

Relationship between Aesthetic and Emotional Labor among the Teaching Staff of Higher Education Institutes

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Abstract

This study examines the connection between aesthetic labour and emotional labour in higher education institutions in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. It conceptualizes aesthetic labour through a 'performative' lens, which means that aesthetic labour is 'performed' in everyday life and is purposive in nature. It employs qualitative method with a narrative approach to understand the 'lived experiences' of the respondents in relation to their performance of aesthetic labour and the interrelated emotional labour, which is often hidden and disguised. Data has been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews from twenty university teachers and analysed through the thematic narrative. Findings demonstrate that aesthetic labour and the interrelated emotional labour is engrained within the professional display rules of 'being a teacher'. Also, it demonstrates the way teachers managed their aesthetic labour to comply with the organisational display rules for commodification and to show belongingness and attachment to their respective universities. This study contributes to the literature on aesthetic labour by employing performance theory to highlight its performative nature and reveals the unseen emotional labour involved therein in a teaching profession and in a non-western context, where the aesthetic display rules are different from other professions.

Keywords:

Performance theory, aesthetic management, emotion management, narratives, teaching profession.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade, researchers have focused predominantly on emotional labour - a term coined by Hochschild (1979) in *The Managed Heart*. It is defined as 'the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild 1983:7). Hence, the presentation of emotions in a particular context is embodied within the corporeality of the individual; what individuals experience and how they express their emotions. Thus, aesthetic labour theorizes the 'body work' that is attached to feelings (Mears, 2014). Nevertheless, the interlink between emotional labour and aesthetic labour requires further development and analysis within various organizational contexts and this study aims to address this issue.

Aesthetic labour is a process by which workers' corporeality is 'appropriated and regulated' for 'organizations' commercial benefit' (Nickson & Warhurst, 2007, p. 158). It requires selling one's embodied or personified face or accepted social qualities/attributes to make and maintain professional status. An example could be describing oneself as 'looking good' and 'sounding right' (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). This is crucial for organizational success and employees are even trained to become aesthetically sound, specifically in the interactive service sector (Witz et al., 2003). Most of the research on aesthetic labour has been conducted in the clothing and fashion industry (Wissinger, 2012; Cutcher & Achtel, 2017), actors and dancers, (Dean, 2005; Robinson, 2021), hair stylists (Sheane, 2012), sex industry (Hofmann, 2013; Tyler, 2012) and hospitality (Poulston, 2015; Tsaur & Hsieh, 2020). It now needs to be studied within other professions such as teaching, to better understand the phenomenon (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). The teaching profession is particularly important as the commercialization of higher education has made it a

growing service sector industry (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Berry & Cassidy, 2013). In addition, most of the research on teachers been conducted on emotional labour (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006) and less on aesthetic labour (Ramjattan, 2019).

Research on aesthetic labour is dominated by the theoretical lens of phenomenology to provide an understanding of the lived experiences (Witz et al., 2003; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Poulston, 2015). This study takes a narrative approach with a social constructionist stance. This enables an understanding, not only the individual's lived experiences in relation aesthetic labour in a storied form, but the exploration of the 'performative' aspect of emotional labour. This study aims to address the two main research questions which relate to: (i) how and why aesthetic labour is performed in the teaching profession and (ii) the relationship between aesthetic labour and emotional labour as performed in everyday organisational lives.

This paper begins with a literature review on aesthetic labour and conceptualises it through a performative theatrical lens. This is followed by the context of the study and research methodology. The findings are then presented. Finally, these findings are discussed, and conclusions are made in the last section.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of aesthetic labour dates to 'dress for success' manuals that were used to guide individuals on how to be attractive for a service sector job mainly in the retail and hospitality industry (Warhurst & Nickson, 2005). It was argued that workers' bodies may also be commodified, and thus was termed aesthetic labour in the later studies (Witz et al., 2003). The interactive service jobs mentioned above usually involve face to face interactions leading to a requirement for soft skills that are sometimes valued over experience and technical skills (Nickson et al., 2005; Mears, 2014). Soft skills encompass attitude and appearances, and these are often underappreciated by the academicians and the policy makers (Sheane, 2012; Nickson et al., 2005). Most research on aesthetics is concentrated on corporate hardware, that is, product design and physical environment. There is less on employees' aesthetics (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009).

Research on aesthetic labour indicates that employees mobilize their 'selves' to look stylish and well-groomed and they speak in a language that aligns with the company's image (Wissinger, 2012). Employees, therefore, may become part of the product that is being sold (Mears, 2014). The requirements of aesthetic labour vary between jobs as different workplaces have different normative rules for aesthetic and emotional displays (Thompson et al., 2001). Aesthetic labour requirements also vary amongst race, colour and ethnicity (Robinson, 2021). Failure to adhere to required aesthetic norms often leads to workplace discrimination as revealed in research on teachers (Ramjattan, 2015) and fashion models (Wissinger, 2012). Individuals frequently perform aesthetics and emotions at the expense of their emotional and physical health so they may adjust to the predefined aesthetic norms (Butler & Harris, 2015). Hence, aesthetic labour is an 'invisible labour' which is neither paid nor acknowledged or recognized in the workplace (Hancock & Taylor, 2000) though it has both direct and indirect benefits for the organisation (Mears, 2014; Butler & Harris, 2015). Furthermore, it is often assumed that aesthetic labour is only focused on physical appearance. It does, however, include aesthetic attributes such as dress code, manners, voice and even accent (which is often overlooked) (Cates, 2017).

Aesthetic labour is performative which means that it is performed like actors on stage in a theatre. Notionally, the world is described as a stage and human beings as social actors (Goffman, 1959). Actors are involved in both 'surface' and 'deep' acting to manage their performances on stage (Hochschild, 1979). 'Surface acting' demands that individuals manage their feelings and impressions with little internalisation. In contrast, 'deep acting' may feel the actual emotions when 'deep acting' (Hoffmann, 2016). There is also a front stage and a backstage involved in aesthetic performance. Front stage is a space where aesthetic labour is performed as in the theatre. The backstage is a space where individuals work on their appearances for a convincing performance and is hidden from the audience (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Hancock, 2013). The performative lens also suggests that the felt and displayed feelings in relation to aesthetic labour may be different. Every performance requires emotional sacrifices at the backstage, which require the 'labouring' of emotions (Hochschild, 1979). This means that individuals cope with their unwanted emotions within a set of social norms that creates a difference between felt and displayed emotions (Gabriel et al., 2015). This requires working on themselves for a convincing performance (Hancock, 2013; Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017).

The main purpose of any performance is to create a desired impression upon others (Sheane, 2012). Hence, aesthetic labour is, in fact, ‘presentational labour’ with an underlying purpose (Wissinger, 2012). This is crucial as it manages subsequent actions and inferences that the audience draws from the individuals. In this context, aesthetic labour is in fact a ‘situated relational performance’ (Cutcher & Achteh, 2017). Emotional labour is, thus, embedded in aesthetic performance. Some researchers, however, consider aesthetic labour as a mere component of emotional labour (e.g. Darby, 2017) whereas others (e.g. Grugulis, 2004) emphasize that the way employees manage their feelings (i.e. emotional labour) and the way they look (i.e. aesthetic labour) should co-exist so that employees perform better (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001; Sheane, 2012).

Research indicates that university teachers are continuously engaged in performing emotional labour. For example, they may sometimes exaggerate or suppress their emotions depending on the situation (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004). The components of aesthetic labour are body language, tone, accent, personal grooming to accentuate personal attractiveness. These are also relevant for personnel in higher education (Granleese, 2006) but they have not been studied as such. Nearly all jobs that require emotional labour necessitate aesthetic display requirements. Most of the research on emotional and aesthetic labour emphasizes the employer-employee relationship (Sheane, 2012). This perspective reflects the lack of autonomy amongst employees; how they should look and the necessity to perform in a specific way. This study, however, concentrates on the employee/customer relationship, that is, the teacher/student relationship. This provides teachers with more freedom to decide the nature of their own aesthetic labour. Hence, aesthetic labour becomes a situated relational experience as situations and interactions define the way a teacher should perform aesthetics.

3. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The education sector has become one of the fastest growing interactive service industries globally (Lacey & Wright, 2009). Research shows that an inclusive classroom environment requires emotional labour (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Teachers, for example, have to adjust their “inner feelings or external actions to show the appropriate feelings” whilst delivering lectures in the classes (Jaskani et al., 2014, p. 108). Teachers use emotions to demonstrate enthusiasm whilst delivering lectures and need to engage students during this process to improve the effectiveness of the learning process (Frenzel et al., 2009). These behavioural adjustments lead to, and necessitate, the use of aesthetic labour as a strategy for expressing emotional labour (Darby, 2017).

The emotional and aesthetic labour required in educational settings is emphasized in existing literature, but it is not explored in depth (Bellas, 1999; Zhang & Zhu, 2008) or in a variety of cultural contexts. Chen and Kristjánsson (2011, p. 355) suggest that whilst increased attention in teacher training is being directed to the ‘moral practice of teaching’, citizenship and life skills etc., there is less attention given to the development of teachers during their training in emotional and aesthetic labour. This consideration is important because ignoring these significant factors can pose possible commercial risks for universities (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). It is, therefore, necessary to consider and investigate the emotional and aesthetic requirements in higher education institutions within various cultural contexts and in some depth. This study has been conducted within higher education institutions in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative research methods to provide an understanding of the nuances of this topic. It focuses on the lived experiences and opinions of the research participants (Creswell, 2009). The research methodology aligns with the epistemological stance of social constructionism (Saunders et al., 2009). Data has been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 respondents. These interviews lasted between twenty and forty minutes. A topic guide was prepared related to the research questions of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Respondents were asked to elaborate on their aesthetic experiences at workplace. These included (i) how they have learned the aesthetic norms at workplace and (ii) how they felt about it. Probing questions were asked to gain further insights from the respondents.

The interviews were tape recorded with permission from the respondents and immediately transcribed. Respondent and institutional confidentiality were both ensured. Fictitious names were assigned to maintain

anonymity. Data cleaning was completed after the interviews to ensure accurate transcription. Data was analysed through thematic narrative analysis (Reissman, 2008; Saldaña, 2015). The codes and the themes were shared among the co-authors enhancing validity. The thematic narrative analysis was performed to analyse the underlying assumptions and conceptualizations in the data. It also helped to see the pattern in the data and to understand what is shared and not shared among the participants (Reissman, 2008). Further, narratives helped to understand the meaning and experiences of individuals in relation to aesthetic and emotional labour (Gabriel, 2000; Kleres, 2010).

The data analysis process was systematic and involved several steps and phases. In the first phase narratives were identified using Boudens (2005). Narratives have an identifiable beginning and an end, a temporal ordering of happenings, and the events are causally related as identified by the narrator. After the identification of narratives, a thematic analysis was performed following Creswell (2009 and Saldaña (2015). Codes were assigned to the narratives which were built into higher order codes. Higher order codes were merged into themes and later into thematic categories based on the similarity and the pattern of the data. The higher order codes and themes are presented in table 1.

Table 1: The Coding Process

Themes	Thematic categories
Aesthetic rules as a symbolic presentation	Fitting into ‘roles’ of the teaching profession as per aesthetic display rules
Learning aesthetic display rules	
Judging individuals on aesthetic performance	
Managing impression to show belongingness and connectedness	Managing aesthetics for self-presentation and commodification for the organization
Commodifying aesthetic labour	
Managing self-presentation for gaining acceptance	

5. FINDINGS

The findings produced two thematic categories. The first finding shows the way teachers adjusted themselves to their professional role of teaching by appropriate aesthetic displays. The second finding presents the way teachers managed their aesthetic labor for presentation of self and for commodification of their profession. These are discussed in detail as follows.

Fitting into ‘roles’ of the teaching profession as per aesthetic display rules

Findings show that teachers’ presentation of aesthetics is symbolic in nature and are guided through cultural and professional norms. There is an expectation that their dress, voice tone, body language, gestures and even the way they interact with each other are expected to reflect their professional norms. For instance, wearing a gown, presenting self as decent and sober are all symbolic characteristics of being a teacher and are related to professionalism as shown in the following narrative.

‘For me, aesthetics is about having a good voice, nice accent, well dressed, artful appearance, and ability to fit oneself into the requirement of the job. Aesthetics at workplace could be about the way we walk, the way we talk, our manners and even body language. We have to be professional in how we speak to our students as it influences the way they carry the message given by the teacher’ (Saqib, Lecturer).

Often, the message conveyed to the students about ‘inappropriate’ aesthetics affects the way students make assumptions about a particular teacher. Aesthetic labour that supports professional norms create respect for a teacher as shown below.

‘Sad but true! appearances do matter. People make assumptions about yourself based on your appearance... You are likely to receive better attitude, and more respect if you are properly dressed and speak appropriately’ (Laila, Assistant Professor).

Inappropriate dress (or clothing) undermines a teacher’s authority and influence whereas over formal dressing may be a sign of being unapproachable. Hence, choosing the right clothes or dress involves both emotional and aesthetic labour. The choice of appropriate aesthetics is a complex activity.

‘Dressing too casually was undermining my authority on students, while dressing too professionally was sending the message that you are unapproachable or too rigid. The goal was to find the right balance. I had to work hard’ (Saqib, Lecturer).

The normative rules of aesthetic labour are often unwritten and tacit and are learned through observations, interactions, and experiences over time. The narratives of the respondents suggested that the teaching profession has its own display rules that guide self-presentation. For instance, a female teacher said that she realised that she should wear light lipstick and flat shoes instead of heels to avoid attracting students. She also learned through her experiences that wearing a red colour in the classroom was considered inappropriate.

‘I remember one of my days when I wore a red dress and one of my students took my picture in his mobile camera during the class...I didn’t show from my expressions that I have seen it. I remained calm and handled it very tactfully. After that, I never wore red color because it seeks my students’ attraction in a different way that is not desired by a teacher’ (Muzna, Lecturer).

The aesthetic labour of young teachers was often more intense as they had to present a mature and professional appearance to the students.

‘Initially, I was a little self-conscious about being young, but I have always worn a button up collared shirt with a tie...I had to show that I hold the responsibility of being a teacher very seriously...Wearing a nice watch that add to my outfits and serves a practical use as well. Making sure that my hair looks clean and polished so to give me a professional look to my students’ (Ali, Lecturer).

Teachers had to engage in emotional labour in addition to aesthetic labour. Professional norms require that a teacher is ‘composed’ and ‘calm’. This means that the teacher should be able to control and manage certain emotions, such as, anger, frustration, and helplessness.

‘On job, we are presenting a different version of ourselves or we are acting out a role.... An effective teacher is the one who balances his emotional sentiments with the class environment. There are occasions where you may be angry, frustrated, helpless but you can’t show it to your students...You have to look cool, calm and composed’ (Ali, Lecturer).

Thus, professional norms were crucial in compelling teachers to maintain their aesthetics and engage in emotional labour to ensure their professionalism.

Managing aesthetics for self-presentation and commodification for the organization

Findings reveal that creating a desired impression is vital in the teaching profession. The following narrative shows that aesthetic labour serves two main purposes. It helps to create a positive image for a teacher, and it represents the competency of the individual as shown below.

‘It refers to how people attempt to present themselves to control or shape how others view of them...Self-presentation is aimed to achieve two desirable images. First, people want to appear likeable. People like others who are attractive, and interesting. Secondly, is whether people want to appear competent? People like others who are skilled and able, and thus others are involved in conveying an image of

competence...So, in my opinion it is of highest importance' (Zia, Assistant Professor).

Thus, people form judgments based on the individual's aesthetics. Teachers who conform to the aesthetic rules are seen as more persuasive and authentic. A teacher's qualification alone is not sufficient to create this authenticity. A more rounded and realistic image is also based on aesthetics.

'The reality is that people look at you and make perceptions...Attractive people are often perceived as being more persuasive. I think it's important for people to realise that throughout life they will be judged by what they look like, as well as how they act. Like it or not, this is a fact...Reliance on qualifications alone is not enough' (Mumtaz, Assistant Professor).

Noncompliance to aesthetic rules has repercussions. It raises concern for employee's connectedness and belonging to the organization and to their profession. Noncompliance with the aesthetic rules suggests that employees are less concerned about the organizational reputation and reflects a lack of belonging, and affiliation to the organization.

'...if you are presenting yourself in a good, and professional way, it means you are presenting your organization in a professional way as well. A shabby presentation of yourself will show your least attachment with your organization as if you are least concerned with its reputation.' (Laila, Assistant professor).

Conformity to aesthetic display rules generated positive emotions in the teachers. It had an impact on the way they felt about themselves. Furthermore, a teacher is not merely required to teach subject content within the classroom but also to educate students about their aesthetic performances. Hence, teachers' aesthetic displays have a profound impact on students' learning of aesthetics and aesthetic labour. These norms are explicitly conveyed to the students and form part of their learning.

'Appearance affects how we feel about ourselves. And if we feel good about ourselves, then that's likely to trickle into how we think and act as a teacher throughout our day. Teachers are role models for their students, so when teachers dress professionally it sends important messages to students. We teach our students not just about the academic subject, but also how an adult professional should look and behave' (Sajjad, Professor).

Thus, teachers' aesthetic labour not only required impression management to present a desired image but was also associated to organizational image and reputation. Hence, it could be argued that teachers had to commodify their aesthetic labour when representing their respective universities.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study extends our knowledge of embodied labour practices by exploring aesthetic labour among university teachers. Unlike theatrical performances where actors have a written script, the performance of individuals in everyday lives is governed by a set of unwritten rules that are learned through (inter)actions and social encounters. This study demonstrates that teachers in higher education institutions are not just engaged in aesthetic labour. In addition, there is a matrix of aesthetic and presentational skills which consist of different aspects of aesthetics in the workplace. Examples include voice tone, gestures, appearance, language, behaviour and methods of interaction.

Findings show that teachers had to work continuously on their emotions and aesthetics to fit into their professional roles. Aesthetic labour involved emotional labour as it required teachers to learn and adapt to their professional norms and constraints. Students played a vital role in conveying a message to their teachers to adapt their professional aesthetic labour. This is similar to customers in industry who enact control over workers' bodies in the interactive service sectors (Mears, 2014). The main purpose of teacher's aesthetic labour is to gain acceptability and respect within the workplace whilst maintaining their authority and distance from students, thus asserting belongingness and attachment to their professional roles and the organization.

It was interesting to find that aesthetic labour, even in the teaching profession, is gendered. Extant research shows that the idea of looking good is 'women's work' (Tyler & Taylor, 1998). In the interactive

service industry, it has been argued that the gendering of aesthetic labour reinforces the look of women as sexualized display objects (Mears, 2014; Poulston, 2015; Cutcher & Achtel, 2017). On the contrary, this study shows that women managed their aesthetic display, particularly on how they look, to avoid the sexualized image as they avoided wearing red colour and high heels. This study shows that men who did not adhere to aesthetic display rules were considered to be casual and friendly (unlike women). Hence, the gendered nature of aesthetic labour and the hidden inequalities should be explored further within the teaching profession.

Furthermore, it was found that a teacher's age impacted on the intensity of aesthetic labour. Young teachers, for example, had to work more on their appearances to keep their professional outlook intact. Unlike other interactive service sectors where women, in particular, try to appear young and attractive (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Granleese, 2006), this study shows that teachers try to appear more mature to fit into the role. Further research on aging and aesthetic labour in teaching profession both for men and women is an interesting avenue to explore.

This study contributes to the literature on aesthetic labour and emotional labour. Firstly, it extends our knowledge on aesthetic labour and the performance theory as it highlights the performative aspect of aesthetic labour in the teaching profession and reveals the hidden purpose behind every performance. It asserts that aesthetic labour involves emotional labour and is not simply a component of emotional labour. Secondly, it contributes to the literature on aesthetic labour in teaching profession where the aesthetic display rules are different from other professions that have been widely studied, such as, fashion industry and service sector. The normative aesthetic display rules for teachers are tied to the authenticity and legitimacy of 'being a teacher' by avoiding a sexualised image. Methodologically, narratives have a 'performative' aspect that complements the theoretical approach used in this study. In terms of context, this study has been conducted amongst teachers in higher education sector in an eastern context that is generally lacking in current literature. Most of the time, its applicability is limited to fashion and service provider industries and not in the teaching profession.

Findings suggest that educational institutes should train their employees regarding the normative rules of aesthetic labour to minimise the emotional cost due to inappropriate aesthetic performance. The trial-and-error technique can put an unnecessary emotional burden on teachers. It is advised that organizations should recognise and appreciate the hidden and disguised emotions that is often overlooked or ignored in the rational organizations in general and in relation to aesthetic labour in particular. This is crucial for employees well being and organizational performance.

Finally, this study concludes by suggesting that emotional labour is a hidden process underlying aesthetic labour. Aesthetic labour is overt and displayed. The labouring involved in displaying the 'right' aesthetic, however, in response to the demands of the situation is covert. Hence, emotional labour is an essential element of aesthetic labour as aesthetic labour is an embodied labour. Our knowledge of aesthetic labour remains incomplete without the consideration of emotional labour.

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