: 282), but also to 'the spread of characteristics culturally ascribed to females and thus held to be feminine in society' (Fondas 1996: 282). Operated by a majority of men working with computerised machines in a technology-based work environment, the IT Department had been proclaimed to be a male-dominated domain. The IT Helpdesk Unit, on the contrary, was distinctive from the rest of the IT Department. As an in-house voice-to-voice IT service provider, the IT Helpdesk was a working unit driven by women. Literature on interactive service occupations suggests that employers are more likely to view women as outperforming men in service work because of the social skills which women are believed to 'naturally' possess (Belt et al. 2002: 20 – 21; Wajcman 2006: 88). The management at the IT Helpdesk

appeared to share this view. They became more favourable to women when recruiting first-line helpdesk operators. 'We think women can do this job better,' voiced the Infrastructure Manager who oversaw the IT Helpdesk Unit. Making the assumption that women were more patient in handling pressurised and repetitive work, the management preferred to recruit female operators. In effect, all of the first-line helpdesk operators were women.

In addition, most of the female IT operational staff members whose formal qualifications and previous work experiences were not directly related to the field of IT and computing were usually placed at the helpdesk before being relocated to different work roles. 'Helpdesk may be the easiest place to start for operational staff. It doesn't require much knowhow,' commented the Infrastructure Manager. 'Knowhow', or in this respect, IT and computing skills was not the most important criterion for recruiting IT helpdesk operators, but rather, according to the Infrastructure Manager, an ability to cast positive emotions and to respond to problems in a pleasant and pleasing manner had been prioritised. Such an ability is closely related to what Belt et al. (2002: 31) frame as 'female social skills' in which 'stereotypical feminine qualities' such as 'caring, communicating and making people feel good' (Bradley et al. 2000 cited in Belt et al. 2002: 20), which were once undervalued and ignored in the workplace (Woodfield 1998 cited in Belt et al. 2002: 31), have been commodified as a valuable asset for employment.

Although the helpdesk operators were believed to naturally possess the feminine qualities that were necessary for performing service work, the management continually exerted their authority and endeavoured to reinforce these qualities. New operators were sent to attend customer service training courses. The Infrastructure Manager explained, 'The training aims to give them an idea of what they need to do and how they should speak to users. But well, after a while they may forget. We have to remind them to follow the protocols. We evaluate them regularly. We run random checks etc.' Apart from the formal training and regular monitoring, the helpdesk operators were also prescribed with an instruction to further exploit their ability to 'smile down the phone' (Marshall and Richardson 1996 cited in Belt et al. 2002: 21) when they delivered a voice-to-voice service to users. In service occupations, smiling is deemed significant. As illustrated by a case of female Cathay Pacific flight attendants' industrial action in 1999, the flight attendants subversively used a refusal to smile on duty as a means to negotiate better pay and work conditions (Cameron 2000: 335). In general, smiling

represents a symbolic association between femininity and a subordinate status (Cameron 2000: 334). Smiling, according to Cameron, 'is not simply a spontaneous expression of pleasure but often functions, especially with non-intimates, to signal deference or appeasement. ... Women are routinely expected to smile, and sometimes publicly castigated by complete strangers if they do not smile' (2000: 334 – 335). As such, the instruction for the helpdesk operators to smile arguably demonstrates another strategy of the managerial exertion of authority in organising the IT helpdesk work through feminisation.

In understanding the IT helpdesk operators' experiences at work, I conceptualise the feminisation of the IT helpdesk work as a form of the managerial exertion of authority manifested in part with the work organisation which is designed to extract labour from the IT helpdesk operators. As I mentioned earlier, studies investigating a dialectical relationship between the ways in which work is organised and how the work organisation is experienced by workers mainly focus on identifying the emerging forms of resistance (Taylor and Bain 1999; Taylor and Bain 2003; Holman 2003; Mulholland 2004; Townsend 2005). However, evidence deriving from my ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates that how the operators experienced the feminisation of their work is complex and should not be framed as a mere mechanistic retaliation between managerial control and worker resistance.

Feminising the IT Helpdesk Bodies

At the IT Department, the IT helpdesk operators worked in a stereotypical male-dominated work environment, but were imposed with a responsibility to perform feminised service work. As feminisation was legitimated and endorsed by the management, it facilitated the helpdesk operators with an opportunity to be autonomous in relation to being feminine. The helpdesk operators appropriated further the feminisation of their work. Together they exerted agency in negotiating with the meanings of femininity and reifying such meanings through looking good practices. Looking good practices central to the discussion here inhabit everyday practices surrounding the IT helpdesk operators' consumption of makeup and clothes at work. As Auslander asserts, 'all acts of consumption [are] also acts of production, but some kinds of consumption [produce] things defined as feminine and others [produce] things defined as masculine' (1996: 79). I argue that whilst

engaging in the consumption of makeup and clothes, the IT helpdesk operators produced feminised bodies to be situated in the feminised workplace.

Aesthetics serves a function in interactive service work as it offers an opportunity to influence customers' sensory experiences, add value to and create competitive advantages for an organisation (Olins 1991 cited in Witz et al. 2003: 42). Similar to marketing materials, product designs and the physical environments of workspaces, 'aesthetic labour' or an 'employee with particular embodied capacities and attributes that appeal to the senses of customers' (Warhurst and Nickson 2007: 103), functions to forge a desirable corporate identity (Witz et al. 2003: 42). Through the processes of recruitment, selection, training and monitoring, employers commodify the physical capital of employees in a service encounter. Physical capital has been valorised and converted into economic capital (Warhurst et al. 2000; Witz et al. 2003). The use of dress codes, uniforms and dress regulations, for example, can be seen a mobilisation of aesthetic labour in an attempt to project a desirable corporate image (see Chapter 2).

The IT helpdesk work is an interactive service work, albeit voice-to-voice. Although the intensive monitoring calibrated to extract emotional labour from the operators had been observed, the mobilisation of aesthetic labour necessary for face-to-face interactive service work was not evident at the IT helpdesk. The Infrastructure Manager referred to the imposition of regulations on the operators' dress and physical appearance as 'irrelevant to work'. In the manager's view, 'dress style is an individual's choice'. This implies an absence of the managerial exertion of authority on the operators' dress practices at work. Dress culture at Multivital Corporation in general had also been geared towards the 'freestyle' dress code (see Chapter 4).

The management disregarded the valorisation of aesthetic labour. However, the IT helpdesk operators, themselves, were preoccupied with aestheticising and feminising their bodies. 'It's true that in my job I rarely meet people. Once I arrive in the office, I just sit at my desk all day. Umm...But well, I meet people during lunch. So I should dress up,' Aum opined. Through their engagement in looking good practices, the IT helpdesk operators embraced a routine of their daily lives with a challenge of what they called 'mix and match'. Mix and match is not a mere catchphrase which the operators repeatedly maundered in their conversations. Rather, 'mix and match' engenders an attentive acquisition, selection, coordination and consumption of makeup and clothes. In the making of

aesthetically pleasing femininity, mix and match is an embodied skill which informs the IT helpdesk operators' looking good practices at work.

In the morning before leaving home for work, Kaan anticipated in a careful manner how she should coordinate her clothes and harmonise them with makeup, accessories and even her hairstyle. 'My friend said I'm crazy. Everything must match. If I wear pink eye shadow, I should wear pink lipstick. Colours should complement one another. When I dress up and I think that I look good, I'll be very attentive to my makeup. Makeup should look good too. But if I wear simple clothes, I'll just wear basic makeup,' said Kaan. In avoiding a hectic morning, Aum organised her daily clothes a week in advance. 'I have my clothes planned. I pick and mix what I'm going to wear to work for the whole week. This set is for Monday. Those are for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and so on. I may swap one set with another. If I don't plan in advance,... the other day, I didn't prepare my clothes beforehand, I had to get changed again and again until I found the right match and I was late for work.' Umim did not have a weekly dress plan and selected her daily clothes upon the availability of clean laundry. But she was particular in coordinating her favourite colours. 'I like pink. When I go shopping, I always look for pink. I also like white, but only once in a long while will I buy something in white, mainly I buy pink. But sometimes I think I should dress in different colours for a change. It's sort of boring if I wear pink everyday ... and definitely I'll choose makeup that matches my clothes.'

Not only does 'mix and match' encompass the ability to combine clothes and makeup aesthetically, it also determines the extent of the plethora of looks one can possibly visualise. Aum shared her view on shopping. 'When I go shopping and look around shops, I can tell what is in fashion. Let's say a shrug is a big hit right now, then I'll get an idea what I should buy. If I buy a shrug, what should I wear with it? Which top should I wear underneath, with which skirt, with which shoes? How should I match the new dress with what I've already got in my wardrobe?' Kaan, who proudly announced 'I always buy new things for myself', took pleasure from buying guilt-free, modest clothes and accessories. 'Just buy it,' she said. 'A pair of hairclips or earrings is only 20 baht. Then tomorrow we'll have a plan or something to think about. We're going to wear our new hairclips and new earrings. We can picture ourselves in a new dress and new accessories.'

The practice of mixing and matching clothes and accessories entails an ability to create a variation of looks. Aum appeared vibrant in her crimson, short-

sleeved, polo-neck blouse, which she chose to combine with a cream, canvas, knee-length, A-line skirt. With a combination of the two monochrome pieces, she accentuated her hipline with a statement belt and finished her look with a pair of red, faux-leather, kitten heels. Then she reappeared in a cocoa, striped, sleeveless top, a pair of charcoal, boot-cut jeans and black, patent, wedge sandals. She topped off her look with the same statement belt.

Nong preferred a smart casual feminine look. She wore a black, clean-cut, scoop neck blouse with a heather gray skirt. She matched the pieces with black heeled sandals. To glam up the look, she paired her glossy apricot lips with a set comprising an autumn-orange bead bracelet and matching necklace. On the next day, Nong selected a black, floral necklace to coordinate with her ivory, short-sleeved, lace blouse and black, classic, knee-length skirt. She walked in a pair of wooden wedges neatly embellished with white floral brooches. Later in the week, again she wore the white floral wooden wedges but redressed herself in a combination of a chestnut, velvet, high-neck blouse and a brown and black, check skirt. As a finishing touch she added the autumn-orange bead bracelet worn earlier that week.

'My work is like this, exactly the same everyday, nothing is glamorous. Once in a long while, there might be something different to do. Apart from that, everything is the same,' Kaan shared her feelings. Work may be mundane, repetitive and laborious but what the IT helpdesk operators accommodated alongside their work provided some exhilaration in their everyday lives. To them, lunchtime shopping did not always mean buying. The sixty-minute discretion of hedonic shopping induced a brief escape from the work routine through the contestation of the boundary of time and place. The IT helpdesk operators were preoccupied with feminising their bodies. They were actively engaged in looking good practices. Looking good practices involve consumption. By mixing and matching makeup, clothes and accessories, the operators were creative in making a variety of looks. Looking good practices, in this sense, rewarded the IT helpdesk operators' efforts to endure the demands of mundane, repetitive and laborious work.

The Making of the Looking Good Workplace

The IT helpdesk operators performed identical tasks at identical workstations. Furnished with a pale, pine-finished desk, a light-green fabric office chair, a gray partition, black desktop and black telephone set, each of the individual IT helpdesk operator's workstation was identical to that of one another and, in fact, of all other IT staff members and Multivital's employees. But Nong adored her four-year-old daughter's drawings and proudly exhibited them alongside the printouts of some numerical computer codes on the partition next to her desk. Umim displayed small fluffy toys and miniature ceramic ornaments which were the tokens of appreciation from users and her colleagues. Aum had some small, funky photo frames on top of her desk. Artificial flowers entwined black office supplies. Nail polish, makeup cases, shopping catalogues and women's magazines appeared alongside stationery and piles of documents.

'Control over the working environment can be seen as a constituent part of the control of the labour process,' Chris Baldry writes in his discussion on office space (1999: 535). The management may endeavour to regulate the IT helpdesk operators' work. However, the visibility of the personal and non-work-related items that had been put on display at the operators' workstations signifies the extent of the freedom and control the operators were able to exert over their immediate working environment. Personalisation characterises 'the display of personal or work-related items or the arrangement of the workspace to distinguish the occupant from others' (Sundstorm and Sundstorm 1986: 218). Not only did the children's artwork, photographs, flowers, toys, and miniature ornaments tell the observers how the individual operator may wish to be perceived as a person, but also boldly announced that 'women work here'. In this sense, whilst personalising their workstations with the cultural artefacts which were commonly associated with femininity, the IT helpdesk operators collectively feminised the physicality of the IT Helpdesk Unit.

Anne Witz et al. (2003) discuss how employers endeavour to forge a corporate identity through the 'aesthetics *in* organisation' and the 'aesthetics *of* organisation' (see Chapter 2). The aesthetics in organisation is manifested in a form of 'aesthetic labour', the employees with the embodiment of the organisation's identity. The aesthetics of the organisation can be expressed through the inanimate elements of the organisation, such as the physical environment of the

workplace. Witz et al.'s discussion is fruitful in that it points to a link between the employees' bodies and the physical environment of the workplace in the aestheticisation process. However, by highlighting the employers' strategic uses of the aesthetics, they disregard a potency of the employees' agentic capacity in the aestheticisation of their bodies and the workplace.

In her study of the 'aesthetic dimensions of organisation life', Samantha Warren (2002, 2008) shifts research focus from the management's strategies of workplace aestheticisation to employees' perspectives on it (see Chapter 2). She asked members of a web-design department to take photographs that represented their feelings towards the new 'aesthetically designed' office where they had been recently relocated. In so doing, Warren conceptualises aesthetics as an oscillation between the 'aesthetic experiences and judgement' which 'are subjective reactions to material things (real or imagined)' (2008: 560). By aesthetic experiences, Warren means 'universal, embodied, sensory, modes of human-being-in-the-world', whilst an aesthetic judgement is referred to as 'an intersubjectively constructed appraisal of the former [experiences], influenced by socialization processes and "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984)' (Warren 2008: 561). Warren's study interestingly places an emphasis on the employees' aesthetic experiences and judgement. However, it does not look at the aesthetics of the employees' bodies as such.

A phenomenological approach to place emphasises the 'interanimation' between the lived body and the place, by recognising the role of the lived body as 'an active ingredient of emplacement' (Casey 1996, see Chapter 2). As Edward Casey writes, 'the living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: *lived bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them... By the same token, however, *places belong to lived bodies* and depend on them.... Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse...' (1996: 24, author's italics). Drawing upon a phenomenological approach to place, I argue for a reciprocal interaction between the women office workers' bodies and their workplace. That is whilst being in a particular workplace shapes and regulates the ways in which the women office workers engage in looking good practices, their engagement in looking good practices, itself, constitutes the workplace.

The IT helpdesk operators' looking good practices demonstrates a relationship between their bodies and the workplace. Through their consumption of makeup and clothes, the operators feminised their bodies to be situated in the

feminised workplace. They integrated themselves with the place. They acted as the subjects who aestheticised their bodies and personalised the physicality of their working environment. It was not apparent that the management attempted to exert their authority concerning the aesthetics of either the operators' bodies or their working environment. However, the IT helpdesk operators themselves exerted their agency in the making of the aesthetic workplace. When they were obliged to be stationed at their workstations at all time, the making of the aesthetic workplace functioned as another means for the IT helpdesk operators to negotiate with the exhaustion of their daily lives at work.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how IT helpdesk operators incorporated looking good practices into their everyday life at work. In coping with the mundane and demanding nature of the work, the operators actively and collectively engaged in the consumption of makeup and clothes. Their daily lives at work had been shaped by a labour process that demanded from them not only physical labour but also 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983). Through strict work regulations and extensive performance monitoring, physical labour had been extracted. Through the feminisation of the IT helpdesk work, emotional labour was expected and required. In spite of the intensity of such managerial exertion of authority and surveillance, the IT helpdesk operators tactfully negotiated with the work organisation. They appropriated further the feminisation of their work. Together they negotiated the meanings of femininity and reified such meanings through their consumption of makeup, clothes and accessories. By partaking in the hectic yet hedonic shopping trips, the operators attempted to escape from the boredom of the routine. By mixing and matching makeup, clothes and accessories, the operators produced a variety of looks as compensation for the endurance of repetitive and laborious work. The IT helpdesk operators' active engagement in looking good practices not only produced the feminised bodies, but also constituted the feminised workplace through the interaction between the body and the place.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

How can we understand Thai women office workers' consumption of makeup and clothes at work? To conclude the thesis, in this chapter, I reflect upon the knowledge deriving from my ethnographic fieldwork with Thai women office workers at CAIMEA Banking Corporation and Multivital Corporation. Firstly, I discuss two emerging themes which are the key aspects in understanding Thai women office workers' experiences in relation to their everyday consumption practices at work. These two interrelated themes are the ownership of the body and the notion of appropriateness. Secondly, I reflect upon the contributions of the thesis in terms of theories.

Understanding Women's Consumption Practices

Ownership of the Female Body

The female body is a site of power struggles. From my ethnographic fieldwork, three forces have emerged to compete for the ownership of the Thai women office workers' bodies. The women themselves, their organisations and Thai cultural values coerce one another in defining women's consumption practices at work. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that in order to situate themselves in the organisations and in the complex hierarchical structure of Thai society, it is necessary for Thai women office workers to negotiate the meanings of 'appropriate' bodies at work. That is their consumption of makeup and clothes is informed by the negotiation between the corporate culture and Thai cultural values.

Women use their consumption of makeup and clothes as a means to construct and maintain their self-identity. Kitty, a secretary from Multivital Corporation, for example, reinvented herself soon after she joined the corporation. At work, she determined to be seen as a lively and young career woman. 'New' Kitty always donned vibrant outfit and colour-coordinating makeup. Kib, also a secretary from Multivital Corporation, carefully coordinated her clothes and accessories. She consistently kept herself well-groomed as she was happy to be

perceived by her colleagues as a 'fashion leader'. Mint had never worked in an office environment before embarking her career at CAIMEA Banking Corporation. She endeavoured to be accepted as one of the secretaries at the CEO's Office and adopted a matching suit and skirt in sombre colours as her standard work clothes.

The ongoing tensions between employers and employees, between organisation authorities and women office workers regarding the ownership of the body have been observed. How employees look and present themselves is associated with the fostering of the corporate image. Neither of the two organisations issued any regulations or codes of practices regarding female employees' uses of makeup. However, the organisations tactfully appended a complex amalgamation of strategies to regulate employees' dress practices, especially in the case of CAIMEA Banking Corporation. Observable strategies included both straightforward measures, such as the enforcement of the corporate dress code, dress policy and dress surveillance, and the manipulation at an ideological level through the discourses of professionalism and appropriateness which compelled employees to internalise self-surveillance on their own dress.

Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that women office workers are docile bodies. They may appear to comply with the rules and regulations, avoid conflicts with their superiors and be committed to a projection of professionalism through the use of their makeup and clothes. They continually negotiate with the authorities, albeit in a subtle way. For example, Mint had embraced a practice of self-surveillance and dressed herself in a corporate preferred style. She developed two distinctive sets of wardrobes. One was a collection of dark-coloured suit jackets and skirts for work. The other was an assortment of fashionable outfits for the weekend. Mint sought to maintain her sense of individuality outside working hours. Mai and Bow from Multivital's regulatory affairs department were always well accessorised. Their work outfit might be confined to a skirt-only dress code but their skirts were fashionable with a variety of colours and styles.

At work, Thai women office workers are expected to foster not only a professional look for a good corporate image, but also an 'appropriate' look for an 'appropriate' Thai woman. The women's accounts on their daily consumption practices reveal a significance of Thai cultural expectation on Thai women. Many women office workers claimed to observe the notion of 'appropriateness' (*reabroi* and *kalatasa*) when choosing clothes and makeup for work. For instance, Nok and Prae, long-serving employees at Multivital Corporation, were truly irritated by the

ways in which the 'new generation' dressed for work. They commented that the youngsters did not know *kalatesa* and their clothes were inappropriate [*mai-reabro*]. The corporate dress policy endorsed a freestyle dress code and offered a freedom of choices to employees. However, Nok and Prae's comments imply that women did not have an absolute autonomy. Thai cultural values on appropriateness are another force that endeavours to regulate the female body.

Appropriating the Appropriateness

One of the relevant themes to emerge from my ethnographic fieldwork is a matter of 'appropriateness'. All of the women office workers mentioned appropriateness when discussing their ability or inability to select, acquire, apply, mix and match their clothes and makeup. Appropriateness defines a boundary of consumption practices. However, what defines appropriateness has remained arbitrary.

For Thai women office workers, appropriateness can be related to decency or the concealment of sexuality attached to the female body. Clothes which are commonly associated with leisure and the flaunting of sexuality, such as jeans, trousers, t-shirts, strappy tops, tank tops, and sandals, were repeatedly quoted as 'inappropriate' for wearing at work. CAIMEA Banking Corporation issued a regulation that 'discouraged' employees to wear such clothing. At Multivital Corporation, although employees were understood to be free with their choices of dress, many Multivital's employees disagreed with the wearing of 'too casual' clothes, especially strappy tops which had become popular amongst younger female employees. Women's flaunting of sexuality challenges a discourse of professionalism and workplace norm, and concurrently contests a cultural expectation on 'appropriate' Thai women.

Not only does appropriateness entail women's ability to use a combination of clothes and makeup aesthetically, but also the ability to tailor themselves appropriately to a social situation. The scandalous white tracksuit incident, where the event coordinator wore her utmost casual outfit to attend CAIMEA's most auspicious celebration event, illustrates an extreme case of inappropriateness. Compared with lavish attires and black trouser suits donned by event attendees, the coordinator's white tracksuit signifies not only her short of effort in participating in the event but also her lack of knowledge of *kalatesa*. Appropriateness does not always mean dressing up. Jan, an intern, ditched her tailored trousers, blouse and jacket suit, after a few weeks into her placement at Multivital Corporation. Learning

by surprise that her clothes were too formal, Jan determined to blend in with her senior colleagues and opted for a more casual look. While working at CAIMEA Banking Corporation, I, myself, learnt to look good and to look appropriate, by participating in the practices of wearing appropriate dress shared amongst the secretaries at the CEO's Office. The Thai women office workers' experiences as well as my own experience affirm a significance of the notion of appropriateness that informs women office workers' consumption practices at work. Women claimed to submit to the production of 'appropriate' body as they endeavoured to be accepted and became part of the social community they wished to be situated in.

Reflections on Theoretical Contributions

In this thesis, I question the term 'beauty practices' which has been commonly used as a generic term to refer to any practices associated with the decoration, alteration, manipulation and modification of the female body. Evidence emerging from my ethnographic fieldwork reveals that beauty should not be assumed as the reason for which women are engaged in the consumption of makeup and clothes. Thai women office workers preferred to associate their consumption practices at work with 'looking good' rather than beauty as they distinguished the differences between the two. While beauty is perceived as an innate quality of the body, looking good entails the materialisation of the outer body through consumption practices in an attempt to achieve an ideal look. That is beauty is explained as related to a nature and innate quality of the body, especially the face. According to the women office workers, women who feel the lack of such an innate quality, however, can dress up and wear makeup to look good. In this thesis, I differentiate the term 'looking good practices' from 'beauty practices' and emphasis the exertion of women's agentic capacity while engaging in looking good practices. The significance of looking good practices is that women are performing an active task of being agents who choose and make things happen for themselves by themselves.

Looking good practices implicate women's agency – a capacity to create an action which is reflexive and fully inscribed by intention. Women's agency can be observed through the ways in which women office workers learn to look good at work. I establish a link between a process of social learning, the practices of looking and women's consumption practices in an identity formation process, by

drawing upon Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and concept of community of practices (1991) and Grasseni's concept of skilled visions (2007). Lave and Wenger propose an analytical framework that views learning as a process of social participation, involving a learner's formation of an identity to be included as part of the social community. Grasseni adopts Lave and Wenger's framework, but focuses on the training of vision. She demonstrates how the practices of looking can be connected to the practices of learning in a formation of a professional identity. However, neither of Lave and Wenger nor Grasseni explores learning in relation to the female body and a gender aspect of consumption.

In this thesis, I propose to view women's consumption practices as involving learning through a process of social participation. To be accepted as part of their organisation, women office workers are required to obtain not only skills and knowledge necessary for performing their work, but also an ability to develop an 'appropriate' identity which enables them to move from being peripheral participants to become the full members of the social community. In developing such an identity, the women learn through the process by which they look at other women, participate in the practices shared amongst themselves, negotiate the meanings of appropriateness and reify such meanings by engaging in the consumption of makeup and clothes. By sharing the meanings and practices with other women in the social community, the women office workers inevitably participate in collective practices. As such, women's engagement in looking good practices also demonstrates that consumption practices entail social practices. Furthermore, the ways in which women office workers learn to formulate identity through social participation affirms that their act of consumption is highly interrelated to the act of production. Concurrently, women perform two active tasks. They are both consumers and producers at work. While engaging in the consumption of makeup and clothes, they produce 'appropriate' identity that enables them to be part of the community of practices.

By explaining Thai women office workers' consumption practices at work through an interrelationship between the practices of looking, learning and identity formation, I have argued for a potency of women's active looking in everyday life. I explore the ways in which women office workers look at other women in a particular workplace, construct their perception towards an ideal and 'appropriate' appearance and inscribe their outer bodies through the consumption of makeup

and clothes in order to constitute an 'appropriate' identity at work. The existing theories of looking, such as Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure (1975) and Doane's conceptualisation of female spectatorship (1991), establish a link between looking, gender and sexuality. However, they mainly discuss active men looking at passive women and when women look it involves narcissism, transvestism and taboos. Moreover, these psychoanalytic theories are mainly contextualised in the field of film studies and in the analysis of visual representations, undermining other aspects of looking in everyday life. By conceptualising the practices of looking in relation to learning amongst Thai women office workers, I have demonstrated the empowerment of women as subjects who look and learn.

Women's agency as a defining characteristic of looking good practices also manifests through the ways in which women office workers aestheticise their bodies at work. In understanding a relationship between the aesthetics, the organisation and the female body, I shift a focus from the managerial strategies to employees' agentic capacity in the aestheticisation of the female body. Witz et al.'s concept of aesthetic labour (2003) and Hancock and Tyler's concept of organisation bodies (2000) provide the analytical frameworks to examine how employees' bodies, especially those of female employees engaging in an interactive service work, are objectified and commodified. Their concepts share a commonality in explaining how the management or employers endeavour to aestheticise employees' bodies in order to develop the ideal working bodies that aesthetically represent the corporate identity. However, Witz et al.'s and Hancock and Tyler's discussions disregard a potency of employees' agentic capacity. Warren's empirical work (2008) offers a different analytical and methodological approach to researching the 'aesthetic dimensions of organisational life' through an exploration of employees' perspective on workplace aestheticisation. However, Warren does not discuss the aesthetics of the organisation in relation to the female body. In this thesis, I question the aestheticisation of the female bodies at work. Instead of asking how the management or employers foster the aesthetics in/of the organisation, I explore how women office workers exert their agency, act as subjects and aestheticise their bodies through their engagement in the consumption of makeup and clothes.

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that whilst engaging in the consumption of makeup and clothes, Thai women office workers aestheticise their bodies to be situated in the workplace and through this process of aestheticisation the aesthetic

workplace has been made. I question an uncritical use of the term workplace and draw upon a phenomenological approach to place to enunciate the role of the lived body in the making of the workplace. As Casey emphasises, 'the living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: *lived bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them... By the same token, however, *places belong to lived bodies* and depend on them... Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and transverse...' (1996: 24, author's italics). Whilst being in a particular workplace shapes and regulates the ways in which women office workers engage in consumption practices, their engagement in the practices itself constitutes the workplace. In this sense, the focus on women office workers' everyday consumption practices enables a new understanding of the workplace in relation to the female bodies.

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APPENDIX A

Thailand: Country Profile



Figure 1.1: Thailand: Country Profile

Location;	Southeastern Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Burma
Area:	Total: 513,120 sq km country comparison to the world: 57
Population:	65,905,410 (2009 est.) country comparison to the world: 21
Age structure:	0-14 years: 20.8% (male 7,009,845/female 6,691,470) 15-64 years: 70.5% (male 22,977,945/female 23,512,538) 65 years and over: 8.7% (male 2,594,387/female 3,119,225) (2009 est.)
Sex ratio:	0.98 male/female (2009 est.)
Nationality:	Thai
Ethnic groups:	Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11%
Religions:	Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other 0.1% (2000 census)
Language:	Thai
GDP – per capita (PPP):	\$8,400 (2008 est.) country comparison to the world: 117
Labour force:	37.78 million (2008 est.) country comparison to the world: 16
Labour force – by occupation:	agriculture: 42.6% industry: 20.2% services: 37.1% (2005 est.)

Source: *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html#>

APPENDIX B

Thai Labour Force Survey

Table 1.1

Percentage distribution of persons 'in the labour force' and 'not in the labour force' by sex, 2004 – 2008

Year	15+ years of Age			In Labour Force**		Not In Labour Force		Participation Rate		Unemployment Rate	
	Total*	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man
2004	49,492.9	50.4	49.6	65.2	81.4	34.8	18.6	64.0	80.0	1.5	1.5
2005	50,132.7	51.5	48.5	65.0	81.5	35.0	18.5	64.0	80.1	1.3	1.6
2006	50,680.5	51.5	48.5	64.8	81.0	36.2	19.0	63.8	79.7	1.1	1.5
2007	51,264.0	51.5	48.5	65.3	81.0	34.7	19.0	64.5	79.8	1.0	1.2
2008	52,399.3	51.4	48.6	64.7	81.3	36.3	18.7	63.8	80.0	1.2	1.4

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/lfs2009.htm>

*Unit: In thousands.

**Persons 'in the labour force' (15+ years of age) includes the 'employed', 'unemployed' and 'seasonally inactive labour force'.

Table 1.2

Percentage comparison of employed women and men by employment status, 2004 – 2008

Employment Status	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Total	44.9	55.1	45.9	54.1	46.0	54.0	46.1	53.9	45.7	54.3
Employers	21.4	78.6	22.0	78.0	24.4	75.6	24.3	75.7	25.2	74.8
Government employees	43.8	56.2	44.6	55.4	44.2	55.8	44.7	55.3	45.9	54.1
Private employees	43.8	56.2	45.2	54.8	44.4	55.6	45.4	54.6	44.0	56.0
Own-account workers	35.4	64.6	36.1	63.9	36.2	63.8	36.4	63.6	36.2	63.8
Unpaid family workers	64.0	36.0	65.6	34.4	65.3	34.7	65.4	34.6	64.4	35.6

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/lfs2009.htm>

Table 1.3

Percentage distribution of employed women and men by employment status, 2004 – 2008

Employment Status	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employers	1.6	4.7	1.7	5.0	1.6	4.3	1.5	4.1	1.5	3.9
Government employees	7.8	8.1	8.1	8.5	8.1	8.7	8.4	8.9	8.6	8.5
Private employees	35.8	37.3	35.3	36.3	34.8	35.7	34.8	35.9	33.2	35.5
Own-account workers	23.9	35.6	24.4	36.6	25.2	37.6	25.0	37.3	25.2	37.4
Unpaid family workers	30.9	14.1	30.4	13.5	30.3	13.6	30.1	13.7	31.3	14.6
Others	-	0.2	0.1	0.1	-	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/lfs2009.htm>

Table 1.4

Percentage comparison of employed women and men by major occupational group, 2004 – 2008

Occupation	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Total	44.9	55.1	45.9	54.1	46.0	54.0	46.2	53.8	45.7	54.3
Legislator, senior officials and managers	26.7	73.3	27.2	72.8	29.5	70.5	29.8	70.2	25.0	75.0
Professionals	55.7	44.3	57.7	42.3	57.8	47.2	58.7	41.3	58.0	42.0
Technician and associate professionals	51.6	48.4	53.0	47.0	52.5	47.5	51.0	49.0	53.8	46.2
Clerks	63.6	36.4	65.5	34.5	66.6	33.4	65.3	34.7	65.4	34.6
Service workers and shop and market sales workers	63.5	36.5	64.3	35.7	63.3	36.7	64.0	36.0	60.3	39.7
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	43.3	56.7	44.4	55.6	44.0	56.0	44.2	55.8	43.5	56.5
Craftsmen and related trades workers	32.9	67.1	33.6	66.4	33.2	66.8	32.6	67.4	30.7	69.3
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	30.8	69.2	31.6	68.4	31.8	68.2	32.5	67.5	30.6	69.4
Elementary occupations	47.6	52.4	49.0	51.0	49.6	50.4	49.7	50.3	48.3	51.7
Workers not classified by occupation	36.6	63.4	27.4	72.6	43.3	56.7	53.1	46.9	34.3	65.7

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/lfs2009.htm>

Table 1.5

Percentage distribution of employed women and men by major occupational group, 2004 – 2008

Occupation	2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Legislator, senior officials and managers	4.2	9.3	4.2	9.6	4.3	8.7	4.4	8.8	1.6	4.0
Professionals	4.8	3.1	4.9	3.0	4.9	3.0	4.9	3.0	5.2	3.2
Technician and associate professionals	4.6	3.5	4.6	3.5	4.7	3.6	4.7	3.9	4.7	3.4
Clerks	4.9	2.3	5.0	2.2	5.0	2.1	5.3	2.4	5.1	2.3
Service workers and shop and market sales workers	19.6	9.2	19.1	9.0	19.0	9.4	19.4	9.3	22.3	12.4
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	34.2	36.4	34.9	37.0	35.2	38.2	35.2	38.0	35.7	39.1
Craftsmen and related trades workers	7.7	12.8	7.6	12.8	7.5	12.8	7.2	12.7	7.4	14.0
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	5.7	10.5	5.7	10.4	5.6	10.3	5.8	10.4	5.3	10.2
Elementary occupations	14.2	12.8	13.8	12.2	13.5	11.7	13.0	11.3	12.6	11.4
Workers not classified by occupation	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	-

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/lfs2009.htm>

APPENDIX C

Informant Profile

Table 3.1
Informant Profile: CAIMEA Banking Corporation

Name	Position	Department	Serving Period in Current Position	Serving Period in Company	Age	Marital Status	Highest Education
Lux	Senior Manager / PA to CEO	CEO's Office	10	10	45	Single	Secretary Certificate
Kratae	Confidential Secretary	CEO's Office	2	2	30	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Paan	Secretary to VP	CEO's Office	1	1	50	Divorced, 1 daughter	Bachelor's Degree
Pupae	Training Manager	Organisation Learning	2	2	31	Married, 1 daughter	Master's Degree
Fon	Junior Trainer	Organisation Learning	2	2	27	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Jay	Junior Trainer	Organisation Learning	2	2	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Pomme	Training Coordinator	Organisation Learning	2	2	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Ploy	Confidential Secretary	Consumer Bank Credit	1	1	41	Married, 1 daughter	Bachelor's Degree
Mint	Confidential Secretary	Credit Card & Personal Loan	2	4	32	Single	Bachelor's Degree

Table 3.2
Informant Profiles: Multivital Corporation

Name	Position	Department	Serving Period in Current Position	Serving Period in Company	Age	Marital Status	Highest Education
Umim	Consumer Support Analyst	IT Helpdesk	8	8	34	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Fern	Consumer Support Analyst	IT Helpdesk	2	2	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Nong	Operation Service Administrator	IT Helpdesk	4	10	37	Married, 2 daughters	Bachelor's Degree
Aum	IT Helpdesk	IT Helpdesk	2	2	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Kaan	Secretary	IT	8	10	37	Married, 1 daughter, 1 son	Bachelor's Degree
Maew	IT Support Manager	IT	1	5	48	Married, 1 son	Bachelor's Degree
Ann	Consumer Support Specialist	IT	5	10	35	Married	Bachelor's Degree
Tip	IT Infrastructure Manager	IT	8	8	47	Married, 2 sons	Master's Degree
Mo	IT Manager	IT	3	10	32	Married	Bachelor's Degree
Lyn	Finance Director	Finance	2	18	42	Married, 1 son, 1 daughter	Master's Degree
Lek	Treasury Supervisor,	Finance	2	11	36	Married	Bachelor's Degree
Fai	Cash Management Officer	Finance	1	1	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Ple	Accounting Staff	Finance	9 months	9 months	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Fresh	Category Support Staff	Home Care & Oral Care	1.5 months	3	25	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Kib	Category Support Staff	Cooking Aids	3 months	1	24	Single	Bachelor's Degree

Table 3.2
Informant Profiles: Multivital Corporation (continued)

Name	Position	Department	Serving Period in Current Position	Serving Period in Company	Age	Marital Status	Highest Education
Jang	Intern	Laundry Detergent - Marketing	2 months	2 months	22	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Nok	Secretary	Food Solutions	4	27	49	Divorced, 2 sons	Secretarial Certificate
Nena	Product Manager	Food Solutions	8 months	8 months	30	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Kitty	Department Secretary	Market Hair	1 year 7 months	1 year 7 months	30	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Num	Secretary	Regulatory Affairs (International)	2	2	27	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Mai	External Affairs Staff	Regulatory Affairs	7 months	7 months	23	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Bow	External Affairs Staff	Regulatory Affairs	1	1	22	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Prae	Senior Supply Management	Supply Management	10	25	50	Single	Bachelor's Degree