

EMBODIED SERVICE AND THE POLITICS OF APPEARANCE, AESTHETIC LABOUR IN PAKISTAN'S HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This research is focused on the practice, experience and negotiation of aesthetic labor which requires that the body, voice, behavior and emotions of workers need to be physically, vocally, behaviorally and emotionally fit in accordance with the brand. The research was conducted on the qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with 15 female frontline workers of Serena Hotel Islamabad and the findings of the research revealed that aesthetic labor in Pakistan is located at the intersection of the organization, control, gender inequality, cultural norms and class-based hierarchies. The results show that the hotel sector female employees are under constant control in terms of their appearance and are pressured to add their own money to change their appearance according to their organization's beauty standards, and they face discomfort in balancing their work identity and religious and family values. The study proposes a new aesthetic capital concept as an embodied capital, according to Bourdieu, that can impact the hiring, delegating jobs and promotion. The key is to identify these dynamics in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan, where high power distance, economic vulnerability and a patriarchal mindset combine with the plight of the aesthetic labor and seriously limit workers' ability to resist. The paper thus contributes to the international aesthetic labor literature in three ways: the empirical basis, the culturally located analysis, and lack of analysis in a context of a non-Western developing country.

Keywords: Aesthetic labor, Qualitative research, Hospitality industry, Pakistan, Gender, Emotional labor, Lookism, Embodied capital.

Introduction

When you just step into a five-star hotel's lobby, you know without even realizing it that there is something well managed going on. The front desk employees look a certain way, sound a certain way and act a certain way. This isn't by chance. It is, as I have said, aesthetic labor: the organized mobilization of the physical makeup, voice, manner and body comportment of workers as productive inputs in the provision of services. This concept was formally theorized by Warhurst and Nickson (2001, 2007, 2009) who claimed that in service economies, the worker's body is

transformed into an organizational tool, which needs to be nourished, homogenized, and made useful in combination with technical abilities.(Kele & Cassell, n.d.). The concept has since garnered significant academic interest, and there is a large literature on the organizational mechanisms, social inequalities and individual experiences of appearance-related work. But there is also a strong geographical bias in this literature, which has been produced for the most part in the West and in industrial settings(Ramjattan, 2019). The experiences of workers in the Global South, where aesthetic labor meets with often very

different cultural, religious and economic realities, are largely under researched. One of the most glaring of these gaps is in Pakistan. The country's hospitality industry has developed significantly in recent decades, both because of the country's own visitors and the arrival of international hotel brands in the urban market and facilitated by wider economic growth. But the realities of the everyday lives of the Pakistani hospitality workers, the coping mechanisms they have devised, the struggles they endure daily, and the inequalities they face remain largely under-researched. (Huma, n.d.). What is it like to be a young woman working the front desk of a five-star hotel in Islamabad? What does her job demand from her body, her look and herself? These are questions that the literature has not posed so far.

This paper aims to fill that gap. The study draws on qualitative data from the in-depth interviews with fifteen frontline women workers of Serena Hotel Islamabad to explore the organization, management, and experience of aesthetic labor in the hospitality industry in Pakistan. It especially highlights expectations of gender, the body as capital, and the production of inequality through appearance-based discrimination in Pakistan's particular socio-cultural contexts. The paper has three major contributions. First, it provides new empirical evidence from the Pakistani hospitality context, where it has been least studied in the world. Second, it is an attempt to build the theory of aesthetic labor, by combining Bourdieu's embodied capital and intersectionality approach, using gender, class and cultural norms in a postcolonial context. Thirdly, it illustrates the nature of aesthetic labor and its limitation of the agency of workers in Pakistan, a country with a high power-distance and economic vulnerabilities that has not yet been sufficiently theorized within the existing literature on the subject.

Literature Review

Aesthetic Labor: Conceptual Foundations.

Aesthetic labor was first formally theorized by Witz, Warhurst and Nickson (2003) who argued that organizations in the service sector hire and train employees to display specific embodied attributes, such as a style, a way of speaking or a

look, a way that is consistent with the organization's brand image. (Nickson, 2022). Their basic point was that in service economies it is the body itself that is a site of organization, investment and control – labor processes don't just operate on cognitive and manual levels, they also operate on corporeal ones. This was then built upon by Warhurst and Nickson (2009) who said that aesthetic labor is not mono-dimensional, it is not just about physical appearance, but also voice, manner and style. (NICKSON et al., 2003)

In this regard, from a management point of view, Wu, King, Lu and Guchait (2019) proposed a two-dimensional approach of physical appearance and performative behavior which they believe both dimensions are significant for brand equity and competitive positioning in the hospitality market (Nickson, 2022). Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton (2005) provided empirical evidence that appearance and attitude are an integral part of the customer's evaluation of service quality as well as the aesthetic labor, not peripheral to the hospitality industry, are part of the business model. However, as important literature has noted, what is functional for the organization is not necessarily benign for the worker. There are controversial issues within the field around this association between the benefit of the organization and the cost to the individual (Nickson et al., 2005).

Labor, authority and control

In this spirit of critical thinking questions have been raised against the managerial discourses of aesthetic labor focusing the frames of discipline under which it is operating. Hancock and Tyler (2009) relying on Foucauldian conceptualizations showed that the control of employee bodies is not achieved through obvious or explicit coercion, but through normalizing practices, such as dress code, grooming standards, training, and feedback from management, which, over time, workers come to internalize as legitimate expectations (Wasserman, 2011). Tsaur and Tang (2013) delivered powerful empirical evidence of the costs aesthetic labor places upon frontline hospitality employees and recorded the on-going pressure that comes from strict grooming standards, managerial surveillance

and customer expectations, leading to stress and burnout. What is important is that they have found that the personal financial and time costs of maintaining appearance standards are built into the work of employees, and thus, the work-private life interface is blurred, representing a hidden extraction of labor (Tsaur & Hsieh, 2020).

Gimlin (2007) added a psychological element to propose that with time, prolonged body control may result in fragmentation of identities and emotional fatigue. Abbasi and Shaikh (2025) further extended these concerns in a contextually grounded study in Pakistan, finding that the nature of aesthetics in a workplace may have a profound and negative impact on psychological comfort and wellbeing of employees (McFadden, 2015). The results presented in the bibliometric analysis by Mann and Rawat (2023) confirm the findings that stress, burnout, and emotional exploitation are the most prevalent aspects of the employee-centred strand of the aesthetic labor literature, and that burdens of aesthetic labor are important and uneven (Mann & Rawat, n.d.).

Gender, Class and Social Inequality.

The study of aesthetic labor as an expression and re-production of social inequalities has been introduced by a large amount of research. Adkins (1995) put forward the idea that women's work in the service sector is intrinsically related to gender inequalities and that women are consistently expected to adopt a 'femininity' in accordance with the standards enforced in the organisation (Adkins, 1995). Pettinger (2004) applied this analysis to the field of hospitality, and found that the process of gendered identity performance is more of an integral part of service work than an add-on. The separation of aesthetic labor and gender performance is not successful in the case of the female workers of the hospitality industry (PETTINGER, 2014). As regards the wider analysis of the social structure, Zampoukos (2021) proposed that aesthetic labor also represents exclusionary mechanisms in recruitment and promotion due to racial and class inequalities, which are also reproduced by aesthetic labor (Booyens, 2022).

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital is a concept that has been usefully applied to explain

the oft-granted importance of some aesthetic attributes (whiteness, femininity, youth, or class, and class-situated refinements) over others in the labor market (Bourdieu, 2001). Appearance is a form of capital which the workers invest in a strategic way in the hospitality industry because it affects their employment and career possibilities. Dawson, Russen, Lee, and Madera (2020) provided empirical evidence that the aesthetic climate conditions of hospitality organisations are related to conditions of workplace harassment, thus indicating a wider range of implications of the power dynamics of aesthetic work beyond grooming (Grusky & Szelenyi, 2018).

The Beauty Bias in Politics

The concept of lookism - discrimination based on looks - is a helpful prism through which to view aesthetic labor and how it institutionalises exclusion. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) also found empirical evidence that has had a lasting effect and has been duplicated in various countries, that greater conformity with prevailing images of beauty has a profound positive effect on employment and reward/promotion outcomes (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1993). Lookism in the hospitality industry is not regarded as discrimination, it is just business and it is invisible and unchallengeable as good looks constitute a key component of the good experience of the customer. Hopf (2018) demonstrated that it is appropriate to have employees wearing certain types of clothing is culturally and generationally different (Hopf, 2018). This variation is particularly relevant in Pakistan where ideals of beauty from other countries entangle with modesty and respectability expectations of culture and religion and thus form a unique and multiply policed beauty aesthetic in which hospitality workers operate.

Aesthetic labor in Pakistan: the local context

There was little literature available, but what little literature was available has a local context that validates and affirms that aesthetic labor is not an import from the west and is indeed a true aspect of the hospitality industry in Pakistan (Zeeshan & Tariq, 2026). Malik & Naeem (2013) suggested

that employee presentation is one of the most significant factors that determine the satisfaction of the customers in hotels of Pakistan. Ahmad and Zafar (2018) indicated that work staff are expected to do more than just provide services. Khan, Ahmed and Raza (2020) explicitly determined that appearance is significant dimensions of perceived service quality in the hospitality environment of Pakistan.

These organizational requirements are, however, set in a cultural landscape, that adds to some complexities not found in western literature. To understand how Muslim women workers are required to do the work in a way acceptable to the employer, as well as in a way deemed suitable with modesty according to Islamic culture, Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) introduced the concept of 'contextual emotional labor' (Syed et al., 2005). Within the context of Islamic modesty and its implications for women's employment, Syed (2010) embedded these dynamics in a historical analysis of Islamic modesty and its influence on women's mobility and professional autonomy in unique ways. Raza and Khan (2019) and Hashmi and Bukhari (2021) have documented the workplace stress and the organizational culture pressures which aggravate these pressures in service settings in Pakistan. Abbasie and Shaikh (2025) directly showed how the aesthetic requirements on wellbeing of workers in Pakistan were affecting and Zubair and Khan (2025) when discussing the role of beauty in the corporate service sector of Pakistan, they showed how beauty is both a medium of empowerment as well as disempowerment of women.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two parallel theories. The first is Aesthetic Labor Process Theory developed by Warhurst and Nickson (2001, 2007, 2009) and Witz, Warhurst and Nickson (2003) which conceptualizes how workers' embodied attributes are integrated into organizing processes of production. In the field of hospitality, workers are asked to perform a 'branded self', wherein appearance, voice and behavior are all instruments of service delivery, as well as generators of economic and symbolic value for the organization.

This framework is based on Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power and the way organizations create aesthetically compliant workers via training, surveillance and normalization.

The second is the Theory of Embodied Capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986) which offers a structural explanation for the uneven distribution and experience of aesthetic labor. Bourdieu's framework treats the body as a "bearer of capital," that is, a place where class, culture and socialization are "written" and "made visible. Some aesthetic dispositions are more valuable than others in the labor market not so much for their intrinsic qualities, but for the preferences of the dominant social groups. Those who look, sound, act and dress as if they belong to the middle or upper class, have a westernized appearance, or perform a certain kind of gender are rewarded with jobs, visibility, and promotion. Non-conformists are excluded or relegated to lesser places. This is an interesting framework as it draws a link between the aesthetic demands of organizations and the class structure and post-colonial aesthetics that shape Pakistani society within a Pakistani hospitality context.

These two frames are combined to enable a reading of aesthetic labor that is both organizational and structural, that is, one through which individual workers are disciplined and exploited, and another through which social inequalities are reproduced and naturalized in the labor market.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The interpretivist ontological and epistemological approach is used in this study, thus a qualitative research design is chosen. Qualitative methodology is suitable for this enquiry as this study is interested in understanding how aesthetic labor is subjectively experienced, negotiated and resisted by individual workers in specific social, cultural and institutional contexts. These experiences are highly complex and context specific and can only be observed with the level of engagement that qualitative methods allow. The research design is inspired by previous studies that adopted a qualitative interviewing approach, such

as Saher and Ali (2025), who investigated erotic capital in Pakistani higher education, and Tsaor and Tang (2013), who conducted a pioneering study on aesthetic labor burdens in the hospitality industry.

Study Site and Sampling

The study was carried out in the Serena Hotel Islamabad, which is one of the top five star hotels of Pakistan. The research site was chosen to be Serena Hotel for several analytically significant reasons. First, it straddles the boundaries of international hospitality and the cultural norms of Pakistan, and thus it is a good place to observe how the global aesthetic expectations clash with the local cultural norms. Second, being a leading hotel in the national capital, it sees a wide range of people, from all over the world, government officials, corporate guests, who put a number of challenges in terms of aesthetics on the frontline staff. Third, it is located in Islamabad, a city that, as Saher and Ali (2025) suggest in their study on erotic capital in Pakistani higher education, is a city that comprises multiple cultures, people and ethnic groups from all over Pakistan, making it a rich site to explore the class and cultural aspects of aesthetic labor.

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants which consisted of female front-line employees working in customer service positions such as receptionists, waitresses, hostesses, guest relations officers, concierge staff and banquet coordinators. First, the literature specifically points out women as the target group due to the nature of aesthetic demand in the hospitality industry, which is generally experienced by women, and second, the intersection of organizational aesthetic pressure and Islamic modesty norms and gender inequality makes it more problematic for women in the Pakistani context. The total number of participants that were interviewed was 15 ranging from age 21 to age 38 years and having varied experience in the hospitality industry.

Data Collection

The data was gathered using semi structured in-depth interviews that are suitable to capture the

subjective experiences, perceptions and interpretations of individuals. The semi-structured interviewing permits key themes to be systematically covered while also allowing for the ad hoc exploration of new lines of inquiry that may arise and for the interviewee to describe the world as it was experienced to them. Interviews were conducted at the hotel at convenient times for the interviewees. Considering the sensitivity of the questions related to appearance, gender, and power dynamics in the work place in the social context of Pakistan, the interviews started with general questions about participants' roles and day to day experiences, before moving to more sensitive topics related to appearance expectations, gender dynamics, and workplace power, as explicitly noted by Saher and Ali (2025) in their data collection of similarly sensitive phenomena in the work place. This tiered process, along with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, helped ensure that participants were able to be candid.

The duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews were conducted in both Urdu and English language as per the participant's choice and then transcribed and translated as needed. Personal observations on this process were made during the period of fieldwork and these were also used in the analysis to complement the information gathered from the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Before participation, all participants were given an explanation of the purpose of the study and informed consent. The respondents have been coded with pseudonyms and details of their departmental location within the hotel have been generalised to protect the participant's confidentiality and to prevent potential harm. The study was carried out following the ethical guidelines for conducting qualitative research with human subjects (Goodwin, Mays, & Pope, 2020).

Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were analysed using a reflexive approach to thematic analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2019). Thematic

analysis is suitable for this study as it will enable the systematic identification of, examination of, and reporting of patterns across the data set and the analysis will be sensitive to the language, framings and meanings that participants constructed in their accounts. Data analysis involved several stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading; initial coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; naming and defining themes and finally, the writing up. Emergent themes were then used in an iterative manner to thoroughly review the raw data and provide a grounded analysis. The analysis resulted in four main themes, which are outlined below.

Research findings and discussion are presented.

The results are discussed thematically in four interrelated themes that each focus on a specific aspect of the organization, experience and resistance of aesthetic labor in the Pakistani hospitality setting. They create a portrait of aesthetic labor that is at once an organizational tactic, a matrix of gendered control, a type of class-based capital and a site of cultural tension.

The Branded Body – Organizational Control and Aesthetic Surveillance .Theme 1

The most basic and uniform discovery in the various interviews was the ubiquity of organizational gaze upon the body and demeanour of workers. Participants spoke of their work environment as one that constantly watched them for any grooming, make-up, posture, smile and body language issues that might arise, rather than allowing these things to be personal choices.

The front desk environment was vividly described by a four-year receptionist:

Female Receptionist (Age 26):

“From the very first day of training, it was made clear that how you look is as important as what you do. Grooming was a major focus, down to the make-up, hair, posture, even facial expressions. Typically, managers listen in during morning sessions and little is said if a person is looking unwell or less put-together than usual”

This account is compellingly similar to the Foucauldian interpretation of aesthetic labor put

forward by Witz, Warhurst and Nickson (2003) and Hancock and Tyler (2009); the control of workers' bodies is not a direct form of coercion, but through the normalisation of such surveillance amongst employees. The references to morning briefings are especially telling – it is a disciplinary routine by which the body of the worker is geared up and assessed before the start of the working day – appearance becomes a resource of the organisation which has to be arranged or corrected before it can be used by the organisation.

This organisational logic of supervision was explained quite explicitly by a restaurant manager with many years experience in this sector:

Respondent 8 (Female Restaurant Supervisor, age 33):

“Grooming and communication style is monitored regularly as management believes the employees are the brand image of the hotel. Appearance when on floor is not private matter, it's the business of the hotel.”

The statement is: ‘it is the hotel's business’, and it is exactly this that the formulation expresses in a very concise way – the commodification of appearance that is characteristic of aesthetic labor.

The worker's body becomes part of the organization and is put under the organization's aesthetic regime, no longer the worker's own. This is what Warhurst and Nickson (2009) refer to when they talk of aesthetic labor – the way that the worker's appearance is 'bought' and used as an input in the process of service delivery which has all the implications of power and control.

The surveillance participants referred to was not limited to formal inspection times, but rather encompassed the whole working day. The sum of this monitoring, described by a hostess, was as follows:

Respondent 9 (Female Hostess, Age 23):

“Even small things such as makeup or facial expressions are quickly noticed. When it shows in your face, someone will comment on it. There's always someone around; there's always some measure you're meeting.”

As Gimlin (2007) noted, such long-term forms of surveillance – which include the ability to monitor facial expressions – can result in a fragmentation of identity; the worker is denied access to the

identity that is not being observed and judged in accordance with the organisation's norms. The front desk, the restaurant floor, the lobby - they are all places that the employees who work there are both working spaces, and showcases in which the body is always on display.

Theme 2: The personal price of aesthetic work – financial burden and identity strain

The second major theme throughout the interviews was the high personal price, both economic and emotional, paid by the aesthetic laborers. Corresponding with the landmark research of Tsaur and Tang (2013), the participants spoke of putting in significant personal investments in managing the appearance required by their employers, but in return they did not receive any compensation or acknowledgment from the organisation.

The first person interviewed by the receptionist talked about the changes that the job had made in her attitude towards both her looks and her money:

Respondent 1 (Female, Receptionist, Age 26):

“This employment altered the method I think about myself and the way that I look. I've got to run some money now on cosmetics and beauty treatments, and I have to buy nice clothes, I feel compelled to dress up in order to keep up a certain appearance, so I do spend a lot of money on that nowadays. It's not a question of choice, it's part of the job.”

This account starkly illustrates how one of the most problematic aspects of aesthetic labor, as outlined by Tsaur and Tang (2013), is the hidden extraction of value: the costs of this aesthetic are transferred to the laborer, who then has to internalize them as personal expenses. The statement ‘it is not a choice – it is what the job requires’ is especially meaningful as it exposes how aesthetic requirements have become embedded within the workplace itself, as a true requirement of the job, and not as an imposed requirement.

A banquet coordinator reported a similar trend:

Respondent 15 (Female Banquet Coordinator Age 29):

“It is a lot of work and money to keep up this professional appearance. Uniforms, grooming, clothes – all of these items require an outlay of funds that we must pay for ourselves. We are the ones suffering and the hotel benefits by our appearance.”

The final observation, ‘the hotel benefits from our appearance, but we carry the cost’, succinctly captures the structural relationship identified by critical scholars of aesthetic labor as the key to its exploitative nature. Workers' aesthetic presentation is turned into value for organisations and the costs of maintaining it are externalised, resulting in a type of unpaid aesthetic labor which is hidden in traditional analyses of the employment relationship.

In addition to the financial aspect, the participants also mentioned psychological costs to do with the need to present a continuous aesthetic performance. A front desk officer who had worked in a hotel for five years expressed the feeling of being split in half as this was theorized by Gimlin (2007):

Respondent 4, Female Front Desk Officer, Age 29:

“At times, it seems like I'm two different people; one when I'm at work, one when I'm at home. I am always nice, I am always calm, I'm always dressed in a certain manner at work. I'm someone different out there. After a while you begin to question yourself what it is you are.”

This is a story of the disintegration of a self - the self as a real person and as a worker who performs - and of the identity strain generated by aesthetic labor. The need to perform as a self and to manage that self within an eight or ten hour shift, in a way that is approved by the organisation is not simply a wear-and-tear feature; it is, as Gimlin (2007) suggests, a potentially destabilising one, as the boundaries of performance and self slowly break down.

Theme 3: Gendered Aesthetic Demands – The Double Burden on Female Workers

Each of the 15 respondents reported a strong gender difference in the aesthetic expectations for hospitality employees: women were expected to be

more beautiful than men, and the expectations were more intense for women than for men, and more personally invasive. This is a similar finding as seen in wider feminist literature on aesthetic labor (Adkins, 1995; Pettinger, 2004; Zampoukos, 2021); however, there are some distinct differences in the Pakistani cultural context as the workplace gender expectations are intertwined with modesty and religious values and a patriarchal social structure.

The gender gap in appearance expectations was explained quite succinctly by a waitress:

Respondent 2 (Female Waitress, Age 24):

“Women are under greater pressure than men at customer-facing jobs. Men should be in good appearance and dress. Women should be soft-spoken, approachable, warm, and attractive – all in one. It’s on a totally other stage of expectation. It’s nothing like”.

This resonates with a feminist analysis of service work, as described by McDowell (1997), where women’s bodies must perform particular qualities of femininity, warmth, softness and approachability, which serve both as qualities of serving and as gender performance. Because of the association of femininity and service aesthetics, female workers in the hospitality industry aren’t just expected to look professional, but to enact a gendered self whose traits just so happen to align with the organisational demands of service provision.

A common theme throughout the various interviews was the convergence of the aesthetic requirements of a workplace and Islamic modesty norms outlined by Syed, Ali and Winstanley (2005) as a unique source of contextual emotional labor for Muslim women in the workplace. The restaurant hostess explained how she managed this conflict:

Respondent #3 (Female Restaurant Hostess, 22 years):

“Sometimes balancing personal values and expectations at work can be awkward. I have come from a conservative family and some of the expectations that I feel here (how we’re expected to dress, how we’re expected to style ourselves) sometimes pull me in a direction that

is not congruent with how I was raised, how I believe. You’re in control of it, but it’s always there.”

This is a study of the persistent tension between the organisational and cultural-religious expectations and how it is managed; it is an additional burden carried by the employees in the context of Pakistan, particularly by the women in hospitality sector, in the context of which they are not represented in the western literature on aesthetics of work. As Syed and Ali (2013) have put it, ‘it is always there in the background’ this is a type of chronic, low-level stress, and an emotional labor that is not usually recognised or managed by organisations.

A senior worker after having worked in the industry for almost a decade explained how the veiling status might impact living prospects, citing a telling example of how religious identity and aesthetic capital are intertwined in the context of Pakistani hospitality:

Respondent 14 is a Housekeeping Supervisor (female) aged 38.

“Women who look a particular way are preferred – more modern, international. Without an uncovered head, some opportunities may not come your way as easily as they would otherwise, even if you are more skilled/experienced. Appearance has a bias. It is here that it has social, religious, class meaning.”

This account highlights one dimension which is specific to Pakistan’s postcolonial context, and that is aesthetic norms are not culturally neutral, and shape hiring and promotion in international hospitality brands. They may have underlying attitudes towards westernised or secularised appearances which may have a negative impact on women whose dress and grooming practices embody traditional Islamic modesty. This type of aesthetic discrimination (as Zampoukos (2021) would call it) is an intersection of global brand standards and local religious and cultural identities.

The gendered nature of aesthetic labor was also seen in participants’ descriptions of how they would cope with ‘inappropriate’ customer behaviour. Several of the participants reported being on the receiving end of inappropriate

personal remarks or too intimate an approach by guests, and that they were expected to "take it like a pro":

Respondent 6 (Female Concierge, Age 31):

"Sometimes, female staff members may experience interactions or friendliness that may be uncomfortable with guests. However, it's impossible to respond. Comfort is not a top priority, professionalism is. You smile, you deal with it and you go on with your life. That is the job."

Dawson, Russen, Lee and Madera (2020) have reported the relationship between the aesthetic climate of hospitality organisations (appearance expectations, power imbalances, and objectifying gaze) and higher levels of workplace harassment. The responses from the participants indicate that this process is working in a recognisable manner in the context of hospitality in Pakistan; where female employees are made to bear the burden of customer oriented aesthetic consumption and are afforded little institutional protection.

Theme 4: Appearance as Capital - Lookism, Class and Career Advancement

An analytical, fourth theme that emerged from the interviews related to the importance of appearance as a form of capital that affects both the day-to-day work experience and longer-term career paths. In line with Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) concept of embodied capital, the participants reported a pattern of aesthetic display (including physical appearance, class appropriateness of presentation, communication style and social confidence) affecting the selection of candidates, the allocation of duties and promotion prospects.

A restaurant supervisor who had worked in the restaurant industry for many years stated, "how you look is part of your promotion. A restaurant supervisor who has worked in the restaurant industry for many years stated, "how you look is part of your promotion.

Respondent 8 (Female Restaurant Supervisor, Age 33):

"Background and the way of communication also affect the perception in the workplace. The people who speak English fluently and are more confident in their body

language are often considered more professional. Opportunities and promotions are often associated with presentation and personality. Doors open more easily if you've got the right look and the right manner."

This observation, 'if you have the right look, the right manner, doors open more easily' succinctly and elegantly describes the operation of aesthetic capital in the hospitality sector labor market. Nor is the 'right look' random, as one might imagine; as Bourdieu (1984) would theorize, it is based on class aesthetic dispositions, which are not equally distributed throughout the workforce and which are markers of cultural and social status. It's not that middle and upper class workers with better educations, more money and more exposure to the international cultural norms that dominate Pakistan's five star hospitality industry have fluent English, confident body language and polished grooming more readily available to them.

A front desk officer said that the practical implications of this situation on duty distribution and opportunities for guests were:

Respondent 4 (FFDO, age 29):

"People who are more put together or socially comfortable tend to get better opportunities and more prominent responsibilities. The VIP guests, the important events – all these go to certain people. It's not necessarily the most experienced or the one who works the hardest. Frequently the individual who looks the part is the one."

The term 'looks the part' is telling; it indicates that how workers present themselves is perceived as a display of performance, a credentialing of their competence by appearance, and not necessarily a reflection of skill or experience. This is exactly how Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) explained the process in their classic research on lookism: appearance becomes a substitute for skill and professionalism in the evaluation of the labor market, and as such would systematically be a disadvantage to workers who do not (or cannot) present themselves in a way that is in keeping with dominant standards.

The allocation of high-profile events was described, even more explicitly, as the "appearance-organisational reward", by a banquet staff member.

Respondent 10 is a Female Banquet Staff aged 28:

“Handsome, confident employees will be asked to work in high visibility areas or at higher-profile events. You catch on, who receives the grand weddings, the VIP events. There is a pattern. It is not random.”

The claim that ‘there is a pattern, it is not random’, resonates with a crucial aspect of lookism in the organizational context – it appears to be a matter of ‘confidence’ or ‘professionalism’ yet it is just discriminatory preference. The pattern is apparent to the workers, and they experience its dynamics, but the appearance has been legitimized and it is hard to contest as a legitimate basis for an organization’s decisions.

Several participants also explained ways in which financial dependency and job insecurity limited their ability to oppose or resist aesthetic requirements. The waitress put this into words succinctly:

Respondent 5 (Female Waitress, Age 25):

“While some work demands may seem unfair, we have limited options to oppose these openly because of financial constraints. You need the job. It’s a no-no to look like you’re hard to work with or a prima donna. So you do what you don’t want to, even when you don’t agree.”

The structural aspect of aesthetic labor, as noted by Abbasi and Shaikh (2025) and Hashmi and Bukhari (2021) in the Pakistani context, is evident here, as great economic insecurities significantly decrease the resistance and negotiation power of the laborers. Many Pakistani service workers do not have access to a choice – to refuse an employer’s aesthetic requirements and find alternative employment – if they do, it is a theoretical choice. Unemployment, lack of formal employment opportunities, and the financial burden many young women face for their families, all exacerbate the already powerful dichotomy of workers and employers in aesthetic labor situations.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the unique nature of aesthetic labor in the hospitality industry in Pakistan, adding to and validating the existing

international research. In essence, the experiences captured here are readily identifiable as part of the continuum of experiences reported in the research that has been done in the West: organizations monitor and control workers’ bodies, female workers are more likely to be subject to appearance requirements, appearance comes to be treated as a form of capital that influences employment trajectories, and the economic and psychological costs of aesthetic work go to the workers. In this regard, the Pakistani hospitality industry is not truly outstanding.

The interesting thing, however, is the combination of forces that forms the experience of aesthetic labor in Pakistan. The analysis reveals three aspects of distinctiveness. First, there is a double aesthetic labor, that uniquely emerges from the combination of organizational aesthetic requirements and Islamic modesty norms. In the case of female Muslim employees in the hospitality industry in Pakistan, there is a need to adhere to the organizational norms of appearance – which are often in line with international brands and unwritten westernized aesthetic preferences – as well as the cultural and religious norms of family and community. This double responsibility, as theorized by Syed, Ali, and Winstanley (2005) as contextual emotional labor, is not an added burden on the aesthetic labor of women in Pakistan, but a structural aspect of the labor that needs to be accounted for by any satisfactory theory of aesthetic labor.

Second, the process of becoming classed as aesthetic capital is dependent upon a postcolonial culture that gives certain weight to aesthetic ideals of the West in determining career paths in Pakistani hospitality. Participants mention the preference for speaking English with fluency, having westernized grooming and a confident attitude, which may not only be linked to the standards of an organisation’s brand but also to the underlying cultural hierarchies of postcolonial Pakistan, where western or internationally educated cultural capital still holds substantial importance. The beauty of five-star hospitality is not just demanding, but also a kind of cultural self-transformation for workers whose backgrounds are more traditional or lower class.

Third, the structural conditions of Pakistan's labor market, such as high unemployment, lack of formal employment opportunities, economic dependency and high power distance, significantly limit the scope of resistance by workers and existing western-centric theoretical approaches have not adequately theorized these factors. The economic vulnerability that was found in the interviews does not simply diminish the prospects for open resistance; it renders it virtually unattainable for the majority of workers, and thus constitutes what might be called enforced aesthetic conformity, of which there is no real equivalent in the more economically secure contexts of the literature of the West.

These results have important implications for the theoretical approaches that currently dominate the aesthetic labor literature. An application of Bourdieu's embodied capital in the context of Pakistan's hospitality industry suggests that approaches that "view" aesthetic capital as a fixed asset that is unevenly distributed throughout the labor force are limited. In Pakistan's postcolonial context, the process of aestheticization of capital is itself culturally contested and historically located, not only because the ideals of desirable aesthetic capital are class based but because of the legacy of colonialism, the influence of globalisation and the overall religious and cultural environment of the Pakistani society. Thus to make a theoretically sufficient account of aesthetic labor in Pakistan one has to be sensitive to these multiple and intersecting factors that constitute the 'right' aesthetic in a specific organisational field.

Conclusion

The present study has conducted a qualitative study by conducting in-depth interviews of 15 front line female employees of Serena Hotel Islamabad in order to explore the concept of aesthetic labor in the hotel industry of Pakistan. The findings show that aesthetic labor in this context is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, a pervasive phenomenon, with consequences, and is an intersection of organisation strategy, gender inequality, cultural norms, class based hierarchies and structural economic vulnerability.

The analysis yielded four main themes. The first, the branded body, maps the diffuse surveillance of workers' bodies and the totalizing aestheticization of their appearance and body language, which is internalised by workers as legitimate features of professional work and which are organized through normalizing disciplinary practices. The second, the personal cost of aesthetic labor, show how aesthetic laborers women engaged in the hospitality industry are subjected to a significant financial and psychological cost of maintaining the organisations aesthetic standards and thereby are subjected to a form of invisible labor extraction in the standard analysis of the employment relation. The third – gendered aesthetic demands – shows the unique double burden faced by female Muslim laborers in Pakistan: they have to meet the organizational demands of appearances as well as the cultural and religious demands of modesty and respectability that dominate women's lives in Pakistani society. The fourth (appearance as capital) illustrates how aesthetic presentation can influence hiring, duty allocation, career progression and thus reinforces aesthetic hierarchies of class and post-coloniality, benefiting workers whose aesthetic presentation is in line with international or westernised codes of professionalism.

The results make three contributions to the international aesthetic labor literature. Empirically, they offer new evidence from a non-Western/developing country context that has received little scholarly attention to date, thus affirming that aesthetic labor is indeed a global phenomenon and that its character is determined by local cultural, religious, and economic factors. In theoretical terms, they take the Bourdieuan study of aesthetic capital further by placing it in a postcolonial cultural context in Pakistan to show how the criteria of desirable aesthetic capital are themselves culturally contested and historically determined. Analytically, they show that the structural situation of the labor markets in Pakistan (such as economic vulnerability and high power distance) leads to enforced aesthetic compliance which has not been properly theorized in existing western-centred approach.

A few limitations of the study need to be noted. The study has been conducted on one hotel and the results cannot be generalised to other hotels or locations in Pakistan. While this is theoretically motivated, the gendered dimensions of aesthetic labor as lived by men working in the hospitality sector has not been examined. Future studies are necessary to overcome these limitations by conducting multi-site comparative studies involving male and female workers and studies on the aesthetic labor in various levels of the Pakistani hospitality sector.

More generally, this research highlights the need for a long-term agenda of aesthetic labor studies in non-Western and developing country settings. The Pakistani experience of hospitality workers is not a regional oddity but rather shows aspects of the aesthetic labor phenomenon – its entanglements with religious modesty norms, the postcolonial production of aesthetic capital, and the nature of economic vulnerability in foreclosing worker agency – with important implications for the theorization of aesthetic labor more broadly. An aesthetic labor scholarship that is more inclusive and culturally diverse is not just wanted in terms of academic representativeness, but it is needed to produce the kind of theoretically adequate, globally relevant knowledge that the phenomenon warrants.

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