

Annual Methodological Archive Research Review

<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Volume 3, Issue 6(2025)

Aesthetic Labor In Elite Schools Of Pakistan

¹Noreen Saher, ²Warda Ashraf, ³Nida Nisar

Article Details

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Aesthetic Labor, Elite Schools, Women

Noreen Saher

Associate Professor, International Islamic University Islamabad

noreen.saher@iiu.edu.pk

Warda Ashraf

PhD. Sociology Scholar and Visiting Faculty, International Islamic University Islamabad

wardaashraf456@gmail.com

Nida Nisar

PhD. Sociology Scholar, International Islamic University Islamabad

007212phdsocf24@student.iiu.edu.pk

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology

(MUST), AJK, Pakistan

nida.soc@must.edu.pk

This study explores the role of aesthetic labor in elite private schools in Islamabad, Pakistan and how female teachers are indirectly expected to meet certain standards of beauty and grooming which are a part of their teacher identity. Relying on the concept of cultural and symbolic capital introduced by Bourdieu, as well as being founded on four detailed case studies, the study provides insights into the way these aesthetic expectations, despite being hardly ever explicitly discussed, are both institutionalized and internalized, affecting hiring and promotion, and even classroom visibility. Women teachers spend a considerable amount of emotional and financial resources to achieve these visual standards that are commonly disguised as professionalism but act as systems of gendered and class-based control. Contrary to their male counterparts, women are subjected to even greater scrutiny and pressure to represent the school brand image, thus aesthetic labor constitutes a type of invisible yet fundamental work. In this article, the argument is that these practices affirm systemic inequalities and requests critical policy interventions to confront unacknowledged nuisance and discriminatory consequences of aesthetic labor in the neoliberal education arena in Pakistan.

SETTING THE SCENE

Aesthetic labor as a need in modern economy was started in 20th century when economies were shifted from industrial to self-driven markets. Initially there were jobs that require physical labor, but now there are positions in retail, aviation and hospitality services. Organizations hire such employers that are not only technically skilled but are attractive and beautiful for their brand image (Warhurst et al. 2000). Females become the center of attention and their personal attributes like beauty, style and glamor becomes the assets of organization they worked in. Females working in hospitality, aviation and retail started to focus on their performance based on personal attributes like how they smile, talk and dressed. (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). In this way, women are expected to meet unexpected beauty ideals based on color, height and body mass which is imposing systemic inequality. (Elias et al., 2017) In the past, these standards were enforced in physical labor and organizations however, the digital economy has heightened the aesthetic expectations. Now-a-days influencers make themselves commodity and sell their appearances in order to maintain their social media image. (Duffy, 2017)

Within the growing service sector in Pakistan, the elite private schools have modified into an institution that spans not only pedagogy but also moves into the world of corporate branding. Here, the physical presentation, especially in the case of female teachers, is discovered to be a very essential type of labor. It is also known as aesthetic labor by Warhurst and Nickson (2007) and involves hiring of workers with such embodied qualities that match organizational branding policies.

The four case studies of female teachers that are employed in the elite private schools of Islamabad show that not only are the aesthetic standards institutionalized and gendered, but also become internalized by the teachers themselves. Grooming and self-presentation are altered into obligatory kinds of capital, which is reflected in the narratives of these men and recalls the theory of cultural and symbolic capital introduced by Bourdieu (1986).

Although this is an informal aesthetic regime, it shapes pedagogical spaces and determines who is a part of it, who ascends, and who is made invisible. Aesthetic labor thus comes to be the indicator and the means of socio-professional positioning in elite educational institutions where image is ideology.

CONTEXTUALIZING

COUNTRY LEVEL

The education system in Pakistan, particularly the elite privately run schools, serves as a

complicated blend of formal Western style education and strongly entrenched social hierarchies. Based on the explanation offered by Warhurst and Nickson (2007), the concept of aesthetic labor as applied in this context implies the scenario of using workers with preferred physical qualities and style to display the brand image. Although commonly understood to be part of retail and hospitality industry, aesthetic labor has stealthily established itself in the education sector, especially in the posh private schools in cities.

Not only are teachers expected to models of pedagogical competence, they are also supposed to exude a visual professionalism that is also upper-middle-class consumer aesthetics. Such establishments take advantage of the visual economy of the neoliberal Pakistan where the brand identity, modernity, and femininity are interlaced. The female teachers are therefore cultural producers as well as products who are supposed to reflect ideal class values.

The pressure to meet aesthetic standards is enhanced by the patriarchal and classes conceptualization of femininity, which allows women to be evaluated not merely on their qualifications but also on how well they are put together (Khilji, 2003; Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). Appearance is a sort of non-verbal curriculum - the curriculum that says conformity, desirability, and institutional loyalty.

ORGANIZATION LEVEL

Pseudonym	Title	Age Group
Tania	Teacher	20-25
Saira	Teacher	20-25
Naveeda	Teacher	25-30
Ayesha	Teacher	30-35

In all interviews, it is discovered that there is no formal recording of dress and grooming standards. Rather, norms are communicated via verbal reminders, and orientation programs, and new faculty training programs. This institutional ambiguity gives organizations plausible deniability, although appearance serves as a determinant of employability and promotion.

As Madam Tania has said:

The dressing should be decent, it matters a lot because they are a role model to students.

Likewise, Madam Saira informed:

“Yes, coach me during the time of employment ... not in writing but through meetings and training programs.

These observations imply that elite schools employ indirect systems of reinforcement of the aesthetic norms: training workshops, mentoring, and performance reviews. The institutional demands are created as professionalism and personal grooming, but those are functioning within a classed and gendered project.

These remind the remarks of Saher (2010) regarding the importance of informal rules and verbal codes in Pakistani professional environments, where cultural signaling can be much more important than formal HR policies.

CASE NARRATIVES

1. INTERNALIZATION OF AESTHETIC NORMS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The respondents were in unison to show how institutional pressures would later turn into personal habits. said Madam Tania:

I ignore pressure to spend as much as he can but stated that it is not under pressure rather it is part of his hobbies.

The free discourse conceals the system of compulsion below. The choice to internalize is no choice at all when it comes to grooming equated with self-worth: it is a survival strategy. The experience of Madam Naveeda supports this change:

“It belongs to my self-confidence, I feel more competitive, and more satisfied.”

These stories show the process of what Bourdieu (1986) calls embodied cultural capital, or how systemic discipline is translated into an individualized aspiration. Teachers get to be practitioners in their own aesthetic field.

Similarly, Madam Saira said:

Not so much but when we are involved in it then we must be awake to fulfill these standards.

This confirms the way aesthetic labor functions as soft governance, a non-coercive, but highly efficient managerial approach that dictates the way workers represent themselves and understand their professional worth.

2. FINANCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Aesthetic labor is extremely costly in terms of its financial requirements. Madam Saira approximates that:

“50-70 percent [of earnings] is spent on upholding the desired appearance.”

This kind of financial investment is only comprehensible within the framework of institutional returns on the basis of visual attractiveness. Teachers are not only invested in grooming—they invested in visibility.

Naveeda and Tania confirm the same percentage (3040%), so does Madam Ayesha:

I use 30-40 percent of my disposable income on looks: clothes, grooming, cosmetics.

Such expenses are not only related to choice but to institutional conformity. The psychological impact is just as great. Interviewees wavered between shame and pride:

Yes, occasionally I do get a lot, wasted money—but it is in my self-satisfaction. (Tania)

It has an impact on the mind, Saira says, it makes one more conscious or more satisfied.

Emotional labor also connects with economic discipline thus bringing forth a regime that requires teachers to manage performance and presentation, morale and metrics.

3. GENDERED DISPARITIES AND INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

Among the most striking conclusions is the inequality of applying the principles of beauty to different genders. Although schools apply gender-neutral language frequently, its implementation is over-emphasized on women. Madam Naveeda observed:

Not the same expectation of them [males] on grounds alike in patriarchal society.

Such imbalance produces femininity as an area of aesthetics surveillance. Cognitive performance is what matters to establish the worth of male colleagues; female colleagues need to appear the part to be considered the equivalent.

Tania added:

Yes, the males are dominant ... they have more capacities- it is a myth also.

These gender expectations find an echo in Saher and Mayrhofer (2014) discussion of the role of Vartan Bhanji and informal loyalty networks in enhancing these biases in HR assessment.

4. CAREER IMPACT AND PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT

Aesthetic compliance was unanimously agreed by all the respondents that it results in professional advantage. This is not metaphoric but real. Appearance mediates promotions, visibility, class assignments and even outcomes in conflict resolution.

Madam Ayesha observed:

Favouritism relates directly to how you look.

Tania observed:

“It does—it does exist.”

Saira concluded:

“Yes, definitely—I have witnessed co-workers get punished [because of appearance].

This reflects on the argument of Quach et al. (2017) that in service economies, appearance is

turned into a competence heuristic, an aesthetic stand-in to ability. These practices make superficial judgments institutionalized and they are disguised as performance management.

EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS

The aesthetic labor in the Pakistani elite schools is not accidental, it is infrastructural. It is instituted within the recruitment exercise, professional assessment, and even inter-personal relationship. It turns into a habit and determines the way teachers act, dress, spend money and even think about themselves.

This work is unpaid, unacknowledged, and disproportionately shared but it is professional survival. It establishes a two-level system: people who can and cannot afford the aesthetics economy. It discredits the other forms of capital (experience, pedagogy and training) and substitutes them by the aesthetic indicators.

Aesthetic labor, in this respect, should be located not only in the realm of HR practices but in a bigger issue of classes, gender, and visibility. It is a feminist concern, it is a class concern and it is a structural concern that requires urgent theoretical and policy intervention.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of these four women when combined together can tell the extent to which the aesthetic labor has become ingrained in the system of elite schooling in Pakistan. The teachers are visual ambassadors of institutional brand identity as well as educators. The hidden curriculum that is an outcome of the interplay of gender, class, and aesthetics makes conformity its prerequisite to success.

These results demand an immediate policy debate on the matters of equity and inclusion and the legalization of appearance-based professional conclusions at school. The absence of structural change means that aesthetic labor will keep on replicating the very inequalities that pump and passenger the meritocratic values education alleges to represent.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E., Grunert, K., Katz, J., & Mikkelsen, M. (2010). Aesthetic capital: A theoretical framework. *Sociology Compass*, 4(9), 564–577.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In Richardson, J. (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Duffy, B. E. (2017). *Not getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.
- Elias, A. S., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). Aesthetic labour: Beauty politics in neoliberalism.

Palgrave Macmillan.

- Khilji, S. E. (2003). "To adapt or not to adapt": Exploring the role of national culture in HRM – A study of Pakistan. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 3(1), 121–144.
- Pettinger, L. (2004). Brand culture and branded workers: Service work and aesthetic labour in fashion retail. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 7(2), 165–184.
- Quach, S., Jebarajakirthy, C., & Thaichon, P. (2017). Aesthetic labor and visible diversity: The role in retailing service encounters. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 38, 34–43.
- Saher, N. (2010). *Cultural diversity and human resource development in modern organization*. PhD Dissertation, Quaid-i-Azam University.
- Saher, N. (2023). Career conditions in Pakistan: "Apna banda" and career growth. In *Understanding Careers Around the Globe* (pp. 92–100). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Saher, N., & Mayrhofer, W. (2014). The role of Vartan Bhanji in implementing HRM practices in Pakistan. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(13), 1881–1903.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2007). Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(1), 103–120.