



Aesthetic Labor in Service Work: The Breakthroughs, Debates and Future

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Review Article

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Abstract

Aesthetic labor refers to the process in which workers' appearances make the core of employability. After two decades of development, the theory has yielded outstanding theoretical and empirical achievements. The review briefly investigates the trajectory of the construction, the debates, and the unfinished agenda of aesthetic labor. Introduced at the dawn of the 21st century, aesthetic labor ambitiously re-conceptualizes the emotional labor paradigm by accentuating the role "looking good and sounding right" plays in the new economy. It challenges the analytic frame of emotional labor by foregrounding the importance of corporeal attributes and the embodied dispositions of workers during service encounters. However, the theory is also challenged for its dominating feminist scope and the one-sided accentuation of the dysfunctions of society. A growing volume of research has diverted the attention on the experiences of male workers in aesthetic labor, and some, at the same time, are attempting to justify the prevalence of aesthetic labor by examining the agency of workers during the labor process. Comparative case studies, as well as the scope of cultural approach, are considered two promising research methodologies for aesthetic labor studies.

Although the pursuit of beauty has always accompanied human development, the value of a "good look" has never been more prominent in our age. The booming of beauty industries such as make-up, modeling, and fashion has witnessed how a desirable physical appearance helps countless men and women ascend the social ladder from almost the bottom to the top. An increasing volume of literature focuses on the phenomenon, among which the term "aesthetic labor" stands out as one of the most influential theories that capture the characteristic of occupations based on the never-ending polishment of physical appearance. After two decades of development, the theory of aesthetic labor has stimulated volumes of research examining the role of the body and physical beauty in interactive service work. The review essay aims to sketch the breakthroughs that the theory have made, the debates centered on the theory and the future directions that might fill the gap.

Keywords: Aesthetic Labor; Economy; Strathclyde Group; Sociology of Work

Aesthetic Labor in the Millennium

Aesthetic labor is introduced alongside the discussion of the "new economy" at the advent of the millennium. In

their book "Looking good, sounding right: Style counselling in the new economy", Warhurst C, et al. [1] contend that it is not the "thinking" and technical skills in the IT industry, but the "aesthetic skills" possessed by front-line workers in

service sectors, hold the key to employability and the key to economic success during the industrial transformation of UK at the dawning of the 21st century. Using the successful shift of Glasgow as an example, they illustrate how the recruitment of employees with stunning looks and consonant dispositions vitalizes the service market and the city's economy.

Generally, aesthetics refers to the sensual components of people's daily encounters. Aesthetic labor is "the mobilization, development, and commodification of embodied dispositions" [2]. By accentuating the corporal attributes and a set of embodied dispositions of workers that arouse the visceral sensibilities and aesthetic experiences of customers, Warhurst C, et al. [3], who are later known as the "Strathclyde group", discover the "aesthetic" dimension of service work and its influence on re-defining the service interaction. Later on, the "Strathclyde group" subsequently initiate a series of research surrounding the theory of "aesthetic labor", with the ambition to re-conceptualize the work and employment structure of service organizations [3].

The theory shines out its greater empirical competence nowadays, given the omnipresent beauty images enhanced by the well-developed visual technologies and the lucrative beauty economies [4]. Apart from its empirical significance, the theory has its theoretical stick points to emotional labor. By foregrounding the body and bodily presentations in service encounters, the "Strathclyde group" challenges the theoretical and even the epistemological basis of emotional labor, which has been generally accepted as the dominant research paradigm in studies of interactive service work for decades.

Beyond Emotions: The "Aesthetic Turn" In the Study of Service Work

In her pioneering work "The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling", Arlie Russell Hochschild AR [5] states that besides the physical and mental labor, a flight attendant is also required to "induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the state of mind in others" [5]. This requirement is termed as emotional labor by her and has been widely acknowledged by the academia. The empirical applications spread out to different disciplines from organization and management to the sociology of work, and the core interest of the discussion centers around the dynamic power relations in service encounters and the consequences of the commercialization of emotions [6-9].

After three decades of development, scholars' attention has returned from empirical explorations to theoretical reflections of emotional labor. One of the most often-heard critics among emotional labor theorists is that the empirical

research has been theoretically fragmented and case-specific, lacking the potency to provide coherent theoretical guidance for academia [10]. Recent studies are trying to compensate for the inadequacy by providing an integrative framework to conceptualize and operationalize emotional labor [11]. More than the lack of theoretical coherence, critics from the literature stream of aesthetic labor make a breakthrough by pointing out the theory's analytical drawbacks.

In their article "The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization", Witz A, et al. [2] address the deficiencies of the analytic frame of emotional labor and theorize aesthetic labor. The first one lies in the overlook of corporeality. By theorizing the labor in service work as "the war of smiles", Hochschild AR [5] dives into the inner struggle in the course of labouring while "analytically abandoning" the precise status of the flesh and blood that makes the acting possible. Moreover, the inheritance of the Goffmanian tradition, which leads to the surface-deep acting analysis, adds to the dichotomy of body-soul in the analysis. As a result, the surface "becomes synonymous with the body that is devoid of authenticity, where depth becomes synonymous with the soul as the authentic, feeling core of the self" [2].

Drawing from the "embodied disposition" that Bourdieu brings about in his practice theory, aesthetic labor is capable of resolving the body-soul dichotomy while foregrounding bodily presentation in service encounters. The re-conceptualization further prompted the "aesthetic turn" in service work studies [12]. From 2000 to the present, a series of studies have been carried out successively, led by "the Strachy Group". Case studies in retail and hospitality sectors, along with statistical analysis, are the primary research approach in their thread of research. Their research investigates how organizations perpetuate and institutionalize the importance of appearance not only through the recruitment and selection of "stylish" employees, but also through the cultivation of aesthetic skills underpinned by the training and supervision process [13,14]. The consequences of which are also scrutinized. Employees possessing a sense of "middle classness" gives rise to a new labor aristocracy and the prevalence of "lookism" [15], making physical appearance another important social category in employment discrimination. In their latest book, Warhurst C, et al. [16] gives a systematic theorization and application of aesthetic labor by dialoguing with theories from the sociology of work and body.

Debates and what's Next

Apart from focusing on the general routine interactive service jobs, a growing number of researchers have diverted their attention to professions where the management and commercialization of the body lie at the heart of the work

process. The study of the modelling industry is amongst the most typical. Drawing from the fashion industries of New York and London, Entwistle J, et al. [17] argue that aesthetic labor entails the ongoing production of body/self. Besides staying physically attractive, freelancer fashion models must also invent distinctive “personalities” to survive in the industry. In “Pricing beauty: The making of a fashion model”, Mears A [18] incorporates her own experiences of being a model to unpack the seemingly glamorous while precarious work conditions of fashion models.

The edited work of Elias AS, et al. [4] are worth mentioning for its global vision in providing readers with worldwide empirical studies of aesthetic labor regarding various occupations encompassing the beauty industry from cosmetics, beauty make-up to wellness, social media entertainment. The collection mainly discusses how the ideology of neoliberalism facilitates the association between aesthetic labor and “entrepreneurial labor” and helps female workers re-interpret gender relations, femininity, and the relationship between work and self-transformation.

As the majority stance of aesthetic labor, the previously mentioned research takes beauty as a feminist issue. It is not only because “looking good” has been intuitively reckoned as the mission for women [19], but also due to the fact that the politics of appearance has long been an ineluctable topic in feminist studies. Facing the concentration on female workers in aesthetic labor studies, a group of scholars starts to argue that it is essential for researchers to recognize that “gender is not just about women” [20]. It is not the first reminder. Researchers have proposed that “while there are indeed gendered and sexualized dimensions in aesthetic labour, it is by no means only female labour that is subject to commodification via aestheticization” [2].

By examining the work experiences of men who cross into what is conventionally defined as “women’s work”, Cross S, et al. [21] uncover men’s struggle with their gender identity when masculinity is challenged. Drawing from ethnographic observations and interviews of two men’s hair salons, Barber K [22] examines how organizations strategically habituate their employees with heterosexual masculine aesthetics that cater to their male clients. Elfvig Hwang JK [23] interviews middle-aged urban men in South Korea and discovers that rather than emulating the hegemonic masculinity, men’s aesthetic practices in the workplace are subject to the “homosocial gaze” of other male workers.

Besides the feminist perspective dominance of the theory, there are also oppositions towards the dysfunction of what aesthetic labor poses on the selfhood of workers. For example, using the case of fashion modeling, Holla S [24] argues that the modification and commercialization of

the body do not always lead to the separation of the body and the soul. Instead, models make efforts to justify their bodily practices by using moral repertoires that motivate themselves to be “natural” and “healthy”.

The debates above reveal the necessity to bring new analytical perspectives to unearth more nuanced explorations in aesthetic labor. Mears A [19] suggests that introducing comparative scope to examine the similarities and differences in different workplaces can help offer variable experiences that might be included in aesthetic labor. Another contribution may come from the perspectives of cultural sociology. Most of the contemporary analyses that emphasize the destruction of the commodification of the body in service work can be summarized, according to what Alexander JC [25] calls, as the materialist point of view that presupposes “human beings would be unable to experience their subjectivity in human-made objects until commodity exchange were overcome” [25,26]. This anti-commodification model has hindered a deeper understanding of how meaning is made by actors during the labor process. Instead of holding a material-positivist viewpoint, a hermeneutical approach that allows for a thick description of the meaning-making process of actors might be a refreshing scope for scholars to discover the dynamics underneath bodily performances.

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