

**COMMODIFICATION AND EXPLOITATION OF AESTHETIC LABOR<sup>1</sup>****Res. Asst. Hülya YEŞİLYURT TEMEL\*** **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines what bank employees do in the face of their managers' aesthetic expectations and controls and how they experience this process. The main argument of the research is how one's aestheticism plays a role in working life. The research is designed on the main question 'Is the aestheticism of bank employees used as a means of labor exploitation? Phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, was adopted and the 'interpretative phenomenology' type of phenomenology research design was used. For sample selection, a total of 20 participants, both male and female, from public and private bank employees were interviewed using snowball sampling method. The research data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants. Analyses were conducted using MAXQDA 22, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program. As a result of the research; employees evaluated aesthetic labor not only as physical/visual aesthetics, but also as a whole from different perspectives such as auditory, intellectual and harmony/harmony aesthetics. Employees strive for aesthetic labor in order to participate in employment and sustainability of employment in a postmodern order based on competition. Due to the functioning of the surveillance mechanism, employees take care to keep these efforts dynamic in both manager and customer relations. The growth of the services sector has led employees to develop aesthetic labor strategies as well as aesthetic labor efforts and skills. In the research, the results of aesthetic labor exploitation of the employee in various aspects such as gender-based discrimination, commodification of labor, surveillance mechanism, obligation, emotional mask, glass ceiling, self-alienation, unfair rewarding, time and cost were reached. In this context, when a sectoral and gender-based evaluation is made, aesthetic labor exploitation is more intense in private banks and female employees.*

<sup>1</sup> This study is derived from a PhD dissertation entitled "Bank Employees' Experiences of Aesthetic Labor: A Qualitative Research", conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Hatice Şebnem Seçer at Dokuz Eylül University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations: A Qualitative Research" at Dokuz Eylül University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Hatice Şebnem Seçer.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the 1980s, globalization has taken center stage as information, communication, cultural interaction and capital have gained dimensions beyond national borders through information technologies. While the discipline of work was not dominant in the pre-industrial period; in post-industrial societies, 'work culture', which includes the whole of the importance, thoughts, attitudes and behaviors towards work, started to take shape. Thus, labor has gradually changed form. The system that started with the control of the employee's mental power has brought 'emotional labor', which emphasizes the attitude of the employee, to the agenda over time.

Interactive services involve not only social interaction but also simultaneous visual and auditory sensory engagement. Employers have therefore begun to pay attention to the aesthetics of both job seekers and employees as part of their workforce strategy.

After the introduction in the first part of the article, the concept of aesthetic labor in the literature is explained in the second part. In the third section, the purpose, method and findings of the study are presented. In the last section, the results are discussed.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Baudrillard (2021) has observed that among the items consumed in consumer societies, the 'body' stands out as something more beautiful, unique and precious than other objects. The desire of women to possess a body deemed suitable by the masculine gaze and the provocations in this direction constitute fundamental objectives of consumption. The association of beauty with the body is manifested around the concept of beauty, involving activities such as maintaining health, engaging in sports, and sexuality for reshaping the body. However, the goal is to sustain the aesthetics of the body, making it a constantly transformable and alterable domain (Baudrillard, 2021: 163-175).

Scientists have examined the role of physical attractiveness in self-perception and found that attractive individuals are evaluated more positively, seen as more desirable and more successful in social interaction (Yan and Bissell, 2014: 195). Aesthetic labor refers to the "embodied capacities and qualities" of workers, including "grasp, style, accent, voice and charm" (see, Ramjattan, 2019) as well as physical appearance. These elements show that aesthetic labor is performed through a combination of behaviors and attitudes with physical appearance. (Gruys, 2014: 3).

The concept of aesthetic labor, while directly built upon Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, also draws from Bourdieu's (1984) habitus theory. Aesthetic labor emphasizes the idea shared by both

Hochschild and Bourdieu that workers need to manage not only their emotions but also their bodies and embodied behaviors (Payne, 2018: 3).

There are two approaches in the literature on aesthetic labor. In the first approach, aesthetic labor is seen as an extension of emotional labor, while in the second approach, aesthetic labor is not accepted as an extension of emotional labor. Academics state that the second view should not be ignored (Sheane, 2012; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019). Oliyadi and Dai (2023), in their research on fashion retail, have stated that they believe aesthetic labor is an extension of emotional labor, supporting this perspective (2023: 711).

In understanding the concept of aesthetic labor, Pierre Bourdieu's '*Cultural Capital and Habitus Theories*' provide a broad framework for understanding how workers acquire and improve their embodied qualities and capacities and how this relates to social inequality. Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of cultural capital shows how non-economic assets contribute to social status. While culture manifests itself in the form of assets such as books, instruments or art, in aesthetic labor these are defined as *objectified cultural capital*. This form of capital is when workers have access to, own, and display certain items of clothing and/or other bodily accoutrements such as glasses, jewelry, makeup, nail polish, etc. (Gruys, 2014: 5).

In his Habitus Theory, Bourdieu refers to tendencies acquired and cultivated in childhood and relatively unchanged in adulthood. Habitus theory links embodied cultural capital by referring to competences, i.e. skills that are inseparable from or embodied by their bearers. The accumulation of embodied cultural capital and the formation of habitus are actually two faces of the same socialization process; it is the built-in internalization of cultural schemas. Habitus and embodied cultural capital are not separate things, but as "moments" of the same process, they are continuous with each other (Gruys, 2014: 5). Therefore, aestheticism, which is innate and exhibited, carries sensory participation as a whole.

Aesthetic labor is also an emotional effort. When aestheticized for organizational gain, aesthetic labor is emotional labor. So far, the focus has been on the "What" rather than the "How" (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). In other words, the main difference between aesthetic and emotional labor is that aesthetic labor brings embodiment to the forefront and reveals how not only employees' emotions but also their physicality are made organizationally appropriate and transformed for organizational benefit (Gruys, 2014: 4). Aesthetic labor is a concept that expresses the necessity of "looking good, sounding right, and conforming to organizational values and image" (Graham, 2015: 98).

Aesthetic labor is the state of compulsory clarification of the appearance of employees. Aesthetic labor, which deals with the change and transformation of employees' bodies by the management, has emerged as a result of the profit motive of businesses. Naturally, this situation has paved the way for businesses to treat employees differently based on their physical appearance and to change their expectations from employees (Seçer, 2016: 38).

Aesthetic labor is the state of employing employees with the desired physical dimensions and good appearance. Managers purposefully use the embodied qualities and capacities of their employees as a competitive advantage through aesthetic labor. For employees, aesthetics is under the control of the employee up to a certain stage (at the point of entry into employment). For managers; it is seen as an element that provides commercial gain beyond the recruitment process in representing the corporate image and contributing to production.

Foucauldian Feminism (1988) in neo-liberalism considers the contract between the domination of others (objectifying) and the self (subjectifying). This view sees beauty as a disciplinary politics, arguing that the appearance of bodies is subject to deep discipline and regulation, even if beauty practices are ostensibly freely chosen. From this perspective, neo-liberal subjects are expected to design and practice their own personal development practices. Therefore, this situation clearly reveals the effects of neo-liberalism in objectifying the self. In this context, it shows that accepting both the traditional body and neo-liberalism has a fundamental impact on workers' objectification of their own bodies or aesthetic labor. Both the social construction of the body and the external pressure for objectification emphasize the social context (Tassinari and Arun, 2021: 477-478).

This organizational mobilization, development and commodification of workers' corporeality is called 'aesthetic labour'. Initial research on aesthetic labor focused on the 'style labor market', including designer retailers, boutique hotels, style bars, cafes and restaurants (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007: 789). Recent work on aesthetic labor, however, suggests that managerial concern for employees' aesthetic appeal extends beyond the realm of interactive service work and also into non-service sectors such as manufacturing and professional work (Gruys, 2014: 3).

The focus of aesthetic labor has taken on a new look with the change in the mode of production. While previously the focus of aesthetic labor was on women in powerful careers, image consultancy for professionals, high-paid workers in the modeling industry or in interactive service work, aesthetic performance has become an increasingly important part of labor in low-paid interactive service work and in unstable labor markets in post-fordism (Van den Berg and Arts, 2019: 301).

An important aspect of the post-fordist organization of economic life is the increase in service sector employment. Most workers in Western welfare states today are employed in (interactive) service sector jobs. Most contemporary work, and especially interactive service work, requires characteristics at work that are often considered personal or private.

In order to remain employable in this economy, the person hired for appearance needs to maintain and keep up to date this appearance in order to harmonize it with the job. For most workers, therefore, exercise, dressing nicely, self-care and make-up are a constant part of labor. This is characteristic of post-fordism. Because post-fordism is more precarious and discontinuous compared to fordism due to

the increase in the interactive service sector, it requires constant calibration (Van den Berg and Arts, 2019: 301).

### **3. AESTHETIC LABOR IN THE BANKING SECTOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

#### **3.1. Purpose And Method Of The Research**

The aim of the study is 'What do bank employees do in the face of their managers' aesthetic expectations and supervision? How do they experience this process?' The research is designed on the main question 'Is the aestheticism of bank employees used as a means of labor exploitation? The study focuses on one of the research paradigms, epistemology, that is, understanding the nature of knowledge. Among the epistemological perspectives, it is handled with the 'Interpretivist' perspective. In the interpretivist perspective, reality is socially constructed (Sıgır, 2021). In this study, qualitative research was conducted because of the need to explore a problem or issue, the need to hear silenced voices, or to understand the context and environment in which the participants in the study addressed a problem or issue.

Since the risk of harming the participants, autonomy and informed consent are important in the ethical framework, a semi-structured questionnaire was created to prevent psychological harm to the participants. Care was taken to make the interviews more conversational. In order to ensure an objective and scientific research, attention was paid to issues such as data triangulation, participant verification, researcher's position and reflectivity, expert review (peer review), rich and dense description, and maximum diversity (Creswell & Creswell, 2021: 200-201). The sample selection was made by snowball sampling from the non-probability sampling type.

Phenomenology was used as a qualitative research design. Phenomenological study defines the common meaning of experiences related to a phenomenon or concept (Creswell & Creswell, 2021: 13). In this study, the common meaning of aesthetic labor (phenomenon) was tried to be defined based on the experiences of bank employees. The interpretive phenomenology type of phenomenology research design will be used. With interpretive phenomenology, an answer to the question "What is what is happening?" was sought. It is aimed to reveal the meanings embedded in the experiences of individuals.

The research covers employees working in the bank sector in the positions of box office, retail, operations, assistant manager and manager. Within the framework of qualitative research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 bank employees<sup>2</sup>. Thirteen of the participants were female and seven were male. Seven of the participants work in public banks and 13 in private banks. For the security of personal data, it has been specified that the names of participants will be kept confidential. Therefore,

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<sup>2</sup> For this field research, the approval decision of Dokuz Eylül University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee numbered E-87347630-659-497996 was taken on 24/01/2023. Participants were informed about the research and signed a voluntary consent form.

the bank employees interviewed in the research text have been coded in accordance with privacy rules as K1, K2, K3, and K4. Interviews with the participants were conducted between December 2022 and June 2023. Each participant was interviewed for a minimum of 40 minutes and a maximum of 1 hour and 40 minutes. Interviews were terminated when the research data reached the saturation point, that is, when both code satisfaction and meaning satisfaction were reached. Interviews were transcribed.

Some points were taken into consideration in determining the participants. In the pilot interview, the interviewees indicated the banks in the sector where aesthetic employees are concentrated. Considering the fact that these opinions cannot be a completely objective criterion, priority was given to the banks mentioned, but other public and private bank employees were also interviewed. In the research, box office employees were started to be interviewed; however, taking into account the recommendations and suggestions of the participants during the interview, employees working in the individual unit were also included among the participants. Later on, as a few of the participants stated that more robust findings could be obtained if the research questions were directed to managers, interviews were conducted with three participants in managerial positions. As a matter of fact, quite meaningful findings were obtained in the interviews with the managers. The fact that the managers have worked in different positions for many years and have different experiences and observations in each lane is the biggest factor in this. This added richness to the research.

The process of persuading the participants to be interviewed is one of the most important limitations of the research. This is because bank employees' busy working hours and constant face-to-face interaction with people triggered their desire and difficulties to create time after working hours. Another limitation of the research is that the participants wanted to be interviewed during working hours or at lunch time. In order for the interview to be productive, it is one of the requirements of the research to conduct the interview at a time when the participants feel more comfortable, when they do not have to worry about catching up with work or being late for work, and spatially outside the boundaries of the workplace. Therefore, in the study, care was taken to interview the participants at a time when they felt better and more comfortable energetically and spatially in places where they could chat in social life outside of work.

The interview form includes 11 open-ended research questions in addition to demographic questions. The first interview form was shaped by the scientific realities learned as a result of the literature review. The survey questions and interview questions used in the studies on the subject of "aesthetic labor" in the creation of the questions were very useful in drawing a general framework. However, the unique structure and working conditions of the banking sector, which is the field of research, were also more effective in shaping the research questions. Therefore, since the researcher was from outside the sector, the research questions were renewed as the participants were interviewed. In the renewal of the questions, the experiences and recommendations of the participants, the correct ordering of the questions in a holistic manner, whether they were fully understandable and whether the participants were repetitive in their

answers to the questions were taken into consideration. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted in a conversational atmosphere with fewer and more concise questions, allowing the participant to ask probing questions without getting bored.

In the research with the final version of the interview form; how the participant makes sense of aesthetics, how he describes it, how he experiences aesthetic labor in his working life, how genes and cultural capital have an impact on aesthetics, and whether aesthetic labor is / is not a means of exploitation in working life for the participant.

### **3.2. Findings of The Research**

#### **3.2.1. Is Aesthetic Labor Only Appearance?**

The meaning of aestheticism and what kind of efforts employees make for the visibility of aestheticism gain importance in working life. It can be said that having aesthetics in working life provides some gains to employees. First of all, being well-groomed gives self-confidence and self-esteem and motivation. Thus, it helps to achieve more success in the employee-customer relationship. At the same time, it is also stated that aesthetics provides gains such as being respected as a social status in working life, being taken seriously and giving confidence to the other party. At the level of general perception, the participants considered aesthetics not only as physical / visual aesthetics, but also as a holistic aesthetics as auditory aesthetics, intellectual aesthetics and harmony / harmony aesthetics.

Private banks prioritize aesthetics more than public banks. Participants stated that the customer profile and the preference rate of banks are effective in this situation. Especially the high number of customers visiting the branches of public banks every day is an important factor that pushes aesthetics to the second plan. On the other hand, the high level of competition among private banks and the need to attract customers have caused employees to prioritize aesthetics in this regard.

Aestheticism was found to be more intense in female employees compared to male employees. It is seen that female employees attach more importance to physical/visual aesthetics and support it with other forms of aesthetics for a holistic reflection. The opinions of male employees on this issue are less than those of female employees.

Participant views suggesting that aesthetics in the perspective of the employee is appearanceism, that is, bodily / visual aesthetics;

*"Now posture is very important first of all. Aesthetic look, aesthetic smile... Especially in understanding the customer and convincing the customer. Aesthetics is a very, very important concept especially in dialogues with the other party. I think a person's appearance is aesthetic."*

**(P11- Female- Private bank)**

In banking, especially in face-to-face communication, it is of great importance to show aesthetics in a holistic way to everyone you interact with. Visual aesthetics should exhibit harmony / harmony between the feeling conveyed to the other with the mood and manners, tone of voice, speaking style and behaviors. For example, aesthetics should not be limited only to the employee, there should be a harmony between them, from the design of the branch to the aesthetics of the cards given to the customer. Regarding harmony/harmony aesthetics; *"Aesthetics is not only about the personnel. Even the screen that the customer looks at from his/her seat. For example, even the ATM card is important for aesthetics."* (P18- Male- Private bank)

The ways in which aesthetics is displayed is an extension of how employees define aesthetics. The employee also makes aesthetic labor in that direction. The forms of aestheticism are expressed as personal care, harmonious clothing, shopping, education and personal development and aesthetic operation/health.

It is observed that private bank employees attach more importance to aesthetics and make more effort in this direction compared to public bank employees. The customer portfolio that prefers private banks is the main determining factor here. According to the participant narratives, the fact that public banks offer financial opportunities and alternatives to appeal to all segments of society shows that there are some class differences between the customer profile of private banks. Therefore, the audience addressed by private banks cares more about aesthetics. For private banks, aesthetics play an important role in reaching and convincing customers.

It has been observed that women attribute more meaning to aesthetics and make a lot of effort in this direction. During the interview, female participants emphasized that the expectation from female employees is always higher. Interestingly, not only women but also male participants stated that aesthetic expectations from women were higher.

Employees have taken it for granted that they have to carry out this job in a robotic way every day with the same appearance and the same mood. For example, an opinion on personal care; *"Maybe it will sound ridiculous, but after my maternity leave, I went straight to get a Brazilian blow-dry. Because I thought I might not wake up every morning. The child is breastfeeding or something. So, for example, I couldn't do my hair every day, so I went to get a Brazilian blow-dry."* (P16- Female- Public bank)

In addition to the argument of personal care, harmonious clothing is one of the forms of aesthetic display that private banks pay more attention to. *"For example, the colors of my suits are different, so the colors of the coats I wear over them are also different. Here is this one today for example. And this one is navy blue (pointing to his clothes and coat)."* (K9- Male- Private bank)



### **3.2.2. Aesthetic Appearance of the Sector: Bank Showcases**

The growth of the services sector, the acceleration of interaction by the global market and the change in the mode of production, the openness of the post-fordist system to change and the rapid adaptation to the system in terms of meeting the needs shape the labor markets. In this context, aesthetics is very important in today's changing and developing working life. Aesthetics play a role in many different aspects. In interactive (face-to-face) services, the first impression usually leaves a lasting impression. The fact that the dynamics of the banking sector is based on customer-employee communication makes aesthetics more important. In particular, the fact that employee aesthetics help to display a professional image has caused managers to pay attention to aesthetics in employees. In addition, the importance of aesthetics in the representation of the institution and the marketing of the product or service emphasizes the importance of aesthetics. In addition, in the banking sector, where competition is intense, aesthetics offers the opportunity to provide competitive advantage in the sector.

According to the participants, the idea that aesthetic appearance represents one's respect for work and the organization shows that aesthetics is important in working life. In addition to the effect of appearance, arguments such as communication style, body language and image transmission also have an important share in aesthetics in working life. In this context, how the employee defines aesthetics or the aesthetic perspective that the sector attributes to the employee is important. The participant views on the place and importance of aesthetics in working life, which suggest that appearance is effective, are as follows:

*"The most critical word in our profession is trust. If what we want to create is trust, being well-groomed, taking care of oneself, taking care of the other party, actually looking well-groomed is one of the leading indicators that someone is doing their job diligently. In other words, I think that my work will definitely be examined and evaluated sensitively for the customer on the other side if he/she shows the same care for his/her work as he/she shows for himself/herself." (P6 - Public bank)*

*"Especially in banking, order is important. Dressing up, dressing classically, etc. Because you are not only marketing your job to the other person, but also yourself. Let me talk about the marketing part as follows: reassurance. For example, when you give a loan or distribute a product, you need to give confidence to the person on the other side, and you can do this with your posture or aesthetic appearance." (P11- Private bank)*

In working life, the external appearance of the employee ensures both individual and corporate success. In addition to this success, it was emphasized that aesthetics are important in the representation of the institution. *"You are behind the brand. In order to make that brand look good. I mean, actually, I'm saying this: toll booths are like a showcase. As everywhere has a showcase, we are the showcase of*

*the bank. They want us to dress that way so that they can decorate that showcase." (P19- Female-Private bank)*

Managers give confidence to customers by presenting a professional appearance in the sector with employee aesthetics and provide competitive advantage by strengthening customer relations. For this reason, the importance given to aesthetics in working life is increasing.

### **3.2.3.The Effect of Aesthetics on Recruitment and Job Continuity**

The impact of aesthetics on employment participation and continuity of employment is an increasingly important issue. This raises the questions of how the appearance of the employee has an impact on the recruitment process, how the employee's appearance has an impact on the continuity of the job and the termination process. In the research, it was stated that appearance and first impression are of great importance in recruitment, but self-expression should not be ignored. In the continuity of the job, in cases where aesthetics are not ensured, some negativities arise. First of all, the employees' achievement of the targets that they should meet in certain periods is interrupted and the performance evaluations of their managers are negative. These are manifested as warning/feedback, dismissal and resignation, as well as exposure to mobbing and obstacles to internal promotion. It can also be said that the cultural capital of the employee and environmental factors have an impact on these feedbacks.

While appearance and first impression were the most frequently emphasized arguments in the recruitment process in private and public banks; in the continuity of the job, the arguments of warning/feedback and dismissal or resignation were frequently emphasized in private banks if the employee did not fulfill the aesthetic expectations of the manager, and the arguments of internal promotion and warning/feedback were frequently emphasized in public banks.

In terms of gender, both male and female employees emphasize the importance of appearance and first impression in the recruitment process, while women give more importance to appearance than men. In job continuity, female employees frequently mentioned the argument of internal promotion, while male employees frequently mentioned the argument of warning/feedback. In the sector, women make more effort in terms of aesthetic labor in ensuring job continuity. In case the expectations of the organization or the manager are not met, female employees state that they will be dismissed from their jobs, receive warnings or face obstacles in their internal promotion.

At the time of the first encounter, the fact that the manager or human resources unit does not have the opportunity to get to know the employees closely or have any information about their job skills and professionalism leads them to the appearance and first impression as the criterion that will convince and reassure them at the first stage.

*"You should definitely have nice hair, nice clothes, make-up on your face, you should definitely emphasize your beauty, this is a very big factor. It has a great importance in terms of aesthetics*

*in face-to-face interviews like in the past. I think the most important thing, and I'm saying this because I'm a woman, is that high heels are very important in recruitment. Even the sound of those high heels can be very effective in recruitment." (P12- Female- Private bank)*

Those working in managerial positions, on the other hand, evaluated the recruitment process and stated that appearance and first impression play an important role. This is because the managers said that the person's self-care primarily shows his/her respect for himself/herself and this will reflect his/her respect for his/her work discipline and his/her job.

*"Recruitment is a short-term job. So it's a short-term relationship. Until that moment, you see his face once or twice. One hundred percent has a very important effect. As I said, as we talk, as the work progresses, as we get closer to the end, it loses the effect of the first moment, but the first moment has a great effect. In other words, you actually apply a formula such as someone who has taken care of his job, knows where to wear what to wear, knows where to talk, knows where to do what to do and where to stand." (P6- Male- Public bank)*

*"I wouldn't work with a person I can't comfortably approach visually. It's also a matter of respect. He should pay attention to that. I mean, I didn't buy it, I was determined to buy it, but I didn't. I mean, you can't have an unironed shirt and the second button open." (P15- Male- Private bank)*

The effort that employees show for aesthetics during the recruitment process turns into systematic behavior expected in the continuity of the job. Employees do this behavior voluntarily at first. However, sometimes emotional changes and physical inadequacies required by being human sometimes make this situation difficult in the continuity of the work. At these times, employees encounter some negative feedbacks.

Employees stated that they receive **warnings/feedback** from their managers when they fail to fulfill aesthetics as part of the continuity of work. Most of the time the warning is verbal, but when the employee does not pay attention or the desired expectation is not met, the warning is given in writing. Finally, it can lead to dismissal.

*"Everyone is incredibly well-groomed. It's like a catwalk. You cannot believe it. I mean, those who don't pay attention to this get feedback." (P3- Female- Private bank)*

*"When I first started, I had an experience about this: Because I was young and I was not in the marketing field, I mean, I didn't wear a jacket or a white shirt much because I met with customers less. One day they pulled me aside and said, "... (saying your name), you don't come to meet your friends. You are a banker," they told me. I received a comment that you need to dress more properly and appropriately, you reflect the bank and you need to pay more attention*

*because you reflect the state bank. Since that day, I dress more aesthetically." (P10- Female- State bank)*

If there is no improvement in the employee after warning/feedback, managers resort to dismissal. For the employees who are not directly dismissed due to aesthetics, it is stated that the managers use words expressing that they do not have aesthetics. The most frequently emphasized argument after warning/feedback is dismissal or resignation.

*"First your appearance, then it reflects on your mood and your work. And in fact, what is aesthetically bad in terms of appearance ends with a bad performance, but in fact, the basis of it is completely aesthetic appearance or aesthetic work." (P14- Female- Private bank)*

*"At first, I started working at the call center, by the way. For example, they fired the girl because her speech was not good. Because she spoke to the customers daily. When you look from the outside, yes, she was hired as a presentable, university graduate, but then she was fired because she talked to the customers as if she was talking to them in daily life." (P16- Female- Public bank)*

*"Gesture, mimicry and speech are effective in termination, yes. Because just recently a friend of ours quit his job. Maybe he was forced to resign, we don't know." (P10- Female- Public bank)*

Another argument for the effect of aesthetic labor on job continuity is internal promotion. The promotion of the employee within the organization is possible by fulfilling certain criteria. According to the participants; while being successful in the exam and meeting the target can be measured by objective criteria with the effort of the employee, the fact that performance evaluation is left to the initiative of the manager shows that the evaluations are not objective from time to time.

*"For example, a friend of mine went to human resources, of course, it was a very different thing that she was successful. But the girl's speech, her persuasiveness, her ability to interpret something when she saw it, and most importantly, her appearance. I think it is very important for our company, or for most companies, that the people to be brought into human resources are model-like, especially if they are women. Appearance is very important to this extent. But diction is as important as appearance." (P16- Female- Public bank)*

While emphasizing that aesthetics is important in internal promotion, the fact that gender discrimination already exists in this regard was supported by the opinion that *"I think it can definitely have an effect. I think that they definitely look at aesthetics while even being a man or a woman is important." (P17- Female- Public bank).*

On the other hand, promotion means that the manager vouches for his/her employee. At some point, the employee represents his/her manager. The fact that the manager discusses this issue with his

superiors, the aesthetic appearance and posture of the employee he wants to be promoted shows the success of his manager. Therefore, managers think sensitively at this point and act accordingly. *"Aesthetics are effective even in promotion. I mean, it is difficult for someone who is poorly dressed, who does not look good, who does not pay attention to self-care to be promoted. Because he becomes his showcase. He has to write a letter to his superiors to ask for his promotion. The higher-ups need to see what he sees so that this promotion is the right one or they can say "yes, you see people now.""* (P13- Male- Private bank)

### 3.2.4. Employees' Aesthetic Labor Skills and Strategies

The ability of employees to ensure the continuity of the business in working life depends on having certain skills or developing strategies within the framework of aesthetic labor phenomenon. In this context, the question "What is the place and importance of aesthetics in communicating with customers?" has a broad meaning from the employee perspective. While emphasizing the role of aesthetics in the customer-employee relationship, how employees use aesthetic labor skills and the aesthetic strategies they apply to win customers have gained importance. Under the category of aesthetic labor skills and strategies of employees; *image and professional appearance, emotional bonding, oratory/language, persuasiveness, emotional agility, customer attraction and competition* arguments were mentioned.

In terms of the sector, private and public banks frequently mentioned the codes of *image and professional appearance* and *emotional connection*. In addition, public bank employees did not express any opinion on emotional agility, customer attraction and competition codes. Private bank employees exhibit more aesthetic labor skills and strategies than public bank employees. The increase in the post-modern structure in the services sector and competition have had a significant impact on this situation.

In terms of gender, it was observed that female employees focused on aesthetic labor skills and strategies more than male employees. Female employees ranked *image and professional appearance* in the first place in terms of frequency of mention, *while* male employees ranked the argument of *emotional connection* in the first place.

Employees shared their views on the strategies they apply to attract customers by increasing the visibility of certain aesthetic labor skills. The most frequently mentioned ones are image and professional appearance. The first thing that the customer pays the most attention to is the image of the employee.

*"I came across something like this. There were three different places at the counter in the branch. The one near the entrance always has a more attractive and beautiful customer representative. Because as soon as the customer enters, they see that customer representative*

*first. This is a very important perception and this is something that the manager determines: You sit here, you sit there, you sit there." (P12- Female- Private bank)*

*"There are customer segments, for example, there is a bank that wants to attract customers in the individual sense or wants to attract small salaried factory workers, let's say there is a bank that follows such a strategy, visuality is very important there. Because the audience you are already addressing is not the company owner or the executive part, it should be attractive so that they come and make transactions here. This applies to both women and men. It is related to the audience you address." (P13- Male- Private bank)*

Employees resort to emotional bonding to make their business relationships with their customers more meaningful, sincere and long-lasting. In order to establish an emotional bond, employees show that they empathize with the customer by making them feel that they understand the customer's wishes and concerns and that they can look from his/her perspective. Thus, it is seen that it is important to establish an emotional bond between employees and their customers within the scope of aesthetic labor skill or strategy.

*"Of course, energy is also important here. It is very important to welcome them with a smiling face. The other person then establishes an emotional bond. You have to make the customer feel that you are with them. You have to be the customer's friend, companion. So you need to break the wall between them." (P2- Male- Private bank)*

*"For example, Sultan (the painting) has this thing here, I don't know if you've seen it before in a bank branch, but I bought it and put it there, and when my manager came, he was surprised. What is this doing here and so on. I asked for permission and he gave me permission. A month and a half later, the sultan now has his own portfolio. They come here to see him. They sit with me to see if it's there. The man moved his 6-7 million money from another bank and brought it here." (P15- Male- Private bank)*

### **3.2.5. Aesthetic Labor and Exploitation**

The research is based on the question of the use of aesthetics as a means of exploitation by managers in working life. The fact that employees' self-realization efforts have turned into an obligation over time has brought exploitation along with it. Especially at first, the employee sees aesthetics as a part of his/her job and fulfills its requirements. However, in the continuity of the job, as aesthetics began to transform with the expectations of managers, in-house trainings and practices, the loss of control over the sensory transfer and body of the person made the person more vulnerable to exploitation.

Private bank employees emphasized the relationship between aesthetic labor and exploitation the most. Public bank employees, on the other hand, while expressing their views on the relationship between aesthetic labor and exploitation, emphasized that this exploitation is more common in private

banks based on their previous private bank experiences and the experiences of private bank employees in their close circle.

In the category of the relationship between aesthetic labor and exploitation, the most emphasized form of exploitation is *gender-based discrimination*. The *commodification of labor* comes second. These are followed by *surveillance mechanism, obligation, cost and time, glass ceiling, emotional mask, self-alienation and unfair rewards*. In private banks, the most frequently emphasized forms of exploitation are *gender-based discrimination* and *commodification of labor*. In public banks, on the other hand, the most frequently mentioned arguments for aesthetic labor exploitation are *gender-based discrimination* and *surveillance mechanisms*.

Female employees mentioned forms of exploitation more frequently than male employees. While there are forms of exploitation that female employees and male employees express in common, there are also forms of exploitation where they differ and where male employees do not express an opinion. While the most frequently emphasized exploitation of aesthetic labor by female and male employees is the argument of *gender-based discrimination*, the *commodification of labor* ranks second. Male employees did not express opinions on the exploitation of aesthetic labor in terms of *cost and time, self-alienation and unfair rewards*.

Since the research was designed on the question "Are bank employees' aesthetics used as a means of exploitation?", the most frequently emphasized argument based on participant findings is gender-based discrimination. Gender-based discrimination is a type of discrimination in which individuals' rights are restricted or they are subjected to inequality of opportunity because of their gender. Participants shared their experiences and views on gender-based discrimination from different perspectives, including expectations and approaches based on gender in the focus on aesthetics, from the perspective of managers and employees, and in the case of internal promotion.

*"I'm going to give a feminist answer again, but I think it's a woman again. For men, it is enough for them to shave their beard and dress nicely in a corporate company. But for women, their make-up is looked at, maybe even their smell is looked at. Maybe this is not so important for men, but since women are looked at much more carefully, I think women are exploited more in terms of aesthetics. So I think sexism is being practiced." (P16- Female- Public bank)*

A male bank employee in a managerial position stated that aesthetics is definitely a means of exploitation for women. At the same time, as a manager, with these statements, he emphasized that the expectation from female employees should be the same during the continuity of the job as it is during recruitment. *"For women, yes. Definitely so. Once you enter the job like that, you always have to stay like that. At least for eastern societies. Not necessarily the one I live in, I mean my circle of friends and girlfriends in Istanbul, most of them are bankers and from the finance department, and sometimes I listen to their conversations among themselves, "she did a kilo of whitewash again" or something like*

*that, this is a very bad thing. When you don't show up like that one day, "are you bad, are you sick, are you okay?". Even if I come without a tie and jacket, not a single person will ask me what's wrong with you. Is aesthetics a means of exploitation from that side, I think so." (P15- Male- Private bank)*

Gender-based discrimination is of great importance at both individual and societal levels. Gender discrimination in institutions can be said to deepen inequality through practices, policies and behaviors. In internal promotion, it was stated that although there were female employees in the same position, the male employee was promoted on the grounds that there were none. This situation shows that female employees are ignored in internal promotion evaluations. According to the participant, if the employee is aesthetically pleasing and has the ability to express himself/herself, he/she has a better chance of becoming a manager as a man than a woman.

*"I switched to the banking sector, and when I look here, in the last year, only in our department, our male specialist friend was promoted as a manager. Considering this, we were told something like "we didn't have a female employee in that position at that seniority yet". Actually, there were, but I think it somehow didn't happen because they were women, so I think it is much more advantageous to be a man. No matter how well you do your job or not, it doesn't matter, if you have a little bit of aesthetics, if you can convey yourself to the other side correctly, I honestly think that you are one step ahead when you are a man." (P8- Female- Private bank)*

According to male respondents, employees work in better harmony with the opposite sex rather than with the same sex. Based on the findings, the relationship between female managers and female employees is often not healthy. The reason for this is that female managers are more detailed and scrutinizing towards female employees. However, it can be said that the problem here is not that managers and employees are of the same gender, but that the management style of the managers does not ensure the harmony between the employees and the management, and that the communication channels between managers and employees are not clear and understandable. Especially the presuppositions of the patriarchal society, which are secretly coded to individuals, constantly bring to the agenda the falsehoods known to be true about divisive emotions such as jealousy, envy and envy in the relationship between women and women. On the contrary, in prosperous countries that emphasize the importance of development as well as development, it is seen that female managers in working life are role models for most female employees and provide support by mentoring. Therefore, how society defines gender is important when addressing gender-based discrimination.

*"If there is a female manager, male employees always get along much better with her. Because the man knows how to treat the other party. The woman is the same way. The opposite sex always gets along better with each other in this regard. There are also extra things in women, for example. You know, some things can reach the level of jealousy. I mean, if a female manager has a female*



*employee, she definitely, definitely examines her outfit, from the high heels she wears to the perfume she wears to the jewelry she wears." (P13- Male- Private bank)*

Female participants stated that communication and relations in the workplace differ according to gender. Gender-based prejudices can be perceived as discriminatory behaviors. Especially female managers are evaluated according to gender-based expectations. The idea that female managers are not warmer, sincere or empathetic towards female employees deepens the perception that women are more strict or critical of women in society. This situation also confronts women managers with the problematic of how to cope with these expectations.

*"Of course, I think gender plays a big role. It's like this; what women wear is actually criticized more or noticed more. For example, when we wear a different blouse or shirt, you are asked if you just bought it. But I have never seen a man being asked this question. I think that no matter how differently they all dress, they are never paid attention to." (P8- Female- Private bank)*

After gender-based discrimination, the most frequently emphasized argument of the participants is the commodification of labor. The concept of commodification of labor is based on the economic ideas of Karl Marx. Workers have to sell the goods or services they produce under free market conditions. According to Marx, the fact that workers have to sell their labor to make a living and that their labor is accepted as goods or services shows that labor is commodified. In this process, labor has turned into a value that can be bought and sold in the market. The commodification of labor, one of the main features of capitalism, also leads to the exploitation of the working class. The fact that the wages paid by employers to workers while purchasing their labor do not meet the real value of labor is an important indicator of exploitation. In the research, the main phenomenon of exploitation of 'aesthetic labor' was focused on the commodification of labor. Participants expressed how their aesthetic labor is commodified and invisible through their experiences and opinions.

Evaluating the aesthetic labor of employees in terms of the commodification of labor provides information about how labor becomes a commodity and gains economic value. Some participant quotes show that aesthetic labor plays an important role in marketing products. While visual appeal helps customers to prefer the product, aesthetic labor affects the sale of products. While aesthetic labor manifests itself as a part of the product or service sold, employers expect extra from employees in competitive markets. Therefore, the fact that employees spend more time and effort for aesthetic labor shows that labor is commoditized and emerges as a form of exploitation.

*"There were many in our sector as well, but this is more common in representatives; 70 percent of the employees would be women. Because the part they address or the part they will convince, let me put it this way, 70 percent of doctors are men. You dress the woman you send there openly. Even if you don't say it, she knows how it will affect her, so she says, "You wear a low-cut dress." In other words, after giving the other party that feeling, there is no medicine that she cannot*

*sell, no loan that he cannot give to bankers. There were examples we also experienced." (P13- Male- Private bank)*

*"The negative side is; In order to constantly make yourself look aesthetically pleasing, financially and as a result, we are human, sometimes we have emotional difficulties. Having to look aesthetic despite everything is sometimes going beyond my emotions. It is like being suspended spiritually and in appearance, it is just an image." (P7- Female- Public bank)*

*"Actually, I think there are many factors, but it varies from manager to manager. It also varies from unit to unit. For example, you are a customer representative. So you are a banker at the head office. There is a promotion to the branch. You are in the branch pool. Your manager, for example, when you look at the branch, generally women who are more naive, more polite, taller, with more beautiful legs are preferred. For example, something like this happens between us. I have a friend at the general directorate and her manager always says. Don't waste your beauty, go to the branch. For example, there is always such a discourse." (P3- Female- Private bank)*

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study examines the nature of aesthetic labor in the banking sector and contributes to the literature on the exploitation of aesthetics in the workplace in terms of sector and gender. Aesthetic labor has an important role in the relationship between customers and employees in the banking sector. At the same time, aesthetic labor is becoming increasingly important in becoming the preferred employee in order to stand out in the eyes of the manager and to ensure the continuity of the job.

In addition to conceptualizing aesthetic labor as the characteristics embodied at the point of entry into labor markets, the analysis presented in the research highlights the dimension of aesthetic appearance in post-Fordist labor markets, where increasing numbers of people are exposed to precarious employment and unemployment. Aesthetic labor is not only appearanceism, but also the ability to adapt to changing working conditions. Employment and unemployment force workers to work on themselves as part of a marketed product or service. Aesthetics is recognized as an important aspect of this marketing and an integral part of labor. Aesthetic labor, then, is no longer trivial, but is increasingly at the root of social inequalities.

Particularly private banks operating in the sector recruit and develop people with social and aesthetic skills and qualities. The fact that banks in the sector mobilize aesthetic labor preferences through corporate dress and appearance policies as well as training and evaluation practices in their recruitment and selection practices shows that they take a strategic approach.

When private banks are compared with public banks, it is seen that private bank employees make more effort for aesthetic labor. In this case, the fact that bank employees have certain periodic target achievement and performance evaluation criteria has an important role. This is because public banks

provide more opportunities to attract customers financially, which leads to a higher number of customers. Therefore, public bank employees achieve their targets more easily because they reach more customers. In addition, the fact that employees in public banks do not face any sanctions when they fail to meet these targets causes them to be more comfortable in terms of aesthetics. On the contrary, private bank employees have to attract more customers in order to meet their targets in a competitive environment and to receive positive feedback from their managers in performance evaluations. Therefore, this functioning of banks makes aesthetics indirectly important, even if it is not directly visible.

Another reason why private bank employees attach more importance to aesthetics is the customer portfolio that prefers private banks. According to participant narratives, the fact that public banks offer financial opportunities and alternatives to appeal to all segments of the society shows that there are some class differences between the customer profile of private banks. Therefore, the customer base that private banks work with cares more about aesthetics. For private banks, aesthetics play an important role in reaching and convincing customers. It can be said that this situation is relatively less important in public banks, but it varies from branch to branch and from manager to manager.

When the research is evaluated in terms of gender; female employees make more effort for aesthetic labor in working life compared to male employees. Especially in private banks where competition is intense, the fact that aesthetics have an important share in the employee-customer relationship in the manager's evaluation of employee performance and in achieving targets increases the expectation of aestheticism from female employees. In this expectation, the dominant gender perspective in society plays a decisive role to a great extent. Therefore, it has been observed that female employees attach more importance to image and professional appearance in the sector. Male participants, on the other hand, expressed less negative opinions such as sanctions, feedback, etc. in the absence of aesthetic labor compared to female participants.

As a result, aesthetic labor serves the transformation and commodification of workers into aesthetic artifacts. At the same time, aesthetic labor forces workers to acquire a new oppressive identity. It can be said that the exploitation of aesthetic labor is added to many obstacles encountered in labor markets from the recruitment process to the termination of the job. There is a more egalitarian perspective in terms of working conditions and a more restrictive and transformative perspective on the employee's choice to be themselves. At the same time, the evaluation of a person on the basis of their physical characteristics, which they are born with and over which they have no control, reveals a new form of discrimination (see, Lipton, 2021).

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