


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Product, equipment, uniform: Material environment and the consumption of work in New Delhi, India

Garima Jaju 

Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom
Email: gj299@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

The article focuses on how low and lower-middle class youth employed in new private sector jobs in the booming service economy in Indian cities engage with the material environment of their workplace, and how, through their ‘aesthetic scrutiny’ of its materiality, come to ‘consume’ work. The setting is the store floor of a fast-expanding organized retail company, called Spexy, that sells budget eyewear products. Through ethnographic elaboration, the article follows how the Spexy staff deride the ‘un-branded’ products, ‘un-technical’ equipment, and ‘un-professional’ uniforms at their workplace. The company, as constituted of these ‘poor’ materials, is mocked for failing in its ‘company-ness’ and branded ‘fake’. The material environment of the workplace provides a platform for the articulation of larger configurations of ‘feelings’ the youth seek to give and get through formal employment in a private company. These articulations, in turn, reveal larger sociocultural valuations regarding ideas of social mobility and visibility in contemporary India where there is a strong interest in brand regimes and brand value hierarchies, fixation with technological education and expertise, and attraction towards a corporate work culture in the private sector, and, concomitantly, a strong desire amongst the store staff to craft branded, technical, and professional work identities. By putting the scholarship on work and consumption in dialogue, the article demonstrates how bottom-rung urban workers look expectantly to the material environment of company work to fulfil these desires.

Keywords: Work; consumerism; materiality; identity; service economy

Introduction

Following the post-liberalization boom in the ‘new service economy’ (Basole et al. 2018) in India, there has been an increasing sociocultural dominance

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of the image of the ‘new age professional’. This category of the ‘professional’ serves both as a ‘discursive construct’ and a ‘figure of personhood’ (Searle 2013: 274). Different from the old elite moneyed class, businessmen, government servants, and the urban poor, the ‘professional’ is a value-laden category of people described as having white collar jobs with private companies, high salaries, impressive educational qualifications, proficiency in English, ‘smart’ dress sense, new consumerist lifestyles, social prestige, and a ‘global’ outlook (Searle 2013, Radhakrishnan 2011, Mankekar and Gupta 2017, Hebbar and Kaur 2021). Beyond the elite class of professionals that dominates the propagated images of new middle-class success and social mobility found in the news and public media, there are also people working precariously, with low skills and earning low salaries, in shopping malls, cafes, gyms, parlours, delivery services, or call centres who too operate under the aspirational category of the ‘professional’, with its promise of ‘respectability, visibility and legitimacy’ (Bardalai 2021; also see Gooptu 2009, 2013a, 2013b, Baas and Cayla 2020, Kaur and Sundar 2016), association with the upwardly mobile middle classes, and new expressions of consumer citizenship (Lukose 2009). They are, as Lukose (2009: 3) notes about her low- and lower-middle class informants, ‘on the margins of its (liberalization’s) dominant articulations yet fully formed by its structures of aspiration and opportunity’.

In this article, I study the transforming subjectivities of young, aspirational women and men from low-income households attempting social mobility and visibility through participation in new types of jobs with private companies at the bottom end of the service economy—jobs that are ‘new’ and ‘professional’ in that they are distinct from work in agriculture, industry, forms of informal service work, or manual labour, and in terms of their job titles, required skills, salary and mode of pay, work organization, and social image, especially its tenuous yet enduring association with aspirational urban ‘modernity’. I draw on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with youth working in an organized retail company that I call Spexy. The company sells heavily discounted, low-quality eyewear products like sunglasses, prescription glasses, and contact lenses for middle-class consumers who are budget minded but also have a preference for shopping in organized retail company stores rather than flea markets or independent showrooms or shops. While Spexy is a young and fast-expanding company with a presence in most of the malls and high streets of Indian metropolises, it is not yet counted in the top-ranking corporate conglomerates in organized retail in the country today. My informants are non-elite service economy professionals employed as salespeople, optometrists, and store managers in the retail outlets of this budget eyewear company. I spent my field study days ‘hanging out’ with the store staff in the company’s various stores across the capital of New Delhi. Through casual conversations, joking, gossiping, complaining, chatting on WhatsApp, as well as observing off-the-cuff remarks, side-glances, smirks, and whispered utterances, I aimed to understand their social valuations, fears, aspirations, and world views, as articulated at the site of work.

I draw attention to the way in which the Spexy workers engage with the material environment of their workspace—the retail store. I note that the

emphasis of the scholarship on work in the service economy has been on the body and emotions of the worker—prominently, its commoditization through demands of ‘embodied labour’ (McDowell 2009) and ‘managed emotions’ (Hochschild 1983). Recent scholarship has focused on service workers’ grooming and fitness, possessing or cultivating the ‘right look’, personality development, conversation skills, English language practice, personal stress management, etiquette training, ability to please, and so on (Gooptu 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Baas and Cayla 2020, Mankekar and Gupta 2017, Bardalai 2021, Pettinger 2011). I contend that the worker’s relation to the material environment of service-based work remains underexplored (for an exception, see Pettinger 2006). Research on work in other sectors, particularly industrial work, has substantially engaged with the materiality of the workplace and the workers’ place in it, variously analysing the relation between the worker, the machine, and other factory tools and equipment.¹ In contrast, since it is the case that service work does not produce any tangible commodities and relies instead on interactive skills and embodied emotional performances to produce intangible informational, cultural, and/or affective exchanges, it is seen as involving ‘immaterial labour’, as conceptualized by Hardt and Negri (2000). The trend in the scholarship has therefore been to centre the body and emotions of the worker, seen as crucial to producing these exchanges, and decentre the material, seen as less relevant to the affective or ‘immaterial labour’ of service work.²

While this focus on the body and emotions of the worker has been immensely productive in advancing understanding of service work, we lose a crucial part of the story when we disregard the material environment of service work. The question is not whether the work itself produces material artefacts, but that, irrespective of it, the materials that nevertheless surround the worker and which are used to do the work ‘matter’ significantly to the experience of work. The point of ‘mattering’ is now well established in material culture studies. Mary Douglas with Baron Isherwood (1979) was amongst the first to challenge the view of things as simply inert objects, instead proposing that they be viewed as social actors in their own right, constituting social life, and vice-versa. In a reciprocal relation, people and materials exert power over each other, and in so doing define each other—that is, materials and people do not just interact, they co-constitute one another.³

¹ The scholarship on the material environment of industrial work has productively pursued questions of alienation, discipline, power, gender, modernity, etc. to considerably enhance academic understanding of the experience of industrial work and the identity of the worker, as the worker and the material environment come to co-constitute one another. See, for example, Braverman 1974, Carrier 1992, Ong 1987, Cross 2012.

² The material environment, when considered in the scholarship on service work, has been mostly done in the limited way of viewing the material as a tool of disciplining, manipulating, and managing the body and emotions at work (Hochschild 1983, McDowell 2009, Wolkowitz 2006).

³ Appadurai (1988: 1 and 31, respectively) has famously argued that things ‘like persons, have social lives’ and engagement with them is ‘eminently social, relational and active rather than private, atomic, or passive’. Daniel Miller (1987, 1998) provides an extensive review of this scholarship

In the context of work, then, the worker's body and emotions inevitably entangle with the matter and technologies at work, and the worker's 'immaterial labour' is necessarily produced with correlates in the material world (Clough 2007; see also Wilkie 2011). I therefore take seriously the materiality of the 'immaterial labour' of service work, and centre it as an important site of study. Further, following Daniel Miller's (1998) writings on material cultures, I study my informants' material engagements as creating important 'expressive environments' that significantly shape and reflect their experience of work, the workplace, and their larger sense of self (also see Miller 2005).

In the article, I focus on Spexy store staff's engagement with the displayed eyewear products, eye-testing equipment, and store uniform. A vast expanse of materials—including chairs, desks, display screens, the music system, product cleaning liquids, and flexi posters—make up the material constitution of their daily workspace. While this composite material sphere shapes the totality of the material experience of the Spexy store floor, I choose to focus on the products, equipment, and uniform because they dominate the staff's material engagements, inviting their active and strong reflections.

For clarity, the domain of materiality is not treated here in opposition to the immaterial, but rather as inextricably linked to various affective fields of emotions, feelings, subjectivities, and imaginings. Indeed, materials matter precisely because of the manner in which the immaterial is 'manifest, reconfirmed, even constituted' (Copeman and Quack 2015: 43) through 'material enactment and demonstration' (Copeman and Quack 2015: 41; also see Maqsood 2014). Nakassis (2012, 2016) in his ethnography of college-going youth in South India demonstrates how the very specific materiality of the counterfeit goods produced and consumed facilitate the youth's desires to gain status within peer groups. So, in fact, the question at hand is: what immaterial force fields do materials animate? In this article, I note how the staff's engagement with each of the materials is tied to specific 'regimes of value' that index valuable forms of personhoods and identities (Nakassis and Searle 2013). 'Social value projects', Nakassis and Searle (2013: 179) write, are 'reflexive attempts by social actors' to access and embody certain forms of social value, importantly by 'linking particular repertoires of signs to particular social identities' (Searle 2013: 178). I discuss how it is branded products, technical equipment, and professional uniforms that are of value to the workers, as it is 'feelings' of 'branded-ness', 'technical-ness', and 'professional-ness' that the workers seek to cultivate through their employment as new age professionals in a private sector company. I develop the analytic of consumption to show how the store staff come to 'consume' work through its materiality, not as consumers or entrepreneurs but as workers. I find that the staff express strong disappointment in finding Spexy's material environment to be 'un-branded', 'un-technical', and 'un-professional', which causes them to label the company 'fake'. The alleged fakeness of the company puts their own status as 'professionals' in jeopardy, and their experience of participation

and makes an emphatic case for paying serious scholarly attention to how much 'materials matter' and co-constitute social life, often in ways that may not be immediately obvious.

in the new economy comes to be marked by an acute sense of being ‘almost but not quite’. The idealized image of the ‘real’ professional proves to be a ‘cruel’ fantasy (Berlant 2011).

Organized retail, Spexy, and the ‘budget professional’

The growth of the service economy subsector of organized retail has introduced shopping malls, hypermarkets and supermarkets, department stores, and large specialty retailers to the Indian consumerist landscape. In 1999, India had only three shopping malls (noted in Srivastava 2015), and today its numbers run into thousands, with shopping malls proliferating even in tier two and three cities, with large advertisement hoardings for branded consumer goods and other consumer services dotting the cityscapes. Stores in organized retail are staffed with ‘trained professionals’ who provide customer service with the stated aim of delivering a holistic and satisfying retail experience. Alongside, there has been a boom in the variety of products available. Prominent has been the introduction of a high level of brand consciousness in clothing, accessories, footwear, electronics, food, and even groceries. The growth in the organized retail sector, and the service economy at large, is closely linked to the swelling size of the new and aspirational Indian middle class and the new consumer cultures they actively participate in, driven by their ‘global imaginaries and cosmopolitan aspirations’ (Brosius 2010: 9). In his ethnography of slum dwellers in Delhi, Ghertner (2015) notes how even the poor cite the city’s multiplying shopping malls (many of which are built upon demolishing their ‘illegal’ homes) as impressive aesthetic markers of the future-orientation of the city that is fast becoming ‘world-class’, and which they hope to become a part of some day. Importantly, organized retail has come to represent a ‘mentality’ different from traditional retail (Srivastava 2015). Often classified in simple binary terms, organized retail is seen as representing ‘high-class’ and ‘modernity’, while unorganized retail is looked down on as ‘backward’ and ‘traditional’, marked by its ‘local’ practices of haggling, price consciousness, lack of ‘culture’, and poor attention to the overall aesthetics of the shopping ‘experience’ (Gooptu 2009).

More specifically, the eyewear retail market in India, for longer and to a greater extent than the market for other consumer products like clothes, shoes, or accessories, has remained dominated by local flea markets, or local *kinara* (around-the-corner) shops—stores attached to eye-care centres or hospitals, owner-managed eyewear boutiques and showrooms. Also, eyewear products were largely bought and sold for reasons of eye-care or to correct vision defects. However, this has been changing rapidly over the past few years. Fashion and style have been prominently introduced as important vectors in the consumption of eyewear. Now, more than ever before, eyewear products (not just sunglasses, but also prescription glasses and contact lenses) are available in a wide range of shapes, sizes, and colours in a plethora of national and international brands, often promoted by celebrities who serve as their brand ambassadors. So, eyewear has become an important site for the consuming

classes to develop new consumerist aesthetics and indulge in conspicuous consumption for higher social status.

Today in New Delhi, there are about five to six prominent organized retail eyewear companies, each with several retail stores across the city. Organized retail companies offer their own line of in-house products, though most also stock a range of established international brands. These companies often place themselves as a more affordable alternative to high end boutiques selling exorbitantly priced international eyewear brands, and as superior in quality, style, and range to other locally produced options. They largely cater to the middling classes, offering an attractive combination of style and quality within a 'reasonable' price range. Spexy is a prominent new entrant in the market of organized retail, selling 'fashion-forward' but 'pocket-friendly' prescription glasses, sunglasses, and contact lenses to the simultaneously price- and image-conscious middle classes.

Spexy stores have—depending on store size, location, and customer volume—between two to six salespeople who are responsible for assisting customers and making sales pitches, and two to four optometrists, who conduct eye testing, but are also expected to perform sales work. There is a store manager and one or two assistant store managers, who are appointed from amongst the rest of the store staff, who perform supervisory duties while remaining fully engaged in the sales work. All the store staff are employed directly by the company, with salaries matching, and sometimes even exceeding, the market average in organized eyewear retail.⁴ The staff frequently move horizontally within the optical retail sector, chasing the slightest increment in salaries. The preference is always for another organized retail company. They mostly take up jobs with rival eyewear companies, which could be budget or high end, and less frequently move to independent showrooms or shops in the unorganized retail sector. It is not uncommon for the staff to return to Spexy if they are able to negotiate a higher salary.

The educational backgrounds of the store staff are varied. Given the larger problem of educated unemployment in the country (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffrey 2008), many of the sales staff are graduates. Some also have MBA degrees, often completed 'through correspondence' while in full-time employment. These degrees or diplomas are from low-ranking government colleges that have nominal fees or tier three or tier four private colleges that charge hefty fees. At the same time, given the low entry threshold in the retail sector, many are just high school graduates, and some even school dropouts. The optometrists have paramedical training in optometry from government or private colleges. Engineering and medical education are two of the dominant fields of aspirational investment in India. The optometrists' paramedical diplomas or degrees are significantly less expensive and less competitive than medical or engineering degrees. Even so, this is an education that is pursued as it feels

⁴ Staff who have no prior work experience are usually offered salaries around GBP 150–200. Experienced salesman can be paid a salary in the range of GBP 200–300. Store managers also earn in the same range, with additional bonuses paid depending on the store's performance. Optometrists earn between GBP 250–350.

'doctor-like', in the hope of accessing the social recognition and respect that comes from joining the medical profession, valued for being both skilled and 'noble'. Poor quality education qualifications, limited job opportunities, and low salaries, however, force the optometry graduates to join the less respectable retail sector, where jobs are higher paying and more easily available.

Scholarship has largely focused on the changing landscape of the retail sector, and the customer-facing service economy more generally, to study the new and varied consumption practices of consumers, looking at how consumers' worldviews, subjectivities, and everyday performances are shaped through shopping, or even through the simple act of entering and hanging out in these new spaces. There is a vast body of literature on the middle classes, or aspiring middle classes, in cities which has largely focused on these as sites of leisure and consumption (Baviskar and Ray 2011, Brosius 2010, Dickey 2016, Donner 2008, 2011; Lukose 2009, Säävälä 2010, Sancho 2013, Fernandes 2006, van Wessel 2004). However, it is not just the consuming public; workers too participate in the 'imaginative economies' (Srivastava 2015) that these spaces come to represent, and the new 'modes of self-perception and status seeking' (Kaur and Sundar 2016: 237) they enable. I argue that paying attention to the everyday experiences and subjectivities of the workers, while keeping in mind the specificity of the site of work of organized retail as one that is saturated with consumerist yearnings, is productive. It expands our understanding of both the category of work and consumption, and helps us better appreciate the social projects the workers imagine and the ways in which they seek to fulfil them.

Finally, the category of the new middle classes that participate in consumption and leisure has been critically disaggregated in the scholarship, with attention paid to its varied social formations and internally fragmented composition. This line of inquiry must also be extended to the new class of professional workers who service them. For example, it is not enough to differentiate between a sales professional in an organized retail store and a *chotu* in a *kinara* shop (a runner boy in an around-the-corner shop) (cf. Kaur and Sundar 2016). The category of the non-elite 'professional' must be internally disaggregated as well. The scholarship so far is based on the assumption that the new service economy is constituted of non-elite professionals working with elite customers and elite products or services, in spaces of aesthetic enchantment (Ghertner 2015). Gupta (2019) has studied the contradictions in the experience of 'back end' digital workers in the 'entrepreneurial environment' of an elite travel company, where the staff are encouraged to mentally immerse themselves in new luxury experiences to service their clients, enjoy new work 'cultures' in corporate style offices, and imagine new futures for themselves. Baas and Cayla (2020) in their work with coffee baristas and gym trainers note how the staff appreciate the opportunity to interact with the middle and upper middle class customers and become 'visible' and 'recognized' (cf. Gooptu 2013a, 2013b; Bardalai 2021). The case of Spexy is different and not one marked by aesthetic enchantment or a sense of 'exhilaration and adventure' (Gupta 2019: 75). Here there are no luxury goods or presence of affluent customers. At an expressly budget retail company providing budget products to budget-

minded customers, the Spexy staff become budget professionals too. Here the term 'budget' is not just an economic category linked to the price of the products, salary of the workers, or the income of the consumers but refers more expansively to a particular mode of economism that shapes the overall aesthetics and ethos of the place—the branding and quality of the goods, the managerial value of sale-centrism, the nature of staff service, and customer interactions at Spexy. In this article I pay attention to the experience of my informants as budget professionals, specifically how the middling non-elite material environment of the retail store restricts the realization of a socially valued, branded, professional, and technical work identity. Nakassis and Searle (2013: 171) have observed how 'acts of valuation are...subject to misfires and failures'. For my informants, the promise of social mobility, visibility, and respect through participation in the new economy comes undone even 'before it can be assembled'.⁵

Consumption of work

In the rest of the article, I take it in turn to look at the Spexy staff's engagement with the store eyewear products, eye testing equipment, and staff uniforms. The products are repeatedly denounced as inauthentic copies of international eyewear brands and of inferior quality, the equipment is judged to be technologically unsophisticated and inaccurate, and the uniform of T-shirts with the company logo is seen as unprofessional, casual, and improper. The staff's disdain for the poor-quality materiality of the Spexy store leads them to class the company as low quality and fake (*naklee, faltu, halkee*). They 'rate' Spexy poorly on social media and contrast it with the experience of working in better companies (*achee, dhang ki, mast type*).

In studying the Spexy staff's engagement with the products, equipment, and uniform, I draw attention to their 'aesthetic scrutiny' (Bauman 1998). Further, following the staff's direct transference of opinions from the company's material environment to the company itself, I argue that through the 'consumption' of the materiality of the workplace, the staff also come to 'consume' the company.

Here, when using the term 'consumption', I am delinking it from the mere practice of expenditure (through which to buy goods and services) or expending (through which to use up goods and services), as it is conventionally understood. Instead, I am viewing consumption in the more expanded sense as a *modality* of thought and practice framing the staff's gazing, holding, using, or wearing of the materials at work, with the final aim of adding value to themselves. This framing of the worker's material entanglements in the language of consumption can be traced to the expanding context of *consumerism*, which is not limited to just the act of buying or using goods and services, but 'spills over all other aspects of contemporary life' (Bauman 1987: 166), providing the vocabulary through which to engage and navigate social life more broadly.

⁵ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of MAS for making this point.

'Like other life activities, work now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience' (Bauman 1998: 33). Work, consumed through a process of 'aesthetic scrutiny', must necessarily provide 'intrinsic satisfaction' to the 'aesthetically guided collector of senses'—the consumer-worker—to be of any value (Bauman 1998: 33). Rose (1990: 102) describes an enterprising consumer as being at the centre of market life and looking to work to maximize their 'quality of life'. Here, work becomes the 'personal lifestyle' of the individual as consumer, *through* (and not *in spite of*) which the worker can seek emancipation and pleasure. Du Gay (1996) similarly acknowledges the propelling force of consumerism which structures the organizational government of work in such a way that work and the subjectivity of the worker are recast in the language of consumer culture. People are encouraged, by the larger organizational design, to 'add value' to themselves through work in the same way they do through market consumption. Bauman, Rose, and du Gay are writing in the Western context, emphasizing consumption, in its expanded sense, as framing the 'epistemological styles' (Appadurai 1990) of life. Importantly, this holds true for India also, where, similarly to the West, the context of consumerism, at least discursively, 'saturates' social life, particularly in urban, metropolitan areas like New Delhi (see Brosius 2010). However, what is necessary is to understand this global force of consumerism in local registers, in how it differently and specifically shapes and textures local lives, especially amid differing economic constraints and realities of the labour market.

In developing the concept of 'consumption' of work for my informants, I critically differ in my emphasis on two fronts. First, the aforementioned scholarship is analytically anchored in what is noted to be a wholesale shift from a 'society of workers' to a 'society of consumers' (Bauman 1998) in the West, where the principle of consumption is seen as having completely dislodged a previously important work ethic in defining and structuring society (also see Sennet 1998). Such a shift cannot be said to hold true for the non-Western case.⁶ Given its long-drawn history of unemployment or precarious employment (Bremen 1996), India cannot be labelled as having once been a 'society of workers'. Similarly, given significant constraints to consumption in the context of the current political economy (Osella and Osella 1999), India today cannot be labelled as a 'society of consumers', let alone a clean shift from the former to the latter being identified. In their varying material and discursive presence and absence, both work and consumption have, simultaneously, continued to be dominant social registers in Indian society. Therefore, instead of privileging consumption over work, I focus on how the two interact and overlap—that is, how a growing context of consumerism interacts with the changing context of work. I am careful not to subsume the identity of the worker in an overwhelming 'society of consumers' and suggest instead that we pay attention to how consumption becomes a modality through which work is experienced and the worker's identity is created and

⁶ Claims of such a neat and wholesale change can, in fact, also be contested in the Western context.

asserted in a society that is made up of workers and non-workers, and consumers and non-consumers. Work is consumed not just to facilitate participation as a consumer in society, but also, importantly, to develop one's work identity through consumption. I believe that such a bi-focal approach, which keeps the social significations of both work and consumption in sharp focus, is crucial for the context of the Global South.

Second, the thesis of the consumption of work, as discussed in the largely Northern scholarship cited above, is premised on the idea of gaining pleasure and self-fulfilment from the task of work. Through a broader organizational discourse and design based on the principle of 'excellence', the doing of the work is promoted as generating meaning, value, and satisfaction, and as ultimately enhancing the quality of life, providing instant gratification in the same way that consumption is expected to. Judged so, some work (mostly the creative and/or high-paying jobs at the top end of the work hierarchy) is 'interesting' and stimulates the aesthetic senses of the worker-consumer, and other work (mostly the routinized, low-paying jobs at the bottom of the work hierarchy, like the retail work studied here) is considered 'boring' and failing in its aesthetic test (Bauman 1998). However, I argue, the task of work and its organizational infrastructure is not the only axis along which pleasure and gratification is sought. I emphasize the material environment of work as a crucial site for the aesthetic satiation of the consumer-workers. More tentatively, I also suggest that the material sphere may be particularly important as a key compensatory site for the fulfilment of desires, given that retail jobs fall at the lower end of the work hierarchy in how much pleasure the work itself can generate.

Therefore, I emphasize the workers' 'aesthetic scrutiny' of the *material environment* of work to comprehensively understand how they consume work, with the desire to create suitable *work identities*, and not just consumer identities. With this in focus, I argue that my informants express the desire to 'consume' the 'right' materials of branded products, technical equipment, and professional uniforms at work so as to embellish their work identity and signal their social differentiation and mobility as branded, technical, and professional workers. Consumption, crucially, is not just there for what one can signal, but also for what one can feel one has become in a subjective fantasy of the self, in the 'creation of alternative existences' (Friedman 2004: 8). As Friedman (2004: 8) writes, 'Distinctions are not just a way of marking a difference in relation to others, they are a way of experiencing their content as a subjective fantasy, a specific identity defined as a world of goods.' Thus, what is also of importance is that one 'gets the feeling' for oneself that one is a branded, technical, and professional worker—'the mirror is our own' (Friedman 2004: 8). Thus, staff members come to demand the high standards of branded-ness, professional-ness, and technical-ness in the products, equipment, and uniform provided at work, with the aim to experience both superior social signalling ('feeling *dena*'/to give feeling) and a fantastical reconstitution of the image of the self for the self ('feeling *aana*'/to get feeling) through the creation of the 'right' sort of worker identity.

In the failure to satisfactorily consume towards desired ends, Alfred Gell (1988) traces the emergence of the 'negative self', whose outline is defined by the limits imposed on the individual's consumption possibilities. At Spexy, limited by the un-branded products, un-technical equipment and software, and un-professional uniforms, we see the emergence of the 'negative self' of the un-branded, un-technical, and un-professional workers employed by what is labelled an un-branded, un-technical, and un-professional company, who cannot give or get the 'feelings' they desire. It is this 'negative self' of the workers that dismisses Spexy as 'fake' and endlessly carps and complains about the limitations imposed on their consumption by its material environment. Through mockery and scorn, the workers attempt to place themselves above Spexy's 'unsatisfactory' materiality and present themselves as desiring and deserving of more branded, more professional, and more technical materials: only through consuming these, they argue, can they craft authentic branded, technical, and professional worker identities.

Here the term 'fake' needs to be considered. There is a critical body of literature on the production, circulation, and consumption of fakes within societal margins that destabilizes the assumed fixity of the category of the 'fake'. It questions both the assumption that the fake is always strictly differentiated from the authentic, and the assumption that the fake is necessarily inferior to the authentic. In fact, it questions whether the distinction between 'real' and 'fake' holds at all. Nakassis (2016) discusses the popularity of counterfeit branded clothes that haphazardly reference multiple brands at the same time. These hybridized goods—which can, for example, display two brand logos at the same time—'seem to disregard the brand even as they animate it' (Nakassis 2012: 704; also see Luvaas 2013). Rather than the authenticity of the brands, what matters here is achieving a general 'aesthetic of brandedness' based on ideas of performing 'fashion' and 'doing style' (Nakassis 2013). In her ethnography of Vietnamese consumer markets, Vann (2006) shows how local logics of authenticity differ from those prescribed by intellectual property rights laws. Here the crucial marker of difference is not between real and fake goods as defined by international standards; instead, low- and mid-income consumers seek out 'mimic goods' that copy 'model goods' in an honest way without any 'deceit', dismissing 'fake goods' that copy 'deceitfully'.⁷

Considering this literature, what is surprising is the way in which my low-income informants uphold hierarchical purity between the real and fake in their rather strict judgement of Spexy. Here, the crucial marker of difference is that they are speaking not in their capacity as consumers but as workers

⁷ The question explored in the scholarship is the manner and style of the fake, through which to rethink 'the classificatory schema' of rigid distinctions between real and fake, with the aim of passing off as a 'sort of' real, a 'good enough approximation', only 'half fakes' not full fakes (Craciun 2012). What emerges is a striving towards the category of what Bubandt (2009: 576) calls 'authentic-fakes'—that which is 'simultaneously authentic and fake'. Writing in the context of fake documents and political violence in Indonesia, Bubandt argues that the authentic-fake fully harnesses the 'force of falsity' (echoing Umberto Eco) and satirizes its larger context, where state power and the workings of the neoliberal market are increasingly seen as counterfeit and 'deception becomes a new means of production' (Bubandt 2009: 578).

consuming the workplace. This enables a certain level of decontextualization. The incessantly complaining ‘negative self’ of the budget professional at Spexy, who dismisses the company as fake on account of its poor materiality, is less easy to find outside of work, where any strictly coded hierarchy of branded-ness, professional-ness, and technical-ness in materials is freely inverted or ignored. We can see how, when consuming the materials at the store as Spexy’s employees, my informants uphold high aesthetic standards in their scrutiny of the material environment, but outside the workplace, they openly disregard the standards they hold at the store. Such contradictory engagement with material purity points to the unique way in which the workers engage with the materials at the workplace. My informants’ personal consumption knowledge, education, financial abilities, or social location are not such that they can consume with the desire and the aim to create branded, technical, and professional identities. The distinctions between fake and original that the staff so rigidly hold onto when appraising the products at the store as its salaried workers creatively collapse in the case of their own personal purchases as spending consumers where they freely ignore, invert, or resignify the category of fake, as they purchase, and even proudly flaunt, their ‘first copies’ of international brands. Authentic branded goods, which they discuss and demand at the store, remain largely out of their own financial reach. Most of my informants harbour strong aspirations to set up their own optical shops in the future. In the hypothetical discussions around it, they focus on tactics of clever profiteering by cutting material costs, and concerns about branded-ness, technical-ness, and professional-ness are pushed away. However, company work, detached from the constraints of their own socio-economic context as consumers or potential entrepreneurs, provides a unique opportunity where they can enjoy learning about and trying on high-end branded products, operating technically advanced equipment, dressing ‘smartly’, and presenting professional demeanours, unrestrained by their own financial situation and social location. Through close proximity to high-quality materials that will qualify as the ‘model goods’ described in Vann’s study (2006), they can aim to create a superior sense of self and inhabit social worlds that otherwise remain inaccessible to them. Their inability to consume in this manner within the ‘budget materiality’ of Spexy is therefore particularly frustrating given this unique context of the workplace on which the possibility of creating a *really* authentic branded, technical, and professional sense of self comes to be so exclusively dependent.

Products and branded-ness

It was a hot summer’s day and customer walk-ins to one of the Spexy stores had reduced to a trickle. At around 3pm, the store received its monthly delivery from the company warehouse. A few of the staff grudgingly fought off their mid-day lethargy and got up to unpack the new stock of summer sunglasses and arrange it on the display shelves. Prem,⁸ a 36-year-old salesperson from

⁸ All names are pseudonyms.

Agra (Uttar Pradesh), was sauntering past and casually stopped to examine the newly arrived stock. He picked up a pair of bright blue reflector sunglasses, took them out of their padded bubble wrapping and tried them on. He examined himself in the mirror, put the pair back, and picked up another to try. One by one, he went through the entire new collection. He finally settled on one pair of sunglasses he liked and handed me his smartphone to take 'DPs' (display pictures) for him. He struck a pose—chin down, head slightly forward, and arms crossed across his chest. I pointed to the price tag sticking out from the stem of the sunglass, but he didn't seem to care much. I proceeded to take the photographs—two vertically and one diagonally, as instructed by him. I smilingly gave the phone back to Prem, complimenting him on how smart he looked in the photographs, but he seemed only mildly pleased with the results. On my enquiring after his lack of enthusiasm, he said, 'the problem is that there is no strength (no *dum*) in the product here, it is not a brand. It is a just-like-that (*faltu*) brand. Just that they have said it's a brand, so it's a brand, but it's not *really* a brand!' To show what a 'real' brand is, he started swiping back on his phone's photo gallery until we reached photographs from six months back when he was working at an upscale eyewear boutique in south Delhi. 'This is Prada (*left swipe*). This is Gucci (*left swipe*). This is also Gucci (*left swipe*). This is Chopard. Chopard is the best brand, ten lakh, thirty lakh⁹....it can go up to any amount. Just no limit,' he said showing me photographs of him wearing these different brands and emphasizing his correct pronunciation of each brand name. He explained to me how in the beginning he used to shiver like a leaf just holding them, but gradually learnt to get over his fear and developed the requisite confidence. Correcting me, he said it was in *these* brands that he looked smart.

Spexy stocks two in-house brands for both sunglasses and prescription glasses—mid-range and high-range, which cost around Rs1,500–2,500 and 4,000–7,000 respectively.¹⁰ In television advertisements and online media, they are promoted as independent brands, with the subtle suggestion that they are designed in Italy. 'No Italy-Pitaly, it's all Chandini Chowk and ching-chong China!' scoffed Prem, calling the company's '*jumlal*' (bluff). It was commonly remarked amongst the staff that Spexy products are simply 'picked up' in bulk (*bas utha ke le aana*) from China and Chandini Chowk (the local wholesalers' market in Old Delhi) at dirt-cheap prices, ranging between Rs 20 to 200 rupees.¹¹ These products are, as a result, disparagingly called 'D' (for duplicate), '*sastaa*' (cheap), 'low quality', '*naklee maal*' (fake stuff), 'Chinese', or 'local'.

In addition to the in-house products, Spexy stores also provide a limited range of eyewear products from other international brands. The limited number of these products was repeatedly complained about. The highest priced pair of sunglasses was an old Tom Ford model for Rs 30,000,¹² followed by

⁹ Approx. GBP 10,000 to 30,000.

¹⁰ Approx. GBP 15–25 and 40–70 respectively.

¹¹ Approx. 20p to GBP 2.

¹² Approx. GBP 300

another old Prada pair for Rs 17,000,¹³ and another couple of ‘dead’, outdated models by brands such as Boss Orange, Carrera, etc.—and this only in its flagship stores. In smaller outlets, it was rare to find anything other than a few old models of low-priced Ray Bans and Oakleys. Moreover, the staff were never too sure of their authenticity and looked upon them suspiciously, as possible ‘first copies’ of the original brands. It was commonly speculated amongst the staff that the company did not have authorized dealership rights for all the brands and that it often sourced them through dubious ‘third parties’, and therefore the products’ authenticity was always under the scanner. ‘Come here,’ Prem summoned me. Picking up a pair of Ray Bans from the shelf, he explained, ‘when you see this bridge here, you know it’s “D”. This bridge is extra.’ Others proposed their own litmus tests—‘if you mist the glass, it should show the brand mark’, ‘the product number should be engraved under the bridge’, ‘the sunglass case should have the brand name embossed, but only outside, not inside also’, ‘the finish should be matt, not shiny like this’. Often they would compare notes with each other to separate the originals from the fake, but never being too certain, they expressed a general sense of dismissiveness towards Spexy’s ‘mixed bag’.

Following the years of liberalization, a vast range of branded commodities have flooded the Indian market, creating strictly indexed taxonomies of brand values in people’s ideological imaginaries (see Fernandes 2006, Osella and Osella 1999), a process fuelled strongly by a robust advertising and marketing industry (Mazzarella 2003, Rajagopal 1999). The ‘brandless-ness’ of Spexy in-house products, and the limited, low-range, and oftentimes suspicious other brands, invite the staff’s scorn as it makes ‘losers’ of them in the semiotic battle of brands that has ensued since liberalization.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1984) image of the ‘desiring machine’, Pun Ngai (2005: 470) in her ethnography of factory work in China, emphasizes that the worker should simultaneously also be seen as ‘a desiring consumer in China’s new economy’ and argues that the experience of work, work relations, and identities can only be understood through this ‘twin process of subjectification’ of ‘ceaseless’ production and consumption (also see Freeman 2000). Here, I push this further by emphasizing how the workers are ‘desiring machines’, not just in the consumer products they desire outside of work, but also in the kinds of products they crave at work through which to create certain desired images of work and themselves at work. So, when Prem is perusing the displayed sunglasses, he is thinking not just as an imagined buyer of the sunglasses, but also, very importantly, as a worker in close proximity to these products. It is the latter that I emphasize here. When proudly showing me photographs from his previous employment, in his work uniform and wearing different brands with their price tags still showing, what he is putting on display is not himself as a confident consumer but rather as a confident worker surrounded by and selling brands that are expensive, international, and the latest trend, through which he can impress and intimidate as a branded worker. It is Prem as this ‘desiring machine’, seeking an ideal branded

¹³ Approx. GBP 170

work and worker self, who registers his gross dissatisfaction against the 'no dum' (no strength) products at Spexy.

Staff, like Prem, who have previously worked at optical stores with highly ranked brands, would often nostalgically recollect their more 'winning' times and find a ready audience in other less experienced staff eager to learn about brand regimes, an 'education' seen as unavailable at Spexy. The 'feel' and 'G.K.' (general knowledge) of the brands, like the different designs available, their premium price listings, and the different colour options available, would be discussed in great detail, with others dutifully making mental notes. Some would impress with their knowledge of the 'full history-geography' of the brands, confidently presenting precise numbers relating to company size, year of origin, annual brand ranking, etc. Disagreements with the presented facts would often result in impassioned threats of fact checking on the internet.

Any time a customer would walk in wearing any one of these discussed brands, the first amongst the staff to notice it would encourage others to take turns to discreetly walk close to the customer to steal a proper look. To accompany this rare visual treat, there would be many stories shared about how such 'cream' brands are sold to 'cream' customers in 'cream' stores. Detailed and often greatly exaggerated accounts would be given of how the shelf would be opened, gloves worn, and products explained to customers. The staff who had previously worked in these top stores narrated dialogue-by-dialogue stories of when 'celebrities' had walked in to buy expensive sunglasses, accompanied with a full description of their clothes, watch, car, and other such items. In contrast, it was often said that Spexy products are 'so *jhand* (fail)' and without any 'history-geography' that one had to forget 'style' and 'lie down and sell', evoking the image of a salesperson stretched out, begging the customer to buy.

Such mockery of Spexy products was strikingly universal, even as the composition of the store staff is significantly heterogeneous. Employees are men and women, 'General' castes and 'Backward' castes, from Delhi and from other neighbouring states, from the city and from villages or towns, 'freshers' and those with many years of work experience, school dropouts and college graduates, with parents who were government school teachers and factory workers. Given these diverging biographies, I had expected the material entanglements and commentary of each staff member to be uniquely determined by their social location and previous 'exposure'. However, with time in the field, I learnt that while each worker's 'initial contact' with the products was indeed different, they underwent a process of 'learning' to complain about the brands in the same manner, irrespective of differences in their social characteristics. In other words, the workers do not all start from the same point of demanding high-quality brands. Many of them are, in fact, unaware of brand names and hierarchies when they first join the company. It is at the workplace that they learn to demand them. So, it is not just that branded-ness is a social value in some homogenous way and therefore the workers come to automatically desire it at the workplace, but rather, the workplace itself contributes to the creation of this desire. Registering their derision against Spexy's

'unbranded' products becomes an important social education in branded-ness as a standard with which one must appraise the products at work and as a value that the staff must present themselves as desiring and deserving of. Noting this, I highlight how the workplace constructs the sense of self of the worker in very specific ways, where they learn to value branded-ness and come to desire the identity of a branded worker. Furthermore, contrary to the expanded or inverted definition of 'branded-ness' (Nakassis 2012, 2013) that may operate in their own personal consuming lives, the immaterial value of branded-ness desired at the workplace is one that is strictly tied to material attributes of authenticity.

Equipment and technical-ness

Like most other companies in the optical retail business in Indian cities today, Spexy provides free eye check-ups to its customers. Each store has an eye examination unit and between two to four optometrists for this job. The unit consists of a motorized chair with a slit lamp and ophthalmoscope mounted on it. Along with this is a distance vision chart, with a pair of adjustable trial frames and a lens set. Varun, a 37-year-old optometrist from the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh (Kanpur), came out of one such unit having 'satisfied' a customer, to announce, 'He became my full fan. He went full *lattoo* (crazy) on me. He said nobody had done his eye examination like this, in the technical style I did each step.' After a full recounting of other praises that the customer had supposedly showered on him, he sighed and added,

But I could not satisfy him more fully. The world has seen how much more impression I can create. But the equipment here is very, very *sasta* (cheap) and basic. I want more class equipment. At Vision Plus (past employer) I could have satisfied him more. There you get very good accuracy. Here the power is always a bit up and down. You can't properly catch difficult powers, like very difficult cylindrical powers. There can be full 18 steps for eye checking. There is step 1, step 2, step 3, 4, 6....like that, one by one. Here (at Spexy), you can finish in just 3 steps.1..2..3...finish!

This was the complaint of most optometrists at Spexy, all of whom shared great enthusiasm for technical accuracy by following a technically sound process. The eye-testing equipment at Spexy, with its simplified procedures and imprecise results, was seen as unsophisticated and unimpressive, earning the contemptuous scorns of the optometrists. While the discussions around products and their suspect branded-ness referenced the consuming lives of the class-disaggregated public today, discussions around equipment were located more squarely within the institutional setting of work and the desire to be classified as a skilled and technically proficient worker.

Their zealous interest in 'technical-ness' can be traced to a larger trend in India where science and technology have been emblematic of the meta-narratives of development, growth, and modernity (Fuller and Narsimhan 2014, Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2008, Upadhyaya 2016a). The Nehruvian vision of

technology serving as ‘modern temples’ laid the foundation of independent India, and the faith in technology as a vehicle for national and personal advance has only grown stronger over the years. This is most visible in the education and employment aspirations in India. Technical education in the sciences, prominently engineering and medicine, is held in high esteem and there is conspicuous condescension towards education in the arts, which is often seen as ‘useless’. Every year more engineering and medical colleges mushroom, producing engineers and doctors by the dozen. Armed with technical degrees/diplomas, this overwhelming number of technically trained people seek technical work in the burgeoning and modern sectors of the Indian economy such as IT and hospitals—work that is imagined as well salaried and respectable (Corbridge et al. 2013, Hebbar and Kaur 2021).

However, given the largely poor quality of the available technical education and poor technical employment opportunities, most of these engineers and doctors fail to actualize their dreams of inhabiting a respectable technical future. Even so, the symbolic and expressive power of the cultural capital of technical-ness remains tenacious. This is well illustrated in Nisbett’s (2009) account of the ‘IT (information and technology) dream’ at the bottom-most rung of the ‘knowledge society’ in South India, amongst youth who continue to bask in its imagined glory, even as they fail to acquire respectable IT work themselves (also see Upadhyaya 2016b). Similarly, the optometrists at Spexy, with their poor-quality technical accreditation, cannot find well-salaried and respectable ‘doctor-type’ work in hospitals, and are forced to follow the money into retail. Nevertheless, they continue to have strong aspirations for crafting individual narratives of progress and distinction by displaying their supposed technical proficiency.

To put on a grand show as technically educated workers, what the optometrists seek is an elaborate set-up with many props. Other optometrists would enthusiastically rally behind Varun in his ‘demands’ for more complex and better quality equipment. They would list full names of different technical tools, such as phoropter, refractometer, retinoscope, etc., which they saw as indispensable to performing a ‘proper’ eye check-up that is more accurate and involves advanced, multi-step tests. Sometimes, to make the point more emphatically, they would even draw out supporting scientific diagrams of parallel sets of light rays being refracted through the different lenses in different equipment. The optometrists imagined as ideal such high-quality ‘proper’ equipment as then housed in a ‘proper’ clinic with a sliding door that clearly states ‘optometrist clinic’. They would emphasize that inside it should be equipped with a washbasin, hand sanitizer, mirror, and a separate contact lens trial station, as they would claim to have been the case in their optometry colleges or previous companies. When the Spexy head office invited suggestions for improvement of the stores, the aforementioned ideas featured prominently in the top ten suggestions that came from the different stores across Delhi. Their current open testing units were too small, under-equipped, and technically unimpressive—there was ‘nothing special’ (*kuch khaas nahin*). ‘When I first came, I asked “is this the C-L-I-N-I-C!?” It finishes even before it starts,’ Varun recounted his first impression of Spexy.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I met Varun at his new job in a newly opened international optical retail chain. It was still just his second day there and he was on his 15-day on-the-job training period. I volunteered to play the customer as the head optometrist demonstrated to Varun the workings of their elaborate optometry equipment, supposedly imported from Japan, and its many steps and buttons. The entire process lasted for a long 20 minutes, leaving me with a strong headache from the multiple times my pupils were refocused and Varun quite flustered and overwhelmed from all the instructions that he was being given, but he was compelled to admit that this indeed was more proper and suitably technical. What impressed him most, he later said after regaining his composure, was how everything was 'auto' and he had only to press different buttons. 'Everything here is auto. In manual there is no fun (*mazaa nahin aata*). Real feeling comes in auto. Life has become very advanced now! Manual is old times (*puraanaa zamanaa*). Auto is modern,' he announced. Automatic technology (even as it may reduce his own technical work and worth) was the technology of tomorrow, indexing 'futuraity' (Mankekar and Gupta 2017). Such modern and advanced technology made him modern and advanced by association—a link Varun emphasized proudly. Unlike the case of consumer products (discussed above) and clothing (to be discussed below), access to such technically sophisticated equipment is only possible at the site of work.

The desire to occupy such visions of technical advance was not limited to the optometrists, but shared by the entire staff in their desire for a more technically sound billing, package tracing, and stock accounting processes. Each store has a desktop computer, which is installed with a customized company programme into which all sales and stock-related information must be entered. At the time of a sale or product return, the staff member feeds in the customer's contact details and billing address, applies different discount coupons that may be relevant, and matches store stock with the warehouse stock. Sometimes, they may also have a short customer survey for which they have to record responses. The staff often complained about many technical glitches in the process. The installed programme was said to 'hang' often and abruptly stop responding, discount coupons that were valid would show as invalid at the time of billing, and products displayed as available would suddenly appear as out-of-stock. The process of entering sales and stock records was also considered to be long-winded and confusing, with particular complaints made about the manual style of entering each detail, as opposed to a desired 'auto' system. Towards the end of my fieldwork, iPad Minis were introduced in some of the bigger stores, and the staff were asked to encourage customers to browse the company's online product listings. The staff were very pleased with the 'technical impression' the iPads gave, but continued to complain about the technical inefficiencies of the installed programme.

Uniform and professional-ness

'I HATE IT!! We look like cartoons!!' exclaimed Vani, exasperated. All the staff at Spexy—store managers and salespersons, optometrists and housekeeping,

men and women—are expected to wear the same uniform: collared T-shirts, with the company logo embroidered onto the chest, paired with beige trousers. For winter, there is an additional black, waterproof, down jacket with the company logo printed on the side. Of the three materials discussed in this article, the disdain towards the uniform was the strongest. While the staff could distance themselves from the products and equipment by flaunting their supposed knowledge and mastery of that which they regarded as better, they felt trapped in the uniforms that were compulsory for everyday wear for the entire workday, making the separation forged in the above two cases very difficult here. ‘I just want to get out of this uniform. I am not some child that you have just put in this uniform. I hate it!! Hate it!! Cartoons, total cartoons we look. Don’t mind my language, but this is just total fuck, *yaar!* Like really, what the fish!’ fumed Vani, a 24-year-old salesperson from Delhi recently promoted to the post of assistant store manager.

Clothing matters. Not just as a daily, sartorial question of ‘what to wear’ but also importantly as a sociocultural process central to self-constitution and expression (Tarlo 1996). Moreover, the ‘sartorial praxis’ of clothing acquires a particular distinction in the public arena, negotiating morally charged questions of respectability, desire, and aspiration (Hebbar and Kaur 2021). Reflecting this, Liechty (2003: 146–147), in his study of the middle classes in Kathmandu, Nepal, has written about ‘public bodies’ that are ‘bodies produced, or fashioned, through consumption for public display’. These public bodies are ‘open to the scrutiny of passer-bys, who plot its position on the fashion axes of suitability and moderation’. The working bodies of the store staff are such public bodies, which, unlike workers who may be hidden behind the high walls or closed doors of factories or in a foreign country (see Cross 2014, Osella and Osella 2000), are constantly aware of their ongoing social audit by the public. Trapped in the ‘cartoon’ Spexy uniforms, the staff members express anxiety about their public examination, and make attempts to reduce public ‘exposure’ as much as possible.

The staff would change into their uniforms only after arriving at the store. Their own clothes would be hung carefully on hooks, to keep them ‘fresh’ for changing back into at the end of the day. The uniform would be left at the store and only rarely taken home for washes. I scarcely saw any staff member entering or leaving the store in their uniform. Once, a salesman and I were asked to urgently go and buy a cake from a bakery just 200 metres away, before the arrival of the zonal manager to celebrate the store’s one-year anniversary. I picked up my purse and was ready to leave, only to find that the salesperson had disappeared to change out of his uniform before stepping out. Another time, when two salesgirls were on their way to the store from the metro station in the morning, there was a sudden rainstorm and the two indulged in a little ‘rain dance’, arriving at the store completely drenched. It remained humid all day and their clothes were still wet at the time of their leaving the store, but both of them, against our collective advice, chose to change back into their damp clothes rather than leave the store in their (dry) uniforms. In the second half of my fieldwork, I was finally given a uniform in belated recognition of my ‘constant presence’. My wearing the uniform in

the stores (and also arriving in it), when I had no compulsion to, was perplexing and amusing for all the staff.

Initially, I thought the staff's 'hate' to be centred around the bodily control a uniform mandatorily imposes, and the subservience and loss of autonomous self-expression that it implies (as noted in McDowell 2009, Ong 1987). However, I realized with time that the staff's opposition was not to uniforms per se, but very specifically to the 'cartoon' T-shirts at Spexy that made them look 'unprofessional', as if they were 'petrol pump workers' or 'pizza delivery boys' and which gave them no 'feeling' of working as optometrists, sales consultants, or store managers—as 'professionals'. They did not seek complete freedom from the discipline of uniforms, but, rather, they sought the discipline of professional work attire, which was in fact positively viewed as material adornment for their public bodies (also see Freeman 2000, 2014). Disciplined into such professional clothing, they would be able to signal a professional work persona and association with the class of upwardly mobile professionals that dominate visual representations of the glamorized, corporatized 'new' economies of India today (Fuller and Narsimhan 2014, McGuire 2013, Upadhy 2016a, Hebbar and Kaur 2021). Thus, what they desired—and put down as their number one suggestion back to the company head office—was that their uniform should be formal office wear—trousers and a crisp, full-sleeved formal shirt with a standing collar, and a white doctor's coat (or 'lab coat') for the optometrists to wear on top. The company rejected this request as it wishes to cultivate a 'casual' look to match its 'not-so-serious' products. However, for the staff, 'serious' professional clothing is the way to gain visibility in the corporatizing landscape of work and come to count as its legitimate members. Writing in the context of low-level call centre work in Barbados, Freeman (2000: 252) notes that the discipline of corporate work attire opens an 'aperture of creative expression and pride' through which the workers fashion themselves professionally and aim to gain a sense of 'respectability'. She notes how professional attire comes to animate the workers' imaginations as a particularly important marker of modernity, and to emphasize their professional selves as distinct from blue-collar industry workers.

'Today, if you strike as professional, you have personality. Otherwise, you have no personality, you just look *chamaar* (ex-Untouchable). Just somebody has to put a *jhaadu* (broom) in your hand. There is no wow feeling, no impression. Just local *mazdoor* (labour) you are,' remarked Varun, joining my conversation with Vani. To illustrate, he stood up and walked across the store with his shoulders slouched, looking dull and timid. He turned around and shouted, 'Nobody. *Chamar!*' He then pretended to put on a doctor's white coat and changed his gait, walked up confidently to Vani and spat out an incomprehensible garble of random English words, loosely held together with a handful of optometry terms. He finished by cueing Vani in to act out the part of an enamoured customer completely under the spell of Varun's professional style. Varun struck the pose of the Indian superhero, *Shaktimaan*, and animatedly exclaimed, '*Shakti* (Power) of the White Coat!' Here the white coat is the crucial prop to create the right 'look' (Mears 2011), 'winning' impression (Goopu

2009), and ‘style’ (Nakassis 2016), critical to such customer-facing roles, through which to perform the ‘deception of glamour’ (Mears 2011), and signal expertise, skilfulness, and future-orientation (Hebbar and Kaur 2021). Without the powered exoskeleton of such professional clothing as a formal shirt and/or a white lab coat, Varun becomes and feels invisible, like the geeky and timid alter ego of the superhero, *Pt. Gangadhar Shastri*, and vulnerable to people considering him ‘nobody’—‘*faltu*’ or ‘*lallu*’ (riff-raff). His anxiety reflects what Dickey (2013: 237–238) writes about social invisibility, ‘To be seen is to count, to have substance, visibility and humanity; not to be seen is to be low, empty or void, invisible and non-human.’ McGuire (2013), in the context of youth in Delhi, has observed ‘professional’ appearances and performances, linked to the right *look* and *style*, to be key to social visibility and mobility in the city.

The staff would often enviously discuss the professional uniforms of some other companies—particularly a rival optical company that has a full-sleeved formal black shirt and trousers for all its staff and a coat for optometrists, which, very importantly, comes with a name badge that says ‘optometrist’. They would also discuss non-optical international brands, particularly high-end retail companies like Lacoste and Tommy Hilfiger, where the uniform would usually be a selection of three sets of clothing from the brand’s own collection. ‘Full feeling comes, by god! Personality is created. You feel like you are a professional working in a proper company. They treat you properly with respect. You really feel like a “fashion consultant” and not some stupid salesperson!’ complained Vani, who had previously worked with the international apparels label ‘Tommy Kids’ and was still, even after two years, struggling to ‘adjust’ to Spexy’s ‘cartoon’ T-shirt.

A ‘fake’ company: un-branded, un-technical, and un-professional

A company—referring to a corporate firm in the organized retail sector, contra public or informal or non-corporate work in the informal economy—is held in high esteem, being seen as one of the flourishing sectors of India’s presumed fast-growing economy (also noted in Gooptu 2009). Consequently, a company, with its distinguishing character, is imagined as ‘modern’ and necessarily branded, technical, and professional, and work in it is seen as a uniquely potent site where one can become branded, technical, and professional. At a company one can, as one should, be able to hold the most branded of sunglasses, operate the most technically advanced machines, and dress and present oneself professionally. With the material environment of Spexy falling short on all three counts, Spexy itself fails to give any ‘feeling of company’ (*koi feeling nahi aatee*) and comes to be disparaged as a ‘*bakwaas*’ (rubbish), ‘shit’, ‘*jhand*’ (loser, failing), ‘worst’, ‘just horrible’, and ‘cheap’—‘totally fake’. In failing to pass the gold standard of branded-ness, technical-ness, and professional-ness, Spexy is seen as failing the quality test of company-ness, and is branded fake.

One particular Monday, the company public relations (PR) and advertising team came to the store to shoot a promotional video of ‘Happy Customers’ as

part of their social media campaign. A few known 'Happy Customers' were selected and invited to come to the store to share their 'Happy Stories' on camera. For the afternoon, the store was converted into a makeshift studio with heavy camera equipment, camera tracks, tripods, boom mikes, bright lights, and cables, generating considerable excitement amongst the staff. As each customer took their turn to heap praises on Spexy, the staff's amusement grew. They started jokingly discussing amongst themselves ploys to disrupt the shoot and 'expose' Spexy. Someone suggested that they do a parallel shoot where they record their own testimonies as 'Unhappy Staff'. This idea particularly excited Prem. He slicked his hair back, dramatically cleared his throat, and collected a few of us to start 'recording' his testimony in English, interrupted every few seconds by our giggles:

Hello friends! My name is Prem Sharma and I am your humble man. I like to share to my friends my 'unhappy story'. Spexy is *jhand* (fail) company. It is not a company. It is a *maha-shit* (massive shit). It is a shitty shit. Please don't mind my language, I am professional guy, but this Spexy does not deserve professional guy like me. You come here, your knowledge, experience will go into minus. There are better company in market. (Here at Spexy) your respect, your confidence go into minus. I want to give Spexy ½ star rating. No, no wait, I give minus star rating.

By now we were all laughing very loudly and had to be shushed by the film crew as we were disturbing the shoot.

While this testimony was mostly for laughs, at other times, testimonies have been more formally recorded and shared. Upon their voluntary or involuntary resignation, some of the staff give their 'feedback' on the company on social media platforms, prominently the company's official Facebook page and other optical and retail job opportunities pages, and encourage others to spread 'awareness' in their networks. Whenever (as is often the case) the reviews are negative, the company's PR team promptly takes them down. However, there is always enough time for someone to save the message (through a 'screenshot' on their phones) and circulate it widely. I share the example of one such 'review' that was made on Facebook, and reached me via WhatsApp:

All optometrists, staff and employee

Be aware from Spexy. BE AWARE!

Spexy is worse company in Optical industry. I had worked in Spexy for one year. I know better about Spexy and can warn to all. I had left now due to product, service and systems issue. Also, eye testing and eyewear is Chinese. This was worst experience in my whole career and professional life. I have also written owner of company about my experience and he has not responded. He also knows in heart that company is doing wrong behavior.

Do not apply in Spexy job otherwise you will be fooled by this company. Please apply in better company. They are making fool by giving discount

and advertising. But Indian people don't know, nothing is free in the world.

In this manner, through their reviews of the company's material environment, the staff come to give their opinion of the company, and extend their derisive scorn to it. Constituted of its 'rubbish' materiality, the company comes to be labelled 'rubbish' and disdainfully rejected.

When deriding the company in this manner, what is really being complained about? The complaint is not simply that Spexy is a budget company. If we follow the classificatory schema of inauthenticity set out by Vann (2006), the case of Spexy is not that of a company that mimics company-ness without actually claiming to be one. Instead, it is the case of an outright fake that promises to be a company in its projected image to consumers and workers, when it is, in fact, as the workers learn through their experience, not one. The final experience is that of 'dhoka' (Bardalai 2021) or deceit, where the workers feel short-changed as professionals. They work in a seemingly professional workplace yet they are not able to sufficiently feel, embody, and perform its constituent qualities of supposed distinction. They are rendered a fake copy of the idealized image of the new age, salaried company employee.

An important point to note is that Spexy is always reviewed in relation to other companies. As has been clear, the staff always present their scrutiny of the products, tools, and uniform at Spexy against those of other retail companies—either the expensive, international brands at a high-end optical showroom or the high-quality optometry equipment at their potential future employer or the professional uniforms at a previous employer. The Spexy staff's current compromised status as budget professionals does not disqualify them from making these wider comparative claims as they do have the experience, or at least the option, to move across retail companies that have vastly different material and aesthetic environments. Indeed, it is through such a comparative analysis, where they present themselves as weighing up the material options available to them across different companies, that they make pointed complaints against Spexy. In other words, they voice their complaints not based on their distantly imagined ideal of a corporate company, but always using more immediate referents of other retail companies.

What qualifies as a *real* company that is not fake? The Spexy staff list names of international retail companies or national retail chains backed by big corporate conglomerates. Prominently, Spexy's rival optical company is singled out as a *real* company. It is run by a reputable Indian company in partnership with an international eyewear company. Their uniform of a full-sleeved shirt, trousers, and white lab coat is mentioned, followed by their 'imported' testing equipment and good reputation of the products. However, the salary offered is lower when compared to Spexy's. The irony pointed out is that it is possible to feel more company-ness for less money. Many independent showrooms servicing affluent customers house high-end international brands and can also offer high salaries, but they are not included in the list as they are seen as old-school family-run affairs (*lala* shops) outside of organized retail and lacking in other features of new age company-ness.

One may wonder, of course, about the overall objectivity of their comparisons. Do the companies identified as superior really throw open the possibilities of being branded, technical, and professional for the workers? It is not my aim here to test the accuracy of these comparative claims. Instead, I am interested in simply highlighting how my informants strategically deploy a comparative frame of reference in their complaints against Spexy, presenting the other companies as affording them the possibilities to be branded, technical, and professional. In so doing, they present the values of branded-ness, technical-ness, and professional-ness as easily accessible to them through work in other retail companies, adding more weight to their complaints and placing themselves above ‘fake’ Spexy.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on how low and lower-middle class youth employed in new, private work available in cities engage with its material environment, and how in their ‘aesthetic scrutiny’ of it, they come to ‘consume’ the workplace. In particular, I have documented how my informants deride the un-branded products, un-technical equipment, and un-professional uniform at their workplace. The company Spexy, as constituted of these materials, is derided for failing in its company-ness. I have noted how materials provide a platform for the articulation of larger configurations of ‘feelings’ the workers seek to give and get through formal employment in a company. These articulations, in turn, reveal larger sociocultural valuations regarding ideas of social mobility and visibility in contemporary India—where there is a strong interest in brand regimes and brand value hierarchies, fixation with technological education and expertise, and attraction towards corporate work culture in the private sector, and, concomitantly, a strong desire amongst my informants to craft branded, technical, and professional work identities for themselves. I have emphasized how my informants, as low-end professionals, expectantly look to the site of company work to fulfil these desires.

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