



## The burden of esthetic labor on front-line employees in hospitality industry



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### ABSTRACT

Hospitality industry has recently used esthetic labor on front-line employees to provide customers with the experience of quality service. The front-line employees must strive to meet various esthetic requirements and improve their personal esthetic skills, which might create stress for employees and make them feel burdened. Previous studies have not elucidated the burden of esthetic labor and its influence from the employee's perspective. Hence, the purpose of this study is to uncover the sources of burden of esthetic labor on front-line employees in the hospitality industry. Through in-depth interview and content analysis, this study extracted the burden of esthetic labor into three dimensions: organizational esthetic requirements and training, customer service pressures, and burdens in time off work. Managerial implications and future research directions are also discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Front-line employees in the hospitality industry are the medium through which companies interact with customers, and they are often seen as a source of service differentiation. In the process of service delivery, managers must depend on employees to maintain the quality of services provided (Nickson et al., 2005). The appearance and the speaking voice of front-line employees when serving customers conveys an esthetic expression that is beneficial to the corporate image. The hospitality business sector relies on the pleasing appearances and cheerful voices of its front-line employees to provide customers with the experience of quality service (Spiess and Waring, 2005), to create a unique corporate image, and to enhance its competitive advantage (Nickson et al., 2005). This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of front-line employees to the hospitality industry. Organizations can use various measures or methods such as dress code, grooming specifications, adjustment of tone or esthetic training to create a pleasing service experience for customers (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003). The concept of esthetic labor constitutes the requirements that an organization places on its employees about their appearances and speaking voices, or the provision of esthetic training to equip front-line employees with esthetic abilities and skills.

Esthetic labor refers to the concrete abilities and attributes expressed by an individual upon entering the workplace. Through the processes of recruitment, selection, and training, business owners modify, develop, and commoditize these abilities and attributes, converting them into esthetic abilities or skills to create a new service style, whereas employees perform esthetic labor throughout the three stages: recruitment and selection, training, and service encounters (Warhurst et al., 2000). Esthetic labor is essential to the hospitality industry. Whether in restaurants, hotels, or cafes, customers can experience the esthetic expression of the service organization (Witz et al., 2003). Hospitality organizations use the esthetic labor of employees to attract customers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a) and positively influence their service experience (Biswas, 2009). Additionally, hospitality organizations can use esthetic labor to differentiate (Spiess and Waring, 2005) their services from those of other business, and thus enhance their competitive advantage (Warhurst et al., 2000). Therefore, esthetic labor has become a point of focus in the recent hospitality industry.

To meet the esthetic specifications of the organization, the service personnel must concretely perform the required esthetic abilities and skills. Organizations can improve corporate images through enacting dress codes for employees. Nickson et al. (2005) indicated that dress code specifications include guidelines for general neatness, clothing style, accessories, personal grooming, hairstyle, and hair length. Warhurst and Nickson (2001) indicated that organizations use training to improve the appearance and esthetic skills of employees. Pettinger (2004) felt that the clothing worn by employees when serving customers must reflect the corporate brand and enhance the corporate image. Additionally, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) indicated that employees

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must spend additional time (beyond regular work hours), effort, and money on presenting an appropriate and attractive appearance in the workplace. Employees must strive to meet various esthetic requirements, improve their personal esthetic skills, and aim to present a good image when serving customers. The above-described efforts create stress for employees, making them to feel burdened.

The concept of esthetic labor has been widely emphasized and investigated in previous studies (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a; Quinn, 2008; Nath, 2011; Hall and van den Broek, 2012; Karlsson, 2012; Sheane, 2012). A majority of these studies approached the phenomenon from the organization's perspective and focused on ways to utilize the esthetic labor of employees to benefit the organization. These benefits include enhancement of organizational performance and corporate image, and customer attraction (Witz et al., 2003; Nickson et al., 2005; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Peluchette et al., 2006; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a; Quinn, 2008). However, these studies have neglected to elucidate the burden of esthetic labor and its influence from the employee's perspective. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the source(s) of the burden of esthetic labor from employees' viewpoints. The results of this study can assist hospitality organizations in understanding whether esthetic labor may become a burden on employees, as well as serve as a basis of reference for human resource departments in formulating related policies.

This study used hotels and the airline industry as targets of research, and utilized in-depth interviews and content analysis to identify the source(s) of the burden of esthetic labor. This study first referred to the literature on esthetic labor and derived four stages (recruitment and selection, training, service encounter, and off-work hours) that may constitute the burden of esthetic labor. Interviews were then conducted to investigate whether front-line employees felt burdened in expressing the esthetic skills required by the organization. Content analysis of the interview data was then used to determine the source(s) of the burden of esthetic labor experienced by employees.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Esthetic labor

Hochschild (1983) indicated that emotional labor refers to employees being required to manage their emotions at work in order to publicly present pleasant facial expressions or body language. Warhurst et al. (2000) pointed out that Hochschild's (1983) construct of emotional labor focuses the workers as a mindful, feelingful self but loses a secure conceptual grip on the workers as an embodied self. Therefore, this construct could not be used to explain the esthetics of the physical body. Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) replaced the concept of emotional labor by esthetic labor and transformed the mental and emotional constructs emphasized in emotional labor into the constructs of appearance and physical presentation at work. However, Williams and Connell (2010) felt that esthetic labor is similar to emotional labor, as both concepts refer to characteristics embodied by employees. Emotional labor refers to the specific emotional states that employees are required to enact in order to cater to customers, and esthetic labor refers to the esthetic abilities and attributes that organizations require employees to embody. If the goal of emotional labor is to shape employees' emotions, then esthetic labor seeks to shape employees' corporeality. The common end goal of both types of labor is the commercial gain of organizations (Warhurst et al., 2009).

Esthetic labor refers to the requirements regarding corporeal attributes that employers make when recruiting employees. Organizations attempt to use the attributes and abilities embodied by

employees to attract customers and thereby enhance their competitive ability. Organizations believe that hiring employees with an attractive appearance can create a bright corporate image and attract more customers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). When employees present a more pleasing style or appearance to customers, customers may be impressed by the esthetic superiority of the staff. To embody esthetic labor, employees must combine their bodies and their self-effort to present an appropriately attractive appearance in the workplace (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). Spiess and Waring (2005) pointed out that airhostesses must control and manage the details of their appearance, demeanor, and tone of voice. Employees must invest thought and effort into planning appropriate outfits for work (Rafaeli et al., 1997). Therefore, this study suggests that esthetic labor performs a type of service, and thus defines esthetic labor as "the effort, control and management needed to perform organizationally-desired embodied capacities and attributes for interactive service work."

Organizations require employees' esthetic labor in three stages. In the recruitment stage, organizations look for employees with a "tasty" and "stylish" appearance. Organizations seek employees with an attractive appearance, including a pleasing smile, pretty teeth, neat hair, and good bodily proportions (Warhurst et al., 2000). In the process of selection, the requirement of the dress code, and the importance of appearance were also emphasized (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). Warhurst and Nickson (2007a) claimed that a number of job posts require employees to not only speak well, but also speak with the right voice and accent. Thus, esthetics is not external appearance only, voice and tone is also a very important component.

Hospitality organizations require employees to not only strictly comply with the appearance and dress code policies, but also receive strict training in self-presentation. Warhurst and Nickson (2007a) indicated that organizations use clothing and appearance requirements, such as requirements on clothing style, make up, grooming, hairstyle and length to regulate employees' appearances. In the research of Witz et al. (2003), grooming and deportment training was given to the staff by external consultants, and instruction was given to new employees on how to wear the uniforms. Furthermore, employees must receive appearance and esthetic related training in dress sense and style, body language and make-up, and grooming and self-presentation (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007b; Nickson et al., 2005; Warhurst et al., 2000). Consequently, employees should comply with a variety of esthetic requirements regarding their work roles and receive esthetic related training and courses.

By serving customers, employees engage in esthetic labor. Biswas (2009) pointed out that in the process of service delivery, employees can use body participation, altering of facial expression, voice adjustment, and a smiling presentation to make customers feel happy and satisfied with their services. Witz et al. (2003) also suggested that an employee with a modulated voice, artful attire and stance tends to attract more customers. When serving customers, organizations may mandate employees to performed self-presentation, therefore, employees not only have to perform professional services, but also need to attend to accent, posture of stand, and smiling invitingly at prospective customers (Warhurst et al., 2000; Nickson et al., 2005).

When facing customers, employees are constantly reminded to use words, such as "exquisite" and "luxurious," instead of more prosaic terms (Warhurst et al., 2000). In the research of Van Maanen (1991), when not serving customer, employees were required to stand at a 40-degree angle near the entrance to smilingly welcome customers. The employees were not allowed to stand with crossed arms and had to pass an appearance inspection before serving customers. Consequently, in order to please customers, employees must pay more attention to perform esthetic labor.

Additionally, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) pointed out that esthetic labor is not only a work matter and that employees must continue their commitments to esthetic labor even during their off-work hours. These commitments include long-term “body projects” (Shilling, 1993) such as weight management and beauty care, as well as dieting and other methods to maintain one’s figure. Tyler and Abbott (1998) indicated that female flight attendants have expended continual effort and time on maintaining their figures and ideal weight, particularly through dieting, as stipulated by the company. Employees also spent much of their salary on clothing that helped them to present a pleasing appearance to customers (Mills, 1951). Williams and Connell (2010) indicated that before entering employment, workers must spend weeks on makeovers and thousands of dollars per month on beauty products.

Employees’ failures to perform the required esthetic labor in the organization may affect their performance. Warhurst et al. (2000) indicated that flight attendants in airline companies were found to monitor each other. Attendants’ nonconformity with company standards for appearance and deportment are seen as a disappointing behavior to their colleagues. In hospitality industry, employees not meeting the requirement of dress code would be sent home to wash, change clothes or appearance before returning to work, receive loss of wages and verbal or written warnings, or even not be allowed to work in a more serious case (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). Flight attendants have maintained a smiling demeanor and embodied the esthetic abilities and attributes required by the organization, in order to avoid losing their jobs and incurring higher workload, and less compensation and benefits (Spiess and Waring, 2005).

Previous studies regarding esthetic labor have subsequently focused on gender and various occupations to investigate the implications of esthetic labor. For Eastern cultures, Gottfried (2003) indicated that Japanese society values the management of people’s posture in terms of esthetic labor as being critical, specifically, stylized uniforms and linguistic and gestural expressions, which are characteristics crucial in defining a person’s position in the society. However, various organizations recruit personnel on the basis of female embodiment and male masculinity characteristics, and organizations frequently seek attractive female workers and manage them in a manner that embodies their sexualized body traits. Furthermore, the embodiment of gender workers is based on the unique specifications of an organization. For Western cultures, esthetic labor is observed in various occupations. For example, in the airline industry, flight attendants must regulate their physical appearance, expressions, and tone of voice (Spiess and Waring, 2005). In the hotel industry, employees must adhere strictly to their dress codes, such as general tidiness, clothing styles, jewelry, accessories, make up, personal grooming, and the length and style of hair (Nickson et al., 2005). In the restaurant, employees must be well dressed and have a pleasant appearance and amiable attitude in the presence of customers (Quinn, 2008). Therefore, regardless of gender, industry, and culture, esthetic labor has emerged as a new style within labor markets.

## 2.2. Burden

McCance et al. (2010) suggested three different forms of psychological burden. The first form of psychological burden is stressor, which is an actual or anticipated loss of valuable resources (Hobfoll, 1989) and obstacles to task fulfillment (Semmer, 1996). The second form of psychological burden is burnout, a psychological response to work stress, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. For example, when employees could not meet the esthetic requirement, they would cause criticism from their supervisor, and thus feel unhappy inside, even reject to perform esthetic labor. The

third form of psychological burden is physical strain (Schwarzer and Leppin, 1989), which means employees continually maintain fixed postures and movements, or make their heart rate faster over an entire working day (Sandmark et al., 1999). For example, when serving customer, employees have to continually maintain registrations of postures and movements for a long time, which may cause physical strain to employees. Consequently, when performing esthetic labor, front-line employees may face stressor, burnout, or physical strain, which we refer to as “burden of esthetic labor”.

Ganster and Schaubroeck (1991) investigated the relationships between work stress and increased risk of psychological and physiological disease. In a study regarding the physical and psychological burden of employees, Macik-Frey et al. (2007) indicated that burden is related to work content. These burdens include both economic costs and humanitarian concerns in the workplace. Furthermore, Macik-Frey et al. (2007) suggested that physical and psychological burdens cause health problems, diseases, and disorders. Collins et al. (2005) examined the influence that physical and psychological burdens have on chronic health conditions, such as disorders, depression, and anxiety. These chronic conditions can reduce employees’ productivity, even when they are physically present and working. Rayner et al. (2001) and Einarsen et al. (2003) indicated that burden includes threats and emotional abuse in the workplace, negatively affecting the health conditions of employees. Allen et al. (2005) showed the effects that burden has on employees’ health and productivity and, to many employees, time pressure and work stress may be the primary causes of workplace burdens. With the results of the aforementioned studies, an employee’s burden in the workplace not only is related to occupational context, economic costs, threat and emotional abuse, time pressure, and work stress, but also can be caused by health related problems such as disorders, depression, and disease. Therefore, understanding how employees’ burden is caused by an organization’s implementation of esthetic labor is necessary.

## 3. Methodology

The participants in a majority of esthetic labor related studies were front-line employees in the airline, hotel, and restaurant industry (Korczyński and Ott, 2004; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Quinn, 2008; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a,b). This study selected front-line employees of airline, hotel and restaurant industries in Taiwan as participants. In order to pinpoint particular individuals who have knowledge and insights about the topics in this study, the method of judgment sampling was used. Since the nature and content of the front-line employees’ work differs among several major positions, only the front-line employees who had experienced burden of esthetic labor were recruited.

To ensure that the survey and interview proceeded smoothly, this study developed an interview handbook. The interview handbook first explained the definition of the burden of esthetic labor (the burden of esthetic labor refers to the various stresses and strains that employees face when engaging in esthetic labor as required by the organization) and then listed the interview questions.

This study used two-stage sampling to select the interviewees. First, convenience sampling was used. Individuals, who were front-line service employees, among the friends of researchers or recommended by friends of researchers were contacted as interview targets. Next, snowball sampling was used. Front-line employees sampled from the first stage recommended other front-line employees who experienced esthetic labor to participate in the research. This study used face-to-face interview methods. The interviews were conducted in Taiwan, the data were collected in

**Table 1**  
Demographics of participants.

Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Position	Years of work experience
01	Female	24	Airline industry	Flight attendant	02 years
02	Female	45	Airline industry	Airline counter staff	05 years
03	Female	35	Airline industry	Shipping clerk	06 years
04	Female	37	Airline industry	Shipping clerk	12 years
05	Female	28	Airline industry	Flight attendant	05 years
06	Female	54	Airline industry	Airport manager	21 years
07	Male	52	Airline industry	Counter manager	18 years
08	Male	30	Hotel industry	Assistant business manager	10 years
09	Female	25	Hotel industry	Vice manager of lobby	02 years
10	Male	30	Hotel industry	Assistant customer service manager	03 years
11	Male	44	Hotel industry	General manager	15 years
12	Male	28	Hotel industry	Waiter	03 years
13	Female	52	Hotel industry	Counter supervisor	30 years
14	Male	26	Hotel industry	Customer service center staff	03 years

2 months, and all interviews were recorded. The average length of an interview was 1 h.

The demographics of the 14 interviewees are shown in Table 1. As of the interview date, all interviewees stated that they were employed in the airline industry or international tourist hotels. The interviewees consisted of eight females and six males; their ages ranged from 24 to 54 years old. The average age was approximately 36. The work experience of the interviewees in their industries ranged from 2 to 30 years and the average tenure was 9.6 years.

### 3.1. Inductive content analysis of the burden of esthetic labor

Two researchers well-versed in qualitative evaluation methods and in the current coping literature analyzed the participants' responses from the interviews using a three-step procedure outlined by Patton (1990) and a method adapted from previous psychological research (Anshel and Wells, 2000). First, two researchers independently filtered valid responses by reviewing the situations identified by interviewees as stressful in terms of esthetic labor to determine the basic unit of analysis for the source of burden from esthetic labor. Because interviewees had to first perceive the burden of esthetic labor in order to identify its source(s), interviewees explained their experiences in terms of the stress they felt when engaging in esthetic labor and described the source(s) of this stress or burden. Two doctoral students (both had industry experience) served as judges and independently coded the transcriptions into 328 units.

In the second step, inductive content analysis procedures were used to analyze these units. This approach allows the units to be grouped into meaningful and interpretable categories. Through this process, the 328 units were classified into 36 burden-related categories. Next, these 36 categories with similar attributes and characteristics were classified into 10 high-order categories. The inter-rater reliability of the two classification processes was 0.87(285/328) and 0.92(33/36), which exceeded the 0.8 standard (Kassarjian, 1977) and indicated that the classification results had strong reliability.

The third step consisted of a second inductive content analysis. The two researchers agreed that the sources of the burden of esthetic labor in the high-order categories were of a similar nature or had similar attributes. Next, the 10 categories were classified into three dimensions derived from the literature review: esthetic requirements and training, customer service, and off-work hours. Both researchers were satisfied that these categories accurately reflected different sources of the burden of esthetic labor experienced by the front-line employees. The researchers compared their findings and jointly labeled and defined each category. Finally, three dimensions were identified, namely "organizational esthetic requirements and training", "customer service pressures",

and "burdens in time off work". With participants from multiple industries (airline industry, hotel, and restaurant) to research the same issue, this study can cross-check one burden source against another, thus increasing the overall reliability of the results.

## 4. Findings

The findings are arranged into three sections: (1) organizational esthetic requirements and training, (2) customer service pressures, and (3) burdens in time off work.

### 4.1. Organizational esthetic requirements and training

This dimension of burden refers to those related to the esthetic labor of front-line employees in meeting organizations' requirements and training, including requirements of clothing and appearance, department requirements, burden from esthetic training, pressure from internal supervision, and the burden from esthetic discordance.

#### 4.1.1. Requirements of clothing and appearance

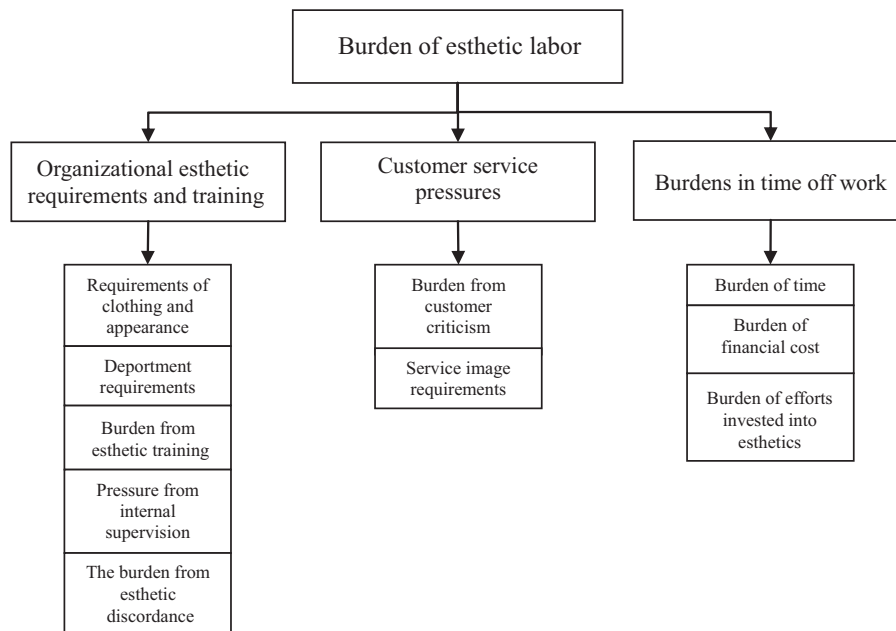
Clothing and appearance requirements refer to the burden of esthetic labor resulting from the need to comply with clothing specifications established by the company. The requirement on clothing and appearance includes clothing regulations, specifications on hairstyle or length, personal grooming, and rules against jewelry, no tattoos, and scars.

Williams and Connell (2010) indicated that companies emphasize clothing and grooming standards for front-line employees. The consensus of opinion in the interviews was that in order to meet clothing requirements, the front-line employees had to continuously maintain good esthetic conditions on a daily basis, and they felt tired of engaging in the same esthetic labor every day. Therefore, the need to fulfill diverse esthetic specifications on a daily basis results in a heavy burden of esthetic labor (Fig. 1).

The hotel industry's aesthetic requirements are many, and being attentive to one's personal appearance every day is tiresome. For example, male staff working at the service counter in a hotel lobby must wear their uniforms, comb their hair neatly, and shave daily. This daily grooming and focusing on appearance is wearying (Male, general manager, 15 years of work experience, hotel industry).

#### 4.1.2. Department requirements

Department requirements refer to the burden of esthetic labor experienced by employees in forcing themselves to meet organizations' requirements and customers' expectations. Department requirements include attentiveness to posture when walking and



**Fig. 1.** The burden of esthetic labor mode.

tone of voice, as well as maintaining a smiling demeanor. [Spiess and Waring \(2005\)](#) indicated that employees must be able to manage and control the details of their appearance, expression, and tone of voice, in order to portray a positive corporate image. Department requirements demand that employees overcome psychological stress and fear, and therefore increase the burden experienced by employees engaging in esthetic labor.

Tone of voice is an aspect that front-line employees must constantly be aware of. Interviewees expressed that using an unpleasant tone of voice irritated customers, and that they were attentive to their tones of voice for fear of angering customers and causing group pressure. When employees feared displeasing customers, their level of attentiveness to esthetic regulations increased, thus increasing the burden of esthetic labor.

We're afraid of group pressure. If a flight attendant speaks loudly or unpleasantly to a passenger, the passenger will be irritated. Therefore, we must always be attentive to our tones of voice when speaking (Female, flight attendant, 2 years of work experience, airline industry).

Organizations require employees to maintain a pleasant demeanor. Interviewees reported that they forced themselves to remain smiling when facing customers. A higher degree of self-coercion suggests a greater burden of esthetic labor.

I am nervous when I meet strangers and worried that I will not be able to maintain a smiling expression when speaking to them. This causes me much anxiety and stress, so I have to force myself to smile (Female, flight attendant, 5 years of work experience, airline industry).

#### 4.1.3. Burden from esthetic training

Esthetic training refers to the organization-provided training which employees must participate in to develop their esthetic skills. In the process of esthetic training, the need to improve esthetic skills causes employees to feel frustrated and anxious, thus increasing the burden of esthetic labor.

[Van Zolingen et al. \(2000\)](#) posited that the on-the-job training places an extra burden on employees. For example, when employees receive on-the-job training, the atmosphere on the

work site may not be favorable to employees and the heavy work pressure can negatively affect the training process. Our Interviewees also remarked that in the process of receiving voice training, they were required to improve their tones of voice according to instructions from their department heads or managers. Managers would correct employees for a poor tone of voice and mandate them to modify and improve it, thereby causing employees to feel frustrated.

When attending broadcasting courses, we would learn about volume, speed, and tone of voice from the tapes. We learned that transitions in speech also had to be taken note of, to produce a pleasant and sweet sounding voice. Our department head would stand by listening, give comments and corrections, and require us to make improvements (Female, shipping clerk, 6 years of work experience, airline industry).

Training in department also caused employees to feel burdened with esthetic labor. Interviewees expressed that this type of training was very taxing. They stated that they were required to attend many training courses in posture, department, and overall appearance, and these courses were so tiring that employees felt nothing but relief at the end. Therefore, a greater amount of esthetic training indicates a heavier burden of esthetic labor.

Department courses impose requirements on how to carry shoulder bags, which side to drag your luggage on, and how to walk! Training in department was 100 times more effort than regular work (Female, flight attendant, 2 years of work experience, airline industry).

#### 4.1.4. Pressure from internal supervision

Pressure from internal supervision includes stress from managerial supervision and stress from peer monitoring. Employees' monitoring each other's clothing and appearance at work causes stress for employees. [Warhurst et al. \(2000\)](#) suggested that peer pressure would also enforce conformity to company standards on appearance and department. To avoid appearing less attractive than colleagues, interviewees invested more time and effort into self-grooming and hairstyle. Therefore, peer monitoring of clothing and appearance causes employees to feel more keenly

the inadequacy of their esthetic skills and strive for improvement, thus increasing the burden of esthetic labor.

There is a lot of comparing among colleagues. Coworkers tell you what outfits or makeup are better, or compare each others' hairstyles. There are a lot of mutual comparisons among peers (Female, flight attendant, 2 years of work experience, airline industry).

#### 4.1.5. *The burden from esthetic discordance*

Esthetic discordance refers to conflict situations between the esthetic labor required by the organization and the esthetic labor embodied by employees. The consequences of esthetic discordance include punishment, work problems, and peer criticism. Interviewees reported that they were not allowed to assume their normal responsibilities until they met the company's esthetic requirements. Employees worked hard to control their personal esthetic states in order to regain their positions.

If you break out in acne, the airline will not let you fly, and you have to frantically find a way to treat your complexion problems. Also, flight attendants who gain weight are required by the company to lose weight before they can fly again. As a flight attendant, you are only paid if you fly. If you cannot fly, your salary is reduced by half or more; thus, not being allowed to fly means loss of chance to make money (Female, flight attendant, 5 years of work experience, airline industry).

Difficulties at work due to failure to meet esthetic specifications also cause employees to feel burdened by esthetic labor. Interviewees expressed that in order to avoid trouble with customers or help their work to progress more smoothly, they had to enhance their personal appearance or present a more professional image. Therefore, employees must invest more efforts into esthetic labor to ensure smoother progress of work, and thus the burden of esthetic labor increases.

If you are wearing makeup, the probability of arousing customers' ire is less. Dressing neatly also makes a difference in customers' attitude towards you. If you present a professional, pleasing image to the customer, he/she is less likely to make trouble. So good grooming, neat clothing, a soft voice, and a smiling demeanor can help your work to progress more smoothly and reduce obstacles (Male, waiter, 3 years of work experience, hotel industry).

## 4.2. *Customer service pressures*

This dimension of burden refers to those related to customer service, including the burden from customer criticism and service image requirements.

### 4.2.1. *Burden from customer criticism*

Dormann and Zapf (2004) considered that customers' behaviors threatening employees' sense of mastery or self-esteem prohibit employees from developing good relations with their customers, and even make employees feel unconfident during interactions with their customers. Interviewees expressed that they experienced stress resulting from fears that a poor tone of voice would lead to customers' complaints. Therefore, employees' being particularly attentive to their demeanor to satisfy customers' expectations causes employees to feel burdened with esthetic labor.

At work, I have to be very careful about my tone of voice and manner of speaking. I am always particularly worried about whether my tone of voice and manner are appropriate, as poor performance in this area results in customer complaints

(Female, counter supervisor, 30 years of work experience, hotel industry).

Dollard et al. (2003) pointed out that the stressful behaviors of dissatisfied customers cause employees to strain in general and have low job satisfaction. Interviewees indicated that when they carried an expressionless or unsmiling look, customers felt that the service they provided was poor. When customer complaints occurred, employees felt that their work performance was poor and thus felt disheartened. When employees must invest additional efforts in attentiveness to facial expressions, they feel burdened with esthetic labor.

When employees are not smiling, customers believe that the employees are not providing a good service. Therefore, we have to take care of our facial expressions to avoid customer complaints (Male, general manager, 15 years of work experience, hotel industry).

### 4.2.2. *Service image requirements*

Employees must overcome stress and strive to make their appearances to portray the correct corporate image, thus causing them to feel burdened with esthetic labor. Interviewees expressed that when wearing company uniforms, they perceived an intangible pressure to portray a corporate image.

I feel pressured when wearing the company uniform and serving customers, because wearing the uniform means that you must perform the tasks that go with this uniform. Sometimes I cannot be myself when wearing the uniform (Female, flight attendant, 2 years of work experience, airline industry).

To present a professional service image, employees are required to overcome the difficulties in projecting confidence. Interviewees expressed that the need to exude confidence when serving customers often caused stress and difficulty to them. The need to overcome these difficulties to portray a professional image increases the burden of esthetic labor for employees.

When facing customers, I am very shy and afraid of strangers. Portraying confidence is very difficult and stressful for me (Female, flight attendant, 5 years of work experience, airline industry).

## 4.3. *Burdens in time off work*

This dimension of burden refers to those related to the phase of off-work hours, including time, financial cost, and efforts invested into esthetics.

### 4.3.1. *Burden of time*

Employees must invest time in their clothing and grooming to portray and maintain an appropriate esthetic state. Peluchette et al. (2006) indicated that time, money, and physical efforts are required for employees to maintain an appropriate appearance in the workplace. Interviewees expressed that occasionally the strict time pressures generate stress for employees, and result in a burden of esthetic labor.

I have to get up earlier in the morning to have time for personal grooming. When I finish lunch, I have to quickly touch up my makeup. All these create stress for me (Female, vice manager of lobby, 2 years of work experience, hotel industry).

### 4.3.2. *Burden of financial cost*

The expenditure on clothing and grooming is a burden of esthetic labor caused by the need for employees to present an individually suitable esthetic appearance. Interviewees expressed that in order to find suitable beauty care and makeup products, they had

to continually try out different brands, which resulted in additional financial cost. The interviewees mentioned that they had spent substantial amounts of money on purchasing particular clothing brands to meet the company's requirements, resulting in additional financial burdens.

Flight attendants have to buy many things, such as pantyhose and hairnets. We sometimes have to spend money on buying more makeup and beauty care products, such as makeup that is darker colored or more suitable for the occasion (Female, flight attendant, 5 years of work experience, airline industry).

Company expects employees to wear particular branding suit, so we have to spend a lot of money, and this creates a financial burden for me (Male, assistant business manager, 10 years of work experience, hotel industry).

#### 4.3.3. *Burden of efforts invested into esthetics*

The aspect of "maintaining figure" refers to the burden of esthetic labor caused by the effort required for employees to maintain their figures. Tyler and Abbott (1998) indicated that female flight attendants must continually invest efforts and time in maintaining their figures, particularly being on diet to maintain the ideal weight specified by the company. O'Neil and Brown (2005) pointed out that maintaining a body image has been found related to weight loss, and weight loss programs can be a source of distress which could lead to unfavorable outcomes. Participating in a weight loss program involves negative emotion or body dissatisfaction. Interviewees reported that they had to devote considerable effort to maintaining their physique and having a pleasing appearance when wearing uniforms. Employees felt troubled when they gained weight and worried about the negative opinions of others. Thus, the greater the effort required for employees to maintain their figures, the greater the burden of esthetic labor.

I worry that I won't be able to fit into the uniforms. The uniforms are limited in sizes, so you cannot be too fat. So I have to exercise to maintain my figure in order to present the right look in my uniform (Female, shipping clerk, 12 years of work experience, airline industry).

From the results of the study's findings, the interviewees invariably felt that the experience of performing esthetic labor not only affected their physical and mental pressure, but also influenced their work lives. This study conceptualized three dimensions of the burden of esthetic labor, namely, organizational esthetic requirements and training, customer service pressures, and burdens in time off work. For organizational esthetic requirements and training, a highly regulated and monitored work environment pressures employees and ultimately causes esthetic discordance or a loss of esthetic balance. For customer service pressures, customers' criticism is the primary cause of pressure for employees. Finally, burdens in time off work comprise the time, money, and effort that employees sacrifice to achieve work-required esthetic regulations.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. *Organization-imposed burden of esthetic labor*

The organization-imposed burden of esthetic labor refers to the heavy burden of esthetic labor for employees mandated by the organization to use their esthetic skills in order to create a good corporate image and enhance the competitive advantage of the organization. This study found that employees were burdened with esthetic labor to meet the esthetic requirements by the organization. Previous studies (e.g., Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a) concluded that employees were circumscribed by clothing style,

make-up and grooming, hairstyle and length. Additionally, our findings revealed that employees not only were burdened by meeting the esthetic requirements of the organization, but also felt the pressure from the training on appearance and esthetics provided by the organization.

Employees were required to receive esthetic training by the organization, and supervisor and peer pressures pushed employees to maintain a specific esthetic state for the organization. This study found that when employees performed esthetic labor, they felt pressured by supervisor and colleagues who were monitoring them. Flight attendants in airline companies were found to monitor each other. A flight attendant who did not comply with company standards for appearance and deportment was seen to be disappointing to their colleagues (Warhurst et al., 2000). Thus, the front-line employees always feel the pressure of esthetic monitoring within the organization.

Employees who cannot meet the organization's esthetic requirements experience esthetic discordance. Morris and Feldman (1996) indicated that when the emotional expression conveyed by employees does not match the organization's expectation, employees must exercise more self-control, skills, and attentiveness to their emotional expressions. Employees experiencing emotional imbalance thus feel a heavier load of emotional labor. Esthetic labor as discussed in this study refers to the effort expended by employees on their appearances and manners. When the esthetic state embodied by employees has a conflict with what is required by the organization, employees must invest more efforts into controlling their esthetic states to reduce the negative influence of the esthetic discordance on their work. Previous studies (e.g., Spiess and Waring, 2005; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a) have concluded that employees had to keep smiling and embody the organization's esthetic requirements; otherwise, they could face the harsh reality of job losses, work intensification, and reduction in rewards and benefits. Our findings agree with those of both Spiess and Waring (2005) and Warhurst and Nickson (2007a) that when employees experience esthetic discordance, they may receive punishment and verbal warning by the organization. Thus, in order to avoid punishment, employees need to make more efforts to perform esthetic labor required by the organization, which results in the burden of esthetic labor.

### 5.2. *Customer-imposed burden of esthetic labor*

In the workplace, front-line employees usually interact with customers at the service counter, and embody appropriate esthetic labor required by the organization. If employees are unable to embody the esthetic state expected by customers, they may suffer customer criticism or complaints. Customer-related stressors have a negative impact on the organization and employees' psychology. For example, customers' intense verbal abuse would cause employees' negative mood at work (Dollard et al., 2003). Consequently, facing different customers requires employees to perform different states of esthetic labor. In such circumstances, employees must invest greater efforts in planning and controlling their esthetic labor in order to meet the esthetic requirements of various customers. This may increase the psychological burden.

### 5.3. *Burden of esthetic labor in time off work*

Burden of esthetic labor in time off work refers to the time, money and resources invested by employees in time off work into maintaining their esthetic states, in order to embody appropriate esthetic attributes and abilities in the workplace. This study found that employees appeared to spend their personal time after work and their money in maintaining esthetic state. Employees must schedule a daily workout routine to maintain their body during

off-work hours (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). For example, female airhostesses had to continuously invest efforts and time on maintaining their figures, particularly through dieting, to maintain ideal weight as stipulated by the company (Tyler and Abbott, 1998). Thus, employees not only perform esthetic labor during normal work hours, but also invest time, money, and effort in maintaining self-body and self-performance during off-work hours, which causes employees to perceive the extra burden of esthetic labor. This study also found that employees spend time and money on clothing, grooming, and beauty care, as well as making an effort to maintain their figures and keep up with information on esthetics. The present findings seem to be consistent with the previous research that employees spent much of their salary on clothing that helped them to present a pleasing appearance to customers (Mills, 1951), and that before entering employment, they must spend weeks on makeovers and thousands of dollars per month on beauty products (Williams and Connell, 2010), together with various methods, to improve their appearances in order to increase their employability and market potential (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006).

## 6. Managerial implications and further research

From a practical viewpoint, understanding the sources of the burden of esthetic labor experienced by front-line employees can provide valuable information for management. Many front-line employees engage in esthetic labor in order to create a positive corporate image for the organization. However, management must also understand the burden of esthetic labor experienced by employees striving to meet the esthetic requirements of the organization. From the organization's viewpoint, being aware of the sources that cause employees to feel burdened with esthetic labor could assist the organization in taking employees' perception of burden into account to formulate esthetic requirements and training, and thus reduce the burden of esthetic labor. Some sources of the burden of esthetic labor can be controlled by the organization to reduce the burden experienced by employees, such as the content of esthetic training, the level of stress resulting from internal supervision, and punishment meted out for esthetic discordance. Rodríguez and Gregory (2005) suggested an organization can modify principles of learning, content, relevance, sequence, and interference of training courses to reduce employees' burdens. Additionally, companies should provide employees with subsidies or benefits for esthetic purposes; for example, companies could collaborate with makeup product suppliers or hair salons to assist employees in this area and utilize company resources to help alleviate their burdens of esthetic labor. Organizations can also produce a handbook of esthetic specifications and use pictures to illustrate the hairstyle, clothing, and jewelry specifications established by the organization. Employees can use this illustrated information to modify their appearance and meet the organization's requirements.

In order to motivate employees to perform esthetic labor, organizations should not only place esthetic demands on employees, but also enable them to earn recognition and rewards from the organization. The results of this study also suggest that esthetic training and requirements must be evaluated circumspectly by organizations. Organizations must make decisions carefully and should be responsible for guiding employees through the esthetic journey to decrease the burden of customer criticism.

From the employees' viewpoint, employees must understand that the organization pays close attention to the esthetic skills of employees. Understanding the various burdens of esthetic labor can assist employees in conducting advance preparation with regard to their esthetic attributes and abilities. This can help employees to achieve a balance between individual ability and work

requirements, and facilitate better performance of the required esthetic skills in the workplace. Consistent with previous studies (Peluchette et al., 2006; Day et al., 2002), the results of this study indicated that employees have to be conscious of self-monitoring and convey positive workplace image for achieving high performance and advancement opportunities.

This study used qualitative research to investigate the burden of esthetic labor. Although this study identified the burden of esthetic labor in three dimensions, the relationship between the burden of esthetic labor and its influence on employees was not verified. Therefore, we suggest that follow-up studies may use quantitative research to investigate the relationship between employees' perception of the burden of esthetic labor and their job satisfaction/job performance, to explore the influence of the burden of esthetic labor. Another important finding was that employees who valued their esthetic labor indicated that it made them feel more competent and confident at work. Thus, we recommend future studies to explore the link between employee's esthetic labor and their self-efficacy and self-esteem, which may involve important managerial implications.

Although this study has drawn out some insights about the burden of esthetic labor on front-line employees in the hospitality field, some limitations have to be recognized. The organizations of the interviewees were limited as this study only interviewed front-line employees from hotels and airline industries. The burdens of esthetic labor in other industries where esthetic labor is implemented in various occupations can be examined. Furthermore, in-depth investigations regarding gender are necessary to determine whether different connotations between gender and esthetic labor burdens exist. Previous studies regarding front-line employees in England, Australia, Japan, and India (Warhurst et al., 2000; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Gottfried, 2003; Nath, 2011) have indicated the phenomenon of esthetic labor. The burdens of esthetic labor in Taiwan were investigated in this study. Therefore, cross-cultural research to compare the differences in esthetic labor among countries is recommended in the future. This study can also serve as a basis for developing analysis of the characteristics of esthetic labor.

## Appendix A. Measurement

We measured burden of esthetic labor using three interview questions based on the four stages (recruitment and selection, training, service encounter and off-work hours) from studies by Warhurst et al. (2000) and Entwistle and Wissinger (2006).

1. In your previous experience with esthetic recruitment and selection, what kind of situations related to esthetic labor caused you to feel stressed or burdened? Please describe these situations in detail.
2. In your previous experience with training, what kind of situations related to esthetic labor caused you to feel stressed or burdened? Please describe these situations in detail.
3. In your previous experience with service encounter, what kind of situations related to esthetic labor caused you to feel stressed or burdened? Please describe these situations in detail.
4. In your previous experience with off-work hours, what kind of situations related to esthetic labor caused you to feel stressed or burdened? Please describe these situations in detail.

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