

## Research Article

# A Qualitative Study on Human Resources Managers' Perception of Aesthetic Labor in Recruitment Processes

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### Abstract

With the rise of the service sector, not only technical skills but also employees' emotional and physical appearances have gained increasing importance in the labor market. In this context, the concept of "aesthetic labor" refers to the incorporation of employees' physical appearance, tone of voice, body language, and overall impression into work processes. Emerging in the 2000s, this concept explains how bodies and emotions are managed and controlled within recruitment, training, and performance management practices. Human Resource Managers (HRMs) now consider not only "mind" and "manual" skills, but also "appearance" and "impression management" as key criteria. Particularly in sectors involving direct customer interaction, aesthetic labor has become an integral component of corporate image. In this process, HRMs act as a bridge between strategy and practice. This study examines HRMs' perceptions of aesthetic labor and its influence on decision-making processes. Findings indicate that candidates are evaluated based on appearance, grooming, body language, and communication style.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic labor, human resources manager, recruitment, service sector, working life

**JEL Classification Codes:** J24, J53, J71, J81

## İnsan Kaynakları Yöneticilerinin İşe Alım Süreçlerinde Estetik Emek Algısı Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma

### Öz

Hizmet sektörünün yükselişiyle birlikte işgücü piyasasında yalnızca teknik beceriler değil, çalışanların duygusal ve bedensel görünüşleri de değer kazanmıştır. Bu bağlamda "estetik emek", çalışanların fiziksel görünüm, ses tonu, beden dili ve genel izlenimlerinin iş süreçlerine dahil edilmesini ifade eder. 2000'li yıllarda öne çıkan bu kavram, işe alım, eğitim ve performans yönetiminde bedenin ve duyguların nasıl kontrol edildiğini açıklar. İnsan Kaynakları Yöneticileri (İKY), artık sadece "zihin" ve "el" becerilerini değil, "görünüş" ve "izlenim" yönetimini de temel kriterler arasına dahil etmektedir. Özellikle müşteriyle doğrudan temasın olduğu sektörlerde estetik emek, kurumsal imajın önemli bir parçasıdır. Bu süreçte İKY, strateji ile uygulama arasında köprü kurar. Çalışma, İKY'nin estetik emeğe dair algılarını ve karar süreçlerine etkisini incelemektedir. Bulgular, adayların görünüm, bakım, beden dili ve konuşma tarzına göre değerlendirildiğini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Estetik emek, insan kaynakları yöneticisi, işe alma, hizmet sektörü, çalışma hayatı

**JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları:** J24, J53, J71, J81

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## 1. Introduction

In today's capitalist societies, the body has transcended its biological existence to become a sociocultural phenomenon at the center of identity construction and gender roles. Society's imposed standards of beauty and appearance norms force individuals to conform their physical appearance to certain patterns, and this process increasingly highlights the concept of “aesthetic labor,” particularly in the workplace. Aesthetic labor refers to the time, emotional effort, and economic resources individuals expend to regulate their appearance to gain social and professional acceptance. In the workplace, this concept takes shape in line with employer and customer expectations, signaling a new mechanism in which labor is no longer solely a productivity-focused activity, but rather the body is transformed into an object of consumption and evaluation. Throughout the historical development of the capitalist system, labor has always been viewed as a commodity and has become an element that is bought and sold. From the Industrial Revolution to the present day, the commodification of labor has deepened, and consumption, as well as production, has become central to social life. In this context, the body, especially in consumer societies, has been commodified as an object of beauty or attractiveness beyond just being healthy. Both female and male bodies have become areas of intense domination and control. Its counterpart in working life has been defined as “aesthetic labor”; it has led to the extent to which individuals are “aesthetic,” “beautiful,” “attractive,” or “appealing” being put forward as a criterion in their entry into work, advancement, and evaluation alongside or instead of their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Aesthetic labor, while mostly examined in the existing literature through the lens of women's labor, is a dynamic that encompasses men as well and affects all workers. Addressing the issue in this way will pave the way for it to be considered a problem area that concerns all workers, regardless of gender. Across a wide range of areas in the service sector, workers' physical appearance, body language, tone of voice, and personal style are being turned into assets and capital. Flexible and insecure working conditions, reinforced by neoliberal policies, have made this process even more pronounced, increasing employers' control over workers' bodies and appearance. HR departments play a key role in this monitoring and evaluation process. HRMs are in a position to bridge the gap between company policies and market expectations in recruitment, placement, and performance evaluation processes, thereby shaping final decisions. Therefore, understanding how aesthetic labor operates in the workplace largely involves examining HRMs' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding aesthetic labor.

This study aims to answer the following fundamental questions by considering HRMs' perceptions of aesthetic labor and their attitudes toward it in the recruitment process, one of their core responsibilities: To what extent and how do HRMs consider the aesthetic labor dimension (appearance, grooming, body language, tone

of voice, etc.) in candidate evaluation? How does this perception differ depending on the position or sector to which the candidate is applying? How do aesthetic labor expectations reproduce existing inequalities in the recruitment process?

## **2. The Process of Commodification of Labor in the Service Sector: The Relationship Between Aesthetic Labor and Consumer Culture**

An individual's existence in a consumer society can be realized by being endowed with the desire to consume, falling under a form of domination, and being forced to work to consume. The path to happiness in a consumer society lies in working to consume. Capitalism essentially establishes its own domination by embedding itself in the individual's mind through the desire to have rational living standards. For this reason, it is necessary to work more to consume more. At this point, consumption appears as anything that has a measurable value (Coşkun, 2011). With the spread of consumption, not only the upper echelons of society but the entire society has become involved in consumption at an accelerated pace. In other words, consumption is no longer an activity exclusive to the upper class but has come to encompass the lower echelons of society. In a consumer society, the element of ostentation takes precedence over the utility or necessity of purchased goods. Beyond their use, purchased goods also reveal the individual's struggle to exist in society by surrounding them with a sense of belonging, desire, and pleasure (Bauman, 2015). Consequently, while the impact of consumption on individuals has increased significantly in consumer societies, individuals have been reduced to the position of consumers who fulfill the duty of consumption with the aim of ensuring the continuity of capitalism. Concepts such as freedom, happiness, success, good, and beautiful are instilled in the minds of individuals and used as a driving force to fulfill the function of consumption (Ozansoy, 2012). Baudrillard, on the other hand, refers to the consumer society's relationship of domination and the consumer's desire for false needs as "compulsion to pleasure." "One of the best proofs that the principle and purpose of consumption is not pleasure is that today pleasure is a compulsion and has become institutionalized not as a right or enjoyment but as a civic duty. The consumer human thinks of himself as a pleasure and satisfaction machine that must derive pleasure." According to him, the individual feels compelled to consume and strives to fulfill this function of consumption" The consumer human spends his life less and less in labor-intensive production but increasingly in the production and constant renewal of his own needs and well-being. The consumer must focus on mobilizing all of their consumer potential and capacity. If they forget this, they are politely and persistently reminded that they do not have the right to be happy. (Baudrillard, 2013).

In a consumer society, the idea of being an individual on one's own has been instilled, and the notion that there can be different products for everyone's needs has been promoted. Consumption is not only economic in nature; pleasures, lifestyles, desires, culture, cities, and even people can be consumed. The purpose

of a consumer society is to respond to individuals' desires. Individuals are happy to the extent that they fulfill these desires. This happiness or satisfaction does not last long because after a while, another need arises or is created, and the consumer is directed to consume in various ways, thus perpetuating the cycle. Shopping malls largely sustain this cycle (Ceylan, 2010). The purpose of consumption sustained in this way is not so much to develop people as it is to become a vicious cycle that prevents them from thinking and creating and alienates them (Bayhan, 2011). Shopping malls stand out as consumption-oriented spaces in capitalist society, primarily because they transform the function of consumption. This is because satisfying desires has become a necessity. Shopping malls have become indispensable spaces because they are equipped to respond to all kinds of desires and needs, such as eating, activities, socializing, and entertainment, despite establishing their own control within them. In this way, they have ensured the continuity of consumption by increasing it.

The body, historically viewed as an object within changing life activities, has undergone continuous transformation within religious, social, and political factors. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, the body was seen from a religious perspective as a "mass of flesh," but with the Industrial Revolution, it came to reflect "capital" equivalent to the power of labor. In a consumer society where it is emphasized that a conventional or ordinary body is not sufficient for the individual, identities, values, and desires have begun to emerge through the body, and the body has undergone a transformation into a kind of unique capital for the consumer society (Kara, 2017). The body has been treated as a machine and has become an element whose contribution to the capitalist order cannot be denied (Foucault, 2007). "The most important goal in the consumer society (even if it is not often mentioned or even discussed publicly) is perhaps not the ultimate goal of consumption, which is the satisfaction of needs, desires, and wishes, but the commodification and re-commodification of the consumer: consumers are elevated to the status of saleable goods." (Bauman & Lyon, 2016). This procedure paves the way for the commodification of the body through consumption. The body has become increasingly materialized and shaped according to the needs of the capitalist system. With the Industrial Revolution, people whose workplaces were factories were forced to sell or rent their bodies and physical strength to capitalists for a certain period of time. These conditions gave rise to a structure that enabled different perceptions of the body, allowing it to be perceived as a commodity, a tradable good (Eke, 2013). Particularly in societies where the economic system is synonymous with consumption, norms organized around the body serve to subjugate the body and perpetuate consumption (Özgen, 2017). Consequently, in societies shaped by consumption, the body has become part of subjugation and control, commodified to ensure the continuity of consumption. According to Işık's narrative, in a consumer society, the body has cumulatively become an image of ideological media. Today, the image in question is the body and the fragmentation of the body. According to social inferences, one of the main reasons for the body's central

position is that the body is the main element in the hedonistic structure of the consumer society. Making the body look more beautiful, its health and control emerge as the fundamental goals of the consumer society in the postmodern world. (Işık, 1998).

As a result of the capitalist system influencing societies based on ostentation rather than needs, everything that commodifies the body has begun to be consumed (Güzel, 2013). Before the consumer society, the body was an indicator of labor power based on production forms (Revel, 2012), but with the advent of the consumer society, the view of the body changed, and it became commodified and an object of consumption. As an output of the culture synonymous with consumption, the body has been valued as a social image and adapted for its own benefit. Consequently, as the domination of the social over the body became more pronounced with the phenomenon of consumption, the idea that the social shapes the body has developed (Kalan, 2014). Society does not produce bodies, but it influences, shapes, changes, and transforms them. At its core, the body is characterized as the natural aspect of human beings, but descriptions of the nature of the body are a reflection of the language used and the culture of society (User, 2016). In a consumer society, the blurring of the body's boundaries has paved the way for intervention in the body, and the body, whose boundaries, measurements, and shape have become uncertain, has become an endless, constantly renewed commodity in light of technological developments (Kurt, 2016). The body, as coded by consumer society, is valued far more than an individual's abilities, knowledge, and effort, serving as capital derived from appearance for social acceptance, investment, or projects. Moreover, this capital does not diminish with use or expenditure but rather increases in value (Köse, 2011). The body now carries a meaning that goes beyond being a living entity, primarily emphasizing its social aspect. It bears the traces of social life's activities and discourses. In every period, it aims to achieve its goals in line with the discourses that define and shape the body (Köse, 2011). The body perception of today's society is to create its own meanings and practices by controlling and regulating the body. For this reason, social practices create and implement their perceptions of the body. In a consumer society, the counterpart of body perception is not to have meaning but to be a consumable commodity without carrying any value or meaning.

The body emerges as a field where the social is reflected in the most persuasive way individually and where moral, legal, and aesthetic powers are needed to control it through domination and control within the discourse of liberation. Because it argues that without control and domination, it poses a potential threat (Fiske, 1999). Consequently, the body has become an indispensable project of consumption in contemporary societies as an element of domination and control; it has become the focal point in areas of consumption such as diet, sports, lifestyle, and cosmetics (Topateş, 2015). Producing a body that consumes in these areas is one of the most important projects of today's society (Okumuş, 2009). This project has become a

crucial element of the capitalist order, the focal point of the phenomenon of consumption, and has gained widespread prevalence in the service sector. (Ozansoy 2012). The understanding is that the body is an economic investment and, consequently, the aim is to make the body profitable. The capitalist system shapes the body and directs it as a signifier, and the reappropriated body emerges as a signifier of exploitation or consumption under the discourse of liberation (Baudrillard, 2013). Since every part of the body is transformed into a signifier, bodies “become enchanted with themselves and lose themselves” (Baudrillard, 2016). The body is both glorified with ideal body measurements and detached from individuality to be included in social domination. The individual now begins to perceive their body not as they see it, but as a signifier in society; this leads to the individual becoming alienated from their own body (İnceoğlu & Kar, 2016).

The body is also an important part of the consumption activities that consumers engage in to establish connections between themselves and society. At this point, the body is also consumed in order to achieve goals such as integration with society and adaptation (Dedeoğlu & Savaşçı, 2005). The body is instrumentalized through consumption, with each part of the body being divided into pieces and made suitable for the capitalist order. In this way, during consumption, the body consumes and is consumed at the same time (Öztaş & Özbolat, 2019). In his article “The Body as a Victim of Perfection Rituals in the Consumer Society,” Kurt describes consumption as an epidemic disease, emphasizes its impact on the body, and explains that it is a means to happiness for individuals (Kurt, 2016). At this point, the body has become the most prominent commodity of the consumer society and has taken its place at the forefront of what is consumed. Today, the body is objectified as an attractive factor in the promotion of goods and services produced by the phenomenon of consumption. At the same time, the body is controlled by imposing the necessity to consume the promoted products in order to improve it. The body is constantly restructured under this imposition and control. The domination of the body is shaped in this way. At this point, the body has been commodified in every part for the capitalist system (Ozansoy, 2012). Devoting time to every part of the body, spending money, suffering for it, and doing so with the dream of achieving freedom and ideal measurements has become a form of worship (Yılmaz, 2017). In addition, the phenomenon of consumption, on the one hand, imposes shopping malls and fast food culture, while on the other hand, the body is controlled by the discourse of the “fit body” (Ersöz, 2010). In this and many similar ways, the body, as a reflection of consumption, is transformed into a commercial object, a commodity, on which investments are made to satisfy desires (Güzel, 2013). In this process, the female body, in particular, is shaped by the capitalist order for the purposes of the consumer economy (Kalan, 2014). The capitalist system, being based on the logic of consumption and ostentation, has emphasized the body, particularly the female body (Kızılcılık, 2003).

The coding of the body as a commodity reveals that every part of the body has become a profitable investment area that the fashion and consumer industries seek to exploit (Köse, 2011) "Just as every product strives to find its place in the market, bodies are also presented in the market. After all, the path of the new paradigm involves bringing everything to market in some way" (Özbolat, 2011). The phenomenon described as a paradigm here is actually the reality of consumption because the body is a commodity in consumer societies. In the practices of daily life woven with consumption, the aestheticization of the body begins in the hiring process of working life, and the employee is expected to maintain this appearance. The physical appearance, outward appearance, tone of voice, and speech of employees who usually communicate directly with customers emerge as an integral element in the provision of service (Atak, 2018). The changing meaning of work and the resulting transformation of working life require employees to change and renew themselves along with their companies. Individuals strive to compete in the workplace by creating a holistic and visual difference through their appearance, in addition to possessing the knowledge and skills required for their job. While the body is positioned as an object of consumption, it is also subject to control, and the time individuals spend in the workplace is slightly increased, or it provides certain advantages in the hiring process. The body can find its place in working life to the extent that it is healthy and beautiful in appearance and shaped by the codes desired by the market. Knowledge, skills, and abilities alone are not sufficient (Çetin, 2009). It is precisely at this point that the concept of "aesthetic labor" emerges as particularly important, especially in the service sector.

### **3. Background of the Concept of Aesthetic Labor**

The concept of aesthetics as it is understood today was explained by Alexander G. Baumgarten. Baumgarten first defined and outlined the boundaries of this concept in his work "Aesthetica," published in the 1750s. Baumgarten gathered issues related to art and beauty under a specific concept and named it "aesthetics." The word "aesthetics" comes from the Greek words "Aisthesis" or "Aisthanestha." The word "Aisthesis" means sensation or perceptible perception, while "Aisthanesthai" means to perceive with the senses (Tunalı, 1998). The term "aesthetics" is said to be closely related to meanings such as beauty, loveliness, pleasantness, and elegance (Mandoki, 2007), and it has been established that it is most commonly associated with the concept of beauty, especially today. Within this scope, the idea that everything beautiful also has an aesthetic appearance has become increasingly prevalent. The presentation of aesthetics or beauty in today's consumer societies is carried out primarily through the body. At this point, possessing desirable aesthetic features can be a complement to being considered successful in society, and sometimes even a prerequisite. In societies where ostentation and lifestyles are prominent and consumption is the main theme, the aesthetic characteristics of employees have become an important image for employers. These characteristics are put forward as a condition for businesses, and consequently, it has become

necessary to carefully determine and control the aesthetic identity of the body (Başçı, 2018).

In line with the notion that what is beautiful is good in working life, the aestheticization of the body and the concept of aesthetic labor were first introduced, discussed, and conceptualized as aesthetic labor in the literature in the work titled "Aesthetic Labor in Interactive Service Work: Some Case Study Evidence from the 'New' Glasgow" (2000). The concept of aesthetic labor was conceptualized and entered the literature (Warhurst et al., 2000). According to Warhurst et al. (2000), aesthetic labor is the source of the “concretized capacities and qualifications” that workers possess during the hiring process. Employers then mobilize, develop, and commodify these capacities and qualifications through recruitment, selection, and training processes, transforming them into competencies or skills that constitute an aesthetic “service” (Warhurst et al., 2000). Aesthetic labor is a process in which workers' suitability for the job is regulated to ensure it is appropriate for the commercial benefit of the business. Workers who perform aesthetic labor are well-groomed, pay attention to their clothing, speak in a manner appropriate to the company's image, and take action to design their own bodies to embody the most sought-after organizationally defined image (Wissinger, 2011).

Aesthetic labor is defined as the organizational equivalent of “looking good and looking right” for employees. Accordingly, it is labor that highlights employees' performance through their bodies (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). According to another definition, aesthetic labor means developing the mobility of employees in their interactions with customers and commodifying them (Johnston & Sandberg, 2008). Warhurst & Nickson (2007) argue that aesthetic labor has emerged as organizations strategically hire workers based on certain norms regarding how their bodies look, the types of services performed to attract customer attention, and the commodification that follows. When it comes to the right appearance, organizations may seek ways to deliberately and strategically highlight their employees' sexuality. The conscious and deliberate effort to aestheticize employees' bodies has turned them into “walking billboards” in line with the organizations' goals by directing customers towards consumption. At this point, employees must utilize their existing aesthetic qualities and capacities (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

Definitions, which form the basis of the field, emphasize that employers instrumentalize employees' physical appearance, behavior, and physical performance for organizational purposes (customer satisfaction, brand image, commercial gain, etc.). These definitions also reveal how the body is controlled as a source of value in the service sector and confront us with the reality that employees are no longer just “labor” but also “image carriers.” As can be seen, the constant desire for consumption, which is the product of consumer society, is carried out through the body, and its reflection in working life manifests as aesthetic labor. By creating an image of beauty, the body is first allowed to be controlled and

serves this purpose. The effort to aestheticize the bodies of employees, particularly those in the service sector, aims to create a positive impact on consumers and increase expectations regarding the quality and affordability of the services offered. Appearance and dress codes are important in enhancing the professionalism and credibility of employees (Çetin, 2009). Today, the body is also used as a competitive factor by employers and commodified. In the workplace, employers aim to contribute to organizational success (by attracting more customers, satisfying existing customers, and supporting the corporate image) through the phenomenon of aesthetic labor, which is not directly related to emotions, such as the shape of the face and body, clothing, gestures and facial expressions, and tone of voice (Başçı, 2019). Aesthetic labor seeks to maximize benefits by highlighting the relationships between employees and customers. Employers increasingly demand that employees use their aesthetic qualities to influence customers, making it a requirement of the job. Many organizations set aesthetic feature rules to determine the aesthetic behaviors that employees should exhibit in the workplace. Therefore, aesthetic features are an important phenomenon in terms of both customer satisfaction and loyalty and employee satisfaction and performance (Genç, 2018).

The aesthetic labor process involves adapting the physical characteristics of employees to the aesthetic norms of the workplace throughout the training they undergo, starting from the recruitment stage. Employees are part of a company's infrastructure and are considered one of the physical symbols of the company's identity, just like marketing materials or product design. Aesthetic labor is more than just a product of the superficial characteristics of the workplace (Katircioğlu, 2017). Aesthetic labor also has a hierarchical structure. Consequently, young, white, middle-class, attractive, and likable employees may be hired for jobs with higher pay and status. Employers tend to discriminate in favor of individuals who look better or project the right image and penalize those who are physically less attractive or project the wrong image (Seçer, 2016).

The visibility of aesthetic labor has been studied particularly in relation to female workers, while an important study attempting to explain it in relation to male workers was conducted by Walls (2008) in the UK. Research on aesthetic labor reveals that the “shaping or control” of workers' bodies is also a condition for men in the service sector. In the fashion industry, men also use their aesthetic characteristics to participate in working life (Warhurst et al., 2012). Consequently, the aesthetic labor displayed by both men and women during service delivery is subject to commodification (Dashper, 2013). Employers deliberately use the concrete qualities and capacities of their employees, regardless of whether they are male or female, as a particular competitive advantage for their organizations (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007).

In summary, the service sector, which plays a significant role in terms of employment, income, and production costs, has undergone a transformation in the

context of capitalist production relations and the transformation of labor processes. This transformation has involved the commodification of “human beings” as a resource and their reshaping according to the needs of the service economy. This shift has moved the center of production from material resources to non-material resources, experiences, and emotional impacts. This transformation highlights a form of labor that incorporates not only mental and physical skills but also the worker's body, appearance, tone of voice, and emotional performance directly into the production process: aesthetic labor. In the service sector, aesthetic labor has begun to be discussed as a process in which an individual's physical appearance, voice, behavior style, and social skills are systematically selected, developed, and disciplined in order to sell a corporate image or create a brand experience. Human resource management has also played an instrumental role in this process. In this context, HRMs are the actors that design, implements, and sustain the instrumentalization process. This role is positioned in a way that legitimizes the process with the discourse of human development, professionalization, and institutional representation, transforming emotional and aesthetic capacities into labor power in the production process that commercializes the human body and aligning personal experience and performance with corporate norms.

#### **4. Aesthetic Labor and the Hiring Process in the Service Sector**

The recruitment process is a strategic management function that involves identifying open positions to meet the “human resource” needs of businesses, conducting targeted candidate search activities, and subsequently evaluating applicants using various valid and reliable selection tools to identify and onboard individuals who are expected to contribute most to the organization's objectives. Today, this process goes beyond matching technical skills and experience, transforming into a control mechanism that evaluates the candidate's appearance, performance, and emotional presentation as an extension of the company's brand identity and representation. HR, especially in positions involving high levels of service, sales, or face-to-face customer interaction, consciously or unconsciously makes the candidate's physical appearance, tone of voice, diction, social skills, and overall “energy” a selection factor under seemingly soft criteria such as “fitness with the corporate culture.” Interviews, in this sense, are not only an assessment of competence but also an area where the candidate's aesthetic and emotional labor capacity is evaluated. The candidate is expected not only to give correct answers to questions but also to present a “persuasive,” “warm,” “reassuring,” or “professional” impression integrated with body language and emotional performance. Therefore, the recruitment process is the first and most critical stage that shapes the company's aesthetic labor demand. If the candidate meets certain criteria at this stage, companies reinforce the process with training and development activities to ensure that the hired candidate exhibits the desired appearance and attitude (Warhurst et al., 2000).

In the hiring process, training and development activities have also become an area disciplined by physical, managerial, and organizational practices in the workplace. Thus, by standardizing employees' dress, gestures, and speech, the process of interaction with customers is controlled. The employee's body, controlled by managers and customers, is considered evidence in the evaluation of employees in the event of a negative situation or complaint.

## **5. A Qualitative Study on HRMs' Perception of Aesthetic Labor in Recruitment Processes**

### **5.1. Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The commodification of the body and its transformation into personal capital is a highly significant and noteworthy issue in the workplace, particularly during the neoliberal era. The visibility of aesthetic labor, particularly in the service sector, supports this definition. Along with neoliberal policies, the goal is to create workers who, despite working in insecure and poor conditions, are constantly required to look good, always smile, behave politely, speak courteously, and willingly accept all the difficulties created by working life. The intensive use of aesthetic labor in the service sector, where all employees, but especially female employees, are widely employed, necessitates that the commercialization of employees' social, emotional, personal qualities, and physical characteristics be presented to the customer and be given serious consideration and addressed. Based on this necessity, the main objective of this study is to reveal how the perception of aesthetic labor is decisive in the recruitment process. In the limited studies on aesthetic labor in the literature, aesthetic labor has been addressed, particularly in relation to female employees, and answers have been sought to the question of how female labor and employment are affected. Aesthetic labor processes have also been examined and addressed in the service sector, where female employment has rapidly increased in recent years. This study distinguishes itself from previous work on aesthetic labor by examining the perceptions and attitudes of HRMs, who are responsible for the hiring process in the service sector, without focusing on gender differences, through semi-structured interviews.

In this context, the main questions of the research are listed below: When hiring for a position, what criteria do you prioritize? What elements are included in your definition of an "ideal candidate"? Does the appearance of candidates during the interview process influence your first impression? Does the physical appearance of candidates (clothing, posture, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) influence your hiring process? Do you have expectations regarding the appearance of employees in terms of corporate representation? Is appearance more decisive in the service sector or in positions that involve face-to-face contact with customers? To support these fundamental questions, the study also includes supplementary questions that examine how aesthetic labor is shaped in a sectoral/cultural context; that raise awareness of appearance-based decisions and their ethical implications; and that

enrich the topic with examples from personal experiences. The research questions listed above have been addressed in light of HRMs' perspectives, feelings, thoughts, assessments, experiences, and narratives on this subject.

## 5.2. Methodology

Qualitative research is a research tradition that aims to deeply understand social phenomena in their natural settings. By analyzing verbal, visual, or behavioral data rather than numerical data, it helps uncover the complexity, relationships, and meanings of human experiences. This study examines HRMs' perceptions and attitudes toward aesthetic labor in the hiring process across different service sectors using a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research method provides an important methodological tool for examining a multidimensional phenomenon such as aesthetic labor (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). In this study, the phenomenological design was preferred because it aims to understand HRMs' perceptions of aesthetic labor. This design was chosen because it focuses on describing and interpreting managers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding aesthetic labor. Phenomenological research “explains the common meaning of a few people's lived experiences of a phenomenon or concept” (Creswell, 2018).

This study also focuses on the phenomenon of “aesthetic labor,” an important concept in recent years related to working life. Research was conducted with HRMs responsible for establishing this phenomenon in working life. The universe of the research consists of HRMs working in different service sectors in Mersin, and the sample consists of 20 participants selected by purposive sampling. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data. This method was specifically chosen because it allows participants to freely share their experiences while progressing within the framework of predetermined questions. The snowball method was used to reach participants. A significant portion of the participants were reached through acquaintances, and the interviewees were asked to refer the study to other interviewees, thus advancing the study through the aforementioned snowball method. It was thought that reaching interviewees through acquaintances would benefit the research in terms of gaining the interviewees' trust. The data for the study were obtained using these techniques, which are frequently used together in qualitative research and complement each other. The length of the interviews varied between forty minutes and two hours. All interviewees were informed about the research in a clear and detailed manner and were asked whether they would volunteer for the research. After the purpose of the study was explained, all interviewees volunteered to participate. They were encouraged to ask questions about the research and obtain information and were not pressured to answer any questions they did not want to answer. They were also informed in advance that the interview could be conducted at a location of their choice and that the name of the institution and the interviewee would be kept confidential. The interviews were conducted in an objective manner. Ethical rules were adhered to throughout the

research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research; participation was voluntary, and personal information was kept confidential. The research was conducted in accordance with the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Social Sciences at Mersin University.

### 5.3. Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

It is assumed that the HRMs who voluntarily participated in the study provided accurate and honest answers to the interview questions. The limitations of the study are as follows: although the aim was to reach more participants, some managers declined to participate due to time constraints, despite being familiar with the study. The study was limited to 20 participants because the responses reached a repetitive level.

### 5.4. Findings of the Research

The profile characteristics of HRMs from different institutions working in the service sector who participated in the interviews are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, 12 of the 20 HRMs who participated in the study were female managers, and 8 were male managers. The HRMs in the sectors reached within the scope of the study were predominantly female. The reasons for this situation can be discussed in depth, but in summary, it can be said that it stems from the orientation of education and the fact that this unit has long been seen as a “support unit” in businesses. During the interviews, the HRMs’ response to the question of whether the gender balance of those in managerial positions in their sectors was male-dominated confirms the aforementioned inference. Men are more oriented towards technical and operational jobs in the sectors. The study took into account the differences between sectors, but in order to make the data more reliable, at least two managers from different companies in the same sector were targeted. While this target was achieved in some sectors, the fact that some sectors responded to the interview request with a refusal due to time constraints constituted one of the limitations of the study, as mentioned earlier.

**Table 1: Profile of HRMs Participating in the Research**

Participant	Age	Gender	Sector	Experience (Years)	Working time in the Current Institution
HRM 1	48	Male	Chemical Industry	25	15
HRM 2	36	Female	Automotive	10	5
HRM 3	40	Female	Tourism	22	10
HRM 4	38	Male	Retail	23	18
HRM 5	47	Female	Automotive	12	3
HRM 6	45	Male	Retail	16	5
HRM 7	52	Female	Banking	25	20
HRM 8	46	Female	Hospitality	17	10
HRM 9	32	Female	Tourism	8	4

HRM 10	42	Female	Aviation	12	5
HRM 11	46	Female	Education	24	12
HRM 12	45	Female	Hospitality	15	8
HRM 13	52	Male	Health	26	8
HRM 14	45	Male	Health	15	6
HRM 15	39	Male	Retail	10	10
HRM 16	48	Female	Education	20	15
HRM 17	40	Male	Retail	17	4
HRM 18	34	Female	Textiles	9	2
HRM 19	32	Male	Textiles	7	3
HRM 20	28	Female	Beauty	6	3

Note: A significant portion of HRMs stated that they previously worked in certain positions within the Human Resources department at the companies where they are currently managers, and that these positions were offered to them later.

#### 5.4.1. General Recruitment Process and Criteria

The focus of the interviews with 20 managers, whose profiles are summarized in Table 1, was the extent to which aesthetic labor (appearance, body language, communication style, capacity to represent the corporate image) is considered in the recruitment process. When HRMs were asked what criteria they primarily consider when hiring for a position, HRM 4, who is a manager in the retail sector, stated, *“Of course, professional qualifications are important, but in our sector, how the candidate appears to the customer is also very important. A well-groomed appearance and a style that aligns with the store's brand image are serious criteria for me,”* thus associating aesthetic labor with corporate image. At HRM 10, a management company in the aviation sector, the candidates they look for in the recruitment process for cabin crew members are service-oriented, have good communication skills, a friendly demeanor, and a neat appearance, as the job requires face-to-face interaction: *“Because the passenger profile is very diverse, we primarily look for candidates who can make quick decisions, have a friendly attitude to make passengers feel good, are well-groomed, and possess sincere communication skills. And based on the impression we get during the interview, we hire those we believe we will not have any problems with.”* He further stated that because they conduct mass recruitment rather than individual hiring in their sector, routine criteria come into play. *“Especially in cabin and cockpit recruitment, there are multi-stage exams. First, candidates take an exam, then height and weight measurements are taken, and then we conduct an interview. Meanwhile, one of the important criteria for us is foreign language proficiency because we don't only transport Turkish passengers. We look at foreign language skills, and if necessary, we send suitable candidates to language courses.”* The HR department of a company operating in the chemical industry has defined itself as a sector where aesthetic labor perception is limited in hiring. HRM 1 states, *“In our sector, aesthetic labor is slightly more important for employees who represent the company and interact with customers. In that case, we expect a neat and professional appearance, corporate representation ability, and communication skills. It's not*

*particularly significant in production, laboratory, and R&D departments, but we pay attention to it when hiring for sales and marketing departments. However, in terms of the sector, our main hiring policy is selecting candidates who will demonstrate order, professionalism, discipline, and adaptability."* In this sector, order and professionalism are the prominent dimensions. HRM 6, working as a human resources director in the retail sector, stated regarding the question about HRM 17: *"Our work is customer-focused, so appearance, speaking style, and communication are very important."* *"Body language is very important to me; I can tell if someone is suitable for the job from their answers after asking a couple of questions. Again, their appearance and speaking skills don't mislead me about whether they can do the job."* HRM 12, working in the hotel industry, emphasized communication and representation skills as part of aesthetic labor in their response. *"For us, the candidate's communication style, body language, and posture are the first things that stand out. Technical knowledge can be developed, but especially in positions where there will be direct contact with customers, both the candidate's appearance and manner of expression must inspire confidence. In other words, I would call it 'representation skills'.* Another manager in the same sector, HRM 8, adds, *"In our sector, first impressions are very important. When you look at a candidate, you look for an answer to the question, 'Can this person establish a professional yet warm relationship with the guest?' A clean, tidy appearance and a polite tone of voice are almost as important as technical skills. Based on years of experience, I can say that guests only maintain loyalty through the energy that employees project. When we look at hotel reviews, thank-you messages to staff are predominantly included."* HRM 2 and HRM 5, who work in the same sector, stated that they focus on a specific appearance, body language, and behavior when hiring for positions that involve direct customer contact, such as sales, consulting, and showroom roles. HRM 2 said, *"We sell high-priced products, so since the employee is the face of the brand and is perceived as such, appearance and body language are very important to us."* HRM 5 added, *"We have a concept of personnel who fit the brand. Being more well-groomed and having softer communication are indicators of this perception, and these significantly affect sales,"* thus establishing a relationship between aesthetics and sales performance.

In the field of education, a distinct service sector with its own purpose and social dimensions, the role of aesthetic labor in hiring was discussed. HRM 16, who has worked for many years in a corporate school chain, stated that appearance, body language, tone of voice, and calmness play a significant role in the performance of the profession and that these are important factors in hiring teachers and all school staff. When asked if appearance wasn't taking precedence over pedagogical competence, she responded, *"Yes, unfortunately, we are aware that aesthetic and emotional labor is prioritized in private schools, driven by customer (parent) demands. However, the very existence of the institution depends on making these qualities possible."* Furthermore, HRM 11 emphasizes that the aesthetic labor expectations differ at each stage of education. *"At the preschool level, purely visual*

*and gentle, calming speech, a reassuring appearance, and communication skills are prioritized, while in primary school, clothing style, calm body language, and controlled behavior are emphasized. In middle and high school, a more authoritative appearance and demeanor, along with communication skills, are prioritized in recruitment."* The rationale behind the aesthetic labor perception that influences recruitment in the education sector is explained by managers as the expectation of "being a role model." HRM 13 and 14, who are managers in the healthcare field, stated that the recruitment process is shaped not only by professional competence but also by appearance, body language, and communication skills. The most important conclusion drawn from interviews with these managers is that aesthetic qualities are considered important in the healthcare sector, linked to trust. HRM 14 stated, *"In our sector, communication with the patient is the most important criterion. A positive facial expression, a reassuring demeanor, a confident attitude that conveys knowledge, and a well-groomed appearance are very effective. Because patients, regardless of their level, decide whether they can entrust themselves to a hospital employee—whether a doctor or other staff—when they see them."* In the tourism sector, the relationship between aesthetic labor and recruitment is most visible. It is one of the areas directly based on hospitality and the provision of emotional labor. Physical appearance, clothing, grooming, body language, tone of voice, and a consistently smiling face have become an integral part of labor in this sector. HRM 3, working in this field, stated, *"Our goal is customer satisfaction, and this is directly related to our employees. Therefore, candidates who make the customer feel good are our preferred choice,"* while HRM 9 said, *"We have a criterion called suitability to the brand and concept. We pay attention to this when selecting candidates."* Both emphasized the significant importance of aesthetic labor in tourism and indicated that employee appearance and behavior are decisive in the recruitment process. HRM 7, who has been in a managerial position in the banking sector for many years, stated that they subtly implement the aesthetic labor attitude in their hiring practices and emphasized that professional competence is important in this sector. *"While we prioritize a corporate and professional appearance, we also pay attention to professional competence. Because the work we do also requires professionalism. Measured communication is very important. Being trustworthy is extremely important. That's why we pay close attention to references when hiring. In the past, we had a strict dress code requirement for our hires, but recently we've relaxed it a bit. We make our recruits sign papers regarding issues like beards and earrings. There is a belief that these could damage the company's image."* HRM stated that they prefer recruits who exude confidence and appear capable of representing the company, and that they associate aesthetic appearance with performance after recruitment. Especially in recruitment for front-line positions in branches and sales and portfolio management departments.

The textile industry is one of the sectors where aesthetic labor is experienced most distinctly and in many ways during the recruitment process. It becomes particularly

crucial, especially in the retail and merchandising sector. In the HR function of a corporate textile chain structure, HRM 18 *“emphasizes that fashion and style knowledge, the candidate's personal style, body language, and an aesthetic presence consistent with the brand identity are highly important to us. Because the customer who comes to us also looks at the appearance of the employee. We especially want our sales employees to embody the brand. Therefore, appropriate physical appearance becomes important in the hiring process. Sometimes we think the candidate is suitable in many respects, but when they don't quite fit our ideal profile in terms of physical appearance, for example, we may suggest they lose weight and then invite them for another interview.”* HRM 19, who manages in the same sector, said, *“We can be a bit harsh in interviews regarding this issue because our job involves sales, and you'll understand that doing this job well is all about visual presentation today. We pay attention to age and weight. Physical attractiveness is very important in this field. When the employee fits this profile, the product can be sold without question. Additionally, we apply these criteria not only for hiring but also for retaining employees. Unfortunately, this is a reflection of today's conditions.”* He stated that in the textile sector, evaluation based on physical appearance is decisive when it comes to recruitment and retention. One of the areas where the most distinct connection is established between the job itself and the employee's body is the beauty industry. In terms of this sector, aesthetic labor is defined not as an expectation but as a necessity. HRM 20 *“we are a corporate structure with many branches. When hiring, we attach importance to skin, hair, makeup, and body presentation. In fact, this is a mandatory requirement. If skin care products are sold, the employees' skin is examined. If regional slimming or weight loss services are offered, the employees are again examined. Our employees are the living models and showcases of the service. Since the result is visible on the body, we prefer employees who embody and will embody the service.”*

As can be seen, the HRMs' responses reveal the criteria that shape recruitment decisions and demonstrate that the perception of aesthetic labor plays a decisive role in recruitment. This situation can often push a candidate's technical competencies into the background, especially in sectors where direct customer contact is high; in some sectors, however, aesthetic labor comes into play as a critical element that complements and strengthens technical skills. The interviews clearly demonstrate how aesthetic labor invisibly structures the recruitment process and shapes HRMs' perceptions.

The key perceptual dimensions that make aesthetic labor decisive in the recruitment process can be summarized as compatibility with the corporate image, communication and body language, representational ability, and trust.

Again, within this context, when asked the question "What elements are included in the ideal candidate profile you have in mind when hiring for a position?" definitions were provided that encompass both the technical competencies required

for the job and personal characteristics, along with expectations for "aesthetic labor" that clearly guide the process in most sectors.

**Table 2: Key Phrases Standing Out in HRMs' Ideal Candidate Descriptions**

Sector	Statements that Stand Out from the Ideal Candidate Definitions
Chemical Industry	"A candidate who has made safety and meticulousness a personal habit, possesses a high sense of responsibility, communicates effectively with data, yet can establish clear communication within the team, and exudes a reassuring demeanor" (HRM 1)
Automotive	"A person who is harmonious, practical, solution-oriented, and has an organized appearance that reflects the discipline of the production area" (HRM 2), "A candidate who embraces the brand and creates their attitude and style accordingly" (HRM 5)
Tourism	"A person who has embraced a smiling face as a professional tool, possesses stamina that doesn't reveal moments of fatigue, and can reflect kindness through their body language (HRM 3); someone who embodies the atmosphere of their workplace through their personality, and can smile under all circumstances." (HRM 9)
Retail	"Has the appearance to carry the brand", "can communicate warmly with the customer", "friendly, energetic, self-caring, professional candidate" (HRM 4), "High persuasion power, self-confident", "person who reflects professionalism with his appearance" (HRM 15), "person who has strong communication, speech, clothes and harmonizes the energy he has with the brand identity"(HRM 17)
Banking	"A professional who combines a stylish image with confidence and can maintain a controlled and measured communication style even under stress" (HRM 7)
Hospitality	"A person who is polite, well-groomed in appearance, and has strong communication skills" (HRM 8), "Neat, tidy, calm-looking yet energetic, a candidate who exudes confidence during interactions with guests" (HRM 12)
Aviation	"The candidate who is polite, able to convey this through body language, well-groomed, never loses her composure in private moments, and instills a sense of safety in every passenger" (HRM 10)
Education	"A person who is friendly, adaptable, and has open communication, serving as an example for students and parents" (HRM 11), "A clean, tidy, self-groomed candidate with a confident and polite demeanor, and who is adaptable" (HRM 16)
Health	"A candidate who takes care of their personal appearance and has a communication style that inspires trust in others" (HRM 13), "Someone who is calm, clean, tidy, and has a professional appearance, and makes the other person feel competent in their job" (HRM 14)
Textiles	"A creative person who identifies their style with their work" (HRM 18), "A person with a presentable appearance, calm, polite, friendly, knowledgeable about the details of their work, and highly persuasive" (HRM 19)
Beauty	"A person who attaches importance to personal hygiene and grooming, delivers high-quality service to customers, follows innovations in their field, reflects this in their own image, and instills a sense of security in customers that 'I'm in safe hands'" (HRM 20)

Source: Compiled by the author based on the key expressions identified in interviews with HRMs.

The key descriptor statements in HRMs' "ideal candidate profiles" regarding managing the recruitment process reveal the attitudes they expect candidates to possess and how they expect these attitudes to be reflected in their physical and behavioral performance. In every sector, aesthetic labor becomes visible by taking on different forms in line with these expectations. In summary, the ideal candidate profile of HRMs, as stated in their own words and as presented in Table 2, can be grouped under four main themes. (1) Professional appearance and aesthetic harmony, (2) Communicative competence, (3) Representation skills and trust-building, and (4) Emotional and behavioral qualities.

#### 5.4.2. HRMs' Perception of Aesthetic Labor

In this context, the questions asked aim to define the impact of appearance on HRMs' evaluations as the initial impression formed during the recruitment process. One of the fastest and most powerful triggers for evaluations made during recruitment interviews is the impression formed during the initial contact with the candidate. The "first impression" phenomenon, particularly manifested through the candidate's external appearance (dress, grooming, posture, and overall aesthetic presentation), rapidly forms a cognitive and emotional schema in the minds of HRMs. In order to determine the extent to which a candidate's appearance affects HRMs' initial perceptions and subsequent evaluation processes during interviews, do candidates' appearances affect your first impression during the interview process? The question was posed and revealed that, from the perspective of HRMs, appearance and demeanor are not merely superficial elements but also carry strong indicators about a candidate's professionalism, adaptability, reliability, and potential to represent the organization's values. The thesis that "appearance affects the first impression" was accepted by all HRMs who participated in the interview, although the reasons for this effect differed across sectors.: For example, in the retail sector, the rationale is presented as brand compatibility, persuasion, and professional image; in the healthcare sector, it is presented as hygiene and trust; and in the education sector, it is presented as setting an example: HRM 4 *"Yes, appearance definitely affects the first impression. In our industry, a neat and tidy appearance is perceived as part of the brand identity of the employee; therefore, it leads to a quick assessment of the candidate. It is impossible to completely ignore this effect"* HRM 11 *"Appearance is not the only determinant, but it creates a strong influence at the beginning of the interview and the idea of whether a person can be an example to students comes to life"* HRM 13 *"determines my opinion about his clothing, hygiene, whether he is anxious or not, whether he is suitable for the job when coming to the interview."* These statements emphasize that appearance is not merely a "beauty" criterion; rather, it is considered by HRMs as part of the candidate's professional identity.

The varying justifications are based on HRMs beliefs in how quickly and effectively external appearance, industry-specific core values, and customer

expectations can be read from a candidate's physique. First impressions serve as an intuitive predictive mechanism for whether a candidate can physically embody the values specific to the industry. Therefore, even though appearance is not a technically defined criterion, it acts as a powerful tool shaping how suitability for the job is perceived. To clarify the question about appearance for HRMs, a sub-question was asked: What role does physical appearance play in the recruitment process? A significant portion of HRMs stated that candidates' physical appearance plays an important role in first impressions and unconsciously or consciously influences their decision-making. However, the notable distinction made here is that while the external appearance is limited to aspects such as weight, height, tattoos, any scars, makeup, and clothing style when describing it, the physical appearance question also includes the reflection of candidates' professionalism and self-confidence in their body language. For example, HRM 15: *"Yes, physical appearance is particularly important in positions that represent the brand. While using the phrase "It is important for the candidate to appear meticulous, organized, and in line with the corporate image from the perspective of employer branding," HRM 1 stated, "The candidate's physical appearance reflects clues about their professionalism and self-discipline, which influences my evaluation."*

A significant portion of the managers agreed that the concept of "physical appearance" does not merely encompass aesthetics or external appearance; they emphasized the importance of an individual presenting a neat, tidy, and role-appropriate overall image that reflects attention to detail. Again, HRMs have stated that the level of this impact may vary depending on the sector. HRMs in sectors such as healthcare, retail, and tourism have stated that a meticulous physical appearance directly enhances the perception of professionalism, reliability, and the ability to represent the organization; while maintenance, cleanliness, and hygiene are considered a minimum requirement and an element of trust by HRMs working in areas such as health and food services. Again, within this context, do you have any expectations regarding an employee's appearance in terms of corporate representation for HRMs? When asked, almost all of them stated that external appearance is not the main indicator of an employee's competence or value, but in cases where corporate representation is important, it is one of the criteria that should be: HRM 1 *"In our business, the goal is to ensure a fair and reasonable balance that will both protect the reputation of our institution and our employees can feel comfortable and original. Our focus is always on performance, competence, and fit with the corporate culture; appearance is considered as part of this whole."* Regarding HRM 11, "our expectations regarding external appearance in terms of corporate representation are, as I mentioned before, present. However, we define these expectations not as a personal aesthetic imposition but as a professional standard and communication tool." In HRM 14, it was stated that *"...a neat, tidy, and well-groomed appearance is part of corporate representation, so I consider it important."* As can be seen, the HRMs whose sample statements were used approached the subject from a balanced and corporate perspective. All HRMs

agreed that appearance is more decisive in the service sector, especially in positions that involve face-to-face interaction with customers.

### 5.4.3. Sectoral and Institutional Effects

HRMs, under this heading, does your industry have certain corporate standards regarding the appearance of employees? Do you believe aesthetic characteristics are more important in certain positions? And how does your company culture shape expectations regarding appearance during the recruitment process? When asked about the subject, the resulting picture emerges as sectors view it either as a necessity (security/protocol), a tool of trust (banking), or a brand component (retail/beauty). The application levels are also determined according to this priority as very strict, strict, moderately strict, and flexible. The summary of the answers to these questions is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Comparison of External Appearance and Corporate Standards by Sector**

Sector /HRM	The Main Determining Factors Are	External Outlook Expectations	Application Level
Chemical Industry	Safety, Functionality, Hygiene	Mandatory personal protective equipment for employees in the production department includes apron, protective goggles, gloves, and mask. Having personal protective equipment such as hair tied back. Defined work attire for office employees.	Due to safety concerns for production, it is very strict and mandatory. For the personal office, it is moderately flexible, managed through a warning mechanism.
Automotive	Functionality, security image, trust	Suit or smart business attire. Reflecting brand prestige.	Medium-strict in terms of corporate representation
Tourism	Brand image, guest satisfaction	Generally, clothing determined by the organization (polo shirt, dress shirt, vest, etc.) A clean, well-groomed appearance and a friendly demeanor.	Medium solid
Retail	Brand identity, target audience, sales focus	Typically business-issued attire or smart casual clothing matching brand colors. In luxury retail, very smart/formal.	At the intermediate level
Banking	Trust, stability, traditional professionalism, customer confidence	Classic formal attire. Suit, shirt, tie (men); suit, skirt or trousers, blouse (women). Non-excessive accessories.	Very strict
Hospitality	Service quality, hygiene, luxury	Clear uniform policies (for reception, kitchen, cleaning, and management). Rank insignia may	Very strict

Sector /HRM	The Main Determining Factors Are	External Outlook Expectations	Application Level
	perception. Differing by department	be permitted. Visible tattoo/piercing restrictions are common.	
Aviation	Security, discipline, global standards, brand image, hygiene.	Detailed uniforms that have become a symbol of the institution. Very specific rules for hair, makeup, jewelry, shoes, and nails. A professional and sterile appearance.	Very strict and detailed
Education	Authority, reliability, being a role model, corporate culture.	Usually between formal and casual. One day a week with more comfortable clothing. Neat, tidy, and respectful towards students appearance.	At the intermediate level
Healthy	Hygiene, trust, care	Apron, hair tied back if long, no jewelry allowed, short and clean fingernails, and mandatory wear of photo ID badge on clothing.	Very strict
Textiles	Smiling face, care, style, diction	Clothing in the style or color specified by the institution. Fashionable clothing that reflects the brand's aesthetic.	Medium solid
Beauty	Aesthetics, trends, brand image, hygiene, being a living example of personal care	Uniform-style clothing, usually in black or white to emphasize hygiene, or in brand colors. Personal care (hair, makeup, manicure) must be perfect. Apron use.	Medium solid

Source: Created based on the definitions provided by HRMs working in the industry during interviews.

In summary, when a comparison is made sector-specific in Table 3 in terms of the key factors determining external appearance standards and the expectations specific to each field, it becomes evident that while aesthetic labor sets the basic framework and requirements for external appearance, corporate culture and brand strategy yield the outcome that shapes, solidifies, or stretches this framework. Again, within this context, it has become evident during the discussions that aesthetic characteristics are more decisive in certain positions. HRMs have drawn attention to the concept of "aesthetics" as referring to a visual coherence compatible with the nature of the position and the industry's representation expectations, rather than societal beauty standards. However, in detailed discussions, HRMs emphasized that in certain sectors, society has become highly integrated with the perception of beauty and that they are seeking this quality when receiving services. In the interviews conducted for HRM 4, HRM 15, HRM 17, HRM 8, HRM 12, and HRM

20, it was stated that work and beauty perceptions are intertwined, as the employee's physical appearance is directly an integral part of the perceived value and reliability of the product or service. For example, in HRM 20, *“when the appearance of the makeup artist who will work for us aligns with society's understanding of beauty and she also possesses flawless skin and meticulous makeup, she essentially becomes a living advertisement for the expertise she offers and we sell the service specifically through her”* The statements clearly illustrate this situation. Again, HRM 18, a manager in the textile sector, made a similar emphasis on the subject: *“...when the staff we hire, select from the store products, and dress accordingly are beautiful and well-groomed, we sell the product directly. The customer asks where are your clothes because.”*

What expectations does your organization's culture set regarding appearance in the hiring process? Regarding the question HRM 1, HRM 7, HRM 11 in summary, our corporate culture considers appearance as a complementary element, while HRM 2, HRM 3, HRM 4, HRM 15, HRM 17, HRM 8, HRM 12, HRM 10, HRM 16, HRM 13, HRM 14, HRM 18, HRM 19 and HRM 20 expressed that they consider it as a filter for the beginning. In this context, they stated that they have built their expectations on an approach that will preserve the corporate image. HRMs have expressed that whether they view aesthetic labor as a complementary element or a filter, their goal is to create a consistent standard in workplaces that enables employees to feel a sense of belonging and perform at their best.

#### 5.4.4. Ethics and Discrimination

The ethical and discriminatory implications of the concept of aesthetic labor arise in the way this labor is demanded and evaluated. Therefore, extreme caution is required. If the recruitment process is not developed based on fair, inclusive, and transparent policies, it runs the risk of becoming an instrument of institutional discrimination that narrows the field of qualifications for the job, deepens inequalities, and gives rise to legal risks. Setting non-objective standards in the hiring process; the expectation of being "stylish" or "well-groomed" often intertwines with biased beauty norms based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, body type, or social class. This, in turn, systematically subjects individuals who do not conform to these norms to discrimination. Moreover, the dominance of the unequal burden paradigm in this process; the expectation of aesthetic labor in the working environment exerts pressure on all employees, but tends to be felt more heavily on female employees in particular. By requiring more makeup, clothing, accessories, and physical discipline such as weight control, it creates an "invisible workload" and additional costs. Moreover, in some sectors, the definition of "nature of the job" reinforces this situation. In sectors such as aviation, beauty, or luxury retail, the argument is made that appearance is "part of the job" and is used to justify discrimination. The crucial question that needs to be answered here is whether the demanded aesthetic standard is essential and measurable for the actual fulfillment

of the work, or whether it is implemented in a way that reflects the standards of privileged groups. Similarly, strict limitations set forth can create a discriminatory workplace culture by rendering cultural and individual identities invisible in working life. During the interviews, a significant portion of HRMs acknowledged that appearance criteria could lead to discrimination if taken to extremes, but they also stated that they primarily use these criteria in the context of professionalism and corporate image. The statements of the two HRMs who participated in the discussion on this subject summarize the views of all managers.

HRM 8 *“Of course, if physical appearance becomes the sole determining factor, the risk of discrimination is inevitable. We determine our standards by taking into account hygiene, clean appearance, and corporate harmony. In this way, we also respect personal differences.”* Again, on the same subject, HRM 16 *“Our appearance-related rules are moderate and focused on professionalism. Aesthetic criteria are important, but they are not the sole criterion we use; yes, if they were the sole criterion, there would be a risk of discrimination. Our approach is related to behavior and the overall presentation of the profession. ”* When we posed the question, Do you, as HRMs expressing your views in this regard, exercise special care to avoid appearance-based biases while managing the recruitment process? to two managers, they both stated that they use standard evaluation forms in the recruitment process to avoid biases (HRM 1-7). HRM 1 stated, *“To avoid biases, we use standard evaluation forms we have prepared for use in the recruitment process. Appearance is included as a supporting factor in these forms, but it is never the sole determinant. ”* While other HRMs express sensitivity to aesthetic-based biases, when their responses to other questions are taken into account, it becomes clear that aesthetic perceptions hold an important place in the hiring process.

Each HRM was asked whether they have ethics agreements or written policy texts on this issue, and the general response received is that the criteria related to appearance in recruitment and performance evaluation processes are limited to the human resources ethical guidelines: HRM 13 *“We have an institutional policy that covers hygiene and cleanliness standards in the sector. Appearance evaluation is also based on these standards; aesthetic or personal preferences are outside this scope. ”* HRM 8 *“Our organization has an employee behavior and appearance policy that has been established in recent years. This policy focuses on the principle that all candidates and employees will be evaluated equally, and that appearance will only be considered in terms of professionalism and guest experience. ”* HRM 15 *“We have an institutional human resources policy text to ensure that candidates' aesthetic differences do not lead to discrimination. We're keeping him under consideration.”*

As can be seen, although ethical and discrimination issues have long been a subject of debate, especially in the recruitment process, they are intertwined with the

concept of "aesthetic labor" and represent a form of discrimination that is more invisible, indirect, yet deeply effective—another finding that emerged from the interviews. Although expectations based on appearance may not be considered overt discrimination, they can become part of corporate culture through aesthetic labor, thus becoming more subtle and enduring. Many businesses disable employees' diverse bodily and identity expressions in the name of corporate representation and operate from an understanding that views the body as a commodity. Before the interview was concluded, HRMs were also asked to share their perceptions regarding aesthetic labor and to describe their personal experiences during the recruitment process. In this context, they were asked whether there was a candidate whom they were positively or negatively affected by solely based on their appearance while performing their duties, and whether they had encountered feedback from candidates regarding this issue along with comments on the matter. Since sectors such as tourism, retail, aviation, beauty, and textiles involve direct and intensive customer contact and where brand image is built on the appearance of individual employees, HRMs' answers to this question reflected both their personal dilemmas and sectoral tensions.

HRMs frequently emphasized the following statement in interviews: "We are looking for a professional appearance in terms of corporate representation; we are not concerned with beauty or handsomeness." They justified this based on customer satisfaction, instilling confidence in customers, and representing the brand. HRM 18 *"Since I manage the human resources of a luxury clothing store chain, I may prefer young candidates who can embody the brand's 'trendy' image through their physique and style of dress, over more experienced candidates who do not fit this 'visual profile' as well, because the customer focuses heavily on the employee working in the sales department"*. Similarly, HRM 20, who is an HRM in a different sector, stated that when hiring a store manager for one of our stores, I may prefer candidates who have a fit appearance, have healthy skin, and have an attention-grabbing voice, because I believe they will market the products more effectively—thus expressing that she associates store employees with the brand's customer profile. And HRM 17: *"Maybe this will feel like a confession. A candidate who came for a job interview was actually very beautiful, well-groomed, and spoke fluently; obviously, she could do the job. However, since I thought she was too overweight to wear the company uniforms, we generally prefer candidates in sizes S-M, and I had to terminate the hiring process."* With this response, she stated that she had failed to act fairly while managing this process. In HRM 2, they cited their customers as the determinant of the attitudes displayed during the recruitment process: *"Since we sell high-end cars, customers want our sales staff and guest-directing consultants, regardless of gender, to have a model-like appearance; they express this expectation to us. One day, our customers expressed this in an email they sent to the company"* HRMs working in the hospitality industry state that HRM 8: *"Although our industry is generally seen as a visually relaxed environment, candidates with visible tattoos, piercings, or extreme hair colors are not given a*

*chance because it is generally thought that they would not fit with every customer base.*" In fact, sometimes our colleagues who review CVs can even disable those applications because they know the company's sensitivity on this issue," he clearly stated this situation. Regarding this issue, HRM 11 responded by stating, "*We accept CVs with photographs and evaluate them as a whole,*" indirectly indicating that they can form an opinion about applicants during this process without even inviting them for an interview.

As a result of the recruitment process, they stated that candidates no longer directly inquire about why they were chosen or why they were not chosen, and that feedback on this matter is now provided primarily through social media rather than direct communication. However, even if it is a small number, there may be candidates who want an evaluation after the interview. "Will I be eliminated because of my appearance?" It was stated by HRM 3, HRM 4, HRM 15, HRM 17, HRM 18, HRM 19 that there were people asking this question. Or HRM 11 stated the situation as follows: "*I knew appearance was important because there were candidates who said they wanted CVs with photos.*" This situation actually demonstrates that aesthetic labor has become normalized and internalized by job applicants. In the feedback provided to candidates by HRMs, HRMs stated that they used terms such as "fit," "customer profile," and "corporate representation." As can be seen, these justifications contain uncertainties. Therefore, aesthetic labor actually plays a decisive role in working life as a reason for rejection that is not usually expressed openly but is sensed. During the HRM interview in the retail sector, HRM mentioned an incident and recounted a personal experience: "*...I think about 8 years ago, a candidate who had previously applied for a job with the company I worked for came to apply again after a long break. The incoming candidate told me that he was excluded from the evaluation due to his physical appearance in his previous application, and this was clearly stated to him, because he is now facing this situation very often in different places, he has undergone a radical physical transformation process to increase his employability, he underwent gastric surgery despite the opposition of his family, and the candidate who came to the institution for reapplication with his new physical appearance clearly stated the reason for the previous rejection, smiling, saying that I want to renew my application with an "acceptable" body this time.*" In fact, this case study is a striking example demonstrating how aesthetic labor and the body become objects of evaluation in the labor market. The incident vividly reveals the decisive role of the physical appearance ideal in employment and the extent to which individuals may resort to radical methods to conform to these norms. This example should also be seen as important data for questioning the serious effects of discrimination based on physical appearance in the labor market on individual bodies and social inequalities.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the data obtained from the interviews, it can be readily stated that aesthetic labor, as an invisible yet highly influential filter in the labor market, profoundly shapes general recruitment processes and criteria beyond competence and capability. As can be seen, this process is also influenced by HRMs' conscious or subconscious perceptions of aesthetic labor. These perceptions can often prioritize elements such as the candidate's physique, appearance, speech, and "suitability for the corporate image" over formal qualifications. The size and form of the application exhibit sectoral and institutional variations; in service sectors where face-to-face communication with customers is intense and brand image is at the forefront, expectations for aesthetic labor become more rigid and decisive. As a result of this situation, ethical and discrimination issues arise. Appearance-based evaluations reinforce discrimination based on weight, age, race, or gender, thereby undermining the principle of equality in the workplace. Ultimately, all these systemic dynamics are embodied in the personal experiences of candidates and employees. Individuals who want to participate in working life manage their own bodies in this direction to adapt all their perceptions to the "wanted body", in this case, it actually leads to damage to self-confidence, identity conflict, self-doubt and feelings of social exclusion, resulting in redefining the labor market as an area where not only job competencies, but also the body is very important and needs to be fought under market conditions. All HRMs who participated in the discussion expressed awareness of the multi-layered problem posed by aesthetic labor, but also stated that they were "forced to take these criteria into account in practice." In fact, this sense of obligation constitutes the core of the issue: While aesthetic expectations constitute a profound problem area extending from individual psychology to social inequalities, they are also justified by realities such as sectoral competition, corporate brand perception, or customer demands.

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