

NEWSLETTER

My Thesis in 300 words: An Interactive Study of ‘Working Customers’ in Robotic Self-Services

Xinzhi XU



Customers used to be the *sovereign* in traditional human-based services. As the adage says, “the customer is king.” But with the increasing use of intelligent kiosks and service robots, more and more technology-based services occur. While technology has fuelled the rapid growth of new services and options, customers are taking over the actual service work and becomes working labour in those settings. Sociologists in service research have noticed the new form of customers in self-service and given them a new term, “working customers” (Rieder & Voß 2010).

From an ethnomethodological approach, my thesis studies the empirical interaction in three *Smart Hotels* in China. I video recorded over 500 hours of mundane interactions between human customers and interactive artefacts from 2018 to 2021. This study develops a systematic understanding of the idea of “working customers” and extends the concept as below. The study reveals that, rather than “taking over partial service work(s)”, customers work as “sense makers” and “self-discipliners” in self-service. They need to figure out *what to do [next]* and *how to do [it]* when accessing the field, and *discipline* their reactions to the instructions during the ongoing interaction. The study also discovers that, in order to collectively achieve the strategy of “letting customers work” in the hotel, service workers address only “the minimal attention” to customers’ work in terms of customer service.

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PUBLICATIONS

Xu, X. 2022. "Look, Robots!": The dynamic construction of artificial intelligent robot's social role(s) in service practices. *Science and Society* [in Chinese] ([Read the article](#))

Olivos, F., and **Wang, P.** 2022. Cultural Omnivorousness and Status Inconsistency in Chile: The Role of Objective and Subjective Social Status. *Sociological Research Online* ([Read the article](#))

Ways to Engage Participants in Sensitive Qualitative Research

Winky CHENG



Some say it is not a wise choice to do qualitative research as a MPhil project, but I would say it is a worthy ride on a bumpy road. It is hard for someone to open their hearts to a stranger, especially when you're trying to unravel their deepest wounds. As I interviewed the participants of the Anti-Extradition Movement, I found it was very difficult to touch upon the most emotional moments that they have ever had. Eventually, I found some tips after having countless moments of awkward silence during the interviews.

First, arranging a phone call before the interview would be helpful in letting them know what to expect. Introducing the purpose of the research, the procedure of data collection, and the areas that the enquiry will tackle can ease most of the worries from the respondents. Although texting is very common in the internet era, the space for immediate Q&A in the phone call is indeed very helpful in building trust.

Second, warm them up before the interview. It would be too mechanical if we jump into the interview once the respondent stepped into the room. Don't take out the recorder right away. Having some chit-chats about current affairs and pop music would be helpful in letting their guard down.

Third, give them space to release their emotions. It is not uncommon to see their teary eyes. Creating a safe space to talk through their pain and sorrow is essential even though we're not therapists. Apart from doing the interview in a private space, giving breaks, and telling them it's okay to cry would make it less awkward for them to break down in front of a stranger. Snacks and drinks could be a great help too!

Interviews are not about finding the punchlines. What really matters is the exchange of thoughts and feelings. There is no shortcut to getting to know someone's story, but it is always worthy to look into the beauty of the human touch.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

✓ Call for papers and applications

- International Conference on Criminal Law and Legal Institutions January 28-29, 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. **Deadline for Abstract: July 1, 2022** [[See the ad](#)]
- International Conference on Sociology of Culture January 14-15, 2023 in Bali, Indonesia. **Deadline for Abstract: July 1, 2022** [[See the ad](#)]

✓ Job Ads

- Postdoctoral Researcher in disabling occupational injuries - prevention Karolinska Institutet, Sweden. **Deadline for Applications: May 16, 2022** [[See the ad](#)]
- Teaching Associate in the Sociology of Race, Racism and Ethnicity (Fixed Term), University of Cambridge, UK. **Deadline for Applications: May 19, 2022** [[See the ad](#)]
- Postdoctoral Researcher on Social Inequalities in Population Health, University of Helsinki, Finland. **Deadline for Applications: May 3, 2022.** [[See the ad](#)]