

Study suggests the body is central to identity manipulation in call center work

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New research highlights the politics of 'identity work' where Indian call centre workers manipulate their cultural identities to sell a global service.

The study, by sociologist and social [worker](#) Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin of the University of Kent, examines the way workers in call centres are required to take on new identities but also make assumptions about the [identity](#) of the people they are calling.

Dr Rajan-Rankin suggests that there is a two-way process, with western clients making assumptions about call workers, and Indian call workers using visualisation techniques to 'imagine' the client, who is invisible to them during the voice call.

The study, entitled Invisible Bodies and Disembodied Voices? Identity Work, the Body and Embodiment in Transnational Service Work, is based on ethnographic research with two global outsourcing firms operating call centres in India from 2010-12.

Findings from the study suggest that, far from the accepted notion that this process is disembodied for all those involved, the body is central to global service work.

Call agents undergo elaborate training programmes where their bodies are targets of discipline; for instance by working on their own bodies (including posture, dress, voice modulation); by working on the bodies of others (through voice-based interactions) and by using embodied

images of Americans to contextualise the service provided.

One of the Indian call centre agents, for instance, recounts that while her voice remains an embodied part of her work, the lack of visibility to the client makes the female call agent feel invisible. To counter this 'corporeal disappearance', she dresses and paints her nails in aesthetically pleasing ways to make her 'absent-present' [body](#) resurface in her own gaze.

The study found that the adoption of western pseudonyms provides another layer in identity work as there is an implicit assumption that the Indian identity would be problematic to western clients. Narratives around identity masking of call agents are rooted in attempts to stem racial abuse from western clients who may perceive them as 'job thieves'. However, this study reveals complex layers in which race, ethnicity and nation intersect within these encounters.

In one instance, an Indian call agent (pretending to be American) calls an American client (who is actually an Indian immigrant). The client challenges the Indian call agents' identity performance and becomes abusive. The call agent experiences customer abuse and alienation of his identity performance at several levels, as an Indian who is trying to be an American, but has failed to be American enough for an Indian living in America.

More information: Sweta Rajan-Rankin. Invisible Bodies and Disembodied Voices? Identity Work, the Body and Embodiment in Transnational Service Work, *Gender, Work & Organization* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/gwao.12198](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12198)

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