Aesthetic labour and diversity on the shopfloor: The experiences of women workers in fashion retail

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Journal: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

Accepted date for publication: 19 December 2022

Article publication date: 17 January 2023

DOI: 10.1108/EDI-10-2021-0257

Citation


https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-10-2021-0257

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the workplace experiences of aesthetic labour among racially diverse frontline women workers in a fashion retail store.

Methodology/approach – This qualitative study is based on an ethnographic study, drawing on findings from participant observation and interviews with frontline workers at a fashion retail store in the UK.

Findings – This paper explores how the embodiments of aesthetic labour are perpetually produced and commodified through the discipline of management in a fashion retail store. It challenges the notion of phenotypical Whiteness as the beauty standard within fashion retail and demonstrates how embodiments differ according to race. While White women are continuously scrutinised by their appearance, the aesthetic demands for women of colour tend to focus on speech and racialised bodies to provide “authentically” exotic experiences for customers. Additionally, this study highlights how the mobilisation of aesthetic labour can create work humiliation and work alienation.

Research limitations/implications – Despite this study being based on an ethnographic study at one British fashion retailer, this paper seeks to give voices to an underrepresented group by exploring the lived experiences of racially diverse women workers.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the intersection between aesthetic labour and race from an embodiment perspective, exploring the workplace experiences of racially diverse women workers in fashion retail and how their various forms of embodiment are racialised and commodified.
Introduction

This paper focuses on how aesthetic labour intersects with race by exploring the experiences of women workers in a fashion retail store in the UK. Aesthetic labour is considered the expectation for employees to “look good and sound right” (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007, p. 104). Aesthetics is crucial to many businesses where management often strategically mobilise and develop it for business gain (Witz et al., 2003). Often unrecognised and uncompensated, aesthetic labour is known for silently worsening the exploitation of labour and deepening social inequalities based on gender, class, and race (Williams and Connell, 2010). In particular, race, which has been increasingly noted as an important aspect of aesthetic labour (i.e., Wissinger, 2012; Walters, 2018). Despite the emerging interest in aesthetic labour within scholarly literature, studies that explicitly focus on the intersections between aesthetic labour and race are relatively limited with a few exceptions, such as Nath (2011), Wissinger (2012), Walters (2018, 2021), Robinson (2021), and Ramjattan (2021). These studies were mostly conducted in North America and offshored Indian call centres. Additionally, most existing studies (except Walters’ study with U.S. clothing retail workers) often focus on one or two racial groups of aesthetic labourers. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the experiences of aesthetic labour among a racially diverse group of women workers in a UK fashion retail.

The overreliance on surface appearance in many aesthetic labour studies (e.g., Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Witz et al., 2003) is criticised by Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) who argue those studies reduce the subjectivity of the aesthetic labourer to “a cardboard cut-out” (p. 784) and aesthetic labour should not be considered merely superficial work on the body’s surface within organisations. Instead, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) claim aesthetic labour entails on-going production of the entire embodied self at and out of work. Following Merleau-Ponty’s work on the phenomenological view of body, embodiment refers to being-in-the-world as “the
body is our anchorage in a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945], p. 146). “Merleau-Ponty… invokes the human body as the site of meaning and experience” (Styhre, 2004, p. 105). Embodiment takes place when particular body work is produced and regulated by employers (Gimlin, 2007), such as wearing make-up, maintaining certain hairstyles, buying and wearing products as uniforms (in this study these are clothes and accessories), speaking and behaving in the “right” way (Pettinger, 2004). Although the embodiment perspective has been used to examine aesthetic labour (i.e., Pettinger, 2004; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), the differences of embodiments in racialising aesthetic labour have not been clarified. Hence, this study employs an embodiment perspective to examine how the embodiments of a racially diverse group of aesthetic labourers are demanded, controlled, and disciplined by management.

Previous studies in aesthetic labour reveal the ideal fashion retail workers are often middle-class White women as they embody the good-looking and right-sounding aesthetic qualities expected by employers (Williams and Connell, 2010). Similarly, it is noted that Whiteness, namely looking White and sounding White, is the preferred racial quality among clothing retail workers (Walters, 2018), fashion models (Wissinger, 2012), ballet dancers (Robinson, 2021), English teachers and call centre workers (Ramjattan, 2019; 2021). Upon interviewing American fashion retail workers, Walters (2018) reports a racialised beauty hierarchies that “(1) favo(u)r Whites as ideal employees; (2) exoticize lighter-skinned ‘racial otherness’ of Asian, Black, Latino/a, and multiracial workers; and (3) discriminates against darker-skinned Black women.” (p.128). Our paper challenges the usual understanding of phenotypical Whiteness as the privileged standard for beauty in retail industry, instead, we focus on how racial diversity of aesthetic labour is commodified by the management. bell hooks (1992) discusses the “commodification of otherness” that is perpetually produced and celebrated in mass culture: “Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (p.21). Building on these arguments, our findings suggest
that the commodification of diversity may take place in a nuanced way through which the various forms of embodiment are racialised in performing aesthetic labour.

Following series of social movements such as Black Lives Matter, the business rationale for diversity and inclusion has been realised by many retailers, as reported with an increasingly more diverse workforce in the UK (MBS Group, 2021). Nevertheless, workplace experiences of ethnic minority workers in the UK are relatively underexplored (Opara et al., 2020; Ozturk & Berber, 2022). It is found that women of colour working for UK retailers are disproportionately disadvantaged in their career progression whilst managers and directors in this field are mostly White male (Kele et al., 2022). Further studies examining the workplace experiences of ethnic minority women workers are much needed (Kele et al., 2022; Opara et al., 2020). This paper seeks to give voices to this underrepresented group of aesthetic labourers. Drawing on a 10-month ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews at a fashion retail store in central London, our paper contributes to this area by exploring the lived experiences of a racially diverse group of women working in fashion retail and how their various forms of embodiment are aestheticised and commodified by employers.

This paper begins with reviewing the literature on aesthetic labour and race related to the fashion retail industry, as well as how an embodiment perspective can be useful in examining aesthetic labour and race. This is followed by the description of the methods and the fieldwork before presenting research findings. It closes with a discussion and conclusion to emphasise the main contributions of this paper.

**Theoretical and empirical background**

According to Warhurst and Nickson (2009), aesthetic labour is the corporeality of employees that are transmitted and appropriated for commercial benefit. Aesthetic labour, like emotional
labour, is often unrecognised and uncompensated work that normalises differences that “stem from social inequality” (Williams and Connell, 2010, p. 372). Building on emotional labour, which focuses on how workers enact and perform particular emotional states in certain roles, aesthetic labour is identified as the mobilisation, development and commodification towards workers who already embody particular characteristics to look good and sound right (Williams and Connell, 2010; Witz et al., 2003). We consider aesthetic labour as an extension of emotional labour rather than supplanting it (see Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006).

Aesthetics is key to many businesses, especially for interactive service industries, where an employee can be considered as a physical asset which then can be corporately moulded and managed (Witz et al., 2003). Selfridges, as a well-known British department store, is a notable example of an establishment that continues to set a revised standard of aesthetics in retail. Upon its opening in 1909, a female employee recalled managers setting high aesthetic standards: They were required to visit the hairdressers every morning, despite an 8am start, and line up for critical hair inspections (Mason, 2015).

Nowadays such extreme practices are looked down upon thanks to the growing social awareness for equality and the enforcement of employee’s rights against discrimination, yet cases of extreme aesthetic demands and discriminative standards are continuously reported each year, particularly against women of colour. It was reported that women were often sent home from work for not wearing 2-4-inch-high heels that made their feet bleed (BBC News, 2017), were asked to wear tight dresses to shape their silhouette (Hope, 2017) or “form fitting tops” so that they look “sexy” (BBC News, 2022). In another prestige British department store, Harrods, a Black employee was told to chemically straighten her curly hair as it did not match the traditional British beauty (Rodionova, 2017). Similarly, Black models reported pressure to fit narrower aesthetic standards and stricter demands from employers on height, weight and lighter skin tone in order to level up with White colleagues (Wissinger, 2012). Unfortunately,
these demands continue as a survey of 2000 women of colour in UK revealed that 61% had to modify their language, discussions, hairstyles, diet, or even their names to fit in at work (Gyimah et al., 2022). There is limited understanding towards workplace experiences among racially diverse women retail workers (Kele et al., 2022; Opara et al., 2020). Further research is needed to explore their experiences, and how different aspects of aesthetic labour may be demanded and controlled by employers.

Appearance has been the focus of aesthetic labour, which holds a significant role within interactive services (Hall and Broek, 2012). The importance of appearance is depicted in Misa and Walters’ (2016) study: When interviewing employees from fashion retailers, a participant said that they would have individuals enter the establishment just to stare at them; these employees felt accomplished for “looking good” because it helped shape their customer interactions and provide meaningful service. It is claimed appearance has a more positive effect in fashion retailing as it is the most valorised and overtly used (Pounders et al., 2015).

Consequently, previous literature shows an overreliance on appearance in aesthetic labour studies (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010). Implications of speech are often ignored despite explicit evidence of discrimination for not “sounding right” due to dysfluency and not speaking in standard English (Butler, 2014; Eustace, 2012). Butler (2014) explores the use of speech to control employees aestheticised labour. She highlights the favouritism displayed by managers to proficient orators who fit the brand; those who did not “sound right” were excluded from promotions and cast from customer facing roles (Butler, 2014). Race plays an important role in the “looking good” aspect of aesthetic labour, but also in “sounding right” (Ramjattan, 2019; Roth-Gordon, 2016). Studies in Indian call centres reveal that as Whiteness is privileged, employees are specifically trained to “Whiten” their voices (Nath, 2011; Ramjattan, 2019; 2021). “Since this language training is often based on US and British English, which are coded as White varieties of the language due to originating from
stereotypically White nations, sounding right means ‘sounding White’” (Ramjattan, 2021, p. 974). For this reason, speech needs to be explored further as a key form of embodiment, specifically for racially diverse employees in interactive services.

Even if employees have the “right” attitude to be aesthetically managed, a clash between organisation and employees can create Aesthetic Discordance (AD). AD often occurs when an organisation’s aesthetic requirements are not met or employee’s aesthetic embodiments cannot be commodified (Tsaur and Tang, 2013). In Tsaur and Tang’s (2013) study they found when AD took place, employees were punished in various ways, such as being prevented from resuming normal responsibilities or loss of benefits until they complied. On the other hand, employees’ accommodation and resistance are also depicted in response to the continuous commodification of workers bodies (Forbes, 2009).

Previous studies of aesthetic labour in retail found that aesthetic labour can be deployed in different ways and to different degrees according to the market and brand (Pettinger, 2004; Hall and Broek, 2012). To specify the differences, Pettinger (2004) coined a new term called Aestheticised Labour (ASL), which emphasises how different forms of embodiment are aestheticised based on employers’ preferences. An embodiment perspective to aesthetic labour puts body at the centre and helps to clarify the different forms of embodiment through which aesthetic labour is performed. As the workplace experiences of ethnic minority women workers are under-represented in the extant literature, this paper provides an account exploring the lived experiences of a racially diverse group of women working in a UK fashion retailer.

**Methodology**

Ethnography is defined as “a genre of social science writing which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the
words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2012, p. 2). Ethnography is often used in aesthetic labour studies, such as Pettinger (2004; 2005), Eustace (2012), and Liu and Pechenkina (2016). To understand how frontline female employees experience aesthetic labour in their everyday lives, this paper is based on an ethnographic study in a fashion retail store “Orchards”, where the first author worked as a full-time sales assistant for 10 months. Participant observation in the field helped to gain an in-depth understanding of the everyday activities, environment, and atmosphere of the Orchards retail store. People encountered in the fieldwork were not seen as objects who were being “researched”, but respected colleagues sharing work experiences. Following the university guidelines of research ethics, the consent for research was granted by all participants and pseudonyms were used to avoid identification of these individuals. All efforts were made to prevent the identification of the organisation.

We contacted eight employees from Orchards through email and SMS. Three rejected due to personal commitment, or concerns of their language skills. Among the five interview participants (see Table I), there are four females and one male. They worked as sales assistants at Orchards in their late 20s or 30s. During the fieldwork there were only two male assistants on the shopfloor, one left shortly after the fieldwork started. The male participant’s interview is used to explore variance in experiencing aesthetic labour between sexes which is mentioned in the findings to reconfirm the gendered nature of aesthetic labour. No managers agreed to be interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with five participants who worked at the same store. Through the fieldwork, the first author established respectful and on-going relationships with the research participants, which allowed time to build rapport and trust to openly exchange views and explore the meanings placed on events in their world (Heyl, 2001). General questions were asked in the interviews such as how do you like working there, how
was your experience with managers, what do you think about the uniform, and do you think employees from different ethnic backgrounds contribute to sales performance? Then, more specific questions were probed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additional characters (see Table I) who were not interviewed, are portrayed anonymously in the research findings based on participant observation.

**Insert Table I here: Summary of characters**

The analysis process of this study is summarised as three phases below.

**Phase 1:** Initial fieldnotes were documented outside of the premises by the first author to avoid being seen as intrusive while on the shopfloor. They are descriptive fieldnotes that focus on key incidents observed and first impressions of any unusual happenings, without seeking explicit analysis (Emerson et al., 2001). Both authors met weekly to make sense of what had happened. Based on our discussions and initial analysis, the fieldnotes were redrafted to highlight the details of noteworthy incidents and dialogues. The writing and rewriting process is part of the analysis through which not only the lived experience was inscribed into written fieldnotes (Geertz, 1973) but attention given to details that relate to race, gender, and body in general.

**Phase 2:** Through examining all the interview transcripts and fieldnotes based on the embodiment perspective (Pettinger, 2004), we identified the following themes for this paper: “Uniforms”, “dress up”, “make-up”, and “speech”. These four themes show different forms of embodiments through which aesthetic labour was performed. For example, the incident where the first author was pressured to wear a wedding fitted dress was coded under “dress up”, as opposed to how participants perceived uniform policies that was coded under “uniforms”.

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Phase 3: As women of colour, we continuously reflect on how our gender, race, and class influence how the data is perceived and analysed. The first author: I am a Black British woman who grew up in London. My views as an ethnographer are influenced by my corporeality and role in society as a young Black woman from a working-class British family. The influence of my ethnographic self illustrates imagery and captivity to the events that occurred around me.

The second author: The first author and I became acquainted from a cross-cultural management module I was teaching. Our discussions on topics such as cultural diversity and race led to the cooperation on this project. I am a Chinese woman, an academic who is interested in critical management studies. My previous work experience in fashion retail also facilitated my understanding of the project.

The research findings are presented next. For this paper we present several vignettes that represent the first author's experience and give voice to the women aesthetic labourers in Orchards. We aligned the findings in this phase to emphasise the different embodiments of aesthetic labour and how they are racialised.

**Research Findings**

**Orchards: the home of flowers**

Orchards is a fashion retail brand that markets itself as “traditionally British”. Since opening in the 1980s it has gained the attention from international customers for its vintage aesthetic and assortment of feminine homeware. The first author worked for 10-months at Orchards flagship store. During her time there, she witnessed many colleagues resigning and replaced each month. It is an elegant place swamped by various beautiful flowers, an enticing visual in central London.
Uniforms - The everyday Hunger Games in Orchards

Uniform echoes the themes and trends of the brand. Details of flowers and quirky characters designed season by season. Plain designs are considered bland for flagship standard. Hence, there is an expectation for female employees to dress in Orchards branded clothes for uniform, whereas smart attire is adequate for the male sales assistants. However, uniforms are not free for us, which we expected to be a natural incentive. As Orchards’ employees, we must buy them at a discounted price.

Like other employees, Ellina sports from head-to-toe Orchards’ shoes, uniform and lunch bag. Although she’s not required to carry around the brand’s bag, she utilises it for work and shopping. She has become accustomed to the brand even outside of work. Nevertheless, in the eyes of management there is always room for improvement. Beatrix the store manager will carefully examine everyone daily, and ruthlessly share her criticism openly.

“In the morning brief, Beatrix would always pick and point out people who she felt needed to improve on uniform in front of everyone. She will threaten employees who do not listen to her...that they might not have a place in Orchards Flagship. It is like the Hunger Games.”

[Eliina’s interview]

The Hunger Games, a metaphor for our experience – a fictional story where children are gathered and randomly selected for a survival game; one could never know who was next to face death. Unlike the annual Hunger Games we have to experience the feeling of being completely mortified on a daily basis. Summoned to listen to the one in charge, being set up for embarrassment and public humiliation by the demands of the cruel manager. Our bodies become the target of discipline (Rajan - Rankin, 2018). As long as we work here, we have to try our best, and every morning whisper to each other “may the odds be ever in your favour” (Quote from the Hunger Games).
Eliina understands that uniforms are to be managed, but feels conflicted and distressed by the demanding revision and everyday criticism. She is constantly berated to buy new clothes season by season. There is evidence of Aesthetic Discordance because managers want Eliina’s appearance fully utilised to show the trendiest products (Tsaur and Tang, 2013). But Eliina’s financial struggles meeting the new, ever-changing demands, created a clash. Eliina perceives the uniform policy as a way to bully employees that don't compile; a method of punishment (Rajan - Rankin, 2018). Her feelings hold resentment towards Beatrix.

“It felt like bullying. Management would just come up to me and ask, “So when are going to buy it?” or “You need to wear a dress!” But dresses are expensive. Even Beatrix said that she cannot buy another piece of uniform as she needs to save up for next payday.... but doesn’t she earn more than us? I felt like a company girl…” [Eliina’s interview and observation notes]

Eliina describes the pressure made her appear as a company girl. Further implying that her identity was moulded to align with the brand (Misra and Walters, 2016). She realises she cannot fight the system. As Orchards it is a fashion store, the level of Aestheticised labour for appearance is explicitly practiced compared to the phone store next door (Pettinger, 2004; Hall and Broek, 2012). Temporarily Ellina accepts this, but eventually leaves Orchards. She resigns, distancing herself from retail work as a means to dismiss the feelings and pressures she experienced.

Dress up in the “right” way

Floral, feminine, vintage dresses are the foundation of this fashion brand. The weekends are set as “dress days” when female employees are expected to wear floral dresses. They are the bigger sale days, so we need to present to the customers the best of Orchards, the best of us.
Guidelines are set for uniform on weekends (*Figure 1*). It is posted conspicuously in the staff room, with capital letters shouting at us constantly.

![Uniform Guidelines](Figure 1: Orchards Uniform Standards for Weekends (recreated to maintain anonymity))

I (the first author) also experienced first-hand demands from Beatrix. As I approach the store doors on a Saturday morning, Beatrix, standing near the entrance, inspects me. By the expression on her face, I feel dread fall upon me as her look is stern. I am wearing a plain pink Orchards top, jeans and Orchards branded shoes for uniform today, nothing out of the ordinary. Immediately, upon entering, she proceeds to scold me; my clothes are too plain.

“Okay maybe not what you are wearing today, it is a weekend. How about you look around and find something to wear, something that is the latest season, a dress or skirt with florals.” [observation notes]

These demands are recurring because Beatrix believes dresses reflect Orchards’ brand and spirit. Similarly, for managers, she expects compliance through attitude. As sales assistants, we need to embody the brand of Orchards to send the “right” signal to the customers (Williams and Connell, 2010).
A majority of employees are women with a few men present, making management appear all the more obsessed with dresses for uniform. And perhaps a reason why Joon (one of the few male sales assistants) is detested, as in his eyes, “management just trusts him” because he is the aggressive seller they need. He is merely expected to dress smart here. This expectation was perhaps a reason for Joon’s unawareness to the subjugation of his female colleagues (Butler, 2014).

Like the rest, I am often pressured to be feminine-looking, elegant, and traditional. Wearing jeans, converses and a pink top is obviously not enough to constitute as “womanly” here. Dresses are the way forward even if it means looking ready for a wedding.

I remember trying on a long dress that customers wear to weddings. It fit perfectly, even Beatrix exalted that I had to have it as I “looked so beautiful”, and I had the “right figure” for the dress. I examined myself in the mirror, I was deemed good looking, proficient, middle class and elegant in speech. But why do I need to wear a dress?

It is easy to say this is just the brand, and call it a day. Since Saturdays are dedicated to dresses, I need to preserve Orchards image of femininity. Although the emphasis on having the “right figure” entails the recurring commodification of Black women’s bodies that are often valorised and warped by “patriarchal ideologies” to reinforce stereotypes on sexuality (Forbes, 2009). On days that I am allowed to wear plain uniform, sporting a plain mini skirt that showed my legs as opposed to jeans never invoked comments from management, despite the mini skirt being off-brand. The focus for those days shifted away from my appearance to my sales skills. I lacked ownership on how my body as a Black woman was consumed as my value to Orchards was measured by my physical and sexual appeal to society.
Make-up to look the “best”!

Another form of embodiments of aesthetic labour is the demand for women to wear make-up. This is not exclusive to sales assistants but is imposed upon team leaders and department managers. I recall every lunch time observing Izumi, our team leader reapplying make-up. Despite lunch being an hour, she still left minimal time for this, setting an example to all the employees. But this was not as unsettling as witnessing Susana ushered into the staff room, mid-shift, to apply lipstick to brighten her face.

But shouldn’t sales skills be more important than a touch of blush?

When Eliina witnessed a female sales assistant ordered to apply lipstick, she said she was disgusted by the implication of a woman’s worth being reduced to mere lipstick. But as Eliina is White, her experience might vary from that of a Black or Asian employee. Hye-Jin and Amporn for example, said they never feel pressure to wear make-up, as well as myself and other Black employees. Rosalva and Eliina believe White women were badgered more than other races.

“They may not focus on the East Asian employees, maybe because they are more concerned with them selling to the Asians instead...if they were to tell them how to look...management may feel weary of that.” [Rosalva’s interview]

Orchards management consists of a board of White men and women; they could see this as a risky territory in which to commodify ethnic appearances, following the re-occurring news of Black people being pressured to follow White standards of beauty (Rodionova, 2017; Gyimah et al., 2022). But, compared to Rosalva, Amporn holds a distinct perspective to make-up. Feminine, modest, and vintage is all that Amporn thinks she should look like at Orchards. Although aware of management’s constant pressure to impose strict make-up standards on White employees, she agrees with their approach to an extent.
“They tell us to wear make-up but it is to keep the brand. If you have a floral dress and your face is pale, it doesn’t look nice for you and the company. (Be)cause Orchards is vintage. I agree that make-up should be worn but not heavy, heavy, heavy makeup, maybe just lipstick and a bit of blush. (Be)cause when people are pale...are you sick? Or you know, something? It is just to brighten up the face” [Amporn’s interview].

Amporn’s response shows a degree of acceptance to management’s high expectations. Her views support management’s discipline to impose strict guidelines onto the pale-toned women. She doesn’t question this form of discrimination even if it meant degrading her colleagues. The demand for my White colleagues denotes more than just applying blush to “brighten the face”, but to look absolutely perfect.

As Amporn is a young Thai woman with a natural warm skin tone and petite figure, I did not observe management pressuring her to wear more make up or criticise how she wears her uniform, as if her body’s mere existence is good enough for management. The negative associations with pale skin in Orchards floral uniform adds further pressure on White female employees to embody the aesthetic ideals. In this situation, White women employees are being used to create a prestige British brand. This, however, should not exclude the pressure on employees of colour. Despite managements’ obsession on make-up for White women, women of colour are also pressured to embody certain racialised aesthetic stereotypes in an attempt to create an exotic experience for customers.

*Speak the “right” way, even if it’s not English!*  

A common occurrence heard throughout the store is echoes of “Hi, how are you?”. To customers dismay, this is a part of the Orchards experience. That is why we are continuously trained on “how to speak”. 15-minute training videos that showed how to elicit and engage a positive response from indecisive customers, and early morning briefs were the times when
managers realign aesthetic labour through discipline. Often, I am pulled aside by Izumi and told to speak more demandingly. To reinforce their control over me, management constantly monitors me, using CCTV.

A key target was Hye-Jin.

“They will approach me in a friendly manner, but suggest that I (should) watch training videos on how to speak to certain customers. Or they would practice with me when there is no customers. But I think it was because I am not British, so I struggle to ask questions to British customers.” [Hye-Jin interview]

Although management are aware of Hye-Jin’s limited English, they still hire her. Of all the employees, Hye-Jin sounds the most manufactured with all the extra “communication training” she receives. She is not just expected to “look good”, but also to speak in a way that “sounds right” (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Management’s perception of Hye-Jin is of a young, Korean woman that appeases their White gaze. She is hired for a purpose, like Joon; to serve Asian customers. Hye-Jin however is regarded more valuable as she speaks Mandarin and Korean. Unlike Tai who was fired two weeks after joining because she could not speak a language expected by management. As a native English speaker and British born citizen, Tai had never learnt to speak Mandarin. To management, Tai did not meet their aesthetic demands of an Asian worker like Hye-Jin, Amporn, and Joon. Therefore, Tai became a liability for Orchards, as they could not fully harness her aesthetic labour and make her sound “exotic enough” (Ramjattan, 2019; 2021). Tai rebelled against these standards and eventually was fired, as her aesthetic labour could not be controlled by management. Although she “looked right” being of Asian descent, her inability to sound exotic or foreign failed to meet the expectations of management’s White sense (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Ramjattan, 2019; 2021).

Xiu like Hye-Jin, can speak Mandarin and is proactive in selling. Everyone admires her, she is what many call a model employee with the right appearance and attitude, and a freshly updated
uniform. Yet, this is not enough for management. One morning brief, Orchards had a sales campaign. We, the sales assistants, were to stand outside, bold and confident, and usher in customers with vouchers. As Beatrix explained the plan for the day, Xiu raised her hand repeatedly, eager to clarify her role. But as Xiu attempted to articulate her words, stumbling over every syllable, Beatrix interrupted

“Don’t worry, we would only put people outside who can speak properly”

[Observation notes]

Xiu occasionally stutters when speaking English, and her strong Chinese accent makes it hard for management to accept her. The racial discrimination against speech is often hidden under the claim for customer service (Butler, 2014). When management recruited Xiu, it was clear they set a higher standard of aesthetic labour particularly for this ethnic group. They expect Xiu to speak Mandarin as well as the “right” level of English, with the “right” degree of foreign accent. Like Tai, Xiu had to leave eventually as she could not meet the aesthetic demand from the management.

Like me, the employees who joined knew that they would experience aesthetic labour to an extent. Perhaps the curiosity to belong to this glamourous world encouraged them to join (Misra and Walters, 2016). Yet I am astonished by the power of aesthetics projected on us, on me – it has transformed our bodies in almost every way. We breathe in aesthetics, then breathe it out. We had become Orchards, the living and walking brand of beauty.

Discussion: Commodification of diversity through embodiments of aesthetic labour

The aim of this study is to explore the everyday experiences of aesthetic labour among a racially diverse group of women working in a fashion retail store. As discussed previously, women, especially women of colour, employees’ voices on aesthetic labour are under-represented in
current literature. Within the findings, there are various embodiments of aesthetic labour that are perpetually produced, developed and disciplined through high demands for women employees’ uniform, “Saturday dress-up”, make-up, and speech. Managements explicit obsession with maintaining a beautiful brand for the corporate benefit often disguises the process of strategically producing and intentionally mobilising the labour of aesthetics (Witz et al., 2003). As described in “the everyday Hunger Games in Orchards”, “the management” is often referred by participants as the source of ruthless control and high demands of their aesthetic labour. Beatrix, as the embodied representation of management, plays an important role to materialise the aestheticisation process.

Because the results of aesthetic labour were evident in sales increases, the managers focus on various forms of embodiment with perceived aesthetic value for profit (Goldman, 1990). Orchards is a business – managers are working for a brand that is founded on aesthetic imagery and values. Hence, managements perception of employees’ capabilities and value were based on their aestheticised labour, as the most valorised in fashion retailing (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). For management to commodify the aesthetic labour, they govern their comprehension and behaviour towards women employees they aestheticised through strict disciplines (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Pounders et al., 2015). Women workers’ bodies become the target of discipline (Rajan - Rankin, 2018). Particularly for female managers, as when Beatrix that Saturday morning decided to wear a dress, it validated her authority to demand dresses for the workforce, to signal that this was the standards to follow. As a result, managers go further to increase the level of aestheticised labour at the expense of employee’s rights in order to benefit the corporation (Witz et al., 2003). Management induce customers purchases by commodifying the diverse appearance of women workers’ bodies. Hiding behind Orchards brand values, they evade accountability and discriminative claims from employees who resist.
Eventually some employees left, but some became accustomed to these aesthetic demands over time, even criticising those who refuse this aesthetic labour.

Although phenotypical Whiteness is usually set as the aesthetic standard in retail and fashion industries (Williams and Connell, 2010; Wissinger, 2012), this paper challenges this view by exploring how racial diversity is commodified as the aesthetic ideal that is developed and controlled by the management. We also consider aesthetic labour as a racial performance that is not limited to employees of colour. Drawing from the research findings, the *White and corporate gaze* is not subjective to just Black and other employees of colour. White female employees’ appearances have also been aestheticised to embody the aesthetic standards at Orchards. They must look faultless to uphold a prestige image of a White, middle-class British woman – not just to satisfy the scrutiny of the majority White management at Orchards, but for everyone’s gaze towards what “Whiteness” should look like. Compared to other races that have to commonly appease the *White gaze*, the aesthetic demand of the embodiments of White women employees focuses on their “almost perfect” appearances to uphold a prescribed image that fits the stereotypes of a traditional British woman. Like their colleagues of colour, their aesthetic labour is also embodied in racial performance produced and controlled by Orchards.

Examining the workplace experiences of other women of colour, specifically the Asian employees who serviced Asian customers, instead of resisting the aestheticisation process some took the stance of acceptance and accommodation (Forbes, 2009). Since these racial biases are accepted, the cycle of racial prejudice for aesthetic labour continued to affect new employees with increased peer pressure. This vicious cycle deepens social inequality and is ultimately for the gain of employers (Williams and Connell, 2010; Witz *et al.*, 2003). As described by research participants, managers gave an illusion that the employees could be trained to improve their aesthetics as disguised as “work performance”. Similar to corporate marketing material and physical environment, employees’ aesthetic labour is produced and moulded by the
corporation (Witz et al., 2003). They have gradually become commodified corporate property to constitute the aesthetics of the organisation (de Gay, 1996; Witz et al., 2003).

As described previously, the examples showing particular demands of “speaking the right way” for employees of colour indicate the racialisation process goes beyond phenotypical presentations of race (Roth-Gordon, 2016). The management expect employees of East Asian heritage to speak a foreign language, whereas there are no such expectations for White and other employees of colour. This is different to previous studies that revealed “sounding right” just means “sounding White” (Ramjattan, 2019; Timming, 2016). At Orchards, “sounding right”, means “sounding White enough and appropriately exotic”. Instead of privileging Whiteness as the aesthetic standard in the retail and fashion industry as previous literature suggested (Williams and Connell, 2010; Wissinger, 2012), Orchards management strategically racialise women of colours’ aesthetic labour by carefully controlling their speech according to White gaze and senses.

As a form of embodiment of aesthetic labour, language ability played a crucial role for “sounding right” in appeasing the White gaze, but the discriminatory nature is often hidden behind the justification for customer service. As shown in Tai’s story, Asian employees were fired for not speaking the “expected-native” language. Specific ethnicities are sought after as management hold implicit racial expectations and belief that foreign language skills can be harnessed to benefit corporate sales, at the cost of increasing aesthetic labour for Asian employees. This imperialist ideology is often hidden during recruitment, yet it highlights the central role of race in examining aesthetic labour. Employees from particular racial groups must take on higher set of aesthetic standards, yet if they fail to satisfy employers’ aesthetic demands their race becomes their burden (Wissinger, 2012) and can lead to bullying and work alienation. Management builds up a vision, or a fantasy of aesthetic labour which is rooted in
the idea of “commodification of otherness” (hooks, 1992) that dictates how women of colour should look, act and sound.

Conclusions

This paper contributes an embodied view of what constitutes aesthetic labour among racially diverse women workers in fashion retail. By exploring their experiences through an ethnographic study, we explore how the female bodies of racially diverse aesthetic labour are perpetually produced, controlled, and commodified through the discipline of management in a fashion retail store. The significance of the racialisation of aesthetic labour is emphasised through the narratives of the participants as well as ethnographic observations.

This paper explains how the embodiments of racially diverse aesthetic labourers differ according to their race. We found that while White women are continuously scrutinised by their appearances, the aesthetic demands for women of colour tend to focus on their speech and racialised bodies to provide “authentically” exotic experiences for customers. The value put on certain embodiments of aesthetic labour can raise questions worth expanding for other industries which include but are not limited to interactive services. The exoticism of the otherness can be incorporated to understand how race affects and shapes aesthetic labour. From this, an introduction of “exotic labour” can be used to further examine other intersections such as race, gender, class, and cultural background. This may prevent oversimplifications of race and diversity within organisations and be of interests to academics and practitioners to develop in areas like Diversity Management, Marketing, HRM and Business Ethics.

The increasingly diverse culture and racial awareness in the fashion retail industry have brought new challenges in understanding the influences of aesthetic labour and frontline employees’ workplace experiences. The research findings suggest that race is a considerably growing
aspect of aesthetic labour, more so than is currently represented in literature. With the growing social awareness following movements such as Black Lives Matter, further research is needed to facilitate the gradual change of organisational processes and practices. This study has its limitations. As the majority of the fashion retail workers in this study were women, we could only engage with one male research participant. Despite our efforts, no manager at Orchards agreed to be interviewed. Future research can engage a wider group of stakeholders as informants to gain multiple perspectives. Although this study is conducted in one British store in the fashion retail industry, the findings and implications of this research can potentially have significant impacts on retail managers, current and future aestheticised labour, consumers, and individuals in societies: Not just in terms of how aesthetic labour is experienced, but how future aesthetic labour should be managed to alleviate the inequality and discrimination against women, especially women of colour. Perhaps this begins with celebrating other qualities that can be mobilised in the workforce instead of moulding employees to fit a prescribed brand image which is potentially rooted in harmful racial biases.

References


Table I: Summary of characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality/ Race</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Job Position</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Finnish (White)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosalva</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Spanish (White)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>1 year ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amporn</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Thai (Asian)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joon</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Korean (Asian)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>1 year ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hye-Jin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Korean (Asian)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrix</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>British (White)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Store Manager</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izumi</td>
<td>Unkn own</td>
<td>Japanese (Asian)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
<td>8 years- ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susana</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Brazilian (White)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiu</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Chinese (Asian)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>British (Asian)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistants</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>British (Black)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Assistant</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(First Author)