Peer Feedback in Aesthetic Labour: Forms, Logics and Responses

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Abstract
Research on aesthetic labour has largely been confined to studying practices and experiences of managerial control and self-discipline. However, co-workers also have an impact on the experiences and practices of aesthetic labour. This article explores peer feedback regarding personal aesthetics in work situations without clear organisational aesthetic guidelines. Testimonies of experiences of peer feedback from 28 qualitative wardrobe interviews with ‘frontstage’ and creative workers in insecure employment positions show that peer feedback (1) is often ambiguous both in content and form; (2) can contain both a commercial logic and logics of ‘belonging’; and (3) is not only accepted, but in many cases is seen as legitimate and taken very seriously by workers on the receiving end. This study illustrates how informal processes of control and distinction concerning personal appearance intensify and complicate experiences of aesthetic labour as the interplay between market logics and judgements of taste has the potential to act as a reinforcement of insecurities and inequalities.

Keywords
Aesthetic labour, frontstage work, informal control, peer feedback, taste judgments, inequality, precarious work

The almost daily recurring question of what to wear to work is relevant to many workers for reasons that evidently go beyond vanity. ‘Looking good and sounding right’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001) has become a prerequisite for finding and maintaining employment in a labour market dominated by ‘frontstage’ service work (Goffman, 1959) and insecure employment relations (Kremer et al., 2017; Lorey, 2015; Standing, 2011). The proximity between workers and consumers in work that is characteristic of post-industrial labour markets brings forth specific demands for workers. They are not only providing a

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service, but their appearance, style and image have become part of what is being sold (Leidner, 1991; McDowell, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2000). The body of literature that has emerged on the topic of aesthetic labour has by and large focused on pre- and post-entry interactions between employer and (candidate) employees, generally analysing the ways in which managers have regulative power in commodifying workers’ aesthetics (Leidner, 1991; McDowell, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2000) and how workers themselves perform, control and manage their own aesthetics (e.g. Adkins and Lury, 1999; Dean, 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). Surprisingly underexplored is the question of how aesthetic feedback and control takes place between workers.

Studies of aesthetic labour generally assume a clear distinction between those who manage and those who are managed (e.g. Butler, 2014; Mears, 2014: 1332; Timming, 2015; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007: 107, 2009: 388; Warhurst et al., 2000: 4; Williams and Connell, 2010). Yet, trends in organisational ideals and practices have been moving towards self-organising and self-managing workers and teams over the past decades (Barker, 1993; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Du Gay, 1996; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sewell, 1998). The surge of ‘horizontal’ management ideals and practices calls attention to social processes of power and control taking place among co-workers (Bourdieu, 1984). In order to get a better understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to managing self-presentation for work – particularly in an increasingly insecure labour market – this article looks into the role of peers in aesthetic labour. It does so by analysing the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which workers give each other feedback regarding personal aesthetics in an attempt to answer the following questions: How does peer feedback regarding personal aesthetics in work situations without clear organisational aesthetic guidelines take place, how is it understood, and how is it reacted upon?

I distinguish three main reasons why feedback from peers is expected to be different from feedback from managers and why it is therefore worth examining empirically. First, managerial feedback and control can be substantiated and legitimised by the official hierarchy within the organisation. The few earlier studies that do address feedback from peers are based on fieldwork within organisations that have clear aesthetic guidelines, such as the airline industry (Tyler and Abbott, 1998). Without these guidelines and official hierarchy, feedback is, arguably, a judgement of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Considering the moral imperative to appear open and respectful regarding others’ tastes (see for instance Jarness and Friedman, 2017), the first sub question arises: How do co-workers give each other peer feedback concerning personal aesthetics?

Second, managerial control in aesthetic labour is often assumed to be an effort to appeal to a certain clientele and hence gain revenue. It is unclear whether this market logic is also a driver for peer feedback and whether workers might be invested in their peers’ appearance in other ways as well. Seeing as, for instance, aesthetic value and moral judgement have a tendency to be associated in the minds of people (Kuipers et al., 2019), co-workers might be invested in each other’s aesthetic appearances in ways that go beyond commercial interests. This raises the question of how peer feedback is legitimised. Hence, this article investigates the following sub question: What kinds of logics can be discerned in peer feedback on personal aesthetics at work? Doing so, it aims to
better the understanding of how the importance of having the ‘right’ aesthetics is substantiated among co-workers.

Third, unlike some managers, co-workers usually do not have the formal task of enforcing aesthetic standards nor do they have formal means for sanctioning peers who do not comply with the norms. This does not necessarily mean, however, that peer feedback is not taken seriously and the present study will therefore explore the question: How do workers respond to what they perceive to be aesthetic feedback from peers?

The present study is based on interviews with workers either in the creative industries or doing ‘frontstage’ service work, as the importance of displaying the ‘right’ look and taste is particularly salient for these workers (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Elias et al., 2017; McRobbie, 2016). The rapid flexibilisation of the Dutch labour market means that an increasingly large number of workers are precariously employed (Dekker, 2017), bringing forth insecurities for workers, such as continuously finding a cultural match and ‘fitting in’ in often changing work places. We therefore interviewed people in insecure employment positions, such as freelance, or those with temporary contracts and zero-hour contracts, who could not (yet) fare on routine or knowledge about contextual norms. The analyses are based on their narratives of peer feedback encounters.

This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to aesthetic judgements and control, particularly in insecure working conditions. The analyses suggest that what is perceived as peer feedback (1) is often ambiguous both in content and form; (2) can contain both a commercial logic and logics of ‘belonging’, in which personal aesthetics are conflated with, for instance, personality and moral value; and (3) is not only accepted, but in many cases is seen as legitimate and taken very seriously by workers on the receiving end. Hence, this study describes how informal processes of control and distinction concerning personal appearance intensify and complicate experiences of aesthetic labour as the interplay between market logics and judgements of taste has the potential to act as a reinforcement of insecurities and inequalities.

**Aesthetic Labour**

The imperative for workers to ‘look good and sound right’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001) is central in a multitude of studies on working life (for an overview, see Mears, 2014). Employers are commercially invested in their employees’ aesthetics, meaning their looks, clothes, voice, posture, demeanour, body language, smell, sound and self-presentation on social media. They therefore select employees based on, for instance, body shape (Tyler and Abbott, 1998), tattoos (Timming, 2015), classed tastes and styles (Williams and Connell, 2010), accent (Nath, 2011; Timming, 2017) and manner of speech (Butler, 2014). Particularly retail, hospitality and the airline industries have been central to the study of aesthetic labour, but also the creative industries are known for the importance of aesthetic self-presentation (e.g. Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Dean, 2005; McRobbie, 2002).

Aesthetic norms are communicated and enforced by employers and managers in several ways. Pre-entry, organisations can base recruitment strategies on aesthetics and lifestyle. Abercrombie and Fitch for instance recruited new employees on college campuses
with fraternities and sororities (Greenhouse, 2004). Moreover, organisations select employees based on their aesthetics (e.g. Warhurst et al., 2000). Post-entry, organisations are known to have clothing policies (Hall and Van den Broek, 2012) and grooming guidelines (Hochschild, 1983; Tyler and Abbott, 1998), to send employees home or ‘backstage’ to the stock room, and even to fire them (Butler, 2014; Mears, 2014). Employers can also ‘nudge’ employees for instance by offering employee discounts on company products (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Williams and Connell, 2010).

Workers and job seekers are, however, not passive receivers of managerial instructions. More recent contributions to the literature on aesthetic labour pay attention to resistance (Elias et al., 2017; Worth, 2016) and to practices of self-discipline and self-management, bringing to light the complexities and never-ending effort involved in achieving the ‘right’ body and look. In an increasingly insecure labour market where temporary and freelance contracts are more and more common, the efforts involved in ‘keeping up appearances’ for freelancers in, for instance, fashion modelling (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006) and retailing (Entwistle, 2009) are ongoing. In other words, research on aesthetic labour practices and experiences has shifted from a focus on managerial control towards a more encompassing study of ‘the effort people make to work on their own appearance’ (Holla and Kuipers, 2016: 330). Not only employees, but also freelancers, job seekers and even the unemployed (Van den Berg and Arts, 2019a, 2019b) and stay-at-home mothers (De Benedictis and Orgad, 2017) perform aesthetic labour. Pressures to do so do not only come from employers and, arguably, surveillance is omnipresent (Elias et al., 2017: 14–17). The present study aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complexities of the aesthetic labour of those in insecure employment positions by looking at aesthetic feedback from co-workers.

Though the worker–worker interaction in aesthetic labour has been mentioned before, it has thus far received little empirical investigation. Warhurst, Nickson, Witz and Cullen (2000) briefly address it and suggest that peer pressure contributes to workers adhering to organisational aesthetic proscriptions, citing a shop attendant: ‘If someone falls [below the Company X standards] the whole shop is affected by it’ (Warhurst et al., 2000: 13). They postulate that workers are familiar, and agree, with the aesthetic standards of the organisation and that workers are motivated to perform aesthetic labour in order to keep up the status of the organisation and to not let their co-workers down. Tyler and Abbott (1998), likewise, have found that informal peer pressure is key to enforcing formal regulations in the airline industry. Airline companies’ strict and clear aesthetic guidelines are internalised by employees, leading to both self-discipline and peer control. This ‘panoptic management’ (Tyler and Abbott: 440) is clearly informed by managerial guidelines. However, in many contexts, norms can be unclear or ambiguous, fluid or unattainable to individuals and there can be considerable disagreement about them.

Without organisational proscription, rules or guidelines, feedback cannot easily be substantiated by any higher formal authority. On the interactional level, we can therefore perhaps understand peer feedback situations as expressions and negotiations of taste and norms – intricately linked to gender, race, class, age and body size – between co-workers within the context of aestheticised labour. Let us look at peer feedback and informal control at work in general before delving into the particularities that might come into play when co-workers are actively involved in monitoring each other’s appearance.
Workers’ Engagement in Informal Control at Work

Informal norms, organisational cultures and peers are key to understanding what happens at work. Burawoy (1982) famously illustrated how the way workers act is found somewhere in the middle of what managers tell them, work floor culture, and their own consent or refusal of these. Despite employers’ efforts to ‘manage their consent’ workers find ways to collectively interfere with the labour process, which can sub-optimise output. That is not to say that social regulation necessarily conflicts with organisational interests. Peer interactions can intensify control and increase workers’ commitment to organisational goals, for instance in luxury services where workers try to position themselves as equal to clients and even superior to their peers by strictly adhering to company standards (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Sherman, 2005, 2007; Tyler and Abbott, 1998).

The client-friendly behaviour of the employees of the luxury hotels in Sherman’s studies (2005, 2007) was above all a result of peer dynamics. Lateral relations between workers proved important in shaping the quality of the services they provide. Workers attempt to produce a ‘superior self’ by drawing symbolic boundaries based on, for instance, cultural capital and status. In other words, social interaction can work in alliance with managerial interests in order to advance worker conformity.

This article’s focus on peers is particularly timely given the current trend towards minimising the role of management. The dichotomy of managers/managed no longer applies so clearly. Current trends in HRM reduce the role of managers and require that workers should be organised in self-directing teams, hence making them personally and as a group responsible for achieving goals formulated by higher management (Du Gay, 1996; Hodgson and Briand, 2013; Sewell, 1998). The push towards self-directing teams emphasises the importance of group identities and norms for ‘fitting in’. This ‘fitting in’ is partly dependent upon matching cultural tastes.

Personal aesthetics, and evaluations of others’ appearances, can be seen as (partly) reflections of taste. The relevance here lies not so much in distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow cultural taste, but in the socially shaped aesthetic disposition that carries in it a certain cultural value within a certain context or field (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Kuipers, 2015). According to Kuipers’ work on evaluations of beauty (2015:39) the appreciation of physical appearance is different from the taste judgements of products such as food, movies and music. Importantly, evaluations of people’s appearances cannot be separated from systemic forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. Moreover, as aesthetic self-presentation is unavoidably part of everyday practices, people embody their own beauty standards through practices such as dressing. The appreciation of appearance is, in other words, ‘doubly embodied’ as people both judge others and groom themselves according to their own aesthetic dispositions.

Both aesthetic self-presentation and the evaluation of others’ appearances, then, are ways to express taste and to establish (or to inhibit) a cultural match. Organisational gatekeepers look for a ‘cultural match’ when selecting new employees, based on, for instance, speech, comportment, communication style and dress (Koppman, 2016; Rivera, 2016). Once ‘in’ the organisation, cultural fit is important for ‘getting on’ as recognition of talent and potential is largely dependent upon cultural affinity (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Friedman and Laurison (2019: 134–144) argue that clothing can be viewed as a
seemingly innocuous code that is both classed and important for creating feelings of trust, identification, appreciation, connection and pleasant communication between co-workers. Particularly in fields of work where merit is hard to assess, such as the service and creative industry under study here, cultural capital is easily converted into other advantages and is key for fitting in, staying in and for getting ahead (Friedmand and Laurison, 2019: 202).

To conclude, personal appearance is an important means for establishing a cultural match and for ‘fitting in’ at work. This underlines the potential relevance for studying how co-workers monitor each other’s appearance, particularly so in contexts lacking organisational guidelines on this. Though peers are by definition formally equals, their positions and relations are of course very much informed by the classed, raced and gendered inequalities of wider society. To be sure, taste differences do not necessarily translate into social boundaries (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Molnár, 2002), but I do suggest that in order to acquire a more complete insight into the inequalities and insecurities of aesthetic labour, we need to take the role of peers into further consideration.

Methods

This study is based on interview data collected as part of a larger research project on how precariously employed workers monitor and adjust their appearance through dress in relation to their constantly changing work settings. Using the method of ‘wardrobe interviewing’ (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016; Woodward, 2007), respondents were invited to reflect on and talk about practices of dressing while using clothes and accessories from their wardrobes to elicit these narratives. Strikingly, respondents seldom mentioned corrections from their supervisors but vividly and fiercely recollected colleagues’ remarks concerning their appearance, which underlines the relevance of an empirical investigation of peer feedback. This surprising finding gave rise to the present exploration of the role of peers in aesthetic labour.

A team of four researchers – all female and in their 20s and 30s – conducted a total of 28 interviews that each lasted approximately two hours. Starting out with questions about the respondent’s work, the second part of the interview centred around clothes and dressing. This part of the interview usually took place in front of the respondent’s wardrobe. Despite it not being explicitly asked, the role of peers in aesthetic labour came up in nearly all interviews, typically when the respondent was asked if they had ever felt they were dressed inappropriately. This question often led to respondents describing situations in which a response from a co-worker made them suddenly very aware of their appearance. The analysis is hence not based on observations of actual situations in which peer feedback takes places, but on workers’ recollections of giving and experiencing receiving feedback. The fact that the role of peers unintentionally came up (in such an important way) in most interviews underlines its importance and salience in workers’ experiences of aesthetic labour.

Respondents were selected based on job type (i.e. frontstage work and/or in creative industries) and type of employment relation (i.e. not secure). Aesthetic labour has mostly been studied in service sector work – where workers are in direct contact with customers – and creative work, where having the right ‘unique’ style is a way of showing cultural capital and creativity (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Elias et al., 2017;
Activities seen as ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ are intimately linked in the creative and service industries (Entwistle, 2009). Based on earlier studies on aesthetic labour, we expected that these types of workers would be particularly concerned with their professional aesthetic performance, making their reflections on how they monitor and adjust their appearance especially relevant. The sample includes shop assistants, restaurant waiters, teaching assistants, childcare providers, music and ballet teachers, photographers, performing musicians, and theatre and movie directors. We do not argue that these workers form a homogeneous group. In many respects, their work experiences are different, particularly as they work in different fields where aesthetic norms and judgements differ (Bourdieu, 1984). Interestingly, in our sample, the categories tended to overlap, with workers, for instance, combining creative gigs with service jobs. What is important here, however, is that for all these workers aesthetic performances are part of the job – it is part of the product that they are ‘selling’, be it their creativity or their style that suits the shop’s status.

As mentioned, this study originally set out to explore how precarious workers monitor and adjust their appearance through dress in relation to their constantly changing work settings. Hence, only workers on temporary contracts, zero-hour contracts and freelancers were interviewed. In analysing these interviews, the salience of peer feedback was striking, which led to posing the research question at hand. In other words, the study's sample of precarious workers partly came about for practical reasons.

Though it is highly conceivable that aesthetic peer feedback also takes place among workers in secure employment, there are two important reasons why workers in insecure employment are particularly interesting for studying this phenomenon. First, due to new and often changing work settings, these workers cannot (yet) rely on familiarity with aesthetic norms. As relative ‘outsiders’ in the organisation they do not have secure knowledge of particular contextual norms and are vulnerable to gossip and social control (Soeters and Van Iterson, 2002). This makes their testimonies and reflections particularly pertinent for studying aesthetic peer feedback. A second reason why precarious frontstage workers are especially adequate for studying the question at hand is that their position within the organisation is insecure. Their employment position is precarious and often partly dependent on their peers’ approval of them, as discussed in this article’s section on workers’ engagement in informal control at work, making them likely to be susceptible to comments from co-workers. In sum, due to the precarity of their work situation they are likely to consciously reflect on their daily aesthetic performances.

The number of workers with temporary or freelance contracts in the Netherlands has steadily increased since the beginning of the century (Dekker, 2017). The Dutch labour market in the decades following the Second World War was characterised by its stability and security, but this has swiftly changed and it is now one of the most flexible labour markets in Europe (Kremer et al., 2017). More and more workers – particularly young people and women, and increasingly those with higher education (Kremer et al., 2017) – are precariously employed and often combine jobs or ‘gigs’ in order to get by, as reflected in our sample.

All respondents were between 24 and 39 years old and living in the urban Randstad area in the Netherlands. This is the major metropolitan area in the Netherlands where the four largest cities (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht) are situated and can be characterised as a ‘global city’ (Sassen, 2006; Van der Waal and Burgers, 2009). It is the culturally
dominant region where creative work is concentrated (Tordoir et al., 2017), associated with a labour market structured as a ‘gig economy’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; McRobbie, 2002). Most – but not all – respondents were white, roughly middle class, 20 of them were women and 8 were men. Respondents were contacted through snowballing.

An important point to be made about the research context is that Dutch ways of displaying cultural status, both in general and concerning clothing and fashion in particular, are distinctly informal (Kuipers, 2010; Teunissen, 2011). Narratives on Dutch clothing culture emphasise functionality and frugality. Formal attire is unusual in many work contexts – even in the financial district in Amsterdam, jeans and sneakers are not uncommon (Haegens, 2019).

**Forms of Peer Feedback**

Feedback here is understood as any information regarding personal aesthetics given by peers. Rather than starting from a preconceived notion of what feedback entails, this section delineates the different forms of peer feedback ranging from candid judgments and instructions to more subtle forms as understood by our respondents.

Peer feedback in its most direct and open form takes the shape of direct instruction, meaning that co-workers literally instruct peers on their appearance. This type of feedback is least subtle in the sense that aesthetic norms are presented as rules, verbally made explicit. Given the ambiguity of power relations and aesthetic norms, it is perhaps hardly surprising that this type of feedback is uncommon in the experiences of our respondents. In the instances it did come about in the interviews, instructions often concerned helping newcomers get to know the situational norms so they would feel comfortable taking physical comfort into consideration, for example by telling peers they should dress warmly or wear clothes they can move freely in.

Often, feedback from peers is verbalised as an observation pointing out aspects that are remarkable or that stand out, sometimes in a positive or negative way, but most often without making this explicit (e.g. ‘wow, you’re wearing a red dress today’). Many of our respondents recollected moments in which someone at work simply pointed out an aspect of their appearance as interactions that made them aware of, and sometimes reconsider, their aesthetics. In this type of interaction judgements are not made explicit, but the fact that something is pointed out implies that it attracts attention. Take for instance Tom, who combines several jobs and gigs as an internet publisher, sales agent and text writer. One of his favourite outfits is the ‘Bonne suit’ – an affordable workman-style suit made by a Dutch designer. Tom’s Bonne suit is made completely out of dark denim and attracted some attention when he first started wearing it:

Tom: I once wore my full Bonne suit to work when they weren’t that well known yet. People reacted like: ‘wow, how funny, you’re wearing a full blue suit’. And I wore it and I thought, like ‘oof’, you know.

This example is used by Tom to explain that wearing something new can make him feel very self-aware. People pointing out that he is wearing something that is new or stands out makes him feel more self-conscious, even when their responses are not necessarily negative.
In some instances, verbalised observations do express opinions or inferences based on clothing. This type of feedback not only entails pointing out aesthetic aspects, but also makes explicit the social or symbolic interpretation of it. Consider for instance restaurant employee Sandra, who does not wear her beloved pair of dungarees to work because, she explains, ‘they are really very ugly and people always ask me if I’m into women [when I wear these]’. Associating this type of garment with female homosexuality, co-workers ask Sandra about her sexual preferences, thus giving feedback about what clothes are appropriate for women while reinforcing a heterosexual norm.

A specific style of commenting is through laughter and jokes. Presented as ‘fun’ or ‘having a laugh’ (see also McDowell, 1997; Fine and De Soucey, 2005) but, again, a way of communicating and reinforcing norms. Jokes are sometimes communicated directly to the person they concern, but can also take the form of gossip. Consider for instance how Joris, a teaching assistant at a university, talks about how personal aesthetics are a topic of conversation at work:

Joris: I just mentioned the example of my colleague who looks either really sloppy or wears a suit, and that stands out, so occasionally there are jokes about that. It’s not like people are saying: wow look at him or whatever.

I: So how does that go?

J: It’s just noticed and observed if you’re looking a bit odd. And then we also have this colleague who wears clothes that I myself would... that are fairly old and worn out... Yeah, there are comments about that. It’s not like anybody disapproves or that it actually bothers people, but people do comment on it. It suits him and that’s all fine, but I myself would try and prevent that for myself.

Gossip is one of the favourite and most successful means of creating a high-energy interaction between conversational partners (Collins, 2004). By gossiping about the looks of co-workers, Joris learns and reaffirms the aesthetic norms of the office (Soeters and Van Iterson, 2002). Throughout the interview, Joris repeatedly stresses that different styles are fine really and that nobody disapproves if someone stands out aesthetically. This is a common illustration of people’s wariness to disapprove of other people’s cultural tastes (particularly in the Netherlands, see Kuipers, 2010) while drawing symbolic boundaries based on just that (Jarness and Friedman, 2017). By talking about co-workers with other co-workers, the importance of having the ‘right’ aesthetic is communicated (Besnier, 2009; Hafen, 2004; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). Its coercive effect is illustrated by Joris stating that he himself tries to prevent becoming the object of such gossip.

As mentioned, feedback entails any response or reaction regarding personal aesthetic that workers might give or receive. It need not be verbal. Stares and gazes alone can be enough to make people aware of, and perhaps reconsider, how they look. Alexandra, a receptionist, talks about wearing a skirt in an office with only men:

Alexandra: I felt very uncomfortable and it really bothers me when I get the idea they’re staring at me.

I: And did you get that idea sometimes?
A: Yes, yes, yes. Because she [a former female colleague] would sometimes wear a really pretty dress. And then I would just feel sort of uncomfortable for her, because these men would be looking at her.

Seeing men stare at a woman wearing a dress is enough for Alexandra to realise that if she wears clothes that stress aestheticised femininity, they will stare at her as well – something she fervently tries to avoid. This example provides an interesting illustration of how peer feedback, in this case, stares, can cause both feelings (‘I would just feel sort of uncomfortable’) and consequences for how workers present themselves aesthetically. In order to not get stares from her male colleagues, Alexandra avoids wearing things that are too ‘pretty’. Clearly gendered, certain kinds of feminine aesthetics are problematic because they attract unwanted attention from men (see also Enwistle’s (2000: 232–233) discussion on managing the potential ‘threat’ of unwanted gazes from male co-workers).

The somewhat contradictory way in which respondents talk about the importance of aesthetics, as demonstrated by Joris, is illustrative of the ambivalence of peer feedback in aesthetic labour. Personal appearance is considered important enough to comment on and it is a common topic of conversation in the work place. However, it is often discussed in an implicit way and the importance of aesthetics is often explicitly downplayed. There are no fixed rules and on the surface it appears that anything goes – in fact, having an individualistic ‘authentic’ style is found to be a recurring norm in the interviews. Yet, this seeming informality does not mean that everyone is free to look the way they want and it can even contribute to concealing norms, in effect making socialisation into getting to know the particular contextual norms a difficult process.

A general distinction can be made between general societal norms and situational norms that are different for (and sometimes even within) particular organisations. Recurring general norms in the interviews are stylistic consistency and authenticity, and, in addition to that, the clearly gendered norm that looking sexy is not suitable for work (see also Entwistle, 2000; Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila and Erola, 2016). It appears there is much ambiguity and disagreement regarding the specific content of these norms. Take for instance the general norm that looking too sexy or attractive is not suitable for work (cf. Anderson et al., 2010). The right middle ground between looking sexy and not looking sexy enough is very much dependent upon the particular context and situation. Norms are multifaceted and situational, making it difficult to achieve ‘clothing competence’ (Hansen, 2005) and aesthetic fit with co-workers.

In sum, the content and the shape of peer feedback regarding aesthetics at work can be characterised as implicit and ambiguous. Aesthetic norms in professional contexts are multifaceted and situational and are often communicated indirectly and implicitly. This means that potential judgement is omnipresent while making it hard to ‘get it right’. The ambiguity of norms and the subtlety in which they are communicated does not imply that personal aesthetics are not experienced as important. On the contrary, as the following analysis of the logics driving aesthetic peer feedback suggests.
Logics Behind Peer Feedback

Workers are invested in their peers’ personal aesthetics in ways that are in unison with and go beyond the market logic typical for employers and managers. This section delineates the two main logics driving peer feedback.

First, personal aesthetics are seen as an indicator of other things, such as personality or morality (see also Kuipers et al., 2019). The main concern here is for co-workers to project an image of the organisation that appeals to a particular (classed) clientele. In this sense, this logic resembles the reasons driving aesthetic control by employers as it is about looking representative and appealing to clients. In our sample, particularly the workers in hospitality and other service industries, find the image of their organisation is affected by their peers’ aesthetics, as Warhurst et al. (2000: 13) note. In the sample of this study, this is mostly related to class. Workers express they feel their peers need to find the right middle ground between looking too casual and too formal. Restaurant employee Sandra illustrates this in the way she describes how new co-workers often ‘get it wrong’ when they are new: ‘The first day you see everyone coming in with a neat blouse, ironed and all – this is just not that sort of place’. The restaurant where she works is situated in a neighbourhood with mostly (upper-) middle class families. She goes on to explain that new workers need to find the right middle ground in order to appeal to the clientele the restaurant aims to attract: ‘You have to realise that you’re sending out a message’, which should be, she clarifies using a pejorative term, ‘that you are not [lower or working class]’ because that sort of style does not emanate hospitality and warmth. In this sense, she conflates aesthetics, style and personality with the capacity to give the restaurant guests a welcoming feeling. The imperative to fit in with the style of the organisation and customers has of course been illustrated before, as discussed in this paper’s section on earlier research on aesthetic labour. This example illustrates how workers, like Sandra, can embrace this notion and give feedback to peers accordingly.

The second main logic relates to the importance of aesthetics in belonging to the group or organisation. As discussed, workplaces have particular situational (interpretations of) norms. Hence, aesthetics can form a symbolic boundary (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Showing knowledge of situational norms and adhering to them is, to varying degrees, a prerequisite for belonging. This can take different forms. Director’s assistant Annelies works on film sets with large crews of people with diverse classed backgrounds. Explaining why a particular dress showing some cleavage would not be suitable for work, she articulates an important aesthetic norm for film makers:

Annelies: Actually almost anything goes on set. But if somebody dresses in a very sexy way, then everybody thinks: ‘that one doesn’t belong on set’.
I: Because . . .?
A: Because it’s very inconvenient to dress sexy on set. Sexy as in: showing lots of skin, lots of make-up, heels.
I: Why would that be inconvenient?
A: Well, an average day of work is 11 hours and you’re standing around a lot and waiting for long periods of time. Sometimes you have to get into action really quickly, run. You never know in what kind of setting you will work, as I mentioned before. You never know what the
weather will be like. Especially because working days are so long and because you’re outside all day, it’s just convenient to dress warmly and comfortably.

Annelies’ explanation of why sexy is not suitable for working on set illustrates different levels of aesthetic norms. Clearly gendered, the norm to not look sexy on set signifies group membership. Belonging and fitting in is partly conditional upon fitting in aesthetically. Annelies attempts to substantiate her judgement using the more ‘neutral’ argument of practical considerations rather than that of cultural taste (cf. Jarness and Friedman, 2017). Moreover, this again illustrates that looking ‘right’ for work is not always about looking beautiful or attractive – to the contrary even. Following the same logic, Samuel received feedback from co-workers when he started working as a teaching assistant at a university that has a reputation for being informal and leftist:

Samuel: When I first started [working as a TA] I liked to dress more formally because I wanted to be serious at work. And also because I was sort of proud to be a teacher, I liked that . . . I liked wearing a suit because I think it looks good, a suit. But I kept on getting comments so then I replied: yes but I just like the fabric. [I] would like to wear it, but then you’re seen as formal and you have to answer for it. I didn’t feel like doing that, so from then on I don’t wear it any more.

I: [did you get comments] from students?
S: Yes and sometimes from colleagues. So I didn’t feel like that. [getting comments]

Obviously, for a man to wear a suit to work is very much accepted, if not the norm, in many organisations. In this instance, however, the suit conflicts with the university’s reputation and the department’s identity of being informal and definitely not corporate. The norm of dressing in an informal style (‘studied informality’, as Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 132–140 call it) may seem like a social leveller, but the ‘code’ for showing fit is particularly subtle and intricate, requiring context-specific cultural capital. Samuel’s colleagues are involved with their workplace identity and its aesthetics in such a way that they feel they can, and perhaps should, give feedback to their new co-worker who does not fit in aesthetically. The two logics are in conflict here. Samuel’s estimation of what is representative is incongruent with the internal logic of the organisation.

It is interesting to note that in Samuel’s reply to the comments he explains his choice of attire by pointing to the material aspects of it: ‘I just like the fabric’, and later in the interview stating that ‘I like wearing a jacket [that is part of a suit] because it’s comfortable, not because it’s necessarily formal’. Doing so, he circumvents talking about aesthetic preferences by emphasising the perhaps more neutral consideration of physical comfort.

Another way the logic of belonging can drive peer feedback is by attempts to prevent others from embarrassing themselves or offending others with their looks. Crucially, this type of feedback is not necessarily a reflection of norms the giver of feedback agrees with. College teacher and photographer Lara, for instance, feels that it is a form of support to point out to colleagues when she thinks they are not complying with certain aesthetic norms:
Lara: So I think I have my freedom there to wear what I want but it cannot be sexy of course. Sometimes a colleague is a little bit sexy and then we say something fun ‘hello there!’ [laughs]. So we give each other feedback on that.

Lara expresses a double judgement: sexy is not suitable for work, and this particular look is too sexy. She assumes that a subtle joke or remark is sufficient for her co-worker to understand her judgement, and that s/he will agree. The goal is not to appeal to customers in order to get competitive advantage, but to help peers from ‘failing’ aesthetically (see also Winch’s (2013: 8–28) discussion of the ‘girlfriend gaze’). This again illustrates that looking good for work does not equal looking attractive or beautiful. The underlying logic in this particular example is the belief that there are certain norms that apply to particular contexts and that not adhering to these norms is due to a lack of knowledge or correct understanding of the norm. The co-worker not following the norms needs to be informed, as not complying with the norms could lead to unwanted responses from others, such as negative reactions or unwanted attention. There appears to be a paradoxical logic here: by ‘helping’ others, norms are fortified and the importance of aesthetics is essentialised. Even those that do not necessarily agree with aesthetic norms are involved in reinforcing those norms in order to help others from painful situations (cf. Ridgeway, 2009: 148–149).

To Lara, the norm of not looking sexy is self-evident, but clearly there is disagreement regarding what constitutes a sexy look. Similar to youth worker Patrick, who enjoys instructing new colleagues they should not ‘show too much’, Lara considers giving feedback as something light and even ‘fun’. Patrick, likewise, finds these feedback moments ‘kind of nice’ and ‘[not] really an issue’. Both the logics of appealing to customers and of ‘helping others’ fit in aesthetically arguably conceal taste judgements. They imply that the person giving feedback is merely the messenger, rather than the judge. Considering the social, emotional and affective importance of aesthetic labour, feedback situations are not neutral moments of socialisation in which information is simply passed on. The following section delineates the different responses to receiving peer feedback, illustrating the discrepancy between the experiences of givers and receivers of feedback.

**Responses to Aesthetic Feedback from Peers**

Feedback is in many instances essentially a result of disagreement about perceived norms. The receiver of feedback apparently thought an item or combination of clothes would be fine for work, but a co-worker does not agree and expresses her or his opinion about this. This poses a dilemma for the receiver: who is right? Should I adapt my opinion and style, or refuse?

How exactly not adhering to informal aesthetic norms is sanctioned does not become clear from our data. Despite this limitation, the interviews do suggest that peer feedback has real consequences, both for workers’ sense of comfort and confidence, and for how they actually dress. Consider again for instance Samuel, who stopped wearing a suit, and Alexandra, who avoids pretty dresses and things that show her body shape because she knows they will lead to unwanted attention from male colleagues. Assistant director Annelies, similarly, anticipates the need to avoid comments from male technicians and does not wear her favourite pair of shiny leggings on days she is not sure who will be on set.
The responses to feedback in our interviews range from disinterest or refusal, on one end, and feelings of embarrassment and being out of place, on the other. The latter reaction is the most typical. The former response was the exception and exclusive to men. This contrast is illustrated by youth worker Patrick’s and Anne’s (a 30-year old landscape architect, returning to work after being away from work on sick leave) respective responses to peer feedback:

I: Do you ever get comments?
Patrick: Eh, no. Really the only thing is that sometimes my pants are hanging too low.
I: Oh, yes? Has someone ever said something about that?
P: Yeah, ‘Patrick, pull your pants up, I can see your underwear’. So that’s the only thing . . . I’ve always worn them this way. I love it, you know, loose on the hips is what I call it. But well, I should realise a bit more that if I’m reaching for something for instance, or I’m bending down, that I should pay attention to my surroundings and to how I’m standing.

Anne: I once wore this [knee length black dress] in the middle of summer, with a cardigan. I think it’s a really nice dress . . . And then one of my co-workers made a remark, something like: are you going to the beach? And I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. I was feeling fine before that.
I: What was it about that remark that made you feel uncomfortable?
A: All of the sudden I started to doubt, like, is this too revealing? Or do they not take me seriously now? That sort of idea, even though I think it’s quite a serious dress.

The contrast between Anne’s and Patrick’s responses demonstrates how inequalities – in this case concerning gender – can be reproduced in interactions of peer feedback. Anne could have thought it was superficial or rude of her colleague to make a remark about her clothing, but instead she sees it as legitimate and even as a ground for others to not appreciate her professional capabilities. She makes the assumptions that her colleague is right in his opinion that her clothing is not suitable for the office, that he has the right to express this opinion to her, and that the negative consequences of wearing the ‘wrong’ outfit will bear down on her. This expresses, first, a general and typically gendered fear of not begin taken seriously (see also Elias et al., 2017: 35) and, second, the norm that a feminine leisurely style of clothing is incongruent with professionalism (which contrasts with the responses to the hoodies and flip-flops worn by men in the tech sector, as Van den Berg and Arts (2019a) point out). Moreover, the acceptance of the principle that others deservingly estimate your professionalism based on appearance endorses the notion that dress has true and inherent meaning. In an aestheticised economy, giving feedback on a colleague’s appearance is not only accepted; it is experienced as embarrassing that someone ‘needs’ to give you feedback on your appearance – particularly for those in an already vulnerable or less powerful position. The question of the legitimacy of the feedback is not even raised, underlining and reinforcing both the importance of aesthetics and the power imbalance that determines who gets to define what aesthetics are suitable for work.
Aesthetic norms are partly negotiated in peer interactions that are laden with status inequalities. This means that being established and possessing certain (situational) cultural knowledge brings the advantage of feeling one’s own taste is legitimate. If others disagree, that can be interpreted as signalling the inferiority of their taste and cultural knowledge, and their feedback can be readily dismissed. Hence, aesthetic labour has the potential to intensify insecurities. Particularly those in a vulnerable position – be it due to a precarious employment position, gender, age, race, and so on – find themselves on the receiving end of peer feedback while for them it is most important to achieve aesthetic fit. The social and affective importance of aesthetics and the perceived legitimacy of this importance make receiving negative feedback particularly painful, which, in turn, legitimises the importance of personal aesthetics.

Conclusions

This article explores peer feedback regarding the personal aesthetics of ‘frontstage’ workers in insecure labour relations. Studies on aesthetic labour have mostly focused on top-down practices and instructions regarding workers’ corporeality and have tended to omit co-workers in their analyses. Though the role of peers in enforcing managerial instructions has been acknowledged, little is known about horizontal feedback that is not based on formal guidelines. This study furthers the understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to aesthetic judgements and control in insecure working conditions. Based on testimonies of perceived feedback situations from 28 wardrobe interviews with the aforementioned workers, I have sought to answer the following three questions: (1) How do co-workers give each other feedback concerning personal aesthetics? (2) What logics are applied in this type of feedback? (3) How do people respond to what they perceive to be feedback from peers concerning their personal aesthetics at work?

In answering the first question, I have illustrated that what workers perceive as feedback from peers often takes a very subtle and even concealed form. Rather than giving direct instructions, peers tend to communicate norms through remarks, glances, gazes, jokes and gossip. General societal norms such as consistency, authenticity, dressing appropriately for your gender, and not looking too sexy were recurring in the interviews, but the exact content of these norms and the standards of evaluation are situational and depend on context (see also Van den Berg and Arts, 2019a). Feedback from peers thus further complicates aesthetic labour because the difficulty does not just lie in achieving a clearly defined standard, but also in learning and negotiating the contextual standards.

This study illustrates that the aesthetic component in labour is not just a matter of gaining commercial benefit by appealing to a particular group of clients. Regarding the second sub-question, analyses of the logics in peer feedback suggest that workers are invested in their peers’ aesthetics in ways other than those of the managers, as aesthetics become entangled with morality and personality and signify group membership. The logic of giving feedback to help others learn what is suitable and what is not allows the person giving feedback to appear to be merely the messenger, rather than the judge. These logics illustrate that aesthetics are indeed not superficial or frivolous, but that they are deeply felt (cf. Brown, 2017; Kuipers et al., 2019). In agreement with this significance, the analysis in answer to sub-question 3 indicates that aesthetic peer feedback is often considered
legitimate and taken seriously, particularly by those who already feel insecure about their status position at work. This suggests that aesthetic judgements from co-workers can intensify insecurities at work (cf. Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

Let us consider how peers actually play a role in exclusions and the shaping of social boundaries. Do the judgements of peers matter? Can co-workers sanction others for not conforming to aesthetic norms? The empirical data on which this study is based suggest there are two important reasons for why aesthetic judgements from peers matter. First, and coming back to the blurred distinction between management and employees, it is striking that many of our respondents mentioned being involved in the selection of new co-workers. Particularly interviews in retail and hospitality function as gatekeepers. They are often the first ones to talk to people who are interested in working in their work place or establishment and to hand candidates’ curricula vitae over to managers. Peers can thus actually select and exclude co-workers. Second, cultural fit – partly hinged on aesthetic performance – is important for feeling confident and comfortable (cf. Van den Berg and Vonk, 2020) and for ‘getting on’ within the organisation (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Hence, aesthetic feedback and judgements from co-workers can cause feelings of unease and being ‘out of place’, but can also function as pedagogical encounters that can help workers achieve ‘clothing competence’ (Hansen, 2005).

This study illustrates how informal processes of control and distinction concerning personal appearance intensify and complicate experiences of aesthetic labour as the interplay between market logics and judgements of taste has the potential to act as a reinforcement of insecurities and inequalities. The empirical data on which this study is based show how gender, class and employment situation are important categories for shaping both feedback and responses to it. In order to get a more complete understanding of the complexities and insecurities put forth by the aestheticisation and precarisation of labour, the role of peers and the specific ways in which distinction and judgements of taste are shaped by categories such as race, age and body size should be considered.

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