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# The Devil Wears Nada: Female Employees' Hidden Transcripts and Public Responses to Inessential Esthetic Demands

Lakshmi Balachandran Nair 

LUISS Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy

**Correspondence:** Lakshmi Balachandran Nair ([lbalachandrannair@luiss.it](mailto:lbalachandrannair@luiss.it))**Received:** 5 December 2024 | **Revised:** 14 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 2 February 2026**Keywords:** gender | hidden transcripts | inessential esthetic demands | qualitative | resistance

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how reluctant female employees discuss and respond to the inessential esthetic demands that they receive from their bosses through an anonymous online forum as well as in real-life work settings. Substudy 1 analyzes the corpus “r/antiwork” to identify the hidden transcripts of employees after inessential esthetic demands. It identifies four discursive practices involved in Reddit threads—“Construction of the ‘Other,’” “Reinstatement of normative views through individualistic rhetoric,” “Rhetoric of choice feminism,” and “Rhetoric of feminist consciousness.” The discourses also include potential responses to the esthetic demands—resistance, compliance or acquiescence, satirical compliance, and malicious compliance. Substudy 2 involves the analysis of a small-scale survey. The survey confirms the findings of Substudy 1 and also identifies significant relationships between how employees feel when they encounter esthetic demands and how they respond to them. The reasons behind employees' reluctance to report such demands to HR are also detected. This study contributes to the esthetic labor literature by introducing the concept of “inessential esthetic demands,” thereby broadening the field beyond customer-facing roles, while also advancing understandings of workplace resistance, feminist organizational studies, and gender dynamics in organizations.

## 1 | Introduction

From Abercrombie and Fitch to Hooters, beauty is managed by businesses as an investment strategy for better returns (Hakim 2010). Although their work entails more than just “looking good,” front desk hotel staff, fashion models, actors, strippers, flight attendants, and sex workers are examples of workers for whom displaying their looks is considered an explicit or implicit part of their jobs (Mears 2014). The workers' grooming, presentation, and attire are often guided by explicit policies, reinforcing the organization's desired image. They are expected to display their esthetic fit and be “walking billboards” for their employers. For example, Disneyland Park's handbook on personal grooming, aptly named “Disney Look Book,”

explicitly states how the employees are “personal representations of the Disney tradition of excellence” (Disney Programs Support 2023). Likewise, shop assistants at Leviathan retail stores are supposedly required to adhere to strict appearance standards. According to an employee, even drastic haircuts or getting highlights must first be discussed with a manager (Witz et al. 2003, as cited in Karlsson 2012). Similar trends are observed in other public-facing professions such as retailing, hospitality, sales, marketing, television anchoring, politics, and customer relations, where employees are expected to visually embody the brand (Warhurst and Nickson 2020).

However, appearance-based expectations extend beyond customer-facing jobs. The makeup, grooming, dressing style,

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and overall attractiveness of employees are subtly regulated even in non-customer-facing jobs where there are no such formal requirements (Hollis et al. 2021). More often than not, such esthetic expectations are higher for female employees, whose appearances are scrutinized more often than those of men (Jackson 1992). This aligns with prior studies, which have pointed out that the norms regarding physical appearance are usually gendered, with women and men facing different expectations regarding their physical appearances (e.g., Åberg et al. 2020). Our study contributes to this discussion by examining how female employees in non-customer-facing professional environments discuss and negotiate these gendered esthetic pressures in anonymous spaces as well as in real-life work settings.

Specifically, this study investigates how female employees react to esthetic expectations in jobs where their appearance is not central to the core commercial activity. In such contexts, efforts to enhance one's appearance are also unpaid, underscoring the nonessential nature of these esthetic demands. One illustrative case is that of Sandra Rawline, a real estate employee allegedly dismissed for refusing to alter her appearance to meet her employer's preferences, which included dyeing her gray hair and adopting more youthful and fashionable attire. Her experience reflects a growing concern: the imposition of esthetic standards in roles where appearance is irrelevant to job performance (Pilkington 2011), a phenomenon we refer to as "inessential esthetic demands."

Hence, the main questions we aim to find answers to through this study are as follows: How do female employees react to inessential esthetic demands in jobs that do not formally require them to wear makeup or dress up? Specifically, how do female employees who are reluctant to abide by and are not contractually obliged to do so react to inessential esthetic demands from their bosses and employers? The study answers these questions in two stages, through two substudies that explore (a) how female employees discuss inessential esthetic demands at workplaces in an anonymous context in which there is no fear of retribution and (b) how female employees respond to these esthetic demands in their actual workplaces.

There are several contexts in which employees can air the causes of their distress without their employers' knowledge. For instance, users on social media platforms post and vent feelings anonymously about different aspects of their lives, including workplace grievances. To investigate discursive constructions of inessential esthetic demands and their potential responses, exploring Reddit threads on the topic appeared to be an ideal first step. Building on these insights, we also launched a survey to examine whether the online discourses reflected real-life responses and consequences in actual workplaces. The survey also included open-ended questions to further analyze the nuances behind specific experiences of the participants.

Although the qualitative analysis of social media data is the major method used, it is supplemented by both quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey data. The rest of this article is structured as follows: Literature Review, a section describing the focus of the study and the research questions, a methodology section and findings from Substudy 1, a methodology

section and findings from Substudy 2, discussion, implications and limitations, and conclusion. The Literature Review teases out the concept of "inessential esthetic labor" that is the focus of this article by discussing its differences and similarities with three other types of esthetic labor that exist in commercial settings. Subsequently, the review situates the central concept of "hidden transcripts" in the context of this inessential esthetic labor.

## 2 | Literature Review

From Victorian times to the present day, women working in department stores and front offices are often required to possess and cultivate specific looks that complement and showcase the store brand or the classed culture of the concerned organization (Mears 2014). Thus, although an esthetic demand in the labor market is not a novel occurrence, the fact that modern organizations still have practices and requirements pertaining to their female employees' esthetic capital makes it a topic currently worth pursuing. Prior scholars have identified different concepts pertaining to the work done on bodies (e.g., intimate labor, affective labor, beauty work, body work, etc.). Although these concepts pertain to the work done on bodies in general, this study specifically focuses on work done on bodies by women in commercial settings. It discusses four types of such work, namely, esthetic labor, beauty work, esthetic services, and inessential esthetic labor. See Table 1 for a summary.

### 2.1 | Esthetic Labor

The practice of recruiting and training employees to showcase beautiful appearances and affects constitutes esthetic labor (Mears 2014). Employees' bodies are central to the involved commercial activities, and they are paid directly or indirectly to "look good" and/or "sound right" (Nickson et al. 2012). The body language, appearance, dressing style, and even the speech of the employees are molded to produce a desired style, for instance, in retail and hospitality sectors (Nickson 2022). In this study, we concentrate on the "looking good" component of esthetic labor, as opposed to the "sounding right" aspect. This distinction is more evident in professions such as modeling and acting, where individuals are often treated as esthetic symbols, and their corporeality is appropriated, maintained, and sometimes even modified for commercial benefits (Mears 2014; Spiess and Waring 2005; Warhurst and Nickson 2009).

Even in fields such as fashion retail and hospitality, where the display of bodies is not the central part of the job, the employees are often required to identify with the brand through their appearance and to present themselves as artifacts of the brand (Cutcher and Ahtel 2017; Warhurst and Nickson 2020). As discussed in the introduction, although both men and women work in such professions that demand a certain level of embodied attractiveness, women typically face more intense scrutiny. For instance, female actors have historically been held to stricter and narrower definitions of "good looks" than their male counterparts. Although men in these professions are increasingly being required to perform esthetic labor, their

**TABLE 1** | Work done by women on bodies in job contexts.

Compensation	Centrality of employees' esthetic capital in the involved commercial activity	
	High	Low
Paid	Esthetic labor (e.g., modeling)	Esthetic services/bodily labor (e.g., beauty salons)
Unpaid	Pro bono esthetic labor/beauty work (e.g., nightclubs)	Inessential esthetic labor (e.g., demanded in organizations having no contractual requirements about work done on bodies)

embodied dispositions are still not judged by the same parameters as their female counterparts (Dean 2005). Because employee appearance and presentation are integral to the commercial success of these industries, employers usually remunerate workers for this form of esthetic labor. However, the thus-remunerated esthetic labor is not the only one that exists in commercial settings, as demonstrated in the following sections.

### 2.2 | Pro Bono Esthetic Labor (Beauty Work)

Even the beautification and embellishments women undertake for their own personal purposes could have commercial implications (Mears 2014). A main premise behind indulging in such practices is the belief that physical attractiveness is a quality that can be achieved and enhanced through applying makeup, styling hair, wearing refined clothing, etc. Such grooming practices that people perform on their own bodies for eliciting benefits within a social hierarchy are referred to as “beauty work” (Kwan and Trautner 2009). This beauty work that women perform helps in signaling gender appropriateness and subsequently the conformity to hegemonic ideals of femininity in the workplace (Wong and Penner 2016), even in professions in which there are no explicit esthetic requirements.

To give an example, a woman might choose to apply makeup or wear attractive clothing as a personal choice. The work she performs on her body in this case could be classified as beauty work. Although this beauty work is voluntary and unpaid, performing it could not only have personal implications such as higher self-esteem but also commercial implications. For example, well-groomed women in nightclubs and fraternity houses contribute to the value and income of these organizations through their beauty work (Mears 2014). In this manner, women often do “pro bono” esthetic labor in the organizations where they work or whose services they avail of.

### 2.3 | Esthetic Services (Bodily Labor)

A third type of work that involves the corporeality of women is bodily labor. The often-feminized work that is directly focused on the bodies of others constitutes bodily labor or body work (Twigg et al. 2011). This definition of bodily labor relates to all forms of paid work that involve touching other people’s bodies (e.g., hairstyling, massaging, personal training, prostitution, etc.). In this study, the term “bodily labor” is used to denote the work that is involved in beautifying or adorning the body of another person. The esthetic services provided by hairstylists, makeup artists, manicurists, and tattooists are included in this definition. Although these esthetic services are paid endeavors and involve the embellishment or enhancement of bodies, the

beautification of the workers’ own bodies is not central to the involved commercial activity.

It is to be noted that the three categories of beautification and embellishment activities mentioned in the previous sections are not exclusive and could be performed concurrently. To give an example, hairstylists who work on someone else’s hair can also style their own hair, thus performing bodily labor on another person and beauty work on themselves. Likewise, a woman could perform paid and unpaid esthetic labor simultaneously (e.g., a front desk employee could wear makeup as part of her job requirements and also while visiting a nightclub). The common feature among these different types of work is the fact that in the case of esthetic labor and bodily labor, the employees are compensated for the work they do on their bodies. In the case of pro bono esthetic labor, there is no payment involved. However, pro bono esthetic labor’s impact on the involved commercial activity is more a side effect than the main purpose.

In all these three cases, the individuals have the agency to perform or not perform work on bodies. One could refuse to perform pro bono esthetic work if one does not feel like it. One could refuse to perform esthetic labor and bodily labor, although it might come at the cost of not getting paid. In fact, because esthetic labor and bodily labor requirements are central to the involved commercial activity, the employees are most likely informed of these requirements even before they start these jobs. This brings us to a fourth type of work done on bodies, which is neither paid for nor central to the commercial activity involved. The employees are also most likely uninformed of these requirements before they start the jobs. This type of work is termed as the “inessential esthetic labor,” which is the focal point of this study.

### 2.4 | Inessential Esthetic Labor

The beautification of the workers’ bodies is not crucial in several jobs. IT professionals, factory workers, and back-office employees are some examples of workers for whom wearing makeup or dressing up in an esthetically pleasing manner are not explicit requirements of their jobs. Although such employees might perform beauty work for private reasons, their looks and affects are not directly or indirectly related to the commercial activities involved. However, even under these circumstances, women might be asked by their bosses to perform work on their bodies. A logic behind such demands could be that wearing makeup or dressing up in a normative manner supposedly signals competence and credibility, which, in turn, could lead to direct or indirect benefits for the employee.

Relatedly, women who do not dress up or wear makeup in a normative manner might be condemned as ugly or incompetent.

They are asked to don makeup, style their hair, or wear attractive clothing to fit in and appear competent in these workplaces (Dellinger and Williams 1997), and any disconfirmations to these hegemonic ideal appearances are met with the request to “make an effort.” Thus, for women, attractiveness is often essential or even compulsory (Kwan and Trautner 2009), even in work settings in which they are not contractually obliged to do so. The demands made for this inessential esthetic labor and how working women meet such demands are topics yet to be explored by researchers. Correspondingly, this study explores the employees’ private discourses, aka “hidden transcripts,” pertaining to the demands to perform inessential esthetic labor, meaning inessential esthetic demands, and if and how these transcripts play out in real-life work settings.

### 3 | Hidden Transcripts

This study explores female employees’ responses to esthetic demands in a bifurcated manner. Firstly, it investigates the employees’ hidden transcripts surrounding esthetic demands from employers in work settings where donning makeup or dressing stylishly is not a mandatory written requirement. Hidden transcripts are discourses that take place “offstage” where powerholders such as employers cannot see them. These transcripts are “behind the scenes” “speeches, gestures, and practices which confirm, contradict, or inflect what happens in the public transcript” (Scott 1990, 4–5). Discourses and decisions that cannot be openly expressed to powerholders without suffering penalties are the ones that appear in the hidden transcripts. In the context of this study, this means that the transcripts are not produced for the eyes of the bosses or employers who make esthetic demands, but for a collective group of employees with similar experiences. More likely than not, these transcripts remain hidden except within the collective group, where they are a shared reality. Nonetheless, these transcripts also have the potential to break out of the corresponding collective group and become public discourses or, at the very least, perform the groundwork required to do so. Exploring these hidden transcripts is, hence, instrumental in understanding the potential power imbalances in organizational settings and unsettling or even changing existing power relationships.

### 4 | Focus of the Study

This study specifically concentrates on how inessential esthetic demands are discussed and negotiated by female employees in two distinct contexts: an anonymous social media platform and real-life workplaces. Substudy 1 focuses on how female employees discuss inessential esthetic demands in an anonymous online environment. To explore these hidden transcripts, we analyze digital data from Reddit, a social media platform. On Reddit, the users or “redditors” collectively voice their opinions and analyze events (Neu et al. 2020). Reddit’s role as a valuable data source is supported by previous research on gender and organizations, which has also utilized the platform (e.g., Hoelscher

et al. 2023; Maaranen and Tienari 2020). Reddit is an online community with more than 91 million daily active users as of March 2025 (Saini 2025). As a public platform, it enables users to create and share content, as well as engage by commenting on posts or voting (Aslam and Adams 2022). Reddit is divided into smaller communities known as subreddits, each focused on a specific topic. The threads, that is, the initial posts and the ensuing comments in subreddits, co-construct the discourses together (Ravazzani and Mazzei 2018). Reddit users are able to seamlessly switch between posting under their regular usernames and using temporary “throwaway” accounts, which allow for anonymous participation (Aslam and Adams 2022). This feature of anonymity was one of the key justifications for selecting Reddit as a data source, particularly as our aim is to uncover the hidden transcripts embedded in communications about inessential esthetic demands. Accordingly, the first and primary research question is as follows:

**RQ1:** What are the hidden transcripts in Reddit conversations about employers’ inessential esthetic demands?

To address this research question, we collect digital data from discussion threads within a Reddit community (or “subreddit”) created for the purpose of discussing work-related struggles, where employees can hide their identity and engage in conversations without fear of identification or reprisal by the former. This subreddit is dedicated to critiques of work, labor movements, and antiwork ideologies. This investigation constitutes the first substudy. Building on the insights from the first substudy, the second substudy examines how these hitherto hidden transcripts play out in real-life work settings. Using a survey developed from the themes identified in Substudy 1, we investigate how female employees perceive and respond to inessential esthetic demands on the job and the consequences of their responses. The research question guiding the second substudy, hence, is as follows:

**RQ2:** Do the hidden transcripts find their way into the public sphere, that is, actual workplaces? If yes, what are the subsequent outcomes?

Considering the bifurcated nature of the study, the methodology section is subdivided into two parts. This study is predominantly qualitative, with the quantitative part playing only a supportive role. To this end, it follows the QUAL-> Quant-> qual, exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell and Creswell 2018). As discussed previously, qualitative data are collected and analyzed first. Afterward, a small-scale, quantitative survey is designed based on the qualitative findings to test how the themes identified are enacted in actual workplaces. The survey also contained open-ended questions, the answers to which facilitated an additional round of qualitative analysis. In the forthcoming section, Substudy 1, which involves the qualitative analysis of social media data, is discussed. Then, after discussing the findings from this substudy, the second substudy, which involves the qualitative and quantitative analyses of survey data, is presented. This section will be followed by the concerned findings. See Figure 1 for a summary of the methodological approach.

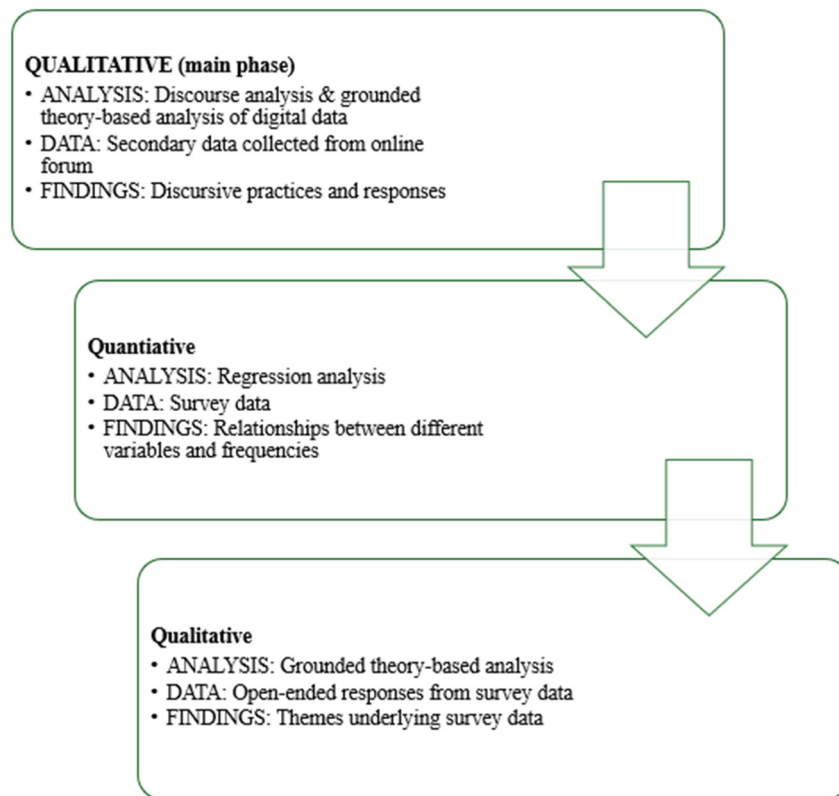


FIGURE 1 | Stages of methodology. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

## 5 | Substudy 1: Qualitative Analysis of Social Media Data

The corpus analyzed is “r/antiwork,” a subreddit of the Antiwork Community. The community is for “those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most out of a work-free life, want more information on antiwork ideas, and want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles” (About Community. R/antiwork [Online forum post] 2013). As of 2021, 93.73% of the Antiwork Community engage with each other through the r/antiwork subreddit (R/antiwork Survey Results 2021). R/antiwork is one of the 15 fastest-growing subreddits (Ballentine 2021) and ranks within the top 1% of all subreddits by size (Reddit, n.d.). In its own words, the purpose of the subreddit is to start conversations and to problematize contemporary work practices. The threads on r/antiwork usually discuss redditors’ negative experiences at workplaces, such as unfair treatment, poor pay, and other kinds of dissatisfaction with the working conditions. Redditors can interact with each other in r/antiwork through posts, comments, upvotes, and downvotes, as well as awards, which are given to recognize or react to others’ comments and posts.

The keyword search used the terms “makeup,” “dress,” “women,” and “female.” From the search results, the threads that were published within a year (2022–2023) and had the most comments were selected. The focus on 2022–2023 was to ensure the contemporaneity of the threads. Data collection took place during early to mid-2023. The search results were further narrowed down to exclude any threads that were focusing solely on

customer experiences, because the research question pertains to experiences with bosses/employers rather than with customers. Indeed, although Reddit’s anonymous nature provides candid insights into the discourses surrounding esthetic demands in the workplace, it limits access to users’ sociodemographic information. To mitigate this limitation, only comments that were explicitly identified as pertaining to working women were included in the data collection. Gender was determined based on user-provided information in the threads and comments, including explicit declarations (e.g., “I’m a woman”), mentions of gender-specific relational roles (e.g., “When my wife...”), and contextually gendered descriptions contained within the posts (e.g., “Female boss told me I should wear makeup to work”). Similarly, the data were thoroughly reviewed to confirm that they accurately represent experiences of inessential esthetic demands, rather than other types of work performed on bodies (see Table 1 for a summary of different types of work done on bodies). In the end, 4 threads with a total of 1297 comments, 10,181 upvotes, and 8 awards constituted the preliminary dataset.

The threads were analyzed using a combination of grounded theory and discourse analysis. The entire corpus was read multiple times to ensure that the meanings of the individual posts and comments were grounded in their own context. Afterward, the data were coded to identify the open codes displayed in the data. Initially, 278 open codes were identified, which were then examined and categorized into different responses to esthetic demands. To give an example, the following quote was open coded as “asking for specifics behind makeup demands”:

When I had to work in the office, I wore what they pictured in the employee handbook...polo shirt, khaki slacks, a cardigan, and some slip on dress shoes. Got a warning that I wasn't dressed appropriately. So I took the handbook to my manager, showed him the pictures, and asked what I was doing wrong. He couldn't, but mentioned makeup. When I explained my skin is sensitive and prevents me from wearing any, he almost demanded a doctor's note until I again pointed to the handbook and asked him to show me where it says I *must* wear makeup. He dropped it and never bothered me again.

Afterward, together with other open codes such as “refusing to work in place where makeup is demanded,” this code was categorized under “resistance to inessential aesthetic demands,” as by asking for specifics and pointing out reasons not to comply with the esthetic demands, the redditor was, in fact, resisting.

In the second round of data analysis, the patterns of communication in the Reddit threads were examined to find the underlying discursive practices. To give an example, many redditors justified both wearing and not wearing makeup as a personal choice. Some of them even mentioned the use of digital makeup or occasional makeup as something they do as and when they like. This interpretive repertoire, or contradictory and inconsistent but very regular and familiar way of describing their approach toward wearing makeup, was grouped together under the discursive practice “rhetoric of choice feminism” (Wetherell 2025). By combining grounded theory and discourse analysis in this way, overarching themes, namely, the responses to esthetic demands, as well as the discursive practices underlying the r/antiwork

conversations, were identified. Figure 2 shows an overview of the main findings.

## 6 | Findings From Qualitative Analysis of Social Media Data—The Hidden Transcripts

With regard to the hidden transcripts angle of the study, the study identified how redditors discursively devise responses to inessential esthetic demands from their employers on the Reddit platform. The main discursive practices that were identified included the “construction of the ‘Other,’” “reinstatement of normative views through individualistic rhetoric,” “rhetoric of choice feminism,” and “rhetoric of feminist consciousness.” The responses developed through these discursive practices included “resistance,” “compliance, aka acquiescence,” “malicious compliance,” and “satirical compliance.” See Figure 2 for a summary of the discursive practices and the responses, which are also discussed below in detail.

### 6.1 | Discursive Practices

The redditors in the sample threads are aware of the implicit and explicit consequences of refusing to wear makeup or dress up. Subsequently, they claimed to exercise the rhetoric of choice feminism in their responses to such esthetic demands. Although Foucault's docile body thesis, which describes how bodies are passive vectors upon which power is inscribed (McNay 1991), was thus rejected by the redditors in the sample threads, they unwittingly did so by constructing the “other.” Unknown to themselves, they thus reinstated normative views about gender and femininity. The practices involved in the Reddit discourses are discussed in detail below.

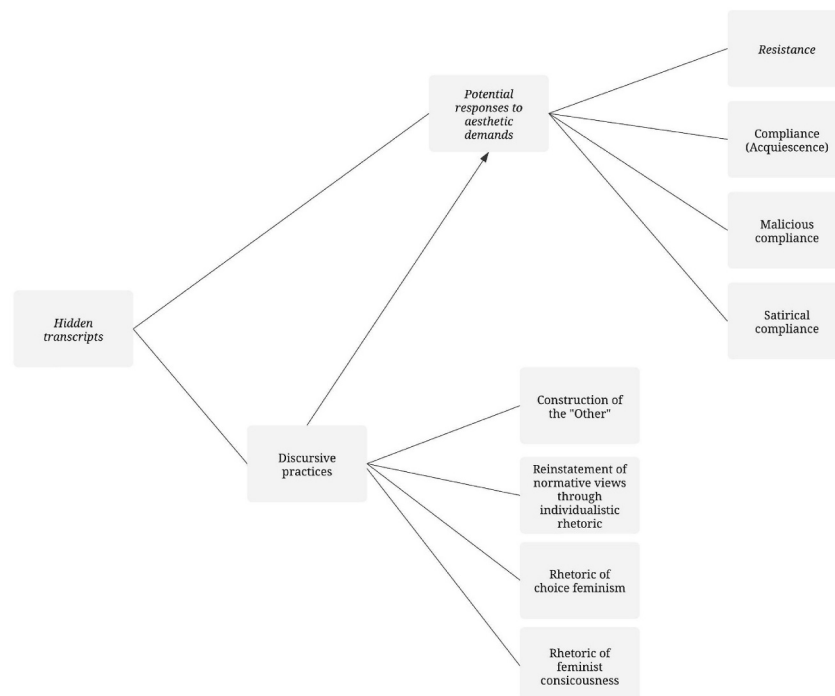


FIGURE 2 | Hidden transcripts in Reddit discourses on esthetic demands at workplaces.

### 6.1.1 | Construction of the “Other”

All the threads were initiated by original posts from aggrieved employees who were affected by the inessential esthetic demands made by their employer. In some of the cases, the demands were put forth by female employers. In these scenarios, the most evident theme was that of “othering” the female employer.

There are a lot of women .... that feel they look dead, tired, or horrible without at least a little bit of makeup. Some take it way too far and cake it on so thick it looks like they used a spatula, but I digress. I feel like she is jealous that you don't need to wear it, that you're the type of woman that doesn't need it to keep you from looking exhausted or tired or whatever. I feel that she's one of those women that need more than just a little to look a certain way and because of that she gets mouthy, catty, and jealous when there's women around that can be natural and don't feel the need to impress anyone including her....

As evident in this quote, the inessential esthetic demands by female bosses were not merely critiqued but were framed as due to their insecurity or jealousy. Unlike in the cases where esthetic demands were made by male bosses, where attributions to insecurity or jealousy were absent, demands by female bosses were portrayed as emotionally driven and antagonistic. The redditors construct a differentiation between women who ask them to wear makeup and themselves, referring to the former as inauthentic and as the “other.” This construction of “the other” also involved delegitimizing the female bosses by evoking gendered and misogynistic stereotypes by using words such as “naturally nasty,” “mouthy,” “catty,” “jealous,” etc. Thus, the redditors who condemn the inessential esthetic demands by those in power simultaneously participate in a parallel form of surveillance of bodies and attributions of the “other” women. This dynamic underscores how lateral hostility is perpetuated through “othering” between female bosses and female employees, a dynamic that is absent between male bosses and female employees.

She might think she's helping you. If she believes that her feminine look has worked to give her an advantage, she may believe it could be useful to you. I've had coworkers give me advice that didn't serve me but the intent was well meaning.

As the quote above shows, in very few instances the demands by female bosses were considered well-intentioned attempts to help, an effort to pass on strategies for navigating patriarchal workplaces. Even in such cases, the construction of “the other” was evident. The female boss is portrayed as someone who internalized the patriarchal norms, which consider a certain esthetic as necessary. Her actions are understood to be shaped by her own compliance with the inessential esthetic demands put in place by someone else. Although the tone is less condemnatory in the example quote, the underlying logic is that there is a divide between the female bosses who “give in” to

persistent patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies and those who are presumed to resist them. This reinforces a distinction that legitimizes certain forms of femininity while pathologizing others, thereby producing the very “othering” it appears to critique.

### 6.1.2 | Reinstatement of Normative Views Through Individualistic Rhetoric

The discourses, although intended to shatter normative views about the implicit esthetic requirements of certain jobs, also reinstated the normative views about femininity and gender. Although the individualistic rhetoric of the non-makeup-wearing, non-dressing-up employee was intended to portray a progressive self, the undertones of normative views were still evident in the conversations.

I had permanent makeup done a long time ago because my genetics are lacking in the eyebrow department and I might do more of that, but honestly I am a bit more rough and tumble for a woman and don't like doing the makeup and dress up sort of stuff.

This quote, like several others, reveals how the redditors articulated their identities as empowered, self-governing, progressive women through their corporeal expressions and comments about their makeup routines or their lack thereof. Expressions such as being “more rough and tumble” or casually dismissing traditional femininity were used to position themselves as autonomous and unbothered by esthetic norms. Yet, these declarations coexisted with subtle forms of conformity, such as the use of virtual makeup or undergoing permanent makeup procedures to compensate for perceived genetic deficiencies. In these examples, there was a clear double entanglement of feminist and postfeminist ideas. While asserting autonomy from external pressures on their bodies, the redditors still participated in practices that aligned with dominant beauty ideals. This ambivalence shows how postfeminist sensibilities allow for the simultaneous rejection and reproduction of normative femininity.

### 6.1.3 | Rhetoric of Choice Feminism

The redditors commented on how decisions regarding wearing makeup/dressing up were something that they made as per their own choice. In such cases, their comments aligned with the rhetoric of choice feminism, where the act of choice, rather than the content, was the focus.

Last couple jobs I never wore makeup unless I dang well felt like it or it was special occasion....Then the days I did feel like it was an all-day ego boost which not gonna lie hearing “whoo girl!” from my female coworkers all dang day was awesome! The one that made my whole year was the gas station attendant I saw damn near every day couldn't get a word out past

“hi” and giggling like a 12 year old boy who just saw a tiddy.

When I used to teach I would always do my hair and makeup for the first 2–4 weeks of the school year.... My last year of teaching (last year) I was SO happy that all I needed to wear was mascara and some tinted brow gel.

These quotes show how the redditors constructed themselves as responsible, autonomous women who engage in esthetic practices on their own terms. The emphasis on indulging in esthetic practices only when they “feel like it” reinforces a postfeminist narrative of empowerment through choice. They discussed how they bore full responsibility for their actions and regulated themselves in their everyday lives. It is interesting to notice that even in such discourses, the ways in which female bodies are habituated to external regulation and subjection were evident. The redditor who stated that she only wears makeup on special occasions admitted that doing so gives her an “ego boost.” She described the pleasure of being noticed by others, highlighting an instance when even a typically silent gas station attendant acknowledged her appearance. These statements reveal how external validation remains a powerful form of social reward in the context of esthetic practices.

The statement by the former teacher, who stated that she only “needed” to wear mascara and brow gel, underlines that even minimal compliance with beauty norms is still framed as a necessity, rather than a complete rejection. This shows that even while asserting their agency, the redditors could not escape the expectations of the hegemonic beauty ideals. They are habituated to self-surveillance and cultural expectations of femininity.

For me, it’s 20 minutes of self-care, I listen to music or my daily podcast while I do my makeup... - my makeup is for me, and if doing makeup isn’t something that another woman enjoys or likes the look of, that’s fine too.

I don’t owe “prettiness” to anybody. If I wear makeup, it’s because I’m doing it for me.

The rhetoric of choice feminism was also evident in comments that referred to makeup or dressing up as self-care. For several women, wearing makeup or dressing up was part of their self-care, something that made them happy. Statements such as “my makeup is for me” and “I don’t owe prettiness to anybody” reflect a postfeminist sensibility in which individual choice is emphasized as the defining feature of empowerment. However, although this framing appears to resist patriarchal norms, it neglects the broader social context in which these choices are made. The idea that a woman chooses to put on makeup or dress up overlooks how such labor is socially rewarded and culturally incentivized. In this sense, the rhetoric of choice feminism operates as a framework that individualizes responsibility and obscures the structural pressures that shape feminine comportment.

#### 6.1.4 | Rhetoric of Feminist Consciousness

During all these conversations, the redditors were aware of the consequences of their choices. They understood that making inessential esthetic demands is a power play and a consequence of patriarchal power systems.

There’s a certain kind of authoritarian personality that like to dictate how others groom themselves, look, and behave, simply so the authoritarian can feel powerful. They generally tell stories about “productivity” or “appropriateness for the office” or “looking professional” that they use to justify their control fetish...“Appropriateness” and “looking professional” just mean “I want to be able to dictate what you wear.”

The shitty part is that there have been studies that show that there’s an advantage at work for women who do wear makeup, but I feel like that’s even more of a reason not to. It’s some patriarchal, misogynistic bullshit.

These examples show how inessential esthetic demands in the workplace were frequently interpreted as mechanisms of control rather than legitimate professional expectations. Employers who were described as having authoritarian personalities were perceived as using the language of professionalism and appropriateness to enforce arbitrary standards of appearance. These demands were also perceived as harassment and sexism. The rhetoric used by the redditors demonstrated a clear awareness of these underlying mechanisms leading to esthetic demands, as well as the consequences of their responses. One redditor explicitly frames the workplace advantage associated with wearing makeup as a manifestation of patriarchal and misogynistic norms and uses that recognition as a reason to refuse participating in it.

The tension between critiquing and participating in inessential esthetic demands reflects an ongoing struggle for the redditors. However, they did not present themselves as passive recipients of these demands. The discourses in the threads also included a range of potential responses to inessential esthetic demands—resistance, compliance/acquiescence, satirical compliance, and malicious compliance. The responses illustrate the complex negotiations women partake in while encountering the demands, balancing both their personal agencies and the realities of structural inequality. These potential responses are discussed below.

#### 6.2 | Potential Responses to Esthetic Demands Evidenced in the Hidden Transcripts

Here, the study explicates the potential responses to the unwelcomed inessential esthetic demands that were discursively developed by the redditors through their discussions. In the Reddit threads, the women were depicted neither as passive victims of patriarchal esthetic demands nor as omnipotent agents of resistance. Rather, the responses offered a spectrum of alternatives for women to negotiate with the ideals of femininity

imposed on them at their workplaces. The study found four such responses to inessential aesthetic demands, often substantiated by the use of metaphors. The metaphor of the clown, for instance, was the most common one found in the threads.

Up to you how you handle it. If my boss told me that dressing up like a clown everyday would increase my chances for better pay, you'd bet I'd do it.

Not surprisingly, the metaphors used also reaffirmed the othering that was discussed formerly in the article. The redditors were distancing themselves from the makeup-wearing, femininely dressing, supposedly nonliberal others by implicitly referring to those who conform to esthetic demands as clowns. The four potential responses to esthetic demands, as derived from the data, are discussed below.

### 6.2.1 | Resistance

The way women resist inessential esthetic demands might not have effects on the broader system. But considering only effective actions as acts of resistance disregards the potential of smaller acts, which might affect individual women and might pave the way for social change in the long run (Weitz 2001). When the term “resistance” is discussed in this study, it refers to acts that challenge ideologies but might not be immediately effective.

I finally gave up the full face after covid hit and I'm not going back. Why am I spending hundreds of \$\$\$ and hours of my life each year when men don't have to?... Now that I've pulled back the veil it's crazy to me. [Men] can show up to any occasion with a bare face and grays showing and no one bats an eyelid. If a woman does the same suddenly she looks sick, tired, or isn't taking care of herself. Nope, that's just her natural face/hair and there's nothing wrong with that.

The quote reflects explicit resistance to inessential esthetic labor, with the redditor deciding not to wear a “full face” of makeup postpandemic. Her decision is framed not only as a personal choice but also as an awakening—what she refers to as not “hiding behind a veil of makeup.” Her decision was substantiated by the observation that men can be themselves with their natural hair and faces, whereas women who do the same are considered unkempt and unprofessional. This recognition exposes the asymmetrical esthetic expectations in professional spaces. Although this frontstage resistance to esthetic demands was the most explicit way of expressing dissent, other expressions of dissent also emerged in the discourses, often taking more subtle or ambiguous forms. Some such forms of dissent were embedded in minimal or strategic compliance.

### 6.2.2 | Compliance (Acquiescence)

Every other day or so [boss] would make shitty comments to me about how I look tired or point out how

nice other female employees looked who wore makeup or send emails to the team about how it's important to look professional. So I started throwing some eye shadow on every day to get her to shut up.

The example quote illustrates a broader pattern of reluctant compliance or acquiescence, where esthetic demands are met not out of agreement, but as a pragmatic survival strategy. The redditors expressed clear dissatisfaction with persistent esthetic expectations—such as being shamed continuously for one's appearance, often in comparison to those of others. Although reluctant, these redditors had a realistic assessment of how they could survive in a work setting where they were asked to wear makeup or to dress up. The quote shows how a specific redditor responded by “throwing some eyeshadow on,” more as a tactic to silence the criticism through minimal, strategic accommodation of the inessential esthetic demands. While being compliant with the inessential esthetic demands, these employees did the bare minimum. This kind of acquiescence, as MacLeod (1991) argues, reflects a dual consciousness—a simultaneous awareness of the injustice of the demand and a practical adaptation to survive in that work environment. Such employees were complying without conceding. Compliance was not an endorsement of the norm but a tactical gesture.

### 6.2.3 | Satirical Compliance

If you really wanted to have fun with it, hit up a few secondhand stores and get some outrageous suit combos—real Farnsworth Bentley style—3-piece plaids and a pocket watch or something and the next time you see the VP just say “dressing down eh?”

The findings show how redditors challenged the esthetic demands by masquerading the beauty practices that were demanded of them. They strategically adopted exaggerated or performative forms of appearance that complied with inessential esthetic demands while simultaneously mocking them. This form of mimicry allows employees to resist without engaging in direct confrontation. Similar to Butler's (1990) example of drag as a form of preserving the sense of women's agency in oppressive settings, satirical compliance allowed female employees to undermine the power play of their employers by subverting the meaning of the oppressive esthetic demands (Dellinger and Williams 1997). Such acts reappropriate the very practices that are used to enforce conformity by exposing their absurdity and arbitrariness through satire. In the exemplary quote, the redditor suggested a way of complying with the esthetic demands in a satirical manner, that is, by wearing a flamboyant outfit. Satirical compliance mocks the inessential esthetic demand while technically complying. It highlights the creative ways in which employees navigate esthetic surveillance in the workplace.

### 6.2.4 | Malicious Compliance

I had two bosses harass me over not wearing makeup. It was a fucking call center....I basically told them the

truth, I'm allergic to mica powder and every single makeup I've tried sends me into horrid rashes and difficulty breathing. They kept pushing.... "The CEO is coming to see YOU, don't you want to be professional? For your career?".....I put on the cheapest, most itchy rash inducing make up I'd ever found right before our quarterly meeting with the CEO. The photos of me being given [an] award and shaking the big boss's hand include me being swollen from the neck up and wheezing, then I tried using my asthma inhaler, which didn't help. I had to use my EpiPen before photos were done, and be wheeled to an ambulance.... let's just say that I got a very nice "please don't sue us" bonus along with my award.

Although the former types of compliance dealt with challenging esthetic demands through acquiescence and satire, malicious compliance represented a more confrontational strategy. In these cases, the employees complied with the inessential esthetic demands in a way that intentionally damaged the employer. Here, the compliance was not only to mock or to subvert negative consequences but also to harm. This form of compliance exposed the coercive nature of esthetic labor by revealing its adverse consequences, sometimes with legal or reputational implications for the concerned organization. In the sample quote above, the employee exposed herself to the risk of a severe allergy attack just to let her employer literally pay for the esthetic demands made. The result of this compliance was not only personal harm but also institutional liability, resulting in the "please don't sue us" payout. This compliance is essentially a form of protest, which forces the organization to confront the tangible consequences of inessential esthetic demands.

## 7 | Substudy 2: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of Survey Data

To understand the public responses to inessential esthetic demands and their aftermaths, a survey was conducted. The findings from the analysis of the Reddit data shaped the survey questions, enabling us to further investigate how widespread and relatable these experiences are beyond the online discussions. The survey data were collected over the course of early to mid-2024. The survey was prepared using Qualtrics and was administered using the Prolific platform. Potential participants were screened for age (18–40), employment status (both full and part time), as well as sex (female) and gender (woman, including trans female/trans woman, nonbinary). The participants were all English speakers involved in non-customer-facing jobs, with a supervisor. None of them were students. They were all required to work from an office, either always or occasionally. A total of 5133 participants were found eligible as per the screening process. Of these 5133 participants who met the study's eligibility criteria for age, sex, employment status, and gender, 105 self-selected to participate in the survey. This sample comprised individuals who had experienced inessential esthetic demands, as confirmed through an eligibility question at the beginning of the survey. Although this subset offers

relevant insights, it is not representative of the entire eligible population but rather reflects only those who both met the eligibility criteria and reported experiencing inessential esthetic demands. With 105 complete responses, this sample has a sufficient number of observations to conduct the analysis. Furthermore, the inclusion of open-ended questions enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data for a detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The median time to complete the survey was 5.16 min. The participants received a payment of £11.96/hr. The study received Institutional Review Board approval.

The survey first explored how the participants ( $n = 105$ ) felt when they encountered the esthetic demands. The rest of the survey mostly included paraphrased statements from the Reddit threads with questions on whether the participants agree with or can relate to the experiences mentioned in the statements. Additionally, the participants were also asked how they actually responded to the esthetic demands in their workplaces so as to subsequently inquire about the motivations and the perceived consequences of the responses. They were also asked about their current employment status with the concerned company and whether they ever reported the demands to a higher authority or HR. Further details such as the industry, job profile, age, education level, relationship status, and country of residence were also collected.

The quantitative exploration of the survey data specifically focused on the links between the public responses of women subjected to requests to wear makeup and their individual feelings with respect to such requests. The quantitative analysis is developed around specific survey queries, whose answers can be summarized in dummy variables. A logistic model was implemented to explore the data, where three sets of dependent variables were alternatively used, namely: (i) reactions to esthetic demands, (ii) the effects of the responses, and (iii) the reporting of esthetic demands to higher authorities or HR. The first group of dummies includes indicators for the discursive practices identified as "resistance," "compliance/acquiescence," "malicious compliance," and "satirical compliance"; the second group captures whether the effects of individual responses led to quitting the job or bosses stopping making esthetic demands; finally, the third dependent variable captures whether women reported bosses' esthetic demands to HR. Table 2 summarizes the frequencies of these variables.

As independent variables, the individual women's answers regarding their feelings at the time of receiving esthetic demands were employed, which included "uncomfortable," "pressured," and "angry." These are also dichotomous variables indicating the predominant feeling of each survey respondent. The logit model allowed estimating the probability that a certain outcome summarized in Table 3 is observed in relation to the predominant feeling of women receiving esthetic demands. Hence, although purely descriptive in nature, this approach allowed us to investigate whether any statistical relationship occurred between women's feelings and their subsequent responses or behavior. Tables 3–5 report the logit estimates, the descriptive statistics, and the matrix of correlation coefficients, respectively.

## 8 | Findings From Analyses of Survey Data—Public Responses

As discussed in the methodology section, the survey was intended to explore the public responses of women who received inessential esthetic demands. The proportion of female bosses appeared to be higher by a small majority of 54.3% in the survey. A majority of the participants with female bosses (66.7%)

**TABLE 2** | Frequencies of discursive practices, response effects, and reporting.

	<i>n</i>	%
Discursive practices		
Compliance		
No	19	18.1
Yes	86	81.9
Resistance		
No	94	89.5
Yes	11	10.5
Malicious compliance		
No	74	70.5
Yes	31	29.5
Satirical compliance		
No	73	69.5
Yes	32	30.5
Response effect		
Quit		
No	50	47.6
Yes	55	52.4
Stopped		
No	70	66.7
Yes	35	33.3
Report to HR		
No	10	9.5
Yes	95	90.5

Note: Author's elaboration based on 105 survey respondents.

**TABLE 3** | Logit estimates.

	Uncomfortable			Pressured			Angry		
	(1) Coef.	[95% CI]		(2) Coef.	[95% CI]		(3) Coef.	[95% CI]	
Compliance	−0.034 (0.526)	<i>−1.065</i>	<i>0.100</i>	0.897 (0.604)	<i>−0.288</i>	<i>2.081</i>	<i>−1.248*</i> (0.640)	<i>−2.501</i>	<i>0.006</i>
Resistance	−1.010 (0.810)	<i>−2.597</i>	<i>0.577</i>	−0.442 (0.710)	<i>−1.833</i>	<i>0.949</i>	<i>2.713***</i> (0.722)	<i>1.299</i>	<i>4.128</i>
Malicious compliance	0.560 (0.438)	<i>−0.319</i>	<i>1.398</i>	−0.022 (0.446)	<i>−0.896</i>	<i>0.851</i>	0.477 (0.615)	<i>−0.729</i>	<i>1.682</i>
Satirical compliance	<i>1.157***</i> (0.437)	<i>0.358</i>	<i>2.093</i>	<i>−1.530***</i> (0.539)	<i>−2.588</i>	<i>−0.473</i>	−0.019 (0.641)	<i>−1.276</i>	<i>1.238</i>
Quit	0.750* (0.391)	<i>0.017</i>	<i>1.517</i>	−0.219 (0.389)	<i>−0.981</i>	<i>0.543</i>	0.457 (0.588)	<i>−0.695</i>	<i>1.61</i>
Stopped	0.565 (0.417)	<i>−0.253</i>	<i>1.383</i>	0.511 (0.416)	<i>−0.304</i>	<i>1.326</i>	0.162 (0.637)	<i>−1.086</i>	<i>1.41</i>
Report to HR	0.631 (0.668)	<i>−1.9401</i>	<i>0.679</i>	−1.748 (1.075)	<i>−0.359</i>	<i>3.854</i>	<i>1.293*</i> (0.767)	<i>−2.796</i>	<i>0.21</i>

Note: Significance levels: \*\*\**p* < 0.01, \*\**p* < 0.05, \**p* < 0.1. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Confidence intervals are reported in italics. The number of observations is 105.

believed that the bosses were making esthetic demands with good intentions; that is, because they believed that inessential esthetic labor is advantageous for the concerned employees. Only 19.3% of the participants mentioned that female bosses who make inessential esthetic demands are insecure about their own looks. A majority of the responses confirmed the rhetoric of choice feminism and feminist consciousness. For example, 75.2% of participants stated that they wear only a little makeup and only when it is their personal choice, reflecting a choice feminist perspective. Additionally, 76.2% expressed that being asked by a boss to wear makeup or dress up is a patriarchal imposition, indicating feminist consciousness. At the same time, normative views were also reinforced through individualistic rhetoric—for instance, 71.4% mentioned wearing a small amount of makeup simply to appear presentable.

A total of 90.5% of the participants mentioned that they did not report the esthetic demands to a higher authority or human resources (HR). The analysis of the open-ended responses showed the reasons behind not reporting to be “complexity of reporting,” “negative perceptions about HR,” “fear and insecurity,” “trivialization of the esthetic demands,” and “self-reliance in conflict resolution.” See Table 6 for a summary of the themes identified from said responses. Although 61.9% of the participants mentioned that they have resisted inessential esthetic demands, only 18.1% mentioned that they resisted at all times.

**TABLE 4** | Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Compliance	105	0.819	0.387	0	1
Resistance	105	0.105	0.308	0	1
Malicious compliance	105	0.295	0.458	0	1
Satirical compliance	105	0.305	0.463	0	1
Quit	105	0.524	0.502	0	1
Stopped	105	0.333	0.474	0	1
Reporting to HR	105	0.905	0.295	0	1
Uncomfortable	105	0.362	0.483	0	1
Pressured	105	0.362	0.483	0	1
Angry	105	0.124	0.331	0	1

**TABLE 5** | Correlation matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Compliance	1.00									
2	Resistance	-0.16	1.00								
3	Malicious compliance	-0.08	0.12	1.00							
4	Satirical compliance	-0.12	0.18	0.34	1.00						
5	Quit	0.20	-0.05	-0.09	-0.07	1.00					
6	Stopped	-0.24	0.02	0.07	0.10	-0.74	1.00				
7	Reported to HR	0.10	-0.10	0.00	0.07	-0.05	0.09	1.00			
8	Uncomfortable	-0.01	-0.13	0.12	0.28	0.08	0.06	-0.09	1.00		
9	Pressured	0.15	-0.06	-0.01	-0.28	-0.15	0.06	0.18	-0.57	1.00	
10	Angry	-0.20	0.44	0.07	0.00	0.01	-0.02	-0.17	-0.28	-0.28	1.00

**TABLE 6** | Themes pertaining to not reporting the esthetic demands to HR or a higher authority as identified from open-ended survey data.

Themes	Subthemes	Exemplar quotes
Complexity of reporting	Lack of HR department	“This was a job where he was the only person I was working for and reporting to. There was no formal HR department”
	Cumbersomeness of reporting practices	“I did not want to go through the trouble of processing the complaint through HR because I knew it would be time-consuming”
Negative perceptions about HR	HR is ineffective	“Because others had reported similar situations and worse and HR did nothing, so I didn’t think it was worth the hassle”
	HR cannot be trusted	“Because HR doesn’t work for the employee it works for the management, so it is always pointless to complain”
Fear and insecurity	Fear of retaliation	“My boss is a bully to everyone so it wouldn’t help to report her”
	Fear of negative perceptions by others	“I was worried about what they would say”
Trivialization of the esthetic demands	Perceived lack of importance of the issue	“It seemed trivial”
	Perceived normality of esthetic demands	“It was the norm so I knew HR wouldn’t do anything”
Self-reliance in conflict resolution	Intention to leave the company soon	“Knew I was going to leave the company as soon as I could regardless so I didn’t see the point”
	Handling issues personally	“Because it is something that I can sort out without getting any higher up involved”

The analysis of the open-ended responses showed the reasons behind the resistance to be similar to those found during Substudy 1. The analysis showed that the participants resisted due to “lack of relevance of makeup,” “personal choice not to wear makeup,” “perceptions of power play,” and “unnecessariness of esthetic demands.” See Table 7 for a summary of the identified themes.

The regression analysis showed a significant relationship between feeling angry and not complying with the esthetic demands. Furthermore, participants who felt angry also showed a very significant probability of resisting makeup demands. These findings suggest that anger might serve as a motivation for challenging inessential esthetic demands in real workplaces. The satirical responses were disconnected from feeling angry but had a significant positive relationship with feeling uncomfortable and

a significant negative relationship with feeling pressured. These findings could mean that satire may function as a coping strategy when discomfort is present but when the pressure felt is low. The malicious responses were idiosyncratic and not explained by any of the aforementioned feelings, suggesting that they might stem from other individual or context-specific factors. This was opposite to our expectations, as we expected a relationship between malicious compliance and anger, considering how malicious compliance is aggressive in nature. Prior research has shown how anger involves a tendency to actively remedy an undesired situation, potentially by aggressive means and retaliation (Averill 1982; Van Doorn et al. 2014).

Relatedly, women who felt uncomfortable were more likely to quit their jobs. Women who felt angry were found to be more likely to report the esthetic demands to HR, which was in line

**TABLE 7** | Themes pertaining to rejection of esthetic demands as identified from open-ended survey data.

Exemplar quotes	Themes	Discursive practices from Substudy 1 corresponding to themes
<p>“It is unreasonable and rude. I will always look presentable but do not need to be dictated to”</p> <p>“I was teaching young children life skills. So it was quite ironical to put on makeup and at the same time teach kids about Kermit the frog who should accept them self as they are”</p>	Lack of relevance of makeup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualistic rhetoric</li> <li>• Feminist consciousness</li> </ul>
<p>“It was to wear bright red lipstick and I didn’t feel it was necessary, I preferred a more natural glossy look”</p>	Personal choice to not wear makeup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice feminism</li> <li>• Construction of the “other”</li> </ul>
<p>“... I didn’t wear any makeup at all to work. Sorry, that’s what my face looks like. I’m not going to pretend that I don’t have dark under eyes just to make you feel better”</p>	Perception of power play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construction of the “other”</li> <li>• Feminist consciousness</li> </ul>
<p>“My boss was not a nice person in general and was incredibly misogynistic. I knew even if I conformed he would still find something unsatisfactory and keep prodding at my confidence”</p>	“Because she has no right to tell me what to do that’s not in my job description”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feminist consciousness</li> <li>• Individualistic rhetoric</li> </ul>
<p>“I shouldn’t be receiving any comments whatsoever about my appearance, as long as my hygiene is appropriate, then how I look should not be a question”</p>	Unnecessariness of esthetic demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feminist consciousness</li> <li>• Individualistic rhetoric</li> </ul>

with our expectations based on prior literature, which characterizes anger as an outward-focused emotion that motivates blaming others (Van Doorn et al. 2014). The employees who were angry with the esthetic demands, as expected, thus expressed strong dissatisfaction and displeasure by reporting to HR (Deffenbacher 2011). Prior research has found how a decrease in positive feelings about work could result in withdrawal and quitting the organization (Branch et al. 2013). This could explain our results, which showed that women who felt uncomfortable were more likely to quit their jobs. We discuss these quantitative exploratory findings further in the “discussion” section, where we also integrate insights from the qualitative section.

## 9 | Discussion

Substudy 1 of this investigation addresses the first research question concerning the hidden transcripts in Reddit discussions about employers’ inessential esthetic demands. It identifies four core discursive practices employed by redditors: “construction of the ‘Other,’” “reinstatement of normative views through individualistic rhetoric,” “rhetoric of choice feminism,” and “rhetoric of feminist consciousness.” These discourses gave rise to various forms of responses, including resistance, compliance/acquiescence, malicious compliance, and satirical compliance. Together, these findings illustrate how redditors engage in subversive and counter-hegemonic narratives, that is, hidden transcripts, for critiquing and challenging esthetic demands that are deemed inessential.

Although employee voices can collectively challenge management (Wilkinson and Fay 2011), this study investigates individual forms of routine resistance to employers’ esthetic demands. Prior literature mainly discusses how employees formally voice their concerns within the organization. This study analyzed the data to find how the Reddit threads discussed the esthetic demands, both in terms of the content and the discursive practices involved. Examining discourses about employers’ esthetic demands is imperative, because the discourses not only describe the gendered nature of the demands but also give visibility to the hegemonic masculinity (Gherardi and Poggio 2001) underlying such demands in workplaces. Although there are studies (e.g., Conway et al. 2019; Neu et al. 2020; Ravazzani and Mazzei 2018) that explored how employees informally vent through social media such as X (formerly known as Twitter), there is not much research on how female employees voice their concerns informally in anonymous media where their expressions of dissent most likely will not have consequences that extend beyond exercising their right to speak and discussing their options among other like-minded media users. The online discourses could, in turn, pave the way to alter the gender asymmetry involved in everyday activities at workplaces, such as not/putting on makeup and not/dressing up.

Our findings extend research on esthetic labor by demonstrating that such demands are not limited to customer-facing jobs (e.g., Warhurst and Nickson 2020; Nickson 2022), but permeate organizational contexts where appearance has no direct commercial function. This reinforces arguments suggesting that like other social practices that constitute gender regimes, inessential

esthetic demands also propagate gendering in workplaces (Ortlieb and Sieben 2019) regardless of job roles or relevance (Hollis et al. 2021). We find that redditors traced the materialization of esthetic demands to patriarchal organizational structures and practices, which maintain the normative co-optation of female bodies and agencies in workplaces (Huber 2022). Unlike paid esthetic labor, where expectations are explicit and compensated (Mears 2014), inessential esthetic demands are irrelevant and unpaid. This conceptual expansion demonstrates the need to reconceptualize esthetic labor beyond its traditional boundaries in organizational scholarship.

The findings indicate how displaced dissent, which is dissent expressed to an extraorganizational audience in online forums such as r/antiwork, discursively creates responses to esthetic demands made at workplaces. They reveal that women privately navigate and respond to gendered esthetic demands through various micropractices, including indifferent compliance, active resistance through direct refusal to comply, malicious compliance that harms the employer's reputation or operations, and satirical compliance that uses humor to expose the absurdity of such expectations. In this manner, they are contesting the discriminative ideologies that are embedded in the employers' esthetic demands and aiming to denormalize them (Butler 2011; Handajani 2022). However, even these redditors who claim to be "feminist conscious" and who advocate for "choice feminism" are not averse to othering women who are different from themselves. In line with prior critiques of "choice rhetoric," participants emphasized autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing what is considered presentable or appropriately feminine at work (Kwan and Trautner 2009). By othering and through their individualistic rhetoric, they essentially reinstate the very normative views that they claim to limit. By evidencing how women both oppose and reproduce these norms, our study challenges the traditional view of resistance as purely subversive (Weitz 2001) and shows how hidden transcripts often contain contradictions that sustain the very gender expectations they seek to challenge.

Substudy 2 responds to the second research question, which explores whether these hidden transcripts surface in real-world workplace settings and what their consequences are. We find that all the discursive practices identified during Substudy 1 were also reflected in the survey responses. However, the discursive practices that were largely reflected were those related to the reinstatement of normative views through individualistic rhetoric, choice feminism, and feminist consciousness. In terms of outcomes, only a small number of the participants resisted the esthetic demands in real life at all times. A majority of the participants did not report the esthetic demands to HR, citing reasons such as the complexity of reporting processes, negative perceptions of HR, fear and insecurity, and a preference for self-managed conflict resolution. A potential reason for not reporting could be that, while discussing resistance and advocating it in an online forum such as Reddit might act as a "safety valve" (Fleming 2013) for managing the frustration of employees, it might not be a feasible solution in real life to do so, as it might endanger their jobs (Courpasson 2017), relationships, or reputation within the company. The theme "fear and insecurity," which was identified in connection with the question about reporting esthetic demands to HR, supports this supposition.

These findings align with research showing that inessential esthetic regulation, however trivialized, functions as a disciplining mechanism in workplaces. Even when women perceive such demands as minor, the resulting emotional burden (anger, discomfort, pressure) reflects the embodied costs of such gendered expectations at workplaces (Åberg et al. 2020). Our data highlight how the informal nature of inessential esthetic demands reduces their legitimacy as reportable mistreatment (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2008), positioning women to navigate individually what is structurally produced.

The other themes identified during Substudy 2 (see Table 6) unsurprisingly coincide with prior literature on complaints about bullying. D'Cruz and Noronha (2010) discuss how HR's reluctance or inability to address complaints of workplace bullying might leave the employee dissatisfied with HR. This is similar to the negative perceptions the participants had about HR's potential in resolving their complaints. The positional power and influence of the boss also affect the satisfactory resolution of the matter (Vickers 2006). The fact that some organizations did not even have an HR department or had difficult grievance redressal processes also contributed to the low reporting count.

Instead of reporting to HR, some employees took the matter into their own hands by exiting. This is in line with the literature on unhealthy organizational cultures, which states that employees who feel that they are mistreated might lose trust in those who lead and exit the organization (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2008). Although the findings show that inessential esthetic demands might invoke some reactions that are similar to those incurred during bullying and mistreatment, some participants trivialized the demands themselves. This is surprising, as one would expect HR or the organization to be the one trivializing or legitimizing the demands (Harrington et al. 2015; Thirlwall 2015). Instead, the study shows that when it comes to inessential esthetic demands, the employees themselves tend to trivialize their complaints rather than report to HR.

Additionally, emotional reactions to esthetic demands, such as anger, pressure, and discomfort, were strongly linked to specific outcomes, including resistance, noncompliance, reporting to HR, engaging in satirical compliance, and even quitting their jobs. The findings from the regression analyses show that the participants who felt angry were most likely to report to HR as well as to resist and not comply. Expressions of anger are associated with the potential for retaliation (Allred et al. 1997). It is possible that this need for retaliation might prompt harsher responses such as downright resistance, noncompliance, and filing complaints. Contrarily, the participants who felt uncomfortable were more prone to quitting their jobs and making satirical responses. This is an interesting finding that would add to the literature on the role of subversive humor against sexism.

Researchers in other social science disciplines have already explored the role of humor in the form of jokes, satire, and caricatures as a tool to promote reflection on situations that are unjust (Holmes and Marra 2002). It is likely that employees experiencing discomfort would choose a less confrontational approach, such as satirical compliance or quitting the job, rather than confronting the bosses or approaching HR. Different from

them, the participants who felt pressured did not respond satirically. One potential reason for this finding could be that feeling pressured brings about a sense of urgency or denotes high stakes. In such situations, it is likely that employees are not in a position to craft satirical responses. In summary, the regression analysis shows that anger is an important indicator of the employees' responses to esthetic demands and the further steps taken. Although feelings of discomfort and pressure also influence satirical compliance, neither of them is related to any other type of response. Feelings of anger and discomfort also have an aftermath, in the form of reporting to HR and quitting, but feeling pressured was not associated with either of them.

## 10 | Implications and Limitations

By integrating insights from organizational studies and literature on esthetic labor, this study advances understanding of how gendered power operates through mundane workplace interactions. Prior work has largely conceptualized esthetic labor as commercially essential (Cutcher and Achtel 2017; Nickson et al. 2012). In contrast, this study shows that even when esthetic practices do not impact organizational productivity, they are leveraged as tools of gendered governance. Recognition of inessential esthetic demands as a theoretical notion thus reveals a new terrain in the study of appearance-based inequality, which hinges on the normalization of female esthetic labor as unpaid and expected.

Furthermore, the analysis of the Reddit threads points to the lack of employee voice in organizations when it comes to inessential demands. One main implication of the study is that it identifies the need for exploring the barriers to employee voices at the organizational level. For instance, the study illustrates the role played by social media in the micro-emancipation of women from gendering practices at workplaces (Gherardi and Poggio 2001). Organizations can leverage social networks, both online and offline, as potential platforms for employees to voice their concerns. Likewise, this study identifies that the destabilization of the power underlying esthetic demands of employers is achieved through micropractices of dissent. The study thus reminds organizational researchers not to overlook the potential of everyday practices or small actions.

By identifying the power play underlying something as personal as one's makeup/dressing routine and by exploring the barriers to female employees' voicing of dissent, one can identify the norms that no longer serve the employees or the organizations. Subsequent organizational policies can change such situations. Lastly, some of the prior work on resistance considers anything but direct resistance as compliance and subsequently as inconsequential (Du Gay and Salaman 1992). The findings of this study show that not all compliance is inconsequential. Rather, some unobtrusive, hidden, indirect forms of compliance, such as malicious compliance, are more consequential than direct resistance. This study thus also adds to the stream of literature which refuses to consider compliance and resistance as absolute categories with "either-or" memberships (Ybema and Horvers 2017).

In fact, this study contributes to multiple streams of literature, with its primary contribution situated within the esthetic labor

literature. By defining, identifying, and analyzing a new variant, that is, "inessential esthetic demands," it expands the scope of esthetic labor beyond traditionally examined customer-facing roles. Additionally, the study advances scholarship on workplace resistance and organizational dissent by exploring both covert (subversive) and overt (direct) forms of opposition. Through its analysis of the discursive strategies embedded in hidden transcripts, the study also engages with and contributes to the literature on postfeminism, choice feminism, and feminist organizational studies. Finally, by illustrating the gendered nature of inessential esthetic demands, the research builds on existing work concerning gender dynamics within organizational contexts.

Indeed, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, although the collected data are deep enough to warrant the analysis and the identification of the hidden transcripts, social media data from other platforms such as X or Bluesky could extend the findings. Secondly, the study explores how redditors discuss esthetic demands and develop responses to them and how these responses play out in real-life organizational settings. However, the study does not track if the redditors themselves followed through on the responses they discussed in the online forum. Third, as is common in an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, our approach combined qualitative and quantitative components, but with a stronger emphasis on the qualitative part. The intention was not to compare the two samples statistically but rather to assess whether the insights that emerged from the Reddit data also apply in a context where the participants' responses to inessential esthetic demands are not expressed under the same conditions of anonymity. The central point of alignment between the Reddit participants and the survey respondents is that both groups comprise women who have experienced and responded to inessential esthetic demands in workplaces. The small sample size of the quantitative part ( $n = 105$ ) limits the statistical power of the logistic regression analyses and hence should be regarded as preliminary and exploratory. Future research could build on this dataset and strengthen the generalizability of these findings by examining the identified practices, responses, and consequences with a larger quantitative dataset. Examining the responses and discursive practices pertaining to esthetic demands in specific organizations will also enhance the situatedness of the findings.

## 11 | Conclusion

This study addresses a notable gap in organizational studies, where topics such as makeup and dress-up are often dismissed as vain and frivolous (Lakoff and Scherr 1984; Dellinger and Williams 1997). Furthermore, no prior study in organizational studies has explored social media as an avenue for resistance to esthetic demands. Through Substudy 1, we find hidden transcripts of how r/antiwork redditors challenge the microprocesses of power behind esthetic demands. Substudy 2 follows up with a small-scale survey, revealing that the identified hidden transcripts do manifest in real workplaces. These transcripts subsequently shape responses such as resistance and different forms of compliance, as well as result in consequences such as reporting to HR or quitting. We also identify how emotions such as anger, discomfort, and feeling pressured influence said responses and

consequences. Together, the findings of this study provide a foundational overview on the topic of how gendered inessential esthetic demands are dissented against both online and in real-life workplaces. Addressing gendered practices in work life, such as inessential esthetic demands, is essential to disrupting the tactics that reinforce gender discrimination in workplaces.

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## Ethics Statement

The study has received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of LUISS Guido Carli University.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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