

The Dark Side of Aesthetic Labor: Ethics and The Atmosphere of Sexual Harassment

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Mustafa Kocanci¹ , Tuğçe Duygu Yazar² , Mete Kaan Namal² ,
and Beyhan Aksoy² 

Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of aesthetic labor, focusing on the conditions that foster a climate of sexual harassment within the workplace and how workers engaged in such labor respond to it. The research interprets the interconnections between aesthetic labor and related concepts, particularly the embedded patriarchal codes within aesthetic labor. Through in-depth interviews with 37 women working in the entertainment industry, the study provides a descriptive analysis of how the dimensions of aesthetic labor contribute to creating environments that are conducive to sexual harassment. Findings suggest that women in this sector often perceive harassment as an inherent part of their jobs and develop various coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the study reveals that businesses frequently adopt patriarchal responses to harassment or disregard it altogether due to concerns about profitability and competitiveness, thus normalizing sexual harassment and perpetuating a hostile work environment. This study argues that, by situating aesthetic labor within broader discussions on work ethics, such labor practices not only commodify the female body but also intensify gender-based vulnerabilities in service delivery processes, particularly in the entertainment industry. The research calls for ethical and policy interventions to safeguard workers' dignity and counter the normalization of harassment, advocating for accountability that respects work ethics and promotes safer environments.

Plain Language Summary

How aesthetic labor in the entertainment industry creates vulnerability to sexual harassment: An ethical perspective

This study examines how aesthetic labor shapes the work environment for women in the entertainment industry. Aesthetic labor, which emphasizes appearance, behavior, and social interactions, can make sexual harassment a routine part of jobs in this industry. This research uses interviews with 37 female workers to understand workplace expectations around appearance and charm. These expectations often put women in uncomfortable or unsafe situations that they may feel pressured to tolerate. The findings reveal that harassment is often perceived by these women as an unavoidable part of their roles, and they develop different ways to cope with it. Businesses within the entertainment sector may ignore or downplay harassment concerns, prioritizing profits and competitive edge over the well-being of their employees. This attitude not only normalizes harassment but can also create a workplace atmosphere that is hostile to women. The study argues that current practices in aesthetic labor exploit the female body and reinforce

¹Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Antalya, Türkiye

²Akdeniz University, Antalya, Türkiye

Corresponding Author:

Beyhan Aksoy, Akdeniz University, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Çalışma Ekonomisi ve Endüstri İlişkileri Bölümü, C Blok, Antalya, 07070, Türkiye.
Email: beyhanaksoy@akdeniz.edu.tr

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article



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gender vulnerabilities. The research calls for stronger ethical standards and policy changes to protect workers' dignity. It advocates for companies to adopt accountability measures that ensure a safer, harassment-free workplace.

Keywords

aesthetic labor, sexual harassment, work ethics, entertainment industry, gender

Introduction

In today's service economy, the body is transformed into a tool and a resource to enhance employment opportunities and economic returns, becoming an "asset" that offers better social and financial returns (Lovell, 2000). Patriarchal capitalism, which integrates the female body into the product itself (Elias et al., 2017), not only exposes the female body but reconstructs it to be presented alongside the commodity, aiming to mask the deficiencies of the product. This commodification of the female body intersects closely with broader cultural and economic transformations shaped by neoliberal values.

The neoliberal self, by privileging femininity through the relationship between women and consumption, seeks to expand individual consumption capacities; this call for transformation becomes especially pronounced through women (Davies, 2005). While Peiss (2001) describes beauty as the best form of marketing, Foucault (2012) highlights how the body is mobilized by power and placed at the center of social control. According to Wallace and Wolf (2012), the body, disciplined through culture, becomes a manipulative object of sales strategies.

As Bourdieu (2017), Baudrillard (2013, 2014) and Bauman (1999) point out, this sales strategy underlines the role of consumption in shaping the social position of the individual and reveals the often-invisible socio-cultural dimensions of this process. Bock (1997), meanwhile, interprets consumption as a form of identity construction. Baudrillard (2013) argues that the body, as the most valuable object of consumption, is saturated with meaning and sexualized under the guise of "liberation." In this discourse, which turns the body into a spectacle, shame is reframed as an obstacle to be overcome (Featherstone, 1982). Thus, while women were once enslaved by their gender, they are now "liberated" through it (Baudrillard, 2013). In this process, the female body is directly commodified, standardized, and integrated into nearly every product, becoming a medium of access to the commodity through patriarchal representations in media, advertising, and pornography (Dworkin, 1974).

Research focusing on the role of atmosphere in the service experience highlights that the appearance of frontline employees has become a strategic tool influencing consumer behavior and enhancing brand differentiation (Pounders et al., 2015). In this context, aesthetic

labor refers to the control of the worker's body in accordance with managerial directives (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Seçkin, 2014; Witz et al., 2003). The growth and increasing competition within the service sector have made physical appearance central to recruitment, training, and management practices (Warhurst et al., 2000), while surveillance mechanisms ensure that aesthetic labor is continuously performed under both managerial and customer-oriented pressures (Temel, 2023).

Beyond managerial strategies, cultural narratives around work and identity also reshape how aesthetic labour is perceived and experienced by employees. Kim (2018) points out that in neoliberal work culture, aesthetic labor gains connotations of entertainment, self-expression, and entrepreneurial identity. Women's aesthetic labor, through adornment and consumption, is reinterpreted as a performance of femininity within the perspectives of pleasure and style, ultimately evolving into a trend. According to Elias et al. (2017), neoliberalism, as an economic, social, cultural, and psychic project, transforms beauty practices and encourages individuals to become "aesthetic entrepreneurs." These shifts highlight the blurred boundaries between imposed aesthetic demands and voluntary self-expression in the neoliberal service economy.

A common feature of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and aesthetic labour is shaping consumer perception, mitigating potential disruptions in the consumption process, and guiding customer choices. Therefore, "looking good, speaking properly, and having a good body" become key performance criteria for service workers (Quinn, 2008; Williams & Connell, 2010; Witz et al., 2003). Aesthetic labor, by centering corporeality, reveals how the worker's body is commercialized and strategically transformed beyond the realm of emotion (Mears, 2014).

In the service sector, particularly in jobs involving direct customer contact, strict standards of appearance and grooming, also a sexualized form of attractiveness, are often imposed (Cockburn, 1991; Folgerø & Fjeldstad, 1995). Within this context, sexuality can become a direct reason for women's employment (Steinle, 2006; Stevens, 2012), and businesses often leverage female sexuality to enhance productivity in such roles (Hanser, 2005). Over time, these expectations are also internalized and reflected in workers' choices and actions. In this regard, Mears (2014) highlights that workers engaged in aesthetic labour commodify their bodies to varying degrees, with

appearance occupying a central position in wage-effort negotiations. Moreover, although the feminine self-presentation is culturally expected, it is simultaneously devalued through its association with low status (Elias et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Warner (1991) argues that heterosexuality is established through structure and culture as a normative framework, wherein sexuality is defined between men and women and reproduced in a heteronormative manner. According to Acker (1990), heteronormativity shapes sexuality as a natural part of the social order, normalizing sexual harassment in everyday work life. Women engaged in aesthetic labor are sexually objectified under the influence of patriarchy and the male gaze. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), this can be explained through objectification theory, which posits that sexual objectification occurs when the body or its parts are evaluated based on sexual desirability, independent of the person's identity, resulting in the woman being perceived as a sexual object. Millet (2024) characterizes this phenomenon as the control and exploitation of female bodies and sexuality by men. However, the ethical foundation of employment relationships necessitates respect for workers' rights and dignity. Yet, insecurity, the normalization of sexual harassment, and the burdening of individuals with ethical responsibility hinder this process (Rowan, 2000; Perry et al., 2020). As Bloom (2017) emphasizes, neoliberalism depoliticizes moral problems by detaching them from structural contexts and individualizing ethical responsibility, thus reinforcing a system that overlooks power imbalances.

This study provides a descriptive analysis of how the dimensions of aesthetic labour contribute to the creation of environments conducive to sexual harassment, based on in-depth interviews conducted with 37 women employed in the entertainment sector. The findings, which explore how workers engaged in aesthetic labor perceive their jobs and cope with sexual harassment, are discussed within the framework of the ethical standards governing employment relationships.

Aesthetic Labor, Sexual Harassment, and Work Ethics

Building on the recognition of the body as a strategic tool in the service sector, scholars have sought to conceptualize the various ways in which aesthetic expectations are systematically embedded into employment practices. Within this framework, Warhurst et al. (2000) identified three key dimensions of aesthetic labor. The first dimension pertains to the recruitment process, characterized by employers' expectations of specific social and aesthetic qualities in candidates (Huzell & Larsson, 2012). The second dimension encompasses training and management

practices, where employees undergo transformations to align with the company's ideal worker, subject to constant monitoring. The third dimension involves external controls on employees' body language, verbal communication, and other behaviors during customer interactions. These embodied expectations not only shape employment practices but also intersect with broader social structures, creating vulnerabilities that can manifest in various forms of workplace violence and harassment.

Violence and harassment against women takes place within a socially structured framework shaped by politics, class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Hayes, 2013). Workplace violence and harassment are significant global issues, with 22.8% of workers reporting experiencing at least one form of physical, psychological, or sexual violence or harassment during their employment. The prevalence of sexual violence and harassment in the workplace is particularly concerning, with one in fifteen employees reporting such experiences, and young women being twice as likely as young men to be victims (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022). It is important to acknowledge that a substantial portion of workplace sexual harassment cases remain unreported (Clarke, 2014).

Sexual harassment is defined as the imposition of unwanted sexual demands within the context of an unequal power relationship (MacKinnon, 1979). Fitzgerald et al. (1999) classify sexual harassment into "Sexual coercion and bribery" involving demands for sexual favors in exchange for job-related benefits or threats, and "unwanted sexual attention," which includes unwanted romantic advances or physical contact. "Sexual hostility" also encompasses offensive behaviors like sexual jokes or exposure to sexually suggestive material, while "sexist hostility" refers to discriminatory remarks or actions based on gender. It manifests in various forms, including unsolicited requests for social interaction or dating, personal insults and mockery, leering, offensive remarks, non-verbal gestures, sexual propositions, and both sexual and physical assaults (McDonald, 2012). However, what is considered sexual harassment can vary across cultures and contexts. Toker (2016) highlights that in addition to sexual coercion and bribery, physical sexual offense, and sexual hostility, research conducted in Türkiye has identified "Insinuation of interest" as a form of sexual harassment.

These cultural and structural norms legitimize gender inequalities, reinforce male dominance, and normalize sexually suggestive behaviors such as touching, gazing, and catcalling within everyday social interactions (Anderson et al., 2009; Kavanaugh, 2013). Although harassment is observed in all areas of working life, according to Eurofound (2020), the service sector is where harassment is most prevalent. Sales personnel and

service workers experience harassment at disproportionately higher rates compared to others. Reşitoğlu and Tokat (2018) attribute the widespread nature of harassment in the service industry to the dominance of neoliberal policies and the multifaceted expectations imposed on workers, including aesthetic and emotional labor. The labor qualities in question are primarily the aesthetic labor integrated into the marketing processes of the product. Organizational models that focus on continuously improving employee performance to increase company profits have led to the highest tolerance levels for employee attitudes and behaviors towards customers, focusing on changing work attire to increase sales (Adkins, 1995; Hochschild, 2012; Taylor, 1997; Wolkowitz, 2006), thereby commodifying employees and, in some cases, making the employee the product itself. Bars and nightclubs, where sexuality is made aesthetically visible, are among the primary workplaces in the service industry where such dynamics are most pronounced. Hall (1993), Kavanaugh and Anderson (2009), and Kavanaugh (2013) argue that the cultural atmosphere in these environments normalizes sexual harassment, blurring the lines between harassment and normal behavior, and even perceiving it as a natural part of the labor process.

Numerous studies show that orienting women's bodies toward closeness and sensitivity to male customers reinforces their subordinate status in working life and increases their vulnerability to harassment (Coffey et al., 2018; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Wolkowitz, 2006; Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). Businesses in the hospitality industry, such as cafes, bars, and restaurants, increasingly demand higher levels of aesthetic labor from front-line employees to enhance customer satisfaction. However, research also suggests that aesthetic labor positively impacts customer satisfaction (Luoh and Tsaur, 2009; Tsaur et al., 2015; Quach et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Workplaces that require high levels of aesthetic labor are described by Szymanski et al. (2011) as "sexually objectifying work environments," while Walters (2016) describes these workplaces as spaces where "satisfied" customers encourage employees to harass them. In these settings, women's bodies and sexuality are on display; their appearance and attire are adjusted to make it difficult to avoid the male gaze. In this context, elements of emotional labor such as patience towards customers, prioritizing customer needs, suppressing personal feelings, and resolving problems in favor of the customer are activated (Hochschild, 2012; Good & Cooper, 2016). However, aesthetic labor goes beyond emotional labor by altering the nature and context of the customer-worker relationship. Good and Cooper (2016), along with Fuller and Smith (1991), highlight how this

"intimate" demeanor can be misinterpreted by customers, thereby increasing the likelihood of harassment. Scholars such as Adkins (1995), Guerrier and Adib (2000), and Kavanaugh (2013) assert that the work itself in service and sales roles is inherently sexualized.

The glamour aspect of aesthetic labor also involves the physical labor required for an individual to be readily approachable and to align their physical self as closely as possible with their public self-image (Wissinger, 2016). While presenting such a self in the workplace is considered "part of the job," the customer's response to this proximity is determined by the customer's boundaries and is difficult to control externally, thus leaving the employee vulnerable to sexual harassment. According to Riach and Wilson (2014), such dynamics naturalize the perception of workers' bodies as objects of desire and shape customer-employee interactions accordingly.

Young women working in service and sales, especially in late-night environments where alcohol consumption is high and pleasure and danger intertwine, are often stigmatized as "easy women" (Kavanaugh, 2013; Nicholls, 2017; Hubbard, 2007). To combat this stigma, women attempt to create safe spaces within these risky environments by using various symbols and developing certain behaviors and attitudes. Waitt et al. (2011) note that in these situations, women try to either render their sexuality invisible or make it socially acceptable. Leyshon (2008) draws attention to efforts to manage relationships through "moderate" cleavage or sexy attire, while Riach and Wilson (2014) emphasize the use of physical barriers or bodily distance to establish boundaries with customers. Nevertheless, women working in these environments are often isolated and do not experience enjoyment in their labor (Waitt et al., 2011; Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Nicholls, 2017). Furthermore, they face heightened risks of psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Smyth et al., 2024).

In addition to these problems, Waring (2011) argues that strategies designed to profit from the aesthetic qualities of employees are discriminatory and can be as harmful as other discriminatory practices. Nevertheless, employment relationships should adhere to certain ethical standards. Employment relationships must be grounded in ethical principles in order to safeguard the dignity, rights, and well-being of workers. On the other hand, the asymmetrical bargaining power between employers and employees often results in exploitation, discrimination, and breaches of confidentiality (Rowan, 2000). In particular, the normalization of harassment as "part of the job" in some sectors and the perception among employees that they are insufficiently protected hinder reporting of such incidents, creating a cycle of silence perpetuated by precarity (Perry et al., 2020). Bloom (2017) argues that neoliberalism strategically

adopts traditional ethics to legitimize the capitalist system, holding individuals personally accountable for making their societies, workplaces, and lives more ethical. Rather than transforming morality, this perspective individualizes it, making individuals responsible for addressing the market's moral issues and inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of the very system they oppose. Individuals' ethical evaluations vary between universal principles (idealism) and contextual relativism (Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977). While relativists are sensitive to context, idealists adhere to absolute principles regardless of circumstances (Keyton & Rhodes, 1997). Such individual differences influence perceptions of sensitive workplace issues like sexual harassment. However, leaving ethical assessments entirely to subjective individual judgment may undermine core values such as justice, equality, and respect.

Legge (2007) contends that ethics is about defining what is good and ensuring fair distribution, and that the post-Enlightenment modernist understanding of ethics (Kant, Mill, and Rawls) is collectivist because it links ethics to collective rules that justify individual behavior. This approach differs from postmodern individualism, which views ethics as a personal choice for creating an aesthetic identity. Cummings (2000: 213) argues that individuals cannot simply create their own morality, and that ethics is more about how we should live, emphasizing the collective "we."

The adoption of a singular rather than pluralistic perspective in employment relations (Budd & Bhawe, 2010; Greenwood & Freeman, 2011) and the concentration of power in managerial hands weaken ethical responsibility (Aksoy & Koçancı, 2019). According to Erdemir (2012), business ethics has evolved from regulating employer-employee relationships on an ethical basis to offering strategic responses to the crises of liberal capitalism. Yet, a moral employment contract should be based on mutual rights and responsibilities. Business ethics, rather than focusing on individual gain, must be grounded in a collective value system that ensures fairness, acknowledges power asymmetries, and promotes trustworthy work environments.

Research Design and Methodology

This research examines the intersection of aesthetic labor, gender, and sexual harassment. It investigates how employers utilizing aesthetic labor construct their understanding of it, the processes through which aesthetic labor exposes female employees to sexual harassment, and the techniques these employees use to protect themselves against harassment. The research also considers employers' responses toward harassment in the context of establishing a work relationship with ethical standards.

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue, with many women reluctant to report incidents due to fear of stigmatization or retaliation (Reşitoğlu & Tokat, 2018). Defining the exact boundaries of sexual harassment can be challenging, as legal definitions often rely on subjective standards of "reasonableness" and the frequency of the behavior (McDonald, 2012). This ambiguity makes it difficult to quantify and analyze sexual harassment as a discrete variable.

The perception of sexual harassment is highly contextual, shaped by factors such as workplace culture, employer attitudes, and power dynamics. This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how these factors contribute to a climate that can facilitate sexual harassment, particularly within the context of aesthetic labor. By examining the experiences of women in this field, the research aims to shed light on various forms of harassment, including unwanted physical contact, verbal abuse, and invasions of personal space. Based on this aim, the research seeks answers to the following questions:

- How do women employees' aesthetic labor practices shape their visibility and perception in the workplace?
- How do aesthetic labor expectations contribute to the creation of an atmosphere open to sexual harassment for female employees?
- How do working women experience and make sense of the boundary between aesthetic labor and harassment?
- How do patriarchal capitalist workplace structures normalise and legitimise aesthetic labor and sexual harassment?

Within this framework, adhering to the fundamental principles of feminist approach, data was collected through semi-structured interview forms based on a phenomenological design. The research was conducted with female receptionists, waitresses, and bartenders working in bars, restaurants, and bistros within the service sector where aesthetic labor is considered indispensable and sexual harassment is perceived as "natural" for female employees. The sample was determined using criterion-based sampling (Creswell, 2013). The sample size was 37. The interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted face-to-face. Prior to the interview day, appointments were scheduled with individuals invited to participate in the study. The meetings took place outside the workplace, and no monetary or material incentives were offered to the participants. All participants in this study are women who were required by their workplaces to wear sexually appealing, attractive, and aesthetic clothing. In line with feminist methodological principles as suggested by Kümbetoğlu (2019), the data were

analyzed through the lived experiences and narratives of the participants using the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis, with its flexible structure and sensitivity to data, is an effective qualitative method (Braun & Clarke, 2021) for exploring complex social phenomena such as aesthetic labor, sexual harassment, and gender. The analysis process involved six stages: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An open coding technique was employed during the coding stage. Each interview transcript was thoroughly reviewed to ensure comprehensive coding (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were developed using both inductive and deductive approaches. Pre-determined, conceptually grounded themes such as aesthetic labor, patriarchy, and sexual harassment (a priori themes) were combined with themes emerging directly from the interview data (data-driven themes).

The coding process was supported by MAXQDA 2020 software, which facilitated the systematic organization of data. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the following procedures were implemented:

- To enhance the reliability of the coding, the initial codes were reviewed by two independent academics specializing in gender equality. The codes were then compared with those generated by the authors, resulting in an intercoder reliability rate of 90% (Campbell et al., 2013). Codes on which consensus could not be reached were excluded from the analysis.
- An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, with detailed documentation of all analytical procedures, including participants' contributions (Nowell et al., 2017).
- Negative case analysis was employed to ensure thematic coherence. Divergent participant experiences and expressions related to harassment were incorporated into the coding process and shared with external reviewers to address limitations in generalizability, which are inherent in qualitative research (Patton, 2015).
- Finally, short member-check interviews were conducted with two participants to verify the accuracy of the findings. Participants confirmed the validity of the themes and codes in reflecting their experiences (Birt et al., 2016).

Given the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences, the research was conducted not only with the approval of the Ethics Committee of [University Name] but also under additional ethical safeguards. Interviews

were held in one-on-one settings chosen by the participants to ensure privacy and security. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, identifying information was kept confidential, explicit consent was obtained before audio recording, and all recordings were stored securely with access limited to the researcher.

Recognizing the potential emotional impact of recalling traumatic experiences, the interviews were paced according to the comfort of the participants. Rather than asking detailed questions about the specifics of harassment, the focus was placed on the environments in which harassment occurred and the structural dynamics shaping those contexts. Participants were informed about support organizations they could contact if needed during or after the interviews, and they were clearly told that they could terminate the interview at any time.

This research seeks to contribute to the visibility of aesthetic labor practices and gender-based harassment, thereby generating knowledge that supports the promotion of gender equality in the workplace. The sharing of participants' experiences not only helps others in similar situations feel less isolated but also enhances public awareness in this domain. For these reasons, the potential societal benefits of the study are considered to outweigh the minimal risks posed to participants.

Before the study commenced, participants were presented with an Informed Consent Form detailing the research objectives, scope, methodological procedures, and confidentiality principles. Consent was obtained either in written or verbal form after participants had read and understood the information provided.

Findings

The study involved 37 women aged between 18 and 28. A significant majority of the participants (29) were currently enrolled in university, while only one was married. Those employed earned an average of \$515 per month, supplemented by variable tips. While the exact income from tips could not be quantified, it was evident that it positively influenced their work motivation.

Regarding social security, 26 of the participants were covered, while 11 were working off the books. The average workday lasted between 9 and 10 hours, typically starting in the afternoon and extending into the late night. The most experienced participant had been working in this role for 7 years.

Performing Aesthetic Labor

Working in the entertainment sector of the service industry is characterized by a high degree of precarity and a lack of standardized working conditions. Job tasks, including break times and meal periods, are often

dictated by customer demands. As Participant O37 stated, "If I didn't need the money, I wouldn't work here, not even for fun." This sentiment is echoed by many participants, such as Participant O22, who described her job as "a terrible job" and expressed her desire to leave as soon as possible. This aligns with the broader trend of women in service industries experiencing exploitative working conditions, low wages, and limited opportunities for advancement. While many participants expressed their desire to leave these jobs once they had completed their education or secured more stable employment, others, like Participant O36, viewed the work as a temporary means to an end. She stated, "You can't do this job forever; there are very few women over 30 in our sector. Tips are very good during the tourism season, so I'll continue for a few more years and then quit. Maybe I'll open my own place." This suggests that while the work is often seen as exploitative, it can also provide opportunities for women to gain valuable experience and capital for future endeavors.

None of the participants viewed their aesthetic labor-based work as a part of their long-term career. For them, this job was primarily seen as a stepping stone or a temporary phase to meet their immediate financial needs. All participants understood that this type of work is highly contingent on youth, appearance, dynamism, and performance.

Experiences in the First and Second Dimension of Aesthetic Labor

Participants were asked whether employers clearly defined the expected qualifications and tasks at the beginning of employment. According to their responses, the expectations related to emotional and aesthetic labor included being smiley, energetic, dressed casually, well-groomed, having good posture, being attractive, charming, having an ideal height and weight, being thick-skinned, and wearing specific work attire. During the training and management phase, participants were expected to acquire skills such as providing recommendations to customers, showing interest in customers, assisting customers, persuading customers, being patient, and being a guide. These skills were emphasized as essential requirements by the companies they worked for.

As Participant O33 stated, "My job is not just saying 'welcome.' First, I need to visually attract customers, then seat them, and ensure they stay as long as possible." This statement effectively captures the construction of the first two dimensions of aesthetic labor. The organization of emotional and aesthetic labor, coupled with the control of bodies and the display of beauty alongside the product, are some of the aspects we found in our research

and were later identified by participants as "justifications" for harassment.

The Construction of Sexual Harassment

Service industry jobs impose aesthetic demands on employees, requiring them to embody specific looks or behaviors to enhance customer satisfaction. While participants were not required to wear "specific" uniforms, they reported being expected to wear clothing that revealed their legs, midriff, chest, back, or shoulders while working. The cost of purchasing these outfits was not reimbursed by the establishment, and women were also expected to wear perfume and makeup while on the job.

As Participant O21 stated, "I work with my hair down and always have to smell nice. The boss wants us to get close enough to the customers for them to smell our hair," highlighting how aesthetic labor is used to entice customers before the service itself. Participant O23 emphasized the controlling nature of establishments by saying, "I take great care when going to work. I have to wear a dress instead of simple pants. My hair and makeup must be flawless... I accepted these conditions when I started this job. The bosses want us to be very visible." While some participants reported less strict environments, the overall trend in the sample suggested otherwise, as these practices were seen as integral to attracting customers. Participant O1 stated, "I need to make myself noticeable in the establishment. When I dress more conservatively, there are fewer customers. If there are fewer customers, there's less income, and if there's less income, we're not needed. Besides, this visual display is necessary to increase tips... being open and sexy is part of it." These statements indicate a situation where female employees are encouraged to tolerate harassment in exchange for tips. Some participants even linked this to the initial stages of harassment. Participants O1 and O19 reported being criticized or reprimanded by their employers for not being sufficiently "open and sexy," with employers even using derogatory language to make the employee feel inadequate. O19 summarized many participants' experiences by saying, "Actually, when I didn't pay enough attention, my boss would directly tell me I looked ugly and send me home to change my clothes."

Participant O2 stated, "I've developed such a mindset that when the place is empty, I feel like it's my fault. My male coworkers and boss think the same way. They've repeated it so many times that if the bar is empty, it's definitely our fault," indicating that the system for attracting customers is built on their backs. This situation is often compared to the occupancy rates of other bars and

restaurants in the area. Establishments expect female employees to dress more revealingly and compete with women working in other businesses. Participant O1 expressed this as follows: “If I wear less revealing clothes and the bar next door is full, my boss mentions it. He scolds me saying, ‘Look at the others, and then look at yourself.’”

Another factor leading to interviewees experiencing sexual harassment is the employers’ expectation that employees facilitate customer socialization within the venue. Employees are expected to incorporate some social skills into their appearance. A key skill is to be friendly, helpful, and outgoing towards customers. All interviewees reported that employers expected employees to prioritize these qualities in their interactions with customers. As Participant O26 stated, “To do this job, you need to have the highest level of communication skills. Being shy, timid, or having a dull personality is a sufficient reason to be fired,” indicating how employers utilize the expected sociability when hiring. Participant O1 further elaborated, “The boss wants us to be both charming, talkative, and sexy. Flirting with customers, allowing small touches, and maintaining eye contact are part of the job.” This highlights the transformation of customer interactions.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that expectations regarding the appearance and behavior of female employees are considered part of aesthetic labor and are instrumentalized to serve customer satisfaction and profit-making goals in the workplace. This situation exacerbates the physical and psychological burdens of aesthetic labor demands, as well as increasing the risk of harassment. The demands of employers and customers in this regard create a conducive environment for the exploitation of female employees, both emotionally and physically.

What Happens in the Third Dimension of Aesthetic Labor Perception of Sexual Harassment and Strategies to Avoid Sexual Harassment

The entertainment industry is a field shaped by socio-cultural characteristics and designed to fulfill the expectations of those participating in entertainment. All participants reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention from customers. This often occurs both overtly and covertly. These behaviors range from requesting phone numbers, giving phone numbers, making light touches while taking orders, telling sexual jokes, making uncomfortable eye contact, trying to connect via social media, and even stalking. Men think that the sincere and warm relationship exhibited by female employees is an indicator of

the interest shown to them instead of seeing it as a part of emotional labor.

Participant O11 states, “After we’ve made our bodies a display and become intimate with customers, men feel entitled to a different position. Instead of acknowledging that this is part of my job, they assume I’ve become emotionally attached to them,” indicating that aesthetic labor naturally leads men to believe they have a right to approach women sexually. Participant O5 states, “Men misunderstand friendliness and intimacy, and it makes them uncomfortable. Some directly think we’re there for sex. They think they can harass me because they paid for a drink,” suggesting that aesthetic labor in their workplace is seen as an opportunity for men. Participant O18 recounts an experience, “One day, a couple came to the bar. The woman looked at my cleavage and said, ‘What are you wearing, beautiful? You look amazing.’ She stared at me the whole time they were sitting,” highlighting that harassment can also come from women.

Participant O11 explains how they try to prevent harassment by regulating the level of intimacy with customers: “The clothing we wear is already inviting, but if our communication doesn’t counteract that invitation, harassment becomes inevitable. We protect ourselves through communication by using formal language, avoiding close proximity, serving customers and then moving away from the table, and responding to jokes with a slight smile without engaging further in the conversation.

O30 described a harassment incident she experienced, conveying the fear she felt and the subsequent measures she took. She stated, “There was a man who had been a regular customer for years. Of course, he continued coming after I started working there... He always had harassing behaviors. For instance, he would tip excessively, creating a sense of obligation... Money is important, of course, so seeing this, you tend to stay quiet about other incidents. Anyway, one day someone knocked on my door, and it was him. I was incredibly shocked and scared. He asked if we could talk, and I slammed the door in his face. Apparently, he had been following me... I never worked at that bar again,” thus highlighting how sexual harassment can escalate into an obsession and pose significant danger.

All women participating in their study indicated that their primary strategy to avoid sexual harassment was to “fine-tune” this intimacy. This is a paradoxical situation as maintaining customer satisfaction through emotional labor is considered a fundamental requirement of the job.

Participants reported frequently engaging in avoidance behaviors when feeling harassed. O33 summarized the most common avoidance strategy by stating, “When I feel like I’m about to be harassed, I ignore the customers at that table, avoid eye contact, and transfer the table to another colleague.” Almost all participants mentioned

creating distance from the harasser, while some described positioning themselves behind bars, other tables, or columns to remain out of sight. O36 stated, "A man comes to the bar and sits down, constantly trying to talk. Talking is part of our job, but when I notice he's being pushy, I move to the other end of the bar. As the drinks increase, so do the shouts from the other end of the bar, but minimizing contact is my first resort," indicating that distancing oneself is the most common strategy to avoid sexual harassment.

Men can be important allies in supporting women in the fight against sexism. Participant O32 described receiving support from male colleagues in the face of sexual harassment with the following words: 'Our work environment is better than many others. When someone hits on me, I tell the other male employees. They handle the table, but if that's not enough, they take the bill directly to his table.'

Some participants reported having to remind customers that they were not their personal servants and that they should be treated with respect to prevent sexual harassment. O31 stated, "No one can ask me, 'Honey, where's my drink?' or 'Beautiful, bring me my drink.' No matter how friendly they are, I have to warn them in such situations. Usually, this warning works," explaining how she prevented harassment from escalating.

While it may not seem like an avoidance strategy at first glance, indifference to sexual harassment emerged as a strategy developed by female participants. O10 stated, "Customers think we are easy women, ready for anything. They ask for my number, what time I get off work, if I want to go to dinner... and hundreds of other questions. I don't answer any of them, and they understand," indicating that indifference was effective. Several participants accepted sexual harassment as a part of the job and suggested it should be ignored. O34 stated, "If you think you won't be harassed while serving people drinks, showing off your sexy legs and breasts, and getting them drunk to drink more, then you shouldn't be in this business," implying that indifference, or rather, apathy, was a strategy. O26 expressed, "I don't care anymore. As long as there is no physical contact, I don't bother... When you are exposed to it every day, you get used to it, and I don't have time to sit and cry," indicating a degree of acceptance of sexual harassment.

Some participants argued that sexual harassment should not be personalized due to the nature of the bar environment and the prevalence of intoxication. As Good and Cooper (2016) also pointed out, our study found that different reasons are sought behind sexual harassment incidents. However, this does not absolve women from being passive actors in sexual harassment. O34 stated, "There's a saying, 'There are no ugly women, only little vodka.' There's a lot of vodka in the bar we

work in. So even if I didn't dress this way or act this way, that man would do it after drinking that vodka, it's not about me," indicating that she did not personalize the harassment.

Some participants mentioned creating fictitious fiancés or boyfriends to avoid sexual harassment. O21 stated, "I don't have a fiancé, but I always wear a ring when I'm at work. I realized that this protected me to some extent," indicating that she created the image of being in a relationship to protect herself from harassment. O10 said, "The person who intends to harass doesn't jump straight to the point. First, they want to have a conversation. They ask questions to understand if what you're visually presenting is directed at them. During that question phase, I say that I live with my family, have a boyfriend, will be an engineer after graduation, and will get married soon. I'm lying, of course. This sends a message to the other person that I'm doing this job, but I'm not alone, and they usually understand," explaining how she created fictitious protectors. O10 continued, "Customers who will continue to harass are already there. They try to provoke me by asking questions like, 'How does your boyfriend allow you to work here?' or 'How does your family allow you to work here?' That's when you realize that if you continue the conversation, the harassment will escalate," indicating that she was setting boundaries to prevent sexual harassment.

While women resort to strategies such as distancing themselves, remaining indifferent, and creating fictitious relationships to protect themselves from sexual harassment, some choose to disregard the acts of sexual harassment. Consequently, the notion of "this is just how things work here" creates a ground for women to convince themselves that their actions are not wrong. As others' perspectives are often "you knew what you were getting into when you started working here," women are mostly alone in coping with the sexual harassment they face in this sector.

Employers' Attitudes Towards Sexual Harassment

It is possible to categorize the attitudes of the employers within the scope of our study toward sexual harassment into three distinct groups. The first group consists of businesses that do not allow their employees to be harassed by customers. These businesses either control sexually harassing behavior or, when a female employee reports the incident to the manager, warn or remove the customer from the premises. According to our observations, all of these businesses are restaurants. O27, one of the women working in these businesses, said, "One day, I told the boss that the table over there was harassing me, and without saying a word, he told the chef to send the

bill. It's a great luck to have a boss like that at my workplace," providing an example of the firm's uncompromising stance against harassment. O15, on the other hand, stated, "The boss told me during the hiring process that I should dress in revealing clothing, be well-groomed, and build close relationships with customers, but he also added, 'If anything bothers you, tell us directly, consider me like an older brother.'", indicating that he presented himself as a safe haven for the employee whom he had made vulnerable to harassment.

The second group of employers, often bistro-style establishments, are those where female employees face sexual harassment that pushes the limits of their tolerance, or even physical harassment, and where these situations are not addressed. In these businesses, it is noteworthy that sometimes even the boss or managers are involved in verbal sexual harassment. O26 stated, "When you say harassment, in our job, harassment starts with the boss. In front of my boyfriend, the boss squeezed my cheek, his eyes were on me from the first day, but maybe he doesn't even think it's harassment, he sees it as intimacy, so he certainly doesn't interfere when customers make lewd remarks or sexual jokes," indicating that harassment starts within the business itself. The vast majority of women working in second-group businesses do not consider verbal harassment as sexual harassment. O28 stated, "I don't care about verbal harassment anymore, and the boss doesn't care either," indicating that she has normalized verbal harassment due to being left alone by the business in this matter.

The third group of employers includes bars and bistros with a more intense nightlife. In these establishments, all types of sexual harassment, including physical harassment, occur, and harassment can begin with the owner himself. Employees are expected to engage in a level of intimacy with customers, including touching, almost as if flirting. O6 stated, "When customers get drunk, things escalate to a whole new level. The boss actually opened this business to get them drunk. Just the other day, a 55-year-old man hugged me around my waist, and the boss was laughing," indicating that the business's profits take precedence over harassment. There are numerous examples of this, and it can be said that the businesses are complicit in the harassment. O24 said, "The boss himself is a harasser, hugs, kisses... the more we remain silent about harassment, the more we gain, that's ok, but sometimes I ask myself why I put up with it... and the answer is clear. When I finish school, this job will be over." In these businesses, not only the boss and customers, but also other employees, emboldened by them, see no problem in harassing women engaged in emotional labor. O35 stated, "Male waiters, commis, kitchen staff... they are all actors in the harassment. Whether it's someone sticking their mouth right

next to your ear using the music as an excuse, or someone rubbing against you, it's all the same," emphasizing that harassment is a natural part of the establishment.

Research findings indicate that the experiences of women engaged in emotional labor with respect to sexual harassment in different types of businesses vary according to the attitudes of employers. While the first group of businesses is relatively better at protecting their employees from sexual harassment compared to other businesses, this protection is weak in the second group and sexual harassment is often overlooked. In the third group, however, sexual harassment is almost normalized in line with business interests, and the employer is also involved in this situation. These findings reveal that the level of harassment experienced in the workplace and the extent to which harassment is normalized are closely related to the employer's attitude and moral judgments. As summarized in Figure 1, these dynamics collectively illustrate how aesthetic labor intersects with managerial practices and customer interactions to create an atmosphere in which harassment becomes normalized.

Conclusion and Discussion

Within the patriarchal structure characteristic of the entertainment industry, sexual harassment is normalized; however, our study revealed no instances where this situation was reflected in formal complaints or legal processes. This absence may be attributed to the normalization of harassment frequently encountered by women in social life, coupled with the coping strategies they may develop from an early age. Aesthetic labor workers in this sector may perceive harassment as an inherent aspect of the profession. The prevalence of this perception diminishes women's resistance. It is particularly noteworthy that the three dimensions of aesthetic labor are transformed by men into a tool for legitimizing harassment. Aesthetic labor constitutes a mechanism predicated upon the exploitation of the female body by employers and clients. As a general summary of the study's findings, we can visualize the atmosphere in which sexual harassment emerges as follows:

Aesthetic labor workers in this sector are rendered more susceptible to sexual harassment owing to their subjection to the emotional and physical control of businesses. Women are positioned as potential objects of harassment across every dimension of aesthetic labor. Research findings demonstrate that during the recruitment process, individuals tolerant of harassment are selected, and subsequently, these behaviors are instilled in employees through a process of "normalization." In the third stage, employees are compelled to tolerate client-perpetrated harassment due to factors such as job insecurity and the fear of income loss. Furthermore, harassment

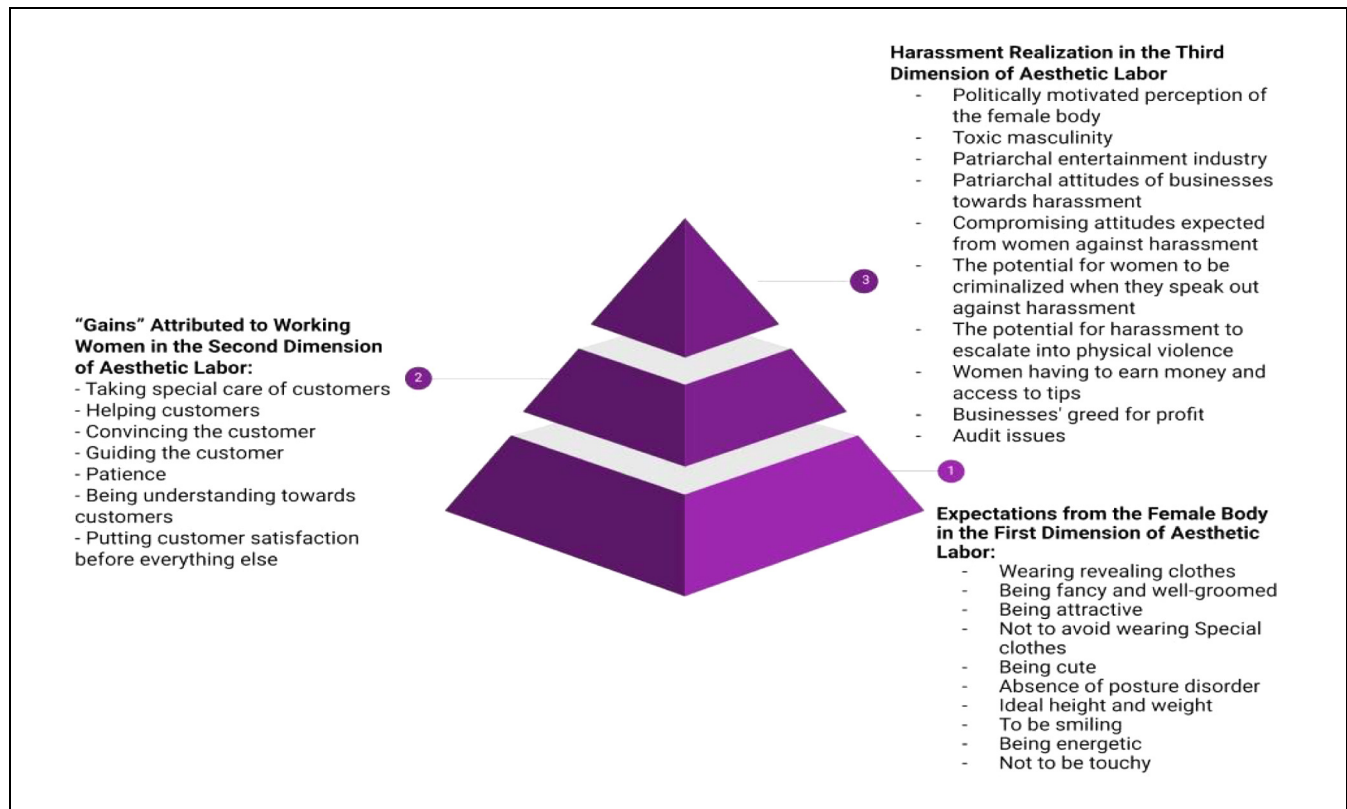


Figure 1. Aesthetic labor and the emergence of an atmosphere of harassment.

can originate not solely from clients but also from fellow employees and organizational policies, a phenomenon that becomes particularly salient within the upper echelons of aesthetic labor. The protection afforded to female aesthetic labor workers by businesses stems from patriarchal judgments rather than being grounded in work ethics (Cihangir et al., 2014). Measures implemented against harassment are likewise patriarchal in form: Employers provide this protection not through a corporate structure, but as “big brother” or “father” figures (or as male venue owners). Consequently, the employee-employer relationship constitutes a manifestation of ambivalent sexism, as defined by Glick and Fiske (1999) which perceives women positively yet as fragile, incompetent, and in need of protection. In patriarchally organized workplaces, sexual harassment, although addressed in legal frameworks, is nearly impossible to prevent and often remains at the level of mere aspiration. Patriarchal structures facilitate the concealment of harassment or its presentation as an intrinsic component of the work by normalizing concepts such as “flirting” and “intimacy.” As demonstrated by our research, even the protective stance rooted in patriarchy devolves into a hypocritical morality, whereby employers impose conditions upon their employees, citing them as “a requirement of the work,” that they would deem unacceptable for women in their private lives.

Women subjected to harassment typically confront a dichotomy of choices: filing a formal complaint or resigning from their job. However, initiating a complaint can result in victims being positioned as culpable parties, lead to social stigmatization, or even precipitate the violent escalation of the harassment. Consequently, filing a complaint is far from constituting a viable resolution. It is noteworthy that all women participants in the study indicated they would not pursue this occupation following graduation. The transient nature of aesthetic labor and the availability of gratuity income effectively transform the endurance of harassment to a certain degree into an economic imperative.

Our holistic evaluation of the findings indicates that combating harassment requires a multi-pronged strategy where various measures are mutually reinforcing. Key among these are clear anti-harassment policies (Becton et al., 2017; Lawrence, 2023). In addition to the implementation of anti-harassment policies, streamlined complaint mechanisms (Jenner et al., 2020) and comprehensive training programs (Tsuno et al., 2022) are also anticipated to contribute to the reduction of workplace harassment. Consistent with the findings of Perwaiz and Chhotani (2024), our study also observed that a lack of psychological and legal support contributes to the perpetuation of harassment. This deficiency

highlights aesthetic labor workers' limited capacity to defend themselves against harassment and impedes their psychological recovery following such incidents, potentially leading to a normalization of harassment. Drawing on Agrawat and Haridas (2023), our observations indicate that transforming the organizational climate and consistently implementing managerial attitudes and sanctions against all forms of harassment are equally crucial elements in the prevention of harassment. We contend that patriarchally motivated anti-harassment measures adopted by businesses undermine gender equality in the workplace, rendering harassment a 'relative' construct.

We also observed that, as Wolkowitz (2006) notes, the framing of the female body as "part of the job" is an important form of institutional neglect in the aesthetic labor sector. Similarly, Warhurst and Nickson's (2009) argument that the imposition of appearance-related standards, such as dress and make-up, creates a sexist atmosphere was echoed.

Towards a comprehensive resolution, the following measures are necessary:

- Gender-equality-focused appearance policies,
- The elimination of aesthetic requirements imposed without explicit employee consent,
- The expansion of mechanisms for addressing harassment to encompass the specific contexts of aesthetic labor,
- The inclusion of labor unions in the discourse surrounding bodily autonomy.

Fundamentally, these interventions must transcend mere individual protection and target the transformation of the institutional culture.

According to the feminist perspective, the individual is inherently political, with this political structure predicated upon relations of domination. Capitalism, understood as a constellation of political choices that reproduce relations of domination, is fundamentally premised on profitability (MacKinnon, 1989). Within this conceptualization, neoliberal logic fosters individualism, thereby granting privilege to economic elites while simultaneously eroding social solidarity. Legge (2007) highlights how the inclination towards individualism within the service sector subordinates work ethics to the discretion of management. Drawing on Giddens (1971), human qualities are quantified by exchange values; simultaneously, desires are directed with moral and aesthetic responsibilities relegated to the periphery (Whitehead & Crawshaw, 2014). Žižek (2011) attributes the individual's transformation into a consumer to a propensity for "stupid pleasures." In this vein, alcohol-based entertainment and leisure practices evolve into a deregulated value

environment consecrating personal consumer sovereignty (Ellis et al., 2018).

According to Mascini et al. (2013), neoliberalism's utilitarian individualism compels individuals, particularly those in precarious labor positions, to internalize work-related risks as personal responsibility, suggesting that even the most vulnerable among them internalize the neoliberal ideology. The varying degrees to which participants in our study remained silent in the face of harassment, taking responsibility and attempting to manage these challenges, reflect this trend. However, the normalization of sexual harassment in aesthetic labor extends beyond the individualizing, profit-oriented, and competitive neoliberal system.

Although men may hesitate to employ the term "sexual harassment," some persist in these behaviors for social, cultural, and biological reasons. This is because harassment is frequently perceived as integral to conforming to masculinity norms; these norms, constructed around axes of power, control, and sexuality, serve to normalize flirtatious conduct and sexually suggestive humor. This dynamic fuels toxic masculinity while simultaneously rendering sexual harassment commonplace. Conversely, according to Budd and Scoville (2005), interpretations of utilitarianism and liberal economics equate the maximization of individual interest with freedom. However, this perspective, while narrowly circumscribing freedom, presents a defense predicated on ethical egoism that is philosophically untenable. Under these conditions, the authors pointed out that justice and human dignity are overlooked, and emphasized the guidance offered by the ethical theories of Kant, Rawls, Aristotle, and Gilligan. These are theories that evaluate work relations through a more humane and dignity-centered lens, and which we, as the authors of this study, likewise embrace.

Kantian duty ethics offers a rational ethical framework based on the principle of "do not treat others in ways you would not want to be treated yourself," emphasizing the irrationality of failing to respect individuals (Bowie, 2005). However, our research shows that employers who hire aesthetic laborers violate this fundamental ethical principle by imposing conditions on others that they would not deem acceptable for women close to themselves. Similarly, in Rawls's (1991) concept of the "justice of fairness," social justice must be structured to protect the most disadvantaged individuals and be consistent with the idea of the "veil of ignorance." Yet, in pursuit of profit, employers violate the principle of liberty by exercising control over women's bodies; the principle of equal opportunity by favoring only those who meet specific aesthetic standards; and the principle of concern for the least advantaged by rendering

economically needy and gender-disadvantaged women vulnerable to harassment.

Aristotelian virtue ethics emphasizes the virtues necessary for a good life in a flourishing society, such as justice, courage, generosity, friendship, and honesty, qualities that contribute to becoming a good person (Kraut, 2018). Virtue theorists generally refer to human flourishing or development (Simpson, 1992), and virtues are admirable character traits that facilitate human growth (Slote, 2001). From this perspective, actions that contradict virtues that contribute to individual and societal development (Budd & Scoville, 2005:10) are contrary to virtue ethics. By instrumentalizing women's bodies through aesthetic labor and simultaneously expecting women to perform emotional labor and tolerate harassment, employers violate virtue ethics.

Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care, with its emphasis on the significance of personal relationships and the consideration of contextual factors (Edwards, 2009), provides guidance for ethical work relations. However, as our study demonstrates, the employers' practice of rendering female aesthetic laborers susceptible to harassment, grounded in exploitation and disrespect, fundamentally conflicts with this ethical perspective. This underscores the problematic nature of work relations predicated solely on a utilitarian approach focused on self-interest, as assessed across all ethical frameworks, including that of Gilligan.

It is evident that exploring how the relationship between aesthetic labor and sexual harassment manifests within the context of intersectionalities such as different class, ethnic origin, and other identities – an area that could not be addressed within the limitations of this research – will primarily contribute to objectives such as highlighting the spheres of women's exploitation. Given the inherent challenges in conducting quantitative assessments of harassment and aesthetic labor, undertaking research capable of surmounting these difficulties represents a significant need within the extant literature.

Author Note

The data used in this study are an extended version of the data from the master's thesis titled "Commodification of the Female Body: A Case Study of Welcome Hostesses in Antalya" written by one of the authors of this article, Tuğçe Duygu Yazar, under the supervision of Mete Kaan Namal and Mustafa Kocanci at Akdeniz University, Institute of Social Sciences. The data had not been used in previous publications or research, and new data were collected and analyzed with a focus on sexual harassment.

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ORCID iDs

Mustafa Kocanci  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3950-3532>
 Tuğçe Duygu Yazar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2430-6755>
 Mete Kaan Namal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0937-8355>
 Beyhan Aksoy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6365-8131>

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee at Akdeniz University. The approval was granted under protocol number 2021-14/374, dated November 4, 2021. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants. No personal data were requested from the participants except for their age, marital status and education level. The research report did not include descriptions that would disclose the identities of the individuals. We, the researchers, undertake that we fully fulfil the ethical principles of SAGE.

Author Contributions

Mustafa Kocanci: Research idea, literature review, data collection and analysis, initial draft, further revisions, final review and reporting, translation into English. Tuğçe Duygu Yazar: Research idea, literature review, data collection. Mete Kaan Namal: Research idea, obtaining ethical permissions, initial draft final review. Beyhan Aksoy: Literature review, analysis, initial draft, further revisions, final review and reporting, translation into English.

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Data Availability Statement

Data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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