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## Looking Good, Feeling Better? Aesthetic Labor's Role in the Well-being of Hospitality Staff in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa

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### Abstract

This study digs into how frontline employees in the hospitality industry perceive aesthetic labour practices and whether these practices affect their psychological well-being. We conducted a qualitative exploration, and interviewed 12 frontline workers chosen through purposive sampling for their direct experience with aesthetic labour roles. Using thematic analysis, we sifted through the data and uncovered two main understandings: employees often have a shaky grasp of what aesthetic labour entails, yet they report feeling uplifted by it in terms of mental well-being. The findings hint that even with limited understanding, engaging in these practices can boost how employees feel about their jobs. We suggest hospitality managers work on building awareness among staff about aesthetic labour and find ways to spur them toward better performance in these roles, which could benefit both the workers and the businesses in the hospitality sector.

### Key Words

Tourism & Hospitality, Hotels, KPK, Psychological Well-being, Frontline Employees, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.

### Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of the largest and fastest growing industry around the world, with new ventures and segments in the hospitality industry are trying to provide quality service to their customers. Moreover, it also generates a lot of jobs and revenue which contributes to the country's GDP and overall employment condition of a country. Similarly, in Pakistan the hospitality industry has experience a significant growth in the recent year, as the flow of both domestic and international tourists has increased significantly which has resulted in increased number of hotels, restaurants, airlines, and other hospitality services. In the recent times the hospitality industry of Pakistan was estimated worth of 20 billion dollars, however it was affected due to the covid-19 (Moosvi & Ali, 2022). According to Pakistan tourism development corporation report (2022), the tourism and hospitality industry of Pakistan has contributed 7.1% to the local GDP along with the contributions of 7.9% jobs to the overall employment in Pakistan. Considering the above statistics, it is important to sustain and maximize these contributions of the hospitality industry for smooth operations. In order to operate the industry smoothly it requires many resources such as financial, and human resources. It is evident that hospitality industry is all about providing a variety of services to the customers which is not possible without human resources which clearly show that the hospitality industry primarily depends upon labour to run the operations smoothly.

In order to provide quality services and create memorable experiences for its customers it recognizes the importance of Aesthetic Labour practices during the service encounters which provide unique brand image with enhanced customers experiences. These Aesthetic Labour practices are basically linked with the monitoring, controlling, and managing of employees physical appearance according to the standards desired by an organization, which requires frontline employees to manage their physical appearance which creates positive impression on customers (Pounders et al., 2015). Moreover, these practices can be observed with in the service sector across the world, especially in Food service establishments, Hotels, Health care, Airlines, and other segments of the service sector, all of these service organizations focuses on providing quality experiences for customers through aesthetic labour practices. Apart from creating quality experiences for customers, aesthetic labour practices may also contribute to positive brand image and it also give a competitive edge over other organizations in the hospitality industry. With the frequent focus on frontline employees physical appearance and expecting them to follow these aesthetic labour practices can become very challenging for frontline employees, resulting in a variety of concerns for employees ranging from psychological, to physical health concerns. These concerns are basically the result of frequent pressure from customers and organizational expectations regarding their physical appearance. Moreover, aesthetic labour is an important part of the hospitality industry, however it is directly linked with employees psychological well-being. The psychological well-being of employees covers a range of elements such as, the overall mental health, of an employee covering other aspects like, purpose and meaning in life, personal growth and development, positive relation with other people, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and autonomy (Ryff, 2005). In order to explore these links further, this study was conducted to identify the impacts of aesthetic labour practices on the psychological well-being of frontline employees in hospitality industry in khyberpakhtoon khwa Pakistan. The current study was focused on experiences of frontline employees who were engaged in aesthetic labour practices with regards to its impacts on their psychological well-being.

The desired expectation of service sector organization and presenting well in front of customers, commonly known as aesthetic labour practices is the process of conforming to these standards of physical appearance (Warhurst, 2000). Similarly, these practices can be also found in the hospitality industry around the world like the emotional labour practices which are concern with the emotional display of employees (Hoschild, 1983). The positive aspects of aesthetic labour practices are significant contributors to the overall organizational and brand image with enhanced customer experiences and better customer satisfaction (Rafaeli et al., 2019). In addition, to these positive contributions, aesthetic labour practices can also lead to impact on employees psychological well-being (Weng, 2015, : Harrington, 2011). These concerns led to the growing interest of international scholars to explore this particular area of research, however, this area requires further exploration (Gill, 2020 : Alves, 2016). In addition, there was a limited literature available on this particular area in the context of Pakistan, especially in the context of hospitality industry in khyberpakhtoon khwa (Ali, 2014). So therefore, it was important to understand these impacts for developing, promoting, and enhancing the psychological well-being of employees in hospitality industry (Khan, 2016). Many researchers around the world have demonstrated the links between Aesthetic Labor and its negative psychological effects such as, stress (Van den Broek, 2018), anxiety (Ashforth et al., 2018), burnout (Hsu, 2011), and body image dissatisfaction (Weng, 2015). The finding of these previous research studies have uncovered the associated risks with Aesthetic Labour and suggests that future researchers should investigate this in different service sectors such as Tourism and Hospitality Industry and different cultural contexts (Harrington, 2011).

In Pakistan, researchers have mainly focused on the impacts of emotional labour which is another type of practices found in the service sector that involves the management of emotions according to organizational standards for better customer experience (Khan, 2013; Khan, 2016. On the other hand, research on Aesthetic Labour practices has gained less attention from researchers in Pakistan. Therefore, it was essential to explore the knowledge and understanding along with the impacts of these practices on

employees psychological well-being in order to fill this gap in the existing literature in the context of hospitality industry in khyberpakhtoon khwa, Pakistan.

This study digs into what frontline employees in the hospitality industry know about aesthetic labour practices and how these practices mess with—or maybe boost—their psychological well-being. It's guided by two big questions: how much do these workers really get about aesthetic labour, and what's it doing to their psychological wellbeing.

## **Literature Review**

### **Aesthetic Labour Practices and Psychological Well-being**

The employees who engage in aesthetic labour practices are always directed to present their bodies in a certain way desired by the organization can significantly contribute to body image issues (Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014). Research suggests that increased pressure from management to maintain the presentation may engage employees in unhealthy practices such as increased food intake, unhealthy cosmetic procedures (Wang, 2014). Similarly, (Di Mattei, et al. 2015)) argues that as a result of constant pressure on employees regarding their body's presentation may involve employees in excessive diet and exercise. In addition, the frequent focus of service organization on employees' body presentation further leads to employees feeling of self-objectification (Fox et al. (2015)). Furthermore, research studies have shown that level of body image and self-objectification issues are higher among frontline employees in the hospitality in comparison with those work in the back of the house areas in the hospitality industry (Gross et al., 2017 : Chen, 2019). Moreover, research has shown this in the airline sector where the level of body image and self-objectification is higher among female employees as compared to male (Gross et al., 2017: Slater & Tiggemann, 2018). Alongside, this research has shown that these issues further lead to impact individuals' self-esteem, which is an important element of psychological well-being (Hart & Kenny, 2019). Apart from these research findings suggesting how body image and self-objectification issues can impact employee's self-esteem. Subsequently, studies have also shown that proper strategies should be developed to enhance employee's self-esteem while minimizing the negative impact of body image and self-objectifications (McDonald & Thompson, 2020). Research suggests minimizing these impacts, employers must focus on creating awareness regarding body image and self-objectification and make them feel like the important part of the service sector and their contribution towards customer service. In addition, researchers and organizations should focus on employee's recognition who are engaged in aesthetic labour practices. The link between aesthetic labour practices and body image is not entirely negative as many research studies have suggested that employees, especially in aesthetic labour can have positive impact by developing their aesthetic skills and create their personal awareness regarding their body presentation. Moreover, actively engaging in aesthetic labour can minimize the negative impacts of aesthetic labour on body image dissatisfaction (Halliwell & Malson, 2021: Gill & Orgad, 2022)).

### **Autonomy:**

Autonomy is one of the important dimensions of psychological well-being. It refers to the degree of control and freedom of an individual over certain things (Ryff, 1989). The aesthetic Labour demands are strict guidelines which can be observed within the service sector in the form of dress codes, physical appearance and beauty standards that are implemented by organization on their employees (Richards & Miles, 2014). In addition, conforming to these standards without any control over physical appearance can lead to feelings of stress (Mangan, 2017). Furthermore, this lack of autonomy due to aesthetic labour practices can suppress employees creativity in a variety of ways, such as developing policies regarding aesthetic labour practices, designing attractive dress codes, and colour combination (Hotchkiss & Kelly, 2017 ). A Study in the UK by Daniels & Henry, 2018, argues that empowering employees in terms of physical appearance management can enhance employees service delivery and quality (Entwistle & Mears, 2018 : Kang & Stewart, 2019). As research studies suggests that employees needs to be given the

autonomy of maintaining their physical appearance but however research have also shown lack of autonomy in the service sector in terms of aesthetic labour practices(Li & Li, 2020). Furthermore, studies are still trying to investigate this particular research area as the findings may vary across various regions. (Mangan, 2017)

### **Mental Health Concerns:**

The constant pressure on employees to manage their physical appearance in work place may result in various challenges and many research studies have been conducted on this particular area. The management of one's appearance and focusing on enhancing customer experience may have a lot of concerns for employee's mental health (Warhurst & Nickson 2015). In addition studies have found that frequent pressure to maintain certain presentation and deliver quality service to the customers increases the mental health issues, resulting in anxiety, depression, and long-term mental disorders (Mears & Connell, 2016).A study in the hotel industry found that employees who have experienced mental health problems as a result of engaging in aesthetic labour practices were more likely to have emotional exhaustion (Parvez, 2017). Similarly studies also found that the frequent pressure of physical appearance demands may develop more serious mental health issues over a period of time further leading to employees turnover intention(Hall & Van Den Broek 2018).In addition studies have shown that the constant surveillance of employees based on their physical appearance may result in emotional exhaustion, burnout and stress(Wu & Cheng 2018) Studies are frequently exploring the factors that are associated with employees mental health concerns in the context of aesthetic labour practices. However the existing literature around the world is focused on the short-term consequences of aesthetic labour practices and furthermore, suggests that future researchers should focus on the long-term effects of aesthetic labour on employees health in the service sector (Krings & Fakoussa 2019) Moreover studies have revealed that proper strategies needs to be developed to minimize negative impacts and maximize the positive impacts of aesthetic labour practices. Overall findings have highlighted all the negative impacts of aesthetic labour on employees mental health while on the other hand suggests mitigating strategies to manage its outcomes for employee's mental health.

### **Confidence and Self-esteem:**

Confidence and self-esteem are considered to be an important part of individual's psychological well-being. The link between aesthetic labour practices and employee's confidence and self-esteem has been investigated by many researchers across the globe, especially in developed countries (Tsai & Hsieh, 2014). Studies have found that individuals engaged in aesthetic labour practices may experience increased confidence with in the hospitality sector (Grandey et al., 2015). Research further argues that five star hotel properties have certain physical appearance standards that enhance confidence (Ashforth et al., 2016: Witz et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that employees feeling active while engage in aesthetic labour practices which give them more confidence as compare to employees working in the manufacturing sector(Wrzesniewski et al., 2018: Rafaeli et al., 2019 ). Moreover, finding of studies suggests that employees presentation can not only influence their confidence but also impact their interaction with customers (Mumby et al.,2020 :Lee & Clark, 2020). Overall studies have shown that maintaining physical appearance and considering it as a way of boosting confidence is very important for service encounters while delivering services. In addition, it also increases employees overall confidence and self-esteem (Nicholls et al., 2023). Furthermore, it can also enhance the brand image and enhance customer experience which leads to customer brand loyalty.

### **Discrimination:**

The issue of discrimination is an area of interest for many researchers around the world, many researchers have put their efforts in to this particular area, similarly in the service sector a lot of research work has

been done to identify the reasons behind discrimination and to come up with strategies to overcome discrimination in the workplace (Elias, 2015). Employees in the service sector especially in aesthetic labour roles face a lot of discrimination (Haynes, 2021). The employees engaged in aesthetic labour practices specifically female employees face a lot of discrimination in terms of their physical appearance management (Silver, 2014). In addition the issue of discrimination in the service sector is higher among female employees in the hospitality sector, where as female employees are asked to follow certain dress code which is revealing (Britt-Smith, 2017). Furthermore, research argues that male employees are expected to follow the traditional uniforms showing their masculinity hence making it more comfortable for male as compare to female employees (Choi, 2018; Bridges, 2019). Furthermore, research have shown that imposing such revealing uniforms on female employees can lead to their harassment in the work place especially in the hospitality sector (Emory, 2020). In addition existing studies have also shown that discrimination based on race is higher among employees within the airline sector where black are limited to work in back of the house job as compare to those with white skin tones working in the front of the house roles (Stevens, 2021 : Silver, 2022). Moreover, studies have also shown that other factors such as disabilities' were considered to be the limitation of workers not to work in the frontline roles (Elias, 2023). Overall employees engaged in aesthetic labour roles face a lot of discrimination based on various grounds while research have only focused on highlighting these issues and suggests that organization should treat employees on equal grounds avoiding discrimination in the workplace environments.

### **Synthesis**

The existing body of literature has shown a lot of concerns for employees who engaged in Aesthetic Labour practices across various service sector organizations. These studies have shown certain concerns experienced by employees engaged in these practices. The existing literature argues that employees engaged in Aesthetic Labour practices can experience issues such as body image and self-objectification which leads to employees' engagement in various unhealthy activities which may be harmful for their health and psychological well-being. In addition, these body image concerns also develops bad eating habits which causes eating disorders. Furthermore, the existing research have also shown that the issues of body image and self-objectification can further leads to low self-esteem and confidence among employees which are the important pillars of the individuals psychological well-being. Furthermore, themes in existing literature have also shown that Aesthetic Labour roles may experience an imbalance between their personal and professional identities whereas majority of the studies have shown that it is very difficult for employees to maintain a line between their professional and personal identities yet causing anxiety and depression among employees. Similarly studies have also shown that the Aesthetic Labour practices can be very challenging as employees are expected to maintain their physical appearance according to the desired organizational standards put a lot of pressure on them and on the other hand pressure from customers to present well in front of them can lead to stress, and anxiety where studies have shown these mental health concerns as a result of engaging in Aesthetic Labour practices. In addition to these mental health concerns studies have also highlighted the theme of lack of autonomy among frontline employees regarding Aesthetic Labour practices, whereas studies have found that Aesthetic Labour practices are basically strict rules and guidelines on how to maintain physical appearance and presentation, where studies have shown that employees have experienced lack of autonomy in terms of maintaining their physical appearance and presentation. In addition studies have suggest the importance of autonomy in terms of Aesthetic Labour by arguing that autonomy can enhance employees creativity by making new interventions and bringing new ideas for improving Aesthetic Labour Practices, such as, designing new dress codes, uniforms and other colour combinations. As the findings of the existing literature have shown that employees lack autonomy in terms of these practices while autonomy is one of the important aspects of employees psychological well-being. Furthermore, the existing studies on the impacts of Aesthetic Labour practices studies have also demonstrated that employees may also experience discrimination based on their physical appearance and presentation, whereas studies have found that in comparison to

male frontline employees female employees are always asked to wear revealing uniforms which may cause the issue of harassment among female frontline employees which leads to continuous stress affecting the psychological well-being of female individuals. Overall all the majority of themes emerged with in the existing literature have shown the negative impacts of Aesthetic Labour Practices on employees psychological well-being.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature**

The current study was aimed at identifying the impacts of Aesthetic Labour Practices on Employees Psychological Well-Being in Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Despite the significant contributions of the existing literature on this particular area across the service industry around the world, majority of the studies have been conducted with in the developed regions of the world. In addition, majority of the existing studies have highlighted the negative impacts of Aesthetic Labour on Employees psychological well-being while on the other hand there is limited focus of the existing literature on the developing regions i.e. Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, province. Furthermore, the existing literature is lacking such studies in the context of Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, as it has already been demonstrated within the problem statement section with in the introduction section of this study. In addition, the existing body of literature is only focused on identifying the impacts of Aesthetic Labour practices on employees psychological well-being in various service sector organization it shows the limited focus of researchers in the context of khyberpakhtoon khwa Pakistan and also it lacks the focus on employees knowledge regarding these practices. So therefore, this study was conducted to fill the gap by identifying the knowledge and understanding of frontline employees regarding these practices and to find out how these practices impacts their psychological well-being in Hospitality Industry.

### **Methodology**

The current study has adopted qualitative research design to obtain a subjective, yet a comprehensive understanding about the aesthetic labour practices' and its effect on employees' psychological wellbeing. In addition, the study's decision to proceed with being qualitative in nature was because of the lived experiences of employees engaged in aesthetic labour roles (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

### **Population of the Study**

The population of the present study consists of the frontline employees working in the Hospitality organizations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. There are seven divisions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but the current study is restricted to two divisions due to the scope of the research and its participants. The two divisions that are Peshawar and Malakand where many hospitality organizations exist. So, the population for the current study was selected based on the availability of suitable respondents for the study.

### **Sample Size and Techniques**

The current study is qualitative in nature, so the sample size was determined by the point of data saturation. Thus, data was collected from participants till it has reached the saturation point. In addition, a total of 12 participants were interviewed after that no new responses were obtained, so therefore further data collection was stopped. The participants were selected based on purposive sampling method. This method was appropriate due to the requirement of the study, as it only focused on the frontline employees who were involved in aesthetic labour practices in hospitality industry.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The data analysis is also an important aspect of any research study. As the data for the current study was obtained through in-depth interviews. Therefore, it has employed thematic analysis where the responses were first transcribed from audio recordings and notes then were codified into themes and were analysed further to address the study's objective and questions. According to Sundler et al. (2019). In addition, this study has employed widely used framework of thematic analysis across qualitative studies developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents all the identified themes within the collected data which were interview transcripts along with relevant participants' quotes to support the themes. The findings of the current study in the form of themes with explanation have been presented below.

#### **Findings:**

##### **Theme 1: Lack of Knowledge and Understanding of the Term Aesthetic Labour Practices**

This theme represents the lack of awareness about the term Aesthetic Labour Practices among frontline employees within the Hospitality Sector. Majority of the participants were not knowledgeable about the term. Some of the participants mentioned, "I must admit that I was unfamiliar with it till now" (Participant, 1). In addition, few participants shared their understanding of these practices, said, "Well before this I haven't heard this" (Participant, 2). "I don't know about the aesthetic labour term" (Participant, 5). "I am listening this word for the first time" (Participant, 7). The majority of participants were not aware of the term aesthetic labour practices except one participant who mentioned "Yes I do know about Aesthetic Labour practices" (Participant, 3), while Participant, 10, said "I think I have this word in my mind but can't remember what it means?"

##### **Theme 2: Impact on Psychological Well-Being**

This theme demonstrates that majority of the participants are of the view that, they have very significant positive impact on their psychological Well-Being, while performing Aesthetic Labour Practices and shared "I find it enjoyable to maintain a well-Groomed and clean appearance at work" (Participant, 1). "I feel confident in my work uniform because when I am well-Dresses I feel happy" (Participant, 2). "My physical appearance at work is important not only for guests but also for me because I feel very confident in this" (Participant, 4). –"I am very satisfied and happy with my uniform and appearance in hotel" (Participant, 6). "It feels very good when my physical appearance is perfect, I am very happy and I feel courageous at work" (Participant, 8). "I directly interact with guests and when I am well-Dressed so it gives me the confidence to build good relationship with Guests" (Participant, 12), with all these similar responses, few number of the participants offered a different view and shared "It can be difficult to look good all the time" (Participant, 5). "It looks good to be well-Presented but wearing this uniform all day is difficult" (Participant, 7).

### **Discussion**

This section discusses the findings, i.e. themes in the light of the existing literature and draws conclusion based on the discussion of these findings.

##### **Theme 1: Lack of Knowledge and Understanding of the Term Aesthetic Labour Practices**

This theme highlights the lack of understanding and knowledge about the term aesthetic labour practices, whereas majority of the frontline employees in the Hospitality sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were unfamiliar with the term Aesthetic Labour. The majority of frontline employees were although engaged in Aesthetic labour practices but however they were not aware of the exact term Aesthetic Labour Practices. It is very important for the frontline employees to have proper understanding of the term

aesthetic labour practices. The majority were lacking understanding of the term but however one of all twelve participants was fully aware of the exact term and its importance in the Tourism and Hospitality sector, while the participant mentioned, that he is a Tourism and Hospitality graduate from abroad where participant gained sufficient knowledge about Aesthetic Labour practices. It's important to consider the understanding of Aesthetic Labour Practices before understanding its impacts on psychological well-being of employees. Moreover the existing research seems to be lacking this particular theme within the context of Hospitality Industry in Pakistan, especially in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, however there is a lot of existing studies on this particular area in the developed regions across the world (Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014). Furthermore, studies have suggested exploring this research area in other parts of the world where as cultural contexts, industry situation and employees attitude and understanding may vary across the globe (Gross et al., 2017; Spielmann & Bailey, 2016; Chen & Kang, 2019). In addition this particular theme is considered to be one of the key contributions to existing literature in the context of Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

#### Theme 2: Impact on Psychological Well-being

The findings of the current study have shown that employees who were engaged in Aesthetic Labour Practices in Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have experienced very positive impacts of Aesthetic Labour on their psychological Well-being, where majority of the participants were of the view that they feel active, confident, motivated and happy at work while engaging in Aesthetic Labour practices. Moreover the findings suggest the participant's passion and dedication for a career in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry make them able to work in any situation, which shows the motivation of employees behind their jobs which enhance their psychological well-Being. In addition these findings meet the current study's objectives by identifying the impacts of Aesthetic Labour on employee's Psychological well-being in Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However this study disagrees with the existing literature based on its findings where majority of the studies have highlighted a variety of negative impacts of aesthetic labour on employees psychological well-being , such as mental health concerns, body image dissatisfaction (Harrington, 2011), body commodification, and identity conflict(Weng., 2015 : Grandey 2016) .In addition the existing body of literature have also shown other important aspects of psychological well-being, such as Autonomy, confidence, and self-esteem, where studies have highlighted a low level of confidence, self-esteem, and lack of autonomy among participants, all of these aspects are important part of psychological well-being (. However the current study's findings have only highlighted the positive impacts of Aesthetic Labour on employee's psychological well-being in the context of Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, considering it to be the contribution of the current study to the body of existing literature in the context of Pakistan. Overall the existing studies are conducted in various sectors across the globe where situation may vary from region to region. So, therefore the current study's contribution to the existing literature in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa context is a major part of this whole research process.

#### Conclusion

The current study was based on two main objectives i.e. to identify the level of knowledge and understanding of the term aesthetic labour practices and to identify the impact of these practices on their psychological well-being. The findings have revealed that majority of employees were lacking knowledge and understanding of the term aesthetic labour practices and the majority of employees have positive experiences with these practices as they argue that they feel happy and confident. Overall these findings must be considered by the management of the hospitality sector organizations to keep their employees motivated and engaged in these practices and to create and build the knowledge and understanding of these practices especially among frontline employees. Keeping in view the limitations of the study, future research should focus on other organizations with in the service sector as Aesthetic Labour practices can



be seen across the overall service industry. Furthermore, future research need to focus on other geographical regions as the current study was limited to the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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