



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

A matter of appearances

How workers' aesthetics are regulated in advice, hiring, and at work

Vonk, L.A.

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

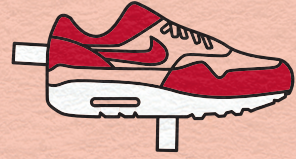
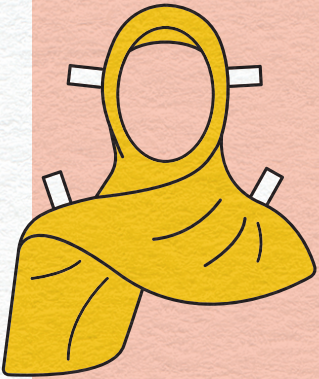
Vonk, L. A. (2024). *A matter of appearances: How workers' aesthetics are regulated in advice, hiring, and at work*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

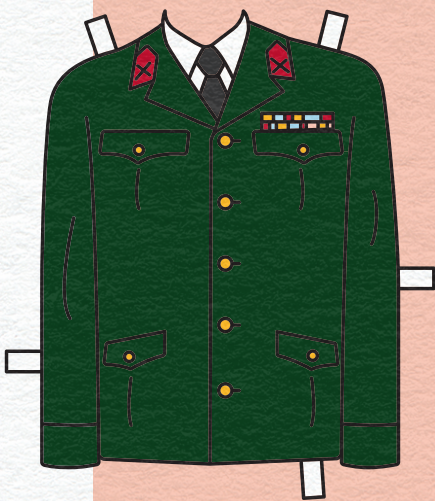
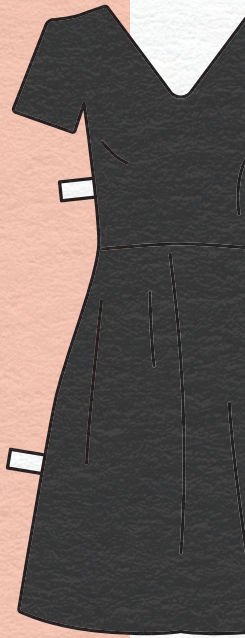
Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



a matter of appearances

How workers' aesthetics are regulated
in advice, hiring, and at work



Laura Vonk



A Matter of Appearances

How workers' aesthetics are regulated in
advice, hiring, and at work

Laura Vonk

ISBN: 978-94-6496-065-5

This research is funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), project number 023.011.040

Cover: Jan-Willem de Man (www.demanand.studio)

Layout: Ilse Modder (www.ilsemodder.nl)

Printed by: Gildeprint Enschede (www.gildeprint.nl)

Copyright © 2024 L. Vonk. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without written permission of the author. The copyright of the publications remains with the publishers.

A matter of appearances
how workers' aesthetics are regulated in advice, hiring, and at work

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op vrijdag 19 april 2024, te 10.00 uur

door Laura Ann Vonk
geboren te HENGELO

Promotiecommissie

<i>Promotor:</i>	dr. M.A. van den Berg	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Copromotor:</i>	dr. K. De Keere	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. S.A.E. Bracke	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. F. Fleischmann	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. M. Kremer	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. O. Sezneva	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. J. Arts	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. O. Sarpila	University of Turku

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

Contents

List of publications	9
Chapter 1 Introduction: The complexities of looking right for work	11
Chapter 2 Fitting in and being unique	43
Chapter 3 Legitimizing beauty in hiring	67
Chapter 4 Peer feedback in aesthetic labor	87
Chapter 5 Identity regulation and aesthetic control	113
Chapter 6 Conclusions: Making appearances matter for work	139
Summary	156
Nederlandse samenvatting	159
Appendix	162
Dankwoord	163

List of publications

This dissertation is based on the following articles:

Chapter 2

Vonk, L. (2023). Fitting in and being unique: How online aesthetic advice from temporary work agencies legitimises exclusions. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2169182>

Chapter 3

Vonk, L. & De Keere, K. Legitimizing beauty in hiring: an analysis of cultural repertoires in defense of appearances as selection criteria. *Currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal.*

Data were collected by Kobe De Keere and research assistants as part of the project 'Hiring on taste'. Laura Vonk and Kobe De Keere jointly analyzed the data and wrote the paper.

Chapter 4

Vonk, L. (2021). Peer Feedback in Aesthetic Labour: Forms, Logics and Responses. *Cultural Sociology*, 15(2), 213–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520962368>

Chapter 5

Vonk, L. Identity regulation and aesthetic control: the affordances and restraints of uniforms in service work. *Currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal.*

1

Introduction:

The complexities of looking right for work

Looking ‘presentable’ or ‘right’¹ for work has become increasingly important in the Netherlands. Having the right appearance is important in many labor markets in the Global North, both for finding employment and for one’s position at work. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that many job seekers look for advice on how to dress when applying for a job. An online search for this may quickly lead to, for instance, the following advice on how to dress for a job interview from one of the largest staffing agencies in the Netherlands:

Every person is different, and the most important thing is that you wear something that makes you feel good. So make a wise choice about how you dress – it’s about you feeling at ease, so that you can transfer that feeling to your conversational partner.

Don’t dress up for a job interview – just be yourself and wear your favorite pair of jeans. This is essentially what staffing and temporary work agency Manpower here tells job seekers preparing for a job interview. Tempo-Team, one of the largest labor market intermediaries in the Netherlands, agrees:

It’s all fun and nice to get advice, but it’s actually about you putting on something that makes you feel good. So just wear something that makes you feel confident. Did you shop for a hip dress, but feel it doesn’t suit your style? It’s simple! You radiate how you feel. So wear something that makes you happy. And shine on!

These exemplary pieces of advice are deceptively reassuring and simple. An online search for advice on how to prepare and dress for a job interview leads to dozens of pages from temporary work and staffing agencies, that together organize a substantial part of the Dutch labor market (Tijdens et al., 2006; Webbink, 2017). The advice promises that anything goes, so long as you feel comfortable. Taste preferences in clothing and style of self-presentation are presented as neutral and natural, not as related to status differences and inequalities. Essentially, these agencies all communicate the same lesson: the most important thing is to dress ‘authentically’. Being yourself and dressing authentically not only increases your chances of finding work, they argue, but also indicates whether you will fit in somewhere. A dress code that does not suit your personal style is ‘a bad sign’, as a temporary work consultant explains in an advice article. Another agency, likewise, explains: ‘When you feel you have to divert too much from your personal style to meet the expectations, you should

1 In this dissertation, I will not consistently place terms like these in quotation marks, but that does not mean that I consider the meanings of ‘presentable’ or ‘right’ to be universally applicable.

ask yourself whether this [work]place is right for you'. It appears that these pieces of advice both downplay and enforce the importance of looking right for work, raising the question of how aesthetics come to matter for work.

This dissertation looks into aesthetic advice, but also into how organizational gatekeepers (such as recruiters and personnel advisors) and workers themselves perceive the matter of appearances for work. I have therefore conducted interviews (together with a small team of researchers within Marguerite van den Berg's research project 'Dress Work in Precarity – The Aesthetics of Precarious Urban Labor Markets') with precariously employed workers in the service and cultural industries, with uniformed service workers, and I have analyzed interviews conducted with organizational gatekeepers (collected for Kobe De Keere's research project 'Hiring on taste'). The interviews with the gatekeepers show that not every 'authentic self' is appreciated equally. According to those actually making hiring decisions, simply 'being yourself' is not enough; authenticity should entail fitting in. In interviews conducted for this dissertation, professional recruiters and hiring managers problematized the importance of appearances in how they evaluate job candidates, while acknowledging that looks *do* matter. They emphasized that it is not about looking beautiful, but about looking 'right', which again begs the question: how do you look right? In contradiction to what the temporary work agencies say, some gatekeepers argue that job applicants should show that they have made an effort. For instance Jennifer, head of HR in an organization in the cultural sector, states: 'Once you're walking around here [as an employee] in the office it's not a problem – everyone here is dressed fairly informally. But for a job interview you need to make your best effort.' Others, however, argue that applicants who dress formally 'just don't get it' and won't fit in.

Then again, appearances that might work in a job interview can conflict with what the 'right' aesthetics are on a normal working day. Our² interviews with precariously employed workers in the creative and service industries illustrate that workers receive critical feedback from co-workers for dressing formally ('it's not like anyone minds, but there are jokes') and for wearing a dress to work ('are you going to the beach?'). And although these peers have no formal power, their aesthetic judgments are deeply felt and have actual effects on how people feel and act at work. Likewise, my interviews with uniformed workers in the service sector reveal that work clothing itself can have profound effects on work practices, and on how workers perceive themselves at work.

These examples paint a picture of the complexities of work aesthetics that might complement what the body of literature on aesthetic labor has argued so far. First, whereas this body of literature emphasizes the role of employers in regulating workers' aesthetics (e.g., Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Williams & Connell, 2010),

2 The third case study in this dissertation is based on interview data collected as part of a larger research project on how precariously employed workers monitor and adjust their appearance through dress in relation to their constantly changing work settings. A team of four researchers, including myself, conducted these interviews.

these examples teach us that not only employers but also other labor market actors, such as co-workers and gatekeepers, are involved in *making* appearances important and in shaping norms on what aesthetics are ‘right’. Secondly, whereas studies on aesthetic labor tend to emphasize employers’ top-down regulation and even coercion (Ibidem), these examples paint a picture of aesthetic regulation as a process that can also be subtle and intricate. Moreover, they suggest that clothes can deeply affect how people feel and experience themselves, which indicates that the top-down aesthetic regulation of employers, for instance in the shape of a work uniform, can have profound consequences for workers. And, finally, they illustrate how aesthetic norms can be contradictory and morally complex – also for employers and gatekeepers – which has thus far not been fully recognized (Ibidem; Timming, 2015). This raises new research questions for the field of aesthetic labor, as I will explain after first sketching the relevance of my research topic.

The significance of aesthetics in and for work is a crucial societal issue. In many contemporary societies, the pursuit of looking good has become an ‘ethical ideal’ (Widdows, 2018), placing increasing demands on appearances and establishing a ‘beauty regime’ (Kuipers, 2022). This development can be attributed to factors such as the rise of visual media, consumer culture, new media, and the transition to service-based economies. As social life becomes more demanding and complex, acceptable appearance standards have intensified (Ibidem), resulting in a rising bar of normalcy (Widdows, 2018), pertaining to both the intensity and scope of standards of appearances. The labor market and workplace serve as a notable context where the significance of aesthetics and aesthetic regulation is highly evident.

Aesthetic requirements have become a prerequisite for various types of work and, specifically in the case of the Netherlands, even for social assistance (Van den Berg & Arts, 2018). This places a burden on individuals, forcing them to adapt and conform to meet labor market demands. However, these efforts primarily benefit employers rather than workers and job seekers themselves (Besen-Cassino, 2013; Mears, 2014; Williams & Connell, 2010). Extensive academic research on aesthetic labor has identified how this phenomenon leads to exclusions and inequalities within the supposedly meritocratic domain of work. Aesthetic norms reflect racist and sexist norms, and hence the importance of aesthetics can reinforce forms of inequality and exclusions, including racism and sexism (e.g. Monk et al., 2021).

These aesthetic standards not only perpetuate sexist, racist, ableist, and ageist norms, but also present challenges or even impossibilities for certain individuals. Therefore, comprehending contemporary inequalities in Dutch society requires an understanding of how and where aesthetics become significant in work, of how aesthetic norms are reproduced, and of how the importance of aesthetics is legitimized. This dissertation aims to contribute to this understanding by looking into the *regulation* of workers’ aesthetics.

Towards new perspectives on aesthetic regulation

In this dissertation, I look into the regulation of workers' aesthetics and the reciprocal influence between aesthetics and work. I focus specifically on the Dutch service sector and creative industry, while also considering the corporate sector in one of my case studies. The service sector emphasizes interactive contact as an integral part of the provided service (Leidner, 1991; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), whereas the creative industry highlights the importance of style and self-presentation in selling taste and creativity (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; McRobbie, 2016). Less commonly associated with aesthetic labor (with the notable exceptions of McDowell (1997) and McDowell & Court (1994), the corporate sector also presents an interesting case for studying aesthetic regulation. Work in the corporate sector often also entails interactive contact with clients - as was the case for our respondents - but aesthetic norms within the corporate sector are usually very different from those in the service and creative sectors (Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

This study contributes to the existing literature on aesthetic labor by offering new perspectives on the regulation of workers' aesthetics. Previous research has primarily examined hiring and post-entry regulation by employers (e.g., Leidner, 1991; Warhurst et al., 2000; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), as well as how workers manage and control their own aesthetics (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Dean, 2005; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Holla, 2018). These studies often depict a top-down dichotomy between workers and employers, emphasizing the demanding and exclusionary nature of the aestheticization of work (Elias et al., 2017; Williams & Connell, 2010). This is somewhat in line with the early work on Labour Process Theory (LPT) by Braverman (1974), that initially focused on objective aspects of labor processes (including worker regulation) such as deskilling and Taylorist management techniques. This top-down approach, with a strong emphasis on coercion, is reflected in early studies on aesthetic labor, where direct instructions and managerial control are described and analyzed (e.g., Warhurst & Nickson, 2001).

However, broadening our perspective on what worker regulation might entail provides valuable insights for studying aesthetic labor. Burawoy (1982) famously highlighted the significance of subjective aspects of work, such as the capacity for creativity and interaction with co-workers in order to understand worker consent – a perspective that is nowadays still applied in relevant ways in order to study for instance gig work (Gandini, 2019; Purcell & Brook, 2022). This perspective is to some extent also reflected in the literature on aesthetic labor. Studies show that some workers take pride or derive status from meeting the aesthetic standards of the retail or hospitality establishment where they work, to the extent that they may accept poor working conditions (Besen-Cassino, 2013; Oejo, 2017; Sherman, 2007). Yet, there has been limited attention given recently to the role of co-workers in creating consent

in aesthetic labor, despite their importance in fostering self-discipline (Das, 2019: 10; Sewell, 1998). I believe this is a gap in the literature. I will further explain this point in the section on the triadic regulation of workers' aesthetics.

Worker regulation can be further understood by examining identities and organizational culture (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and recent studies emphasize materiality and the aesthetic dimensions of work (Hultin et al., 2021; Paring et al., 2017; Siciliano, 2016). We hence know that materiality and sensory experiences influence work identities, but surprisingly, this perspective is rarely reflected in analyses within the study of aesthetic labor on what standardized work attire actually does to workers. In other words, there is extensive discussion on how uniforms are an outcome of managerial control (see for an overview Warhurst & Nickson, 2020: 70-80), but we still know little about how uniforms can be a *means* of managerial control.

Furthermore, worker regulation does not only take place at work, but also within broader discourses and knowledge systems (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Hill, 2018). Foucauldian perspectives (Du Gay, 1996; Foucault, 1977, 1982; Rose, 1989) emphasize that power deeply penetrates the core of individuals, and that power does not solely originate from an ideology within specific individuals but resides among individuals and organizations (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Discourse does not only represent power but also possesses constructive qualities in itself. This raises questions about how individuals are motivated to make efforts in their aesthetic appearance for work beyond specific contexts, as well as how employers and managers perceive the importance of appearance within the broader process of aestheticization, given that they may have little individual control over this broader process.

In summary, I consider the regulation of workers' aesthetics not only as a result of direct coercion but as something that (1) might occur within a broader discourse about work, (2) can involve the participation of co-workers, and (3) may extend beyond simply following instructions and can have material-mediated effects on work identities. This broader understanding of regulation invites us to look at how workers learn that aesthetics are important and what aesthetics are considered 'appropriate' in different ways. Specifically, I examine three consecutive labor market moments – pre-entry advice, the gatekeeping moment, and post-entry feedback and regulation – to investigate forms of aesthetic regulation that have received little attention in research. This exploration is crucial as there is still much to learn about the subtler forms of worker regulation regarding their aesthetics.

The central research question guiding this dissertation is: *How does the regulation of workers' aesthetics in the Dutch post-industrial labor market take place?* I seek to answer this question in four separate yet complementary case studies, namely labor market intermediaries, organizational gatekeepers, co-workers, and work clothing, each looking into a specific type of actor involved in such processes of regulation. My

sub-questions and cases are:

1. *How does pre-entry regulation in the shape of aesthetic advice take place?* I use the case of aesthetic advice that staffing agencies post on their websites to answer this sub-question.
2. *How do gatekeepers legitimize appearances as hiring criteria?* I seek to answer this based on an interview study with organizational gatekeepers from the cultural and corporate sectors.
3. *How are peers involved in the regulation of workers' aesthetics at work?* I answer this sub-question based on an interview study with precariously employed workers in the interactive service and creative sectors.
4. *How do work uniforms regulate work practices and identities?* I seek to answer this sub-question based on interviews with uniformed workers in the service sector.

Taken together, the insights from these studies allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic regulation of workers, and thus contribute to the literature on aesthetic regulation and the aesthetization of work.

Context: the Dutch labor market

This research focuses on how workers are regulated in the Dutch labor market. Two significant aspects of this labor market are important to discuss for the purposes of this dissertation: the dominance of the service sector, and the increasing prevalence of flexible and precarious employment.

The service sector has been dominant in the Dutch labor market since the mid-1960s, encompassing both traditional sectors like hospitality and trade, as well as 'modern' sectors such as banking and business services (De Beer, 2001). Work in the service sector demands distinct skills, primarily centered around soft currencies like communication, social skills, and self-presentation (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). For instance, flight attendants do not only attend to passenger safety and catering but also need to maintain professionalism, engage in polite conversations, and appropriately handle passenger misconduct (Hochschild, 1983). This demands a significant commitment from workers across various aspects of their lives, notably in managing their emotions and self-presentation.

While becoming more demanding in these respects, paid work has become less secure over time. In the post-World War II period, permanent employment contracts were the norm in the Netherlands. However, in recent decades, permanent contracts have become less common, resulting in one of the most flexible labor markets among

EU-15 countries (De Beer, 2016). Non-permanent employment relationships can be classified broadly into flexible employment contracts and self-employment (Kremer et al., 2017). Various types of flexible employment contracts, including temporary contracts, on-call work, minimum/maximum hour contracts, and temporary agency work, have seen a substantial increase in prevalence (De Beer & Verhulp, 2017). Additionally, approximately 10% of workers are self-employed or freelancers (Kremer et al., 2017). Overall, between 30% and 39% of workers in the Netherlands hold insecure or flexible contracts, indicating a trend of increasing flexibility (De Beer & De Goede, 2021). This trend is relevant to this research as it highlights the need for workers to continuously prove that they fit and are productive, especially as they find themselves in new work contexts, thereby making their aesthetic self-presentation crucial (Van den Berg & Vonk, 2019).

Insecure work arrangements, such as temporary contracts, are more prevalent among lower-paid individuals and young people (De Beer & Verhulp, 2017; Dekker, 2017). This has led to the notion of a ‘gap’ in the labor market between those with permanent employment contracts and those without, as addressed by the Borstlap Committee in 2020 (Kalleberg, 2003). Flexible work often lacks genuine flexibility (e.g., due to being seasonal) and can shift risks from employers onto workers (Pugh, 2015). However, it is important to note that the depiction of a labor market divided solely between secure and insecure employment is contested, as even permanent employment offers conditional and temporary securities, and all lives are vulnerable and precarious (Van den Berg, 2021).

The Dutch labor market is partly structured by different forms of exclusion and inequality. Several field experiments demonstrated that applicants with non-Western backgrounds have significantly lower chances of being invited to a job interview when their written application reveals their background (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Lancee, 2021; Thijssen et al., 2021). Women wearing a hijab face particular high levels of discrimination, especially when applying for a job involving customer contact (Fernández-Reino et al., 2022). This is important to take into consideration in this study, particularly given the ways in which aesthetic norms contain, for instance, racist and sexist norms, as I will discuss in more detail later on.

The labor participation rate is more or less the same for men and women in the Netherlands: 72.3% in 2022 (CBS, 2023). However, 70% of working women do part-time paid work – particularly those working in care and in hospitality – compared to only 28% of working men (CBS, 2022). Norms regarding who should take care of household tasks, young children, and for instance elderly family members are still very much gendered, and studies suggest that many women feel urged to take up unpaid work (Portegijs, 2022). As a result, women perform most unpaid care tasks in many households and families (Van den Brakel et al., 2020).

Staffing agencies in the Netherlands

The first case study in this dissertation examines aesthetic advice provided by staffing agencies³, while the second involves interviews with gatekeepers, among them recruiters from these agencies. Staffing agencies serve as a compelling case for exploring norms related to aesthetic appearance in the Dutch labor market due to their influential role as labor market intermediaries.

The temporary employment sector in the Netherlands is relatively large, with 4% of the employed workforce working on temporary agency contracts in 2016, the second-highest percentage in Europe (Webbink, 2017). While over 500 temporary employment agencies are affiliated with the industry organization ABU (Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen), the market is dominated by the five largest agencies, with a combined market share of nearly 50% (Tijdens et al., 2006). In the sampling of my research I took this into account by including the large agencies that are likely the most influential. These agencies not only offer temporary jobs, but also play a crucial role in connecting employers and job seekers, often handling candidate selection processes on behalf of companies. Major agencies like Randstad primarily function as recruitment agencies, assisting companies in recruiting and selecting employees. Although exact figures on the number of workers whose employment is organized by staffing agencies are unavailable, this number would exceed the 4% who hold temporary agency contracts.

As a business case, staffing agencies depend on employers who provide them with assignments to search for and select candidates, and ultimately pay for their services. It is not uncommon for employers to have specific requests regarding the characteristics of the candidates they are seeking, such as around gender, race, or age – according to Bouma & De Ruig (2013), 83% of temp agencies reported receiving such requests. Although it is prohibited to discriminate based on these factors, studies have shown that temp agencies are often willing to comply with employers' racist preferences and, for example, only present white candidates to them (Andriessen et al., 2015; Loeters et al., 2014).

Aesthetic inequalities in the Netherlands

The issue of aesthetics and inequality in the Dutch context is largely understudied. However, two reports from the influential Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP) highlighted aesthetics as an important factor of inequality that is produced and reproduced through labor market selections and success (van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014; Vrooman et al., 2023). Despite recognizing significant conceptual and methodological limitations in their approach, I

3 I use the terms 'staffing agency' and 'temporary work agency' interchangeably here, as these agencies generally serve both functions.

will briefly discuss these two studies. Firstly, this is because they nonetheless indicate that aesthetics, even when measured in a limited way, correlate with social position in the Netherlands. Secondly, these studies illustrate remaining gaps in this theme, highlighting the contribution of my dissertation.

Van Campen & Versantvoort (2014) provide what they claim to be an initial exploration of the distribution of aesthetic capital in the Netherlands. They define aesthetic capital as: ‘a personal asset that encompasses both physical elements (looking good or slimness [*“er goed uitzien of slankheid”*]) and mental elements (radiance or charm [*“uitstraling of charme”*])’ (p. 144). They measure this type of capital by surveying individuals about their own satisfaction with their appearance, asking whether others find them attractive, and using the Body Mass Index, which they consider an ‘objective’ measure of body image (p. 145). This conceptualization of aesthetic fails to recognize that the value of this form of capital is not personal, but relational (Bourdieu, 1986). This means that there is no universal definition of what aesthetics are ‘right’, but rather that it is defined in social relations, as is the exchange value of this capital. It is, moreover, debatable whether self-satisfaction and the perception of attractiveness by others are good indicators of aesthetic capital. As expected, Van Campen & Versantvoort (2014) find that individuals with more personal capital (including aesthetic capital) have higher incomes, more frequently hold high-level positions (according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations), and have higher levels of education.

Similar findings and limitations can be found in the recently published SCP report ‘Eigentijdse ongelijkheid’ (‘Contemporary Inequality’) (Vrooman et al., 2023), which aims to demonstrate that inequality in the Netherlands encompasses more than just differences in income, education, or wealth. This report emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, and personal capital, including aesthetic capital, measured in the same way as Van Campen & Versantvoort (2014) did. Based on data on the distribution of these forms of capital, Vrooman et al. (2023) propose a new class classification for the Netherlands. Although they include ‘aesthetic capital’ in their analysis, it remains unclear what exactly this signifies about the role of aesthetics in the Netherlands. In summary, these SCP reports – of which particularly the latter received ample media attention – argue that aesthetics matter for inequality in the Netherlands. However, the limited conceptualization of aesthetics and the questionable operationalization of aesthetic capital raise questions about *how* exactly it matters.

In the Netherlands, the significance of aesthetics for accessing social assistance and paid employment is further reinforced by the government, and a broader discourse on what it takes to be ‘employable’. The regulation of individuals’ aesthetics does not solely occur through employers during selection processes or within work settings, but is part of a broader regime of aestheticization. This is evident, among other things, in the study by Van den Berg & Arts (2018) on the practical implications of the Dutch

Participation Act (2015). Since the implementation of this law, adherence to aesthetic norms has become a prerequisite for receiving financial assistance in the Netherlands. The law states that welfare recipients are obligated not to ‘obstruct employment by appearance’, with specific mentions of clothing, personal grooming, and behavior, and with a financial penalty as a potential consequence. This means that aesthetics have become a precondition for welfare rights. Van den Berg & Arts (2019) examined how this requirement is implemented in practice and how bureaucrats interpret this rule. The welfare officers in this study consistently translated this requirement into welfare clients needing to appear ‘representable.’ In the Dutch context, it is thus a formal requirement to engage in aesthetic labor and present oneself as ‘presentable’, even during periods of unemployment. Van den Berg & Arts argue that this emphasis serves as a pedagogy to achieve work readiness and to shape individuals into flexible, adaptable subjects. The focus is on teaching unemployed individuals to (aesthetically) conform to the ever-changing work context. This is significant for the present study as it sheds light on the role of aesthetics in the Netherlands, particularly within the labor market.

Literature review

1. Aesthetic labor and the aesthetization of work and society

The concept of aesthetic labor, initially developed by Warhurst & Nickson (2001), emerged from their observation of Glasgow’s transformation into a trendy post-industrial city. They noticed that employers in cafes, restaurants, boutique hotels, and shops explicitly sought employees who were ‘trendy,’ ‘attractive,’ and ‘well-spoken’ (Ibidem: 17). This service-oriented work required a specific aesthetic disposition (Bourdieu, 1984), which employers continued to control even after hiring, by engaging in practices such as screening, managing, and controlling workers based on their physical appearance (Mears, 2014: 1330). Of course the importance of looking good for work is not an entirely new phenomenon. As early as the 1950s, social scientists were paying attention to this. For instance, C. Wright Mills analyzed how a salesperson’s charm contributes to their success and observed that employers ‘buy’ the personalities of service workers (1951). What is new, however, is the magnitude and ubiquity of this importance in the workplace, how it has become a deliberate strategy for managers (Mears, 2014: 1332; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), and how the significance of looking good has become part of the contemporary discourse on what work should be and its role in the lives of individuals (Mears, 2014; Williams & Connell, 2010).

Warhurst & Nickson built upon Arlie Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor (1983) in the development of the aesthetic labor concept. Hochschild’s seminal study

on the work of flight attendants and debt collectors illustrates how managing emotions and attitudes in interactions with customers or clients are central to certain jobs. While she recognizes the importance of self-presentation (stating, ‘Display is what is sold’ (1983: 90)), Hochschild emphasizes how employees manage their emotions, how they are trained to do so, and how communication and listening form the core of their work. Centrally, she argues that emotional labor leads to workers being alienated from their own emotions, and that it contributes to their exploitation as the surplus value added by their emotional labor is extracted by their employers. Aesthetic labor shifts this focus to the management of appearance and self-presentation, highlighting the requirement to ‘look good and sound right’ (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001: 24) as professional prerequisites, but thereby somewhat neglecting the alienation and exploitation that is so central to Hochschild’s analyses. Warhurst & Nickson describe the innovative aspect of the aesthetic labor concept as follows: ‘...employers once sought to control the heads and then hearts of workers; now with aesthetic labor, they seek to do likewise with the bodies of workers’ (2020: 5). Note here how they focus not on the efforts of workers, but on what *employers* do.

Indeed, employers in many hospitality and retail businesses (and, as later demonstrated, in fields such as hairdressing (Chugh & Hancock, 2009) and fitness (Harvey et al., 2014)) actively manage the physical appearances and styles of their employees. They attempt to create a pool of ‘ideal’ workers by initially hiring individuals who fit their brand image and by then further shaping them aesthetically through dress codes and aesthetic requirements (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). These studies hence demonstrate that the regulation of workers’ aesthetics is a process that occurs at different stages and moments: pre-entry (in job advertisements), during the application process, and in the workplace. The emphasis is consistently on direct and explicit instructions and criteria (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009: 388), sometimes going as far as sending a checkout employee home to shave her legs or requiring railroad guards to roll down their sleeves to hide tattoos (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001: 29-30).

However, focusing solely on explicit regulation has proven limited for understanding the efforts individuals make to appear presentable for work, and the associated costs. Entwistle & Wissinger (2006) demonstrated in their study on models – who do not have a fixed employer but have to ‘sell’ themselves for each gig – that individuals must perform work to appear presentable even without direct control from employers. This professional requirement of ‘self-commodification’ (778) demands physical self-discipline, emotional management, and the production and presentation of a particular personality, all of which are formative of the self (Holla, 2016, 2018). Therefore, aesthetics are not simply ‘embodied’ but require continuous work, with profound implications, such as the risk of self-alienation as observed by Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2010) in the cultural industries.

These critiques bring the concept of aesthetic labor closer to its predecessor:

emotional labor. Hochschild's (1983) work sheds light on how flight attendants undergo training to manage their emotional expressions, distinguishing between 'surface acting', which essentially means putting on a performance, and 'deep acting', where flight attendants attempt to manipulate the emotions they are experiencing. In the latter case, individuals adjust and sacrifice parts of themselves and their own experiences to serve the commercial objectives of the company they work for, meaning that deep acting leads to self-alienation and hence increased exploitation of workers. This distinction emphasizes that emotional labor is not a superficial performance, which is crucial for understanding what aesthetic labor actually can mean: it goes beyond merely adapting outward appearance based on instructions, and can profoundly influence individuals' practices and experiences. This consideration is important, especially given the increasing flexibility and uncertainty of work, as discussed in the Context section. With more people working on temporary contracts or as freelancers, many workers simply do not have a single employer telling them how to look. Nevertheless, their aesthetics are still highly important for their position in the labor market. This necessitates self-governance and self-discipline (Foucault, 1982; Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1998). The compulsion to work on their aesthetics, therefore, does not solely arise from direct instructions and explicit requirements but also occurs in other, more subtle ways. Just like the flight attendants in Hochschild's analysis of emotional labor are no longer the owners of their own emotions, the appearance of aesthetic workers is no longer their own. It is something they have to invest a lot of effort in, of which the surplus value benefits employers.

The literature on aesthetic labor, as discussed, primarily attributes the increased importance of aesthetics in work to the fact that many jobs nowadays are in the service sector, where interpersonal contact, rather than the production of goods, takes center stage. In this 'aesthetic economy' (Entwistle, 2002; Hakim, 2010), looking good is a professional requirement. Additionally, this development can be situated within a broader societal trend: the aesthetization of society and everyday life (Featherstone, 1991). With the erosion of traditional institutions and identities and the increase in individualization, identities have become more flexible and changeable (Giddens, 1991). As a result, the presentation of self has become increasingly important; after all, how one presents oneself to a great extent determines one's identity (Holla & Kuipers, 2016). In addition to this, Kuipers (2022) describes several historical developments that explain the rise in aesthetic standards and the increased work people put into looking good. She argues that the rise of visual culture (with its constant exposure to images of oneself and other often attractive individuals), digitalization (which makes visual images in general more widespread), and the increased availability of consumer goods for self-enhancement have contributed to the aesthetization of Western societies. She refers to this as an 'expanding beauty regime', where aesthetic norms apply to more and more people and become increasingly demanding. In

this context, Widdows (2018) discusses beauty as an ‘ethical ideal’ and argues that aesthetics and morality are increasingly conflated.

This development shows that the importance of aesthetics is not a natural given, but socially constructed. However, there is a tendency to perceive both the significance of beauty and its interpretation as natural phenomena. This is evident for example in studies that assume beauty is evolutionarily determined and universally definable, with variations encapsulated on a two-dimensional scale (e.g., Etcoff, 2011; Singh & Singh, 2011). However, the definition of beauty varies across social contexts and throughout time, illustrating that it is socially constructed. Research by Kuipers (2015) demonstrates that how individuals evaluate and judge others’ faces depends, among other factors, on their age, gender, level of education, and whether they reside in more or less urbanized areas. Furthermore, beauty standards are established within unequal power dynamics, often reproducing other forms of inequality.

2. Reproducing inequalities through aesthetics

Perceived attractiveness has been associated with various benefits, including being perceived as trustworthy and competent, receiving higher salaries, and better evaluations (Anderson et al., 2010; Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013). Aesthetics hence can be viewed as a form of capital contributing to the accumulation of material and living goods (Bourdieu, 1986). Some authors consider it a type of human capital and emphasize that working on appearances can be a wise investment strategy (Hakim, 2010; Van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014; Vrooman et al., 2023). However, this narrow analysis of aesthetics in post-industrial societies and labor markets is problematic because it ignores the relational aspect of aesthetic as capital and because it disregards how aesthetic standards are classed, gendered, racialized, ableist and ageist. Standards of beauty and representative appearances vary across contexts and over time, highlighting their socially constructed nature (Mears, 2014; Holla & Kuipers, 2015). These standards hence reflect and perpetuate inequalities shaped by unequal power relations.

Aesthetic norms and beauty standards are, for one, closely linked to social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Vandebroek, 2016). Friedman & Laurison (2019) demonstrate that what is perceived to be an appropriate appearance varies depending on the specific classed culture of the three companies in which they conducted their research. In the accounting firm – where technical skills are relatively highly valued and where people who do not come from privileged backgrounds are more likely to ‘get in and get on’ – people dressed formally and maintained a well-groomed appearance. However, in the media company – with many employees from privileged backgrounds and a relative centrality of soft skills – individuals were expected to conform to the standards of ‘studied informality’, which meant presenting and dressing in a specific informal manner (p. 137). Navigating such contexts requires specific classed cultural knowledge,

for instance about exactly which sneakers to wear. Furthermore, body shape, language, posture, and ways of speaking are embodied dispositions, meaning that styles of self-presentation are deeply rooted in the body and difficult to change (Bourdieu, 1984). Even bodies themselves and the ways in which they are valued are linked to social class. This is evident, for example, in body size: individuals with higher social status are more likely to conform to the widely shared norm of slimness, so body size is both a question of resources and a signifier of social class (Vandebroeck, 2016; Mears, 2010: 10). The same applies to teeth: having a white, straight, and complete set of teeth has become the norm, yet not everyone can afford orthodontic treatment or replacing broken teeth (Craig, 2021). Nevertheless, a middle-class aesthetic is often a requirement for employment, as demonstrated by Williams & Connell (2010) in the retail sector, by Warhurst & Nickson (2007) in hospitality, and by Mears (2011) in modeling. Moreover, not everyone is subject to the same standards. While a tech entrepreneur may get away with wearing a hoodie and flip-flops to work, a welfare recipient applying for a job in such attire may face financial penalties due to an ‘inappropriate’ professional appearance (Van den Berg & Arts, 2019).

Moreover, aesthetic norms and the valuation of aesthetics are gendered, as highlighted by Bordo (2003), Tyler & Abbott (1998), and Wolf (2013). Women’s investment in their self-presentation is often naturalized and perceived as inherent to their femininity, reinforcing gender inequalities. However, it is overly simplistic to view femininity solely as a liability in relation to aestheticized work. The demands of aesthetic labor, for example, can also conflict with working-class masculinities in significant ways (Nixon, 2009; Van den Berg, 2019). That is not to say that working class women do not experience similar struggles, as illustrated by Rafferty’s (2011) study on class-related fashion anxieties among women.

The intersection of age and gender further shapes the importance of aesthetics in work and contributes to inequalities. Studies indicate that aging is particularly problematic for women, as they face gendered ageism in their careers (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). Female managers encounter sexualization and high aesthetic demands when they are young, while being considered unattractive or ‘menopausal’ when they reach the age of around 40. In the acting industry, Dean (2005) explains how gender and age influence the availability of roles. Women over the age of 40 face limited opportunities, while for men age has little impact on the availability and diversity of roles.

As discussed in the section outlining the research context, racism in the Dutch labor market is significant, and aesthetics in work are racialized. Likewise, in the context of the U.S., studies demonstrate that for instance black models face narrower aesthetic standards, leading to stereotyping and typecasting (De Keere, 2022; Wissinger, 2012; Zuckerman et al., 2003). And in the U.S. retail sector, employers often seek workers who embody their ideal image, which incorporates both sexist and racist elements

(Misra & Walters, 2022). For entry-level jobs, the evaluations of candidates and their soft skills are heavily influenced by race, even though managers do not attribute their negative evaluations to racism (Moss & Tilly, 1996). Instead, they refer to other criteria – soft skills – that are more morally acceptable, and hence legitimize their evaluations and selection that are essentially racist.

The significance of race in evaluating appearance and beauty is also evident. Kuipers (2015) examined how people evaluate beauty, and while the Q-results – put briefly, the results of the respondents’ sorting of pictures on a scale from least to most attractive – demonstrate that race indeed matters in people’s preferences, it is not explicitly mentioned in the interviews, where individuals elaborate on their beauty preferences. Additionally, race, gender, and perceived attractiveness interact in their impact on income, as revealed by the intersectional quantitative study conducted by Monk et al. (2021: 216). In addition to the independent effects of these variables, the impact of physical attractiveness is greatest for black women and men. Considering the racialization of beauty, black individuals, particularly women, score lower in perceived attractiveness (p. 214). Therefore, a more precise formulation of the interaction effect would be: the penalty for being deemed unattractive is greatest for black individuals in the United States (p. 221). Consistent with the findings of Moss & Tilly (1996), Monk et al. (2021: 222) conclude that ‘lookism’ represents a legal means of perpetuating gender and race-based inequality in the labor market because the importance of aesthetics serves as a legitimation for sexist and racist evaluations.

We can even extend beyond visual beauty to sonic or auditive elements. In Butler’s (2014) study on people who stutter, it is shown that those who struggle with speech fluency face discrimination from employers. Surprisingly, the respondents justified this treatment, perceiving it as their own problem for not conforming to speech norms. This demonstrates that unequal treatment is often perceived as justified, based on the repertoire that work requires looking and sounding in ways that are appealing to clients, even when individuals cannot meet the standards of self-presentation.

Aesthetics in the context of the labor market are a means through which structural inequalities are reproduced. Simultaneously, they function as a way to dismiss issues such as racism and sexism as merely aesthetic concerns, thus making them appear less illegal or harmful. The notion of ‘aesthetics as human capital’ is therefore problematic because it suggests that aesthetics is a sensible personal investment strategy, while aesthetic standards perpetuate racist, sexist, classist, ageist, and ableist norms. Not only are these standards unattainable for many individuals, but by legitimizing the importance of aesthetics, it allows for their continued use as an argument for maintaining structural exclusions. It is therefore important to understand how the importance of aesthetics for work is both legitimized and (re)produced in different contexts. I will go into this by discussing what the literature teaches us about the regulation of workers’ aesthetics.

3. The regulation of aesthetics

a. Aesthetic advice and the regulation through advice

Advice on aesthetics and/or work takes different forms, including generic advice in professional literature (De Keere, 2014; Illouz, 2007), personal advice in TV makeover programs (Skeggs, 2009), and advice provided in personal interactions (Cummins & Blum, 2015; Van den Berg, 2019). An exemplary and well-studied case in the context of job seeking is Dress for Success (DfS), where job seekers, usually sent by welfare officers in municipalities, receive guidance on putting together an outfit for a job interview. Dress for Success is originally an American concept that can also be found in various cities in the Netherlands (Cummins & Blum, 2015; Van den Berg, 2019; <https://www.dressforsuccess.nl>). This non-profit organization is subsidized by municipalities and operates small boutiques with donated clothing, run by volunteers.

Despite caring intentions, advice can create divisions between the advisor and recipient, positioning the recipient as lacking knowledge or deficient, not only in their appearances, but also in their subjectivities (Cummins & Blum, 2015; Skeggs, 2009). Van den Berg (2019: 707-9) observes how DfS employee Alice clearly conveys to job seeker Kevin that what he thought was sufficient effort is actually not enough to look 'good' for work. While he may be helped in the short term with his new outfit, this interaction reinforces his position as someone who lacks certain knowledge and makes it clear to him that he does not know how to present himself for work. These divisions can be gendered, classed (Van den Berg, 2019; Skeggs, 2009), and racial, illustrated by Cummins' (2015) observation of a DfS volunteer instructing a Black woman about her hair, saying, 'You just need to smooth it out a little (...) to look professional (p. 638). This perhaps well-intended instruction not only reinforces her class-based superior taste but also reproduces a racist norm.

Van den Berg (2019) argues that the encounters at DfS are exercises in adapting to economic and work demands, aimed at learning to be adaptable and flexible, not just in physical appearance but also in terms of identity. With each new outfit tried on, the advisors exclaim, 'There's a whole different person!' (p. 713). This highlights that it was apparently necessary to present a different self for work, and it becomes an exercise in trying out different 'selves' and being flexible. Aesthetic advice thus not only affects one's appearance but deeply influences subjectivities and how individuals position themselves in relation to others and work.

While studies have focused on personal interactions, limited knowledge exists on generic aesthetic advice found in literature, media, government websites, or company websites. Work by Boland (2016) and Handley (2018) do suggest that these websites are important in shaping positions towards work. This dissertation investigates the case of generic aesthetic advice posted on temporary work agencies' websites to understand how pre-entry regulation through generic aesthetic advice occurs. This

is valuable for the literature on aesthetic labor as it can provide empirical insights into the widely accepted discourse on the importance of aesthetics, and hence into how workers learn that aesthetics matter for work. Given that aesthetic norms are highly contextual and exclusionary, as discussed earlier, it raises the question of what exactly generic advice can propose and how it will be formulated. Furthermore, this dissertation sheds light on the role of labor market intermediaries in (re)producing aesthetic norms and the significance of aesthetics for work. Thus, this first case study explores pre-entry regulation through advice, while the second case study investigates the hiring process, which I will now describe in more detail.

b. Aesthetics and employee gatekeeping

Evaluations and choices in hiring procedures are not solely based on technical skills, credentials, work experience, and productivity; ‘soft currencies’ such as communication skills, social skills, and self-presentation also play a role in the evaluation of applicants and in ultimate hiring decisions (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; De Keere, 2023). Therefore, factors like appearances, ways of speaking, comportment, and self-presentation also come into play. In other words, aesthetics cannot be detached from what are considered as ‘soft currencies.’ Particularly in sectors where job criteria are not clear and explicit, and where evaluation processes are therefore often more ambiguous, evaluations and decisions by gatekeepers depend more on symbolic self-presentation, taste, and status (Bourdieu, 1984; Darr & Mears, 2017; Hamann & Beljean, 2021; Lamont et al., 2014). This is evident, for example, in the fact that in the Netherlands, individuals from a less privileged class background have a greater chance of finding a job in the technical-corporate sector, where hard currencies are more prominent, than in a sociocultural sector, which is more characterized by soft currencies (Güveli et al., 2012).

The importance of soft skills, including aesthetics, can serve as a legitimization for evaluations that are essentially based on factors like class, race, or gender. This point, similar to the argument made by Monk et al.’s (2021) study based on quantitative data, is supported by several qualitative studies on hiring. For instance, in an influential study on hiring in elite law firms, investment banks, and consulting firms, Rivera (2012) observed that employers often prioritize cultural similarities, such as lifestyle, leisure activities, and self-presentation, over assessing whether the applicant would be a productive employee. The managers interviewed argued that cultural matching was crucial for client interactions and for establishing a positive work environment within these highly demanding settings. De Keere’s (2023) research demonstrates how gatekeepers decode these cultural signals, thus opening up the ‘black box’ of evaluations in hiring. He for instance finds that gatekeepers consider authenticity to be important, but that the concept of ‘being yourself’ is gendered: how candidates said something and what they said were interpreted through gender-stereotypical lenses. For example, women were more likely to be seen as ‘friendly’ or ‘too serious,’

while men were more frequently perceived as ‘independent’ or ‘stubborn’ (De Keere, 2022: 99-100). This study again highlights the difficulty of evaluating soft currencies.

Gatekeepers are concerned about fairness and legitimacy in their evaluation and decision-making processes (De Keere, 2022, 2023). These decisions have significant consequences for applicants, companies, and the structuring of labor market inequalities. However, gatekeepers must navigate limited and unreliable information from candidates. This can lead to moral discomfort: gatekeepers want to make a decision that can be justified with acceptable criteria, which requires legitimizing the imperfect and flawed criteria they use and how they do so. Legitimacy is therefore a central problem that gatekeepers experience (De Keere, 2023). Importantly, legitimacy is not universal and is not something that is or is not present, but rather a process that depends on power relations and situational norms and definitions (De Keere, 2023; Johnson et al., 2006; Reinecke et al., 2017). By explaining their practices using culturally conventional reasons or justifications, people can try to achieve legitimacy (Tilly, 2008).

The role of aesthetics is something that demands legitimization above all else because, in hiring, the relevance of appearance conflicts with ideals of meritocracy and fairness. Studies on aesthetic labor often focus on the influence of aesthetics on managers’ evaluations, without examining managers’ perception of these criteria’s validity (Timming, 2015; Warhurst et al., 2000). While equal employment opportunities are increasingly valued (Dobbin, 2009), the aesthetic labor literature emphasizes how employers tend to adhere to a ‘aesthetics as human capital’ perspective and that they overlook or simply disregard the exclusionary consequences of their evaluations of job candidates and workers. Research suggests that employers seek individuals who appear attractive to clients for business purposes (Butler, 2014; Butler & Harris, 2015; Hall & van den Broek, 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010). However, the perceptions of employers regarding the fairness of evaluating appearances remain unclear.

In short, we know that aesthetics (both in terms of ‘beauty’ and cultural fit) play a role in hiring. However, it is still unclear how those making hiring decisions perceive the importance of aesthetics in hiring: do they consider appearances to be suitable criteria, or do they struggle with the fairness of their evaluations? Ultimately, gatekeepers must make decisions based on ambiguous criteria and limited information that they find acceptable and can justify to the outside world (De Keere, 2023). In case study 2, I therefore aim to answer the question of how they justify the role of appearance in their evaluation of applicants. This knowledge is crucial because it provides insight into the mechanisms that (re)produce aesthetic inequalities and related forms of systemic exclusion.

c. The triadic regulation of workers’ aesthetics

The studies I have discussed mostly assume a dichotomy between workers and

employers, emphasizing how the latter have regulatory power in enforcing and commodifying workers' aesthetics. However, it is important to acknowledge that the workplace involves a triadic relationship among employers, workers, and customers (and/or patients, students, clients, or others who 'receive' a service) (Elias et al., 2017: 14-17; McDowell, 2009: 59-60; Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Warhurst et al., 2000). Notably, employers not only shape aesthetic norms based on what they believe appeals to customers (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020: 157), but workers themselves also adhere to customer-driven aesthetic norms. For example, research conducted by Boyle and De Keere (2019) on employees in luxury retail in Amsterdam highlights the importance workers themselves place on conforming to appearance standards associated with the clientele in the city's luxury district.

Moreover, non-hierarchical colleagues, or peers, also play a significant role in shaping aesthetic norms and practices in the workplace (Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Warhurst et al., 2000). Tyler and Abbott's (1998) study on weight-watching practices among female flight attendants demonstrated that strict norms exist in the airline industry regarding women's body size, while companies seem to assume that being slim is an inherent ability of women. Therefore, female flight attendants must constantly monitor their own bodies and have their bodies monitored by peers. It is precisely this informal peer pressure – referred to as 'panoptic management' by Tyler and Abbott (1998: 440) – that is crucial in adhering to managerial aesthetic guidelines. Similarly, Warhurst et al. (2000: 13) observe that workers in retail value conform to aesthetic standards to avoid disappointing their peers. Indeed, fitting in and aligning with a specific store or hospitality establishment can be a source of status or pleasure, which can contribute to accepting exploitative working conditions (Besen-Cassino, 2013; Nath, 2011; Ocejo, 2017).

While earlier studies have primarily examined companies with explicit guidelines or uniforms, the creative industry and other workplaces often lack such formal guidelines. Nevertheless, workers' aesthetics remain crucial for their own access and the organization's status (McRobbie, 2002, 2016). In the absence of clear guidelines, providing feedback becomes more complex, potentially causing discomfort among individuals (Jarness & Friedman, 2017). Therefore, the question arises: how do peers participate in regulating workers' aesthetics in organizations without clear aesthetic guidelines? In case study 3 I answer this question, which is significant as it illuminates the informal processes of aesthetic control and the influence of taste judgments on what is often assumed to be commercially driven aesthetic labor.

d. Experiences of regulated work aesthetics

Warhurst and Nickson's (2020: 78-83) extensive research on aesthetic labor in and around Glasgow reveals that employees generally have no issue with organizational guidelines regarding their appearance. These employees apply the customary cultural

repertoires of being attractive to customers for commercial gain to explain why they find it acceptable or even beneficial to look a certain way. They state for example: ‘You’re sort of the PR for the shop (...)’ (Ibidem: 78). Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, meeting the aesthetic norms and style of an organization can be a source of status, pride, and pleasure (Besen-Cassino, 2015; Ocejo, 2017).

However, it is crucial to recognize that aesthetic regulation can have significant consequences for workers. Nath’s (2011) study on call center employees in Bangalore demonstrates how employees are required to adopt a U.S. or U.K. accent instead of their regional accent in order to minimize the ‘Indianness’ in their way of speaking, and how they are even encouraged to take on anglicized or Western names. According to Nath, this aesthetic component makes the work burdensome as employees must deny their own identity and fake an alternative one at work. This could potentially apply to aesthetic demands regarding clothing as well. Drawing on insights from materiality studies, the following section provides more theoretical background and explores empirical findings on the experiences and consequences of standardized aesthetics.

According to the materiality approach, not only do people make things, but things also make people (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014; Miller, 2010; Woodward, 2016). It challenges the semiotic approach by focusing on how the materiality of clothing influences actions, perceptions, and identities. Recent studies on work identity regulation have highlighted the significance of materiality in shaping practices and identities in organizations (Hultin, 2019; Paring et al., 2017; Siciliano, 2016). Up until recently, research on how organizations perform control through identity regulation placed emphasis on discourse (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2022; Collinson, 2003). These recent studies have shown how the role of materiality proves to be crucial in shaping practices and identities in organizations. Paring et al. (2017) conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a large European service company in the newly formed ‘Organization Department’ by higher management, which was intended to become an ‘internal consulting firm’. During the fieldwork period, a transformation program took place aimed at shaping internal consultants for a newly formed department. The goal of this program was to mold the work identities of the employees to the following characteristics: ‘rational problem solvers, always in motion and efficient, exemplars and role models, transparent and dedicated to the delivery of projects’ (p.849). Paring et al. (2017) demonstrate how a whiteboard plays a significant role in this transformation program by ‘affording’ certain bodily performances and practices. These new behaviors and postures, partly influenced by the use of material artifacts of the office, contribute to the transformation desired by higher management.

Material artifacts can also make work appealing despite bad working conditions, as Siciliano (2016) shows in his study on audio engineers in a music recording studio. The technical artifacts in the studio provide a sense of creativity in what is essentially

routine work, influencing how employees perceive their work and their working selves by making them feel they are engaged in creative work. Siciliano (2016) refers to this as ‘aesthetic enrollment’, by which he means a control strategy that taps into the sensory experiences of material at work. While it is obvious that clothing can similarly influence workers’ experiences, this concept has not yet been applied in the study of aesthetic labor.

Uniforms serve as a clear manifestation of the intersection between materiality and aesthetics. While existing research on uniforms primarily focuses on the effects of uniforms on observers (Fussel, 2002; Joseph & Alex, 1972; McVeigh, 1997; Tynan & Godson, 2019), Warhurst and Nickson (2020) do touch on employees’ views on the usefulness of uniforms, but without delving deeper into how uniforms specifically affect work practices and identities beyond their symbolic aspects. Their concept of ‘aesthetic dissonance’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2020: 81), which problematizes the discrepancy between an employee’s self-image and the look prescribed by the company, illustrates their more semiotic approach to clothing as it only concerns the stylistic or symbolic aspects of clothing, and not the material. One exception to this omission is a study by Nelson & Bowen (2000), who do pay attention to the material properties of a uniform and argue that a practical and comfortable uniform has a positive influence on how people experience their work and the role they must play within it. They demonstrate this with quantitative data, thus leaving open the question of what exactly accounts for this effect and how employees reflect on their experiences of their uniforms. Therefore, the question of how uniforms regulate work identities and practices remains partly unanswered so far. I aim to answer this question in the fourth case study of this dissertation, and thus contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what explicit, top-down aesthetic regulation does to work identities and practices.

Research design

To answer my research questions, I use a combination of qualitative research methods, specifically qualitative content analysis of aesthetic advice literature, in-depth interviews with workers, and in-depth interviews including a video-elicitation method with employee gatekeepers. The main research question and subsequent sub-questions focus on understanding the social processes involved in the regulation of workers’ aesthetics and the legitimation of the importance of aesthetics for work. The purpose of this study is hence not to causally explain certain phenomena, but to contribute to the understanding of how regulation regarding workers’ aesthetics actually happens. Because this demands a precise and concrete investigation of people’s practices, experiences and reflections, a qualitative approach is most

suitable. The upcoming chapters provide detailed explanations of each case study's methodology, while the current section offers a brief rationale for the chosen methods and an introduction to each case study.

There are three main arguments for my combination of case studies. First, it allows for an examination of different elements and actors involved in regulation, providing a comprehensive understanding of its varied forms. By exploring subtle forms of regulation, such as aesthetic advice from labor market intermediaries and gatekeepers' legitimations of the role of appearances in their evaluations, this study sheds light on overlooked aspects that shape cultural repertoires and understandings of the importance of aesthetics for work. Additionally, it challenges assumptions about organizational gatekeepers' enforcement of aesthetic norms without moral considerations, aiming to uncover cultural repertoires that perpetuate the aesthetization of work. Furthermore, this study investigates the often-neglected roles of both peers and materials in regulating workers.

Second, the case studies provide insights into different moments where aesthetic regulation occurs. Recognizing that regulation is a process unfolding over multiple sequential moments (Collier, 2011), this research examines three key moments in the labor market: pre-entry, job interviews, and post-entry. By investigating these moments, I increase the variation in relevant cases with the purpose of obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of when regulation takes place (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230). The reasons for choosing this research design of sequential labor market moments is that it provides a more comprehensive insight into the subtleties of worker regulation, by looking beyond the intra-organizational regulation exercised by employers, and it also allows for an understanding of regulation as a process.

Finally, the use of different sources of data allows for a comprehensive and triangulated study. In-depth interviews with workers provide detailed exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Video-elicitation interviews with gatekeepers simulate decision-making and legitimation processes, offering insight into hiring evaluations. The qualitative content analysis of advice literature took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the possibilities for doing fieldwork were highly limited. However, it serves a vital purpose by analyzing the real material that job seekers encounter. The methodologies of each of the separate case studies in this dissertation are briefly explained below.

Introducing my case studies

Case Study 1: Aesthetic advice from labor market intermediaries

This case study is focused on pre-entry regulation through a qualitative content analysis of aesthetic advice posted by staffing agencies on their websites. The motivations for

conducting a content analysis were partly informed by practical reasons; due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was forced to cancel my original fieldwork plans. Because of the limited possibilities of contacting people – fieldwork was not possible, but also online interviews were difficult to plan at this distressing time – I opted for an analysis of online material. Importantly, the advantages of doing so go beyond mere practical reasons. This material is interesting and relevant for the research question at hand because it is very real, in the sense that it is the actual material that is out there and that job seekers read. The method of content analysis was inspired by the work of Pauwels (2012), in which both the content of the text and the visual material are taken into careful consideration.

I collected the material for the content analysis through a Google search and by examining the websites of the 20 largest staffing agencies in the Netherlands (according to the sector organization ABU). After an initial open coding of 49 relevant websites, where I identified important themes and contradictions in the advice, I selected 13 advice articles for more in-depth study. This small number allowed me to analyze the material repeatedly using various theoretical lenses (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The cyclical process of continually revisiting the data and theory ultimately led to an analysis that exposes the inherent contradictions and tensions regarding the role of aesthetics in finding work. It suggests that the advice contains cultural repertoires that legitimize exclusions, not only based on aesthetics but also by legitimizing other forms of exclusion, such as racism.

Case Study 2: Gatekeepers legitimizing the role of appearances in hiring

In line with the point that the importance of appearances for work is in need of justification, case study 2 investigates the reflections and legitimations of organizational gatekeepers – i.e., (in-house and external) recruiters and HR managers – regarding appearances as criteria for evaluating job candidates. Hence, we look at the crucial gatekeeping moment in order to answer the question of how gatekeepers legitimize appearances as hiring criteria. This second case study is based on 40 in-depth interviews with organizational gatekeepers in the cultural and corporate sectors. The data was collected as part of a larger research project on hiring, led by Kobe De Keere (see for other articles from this project: De Keere (2023) and De Keere (2022)). In the interviews, respondents were asked to describe and reflect on how they evaluate job candidates and on how they make hiring decisions. The respondents were also asked to watch 3-minute fictional video resumes played out by actors, and to then evaluate and rank the fictional job candidates. This video-elicitation exercise (Keesman, 2022) proved useful as the ranking game evoked actual evaluations, which facilitated reflections on general hiring evaluations and practices. The two different sectors in which the respondents worked – cultural and

corporate – allowed for comparisons and helped to get a broader understanding of the importance of aesthetics than from previous studies, which mostly focused on the cultural and interactive service sectors.

Case Study 3: Aesthetic regulation by co-workers

This case study explores how co-workers provide feedback on aesthetics at work, the underlying logics of this feedback, and how workers experience receiving it. The study utilizes in-depth “wardrobe interviews” (Woodward, 2007, 2016) with precarious workers in the Netherlands working in the cultural or interactive service sectors. The data for this work was collected as part of the research project ‘Dress Work in Precarity – The Aesthetics of Precarious Urban Labor Markets’, led by Marguerite van den Berg. The experiences of precarious workers are of particular interest for studying aesthetic regulation, as these workers experience that they have to make an effort to fit in and make a good impression because they lack job security. In other words, their positions make them extra sensitive to regulation, making this case study a salient one for researching the central question in this dissertation. The interviews took place in the intimate setting of the informants’ bedrooms, in front of their wardrobes, and largely consist of respondents talking about actual pieces of clothes that were present, and could be seen and felt. This led to rich descriptions and spurred detailed accounts of occasions on which the garments were worn.

Case Study 4: Uniforms and work identity regulation

Studies of materiality have shown that how people feel, how they perceive themselves, and how they conduct their practices, is partly shaped by the ‘stuff’ that they use and that surrounds them (Miller, 2010; Klepp & Bjerck, 2014). In the fourth case study, I therefore explore how work appearances might shape experiences of the ‘self’ at work. The case I employ to do so is that of uniforms. Uniforms are both aesthetic objects with symbolic meanings and material ‘things’ with physical properties. They therefore make for an excellent case to investigate the role of aesthetic materials in workers’ identity regulation at work, or: how an imposed and standardized work aesthetic shapes work identities and practices. In case study 4 I therefore look into what uniforms – as both aesthetic symbols and material things – do in the regulation of workers’ practices and experiences of self at work. In order to answer this question, I conducted 11 interviews with train conductors in the Netherlands and 10 interviews with servers in fine dining restaurants in Amsterdam. In the interviews, the respondents either wore their uniform or brought their uniform with them, which encouraged them to describe the material and to reflect on how the uniform felt to them and what that did to them when working. This method of interviewing, in which material objects such as clothing are a central aspect, was inspired by Woodward (2007), Klepp & Bjerck (2014), and Velthuis & Van der Laan (2016).

Overview of this dissertation

The following chapters are structured according to the sequential steps a person might take in finding work, and once in work. The table below provides an overview of each case study's moment within the process of regulation, the element of regulation central to the study, the actor under study, the specific research question, and the method employed to answer it.

	Chapter 2: Fitting in and being unique	Chapter 3: Legitimizing beauty in hiring	Chapter 4: Peer feedback in aesthetic labor	Chapter 5: Identity regulation and aesthetic control
Moment of process	Pre-entry	Gatekeeping moment	Post-entry (at work)	Post-entry (at work)
Element of regulation	Advice on how to look at job interview	Cultural repertoires for legitimizing the role of appearances in evaluations of job candidates	Peer feedback regarding aesthetics at work	Materiality: How uniforms regulate workers
Actor	Staffing agencies	Gatekeepers	Peers	Things, materiality
Research question	<i>How does pre-entry regulation in the shape of aesthetic advice take place?</i>	<i>How do gatekeepers legitimize appearances as hiring criteria?</i>	<i>How are peers involved in the regulation of workers' aesthetics at work?</i>	<i>How do work uniforms regulate work practices and identities?</i>
Method	Qualitative content analysis of online advice from staffing agencies	In-depth interviews with video elicitation	Wardrobe interviews with precarious workers in the interactive services and creative sectors	In-depth interviews with workers in interactive service jobs

In the final chapter (Chapter 6), I bring together the findings from each empirical chapter and formulate an answer to the central research question. Moreover, I explain what these findings mean for our understanding of the persistence and reproduction of inequalities related to personal aesthetics at the levels of workers, organizations, and society.

References

- Adkins, L., & Lury, C. (1999). The labour of identity: performing identities, performing economies. *Economy and Society*, 28(4), 598–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149900000020>
- Ainsworth, S., & Hardy, C. (2009). Mind over body: Physical and psychotherapeutic discourses and the regulation of the older worker. *Human Relations*, 62(8), 1199–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709334490>
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: producing the appropriate individual. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(5), 0022–2380.
- Anderson, T. L., Grunert, C., Katz, A., & Lovascio, S. (2010). Aesthetic Capital: A Research Review on Beauty Perks and Penalties. *Sociology Compass*, 4(8), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00312.x>
- Andreoni, J., & Petrie, R. (2008). Beauty, gender and stereotypes: Evidence from laboratory experiments. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 29(1), 73–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2007.07.008>
- Andriessen, I., Ent, B. Van Der, Linden, M. Van Der, & Dekker, G. (2015). *Op afkomst afgewezen*. https://www.sep.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2012/Op_achterstand
- Besen-Cassino, Y. (2013). Cool Stores Bad Jobs. *Contexts*, 12(4), 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504213511215>
- Boland, T. (2016). Seeking a role: disciplining jobseekers as actors in the labour market. *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(2), 334–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015594097>
- Bordo, S. (2003). *Unbearable weight: feminism, western culture, and the body*. University of California Press.
- Bouma, S., & De Ruig, L. (2013). *Verkoopster gezocht (m/v). Onderzoek naar de aard en omvang van discriminatie in de uitzendbranche*.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Boyle, B., & De Keere, K. (2019). Aesthetic labour, class and taste: Mobility aspirations of middle-class women working in luxury-retail. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 706–722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119827753>
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labour and monopoly capital*. Monthly Review Press.
- Brown, A. D. (2022). Identities in and around organizations: Towards an identity work perspective. *Human Relations*, 75(7), 1205–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726721993910>
- Brown, P., & Hesketh, A. (2004). *The mismanagement of talent: Employability and jobs in the knowledge economy*. Oxford University Press.
- Burawoy, M. (1982). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(5), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013501956>
- Butler, C., & Harris, J. (2015). Pills, ills and the ugly face of aesthetic labour: ‘They should’ve discriminated against me.’ *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(3), 508–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014559965>
- CBS. (2022). *Wie werken het vaakst in deeltijd?*
- CBS. (2023). *Arbeidsparticipatie naar leeftijd en geslacht*.
- Chugh, S., & Hancock, P. (2009). Networks of aestheticization: The architecture, artefacts and embodiment of hairdressing salons. *Work, Employment and Society*, 23(3), 460–476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017009337060>
- Collinson, D. L. (2003). Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization*, 10(3), 527–547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084030103010>
- Craig, M. L. (2021). Orthodontics as expected beauty work. In M. L. Craig (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics* (pp. 273–285). Routledge.
- Cummins, E. R., & Blum, L. M. (2015). “Suits to self-sufficiency”: *Dress for Success and Neoliberal Maternalism*. 29(5), 623–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215591949>
- Darr, A., & Mears, A. (2017). Locating local knowledge in global networks: Scouting in fashion and football. *Poetics*, 62, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.03.001>
- Das, D. (2019). *7 Towards a Theoretical Framework for Organizational Surveillance Towards a Theoretical Framework for Organizational Surveillance*.
- De Beer, P. (2001). *Over Werken in de Postindustriële Samenleving*.
- De Beer, P. (2016). *Publicatie nr. 14: “Onzeker werk”*.
- De Beer, P., & De Goede, M. (2021). *Publicatie nr. 23: Werkgeversmotieven voor flexibele arbeidsrelaties*.
- De Beer, P., & Verhulp, E. (2017). *Dertig vragen en antwoorden over flexibel werk*.
- De Keere, K. (2014). From a self-made to an already-made man: A historical content analysis of professional advice literature. *Acta Sociologica (United Kingdom)*, 57(4), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699314552737>
- De Keere, K. (2023). *Justifying employee gatekeeping: a video-elicitation and comparative study on resolving moral unease during hiring*. <https://osf.io/5p69w/download>
- Dean, D. (2005). Recruiting a self: Women performers

- and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(4), 761–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005058061>
- Dekker, F. (2017). Flexibilisering in Nederland: trends, kansen en risico's. In M. Kremer, R. Went, & A. Knottnerus (Eds.), *Voor de zekerheid: de toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid* (pp. 69–89). Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR).
- Di Stasio, V., Lancee, B., Veit, S., & Yemane, R. (2021). Muslim by default or religious discrimination? Results from a cross-national field experiment on hiring discrimination. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(6), 1305–1326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622826>
- Dobbin, F. (2009). *Inventing equal opportunity*. Princeton University Press.
- Du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at work*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (A. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1
- Entwistle, J. (2002). *The Aesthetic Economy The production of value in the field of fashion modelling*.
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Etcoff, N. (2011). *Survival of the Prettiest. The Science of Beauty*. Random House .
- Featherstone, M. (1991). *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. Sage.
- Fernández-Reino, M., Di Stasio, V., & Veit, S. (2022). Discrimination Unveiled: A Field Experiment on the Barriers Faced by Muslim Women in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcac032>
- Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2014). Power in Management and Organization Science. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), 237–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.875671>
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208–228). University of Chicago Press.
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press.
- Fussel, P. (2002). *Uniforms: why we are what we wear*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Gandini, A. (2019). Labour process theory and the gig economy. *Human Relations*, 72(6), 1039–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718790002>
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- Güveli, A., Luijckx, R., & Ganzeboom, H. B. G. (2012). Patterns of intergenerational mobility of the old and new middle classes in a post-industrial society: Netherlands 1970–2006. *Social Science Research*, 41(2), 224–241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.11.002>
- Hakim, C. (2010). Erotic Capital. *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 499–518. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq014>
- Hall, R., & Van den Broek, D. (2012). Aestheticising retail workers: Orientations of aesthetic labour in Australian fashion retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427592>
- Hamann, J., & Beljean, S. (2021). Career gatekeeping in cultural fields. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 9(1), 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-019-00078-7>
- Hamermesh, D. S., & Abrevaya, J. (2013). Beauty is the promise of happiness? In *European Economic Review* (Vol. 64). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2013.09.005>
- Handley, K. (2018). Anticipatory Socialization and the Construction of the Employable Graduate: A Critical Analysis of Employers' Graduate Careers Websites. *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(2), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016686031>
- Harvey, G., Vachhani, S. J., & Williams, K. (2014). Working out: aesthetic labour, affect and the fitness industry personal trainer. *Leisure Studies*, 33(5), 454–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2013.770548>
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2010). “A very complicated version of freedom”: Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics*, 38(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Holla, S. (2016). Justifying Aesthetic Labor: How Fashion Models Enact Coherent Selves. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 45(4), 474–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615575067>
- Holla, S. (2018). *Beauty, work, self: How fashion models experience their aesthetic labor*. University of Amsterdam.
- Holla, S., & Kuipers, G. (2016). Aesthetic capital. In L. Hanquinet & M. Savage (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture* (pp. 290–305). Routledge.
- Hultin, L. (2019). On becoming a sociomaterial researcher: Exploring epistemological practices grounded in a relational, performative

- ontology. *Information and Organization*, 29(2), 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2019.04.004>
- Hultin, L., Introna, L. D., & Mähring, M. (2021). The decentered translation of management ideas: Attending to the conditioning flow of everyday workpractices. *Human Relations*, 74(4), 587–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719897967>
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity.
- Jarness, V., & Friedman, S. (2017). ‘I’m not a snob, but...’: Class boundaries and the downplaying of difference. *Poetics*, 61, 14–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.11.001>
- Johnson, C., Dowd, T. J., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2006). Legitimacy as a Social Process. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32(1), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101>
- Joseph, N., & Alex, N. (1972). The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective. In *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 77, Issue 4).
- Jyrkinen, M., & McKie, L. (2012). Gender, age and ageism: Experiences of women managers in Finland and Scotland. *Work, Employment and Society*, 26(1), 61–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017011426313>
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2003). Flexible firms and labor market segmentation: Effects of workplace restructuring on jobs and workers. In *Work and Occupations* (Vol. 30, Issue 2, pp. 154–175). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888403251683>
- Keere, K. De. (2022). Evaluating Self-Presentation: Gatekeeping Recognition Work in Hiring. *Cultural Sociology*, 16(1), 86–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211032527>
- Keesman, L. D. (2022). Action accounts of police-civilian interactions: Using video elicitation to explore police officers’ how-to knowledge. *Poetics*, 91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101561>
- Klepp, I. G., & Bjerck, M. (2014). A methodological approach to the materiality of clothing: Wardrobe studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(4), 373–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2012.737148>
- Kremer, M., Went, R., & Knottnerus, A. (2017). Voor de zekerheid. De toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid. In *Verkenningen Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*. <https://www.wrr.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2017/02/07/voor-de-zekerheid>
- Kuipers, G. (2015). Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries. *Poetics*, 53, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.10.001>
- Kuipers, G. (2022). The expanding beauty regime: Or, why it has become so important to look good. *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 13(2), 207–228. https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00046_1
- Lamont, M., Beljean, S., & Clair, M. (2014). What is missing? Cultural processes and causal pathways to inequality. *Socio-Economic Review*, 12(3), 573–608. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwu011>
- Lancee, B. (2021). Ethnic discrimination in hiring: comparing groups across contexts. Results from a cross-national field experiment. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(6), 1181–1200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622744>
- Leidner, R. (1991). *Serving Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work, and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs*. 5(2), 154–177.
- Loeters, E., Backer, A., & Andriessen, I. (2014). Uitzendbureaus: gekleurde doorgeefluiken? *Tijdschrift Voor Arbeidsvraagstukken*, 30(4), 341–349.
- McDowell, L. (1997). *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*. Blackwell.
- McDowell, L. (2009). Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities. In *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444310214>
- McDowell, L., & Court, G. (1994). Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks. *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, 12(6), 727–750. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d120727>
- McRobbie, A. (2002). Clubs To Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded Up Creative Worlds. *Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 516–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380210139098>
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity.
- McVeigh, B. (1997). Wearing ideology: How uniforms discipline minds and bodies in Japan. *Fashion Theory*, 1(2), 189–214.
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12211>
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. The Polity Press.
- Misra, J., & Walters, K. (2022). *Walking mannequins: How race and gender inequalities shape retail clothing work*. University of California Press.
- Monk, E. P., Esposito, M. H., & Lee, H. (2021). *Beholding Inequality: Race, Gender, and Returns to Physical Attractiveness in the United States I*.
- Moss, P., & Tilly, C. (1996). “Soft” skills and race: An investigation of blackmen’s employment problems. *Work and Occupations*, 23(3), 252–276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888496023003002>
- Nath, V. (2011). Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma: National identity management and racial abuse in offshored Indian call centres. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(4), 709–725. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017011419726>
- Nelson, K., & Bowen, J. (2000). The Effect of Employee Uniform on Employee Satisfaction. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 41(2),

- 86–95.
- Nixon, D. (2009). “I can’t put a smiley face on”: Working-class masculinity, emotional labour and service work in the “new economy.” *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(3), 300–322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00446.x>
- Ocejo, R. E. (2017). *Masters of Craft: Old jobs in the new urban economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Paring, G., Pez , S., & Huault, I. (2017). ‘Welcome to the whiteboard, the new member of the team’: Identity regulation as a sociomaterial process. *Organization*, 24(6), 844–865. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508416686407>
- Pauwels, L. (2012). A Multimodal Framework for Analyzing Websites as Cultural Expressions. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 247–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01572.x>
- Portegijs, W. (2022). *Eens deeltijd, altijd deeltijd. Waarom vrouwen in deeltijd blijven werken als ze ‘uit’ de kleine kinderen zien*.
- Pugh, A. (2015). *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity*. Oxford University Press.
- Purcell, C., & Brook, P. (2022). At Least I’m My Own Boss! Explaining Consent, Coercion and Resistance in Platform Work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 36(3), 391–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020952661>
- Rafferty, K. (2011). Class-based emotions and the allure of fashion consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(2), 239–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540511403398>
- Reinecke, J., Van Bommel, K., & Spicer, A. (2017). When Orders of Worth Clash: Negotiating Legitimacy in Situations of Moral Multiplexity. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 52, 33–72.
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>
- Rose, N. (1989). *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. Routledge.
- Sewell, G. (1998). The Discipline of Teams: The Control of Team-Based Industrial Work through Electronic and Peer Surveillance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43(2), 397–428.
- Sherman, R. (2007). *Class acts: Service and inequality in luxury hotels*. University of California Press.
- Siciliano, M. (2016). Disappearing into the Object: Aesthetic Subjectivities and Organizational Control in Routine Cultural Work. *Organization Studies*, 37(5), 687–708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840615626464>
- Singh, D., & Singh, D. (2011). Shape and Significance of Feminine Beauty: An Evolutionary Perspective. *Sex Roles*, 64(9), 723–731. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9938-z>
- Skeggs, B. (2009). The moral economy of person production: The class relations of self-performance on “reality” television. *Sociological Review*, 57(4), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01865.x>
- Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. University of Chicago Press.
- Thijssen, L., Coenders, M., & Lancee, B. (2021). Ethnic Discrimination in the Dutch Labor Market: Differences Between Ethnic Minority Groups and the Role of Personal Information About Job Applicants—Evidence from a Field Experiment. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22(3), 1125–1150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-020-00795-w>
- Tijdens, K., Klaveren, M. Van, Houwing, H., Meer, M. Van Der, & Essen, M. Van. (2006). *Temporary Agency Work in the Netherlands* (Issue 06). Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies. http://www.uva-aias.net/files/working_paper/WP54.pdf
- Tilly, C. (2008). *Why? What happens when people give reasons...and why*. Princeton University Press.
- Timming, A. R. (2015). Visible tattoos in the service sector: a new challenge to recruitment and selection. *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(1), 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014528402>
- Tyler, M., & Abbott, P. (1998). Chocs away: Weight watching in the contemporary airline industry. *Sociology*, 32(3), 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038598032003002>
- Tynan, J., & Godson, L. (2019). *Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World* (J. Tynan & L. Godson, Eds.). Bloomsbury.
- Vallas, S. P., & Christin, A. (2018). Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to “Personal Branding” Discourse. *Work and Occupations*, 45(1), 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417735662>
- Vallas, S. P., & Hill, A. L. (2018). Reconfiguring Worker Subjectivity: Career Advice Literature and the “Branding” of the Worker’s Self. *Sociological Forum*, 33(2), 287–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sof.12418>
- Van Campen, C., & Versantvoort, M. (2014). *Aantrekkelijk gezond: de sociale gevolgen van verschillen in fysiek, mentaal en esthetisch kapitaal*. December 2014, 174.
- Van den Berg, M. (2019). Precarious masculinities and gender as pedagogy: aesthetic advice-encounters for the Dutch urban economy. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 26(5), 700–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1551782>
- Van den Berg, M. (2021). *Werk is geen oplossing*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2018). The Aesthetics of Work-Readiness: Aesthetic Judgements and Pedagogies for Conditional Welfare and Post-Fordist Labour Markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018758196>

- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2019). Who can wear flip-flops to work? Ethnographic vignettes on aesthetic labour in precarity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861621>
- Van den Berg, M., & Vonk, L. (2019). The new discomforts of precarious workers: Wardrobe matter, insecurity and the temporality of calibration in dress work. *The Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119892402>
- Van den Brakel, M., Portegijs, W., & Hermans, B. (2020). *Emancipatiemonitor 2020*.
- Van der Laan, E., & Velthuis, O. (2016). Inconspicuous dressing: A critique of the construction-through-consumption paradigm in the sociology of clothing. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513505609>
- Vandebroeck, D. (2016). *Distinctions in the Flesh Social Class and the Embodiment of Inequality*. Routledge.
- Vrooman, C., Boelhouwer, J., Iedema, J., & Van der Torre, A. (2023). *Eigentijdse ongelijkheid: de postindustriële klassenstructuur op basis van vier typen kapitaal*. www.scp.nl
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2001). *Looking good, sounding right*. Industrial Society.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2007). A new labour aristocracy? Aesthetic labour and routine interactive service. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(4), 785–798. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017007082887>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2009). “Who’s got the look?” emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour in interactive services. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(3), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00450.x>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2020). *Aesthetic Labour*. Sage.
- Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Witz, A., & Cullen, A. M. (2000). Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: Some case study evidence from the “new” Glasgow. *Service Industries Journal*, 20(3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642060000000029>
- Webbink, E. (2017). *De uitzendbranche in Nederland sinds 2005*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). https://www.cbs.nl/-/media/_pdf/2017/43/de-uitzendbranche-in-nederland.pdf
- Widdows, H. (2018). *Perfect me: beauty as an ethical ideal*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). “Looking good and sounding right”: Aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Wissinger, E. (2012). Managing the semiotics of skin tone: Race and aesthetic labor in the fashion modeling industry. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427591>
- Wolf, N. (2013). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. Random House.
- Woodward, S. (2007). *Why women wear what they wear*. Berg.
- Woodward, S. (2016). Object interviews, material imaginings and ‘unsettling’ methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture. *Qualitative Research*, 16(4), 359–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115589647>
- Wright Mills, C. (1951). *White collar. The American middle classes* (1969th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Zuckerman, E. W., Kim, T. Y., Ukanwa, K., & Von Rittmann, J. (2003). Robust Identities or Nonentities? Typecasting in the Feature-Film Labor Market. In *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 108, Issue 5, pp. 1018-1074+i). <https://doi.org/10.1086/377518>

2

Fitting in and being unique: How online aesthetic advice from staffing agencies legitimizes exclusions

An earlier version⁴ of this chapter is published as a research article in:
European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology (2023), 1–21

⁴ The main changes compared to this publication are: 1) I have added the main research question of this dissertation; 2) in the published version, I predominantly used the term 'temporary work agency'. Upon further reflection, I realized that 'staffing agency' better aligns with the actual core business of many of these organizations, so I have made this adjustment. And 3) in the current chapter, I discuss what this case study contributes to the main question of the dissertation.

Abstract

This chapter investigates the aesthetic advice posted by staffing agencies on their websites. These agencies organize a substantial part of the Dutch labor market and they are known to apply exclusionary practices in their strategies of recruitment and selection in order to meet employers' preferences. This chapter sheds light on (1) the content of the advice; (2) how the advice legitimizes the importance of aesthetics for finding work; and (3) in what ways the advice serves the purposes of the agencies. An in-depth content analysis illustrates how the advice has the potential to reproduce exclusions, thus helping employment agencies adhere to employers' exclusionary requests. Creating online content that generates traffic to the websites in this case causes a circular logic in which the importance of aesthetics is self-reinforcing. The study illustrates that the seemingly neutral advice posted on websites may enforce exclusions in the temporary work labor market.

Keywords

Aesthetic labor, lookism, aesthetic economy, employment inequality, online advice, labor market intermediaries

Introduction

Staffing agencies⁵ have taken it upon themselves to advise job seekers on how to dress and present themselves for job interviews. On their websites, many of these agencies – that together organize a substantial part of the Dutch labor market (Tijdens et al., 2006; Webbink, 2017) – post lists and articles on how to dress, look, smell, and sound in order to increase chances of finding employment. These advice articles are read by large audiences. In fact, many are primarily written for the purpose of attracting traffic to temp agencies' websites. A manager from one staffing agency explained in an interview how the advice is part of their marketing strategy:

[W]e try to attract as many people from our target audience as possible to our website, by publishing stories and blogs that they find interesting. And then of course clothing is something (...) that interests people. (...) Nowadays it is of course very important to attract as many people as possible to your website; in our case, to find new clients, but also good candidates.

This excerpt illustrates how the advice is not primarily intended to help or inform job seekers, but rather serves the commercial purpose of attracting visitors to their website (Adkins, 2008). Moreover, by giving advice, the agencies frame themselves as providing a useful service to job seekers. In the Dutch labor market, staffing agencies have an increasingly important intermediary role in bringing together employers and job seekers. They are involved in making hiring decisions, either directly or for instance by deciding which workers are to be introduced to which employers. Hence, these intermediary organizations are important gatekeepers, arguably making their advice meaningful to job seekers. At the same time, temp agencies do not primarily serve job seekers. Their business case is finding the 'right' candidates for their clients, i.e., employers – even in cases where employers stipulate certain demands pertaining to race, gender, or age. An overwhelming majority (83% in 2012) of temp agencies state that they have received requests from employers to only select candidates with certain personal traits (Bouma & De Ruig, 2013). Studies have shown that temp agencies are often willing to adhere to employers' preferences to such an extent that they for instance consent to only introducing white candidates to the employer (Andriessen et al., 2015; Loeters et al., 2014). Given their business case of helping employers find the 'right' candidates, staffing agencies profit from legitimizing different forms of exclusions.

5 In this chapter, I use the terms staffing agency and temporary work agency (or temp agency) interchangeably, as these agencies usually perform both functions.

The present study acknowledges that giving aesthetic advice and legitimizing aesthetic criteria is both practically and morally complex. A first, and practical, difficulty is that aesthetic norms are dependent on context. Sectors and organizations have particular aesthetic norms, which can be as specific as the type of sneaker that should be worn (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). How, then, do these agencies give universal advice? Moreover, many aesthetic aspects that evidently matter for how someone is perceived – such as height, body shape and size (Van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014; Vandebroek, 2016), and skin color (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Kwan & Trautner, 2009) – are immutable. Accordingly, many aspects of self-presentation that are not malleable have actual consequences, and aesthetic norms tend to reproduce systemic inequalities. Although earlier studies have shown that professional advice can have regulative power over individuals in shaping their positions towards work (Boland, 2016; Cummins & Blum, 2015; De Keere, 2014; Handley, 2018; Illouz, 2007; van den Berg, 2019), we still know little about generic aesthetic advice for work, and how this type of advice might regulate individuals. This chapter therefore addresses the following question: *How does pre-entry regulation in the shape of aesthetic advice take place?* I aim to answer this research question by clarifying the following sub-questions: (1) What is the content of the aesthetic advice posted on staffing agencies' websites?; (2) How is the importance of aesthetics for finding work discussed and legitimized in this advice?; and (3) In what ways does the advice serve the purposes of the staffing agencies?

The online aesthetic advice from staffing agencies offers a relevant case study for gaining more understanding of the moral complexities of the importance of aesthetics for and in work, and of how workers' positions towards work aesthetics are regulated (Sarpila et al., 2021). Previous literature has outlined how employers screen and manage the aesthetics of workers (for an overview: Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), how employees comply with aesthetic norms (e.g., Boyle & de Keere, 2019; Mears, 2014; Misra & Walters, 2022; Williams & Connell, 2010), and how co-workers are involved in upholding aesthetic norms (Tyler & Abbott, 1998). The role of labor market intermediaries and gatekeepers has thus far received less attention and little is known about how they enforce and legitimize aesthetic norms and lookism (Warhurst et al., 2009) at work. Moreover, earlier studies have analyzed aesthetic advice for work provided in personal interactions (Cummins & Blum, 2015; Van den Berg, 2019), but we still know little about the content and regulative potential of generic aesthetic advice aimed at large audiences.

The present study of the role of staffing agencies offers a contribution to the literature on appearance-related inequality and discrimination in working life. On the one hand, staffing agencies are commercially invested in adhering to employers' (exclusionary) wishes, as their business model requires them to find and hire workers that fit the image of what employers are looking for. On the other hand, their brokering

position also requires them to cater to the needs of job seekers/employees, which is reflected in the special section of the agencies' websites on ethics in which they explicitly state that they do not discriminate and that they promote equal opportunities. This conflicting position of staffing agencies makes their aesthetic advice a pertinent case. Moreover, the generic online pieces of advice are relevant for the question at hand because they form a discourse on how the relevance of aesthetics for work is discussed. This study is not about uncovering secretly exclusionary practices, but rather about how aesthetics as a source of employment inequality is discussed in these publicly accessible articles. These advice articles are important because they are evidently what people looking for aesthetic advice online – often people who are precariously employed or unemployed and hence circumstantially compelled to work on finding employment – will actually find. Because of their dominant position as brokers, the staffing agencies diffuse standards, even beyond their own clients. These websites can be regarded as expressions of how the relevance of aesthetics in work is discussed, and it could be argued that the online information can even reinforce offline practices and beliefs regarding the role of aesthetics in job application procedures (Pauwels, 2005).

This study is based on an in-depth content analysis of aesthetic advice articles found on 13 websites of staffing agencies, selected from a larger corpus of online advice articles from these agencies based on considerations of data richness and representativeness of the staffing agency sector (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Extensive reading of the material shows that the advice is strikingly unhelpful. As the advice is not effective for those job seekers actually looking for aesthetic advice, this chapter analyses how these advice articles have the potential to serve the temp agencies. In-depth analysis of the advice illustrates how the importance of personal aesthetics is legitimized and how the paradoxical advice of fitting in while being authentic promotes (self-)exclusion. It concludes that the seemingly neutral pseudo-advice posted on websites for marketing reasons has the potential to enforce exclusions in the labor market, thus serving the temp agencies' commercial interests.

The complexities of aesthetic advice for work

Looking good is important for finding work. This has been illustrated extensively for 'front stage' work such as retail and hospitality (Leidner, 1991; Warhurst & Nickson, 2001, 2020; Williams & Connell, 2010). However, not only in interactive service jobs are personal aesthetics key to finding employment. In an aestheticized society and economy (Elias et al., 2017; Featherstone, 2007), presenting the self in the 'right' way is a prerequisite for work in general. In other words, looking 'right' is part of a model's or sales assistant's job, but it is also important for jobs in which looks are not

part of the product being sold. Displaying the right type of appearance and style is an implicit job requirement in post-industrial economies (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Elias et al., 2017; Holla & Kuipers, 2016; Misra & Walters, 2022; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Williams & Connell, 2010).

Accomplishing the right type of appearance and style for work is not a simple task. Aesthetic norms tend to be unclear and, for many, unattainable. Equally, giving advice on how to look right for work is complicated, for two main reasons: firstly, aesthetic norms are ambiguous and contextual and, secondly, aesthetic norms tend to reproduce systemic inequalities. A first reason for why giving (generic) aesthetic advice for work is complicated is that norms differ per context. The general dress code in the corporate sector is very different from the general aesthetic norms in the cultural sector – not to mention more specific norms even within organizations. Looking right for work is not as simple as putting on a suit; accomplishing the right informal look requires very particular and subtle cultural knowledge (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Moreover, the interpretation of aspects of aesthetic self-presentation depends on person and context. As Van den Berg and Arts (2019) have illustrated, tech entrepreneurs can wear flip-flops and hoodies to work, whereas the unemployed might be penalized by social services for wearing the exact same items to a job interview. Aesthetic norms, in short, can be highly ambiguous.

A second difficulty is related to the moral ambivalence of giving aesthetic advice, as such advice is not innocent or neutral (Skeggs, 2009). What is deemed acceptable or attractive is socially constructed in systemically unequal power relations (Holla & Kuipers, 2016; Mears, 2014). As the previous example of the divergent interpretations of flip-flops illustrates: not everyone is able to meet the standard, and not everyone is equally able to use their self-presentation to their advantage (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020). This is partly because some things are fixed, such as face, height, size, skin color, hair, and age, while being important for esteem and status (Van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014; Vandebroek, 2016). Other aspects of appearance might seem easy to adjust, but require context-specific cultural knowledge and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Consequently, the importance of personal aesthetics for work conflicts with the ideal of equal labor opportunities, which staffing agencies on their websites claim to find important. Rather than an asset to be employed by anyone (Hakim, 2010), appearances tend to reproduce intersecting inequalities (Mears, 2014).

In sum, giving aesthetic advice to job seekers is both practically difficult and morally complicated. Earlier studies on aesthetic performances in work have mostly looked into how inequalities come into being in practice, for instance in hiring decisions and at work. The present study advances the literature of aesthetics and inequalities by going into the question of how the importance of aesthetics – and its accompanying inequalities – is considered and reckoned with by staffing agencies in

their aesthetic advice to job seekers. This is important, given that power and control over workers does not only take place in the workplace, but also within broader discourses and knowledge systems (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Hill, 2018).

Contradictory advice on job finding

Style, grooming, demeanor, and dress are all part of what are considered soft skills. These are central to the job interview – for which only candidates who have the right technical skills are invited, after all (Jackson, 2006). Employee selection is hence not only based on technical requirements, but also and importantly on ‘match’ (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Rivera, 2012; Sharone, 2014). The candidate needs to fit within the organization in order to be hired. This fit is classed, racialized and gendered, and is expressed through aesthetics and styles of self-presentation. The importance of aesthetic performance is partly due to physical beauty and, relatedly, to bodily displays of class. In the elite organizations Rivera (2012) studied, employers declared a preference for candidates who expressed similar classed lifestyles and preferences (Ingram & Allen, 2019). Also for entry-level jobs, showing cultural fit is important (Moss & Tilly, 1996).

Accordingly, it might be expected that advice on job finding centers on the message that creating a ‘match’ with the organization is key. However, in a post-industrial service economy, the right kind of self-presentation does not allow for a standardized uniform or a standard set of aesthetic norms. Job seekers need to express the right kind of unique individuality and personality (cf. Skeggs, 2009 on make-over TV).

The question of how to find a job in a post-industrial labor market is therefore often answered by the idea of ‘personal branding’ in order to increase ‘employability’ (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Studies have demonstrated how this ideology of employability is communicated in work-related advice, both from governments (Van den Berg & Arts, 2018) and from employers themselves (Boland, 2016; Handley, 2018), and how this generates self-blame (Sharone, 2014). In the Netherlands and in other liberal market economies, individuals are expected to put effort into and to take responsibility for their ‘employability’ – that is, ‘the capacity of individuals to adapt to the demands of employment’ (Garsten & Jacobsen, 2004: 8) – not only for employers, but also for the government, social services, and educational institutions (Van den Berg and Arts, 2018). Key to this ‘personal marketability’ (Vallas & Cummins, 2015) is demonstrating attitudes such as adaptability and flexibility, showing potential (Handley, 2018: 242), and even submission (Purser & Hennigan, 2017). In other words, employability is very much about *presenting the self* in an attractive, authentic, unique way. The imperative to present the self as authentic and original inherently conflicts with generic aesthetic advice.

In conclusion, (aesthetic) advice on job finding contains a paradox. Job seekers are required to both match with the organization they are applying to while expressing (the right kind of) unique individuality and personality. Based on a content analysis of advice found on the websites of staffing agencies, this study further explores this tension and its implications for labor market inequalities. Innovatively, this study integrates the temp agencies' commercial logic of attracting visitors to their websites into the analysis of aesthetic advice for work.

Methods

Case: staffing agencies and temp agency work in the Netherlands

The position of temporary work agencies in the Netherlands is exceptional from an international perspective in the sense that these agencies structurally organize a relatively large proportion of work in the labor market. The Dutch labor market as a whole is quite deregulated, with 1 in 3 workers not having a steady work contract (Dekker, 2017: 69). The amount and percentage of workers on a temp agency contract has risen steadily over the past decades, to 4% in 2016 (Webbink, 2017) – the highest number in the EU, with the exception of Slovenia. Temp agencies not only organize temporary jobs, but also play a crucial role in connecting employers and job seekers, often handling candidate selection processes on behalf of companies. Major agencies like Randstad are known as temp agencies to the public, but they primarily function as recruitment agencies, assisting companies in the recruitment and selection of job applicants.

Specifically temp agency work in the Netherlands is on average paid less than other kinds of work, and workers are usually less satisfied (Webbink, 2017). Though sometimes seen as a stepping stone to a steady job (Arts & Van den Berg, 2019), temp work often does not lead to steady employment, but rather to another period of unemployment (Webbink, 2017). Besides generic agencies providing staff for mostly low skilled work (e.g., manufacturing, cleaning, transport), there are also highly specific agencies focusing on specialized workers such as technical and medical staff, nurses, and managers (Tijdens et al., 2006).

More than 500 temp agencies are officially registered with the sector organization ABU ('Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen' ['General Federation of Temporary Employment Agencies' - my translation]). However, the 5 largest temp work agencies are clearly dominant, with a combined market share of 45% (Tijdens et al., 2006). These agencies are most visible to the general public, with branches in commercial centers in towns and cities throughout the country.

Data and approach

A Google search (in Dutch) on how to dress for job interviews and for work led to hundreds of applicatory results – not only from employment agencies such as temporary work agencies, recruitment agencies and job boards, but also from government agencies, style advisors, management websites, newspapers, and magazines. This illustrates that the material analyzed here is actually what people find when they are looking for aesthetic advice for work. The translated search terms I used were ‘how to dress/what to wear for work/job interview’. I looked into the first 100 hits resulting from these different search terms and found that the results overlapped to a very large degree. In all cases, the articles posted by staffing agencies were quite prominent. To illustrate, of the first 10 results when googling the aforementioned commands, 4 were posted by temp agencies and 2 by job boards. From the first general 100 hits I selected only the posts by staffing agencies, which led to a set of 29 advice articles. In order to ensure that the case selection was relevant I extended my search method. Using the member overviews of ABU, I additionally looked for the aesthetic advice on the websites of the 20 largest temp agencies in the country that were not already included in the dataset.

A preliminary exploration and open coding of this set of 49 advice texts from employment agencies and job boards allowed me to distinguish recurrent themes and tensions. The observation that the advice was very rarely concrete, and mostly stressed job seekers’ responsibility for ‘sensing’ how they should dress appropriately for a job interview, while not mentioning structural inequalities, led to me specifying my open research question. With a theoretical focus on the tension between self-responsibilization and the importance of aesthetics for inequality, I decided to narrow down the number of cases to allow for an in-depth analysis. A smaller number of interesting cases allowed me to repeatedly revisit the material through different theoretical lenses (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

The leading principle in the selection of cases for the in-depth analysis was to obtain as much relevant information as possible on the phenomenon central to this study. This meant that after exploring the full set of websites I selected the cases that were most informative in the sense that the advice was most elaborate (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229–233). The organizations vary in how they give advice: some sites are limited to a list of standard tips – sometimes literally copied from other websites – whereas others post original work in which they for instance discuss insights from style experts and recruiters and explain how and why aesthetics are relevant for work. A second consideration in selecting cases for in-depth analysis was representing each category of staffing agencies (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230) – i.e., large agencies, agencies focusing on a specific sector, or a specific group of workers – and ensuring that some of the larger agencies were present in the sample. The rationale for this combined strategy was acquiring rich data while ensuring a certain degree of representativeness.

As such, 13 relevant cases were selected for in-depth analysis. An overview of the selected cases can be found in the appendix of this dissertation. The data collection took place between March and June 2020.

The online context is important to take into consideration when analyzing the online advice (Pauwels, 2005). I have therefore not only looked into the textual elements, but I have also taken note of the visual elements and the locations within the website where the advice can be found. Informed by methods of Abductive Analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), the strategy of analysis was flexible and involved repeatedly revisiting the material with different aims and foci. The cyclical process of close examination of the data started with familiarization through open coding, leading to an identification of key topics and themes in the advice and a description of what the advice actually entails, followed by more critical and interpretive readings and recoding of the textual and visual elements on the websites. These ensuing readings paid particular attention to aspects such as: explanations of and legitimations for the relevance of aesthetics, dealing with structural inequalities, and the costs and promises of working on aesthetic self-presentation. This exploration of the legitimations and the moral aspects underlying the advice served as a basis for making comparisons within the material and for finding recurrent repertoires.

In order to understand how these pieces of advice come into being and to understand *why* organizations post them on their websites, I have contacted the organizations offering the advice analyzed in this chapter. Four organizations put me through to the person responsible for posting the advice. Interestingly, with the exception of one copywriter, they were all involved in marketing. They explained that the reason for posting aesthetic advice is attracting visitors to their website. By posting blogs that people would be interested in reading, they generated traffic for their websites. This is important for attracting clients: because employers looking for workers want to reach as many (relevant) job seekers as possible, the number of unique visitors to the staffing agency's website is a key selling point for these agencies.

Findings

The inutility of the aesthetic advice

The aesthetic advice analyzed here is posted on websites of staffing agencies – often large, well-known organizations. Typically, the advice is posted in the section of the website intended for job seekers, usually under headings such as ‘tips for a successful job interview’ and often without mentioning an author. The absence of authors makes it unclear whose views or opinions are expressed, and the advice is presented as neutral and factual. There are a few notable exceptions where experts such as hiring

managers express their views on how applicants should look for job interviews, often making empirical claims on what ‘works’ (e.g., ‘It’s better to be overdressed than to be underdressed’). The texts and the locations in which they are posted imply authority, as they are impersonally posted by large and well-known organizations. For instance the Netherlands-based Randstad, which is the largest staffing agency in the world, has prominently placed ‘8 tips for preparing for a job interview’ on its website, one of which is ‘choose the right clothes’. Placing aesthetic advice under such general advice normalizes the labor going into finding the right clothes and style for a job interview. Additionally, the agencies sometimes post aesthetic advice on their section with current blog posts. The pieces of advice posted here are usually more elaborate and aimed at attracting traffic to the website, as was explained to me by the authors and marketing people from the staffing agencies I interviewed. This section briefly describes the style and form of the advice pages found on websites of the agencies.

Despite staffing agencies’ pervading promise to help job seekers create the ‘perfect’ look, the advice is strikingly ambiguous and inutile. Often a list of criteria, or aspects that should be paid attention to, is given. A typical example of this is:

The first impression you give off is partly determined by the clothes you wear. You can make a smashing impression by:

- Wearing clothes that are not too tight, loose or revealing;
- Not wearing an overwhelming fragrance;
- Dressing according to the style that fits the organization (no jeans or sneakers);
- Putting on clothes that make you feel good;
- Wearing clean and ironed clothing;
- Paying attention to details such as shoes, nails, and socks;
- Look fresh and ready

(Source: temp agency ‘Timing’)

This excerpt is exemplary in the sense that it merely lists some platitudes while not being actually informative. For some, the advice might be contradictory as it tells them to both fit the style of the organization while wearing clothes that make them feel good. Most of the advice concerns clothes, but also grooming, cleanliness, and smell are often mentioned, and posture and speech are occasionally part of the advice. The advice is unspecific, making it essentially useless for those actually seeking aesthetic advice, while reinforcing the norms of aesthetic performance in job interviews. The advice underlines the relevance of aesthetics without actually informing readers on how to get it right. Consequently, rather than helping job seekers increase their chances of finding a job, the advice serves as a reinforcement of the importance of aesthetics for finding work by stating it as a matter of fact that looks matter. It hence

encourages people to turn their attention to themselves rather than to, for instance, structural inequalities and exclusions in work.

Most of the websites contain at least some pictures to accompany the texts. These images are not actually mentioned or discussed – they simply accompany the text without being referred to. Often, the goal or function of the visual material is not explicit. The website of Young Capital is exceptional in this sense in their use of images of ‘example outfits’ to illustrate the textual elements of their advice. They distinguish between informal (not suitable for applying), semi-formal, and formal outfits. For the last two categories, example outfits for distinctly men and women are displayed, shaped so as to fit slender bodies. On all other websites, the purpose of the pictures is not directly clear. I suggest that the vague use of images (with the exception of Young Capital) is very much in line with the textual content of the advice pages. Precisely because the advice is ambiguous, the interpretation of the images is left to the audience. The pictures, like the texts, reflect cultured norms on beauty and aesthetics: everyone displayed in the pictures is white, slim, and young, and conforms to gendered norms. As such, the visual material posted by the staffing agencies reproduces hegemonic norms of what a professional looks like. Reproducing these norms and the discourse on the importance of aesthetics for finding work may be commercially beneficial for temp agencies, given that they are invested in creating a pool of candidates that suit employers’ (exclusionary) preferences.

Aesthetic performance as an opportunity

While the advice is ambiguous and often not very informative, the websites do clearly convey messages on the importance of aesthetics for employment. This importance is not presented as an obstacle or risk, but rather as an *opportunity*. By having the right aesthetic presentation, it is asserted, applicants can increase their chances of finding work. The advice pages under investigation promise to help job seekers gain control over their destinies in the sense that they can influence how others perceive them through their self-presentation. Tempo-Team, for instance, promises to tell the reader how to assemble the ‘perfect’ outfit:

Yess! You get to go on an interview! Fantastic! Of course you have to prepare for the job interview, and your outfit is equally important for leaving a cool impression. We’ll tell you here how to assemble the perfect outfit. Great, isn’t it? Just rock that job interview! [pun in Dutch] (Tempo-Team)

In this passage, the importance of appearance is emphasized – it is said to be as important as preparing for the actual interview – and subsequently the reader is reassured that Tempo-Team will help them find a way to look great and make a great impression. The tone is enthusiastic and extremely informal and the choice of words suggests that the staffing agency is there to help the job seeker. They know exactly how you should look, and following their advice guarantees success. The importance of self-presentation is presented as inherently just and fair: with the right preparation anyone can accomplish the right impression. The advice promises readers to help job seekers in doing this:

Suits, formal dresses and high heels. Work apparel comes in all shapes and sizes. But what is suitable, and what gives off the wrong impression? When to dress formally and when not? What message do you give off? Melissa investigated this for you! (Driessen)

Similarly, this passage expresses familiarity and helpfulness. It is interesting to observe the suggestion that their primary intention is to help job seekers look right and find a job. After all, staffing agencies' business case is not serving job seekers, but employers. Moreover, they are themselves involved in selection in hiring, and therefore in the reproduction of inequalities. Considering the generic nature of the advice and the non-exclusive platform on which it is posted, it is questionable whether the advice actually helps individuals or whether it has the counter effect of raising the bar of aesthetic performances for job interviews. According to Widdows (2018), societal expectations of the effort put into personal appearance have risen. Practices such as working out, dieting, and plastic surgery no longer help individuals 'stand out' as they have become the norm. The aesthetic advice potentially contributes to 'raising [the] bar of normalcy' of aesthetic performances expected for job interviews.

Appearances and self-presentation are presented by the advice as malleable and as ways of increasing chances of employment. Similar to Lewis' (2006) observation that health issues are discussed as a purely individual matter in online advice, the aesthetic advice focuses solely on individuals and makes no mention of social inequalities related to appearances. None of the texts discuss how certain aesthetics may impede employment chances, for instance due to racism, ageism, prejudice against certain body shapes or sizes, or a fashion 'faux pas'. The importance of aesthetics is, in other words, presented as an opportunity to make a great impression – not as something containing the risk of 'getting it wrong', or as a grounds for systemic forms of exclusion:

Nowadays, bucket hats and beanies are totally hip. But it's probably better to show up for a job interview without a hat or cap. Although we

are definitely in favor of having your own style, it could put off your future employer. So for instance put your hair up nicely, or keep it in place with a slab of hair gel. Do you wear headgear because of your religion? No problem of course! Just keep that on. (Tempo-Team)

This excerpt illustrates the tension in giving aesthetic advice. Formulating advice that is actually effective for job seekers in a labor market with systemic exclusions and inequalities is bound to be paradoxical. Tempo-Team – one of the major staffing agencies in the country – tells its readers that they should not wear hats to a job interviews because, they contend, this is not in line with hegemonic norms. In line with their code of conduct found in another location on their website, Tempo-Team claims that covering your head for religious reasons is not a problem. Doing so, they deny issues such as racism and Islamophobia, in clear contradiction with research findings regarding exclusions in the Dutch labor market (Andriessen et al., 2015; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Lancee, 2021). Rather than acknowledging the exclusionary effects of the relevance of aesthetics in job interviews, the agencies present aesthetics as easily adaptable, and as a meritocratic means of presenting the self as the ‘right’ candidate. In this discourse, employers’ aesthetics preferences are presented as an opportunity for the job candidate: as a way to make a great impression. This position towards aesthetics is beneficial for staffing agencies, as it encourages potential candidates to adapt their aesthetic performance in order to appeal to employers, while legitimizing the exclusion of those that do not fit the norm by denying systemic exclusions and presenting aesthetic performance as a mere matter of effort.

Fitting in and being unique

The content of the advice emphasizes two contradicting points: (1) make sure your self-presentation matches the style of the organization, and (2) be yourself and express individuality, comfort and confidence. These imperatives have of course been identified and analyzed (Adkins & Lury, 1999; De Keere, 2014; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Nevertheless, within the context of professional aesthetic advice they are an interesting starting point to scrutinize the legitimation of (aesthetic) inequalities.

The advice articles uncritically communicate the message that ‘fitting in’ aesthetically is important. Looking similar to those already employed would make a candidate seem like someone who is already part of the team, they contend:

“What clothes should I wear to a job interview?” This is a question asked on a daily basis by job candidates. Every organization has its own

dress code and as a candidate it's your goal to fit the image. You want the employer to (literally) see you as part of the team. Employers have certain expectations of job candidates. This concerns both the inside and the outside. It is up to you to meet these expectations, so you can leave a strong first impression during your job interview. (We Talent)

This imperative to fit in is potentially conducive to persistent inequalities and systemic exclusion. Though the advice concerns clothing, clearly 'the image of the organization' pertains also to bodies that are racialized, aged, gendered, classed, and so on. Following this explanation of why fitting in is important, the text goes on to explain how to find out what the specific contextual norms are: 'Dare to listen to your own intuition. Based on an (email) conversation you can form a first impression of the person and the organization.' In order for intuition and tone of emails to be informative for how to dress, context-specific cultural capital is required. Intuition, here, can be understood as cultural specific knowledge or cultural capital. A conversation (orally, or by email) might indeed be informative for 'insiders', but for those lacking context-specific cultural capital it is not informative at all. By emphasizing the supposed simplicity and neutrality of reading cultural codes, the advice pages legitimize the privileges of cultural capital. The advice normalizes and essentializes the importance of fitting in aesthetically while presenting aesthetic fit as something that can be achieved by anyone simply through effort.

However, this particular temp agency goes on to articulate that for some, trying to fit in is actually not desirable:

When you feel that you have to divert too much from your personal style in order to meet the expectations, you should ask yourself if this is really the right place for you. (We Talent)

Fitting in aesthetically, here, is seen as an indicator of something more profound. The advice states that if you feel you have to change your personal style too much for work, you should ask yourself if the organization is the 'right place for you'. Similar passages from other agencies explain that aesthetic fit is important because having to adapt your personal style on a daily basis would make you unhappy. This type of advice not only legitimizes the exclusion of those who do not fit in aesthetically but also promotes self-elimination of those who do not immediately feel at ease, illustrating how self-exclusion is not simply due to individual insecurities, but may be accounted for by aesthetic advice and representations.

Attracting the 'right' candidates and rejecting the 'wrong' ones is one of the core tasks of staffing agencies. In line with Parkin's (1974) conceptualization of social closure, the agencies' aesthetic advice justifies exclusions, thus restricting access to certain

jobs. Essentially, they are invested in creating a pool of candidates that fit employers' preferences, and creating equal employment opportunities is not fundamentally in the interest of these agencies. This discourse in which the importance of aesthetic fit is explained and emphasized, in which the accomplishment of 'fit' is presented as a simple task available to anyone, and in which job seekers are encouraged to listen to their intuition, inherently works in the interest of staffing agencies, as this discourse legitimizes exclusions and encourages self-exclusion.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on fitting in, a second main point of advice communicated in these texts is that job candidates should express individuality and authenticity through clothing and self-presentation. Although most organizations advise to 'overdress', i.e., dress a bit too formally when in doubt, they also emphasize that you can actually get it *wrong* when dressing in standard office apparel:

At the majority of informal companies you will come across a bit stiff if you show up in your suit. Usually you won't be turned down if you're too formal, but you will leave behind the impression that you don't really fit the company culture. (Young Capital)

International research shows that work attire is becoming more and more informal. 75% of corporate professionals find that classic formal attire such as a tie and suit do not fit the workplace of today. Personal branding is increasingly important on the labor market and part of this is wearing clothes that bring your personality to the fore. (Driessen)

In an aestheticized, post-industrial service economy, wearing a standard set of formal office clothes as a uniform is often not sufficient for getting a job. By discussing the informalization of aesthetic norms at work, these advice excerpts actually complicate aesthetic demands. The message is communicated here that in certain contexts simply wearing formal clothes could even lead to being rejected. Formal attire is too generic, and nowadays you need to show your personality through dress, Driessen asserts. The advice thus tells readers that there is no single and simple answer for how to look proper for job interviews. Job candidates should not only (do the work to) fit in, but also need to find the right form of self-presentation to express their personality.

Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, the advice fragments state that job interviews and work situations are not about looks, but about expressing talents and personality. Aesthetics are relevant for bringing these to the fore. Readers are therefore discouraged from diverting from their own personal style, because that would mean that they would hide or cover up their personality. But Tempo-Team, for instance, advises applicants to leave out certain accessories, as these would distract the interviewer:

During the job interview all focus lies on you and on your fantastic talents. All eyes on you! Leave your jewelry and piercings at home; that works out best. Hey presto, you're in the spotlight. (Tempo-Team)

A normalizing imperative follows from the idea that looks should not distract by standing out: because aesthetics should not play a role, they should not attract attention and they therefore have to fall within the range of what is considered normal or neutral. Rather than formulating specific norms, which would be explicitly exclusionary, the agencies convey the seemingly neutral message that looks should not distract and should therefore not stand out. This repertoire offers a legitimation for exclusions: a candidate is not rejected because of her piercings, but because her inner qualities did not come across in the interview due to her distracting appearance. The advice assumes an essentialist notion of subjectivity as a true inner self represented by self-presentation, which contrasts with the material-semiotic idea that self-presentation actually forms subjectivities (Miller, 2010; Woodward, 2007). So, in order to express the 'true' self, job seekers should not work too hard on their aesthetic performance for job interviews. This ideal of authenticity neglects the unequal appreciation of 'authentic selves'.

The analysis illustrates a paradox in the aesthetic advice from staffing agencies. The contradictory main dogmas are fitting in and expressing authenticity and uniqueness. That is, job seekers should work on their self-presentation in order to show they fit within the organization, yet they should also express personality, authenticity, and uniqueness. Both these dogmas contribute to the cultural reproduction of exclusion. By rewarding candidates with the 'right' aesthetics and restricting access for those who do not meet these norms, the discourse reflected in the aesthetic advice promotes social closure (see also Parkin, 1974: 1–19).

Conclusions

This chapter looks into the question of how pre-entry regulation in the shape of aesthetic advice takes place by analyzing the aesthetic advice posted by employment agencies on their websites, with a focus on (1) the content of the advice; (2) how it legitimizes the importance of aesthetics for finding work; and (3) how the advice serves the purposes of the staffing agencies. Given the absence of actual advice, it appears that the advice is not primarily intended to serve readers and job seekers, but rather to attract traffic to their websites and to frame themselves as providing a useful service to job seekers. By doing so these agencies maintain or increase their market position, as employers generally prefer agencies that have access to a large (or specific) pool of job seekers.

The commercial logic of attracting visitors to the website appears morally neutral. However, the pseudo-advice itself has the performative potential to legitimize exclusions. The analysis of the content of the advice has illustrated how aesthetic performances are presented as an opportunity to increase employment chances, rather than a risk of being excluded. The paradoxical dogmas of fitting in while being authentic and unique hinge on the notion that appearances should not form a distraction and show what applying for a job is really all about: showing your true inner self. This salience of self-expression for work has been found in general professional advice literature (De Keere, 2014). The present study illustrates how the stress on fitting in while not adapting too much legitimizes exclusions and encourages self-exclusion.

The advice emphasizes the importance of fit and confidence. Stating that there is not one right way to present the self and that job seekers should be able to read cultural codes, and adapt their aesthetics accordingly, disclaims the classed (and gendered and racialized) character of fit. Rather than problematizing the tendency of recruiters to select applicants who resemble them, the advice urges job seekers to make sure they resemble the people at the organization they are applying to. Accordingly, the advice legitimizes the exclusion of those that do not fit in, and legitimizes the reproduction of hegemonic norms regarding self-presentation.

On the other hand, the advice urges job seekers to not adapt their self-presentation too much. A first reason for this is that not fitting in naturally and working hard in order to fit is not feasible – it would make you unhappy. As such, the relevance of fit is normalized and presented to be in the interest of the job seeker. It consequently even promotes self-exclusion: if you do not fit in, why even apply? A second reason for why job seekers should not work too hard on their aesthetic performance for a job interview is that the advice considers aesthetic fit to be an indicator of general fit. Adapting too much would conceal and muddle the expression of the ‘true’ inner self. Both reasons demonstrate that self-exclusion, leading to appearance-based employment inequality, may be partly understood as a consequence of aesthetic advice and representations, rather than of individual insecurities.

It appears that the purpose of the advice is not so much helping job seekers; it is not intended to clarify or explain how self-presentation matters in finding work. In fact, it does the exact opposite, by misrepresenting how exclusions take place in selection procedures. More important than the quality of the advice is the effect of posting advice that attracts visitors (i.e., potential job candidates) to the website and appears to be of service to them. This reminds us of Adkins’ (2008: 193-195) analysis of what makes a good website according to a web designer: it is not about the quality of the website itself, but about its ‘response rate’. As such, the value is not constituted by the quality of the advice, but by the promise it generates for the future of the staffing agency.

This chapter illustrates how aesthetic regulation can occur early in the employment process. Even before individuals begin working somewhere, they are taught that their appearance matters for work and, although highly ambiguous, that their appearances must meet certain standards. This chapter contributes to answering the main question of this dissertation by highlighting how aesthetic regulation also occurs before entry into a certain organization through means that are more subtle and less explicit than direct instructions.

References

- Adkins, L. (2008). From retroactivation to futurity: The end of the sexual contract? *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 16(3), 182–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740802300954>
- Adkins, L., & Lury, C. (1999). The labour of identity: performing identities, performing economies. *Economy and Society*, 28(4), 598–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149900000020>
- Andriessen, I., Ent, B. Van Der, Linden, M. Van Der, & Dekker, G. (2015). *Op afkomst afgewezen*. https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2012/Op_achterstand
- Arts, J., & Van den Berg, M. (2019). Pedagogies of optimism: Teaching to 'look forward' in activating welfare programmes in the Netherlands. *Critical Social Policy*, 39(1), 66–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018318759923>
- Boland, T. (2016). Seeking a role: disciplining jobseekers as actors in the labour market. *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(2), 334–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015594097>
- Bouma, S., & De Ruig, L. (2013). *Verkoopster gezocht (m/v). Onderzoek naar de aard en omvang van discriminatie in de uitzendbranche*.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Boyle, B., & De Keere, K. (2019). Aesthetic labour, class and taste: Mobility aspirations of middle-class women working in luxury-retail. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 706–722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119827753>
- Cummins, E. R., & Blum, L. M. (2015). "Suits to self-sufficiency": *Dress for Success and Neoliberal Maternalism*. 29(5), 623–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215591949>
- De Keere, K. (2014). From a self-made to an already-made man: A historical content analysis of professional advice literature. *Acta Sociologica (United Kingdom)*, 57(4), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699314552737>
- Dekker, F. (2017). Flexibilisering in Nederland: trends, kansen en risico's. In M. Kremer, R. Went, & A. Knottnerus (Eds.), *Voor de zekerheid: de toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid* (pp. 69–89). Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR).
- Di Stasio, V., Lancee, B., Veit, S., & Yemane, R. (2021). Muslim by default or religious discrimination? Results from a cross-national field experiment on hiring discrimination. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(6), 1305–1326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622826>
- Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (A. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Featherstone, M. (2007). *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Sage.
- Fleming, P., & Sturdy, A. (2009). "Just be yourself!": Towards neo-normative control in organisations? *Employee Relations*, 31(6), 569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450910991730>
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press.
- Garsten, C., & Jacobssen, K. (2004). Introduction. In C. Garsten & K. Jacobssen (Eds.), *Learning to be Employable: New Agendas on Work, Responsibility and Learning in a Globalized World*. (pp. 1–22). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hakim, C. (2010). Erotic Capital. *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 499–518. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq014>
- Handley, K. (2018). Anticipatory Socialization and the Construction of the Employable Graduate: A Critical Analysis of Employers' Graduate Careers Websites. *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(2), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016686031>
- Holla, S., & Kuipers, G. (2016). Aesthetic capital. In L. Hanquinet & M. Savage (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture* (pp. 290–305). Routledge.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity.
- Ingram, N., & Allen, K. (2019). 'Talent-spotting' or 'social magic'? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118790949>
- Jackson, M. (2006). Personality Traits and Occupational Attainment. *European Sociological Review*, 22(2), 187–199. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jci051>
- Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., Sarpila, O., & Pajunen, T. (2018). Exploitation of aesthetic capital – disapproved by whom? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 38(3–4), 312–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-09-2017-0116>
- Kwan, S., & Trautner, M. N. (2009). Teaching and Learning Guide for 'Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency.' *Sociology Compass*, 3(6), 1017–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00243.x>

- Lancee, B. (2021). Ethnic discrimination in hiring: comparing groups across contexts. Results from a cross-national field experiment. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(6), 1181–1200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622744>
- Leidner, R. (1991). *Serving Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work, and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs*. 5(2), 154–177.
- Lewis, T. (2006). Seeking health information on the internet: Lifestyle choice or bad attack of cyberchondria? *Media, Culture and Society*, 28(4), 521–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706065027>
- Loeters, E., Backer, A., & Andriessen, I. (2014). Uitzendbureaus: gekleurde doorgeefluiken? *Tijdschrift Voor Arbeidsvraagstukken*, 30(4), 341–349.
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12211>
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. The Polity Press.
- Misra, J., & Walters, K. (2022). *Walking mannequins: How race and gender inequalities shape retail clothing work*. University of California Press.
- Moss, P., & Tilly, C. (1996). “Soft” Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems. *Work and Occupations*, 23(3), 252–276.
- Parkin, F. (1974). Strategies of Social Closure in Class Formation. In F. Parkin (Ed.), *The Social Analysis of Class Structure* (pp. 1–19). Tavistock Publications.
- Pauwels, L. (2005). Websites as visual and multimodal cultural expressions: Opportunities and issues of online hybrid media research. *Media, Culture and Society*, 27(4), 604–613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443705053979>
- Purser, G., & Hennigan, B. (2017). “Work as unto the Lord”: Enhancing Employability in an Evangelical Job-Readiness Program. *Qualitative Sociology*, 40(1), 111–133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-016-9347-2>
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>
- Sarpila, O., Koivula, A., Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., & Pajunen, T. (2020). Double standards in the accumulation and utilisation of ‘aesthetic capital.’ *Poetics*, 82 (June 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101447>
- Sarpila, O., Kukkonen, I., Pajunen, T., & Åberg, E. (2021). *Appearance as Capital: The Normative Regulation of Aesthetic Capital Accumulation and Conversion* (O. Sarpila, I. Kukkonen, T. Pajunen, & E. Åberg, Eds.). Emerald Publishing.
- Sharone, O. (2014). *Flawed system/flawed self. Job searching and unemployment experiences*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Skeggs, B. (2009). The moral economy of person production: The class relations of self-performance on “reality” television. *Sociological Review*, 57(4), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01865.x>
- Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tijdens, K., Klaveren, M. Van, Houwing, H., Meer, M. Van Der, & Essen, M. Van. (2006). *Temporary Agency Work in the Netherlands* (Issue 06). Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies. http://www.uva-aias.net/files/working_paper/WP54.pdf
- Tyler, M., & Abbott, P. (1998). Chocs away: Weight watching in the contemporary airline industry. *Sociology*, 32(3), 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038598032003002>
- Vallas, S. P., & Christin, A. (2018). Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to “Personal Branding” Discourse. *Work and Occupations*, 45(1), 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417735662>
- Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press: Enterprise Culture in an Age of Precarity. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614563741>
- Vallas, S. P., & Hill, A. L. (2018). Reconfiguring Worker Subjectivity: Career Advice Literature and the “Branding” of the Worker’s Self. *Sociological Forum*, 33(2), 287–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12418>
- Van Campen, C., & Versantvoort, M. (2014). *Aantrekkelijk gezond: de sociale gevolgen van verschillen in fysiek, mentaal en esthetisch kapitaal*. December 2014, 174.
- Van den Berg, M. (2019). Precarious masculinities and gender as pedagogy: aesthetic advice-encounters for the Dutch urban economy. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 26(5), 700–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1551782>
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2018). The Aesthetics of Work-Readiness: Aesthetic Judgements and Pedagogies for Conditional Welfare and Post-Fordist Labour Markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018758196>
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2019). Who can wear flip-flops to work? Ethnographic vignettes on aesthetic labour in precarity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861621>
- Vandebroecq, D. (2016). *Distinctions in the Flesh: Social Class and the Embodiment of Inequality*. Routledge.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2001). *Looking good, sounding right*. Industrial Society.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2020). *Aesthetic Labour*. Sage.
- Warhurst, C., Van den Broek, D., Hall, R., & Nickson,

- D. (2009). Lookism: The New Frontier of Employment Discrimination? *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 51(1), 131–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185608096808>
- Webbink, E. (2017). *De uitzendbranche in Nederland sinds 2005*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). https://www.cbs.nl/-/media/_pdf/2017/43/de-uitzendbranche-in-nederland.pdf
- Wee, L., & Brooks, A. (2010). Personal branding and the commodification of reflexivity. *Cultural Sociology*, 4(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975509356754>
- Widdows, H. (2018). *Perfect me: beauty as an ethical ideal*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). “Looking Good and Sounding Right.” *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Woodward, S. (2007). *Why women wear what they wear*. Berg.

3

Legitimizing beauty in hiring: An analysis of cultural repertoires in defense of appearances as selection criteria⁶

An earlier version⁷ of this chapter is currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal

⁶ This chapter is co-authored by Kobe De Keere

⁷ The main changes compared to the submitted manuscript are: 1) I have added the main research question of this dissertation to the introduction of this chapter; 2) in the conclusion of the current chapter I discuss what this case study contributes to the main question of the dissertation; 3) in the current chapter I place more emphasis on how evaluations of appearances are racialized and gendered.

Abstract

This chapter builds upon the body of literature confirming that aesthetics matter for finding work by investigating how gatekeepers reflect on the relevance of appearances in their evaluations of job candidates. Starting from the notion that, in hiring, the relevance of appearance conflicts with ideals of meritocracy and fairness, understanding of how gatekeepers solve this dispute and how they morally legitimize the importance of aesthetics is sought. The analyses are based on in-depth interviews with 40 gatekeepers from the cultural and corporate sectors, and show that although the gatekeepers problematize the importance of beauty, they do acknowledge that it plays a role in their evaluations. Three cultural repertoires for solving this contradiction and for legitimizing appearances as a hiring criterion are discerned from the data: 1) beauty is productive; 2) appearances express personality; and 3) looking right is a matter of effort. The findings suggest that gatekeepers do not seek to build or maintain systemic exclusions related to aesthetics. Rather than legitimizing a hidden exclusionary agenda, what they try to do is to come to a hiring decision using evaluation criteria that can be considered situationally legitimate. Yet, this can lead to applying evaluation criteria and, more structurally, labor market outcomes that they find morally problematic. This study hence highlights the relevance of cultural repertoires in processes of legitimation for understanding reproductions of inequalities related to appearances.

Key words

Cultural repertoires, legitimation, hiring, gatekeeping, aesthetics, appearances, reproduction of inequalities

Introduction

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, but what happens if the beholder is expected to ignore the value of being beautiful? It is well established that in industries such as fashion, retail, or catering, beauty is explicitly valued as these sectors rely on aesthetic labor to generate profits (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Holla, 2016; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). But in many other sectors beauty is not supposed to co-determine the worth of workers. A shared belief in the – contestable (Young, 2008 [1958]) – ideology of meritocracy (Dobbin, 2009; van Pinxteren & de Beer, 2016) as the guiding principle that shapes labor market success stands in stark contrast with appearances entering as criteria for employment or promotion. However, a torrent of studies has demonstrated that beauty does clearly influence labor market outcome outcomes (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014). This chapter tackles this issue by taking the employer’s eye-view. The goal here is not to establish, once again, ‘which type’ of beauty is valued, or ‘how much’, but to answer the question of *how* it enters employee evaluations.

To do so, the evaluations of job candidates by employee gatekeepers such as hiring managers, recruiters, and HR workers responsible for hiring are the object of study here. Hiring is a critical moment – both for job applicants and for organizations – that is characterized by uncertainty and ambiguousness. Even though gatekeepers may use techniques and tools in an attempt to standardize interviews and to make their evaluations of candidates more objective, many studies have shown that actual evaluations and decisions are informed by cultural codes and signals (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; De Keere, 2023; Imdorf, 2010; Rivera, 2012, 2015; Roberts & Campbell, 2005). Due to the lack of consensus on which criteria are acceptable and suitable, employee selection is not only about instrumentally finding the ‘best’ or most productive candidate, but also about cultural matching and ‘gut feeling’ (Rivera, 2015; De Keere, 2022), thus adding to the reproduction of inequalities. Consequently, gatekeepers perform a highly complex act when evaluating candidates and making hiring decisions, leading to moral uncertainty and a need to legitimize their choices.

This study focuses on how gatekeepers consider the role of aesthetics in their evaluations of job candidates. The role of aesthetics in hiring procedures is particularly interesting given the complex ways in which aesthetics and morality are tied together (Kuipers et al., 2019; Sarpila et al., 2020, 2021), and considering the increasing demands on the aesthetics of workers (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Widdows, 2018). At the same time, its role seems non-meritocratic and possibly illegitimate. This chapter hence aims to answer the following question: *how do gatekeepers legitimize appearances as hiring criteria?*

Legitimacy, here, is understood not as a property that something either has or has not, but as something that is interactionally achieved through a process of

categorization, solving disputes, justifying criteria and testing arguments, within specific situations (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Johnson et al., 2006; Reinecke et al., 2017). As a starting point, the premise is taken that, as social beings, we experience a felt need to justify our actions and negotiate our social lives (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2000). In other words, and as Tilly (2008) pointed out, we always need to give reasons for what we do in order to maintain our social relationships. One important way people construct these reasons is by employing what Lamont and Thévenot called *cultural repertoires*, which are ‘schemas of evaluation mobilized at the discursive and interactional level’ (2000: 8). People fall back on these repertoires to solve questions of value and the appropriateness of criteria we use to evaluate things, ideas, and people.

In order to better understand the persistence of inequalities in the labor market informed by beauty, we need to get insight into the repertoires employee gatekeepers use to legitimize beauty as an evaluative criterion. This study obtains these insights through in-depth interviews with 40 recruiters, HR professionals, and hiring managers in the cultural and corporate sectors in the Netherlands. The interviews contained an element of the interview technique of ‘video elicitation’, which means that the respondents were shown short fictitious video resumes, in which actors introduced themselves based on formal scripts (more on this in the method section). After watching these clips respondents were asked to evaluate and rank the applicants. This approach was valuable because it allowed gatekeepers to demonstrate their evaluation process during the interviews, rather than simply reflecting on it.

This chapter first looks into the role of beauty in hiring, and why this role might be considered to be morally problematic or, at least, at odds with meritocratic ideals within hiring. It then looks into the insights offered by scholarship about hiring and gatekeeping, and into the question of legitimacy in hiring. The results are organized into two parts. The first part briefly describes how gatekeepers problematize the importance of beauty in hiring, while the second analyzes how they nonetheless legitimize this importance in their own evaluation practices. Three repertoires for legitimizing appearances as hiring criteria are distinguished, and it is argued that these repertoires are not arguments for a hidden exclusionary agenda but that they are rather the outcomes of a need to justify a morally complex decision. Nonetheless, these cultural repertoires can eventually contribute to exclusions and inequalities.

Beauty and hiring

Beauty counts in hiring. This is clearly the case for jobs in which presentation is central, such as modeling (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Holla, 2016) and acting (Dean, 2005). Also for jobs in retail and hospitality employee aesthetics are evidently crucial, as they are considered to be an important part of the product being sold (Leidner, 1991; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). ‘Aesthetic labour’ (Witz et al., 2003) is almost self-evidently

expected of service workers. Importantly, however, aesthetics matter for finding work in general – also when they are not related to ‘productivity’ as such.

Indeed, a large number of studies have found support for relationships between what is perceived to be an attractive or appropriate appearance, and being viewed as for instance credible and intelligent, leading to more favorable labor market outcomes (Anderson et al., 2010; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014). Evaluations of job candidates are partly defined by whether traits perceptible by the senses (face, hair, body, smell, sound, clothes, accessories, demeanor/posture) are perceived as appealing. Although some scholars have assumed or sought to find universal standards for what beauty is and how it pays off, it appears that only the importance of beauty is universal in many contemporary societies, whereas the definition of beauty is situational and culturally defined (Elias et al., 2017; Mears, 2014; Wolf, 2013). Norms and definitions of beauty tend to vary along cultural lines (Kuipers, 2015) and, moreover, beauty does not automatically translate into benefits (Sarpila et al., 2020; 2021). Hence, the importance of aesthetics is not only about a standard ideal of visual beauty, but more accurately about looking, sounding, and smelling ‘right’, which is defined across gendered, racialized, and classed lines (Kuipers, 2022; Vonk, 2023; Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). Following from this, the importance of aesthetics for finding employment can be at least partly understood in terms of the hiring criterion of ‘cultural match’ communicated through appearances (De Keere, 2022; Moss & Tilly, 1996; Rivera, 2012). Although we know quite a bit about the effect of appearances on professional careers, we know relatively little about *how* beauty is actually evaluated by those regulating the gates to the labor market.

Critical perspectives have been invaluable in pointing out and analyzing the disciplining and exclusionary practices by employers in their attempt to gain commercial benefit (Butler, 2014; Butler & Harris, 2015; Elias et al., 2017; Hall & van den Broek, 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010). Yet, pointing at the persistence of inequalities only offers us circumstantial evidence as it does not give us insight into how this exclusion is actually executed and, more importantly, made legitimate by those who make the decisions (Alexander & Smit, 2003). On top of that, those who implement exclusionary practices might not even intend to do so. A reason for this is that hiring decisions are often made by recruiters or personnel specialized in HR tasks, not by employers or owners of organizations themselves. The commercial motive central to many studies of aesthetic labor is therefore questionable in many hiring situations outside of the service sector. To take account of this, this study is based on two cases: the cultural sector (typically associated with aesthetic labor), and the corporate sector (not typically associated with aesthetic labor). The motives of gatekeepers cannot be assumed at the outset, but need to be empirically investigated what their positions and practices are. As argued, people find themselves in situations in which they need to navigate and ‘give reasons why’ (Tilly, 2012;

Boltanski & Thevenot, 2000). By investigating the cultural repertoires of legitimizing the importance of appearances in hiring, this study contributes to the understanding how and why inequalities are (re)produced.

The legitimacy of gatekeeping decisions

Legitimacy should not be understood as a binary (i.e., a property that something has or does not have) but as always in the making, a process that inevitably involves negotiation and power struggles between multiple actors, both stakeholders and audiences (Johnson et al., 2006; Reinecke et al., 2017; Friedland & Alford, 1991). Consequently, legitimacy is never universal but always subject to situationally defined conditions, norms, and conventions. Similar to Tilly (2012), it is therefore held that people achieve legitimacy through reason-giving strategies they employ to explain and justify their practices with the goal of maintaining their social relations. This idea shows much affinity with Boltanski and Thevenot's (2000, 2006) understanding of legitimacy as emerging out of a sense of justice and search for a common ground by testing the appropriateness of different types of justification. Both Tilly, and Boltanski and Thévenot, share the conclusion that trying to establish legitimacy is therefore more than merely social decorum but comes from the inevitable need to establish proper connections and navigate oneself through social situations. In this regard, Suchman (1995) provides us with a helpful distinction between *pragmatic*, *cognitive*, and *moral legitimacy*. While the first two are grounded in either defending one's self-interest or taken-for-granted cultural codes, the latter form of legitimacy is about what is deemed ethically acceptable and appropriate given the social situation one is in.

It is exactly this moral legitimacy that is a pressing concern for employee gatekeepers (De Keere, 2023). The decision of who should and who should not be hired can have significant consequences for organizational success, for the individual lives of job candidates, and for how inequality is structured in the labor market and society in general (Dobbin, 2009). On top of that, when it comes down to determining the worth of candidates, there is a lack of clear consensus on how to evaluate and on which criteria to use (Imdorf, 2010; Eymard-Duvernay & Marchal, 1997). One of the most important reasons for this, as several studies indicate, is that employee gatekeepers usually have to evaluate both the hard and soft currencies that candidates bring to the labor market (Imdorf, 2010; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Jackson, 2006; De Keere, 2023). Hard currencies such as degree, years of experience, or specialized knowledge are, relatively speaking, easy to assess through setting benchmarks, making direct comparisons, or employing tests and exercises. Soft currencies, on the other hand, such as communication, self-presentation or sociability, are much harder to grasp which asks for more ambiguous and subjective decision taking. Employee gatekeepers often rely on job interviewing to evaluate exactly this. As many studies have proven, this face-to-face encounter between gatekeepers and candidates is an intricate interaction, shaped

by subjective preferences, status signaling and emotional decision-making (Imdorf, 2010; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Rivera, 2016; Roberts & Campbell, 2005, De Keere, 2022). Consequently, the assessment of soft skills always runs the risk of appearing illegitimate as it stands in contrast to the conception of the labor market as guided by meritocratic principles. Selection based on ‘merit’ serves two important purposes: fairness (societal positions are not inherited, but can be achieved through effort), and efficiency (the person with the best capacities is selected for the job, meaning that talents are optimally put to use) (van Pinxteren & de Beer, 2016).

Hence, when having to assess the value of a candidate, employee gatekeepers find themselves in a situation of moral uncertainty and are therefore in need of cultural repertoires that, as schemas of evaluation (Lamont & Thevenot, 2000, De Keere, 2023), allow them to narrate the logic behind their criteria and decisions. A revealing example of this is Moss and Tilly’s research on racial discrimination in the labor market (2001). In their study they focused not only on the level of discrimination but also on the way employers rationalized their decisions by ‘telling stories’. Although not one of the employers admitted to refusing to hire black people altogether, many of them actually discriminated against black candidates by couching their negative views in terms of soft skills. To legitimize why their choices were disadvantaging black candidates, they argued that their problems in the labor market were the result of individual differences, a failing welfare system, or even of candidates growing up in the inner city. Important here is that they relied on cultural repertoires that appear generally accepted (i.e., “it is fair to select on soft skills, and racial inequality is a larger social problem”) when trying to defend the legitimacy of their choices and reestablish their social relations (with the candidates, their clients, the public and even the interviewer).

With respect to establishing moral legitimacy as a gatekeeper, the role of beauty in producing labor market inequality is particularly interesting. Although beauty clearly comes with benefits (Holla & Kuipers, 2016), and working on beauty has even become a duty (Kuipers, 2022; Widdows, 2018), many people feel a moral unease about the importance of beauty and about ‘using’ beauty for gaining advantages (Sarpila et al., 2021). Seemingly, hiring in particular should be about merit, not about looks. The considerable role of aesthetics hence conflicts with meritocratic ideals in two important ways. First, it means that employment chances are dependent on an aspect of the self that can only be partly manipulated, and on aesthetic hierarchies that come into being in unequal power relations (Bordo, 2003; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). In other words: looking good for work is something that not everyone can achieve to the same extent through effort, and the importance of looking good reinforces norms that are for instance racist, sexist, or ageist. Second, it means that selection is based partly on characteristics that are not an inherently relevant skill for work – save for, arguably, work in retail and hospitality, which can obviously also be

seen as problematic (Warhurst et al., 2009). All this is amplified by the use of job interviewing as a test to evaluate soft currencies. In this context, one's demeanor, facial features, body type, or clothing style, can be deployed as capital which might increase one's chances of getting hired. This issue is generally acknowledged when it concerns sex, and race, but not so much for appearances. To be sure, appearances are indeed racialized and gendered, and they should not be considered as separate or idenpendent. The point here is that we know relatively little of how gatekeepers of employment organizations - i.e. those involved in employee selection - deal and resolve this tension between meritocratic ideals and the relevance of - racialized and gendered - appearances for employment chances. Therefore, this study aims to gain insight into which cultural repertoires gatekeepers mobilize to bring in beauty as a legitimate (or an illegitimate) criterion in their evaluations of job candidates.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project aimed at further understanding hiring processes by looking into the roles of cultural signaling, moral reasoning, and evaluation logics. Other studies within this project have investigated how recruiters and hiring managers decode cultural signals sent out by job applicants (De Keere, 2022), and how gatekeepers deal with the moral unease of hiring through justifications of their evaluations and decisions (De Keere, 2023). The three studies, including the present one, are based on the same data set, consisting of 40 in-depth interviews with occupational gatekeepers. The previous studies included a comparative aspect and therefore respondents were selected from either the corporate (n=23) or cultural (n=17) sector. For the purposes of the current chapter the comparative aspect is not central, but this set-up of the data collection did allow for a variety of perspectives, as the two sectors vary in the ratio of supply and demand of job openings and candidates, in market pressure, and in organizational size. Moreover, the cultural sectors are more commonly associated with aesthetic labor (McRobbie, 2016), whereas the corporate sector less so.

The data was collected by the second author of this chapter and a trained research assistant through in-depth interviews with both internal and external professional recruiters and workers responsible for making hiring decisions for organizations. LinkedIn and snowballing were used to approach possible participants. Participants were selected based on their professional experience (that is, they did at least five job selections procedures yearly), and field (i.e., cultural or corporate). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of the participants' reflections on their own hiring practices. In order to not only talk about hiring but to invoke evaluative decisions, the second part of the interview employed

a video-elicitation exercise (Keesman, 2022). The respondents were asked to watch 3-minute fictional video resumes played out by actors, and to then evaluate and rank the fictional job candidates. The videos were based on different scripts with similar structures, played out by white actors of more or less the same age (23-26), wearing the same clothes. The choice of actors did not allow for an analysis of how evaluations of appearances are informed by race and age, but rather turned the respondents' attention to beauty, class and gender. Although the videos were artificial, the visual elements and the game of ranking were helpful because they encouraged our respondents to actually demonstrate how they evaluate and, importantly, how they justify their evaluations. Detailed information on the set-up of this video elicitation method can be found in De Keere (2022; 2023). These previous articles are based on the data gathered specifically through the method of video elicitation and on the comparison between the two sectors. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The objective of the present study was to investigate how physical traits, body types, or other aesthetic features that the fictive candidates might have entered the evaluation process of the respondents. For this reason, the reactions to videos were used as springboards to discuss the acceptability of appearances as elements of assessments. Respondents were confronted with the physical appearances of the candidates when viewing the fictional application videos, after which this appearance was or was not a factor in their evaluation of the candidates. Eventually, at the end of each interview, the gatekeepers were also explicitly asked about how they deal with issues of appearances during the hiring process. Both authors independently coded the entire interview dataset with a focus on how aesthetics were discussed. The results of this analysis was compared and discussed, leading towards a more fine-tuned coding schema that was used for a second round of coding by both researchers. This allowed us to look more systematically into how the respondents talk about the aesthetics of the fictional candidates, and into how they talk about appearances as criteria for evaluations in their actual selection practices. Further rounds of coding led to three repertoires of legitimizing beauty as a hiring criterion being discerned, as will be discussed in the following section.

Findings

Problematizing the importance of beauty

Aesthetics matter for employment chances, and it could therefore be expected that candidates' appearances are often mentioned when gatekeepers evaluate video resumes. But when gatekeepers were prompted to make hiring decisions based on fictive clips, beauty only very rarely came up explicitly in their verbalized

considerations. Actual mentioning of certain concrete aspects of appearances occurred only a few times, when respondents mentioned glasses, teeth, hair, or a beard. Consider for instance James, who works in a leading function in the cultural sector, discussing candidates' teeth as off-putting:

James: But the strange thing that stands out immediately are his teeth.

Interviewer: Yes?

J: That's one of the first things that attract attention

I: Does he have remarkable teeth?

J: Yes, bad teeth, didn't you notice?

James explicitly mentions a particular aesthetic feature of a candidate as part of his negative evaluation. The finding that other gatekeepers were not explicit in their aesthetic judgments does not mean that they deny the importance of aesthetics, nor that they do not reflect on how aesthetics influence them. In the parts of the interview that were focused on gatekeepers' reflections on making hiring decisions in general, the vast majority of respondents acknowledge that beauty and appearances have an influence on how they perceive candidates. Consider for instance Jacob, who works as an executive director in the cultural sector: 'Let's face it, when we have a bunch of resumes with pictures on them and we all think "ooh, good looking..." then we do try and get a better look. Even though I myself am against it, it does work that way, that's what you do.' Jacob expresses the problem of legitimacy of beauty as a criterion here: he is aware of his preference for beauty, but he is also against letting this preference have an influence on who gets invited for a job interview. Respondents typically acknowledge that aesthetics play a role in their evaluation of candidates, yet also question the legitimacy of this type of evaluation. Arguably, the fact that our respondents seemed to avoid making aesthetic judgments of the applicants in the video clips perhaps illustrates the moral discomfort of doing so. They seem aware that they run the risk of creating a dispute and the breakdown of legitimacy. Hence, the role of aesthetics in application procedures evidently requires gatekeepers to solve the question of the appropriateness of this evaluation criterion (Lamont & Thevenot, 2000).

Legitimizing the importance of beauty

Although beauty rarely came up when evaluating the candidates in the fictitious clips, gatekeepers acknowledge that looks do matter in job application procedures. This section looks into the cultural repertoires employee gatekeepers use to achieve moral legitimacy of beauty as a criterion for evaluating job candidates. Three repertoires

stood out: a) beauty is productive; b) looks indicate personality; and c) looking right is a matter of effort.

a. Beauty is productive

The task of evaluating not only technical skills, but also soft skills and ‘match’ with the organization can be quite different for internal and external recruiters. The first – e.g., HR officers – work internally in the sense that they try to find a candidate for the organization which they themselves work for. The latter – e.g., professional and in-house recruiters – make employee selection decisions for external, i.e., other, organizations. Hence, these external gatekeepers try to select candidates that match their *clients’* preferences. Consider for instance external corporate recruiter Marc, who takes his clients’ preferences regarding aesthetics into serious consideration in his evaluation of job candidates:

Marc: It’s all fine for me, but if you’re in a motorcycle club in your free time, and you’re applying for a job as a director and I can see that you have lots of tattoos, that’s all fine, but I would think: I’m not going to hire you, because I know how my client thinks about these kinds of things. We have a client in Amsterdam (...) that’s one of the biggest trade companies in the world. No piercings, no nose rings, no tattoos – nothing.

Interviewer: So they ask for that?

Marc: Yes (...). That’s just their policy. Is that discrimination? Yes or no, I don’t know. But that’s what the client wants, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re Dutch or Surinamese, that’s all the same. (...) They don’t want offensive behavior; they don’t want a girl at the reception with a nose ring.

In this excerpt, Marc asks himself: is it discrimination to exclude job candidates based on their appearance? He is not sure and he resolves this issue by stressing that for himself it does not matter what a candidate looks like, but that his clients do have certain preferences regarding new employees and they draw on reasons of productivity (e.g., better customer service) to justify this. Adhering to his clients’ wishes here is the most important consideration for Marc: it is simply his job to find the right employee for his client, he maintains. In this repertoire, aesthetics are a relevant criterion because they are important for finding a candidate the client will like. The repertoire of productivity here overrules the question of whether selection based on looks is discriminatory (but note the exception Marc makes for racism).

Somewhat similarly, gatekeepers legitimize the productive role of aesthetics by referring to the importance of looking presentable. Our respondents tend to agree that workers should meet an undefined minimum standard of self-presentation, often expressed using the term ‘presentable’ (‘representatief’ in Dutch). When asked how beauty plays a role in hiring, external recruiter Jeanette explains the difference between beauty and presentability:

Jeanette: Sure. Yes, we even rate people on that aspect [appearance]. It is not so much about beauty, but more about presentability.

Interviewer: What’s the difference between the two?

Jeanette: Well, you can be incredibly beautiful but if you smell bad then you’re not representative. So representative is also...if someone applies here for a job at a bank, then you shouldn’t come to the interview dressed in your old jeans and baggy sweater.

Looking presentable is seen as crucial criterion and is often explained in terms of cleanliness, hygiene, or decent clothing style. When discussing the importance of self-presentation, many respondents are quick to emphasize that it is not about looking beautiful or being attractive, but that it is crucially about meeting a minimal standard of what is acceptable within a certain sector. Norms of representation can vary greatly between sectors, as Friedman and Laurison (2019) have shown. Whereas corporate sectors appreciate ‘polish’ – i.e., a formal suit or female equivalent – organizations within the cultural sector appreciate informal attire. However, particularly in the cultural sectors, knowledge of specific cultural codes is required to display the right taste and to achieve the right kind of ‘studied informality’ (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Jeannette’s argument for the importance of presentability illustrates the role of gatekeepers in finding candidates who look ‘right’ and who match the image of the sector, hence contributing to drawing symbolic boundaries and (re)producing inequalities (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The repertoire of productivity can also apply to the organization itself. Following the classic aesthetic labor repertoire of trying to appeal to a certain clientele (Butler, 2014; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), this repertoire is most typically used when discussing ‘front stage’ jobs, as illustrated by Albert, who works as an HR officer in the cultural sector:

Albert: Well, it all really depends on the function. For technical jobs it won’t be the case so much, but at the ticket office, if you have a public function then I suppose you sort of have to... [...] at a business event

we hired someone recently, it was only a temporary function but still that person has to have an agreeable appearance. There are of course plenty of functions for which that isn't necessary. But in the majority of functions at [organization] you are in contact with the public and then you do want to keep up a certain standard.

This justification for the importance bears strong resemblance to what studies on aesthetic labor in the service industry have consistently argued: employers select employees based on their style and aesthetics in order to appeal to customers. Following this repertoire of productivity, 'lookism' (Warhurst et al., 2009) can be integral to sectors entailing working with audiences or customers. According to this repertoire, it is not acceptable to exclude people based on looks because of personal preferences, but it is acceptable to exclude them if it serves clients, the standards of the sector, or the organization.

b. Appearances express personality

Although actual physical traits were rarely mentioned by our respondents when evaluating fictive candidates, they often voiced less concrete aspects of aesthetics. Confirming the stream of studies pointing out the role of intuition and gut feeling in labor market selection, considerations such as feeling a certain energy, an emotional click, or liking or disliking the way and frequency a candidate smiles were ubiquitous (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Rivera, 2015; Sharone, 2014). Strikingly, when asked if and how aesthetics matter in their evaluation of candidates, our respondents typically answered by stating that looks do not matter, but that charm *does*. Hence, the respondents themselves directly connect aesthetics to personality and charm (in Dutch they usually used *uitstraling* to express this), and rather spoke about the general impression candidates give off than mentioning specific physical features.

Following from this, the second repertoire gatekeepers employ in legitimizing aesthetics as a hiring criterion is that looks indicate personality. According to this repertoire, appearances are not about being beautiful, but about hard-to-pinpoint personal traits. Christian's statement about this is exemplary: 'I just know that appearances play a role. Whether they are important is a different point, but I just know that appearances – and I'm not saying good-looking or something, maybe I should say charm – that that plays a role.' According to Christian, appearances matter not because of beauty but because of what they express. Not beauty, but what he calls 'charm' is taken into consideration when evaluating candidates. Our respondents find it difficult to explain what charm is exactly, or how it can be observed. Whereas bureaucratic forms of organizational decision-making (including employee selection) are based on explicit rules and technical knowledge, charm is about likeability and compatibility (Brown & Hesketh, 2004: 33-39; Dean, 2005). In hiring, these are not

mutually exclusive; after making a first selection based on credentials, technical knowledge, and skills, gatekeepers base a further selection on ‘soft currencies’, but the criteria and how to evaluate them are not clear, causing uncertainty. Interestingly, the gatekeepers find that charm is a legitimate criterion whereas ‘good looks’ are not. Good looks are understood to be superficial, but charm is linked to personality, as illustrated by recruiter for corporate traineeships Louise’s take on the use of visual material in application letters:

Louise: So always with some visual material, with faces. If someone adds that, that just speaks to me more. That’s personality. It doesn’t really matter what someone looks like, you should hope not, I hope I don’t look at it like that. You try to be objective, but regarding personality and making a connection it can help.

This respondent prefers resumes with photos because they tell her something about the personality of the candidate. She goes on to explain that she hopes that it does not matter what someone actually looks like and that she hopes that she does not judge people on that basis. But for making a connection it can help, she states. Christian’s and Louise’s explanations of why looks matter are similar in the sense that they both express discomfort about the fact that looks do matter (‘Whether they are important is a different point’, ‘I hope I don’t look at it like that’) and then deal with this discomfort by reconceptualizing looks: it is not about aesthetic appeal, but about what looks tell you about a person. This repertoire again underlines the moral discomfort of gatekeepers with beauty as a hiring criterion. At the same time, it legitimizes the relevance of aesthetics in hiring by reframing them as an indicator of personality.

c. Looking right is a matter of effort

The third repertoire for legitimating the relevance of aesthetic in hiring is the imperative to show effort. According to this repertoire, candidates can show that they have put effort into preparing for a job interview by looking representative and dressing in a way that ‘fits’ the organization. In many Western, post-industrial labor markets, finding work requires job seekers to enhance their employability by doing unpaid work, for instance on their self-presentation (Vallas & Cummins, 2015; van den Berg & Arts, 2018). Rather than for instance a sign of respect, making the effort to look right is primarily a means of communicating motivation. Moreover, this repertoire is a reflection of the idea that self-presentation is something that can be controlled and improved by making an effort (Widdows, 2018; Kuipers, 2022). As such, the importance of self-presentation is defined as emphatically meritocratic: by putting work into self-presentation or appearance, anyone can increase their chances of finding employment. External corporate recruiter Maarten explains that candidates

who look well-groomed have a head start:

Maarten: I think you cannot escape from [taking looks into consideration], to have an opinion about that as a person. To take that with you in your role, unknowingly. (...) Imagine someone who really tries his best to present himself nicely, and you really don't have to be a supermodel, but a nice jacket, tie, shirt, hair neatly combed, erm that's fine. Yeah and if another [candidate] doesn't do that, then that person was also not so willing to put the effort in.

According to Maarten, looking 'right' as a job candidate is matter of being willing to put the right amount of effort in. As illustrated by this excerpt, recruiters tend to mention aspects of appearance that are relatively easily adjustable in this repertoire, such as clean hair and nails or wearing certain clothes, and disregard the efforts, costs, and specific cultural knowledge this might actually require (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). As such, the relevance of aesthetics is reframed as not discriminatory, but as a test of motivation. Consider for instance Jeannette, who maintains that anyone can be representative, as long as they make the right effort:

Interviewer: So clothes are important [for job interviews]?

Jeannette: Sure, that also has to do with presentability. Is your hair washed? Are your shoes polished? And for some it is important and for others it's not, but you just look and think: is this person groomed? Whether someone is representative in that sense is not so much about beauty, but about the total picture. Are they fat and wearing a tight top? Nothing wrong [with being] fat, but if you wear a tight top [then] something is wrong. You have to dress accordingly.

Jeannette implies a disapproval of large bodies but suggests that body size is itself not the issue: it is about how you dress. This points out an important form of inequality in the way different body types are perceived. She places emphasis on what candidates can do to present their body in a suitable way. This way, a systemic form of inequality related to body size is denied. Instead, candidates are made responsible: they should put the effort into presenting their body in a certain way, and if they do that, they will not be excluded. This repertoire for legitimizing the importance of beauty in hiring supports the argument made by Widdows (2018), Sarpila et al. (2021), and Kuipers (2022) that, in many Western countries, working on personal beauty has become a duty. Within this beauty regime, working on your self-presentation for a job interview (or any day at work) is not vain, but a normal element of the preparations

that are expected of job candidates (or employees), as illustrated by research on the aesthetic advice given by labor market intermediaries in the Netherlands (Vonk, 2023). Furthermore, this study demonstrates that in aesthetic advice, the importance of aesthetics is presented as an opportunity to make a good impression rather than a risk of being excluded based on appearances. Similar to the gatekeepers in the current study, labor market intermediaries deny the exclusionary effects of the relevance of aesthetics in job interviews and present it as a meritocratic way to present oneself as the ‘right’ candidate for the job.

Conclusions

This chapter investigated the question of how gatekeepers in the labor market consider beauty as a hiring criterion. Gatekeepers acknowledge that aesthetics matter in their evaluations of job candidates, and they tend to problematize this. Interestingly, specific physical elements were rarely mentioned by the respondents when evaluating the fictional clips. However, when prompted about actual recent job interview situations and evaluations of candidates, they discuss how aesthetics actually *do* play a role in how they evaluate candidates. Three cultural repertoires for morally legitimizing appearances as hiring criteria are distinguished. The first repertoire is that appearances can be productive – be it on the level of the sector, organization, or client. This productivity is similar to the typical aesthetic labor repertoire of gaining revenue through style and looks (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), and our material illustrates that this repertoire can be extended to sectors outside of hospitality. Second, gatekeepers employ the cultural repertoire that appearances express personality. The third and final repertoire is that aesthetics are a matter of effort, hence making their importance conducive to meritocratic hiring.

What does this teach us about the importance of aesthetics for work and about how workers’ aesthetics are regulated? We know that the relevance of appearances potentially increases exclusions and inequalities. Earlier studies have been critical of this and have emphasized the systematic exclusions and inequalities related to aesthetics. This study advances the understanding of these persistent inequalities by providing insight into the repertoires employee gatekeepers use to morally legitimize appearances as evaluative criteria. Our analysis suggests that labor market gatekeepers do not consciously seek to build or maintain these systemic exclusions. Instead, what they attempt to do is have their, often intuitively based, choices pass a test of justification. The highly complex task of evaluating candidates and making hiring decisions causes moral uncertainty among gatekeepers, and therefore a need to legitimize their evaluations, and the criteria on which they base their decisions (De Keere, 2023). These criteria may conflict in several ways. For instance, gatekeepers

attempt to create equal employment opportunities, but might also feel that they have to meet their clients' or customers' aesthetic preferences. Or gatekeepers might, as a rule, only take criteria into account that are relevant for the job, but may argue that aesthetic appeal is indeed relevant. The uncertainty and ambiguousness regarding criteria for evaluating candidates, particularly regarding soft skills, means that there is room to legitimize different – and even conflicting – evaluations and decisions. Importantly, the cultural repertoires that gatekeepers rely on appear generally accepted but nevertheless legitimize lookism. After all, they provide arguments for why it is acceptable, important, or even morally just, to consider appearance as an evaluation criterion in job application procedures. While the first and second repertoires primarily emphasize the actual importance of appearance for work, and disregard the exclusionary nature of this importance, the third repertoire suggests that taking appearances into account contributes to making fair selections.

Therefore, if lookism is something that should be avoided, these findings have several possible implications. One obvious way of diminishing the role of aesthetics in application procedures is completely reconsidering the way in which these procedures take place, by for instance replacing the job interview with a standardized assessment procedure, or a random selection process. Another, perhaps more subtle way would be not only formulating clear criteria for evaluating candidates, but also explicating why these criteria are important, and making a hierarchical order of the criteria. For instance, organizations and recruiters could reflect on why a certain aesthetic presentation is important for workers who are in contact with customers, what their idea of what a 'right' aesthetic presentation is actually based on, and whether it is indeed attainable for anyone putting the right amount of effort in. Making these considerations and criteria explicit might indeed lead to awareness and the conclusion that aesthetics as a hiring criterion does not stand the test of legitimation.

This chapter teaches us two important things in relation to the main research question of this dissertation. First, it shows that organizational gatekeepers, who play a significant role in enforcing the importance of aesthetics for work by having the decision-making power over who gets hired, are actually quite ambivalent regarding the significance of aesthetics in job interviews. While many previous studies demonstrate that aesthetics play a role in gatekeepers' evaluations and simply assume that these gatekeepers have no moral objections to it, this study reveals the struggles of those making the decisions. Second, it once again illustrates that aesthetic regulation often takes on obscure forms. Gatekeepers do not outright state *that* and *how* appearances matter. Instead, they claim that appearance is about something else entirely, thus both legitimizing and concealing the importance of aesthetics for work.

References

- Anderson, T. L., Grunert, C., Katz, A., & Lovascio, S. (2010). Aesthetic Capital: A Research Review on Beauty Perks and Penalties. *Sociology Compass*, 4(8), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00312.x>
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2000). The reality of moral expectations: A sociology of situated judgement. *Philosophical Explorations*, 3(3), 208–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790008523332>
- Boltanski, L., & Thevenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press.
- Bordo, S. (2003). *Unbearable weight: feminism, western culture, and the body*. University of California Press.
- Brown, P., & Heskeith, A. (2004). *The mismanagement of talent: Employability and jobs in the knowledge economy*. Oxford University Press.
- Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(5), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013501956>
- Butler, C., & Harris, J. (2015). Pills, ills and the ugly face of aesthetic labour: ‘They should’ve discriminated against me.’ *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(3), 508–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014559965>
- De Keere, K. (2023). *Justifying employee gatekeeping: a video-elicitation and comparative study on resolving moral unease during hiring*. <https://osf.io/5p69w/download>
- Dean, D. (2005). Recruiting a self: Women performers and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(4), 761–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005058061>
- Dobbin, F. (2009). *Inventing equal opportunity*. Princeton University Press.
- Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (A. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press.
- Hall, R., & Van den Broek, D. (2012). Aestheticising retail workers: Orientations of aesthetic labour in Australian fashion retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427592>
- Hamermesh, D. S., & Abrevaya, J. (2013). Beauty is the promise of happiness? In *European Economic Review* (Vol. 64). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2013.09.005>
- Holla, S. (2016). Justifying Aesthetic Labor: How Fashion Models Enact Coherent Selves. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 45(4), 474–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615575067>
- Holla, S., & Kuipers, G. (2016). Aesthetic capital. In L. Hanquinet & M. Savage (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture* (pp. 290–305). Routledge.
- Imdorf, C. (2010). Emotions in the Hiring Procedure: How ‘Gut Feelings’ Rationalize Personnel Selection Decisions. In B. Sieben & Å. Wettergren (Eds.), *Emotionalizing Organizations and Organizing Emotions* (pp. 84–105). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackson, M. (2006). Personality Traits and Occupational Attainment. *European Sociological Review*, 22(2), 187–199. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jci051>
- Johnson, C., Dowd, T. J., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2006). Legitimacy as a Social Process. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32(1), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101>
- Keere, K. de. (2022). Evaluating Self-Presentation: Gatekeeping Recognition Work in Hiring. *Cultural Sociology*, 16(1), 86–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211032527>
- Keesman, L. D. (2022). Action accounts of police-civilian interactions: Using video elicitation to explore police officers’ how-to knowledge. *Poetics*, 91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101561>
- Kuipers, G. (2015). Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries. *Poetics*, 53, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.10.001>
- Kuipers, G. (2022). The expanding beauty regime: Or, why it has become so important to look good. *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 13(2), 207–228. <https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.00046.1>
- Kuipers, G., Franssen, T., & Holla, S. (2019). Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 383–398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861634>
- Kwan, S., & Trautner, M. N. (2009). Teaching and Learning Guide for ‘Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency.’ *Sociology Compass*, 3(6), 1017–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00243.x>
- Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167–195. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107>
- Lamont, M., & Thévenot, L. (2000). Introduction: Toward a renewed comparative cultural sociology. In M. Lamont & L. Thévenot (Eds.), *Rethinking comparative cultural sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* (pp. 1–22). Cambridge University Press.

- Leidner, R. (1991). *Serving Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work, and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs*. 5(2), 154–177.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity.
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12211>
- Moss, P., & Tilly, C. (1996). “Soft” Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems. *Work and Occupations*, 23(3), 252–276.
- Reinecke, J., Van Bommel, K., & Spicer, A. (2017). When Orders of Worth Clash: Negotiating Legitimacy in Situations of Moral Multiplexity. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 52, 33–72.
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>
- Rivera, L. A. (2015). Go with your gut: Emotion and evaluation in job interviews. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(5), 1339–1389. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681214>
- Rivera, L. A. (2016). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton University Press.
- Roberts, C., & Campbell, S. (2005). Fitting stories into boxes : performances in British job interviews. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2(1), 45–73.
- Sarpila, O., Koivula, A., Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., & Pajunen, T. (2020). Double standards in the accumulation and utilisation of ‘aesthetic capital.’ *Poetics*, 82(June 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101447>
- Sarpila, O., Kukkonen, I., Pajunen, T., & Åberg, E. (2021). *Appearance as Capital: The Normative Regulation of Aesthetic Capital Accumulation and Conversion* (O. Sarpila, I. Kukkonen, T. Pajunen, & E. Åberg, Eds.). Emerald Publishing.
- Sharone, O. (2014). *Flawed system/flawed self. Job searching and unemployment experiences*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Tilly, C. (2008). *Why? What happens when people give reasons...and why*. Princeton University Press.
- Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press: Enterprise Culture in an Age of Precarity. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614563741>
- Van Campen, C., & Versantvoort, M. (2014). *Aantrekkelijk gezond: de sociale gevolgen van verschillen in fysiek, mentaal en esthetisch kapitaal*. December 2014, 174.
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2018). The Aesthetics of Work-Readiness: Aesthetic Judgements and Pedagogies for Conditional Welfare and Post-Fordist Labour Markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018758196>
- Van Pinxteren, M., & de Beer, P. (2016). *Meritocratie: Op weg naar een nieuwe klassensamenleving* (M. van Pinxteren & P. de Beer, Eds.). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462983397>
- Vandebroeck, D. (2016). *Distinctions in the Flesh: Social Class and the Embodiment of Inequality*. Routledge.
- Vonk, L. (2023). Fitting in and being unique: How online aesthetic advice from temporary work agencies legitimises exclusions. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2169182>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2001). *Looking good, sounding right*. Industrial Society.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2020). *Aesthetic Labour*. Sage.
- Warhurst, C., Van den Broek, D., Hall, R., & Nickson, D. (2009). Lookism: The New Frontier of Employment Discrimination? *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 51(1), 131–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185608096808>
- Widdows, H. (2018). *Perfect me: beauty as an ethical ideal*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). “Looking Good and Sounding Right.” *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Witz, A., Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2003). The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization. *Organization*, 10(1), 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001375>
- Wolf, N. (2013). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. Random House.
- Young, M. (2008). *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Transaction Publishers.

4

Peer feedback in aesthetic labor: Forms, logics and responses

An earlier version⁸ of this chapter is published in:
Cultural Sociology (2021), 15(2), 213–232

8 In the current chapter, I have included the overarching research question of this dissertation as well as a brief discussion on how this case study contributes to answering this main research question.

Abstract

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

Keywords

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

Introduction

The almost daily recurring question of what to wear to work is relevant to many workers for reasons that evidently go beyond vanity. ‘Looking good and sounding right’ (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001) has become a prerequisite for finding and maintaining employment in a labor market dominated by ‘frontstage’ service work (Goffman, 1959), and insecure employment relations (Kremer et al., 2017; Lorey, 2015; Standing, 2011). The proximity between workers and consumers in work that is characteristic of post-industrial labor markets brings forth specific demands for workers. They are not only providing a service, but their appearance, style, and image have become part of what is being sold (Leidner, 1991; Warhurst et al., 2000); (McDowell, 2009). The body of literature that has emerged on the topic of aesthetic labor has by and large focused on pre- and post-entry interactions between employer and (candidate) employees, generally analyzing the ways in which managers have regulative power in commodifying workers’ aesthetics (Ibidem) and how workers themselves perform, control and manage their own aesthetics (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Dean, 2005; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Mears, 2014). Surprisingly underexplored is the question of how aesthetic feedback and control takes place *between workers*.

Studies of aesthetic labor generally assume a clear distinction between those who manage and those who are managed (Butler, 2014; Mears, 2014: 1332; Timming, 2015; Warhurst et al., 2000: 4; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007: 107, 2009: 388; Williams & Connell, 2010). Yet, trends in organizational ideals and practices have been moving towards self-organizing and self-managing workers and teams over the past decades (Barker, 1993; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Du Gay, 1996; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sewell, 1998). The surge of ‘horizontal’ management ideals and practices calls attention to social processes of power and distinction taking place among coworkers (Bourdieu, 1984). In order to get a better understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to managing an aesthetic self-presentation for work – particularly in an increasingly insecure labor market – this chapter looks into the role of peers in the regulation of workers’ aesthetics. It does so by analyzing the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which workers give each other feedback regarding personal aesthetics in an attempt to answer the following question: *How are peers involved in the regulation of workers’ aesthetics at work?* Specifically, I answer the following sub-questions: (1) How does peer feedback regarding personal aesthetics in work situations without clear organizational aesthetic guidelines take place?; (2) How is it understood?; and (3) How is it reacted to?

I distinguish three main reasons why feedback from peers is expected to be different from feedback from managers and why it is hence worth being examined empirically. First, managerial feedback and control can be substantiated and legitimized by the official hierarchy within an organization. The few earlier studies that do address

feedback from peers are based on fieldwork within organizations that have clear aesthetic guidelines, such as the airline industry (Tyler & Abbott, 1998). Without these guidelines and official hierarchy, feedback is, arguably, a judgment of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Considering the moral imperative to appear open and respectful regarding others' tastes (see for instance Jarness & Friedman, 2017), the first sub-question arises: *How do co-workers give each other peer feedback concerning personal aesthetics?*

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

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

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

This chapter aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to aesthetic judgments and control, particularly in insecure working conditions. The analyses suggest that what is perceived as peer feedback: (1) is often ambiguous both in content and form; (2) can contain both commercial logic and logics of 'belonging', in which personal aesthetics are conflated with for

instance personality and moral value; and (3) is not only accepted, but in many cases seen as legitimate and taken very seriously by workers on the receiving end. Hence, this study describes how informal processes of control and distinction concerning personal appearance intensify and complicate experiences of aesthetic labor as the interplay between market logics and judgments of taste has the potential to act as a reinforcement of insecurities and inequalities.

Aesthetic labor

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

Aesthetic norms are communicated and enforced by employers and managers in several ways. Pre-entry, organizations can base recruitment strategies on aesthetics and lifestyle. Abercrombie and Fitch for instance recruited new employees on college campuses with fraternities and sororities (Greenhouse, 2004). Moreover, organizations select employees based on their aesthetics (Warhurst et al., 2000). Post-entry, organizations are known to have clothing policies (Hall & van den Broek, 2012) and grooming guidelines (Hochschild, 1983; Tyler & Abbott, 1998), to send employees home or ‘backstage’ to the stock room, and even to fire them (Butler, 2014; Mears, 2014). Employers can also ‘nudge’ employees, for instance by offering employee discounts on company products (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Williams and Connell, 2010). Workers and job seekers are, however, not passive receivers of managerial instructions. More recent contributions to the literature on aesthetic labor pay attention to resistance (Elias et al., 2017; Worth, 2016) and to practices of self-discipline and self-management, bringing to light the complexities and never-ending effort involved in achieving the ‘right’ body and look. In an increasingly insecure labor market, where temporary and freelance contracts are more and more common, the efforts involved in ‘keeping up appearances’ for freelancers in for instance fashion modeling (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006) and retailing (Entwistle, 2009) are ongoing. In other words, research on aesthetic labor practices and experiences has shifted from a focus on managerial control towards a more encompassing study of ‘the effort people make to work on their own appearance’ (Holla and Kuipers, 2016: 330). Hence, not

only employees, but also freelancers, job seekers and even the unemployed (Van den Berg and Arts, 2019) and stay-at-home mothers (De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017) perform aesthetic labor. Pressures to do so clearly do not only come from employers, and surveillance is, arguably, omnipresent (Elias et al., 2017: 14–17). The present study aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complexities of aesthetic labor for those in insecure employment positions by looking at aesthetic feedback from co-workers.

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

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

Workers’ engagement in informal control at work

Informal norms, organizational cultures, and peers are key to understanding what happens at work. Burawoy (1982) famously illustrated how the way workers act is found somewhere in the middle of what managers tell them, work floor culture, and their own consent to or refusal of this. Despite employers’ efforts to ‘manage consent’ of their workers, the latter find ways of collectively interfering with the labor process so as to sub-optimize output. That is not to say that social regulation necessarily conflicts with organizational interests. Peer interactions can intensify control and increase workers’ commitment to organizational goals, for instance in luxury services

where workers try to position themselves as equal to clients and even superior to their peers by strictly adhering to company standards (Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Sherman, 2005, 2007; Tyler & Abbott, 1998). The client-friendly behavior of the employees of the luxury hotels in Sherman's studies (2005; 2007) was above all a result of peer dynamics. Lateral relations between workers proved important in shaping the quality of the services they provide as workers attempt to produce a 'superior self' by drawing symbolic boundaries based on, for instance, cultural capital and status. In other words, social interaction can work in combination with managerial interests in order to advance worker conformity.

This chapter's focus on peers is particularly interesting given the current trend towards minimizing the role of management. The dichotomy of managers/managed does not apply so clearly anymore, as current trends in HRM reduce the role of managers and proscribe that workers should be organized in self-directing teams, hence making them personally and as a group responsible for achieving the goals formulated by higher management (Du Gay, 1996; Hodgson & Briand, 2013; Sewell, 1998). The push towards self-directing teams emphasizes the importance of group identities and norms for 'fitting in'. This 'fitting in' is partly dependent upon matching cultural tastes.

Personal aesthetics, and evaluations of others' appearances, can be (partly) seen as reflections of taste. The relevance here lies not so much in the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow cultural tastes, but in the socially shaped aesthetic disposition that carries in it a certain cultural value within a certain context or field (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Kuipers, 2015). Importantly, evaluations of people's appearances cannot be separated from systemic forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. Moreover, as aesthetic self-presentation is unavoidably part of everyday practices, people embody their own beauty standards through practices such as dressing. The appreciation of appearance is, in other words, 'double embodied', as people both judge others and groom themselves according to their own aesthetic dispositions (Kuipers, 2015; Vandebroek, 2016).

Both aesthetic self-presentation and the evaluation of others' appearances, then, are ways to express taste and to establish (or to inhibit) cultural match. Organizational gatekeepers look for 'cultural match' when selecting new employees, based on for instance speech, comportment, communication style, or dress (Koppman, 2016; Rivera, 2016; Timming, 2017). Once 'in' the organization, cultural fit is important for 'getting on', as recognition of talent and potential is largely dependent upon cultural affinity (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Clothing, Friedman and Laurison (2019: 134-144) argue, can be viewed as a seemingly innocuous code that is both classed and important for creating feelings of trust, identification, appreciation, connection, and pleasant communication between co-workers. Particularly in fields of work where merit is hard to assess, such as the service and creative industries under study here,

cultural capital is easily converted into other advantages, and is key for fitting in, staying in, and for getting ahead (Friedman & Laurison, 2019: 202).

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

Methods

This study is based on interview data collected as part of a larger research project, led by Marguerite van den Berg, on how precariously employed workers monitor and adjust their appearance through dress in relation to their constantly changing work settings (another article following from this project is Van den Berg & Vonk (2019)). A team of four interviewers, including myself, used the method of ‘wardrobe interviewing’ (Van der Laan & Velthuis, 2016; Woodward, 2007), to invite respondents to reflect on and talk about practices of dressing while using clothes and accessories from their wardrobes to elicit these narratives. Strikingly, respondents seldom mentioned corrections from their supervisors but vividly and fiercely recollected colleagues’ remarks concerning their appearance, which underlines the relevance of an empirical investigation of peer feedback. This surprising finding gave rise to the present exploration of the role of peers in aesthetic labor.

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

underlines its importance and salience in workers' experiences of aesthetic labor.

Respondents were selected based on job type (i.e., frontstage work in interactive services and/or in creative industries) and type of employment relation (i.e., not secure). Aesthetic labor has mostly been studied in service sector work – where workers are in direct contact with customers – and creative work, where having the right 'unique' style is a way of showing cultural capital and creativity (Boyle and De Keere, 2019; Elias et al., 2017; McRobbie, 2016). Activities seen as 'cultural' and 'economic' are intimately linked in the creative and service industries (Entwistle, 2009). Based on earlier studies on aesthetic labor we expected that these types of workers would be particularly concerned with their professional aesthetic performance, making their reflections on how they monitor and adjust their appearance especially interesting. The sample includes shop assistants, restaurant wait staff, teaching assistants, childcare givers, music and ballet teachers, photographers, performing musicians, and theater and movie directors. We do not argue that these workers form a homogeneous group. In many respects, their work experiences are different, particularly as they work in different fields where aesthetic norms and judgments vary (Bourdieu, 1984). Interestingly, in our sample the categories tended to overlap, with workers for instance combining creative gigs with service jobs. What is important here, however, is that for all these workers aesthetic performances are part of the job – it is part of the product that they are 'selling', be it their creativity or their style that suits the shop's status. As mentioned, this study originally set out to explore how precarious workers monitor and adjust their appearance through dress in relation to their constantly changing work settings. Hence, only workers on temporary or zero-hour contracts, and freelancers, were interviewed. In analyzing these interviews, the salience of peer feedback was striking, which led to posing the research question at hand. Though it is highly conceivable that aesthetic peer feedback also takes place among workers in secure employment, there are two important reasons why workers in insecure employment are particularly interesting for studying this phenomenon. First, due to new and often changing work settings, these workers cannot (yet) rely on familiarity with aesthetic norms. As relative 'outsiders' in the organization they do not have secure knowledge of particular contextual norms and are vulnerable to gossip and social control (Soeters and Van Iterson, 2002). This makes their testimonies and reflections particularly pertinent for studying aesthetic peer feedback. A second reason why precarious frontstage workers are especially interesting for studying the question at hand is that their position within the organization is insecure. Their employment position is precarious and often partly dependent on their peers' approval of them, as discussed in this chapter's section on workers' engagement in informal control at work, making them likely to be susceptible to comments from co-workers. In sum, due to the precarity of their work situation, they are likely to consciously reflect on their daily aesthetic performances.

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

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

An important point to be made about the research context is that Dutch ways of displaying cultural status, both in general and concerning clothing and fashion in particular, are distinctly informal (Kuipers, 2010; Teunissen, 2011). Narratives on Dutch clothing culture emphasize functionality and frugality and clothing is particularly informal. Formal attire is unusual in many work contexts – even in the financial district in Amsterdam, jeans and sneakers are not uncommon (Haegens, 2019). In some sectors, however, workers are required to wear a uniform. This will be explored in more depth in chapter 5.

Findings

Forms of peer feedback

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

Peer feedback in its most direct and open form takes the shape of direct instruction, meaning that co-workers literally instruct peers on their appearance. This type of feedback is least subtle in the sense that aesthetic norms are presented as rules, verbally made explicit. Given the ambiguity of power relations and aesthetic norms, it is perhaps hardly surprising that this type of feedback is uncommon in the experiences of our respondents. In the instances it did come about in the interviews, instructions

often concerned helping newcomers getting to know the situational norms so they would feel comfortable taking physical comfort into consideration, for example by telling peers they should dress warmly or wear clothes they can move freely in.

Often, feedback from peers is verbalized as an observation pointing out aspects that are remarkable or that stand out, sometimes in a positive or negative way, but most often without making this explicit (e.g. ‘wow, you’re wearing a red dress today’). Many of our respondents recollected moments in which someone at work simply pointed out an aspect of their appearance as interactions that made them aware of, and sometimes reconsider, their aesthetics. In this type of interaction judgments are not made explicit, but the fact that something is pointed out implies that it attracts attention. Take for instance Tom, who combines several jobs and gigs as an internet publisher, sales agent and text writer. One of his favorite outfits is the ‘Bonne suit’⁹ – an affordable workman-style suit made by a Dutch designer. Tom’s Bonne suit is made completely out of dark denim and attracted some attention when he first started wearing it:

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

This example is used by Tom to explain that wearing something new can make him feel very aware of himself. People pointing out that he is wearing something that is new or stands out makes him feel more self-conscious, even when their responses are not necessarily negative.

In some instances, verbalized observations do express opinions or inferences based on clothing. This type of feedback not only entails pointing out aesthetic aspects, but also makes explicit the social or symbolic interpretation of it. Consider for instance restaurant employee Sandra, who does not wear her beloved pair of dungarees to work because, she explains, ‘they are really very ugly and people always ask me if I’m into women [when I wear these]’. Associating this type of garment with female homosexuality, co-workers ask Sandra about her sexual preferences, thus giving feedback about what clothes are appropriate for women while reinforcing a heterosexual norm.

A specific style of commenting is through laughter and jokes. Comments like these are presented as ‘fun’ or ‘having a laugh’ (see also McDowell (1997) and Fine & De Soucey (2005)), but, again, they are a way of communicating and reinforcing norms. Jokes are sometimes communicated directly to the person they concern, but can also take the form of gossip. Consider for instance how Joris, a teaching assistant at a

⁹ An illustration of this suit can be found on the cover of this dissertation

university, talks about how personal aesthetics are a topic of conversation at work:

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

Interviewer: So how does that play out? [...]

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

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

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

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

Interviewer: And did you get that idea sometimes?

A: Yes, yes, yes. Because she [a former female colleague] would sometimes wear a really pretty dress. And then I would just feel sort

of uncomfortable for her, because these men would be looking at her.

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

The somewhat contradictory way in which respondents talk about the importance of aesthetics, as demonstrated by Joris, is illustrative of the ambivalence of peer feedback in aesthetic labor. Personal appearance is considered important enough to comment on and it is a common topic of conversation in the workplace. However, it is usually discussed in an implicit way and the importance of aesthetics is often explicitly downplayed. There are no fixed rules and on the surface it appears that anything goes – in fact, having an individualistic, 'authentic' style is found to be a recurring norm in the interviews, which is in line with the aesthetic advice discussed in chapter 2. Yet, this seeming informality does not mean that everyone is free to look the way they want, and it can even contribute to concealing norms, in effect making socialization into getting to know the particular contextual norms a difficult process.

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

In sum, the content and the shape of peer feedback regarding aesthetics at work can often be characterized as implicit and ambiguous. Aesthetic norms in professional contexts are multifaceted and situational, and are often communicated indirectly and implicitly, meaning that potential judgment is omnipresent while making it hard to 'get it right'. The ambiguity of norms and the subtlety with which they

are communicated does not imply that personal aesthetics are not experienced as important. On the contrary, perhaps – as the following analysis of the logics driving aesthetic peer feedback suggests.

Logics behind peer feedback

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

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

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

Annelies: Actually almost anything goes on set. But if somebody dresses in a very sexy way, then everybody thinks: 'that one doesn't belong on set'.

Interviewer: Because [...]?

A: Because it's very inconvenient to dress sexy on set. Sexy as in: showing lots of skin, lots of make-up, heels.

Interviewer: Why would that be inconvenient?

A: Well, an average working day is 11 hours and you're standing around a lot and waiting for long periods of time. Sometimes you have to get into action really quickly, run. You never know in what kind of setting you will work, as I mentioned before. You never know what the weather will be like. Especially because working days are so long and because you're outside all day, it's just convenient to dress warmly and comfortably.

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

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

Interviewer: [Did you get comments] from students?

S: Yes, and sometimes from colleagues. So I didn't feel like [dealing with] that.

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

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

Another way the repertoire of belonging can drive peer feedback is by attempts to help others avoid embarrassing themselves or offending others with their looks. Crucially, this type of feedback is not necessarily a reflection of norms that the giver of feedback agrees with. College teacher and photographer Lara, for instance, feels that it is a form of support to point out to colleagues when you think they are not complying with certain aesthetic norms:

Lara: So I think I have my freedom there to wear what I want but it cannot be sexy of course. Sometimes a colleague is a little bit sexy and then we say something fun like 'hello there!' (laughs). So we give each other feedback on that.

Lara expresses a double judgment: sexy is not suitable for work, and this particular look is too sexy. She assumes that a subtle joke or remark is sufficient for her co-worker to understand her judgment, and that s/he will agree. The goal is not to appeal to customers in order to get competitive advantage, but to help peers from 'failing' aesthetically (see also Winch's (2013) discussion on the 'girlfriend gaze'). This again illustrates that looking good for work does not equal looking attractive or beautiful. The underlying logic in this particular example is the belief that there are certain norms that apply to particular contexts and that not adhering to these

norms is due to a lack of knowledge or an incorrect understanding of the norm. The co-worker not fitting the norms needs to be informed, as not complying could lead to unwanted responses from others, such as negative reactions or undesired attention. There appears to be a paradoxical logic here: by ‘helping’ others, norms are fortified, and the importance of aesthetics is essentialized. Even those that do not necessarily agree with aesthetic norms are involved in reinforcing those norms in order to help others avoid painful situations (Ridgeway, 2009: 148–149).

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

Responses to aesthetic feedback from peers

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

How exactly not adhering to informal aesthetic norms is sanctioned does not become clear from our data. Despite this limitation, the interviews do suggest that peer feedback has real consequences, both for workers’ sense of comfort and confidence, and for how they actually dress. Consider again Samuel, who stopped wearing a suit, and Alexandra, who avoids pretty dresses and things that show body shape because she knows they will lead to unwanted attention from male colleagues. Director’s Assistant Annelies, similarly, aims to avoid comments from male technicians and does not wear her favorite pair of shiny leggings on days she is not sure who will be on set.

Though responses to feedback in our interviews range from disinterestedness or not accepting the other person’s opinion, to outright embarrassment and feeling out of place, the latter responses were the most typical and the former responses the

exception – and exclusively found among men. This contrast is illustrated by the respective responses to peer feedback by Patrick and Anne (a 30-year old landscape architect, returning to work after being away from work on sick leave):

Interviewer: Do you ever get comments?

Patrick: Erm, no. Really the only thing is that sometimes my pants are hanging too low.

I: Oh, yes? Has someone ever said something about that?

P: Yeah, ‘Patrick, pull your pants up, I can see your underwear’. So that’s the only thing. (...) I’ve always worn them this way. I love it, you know, loose on the hips is what I call it. But well, I should realize a bit more that if I’m reaching for something for instance, or I’m bending down, that I should pay attention to my surroundings and to how I’m standing.

Anne: I once wore this [knee-length black dress] in the middle of summer, with a cardigan. I think it’s a really nice dress. (...) And then one of my co-workers made a remark, something like: are you going to the beach? And I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. I was feeling fine before that.

Interviewer: What was it about that remark that made you feel uncomfortable? (...)

A: All of the sudden I started to doubt, like, is this too revealing? Or do they not take me seriously now? That sort of idea, even though I think it’s quite a serious dress.

The contrast between Anne’s and Patrick’s responses demonstrates how inequalities – in this case concerning gender – can be reproduced in interactions of peer feedback. Anne could have thought it was superficial or rude of her colleague to make a remark about her clothing, but instead she saw it as legitimate and even as a grounds for others to not appreciate her professional capabilities. She made the assumption that her colleague was right in his opinion that her clothing was not suitable for the office, that he had the right to express this opinion to her, and that the negative consequences of wearing the ‘wrong’ outfit would bear down on her. This expresses, first, a general and typically gendered fear of not being taken seriously (see also Elias et al. (2017)) and, second, the norm that a leisurely style of feminine clothing is incongruent with professionalism (which contrasts with the responses to the hoodies and flip-flops

worn by men in the tech sector, as Van den Berg and Arts (2019) point out). Moreover, the acceptance of the principle that others deservedly assess your professionalism based on appearance endorses the notion that dress has true and inherent meaning. In an aestheticized economy, giving feedback on colleagues' appearance is not only accepted, but it is downright embarrassing that someone 'needs' to give you feedback on your appearance – particularly for those in an already vulnerable or less powerful position. The question of legitimacy is not even raised, underlining and perhaps even reinforcing both the importance of aesthetics and the unequal relation regarding who gets to define what aesthetics are suitable for work.

Aesthetic norms are partly negotiated in peer interactions that are laden with status inequalities. This means that being established and possessing certain (situational) cultural knowledge brings the advantage of feeling that one's own taste is legitimate. If others disagree, that can be interpreted as the inferiority of their taste and cultural knowledge, and their feedback can be readily dismissed. Hence, aesthetic labor has the potential to intensify insecurities. Particularly those in a vulnerable position – be it due to a precarious labor position, gender, age, race, etc. – find themselves on the receiving end of peer feedback while for them it is most important to find aesthetic fit. The social and affective importance of aesthetics and the perceived legitimacy of this importance make receiving negative feedback particularly painful, which, in turn, legitimizes the importance of personal aesthetics.

Conclusions

This chapter provides insights into how peers are involved in the regulation of workers' aesthetics at work by exploring peer feedback regarding the personal aesthetics of 'frontstage' workers in insecure labor relations. Studies on aesthetic labor have mostly focused on top-down practices and instructions regarding workers' corporeality and have tended to omit co-workers in their analyses. Though the role of peers in enforcing managerial instructions has been acknowledged, little is known about horizontal feedback that is not based on formal guidelines. This study furthers the understanding of the complexities and insecurities related to aesthetic judgments and control in insecure working conditions. Based on testimonies of perceived feedback situations from 28 wardrobe interviews with the aforementioned workers, I have sought to answer the question of *How are peers involved in the regulation of workers' aesthetics at work?* by answering the following three sub-questions: (1) *How do co-workers give each other feedback concerning personal aesthetics?* (2) *What kinds of logics can be discerned in peer feedback on personal aesthetics at work?* and (3) *How do workers respond to what they perceive to be aesthetic feedback from peers?*

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

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

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

In relation to the main research question, this chapter emphasizes that aesthetic

regulation is an ongoing process that continues even after people are employed in an organization, that it is not only done by employers but also by co-workers and often in obscured ways. This study illustrates how informal processes of control and distinction concerning personal appearance intensify and complicate experiences of aesthetic labor, as the interplay between market logics and judgments of taste has the potential to act as a reinforcement of insecurities and inequalities. The empirical data on which this study is based describe how gender, class, and employment situation are important categories for shaping both feedback and responses to it. In order to get a more complete understanding of the complexities and insecurities put forth by the aesthetization and precarization of labor, the role of peers and the specific ways in which distinction and judgments of taste are shaped by categories such as race, age, and body size should be considered.

References

- Adkins, L., & Lury, C. (1999). The labour of identity: performing identities, performing economies. *Economy and Society*, 28(4), 598–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149900000020>
- Anderson, T. L., Grunert, C., Katz, A., & Lovascio, S. (2010). Aesthetic Capital: A Research Review on Beauty Perks and Penalties. *Sociology Compass*, 4(8), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00312.x>
- Banks, M., & Hesmondhalgh, D. (2009). Looking for work in creative industries policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(4), 415–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630902923323>
- Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38(3), 408–437.
- Besnier, N. (2009). *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Boyle, B., & De Keere, K. (2019). Aesthetic labour, class and taste: Mobility aspirations of middle-class women working in luxury-retail. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 706–722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119827753>
- Brown, S. (2017). PhD Barbie Gets a Makeover! Aesthetic Labour in Academia. In A. S. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 149–165). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burawoy, M. (1982). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(5), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013501956>
- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton University Press.
- De Benedictis, S., & Orgad, S. (2017). The escalating price of motherhood: Aesthetic labour in popular representations of ‘stay-at-home’ mothers. In A. S. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 101–117). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, D. (2005). Recruiting a self: Women performers and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(4), 761–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005058061>
- Dekker, F. (2017). Flexibilisering in Nederland: trends, kansen en risico's. In M. Kremer, R. Went, & A. Knottnerus (Eds.), *Voor de zekerheid: de toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid* (pp. 69–89). Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR).
- du Gay, P. (1996). Organizing Identity: Entrepreneurial Governance and Public Management. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 151–170). Sage.
- Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (A. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1
- Entwistle, J. (2000). Fashioning the career woman: power dressing as a strategy of consumption. In M. Andrews & M. M. Talbot (Eds.), *All the World and Her Husband. Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (pp. 224–238). Cassell.
- Entwistle, J. (2009). *The aesthetic economy of fashion: Markets and value in clothing and modelling*. Berg.
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Fine, G. A., & De Soucey, M. (2005). Joking cultures: Humor themes as social regulation in group life. *Humor*, 18(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2005.18.1.1>
- Fleming, P., & Sturdy, A. (2009). ‘Just be yourself!’: Towards neo-normative control in organisations? *Employee Relations*, 31(6), 569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450910991730>
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- Greenhouse, S. (2004, November 17). Abercrombie & Fitch Bias Case Is Settled. *The New York Times*.
- Haegens, K. (2019, March 26). Dag krijtstreep, halo sneakers: de dresscode binnen de bankwereld wordt steeds soepeler. *De Volkskrant*.
- Hafen, S. (2004). Organizational gossip: A revolving door of regulation and resistance. *Southern Communication Journal*, 69(3), 223–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940409373294>
- Hall, R., & Van den Broek, D. (2012). Aestheticising retail workers: Orientations of aesthetic labour in Australian fashion retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427592>
- Hansen, K. (2005). From thrift to fashion: Materiality and aesthetics in dress practices in Zambia. In D. Miller & S. Küchler (Eds.), *Clothing as Material Culture* (pp. 107–121). Berg.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2007). Introduction: Change and Continuity, Power and Creativity. *The Cultural Industries*, July, 1–25.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.

- Hodgson, D., & Briand, L. (2013). Controlling the uncontrollable: 'Agile' teams and illusions of autonomy in creative work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(2), 308–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017012460315>
- Jarness, V., & Friedman, S. (2017). 'I'm not a snob, but...': Class boundaries and the downplaying of difference. *Poetics*, 61, 14–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.11.001>
- Koppman, S. (2016). Different Like Me: Why Cultural Omnivores Get Creative Jobs. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 61(2), 291–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839215616840>
- Kremer, M., Went, R., & Knottnerus, A. (2017). Voor de zekerheid. De toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid. In *Verkenningen Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*. <https://www.wrr.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2017/02/07/voor-de-zekerheid>
- Kuipers, G. (2010). De fiets van Hare Majesteit. *Erasmus*, 2010(6), 3–26.
- Kuipers, G. (2015). Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries. *Poetics*, 53, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.10.001>
- Kuipers, G., Franssen, T., & Holla, S. (2019). Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 383–398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861634>
- Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., Sarpila, O., & Pajunen, T. (2018). Exploitation of aesthetic capital – disapproved by whom? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 38(3–4), 312–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-09-2017-0116>
- Lamont, M. (1992). *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167–195. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107>
- Leidner, R. (1991). *Serving Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work, and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs*. 5(2), 154–177.
- Lorey, I. (2015). *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Verso.
- McDowell, L. (1997). *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*. Blackwell.
- McDowell, L. (2009). Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities. In *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444310214>
- McRobbie, A. (2002). Clubs To Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded Up Creative Worlds. *Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 516–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380210139098>
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity.
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12211>
- Nath, V. (2011). Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma: National identity management and racial abuse in offshored Indian call centres. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(4), 709–725. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017011419726>
- Noon, M., & Delbridge, R. (1993). News From Behind My Hand: Gossip in Organizations. *Organization Studies*, 14(1), 23–36.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2009). Framed before we know it: How gender shapes social relations. *Gender and Society*, 23(2), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208330313>
- Rivera, L. A. (2016). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton University Press.
- Sarpila, O., & Erola, J. (2016). Physical attractiveness – who believes it is a ticket to success? *Research on Finnish Society*, 9, 5–14.
- Sassen, S. (2006). *Cities in a world economy*. Pine Forge Press.
- Sewell, G. (1998). The Discipline of Teams: The Control of Team-Based Industrial Work through Electronic and Peer Surveillance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43(2), 397–428.
- Sherman, R. (2005). Producing the superior self: Strategic comparison and symbolic boundaries among luxury hotel workers. *Ethnography*, 6(2), 131–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138105057546>
- Sherman, R. (2007). *Class acts: Service and inequality in luxury hotels*. University of California Press.
- Soeters, J., & Van Itersson, A. (2002). Blame and praise gossip in organizations. Established, outsiders and the civilising process. In A. Van Itersson, W. Mastenbroek, T. Newton, & D. Smith (Eds.), *The Civilized Organization. Norbert Elias and the future of organization studies* (pp. 25–41). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury.
- Teunissen, J. (2011). Deconstructing Belgian and Dutch fashion dreams: From global trends to local crafts. *Fashion Theory - Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, 15(2), 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111X12954359478645>
- Timming, A. R. (2015). Visible tattoos in the service sector: a new challenge to recruitment and selection. *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(1), 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014528402>
- Timming, A. R. (2017). The effect of foreign accent on employability: a study of the aural dimensions of aesthetic labour in customer-facing and non-customer-facing jobs. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(3), 409–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016630260>
- Tordoier, P. P., Poorthuis, A., & Renooy, P. (2017). *Het ruimtelijk samenspel van land: een*

- beleidsverkenning*.
- Tyler, M., & Abbott, P. (1998). Chocs away: Weight watching in the contemporary airline industry. *Sociology*, 32(3), 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038598032003002>
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2018). The Aesthetics of Work-Readiness: Aesthetic Judgements and Pedagogies for Conditional Welfare and Post-Fordist Labour Markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018758196>
- Van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2019). Who can wear flip-flops to work? Ethnographic vignettes on aesthetic labour in precarity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419861621>
- Van den Berg, M., & Vonk, L. (2019). The new discomforts of precarious workers: Wardrobe matter, insecurity and the temporality of calibration in dress work. *The Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119892402>
- Van der Laan, E., & Velthuis, O. (2016). Inconspicuous dressing: A critique of the construction-through-consumption paradigm in the sociology of clothing. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513505609>
- Van der Waal, J., & Burgers, J. (2009). Unravelling the Global City Debate on Social Inequality: A Firm-level Analysis of Wage Inequality in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. *Urban Studies*, 46(13), 2715–2729. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098009344944>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2001). *Looking good, sounding right*. Industrial Society.
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2007). A new labour aristocracy? Aesthetic labour and routine interactive service. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(4), 785–798. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017007082887>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2009). ‘Who’s got the look?’ emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour in interactive services. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(3), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00450.x>
- Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Witz, A., & Cullen, A. M. (2000). Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: Some case study evidence from the ‘new’ Glasgow. *Service Industries Journal*, 20(3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642060000000029>
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). ‘Looking good and sounding right’: Aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Winch, A. (2013). *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woodward, S. (2007). *Why women wear what they wear*. Berg.
- Worth, N. (2016). Who we are at work : millennial women , everyday inequalities and insecure work. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 0524, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1160037>

5

Identity regulation and aesthetic control: the affordances and restraints of uniforms in service work

An earlier version¹⁰ of this chapter is currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal

¹⁰ The main changes compared to the submitted manuscript are: 1) I have added the main research question of this dissertation to the introduction of this chapter; 2) in the conclusion of the current chapter I discuss what this case study contributes to the main question of the dissertation; 3) in the current chapter I place more emphasis on extending the case of uniforms to regulated work aesthetics in general.

Abstract

This chapter contributes to the literatures on work identity regulation and aesthetic labor by discussing how organizational aesthetic guidelines and control have effects that go beyond appearances. Two contrasting case studies of uniforms within the service sector illustrate that – due to the (material) affordances and restraints of uniforms, their agency within client-worker interactions, and their capacity to redefine workers' interests – uniforms have the potential to regulate work identities. Employee aesthetics are thus not only an *objective*, but also a *means* of organizational control. In line with performative and processual views on identity, the empirical material indicates that what uniforms do is not simply imposed by employers in a top-down manner. Rather, how uniforms shape work identities is situational, contingent, and dependent on other human and non-human actors within interactions.

Key words

Identity regulation, organizational control, aesthetic labor, uniforms, service work, materiality, embodiment

Introduction

Me: So you were telling me about how you had to get used to wearing a uniform?

Abdelhamid: Yes, I really had to get used to it. Because of the fabric itself, it used to be very thick and firm. And also I thought: ‘how will people look at me in this uniform?’ – that’s of course very tense. Err and in the beginning, when people would come and ask me questions, I really wished I wasn’t wearing the uniform, because I was afraid they would ask me things I didn’t know the answer to. Those were all things I had to get used to. And then you just become one with the uniform. You literally become one with the uniform.

For Abdelhamid, one of the most difficult aspects of starting his new job as a train conductor was getting used to wearing his uniform. His explanation makes clear that a standardized work outfit is not just a ‘thing’ that makes itself known to the body wearing it; it is more than a simple garment. The material – thick and firm, in Abdelhamid’s case – might feel odd or particular and it may restrict certain postures or movements, while encouraging others. Its recognizability and symbolism partly shape the interactions and the performances that he engages in at work. Through repeated uniformed interactions, Abdelhamid has learned how to act when working in his uniform. In this sense, perhaps he has indeed ‘become one with his work uniform’, indicating that he has developed a sense of self at work that is coherent with his role as a train conductor.

How employees’ work identities can come to be aligned with their professional roles and organizational objectives has proven to be a fruitful question for understanding organizational control, as the body of literature spurred by Alvesson & Willmott’s (2002) study makes clear (e.g., Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Brown, 2022; Collinson, 2003). Primarily, identity regulation is studied as a discursive practice, and recent contributions have raised scholarly attention for material elements and bodies (Iedema, 2007; Paring et al., 2017; Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021; Siciliano, 2016).

The literature on aesthetic labor has mapped out how organizations perform control over and monitor workers’ personal aesthetics (e.g., Witz et al., 2003). In the service sector and cultural industries, the personal styles and tastes of workers have become central to the ‘product’ being sold, and therefore many studies look into organizations that rely heavily on their workers’ tastes and styles for their appeal to consumers. Although we know quite a bit about how personal styles are a basis for employee selection and about how they are monitored and managed (Warhurst and

Nickson, 2020; Rivera, 2012, 2016; Van Campen and Versantvoort, 2014; Warhurst et al., 2009, 2012; Williams and Connell, 2010), we know relatively little about the experiences and effects of prescribed uniforms in the service sector. However, many service workers *do* wear a uniform (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007: 107), which raises the empirical question of how their workers' identities are formed through aesthetic means.

This study aims to further the understanding of organizational control and aesthetic labor by conjoining materiality and embodiment in an empirical investigation of the experiences of uniformed workers in two contrasting service sector cases: train conductors and servers in fine dining. Rather than seeing aesthetics as a mere *objective* of organizational control, I explore how it can be a *means* of organizational control. Self-presentation is not a superficial performance; how people look, what they wear, and how they act can have profound effects on their emotions and sense of self (Hochschild, 1979; Miller, 2010). The two cases of uniformed work that are central to this study are the basis for an empirical investigation of how this might actually play out. The theoretical lens of materiality studies here offers a tool to study how interactions and identities at work are partly shaped by a 'thing', i.e., a uniform, hence contributing to the field of study of organizational identity regulation that strongly emphasizes discourse.

I seek to answer the following question: *how do work uniforms regulate work practices and identities?* In answering this question, this chapter makes two main contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on identity regulation by highlighting how material elements are connected to how workers experience and use their bodies at work. Second, this investigation has implications for how we should understand aesthetic labor and the general aesthetization of work and society (Kuipers et al., 2019; Sarpila et al., 2021; Widdows, 2018), as it illustrates how organizational aesthetic guidelines and control have effects that go beyond appearances.

The regulation of work identities

How do organizations – (un)intentionally and (in)effectively – perform control over employees? The historical development in the research within this field has moved from a focus on hierarchical and bureaucratic means towards the analysis of meaning-making and identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The alignment of workers' behaviors and beliefs with organizational goals can be partly achieved by influencing how workers view and position themselves, i.e., by regulating their identities (e.g., Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Collinson, 2003; Mears, 2015; Ocejo, 2017). This type of regulation of course varies in its intentionality and effectiveness. The regulation of workers' identities is never full or absolute and workers are not passive recipients of managerial discourses and

practices. However, studies make clear that discourses can indeed influence workers' 'identity work', their work practices and hence their work identities.

Research on organizational identity regulation has mostly focused on work *discourses* and how these might regulate identities. However, discourse is not the only aspect shaping practices and the performativity of identity, as Orlikowski & Scott (2015) and Iedema (2007) have argued. Despite their emphasis on the fact that identity regulation at work is *not* simply a top-down process imposed by management, Alvesson & Willmott's approach does not take account of the ways in which agency and power work in non-discursive, non-cognitive, and routinized ways. In order to obtain a more complete picture of organizational control and identity regulation in work, materiality and practices should also be included in the analysis (Hultin, 2019; Reckwitz, 2002). An increasing number of studies have acknowledged this and have shown how objects and matter are important for shaping work practices and work identities (Paring et al., 2017; Siciliano, 2016). Paring et al. (2017) have for instance shown how a whiteboard is an element in a sociomaterial process affording the performativity of the desired organizational identity, through bodily performances of the employees. In order to better overcome the Cartesian mind/body dualism that tends to underlie dominant scholarship on identity regulation, and to obtain a more comprehensive understanding, the role of materiality – including working bodies – is still in need of closer examination (Knights & Clarke, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2022; Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021).

The present study contributes to this by shedding light on a very particular type of material that is worn on the body: work uniforms. I do not assume that employers simply enforce a work uniform and thereby shape work practices and worker identities. Rather, uniforms are understood to be both symbols and things that play a role in (re)producing work practices in interaction with workers, and other human and non-human actors. That is to say, both the symbolism and materiality of what people wear at work are connected to practices and might therefore partly shape what happens in organizations (Hultin, 2019).

Materiality, affordances and uniforms

Western lay thinking on clothing – and appearances in general – commonly assumes that they represent a sort of essential inner core. This study emphasizes the opposite side of this relation: how appearances shape the 'self'. Wardrobe studies and research on materiality have shown how clothing partly forms who we are (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014; Miller, 2010; Woodward, 2007). This does not only concern the symbolic aspects of uniform, but also the material properties of the garments (see for instance Miller's (2010) discussion of the sari in India, and how the physical properties of the sari shape practices and interactions and hence partly shape the experience of being a woman in India). Similarly, the concept of affordances, originally developed by

Gibson (1977), refers to how objects and environments provide potential actions and opportunities (Fayard & Weeks, 2014). Materiality partly determines affordances, as it shapes the potential actions and opportunities that an object or environment can provide. This perspective on clothing and appearances makes clear why uniforms in particular are interesting for further exploring how identities are regulated at work. After all, if the material-semiotic aspects of clothing shape practices and interactions and therefore experiences of self, it would logically follow that clothing prescribed by organizations partly shapes practices and experiences of self at work.

Organizational dress is, however, predominantly understood symbolically and as a means to reflect identities and meanings (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). More specifically, the literature on uniforms focuses on inciting authority, and analyses of what uniforms do to those *wearing them* mostly pay attention to their disciplining effects – for instance to how uniforms coerce wearers into embodying institutional power (Fussel, 2002; Joseph & Alex, 1972; McVeigh, 1997), to their ability to demarcate who is part of the group and who is not (Tynan & Godson, 2019), and to their capacity to enforce organizational hierarchies (Crane & Bovone, 2006; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). The present study builds upon this knowledge in two important ways: (1) it takes the role of the materiality into account, and (2) rather than focusing on the ‘extremes’ of discipline and subversion, it aims to explore the different and subtle ways in which uniforms can play a role in identity formation at work.

Methods

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 23 workers in two different service sector occupations in the Netherlands: train conductors and servers in high-end hospitality. These two cases were selected based on how they contrast in several ways. My goal here is not to make a structural comparison, but to get an understanding of uniforms across different contexts.

The 12 train conductors I interviewed all worked for the same railroad company. Since the privatization of the railroad system in the Netherlands at the turn of the century, there are several companies offering transport on the dense rail network throughout the country. The main tasks of the train conductors include making sure the trains can depart from the stations safely, taking the lead if something goes wrong, checking tickets, and, most importantly according to my interviewees, being visibly present for passengers in the stations and on the train. The work is physically demanding, as the conductors walk many miles every day in moving trains, and because they have to get out of the train at every single stop. Moreover, train conductors are commonly faced with aggression and abuse from passengers. Interestingly, their uniform resembles a traditional police uniform, as it is navy

colored and consists of trousers, a shirt, a necktie (for men) and a silk-like scarf (for women), a vest and a jacket. Conductors can also opt for the more informal variant, with a V-neck sweater or turtle neck sweater.

The 11 wait staff I interviewed all worked in fine dining restaurants in Amsterdam. The restaurants vary in style, ranging from traditional to hip, and from meat-based to mostly vegan. They are similar in the sense that they are all in the higher culinary division, for instance reflected by the fact that they all offer a set chef's menu, consisting of at least 6 courses and with prices ranging from approximately 70 to over 200 euros for a meal. Most of the waiters I interviewed did or were doing studies in hospitality, with the exception of 3 people. The servers work long shifts, often starting in the afternoon and ending after midnight. There is a large diversity in the uniforms of these restaurants, ranging from very formal black suit-like outfits to shiny designer shorts and black t-shirts. All the restaurants included in this study have distinctly different uniforms for men and women. The contrast between the two cases is intended to help find a more complete answer to my research question, as it functions as a tool to see clearly what exactly uniforms do in different contexts. The variety in material and in symbolic function, likewise, aids in getting a more complete insight (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

I contacted most of the respondents through LinkedIn, and respondents referring me to co-workers or friends in similar occupations led to three more interviews. The interviewees with the train conductors usually took place right after their shift in a private office within a railroad station. They were all still wearing their uniform, which facilitated talking about it (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014). Two interviews took place on the train. Approximately half of the interviews with the restaurant employees took place in the afternoon, before their shift, at the restaurant they were working at, while their colleagues were getting everything ready for the guests to arrive in the evening. The other interviews took place in cafés or coffee bars. These workers were usually not in uniform, but they did bring their uniform and pictures of workers in the uniform. For all interviews, the same topic list was used. Topics covered in the interviews include: description of work activities, work history, type of contract, elaborate discussion of the uniform (its elements, material, feel to the touch and movements, comfort, fit, aesthetics, other aesthetic guidelines, where to change into the uniform), reflection on their definition of a job well done, and on what makes their work hard/easy/fun/satisfying.

The approach for the data analyses is based on Tavory & Timmerman's method of abductive analysis (2014). In the first wave of data collection, I interviewed 10 train conductors and 8 servers. In several rounds of revisiting the transcribed interviews, I familiarized myself with the data. Starting out with the very open question of how workers experience their uniform, the first rounds of exploring the data led to refining the question and to a stronger focus on identity regulation. After this

analysis I went back into the field to conduct another round of 5 interviews, which focused on the question at hand. Going back and forth between the literature, the data, and the field helped me to find several ways of open-coding the data, leading to several categories of how identity regulation takes place in relation to uniforms. These categories formed the basis for a more structured and closed round of coding, which founded the current analyses and discussion.

Findings

Uniforms in interactions

Self-identities are (re)created in social interactions, as famously theorized by Mead (1934). In line with this, the empirical material indicates how uniforms partly shape performances and behaviors because they make workers feel visible and recognizable, causing them to respond to what they believe to be the expectations of others. Train conductor Anna, for instance, intervenes more actively in certain situations at work because she thinks other expect that of her. As part of our interview, I joined her on the train for one afternoon in the later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most people were already vaccinated against the virus. I walked with her during her rounds on the train during which she repeatedly told passengers to wear a face mask and to wear it properly over their nose. She later confided in me that she personally is not bothered by people not covering their mouth and nose, and that she does this simply because she believes other passengers expect this of her. This motive for giving a certain performance as a train conductor was a recurrent topic in the way she talked about her work:

Anna: People should be able to see that I work here, and I see now as well that it helps to get a certain kind of authority. When I say something, people respond differently than when someone not wearing a uniform says something. If I'm on the train as a civilian I won't say anything about someone putting their feet on the seat, because then I'm like: who am I [to say something]? (...) But the moment I'm wearing this [uniform] I will say something, because that's also what other passengers expect of me.

In this example, Anna explains why she actively tells passengers to follow the rules on the train: it is not because she herself finds it important or because she is told to do so by her supervisor, but because she feels that other passengers expect it of her. In other words: Anna's work performances are not a simple consequence of hierarchical orders, nor do they simply follow from her wearing a uniform. Rather, this shows how

work performances are created by an interplay of people and objects.

Considering the risks of the work of train conductors, this becomes particularly pertinent. What is it that makes conductors feel responsible for others' behavior on the train? What motivates them during their shifts to make their rounds through the train, to check people's tickets and to correct their behavior? Traditional studies of organizational control might point to hierarchical control. Although the conductors do have train managers that encourage them to perform these tasks, these supervisors are generally not present while they are working on the train, and they are not allowed to evaluate the workers' performances based on measures such as the amount of fines written by conductors (according to my interviewees). It might be argued that it is the uniform, and how it makes the conductors feel visible and responsible by looking at themselves through the eyes of others. This is not only a negative experience – uniforms also afford certain performances, as Dolores explains:

Dolores: (...) it actually bothers me more when I'm not in uniform. I have to keep a low profile then, so it's the other way around. I find it hard not to say something about people's [behavior] when I'm in my civilian clothes. When I'm in my work clothes I get to say something, because in principle it's my work area. But when you're wearing civilian clothes and you tell a guy, like, 'take your feet off the seat', then he will think 'mind your own business', you know.

Dolores feels that wearing her uniform helps her have the authority to correct other people. When she is wearing her own clothes – which she, like Anna, interestingly calls civilian clothes – she expects that others will think that it is not up to her to intervene. When in uniform, she feels that she *is* allowed to say something because people will see that it is her work area. This illustrates again how the interactions of the uniform and people can encourage certain behavior. These interactions can afford certain performances – as Dolores explains – and they can also create a feeling of responsibility. Hospitality worker Madelief, for instance, only feels responsible for guests coming in when she is wearing her uniform:

[Madelief describes putting on her uniform as 'turning a switch']

Me: Can you describe what that switch is like?

Madelief: It's like: 'we're working now'. So sort of action mode, and if I haven't changed my clothes yet, I feel less responsible for the guests coming in. Sometimes I'm also just working on my laptop and then I feel... I do still observe what's happening and I can hear all the conversations, but without the outfit I feel sort of... like the people

wearing the outfit are the ones who are responsible – they are the ones who should help that lady with the walker [rollator] get over the threshold of the door.

The object of the uniform plays a role in interactions in which the worker comes to feel responsibility and to behave accordingly. Hence, the uniform is part of a configuration in which expectations, interactions and identities are shaped. This shows that these workers' practices and interactions are not enforced top-down, but that they are shaped by the uniform and the expectations it brings. So, it is not the uniform itself that lead to certain feelings and performances; rather, within configurations and interactions, uniforms can 'do' different things.

Uniforms and working bodies

In this section, we shift our attention from the symbolic properties of uniforms to their materiality and how they affect bodies and people's perceptions of their bodies. A vivid example of how a uniform can shape working practices and the sense of self at work is provided by Tijn. He works 5 nights a week in a Michelin-starred restaurant which is situated within the building of an upscale hotel. The style of both the hotel and restaurant is quite traditional and chic, as reflected in the uniform for male workers with its black leather shoes, black trousers, and black jacket buttoned up all the way up the neck. Tijn's personal style clearly contrasts with this formal attire; when we meet for an interview over coffee at 11 a.m. he is just waking up and dressed in shorts and a wrinkly floral shirt, buttoned halfway down his chest. For him, as an – in his own observation – extraverted and hyperactive person, the uniform is important for how he performs at work and for how he experiences his own presence at work:

Me: What was it that you had to get used to [regarding wearing the uniform]?

Tijn: Not necessarily the freedom of movement, that didn't bother me really. You do have long sleeves, so sometimes you might think that you can make a certain movement, and then your buttons brush against a glass – that sort of thing. That can be annoying. And for the rest, you sort of have to get used to it, because the way you stand is different in that kind of clothing. If you wear a suit then you stand and move differently than when you wear jeans and a shirt. I think that just happens accidentally. Your posture becomes a bit neater as well, of course. I think that helps. It takes some getting used to.

M: So it helps you stand up straight?

Tijn: Yes. And also just your movements, you pay more attention to them. Because the things you can normally just do, how you walk, you have to pay attention to them. So you start moving differently.

M: How does the way you walk change? Can you describe that?

Tijn: Let me think about that for you. It's not as loose, that's for sure. That's also what I like about it. We don't have to walk with our hands behind our backs, not at all, but you also shouldn't put your hands in your pockets. And because you're wearing a suit, with all the buttons closed... for me that turns a switch. I don't know. I move differently, I am someone different in the workplace than I am here.

The material properties of the uniform influence the posture of Tijn's body and how it moves. This is partly due to the straightness of the cut and the rigidity of the fabric, which makes it hard to slouch and to move freely. These restrictions, in turn, constantly remind Tijn of how his posture and movements should be when at work. He cannot forget his body when wearing the uniform, which is forcing him to consider the way he moves. As such, the materiality encourages a posture and way of moving about that is in line with the style of the restaurant. In a similar vein, uniforms can both obstruct and encourage hard physical work. Albert, for instance, explains how the quite informal uniform of the organization where he is currently employed – consisting of a pair of black trousers and a dark colored shirt – allows a higher pace, compared to the more traditional and formal uniform in which he used to work:

Albert: You can just work freely in it [an informal uniform]. I'm quite used to a three-piece suit uniform, which can make you feel very warm when you're working hard. You know, because you're wearing a three-piece suit and you want to take off those layers, but you can't. That's very uncomfortable. (...) And it [his current uniform] is made in such a way that you can give it one's all [*'rammen'* – original Dutch phrase], you just keep going. (...) The three-piece suit is more common in classic, traditional restaurants, where they have more staff. So then there are higher costs for personnel, but there's a different norm regarding the physical work, it's not so heavy.

In fine dining restaurants, workers have to balance meeting the high standard of service while doing work that is physically demanding, walking many miles every

evening carrying heavy plates. Particularly the more traditional, formal uniform can inform workers about how they are performing through physical sensations, as the overall stress caused by this can make the uniform feel uncomfortable:

Tijn: Yeah, you get used to it. In the beginning it's really warm. The fabric is not breathable.

Me: What kind of fabric is it [made of]?

Tijn: Sort of jacket-like fabric, but you wear it completely closed of course. So it gets warm pretty easily when you're running. It also has to do with in the beginning, when you're not really sure what you are doing exactly, you get this panicky way of doing things. I notice that now, when I work more calmly [it's not so warm].

The uniform gives off information to Tijn about how well he is doing at his job. When everything is under control and he is doing his work calmly, the uniform is not too warm on his body. However, when he loses control and feels he is lagging behind, the uniform makes it physically known to him. It hence encourages servers to be focused and to think ahead in order to avoid unanticipated moments of stress.

The physical firmness and constraints have an imprint on how Tijn behaves and feels at work. Outside his work, he considers himself to be an extraverted and outspoken person, but at work he restrains himself. As he explains, when closing his uniform buttons, he 'turns a switch'. His uniform aids in realizing a work identity:

Tijn: I am of course subservient there [at work]. I treat people differently. I guess I listen more than I talk, and also just the way that I... sometimes you have to laugh a little bit less. Outside [of work] I'm not like that at all, of course. If I find something funny, you're going to hear it. I can't do that there of course.

Tijn's case shows a clear resemblance between the physical properties of the uniform and the way that he feels and acts at work. He even uses the same words for this: stiff (*'stijf'*) and neat (*'netjes'*). The physical sensation of the uniform can partly shape how workers feel, what they do, and how they do it. As illustrated, this may help achieve a certain style of service. However, it can also form a hindrance if the material properties and the style desired by the employer are not in line. Minke, for instance, works for an upscale hotel, which has several in-house restaurants. She started out working in the hotel's more classic formal restaurant with a Michelin star. At some point, she was asked to work shifts in the newly opened informal restaurant within

the hotel. Wearing the same uniform, and having had her earlier experiences within the hotel, made it difficult for her to achieve the informal 'loose' style of service the management was looking for:

Minke: There was sort of a transition, because within [the hotel] they opened up a new restaurant. It had a certain concept and it was also a bit looser. I would stand there in my tight, stewardess-like hotel suit, so it was quite a transition for me. (...)

Me: What was it that made it hard to find that more informal loose style?

Minke: Yes I guess... I myself thought I was looking a bit stiff, and it was also specifically within the walls of the hotel where I was trained [to achieve a formal style of service]. So for me it felt like... I was standing up straight, which was also because of the heels [I was wearing]. You make this ticking sound, you're making noise, your hair is pulled back really tight. And in practice there was some mixing during the day, so I would be standing there in a different outfit than the rest of the staff.

Although the effects were not as desired by the management, Minke's experiences again make clear that the uniform, and its material properties, has consequences for how workers use and experience their bodies and, consequently, their style of service. It is interesting to note how the transition to a looser and more informal style of service was also hindered by the fact that it took place within 'the walls of the hotel' where Minke was trained to perform a different style of service. Apparently it can be hard to change a style of performance when the context and material objects remain the same.

Moreover, the uniform and its material properties, by functioning as a body size standard, can have consequences for how workers perceive and influence their body size. The railroad company carries out an annual health check on its employees, and body weight is often a topic of scrutiny during these checks. So although workers are not forced to lose weight and although the uniforms can be ordered in larger sizes, the company nevertheless makes it clear to its employees that being overweight is undesirable. Some of the workers I spoke with experience their uniform as a yardstick for their body size: they should always wear the same size uniform and it should not be too tight, and otherwise it is a sign that they need to lose weight. Of course, the norm of slimness is dominant in society and not exclusive to work organizations, but it does appear that the uniform can be a material reminder of and a tool to enforce this norm. The uniform makes workers aware of their body size on a daily basis, as

train conductor Caroline illustrates:

Caroline: As you can see, I'm wearing a skirt. Officially, that's not in the catalogue anymore – we're actually supposed to wear trousers. But I feel good wearing a skirt. And to be totally honest, I don't fit into my trousers right now. I am punishing myself, as I refuse to order bigger ones.

Caroline is wearing a navy skirt that she bought herself and that is officially not part of the uniform. The reason for doing so is that all her uniform trousers have become too tight to wear after she put on weight during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. She always wears the same size uniform and she does not want to order a bigger size, because that would mean accepting her larger body. Her personal clothes are not like a uniform in the sense that some items are a bit larger or stretchier, allowing her body weight to fluctuate. In her case, the uniform functions as a yardstick and is disciplining in the sense that it encourages her to lose weight.

In sum, uniforms can regulate how workers experience and how they move their bodies, and hence influence workers' performances at work and their presentation of self. This influence on work identities might even have its effects on self-identities, as illustrated by Caroline's experience of her body size.

Redefining interests

Uniforms can, moreover, affect work identities by redefining workers' perceptions of their interest. The interviews indicate that there are at least two ways in which they can do so: 1) by creating a feeling of unity, and 2) by encouraging a feeling of being a representative for the collective.

One of the most appealing aspects of working in fine dining, according to my interviewees, is the feeling of unity with co-workers. When I asked my respondents to recall a moment of joy or fulfillment at work, they almost unanimously referred to moments of 'collective flow' – evenings during which everyone was attuned to achieve the best service, when they worked together in a fluent way, sensing what needed to be done almost without using words.

Sofie: When we're synchronized, you know. You could be standing somewhere talking to a table [of guests] and you've just taken their plates. So you're standing there with a stack of plates, and then someone passes by and takes them away, you know. They take them to the back and I can stay there and talk for a bit, those kinds of things.

For many servers in fine dining, their most pleasant work experiences are when they and their colleagues work together as a team towards the same goal, that is, giving

their guests an outstanding service and dining experience. The team should work together in a fluent way ('we're everywhere, approaching our guests from all sides'), communicating without words needed, and everyone putting their full effort in. This feeling of unity and flow, perhaps best understood as Durkheimian collective effervescence (1912), is enhanced by everyone wearing the same uniform. Of course, the uniform in itself is not a sufficient condition for creating this feeling of unity and the point here is not to discern the effects of the uniform from other conditions. Nevertheless, in many interviews the attunement of bodies and movements and the feeling of unity and collective flow was often related to wearing the same work outfit. Take for instance Madelief, who experienced resistance from her peers when she was not wearing a uniform at work:

Madelief: Once I was wearing my own clothes, because the first guests were only coming at 12 and I was starting at 8 to get everything started. I did that in my own clothes, which was fine, but at some point that was really not appreciated by other people starting at 10 or 11. They would come to the [restaurant] fully dressed [in uniform] and I would be walking around in my own clothes. That caused a bit of friction, which is maybe too strong of a term for what it was, but I did really get the feeling like I should go and change right now.

Me: What was it that caused that feeling?

Madelief: Yeah I guess it was partly not fitting in. Getting to work and getting into a mode of production [*'productiemodus'*], being a unit together and everyone being equally responsible, and if someone is not changed yet [into the uniform] that might be disruptive for... also because in hospitality the pressure is quite high. So you're getting everything ready and then suddenly lots of guests arrive and then you have to deliver at that exact moment. It's not like you order something and it's made and then you have a look and see what to do. It's all in the moment and 'being on' [*'aanstaan'*] and having lots of communication with each other. I guess it strengthens the feeling of being a team, all wearing the same thing, really like: we're all together in this action mode.

For Madelief, the uniform is important for creating a sense of unity at work. This unity is important, because the pressure to work hard and perform is high, and because everyone should feel like they all give their best together and are equally responsible for working towards the same goals. Interestingly, both the pressure to put on the

uniform and the pressure to work hard do not directly come from someone further up in the hierarchy. Rather, it is the feeling of unity and lack of hierarchy, partly due to everyone wearing the exact same uniform, that is disciplining.

A second way in which uniforms can affect workers' perceptions of their interests and hence their work identities is by increasing the feeling of being a representative of the group. As discussed in the first section on uniforms and interactions, the uniform brings about certain expectations. Because people literally wear it on their bodies, it can play a role in how workers feel like they should behave – also outside of work when in uniform. Consider for instance Remco, who feels he should comply with societal rules when he is in uniform:

Me: Does it feel different when you're recognizable [as a train conductor]?

Remco: Yes it does really. It's very funny, because of course before this I always had work that did not require a uniform. So during my training I had just received my uniform (...) and I jumped on my bike to go to Amersfoort. There are a lot of traffic lights in Amersfoort that are red when it just doesn't make any sense, you know, you just keep on cycling. But now I thought: 'Yeah, I'm wearing my uniform now, so I shouldn't go through the red light.'

Remco normally runs the red lights and he sees no problem in doing this. When wearing his uniform, however, he feels like he should comply with the formal rules and wait for the light to go green. It is interesting to note that during his cycling trip to work he is not actually at work yet, and that there is no one checking whether he is behaving according to the rules. Yet the mere presence of the uniform on the body – and the knowledge that others will recognize which company he works for – makes him feel like his behavior should be irreproachable. As such, the tendency to act according to certain norms is amplified by the uniform.

A similar tendency can be observed in how conductors deal with verbal abuse from passengers. Anna, for instance, bases her response to passengers not on her own norms or feelings, but on what she believes is the company's norm of what is acceptable behavior. In her case, this means she intervenes in situations that she claims she personally does not find very offensive:

Anna: (...) there's just a lot of swearing. Yeah, you can let that pass, but they shouldn't try that on me. And also when they start threatening me: 'I'm gonna call my friends and they're gonna kill you'. Yeah, then you have to intervene. Even if that's not your own personal boundary yet, it's just not

acceptable. As [organization] you can't let them mess with you like that. (...) There's an [organization] boundary and your own boundary, but you should always make sure you intervene at the [organization] boundary.

In situations outside of work, Anna prefers to walk away if someone insults her. At work, however, she feels that when she is insulted, the whole organization is affected, and that she should not let that happen. At work, she does not act upon her own norms, values, and emotions, but on what she believes to be the organization's limits to what is acceptable behavior of clients. The uniform enhances this process, as it is the visibility of her as a representative of the organization that encourages her to act as representing the organization.

In order to avoid the feeling of having to be 'presentable', some workers choose to cover their uniform on their way to and from work. Abdelhamid for instance uses this strategy on his daily commute:

Abdelhamid: So I'm coming from [...] where I live, and those 17 minutes on the train I'm sitting in first class. I close my coat and make some phone calls so no one sees that I'm railroad [staff]... otherwise people will come over and ask me questions, and it really bothers me when people might get the feeling that I'm not there for them.

Abdelhamid puts on his uniform at home and wears it on his way to work. During his commute he wears his coat so other passengers cannot see he is an employee of the train company. He does not want to answer questions from passengers when his shift has not started yet, but he also does not want to disappoint people. Note how it is not his occupation, nor the employer's control, that makes him feel obliged to help other passengers, but mostly the uniform that causes this pressure. Abdelhamid clearly makes the conscious decision to not be recognizable as an employee, illustrating how it is the feeling of visibility and recognizability of the uniform that calls upon his feeling of responsibility.

The train conductors experience that, when they are in uniform, they are not only 'themselves', but also a representative of the company for which they are working. This requires a different performance from them, they feel. Interestingly, this is not something that they are taught, and there is no one checking whether they adapt their behavior when in uniform. Still, they feel a responsibility towards the group when in uniform. This shows that the uniform plays a part in redefining how workers feel they should act.

Shifting personal boundaries

The risk of aggression and violence is part of the daily work experiences of train

conductors. Although violent situations do not occur frequently, all my respondents have at least some experience with it and the possibility of passengers turning to aggression is always something that they take into account. This risk of *body breakdown* (Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2021) means that train conductors have to negotiate whether they are willing to sacrifice themselves or leave the organization.

The conductors feel they are responsible for their own and for the passengers' safety on the train, but they do not receive physical training, nor are they authorized to physically intervene. What they do learn during their training is to not take insults and aggression personally, as Thomas explains:

Thomas: (...) so my workplace supervisor told me: 'If people swear at you or if they are angry at you, then it's not actually aimed at you, but at your suit [uniform]', haha. And that's something I always remind myself of and it's just really how it actually is. I'm sure that if someone yells at me because the train is delayed or whatever reason they are angry... if we walked off and I saw them again an hour later they wouldn't even recognize me.

Me: Yes, so it's not personal then?

Thomas: No, and that makes a difference. What I'm saying, I really would have thought it would bother me more. In my own life when people are angry with me or when I fall out with someone, that bothers me.

Thomas finds comfort in perceiving insults and threats as not personal, but aimed at his uniform. In his training he has learned to use the de-individualizing symbolism of the uniform as a tool to neutralize experiences that otherwise would have bothered him. However, it might be argued that there are risks in using the uniform for this. Firstly, by implying that verbal abuse is simply part of the job and should not affect you personally, this type of violence is normalized. In other words: if it *does* bother you, that is because you are not able to deal with it properly. This encourages workers to shift their own boundaries of what they deem acceptable behavior. Secondly, this reasoning fails to acknowledge that threatening situations at work might not be personal, but can still lead to dangerous situations. Caroline illustrates this by explaining how she de-escalated a violent situation:

Me: (...) Is that an issue for you, not being tall?

Caroline: That's sometimes an issue, but it can also work in your advantage. It doesn't evoke aggression; I'm not that big. Once there was this [guy who was] 2 by 2 meters and he came really, really close to me, and then I thought: uh oh, this is it...

I: Was there anything you could do then?

Caroline: I looked up to him and said: 'Look at me sir, this isn't going to work. One punch from you and I'm gone' (laughs). And then he laughed, fortunately. Yeah at that moment I thought oooooo this isn't going to work. That was the most threatening situation that happened to me. I was powerless, yes.

In this excerpt, Caroline discusses a situation in which a passenger was angry because of a train delay. In his perception, Caroline represented the railroad company, and he therefore directed his anger towards her. By pointing out to him that she is small and not able to defend herself should he turn to physical violence, she emphasized that she is a person, and not just a uniform. The emphasis on her physical traits helped to make the symbolism of the uniform less visible.

The uniform thus functions as a tool to normalize aggression at work, as workers are taught that its de-individualizing symbolism means that insults should not be taken personally. In addition, there are material properties of the uniform that normalize the threat of violence. The neckties and scarves all have a safety clip: should someone pull on a tie or scarf, they immediately click open. Although this might protect the workers from one particular type of suffocation, it is not clear how they should defend themselves from a person willing to go as far as to pull on something that is attached to their neck. The "safety" clip in any case makes clear that people pulling on your neckwear might be part of the job and – perhaps misleadingly – gives off the impression of protection or safety.

For workers in hospitality the uniform, likewise, can push the shifting of their personal boundaries. As discussed earlier in this chapter, workers sometimes feel like they are playing a certain role in a show when working in uniform. This sometimes guides them to accept behavior that they would otherwise not accept, or to for instance behave in a more submissive or obedient way than they would in their private lives. Madelief explains how wearing a uniform made her feel like she was playing a part, which, in turn, induced her to accept behavior that clearly overstepped boundaries:

Madelief: So I had sort of black trousers and shoes from them as well [...], ugly shoes. And a scarf. In a way, it's interesting, I sort of feel good wearing a suit like that and with full make up, I was sort of.. I felt like

someone else. I just played that part, yes. And I notice now that I'm getting a bit older and looking at the world differently, I guess you can be yourself anywhere. You don't have to play a part. But that's what I was taught in that kind of fancy restaurant: the customer is king and you're nothing, kind of like that. You have to look this way and always be subservient. (...)

Me: So you felt like you had to go along in that?

Madelief: Yes, I've really experienced some bizarre things where people would almost sexually assault you (...). At the time I was really young and I would think: this is not cool, but it's probably just part of the job, you know.

To sum up, the interview material shows how the uniform contributes to workers accepting certain behaviors from others. Workers feel encouraged to accept harassment and aggression at work that they would otherwise not accept. The analysis illustrates three ways in which the uniform enables this: (1) through the repertoire that verbal aggression is not personal when in uniform, so it should not be troubling; (2) the materiality underlines the possibility of people turning to physical aggression and promises to defuse aggression; and (3) the symbolism of the uniform encourages workers to play a submissive role. As such, uniforms have the potential to shift workers' boundaries of what they deem acceptable behavior.

Conclusions

This chapter looks into how workers in service occupations experience their uniform. Building on the understanding that clothing – and aesthetics in general – are felt both on and beyond the skin, it addressed the question of worker experiences of standardized work aesthetics. I found that, indeed, a regulated work aesthetic does not only affect how workers look, but that it also affects and regulates their work identities. This study contributes to the existing literatures on work identity regulation and aesthetic labour by combining these two fields of research, and by showing empirically how aesthetic control is not only an objective but also a means of organizational control. This chapter contributes to answering the main research question of this dissertation by showing that aesthetic regulation is a two-way process: regulation not only leads to a specific work aesthetics, but work aesthetics also regulate work. I demonstrate that aesthetic regulation, in the form of an enforced standardized work outfit, can have profound consequences for workers. Both the symbolic and material aspects of

a mandated work uniform can impact work identities and contribute to redefining personal boundaries and the acceptance of aggression and danger at work. More than the literature has shown so far, a regulated work aesthetic can, in this way, contribute to alienation and exploitation of workers.

More specifically, the empirical data suggests four ways in which uniforms regulate work identities. (1) Uniforms make workers feel visible and recognizable, which encourages them to see themselves through the eyes of others, and to respond in ways that they believe to be the expectations of others. Hence, the uniform as an object and symbol plays a role in interactions in which workers come to feel responsible and to behave accordingly, making them part of the networks in which expectations, interactions and identities are shaped. (2) Materially, the work uniform can feel different from the clothes service workers wear outside of work. Due to physical properties such as stiffness, tightness and warmness, workers are reminded of their bodies and of how they move. Therefore, uniforms can regulate how they experience and move their bodies, may remind them of the style of self-presentation that is required of them, and may encourage certain postures and ways of moving. Moreover, the standardized and often tight fit can function as a yardstick for body size. (3) By encouraging feelings of unity and of being a representative for the collective, uniforms can, moreover, affect work identities by redefining workers' perceptions of their interest. (4) In line with this, uniforms can even encourage workers to accept risks and behaviors from others they would otherwise not accept and can hence shift workers' boundaries of what they deems acceptable work circumstances.

Importantly, these mechanisms are not necessarily intentional and effective. This investigation illustrates that what uniforms 'do' is situational, contingent, and played out in interactions. Clearly, my analyses agree with earlier studies on organizational control that employers cannot simply impose work identities on employees through uniforms. Nonetheless, the data confirm that there are a number of ways in which organizational control can be performed through the material and symbolism of work aesthetics.

But this study also has more specific implications. First, it extends our understanding of organizational identity regulation as both a discursive and material practice by highlighting how material elements are connected to how workers experience and use their bodies at work. The 'stuff' that workers feel, use, and sense in their daily work practices partly forms those practices and the experiences thereof. What workers do at work, how they feel, and how they perceive themselves at work is at least partially shaped by how they look and what they wear. Therefore, the material at work and with which people do their work should be taken into consideration in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of identity regulation at work. Secondly, this investigation illustrates how organizational aesthetic guidelines and control can have effects that go beyond appearances. Earlier studies have shown how

the increasing importance of and emphasis on aesthetics in work can be a source of exclusions and inequalities, how it leads to extra unpaid work for (aspiring) workers, and how this surplus value is extracted by employers rather than coming to the benefit of workers. The current study shows how aesthetic guidelines and regulations can go even deeper and affect how people experience themselves at work, adding to a fuller understanding of the aesthetization of work. In other words: the regulation of workers takes place through aesthetics, even though studies tend to focus on the other direction of regulation, i.e. aesthetics as a mere result.

Methodologically, the focus on uniforms proved to be useful for building upon discourse-oriented investigations of organizational control and identity regulation, as it allowed for an analysis of not only symbolism, but also materiality – and specifically material worn on the body. Using a tangible ‘thing’ proved to be a helpful tool for talking about actual work practices and experiences. This suggests that materiality can be a promising methodological tool for studying organizational control and work identities. Following up on this point, what people say they do is of course not always the same as what they actually do (Dumont, 2022; Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). A methodological limitation of this study is that it is mostly based on interviews rather than on observations of practices. Considering that the research question here is how workers experience their uniforms rather than on what they strictly do in and with their uniforms, interviews are an apt method. Further understanding of how uniforms shape work practices can be gained by a research set-up combining interviews with observations.

Whereas most studies on aesthetic labor and on work uniforms tend to take on a critical stance towards aesthetic regulations, this study also shows how uniforms can afford certain practices and experiences, adding to a more nuanced perspective of the literature on aesthetics and work. Particularly in terms of gender, it appears that uniforms can be an aid in achieving a sense of power within interactions. To be sure, this is not to contest the critique of other scholars within the field, but rather to supplement and nuance the literature on aesthetics and work and the regulation of work identities. It is important to note, on the other hand, that from an employer’s perspective this chapter paints a somewhat one-sided positive picture of uniforms primarily providing status and identity to workers. There are of course many instances of work uniforms that make employees feel invisible or even humiliated. Further understanding of how work uniforms – and material at work in general – might improve the experiences of workers, and their work identities can be understood by future studies looking into, for instance, both high-status work uniforms (e.g., doctors, dentists, pilots) and low-status work uniforms (e.g. cleaners, workers in fast food restaurants) and by paying closer attention to the experiences of uniformed workers with identity markers that are associated with disadvantaged positions.

References

- Ainsworth S and Hardy C (2009) Mind over body: Physical and psychotherapeutic discourses and the regulation of the older worker. *Human Relations* 62(8): 1199–1229.
- Alvesson M and Robertson M (2006) The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms. *Organization* 13(2): 195–224.
- Alvesson M and Willmott H (2002) Identity regulation as organizational control: producing the appropriate individual. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39(5). Parker: 0022–2380.
- Brown AD (2022) Identities in and around organizations: Towards an identity work perspective. *Human Relations* 75(7). SAGE Publications Ltd: 1205–1237.
- Collinson DL (2003) Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization* 10(3): 527–547.
- Crane D and Bovone L (2006) Approaches to material culture: The sociology of fashion and clothing. *Poetics* 34(6). Elsevier: 319–333.
- Dumont G (2022) Immersion in Organizational Ethnography: Four Methodological Requirements to Immerse Oneself in the Field. *Organizational Research Methods*. SAGE Publications Inc.
- Durkheim E (1912) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Fayard AL and Weeks J (2014) Affordances for practice. *Information and Organization* 24(4). Elsevier Ltd: 236–249.
- Flyvbjerg B (2006) Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12(2): 219–245.
- Fussell P (2002) *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hochschild AR (1979) *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*. *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Hultin L (2019) On becoming a sociomaterial researcher: Exploring epistemological practices grounded in a relational, performative ontology. *Information and Organization* 29(2).
- Iedema R (2007) On the multi-modality, materially and contingency of organization discourse. *Organization Studies* 28(6): 931–946.
- Jerolmack C and Khan S (2014) Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy.
- Joseph N and Alex N (1972) *The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective*. *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Klepp IG and Bjerck M (2014) A methodological approach to the materiality of clothing: Wardrobe studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 17(4). Taylor and Francis Ltd.: 373–386.
- Knights D and Clarke C (2017) Pushing the Boundaries of Amnesia and Myopia: A Critical Review of the Literature on Identity in Management and Organization Studies. In: *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 1 July 2017, pp. 337–356. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Kuipers G, Franssen T and Holla S (2019) Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(4). SAGE Publications Ltd: 383–398.
- Lawrence TB, Schliendwein E, Jalan R, et al. (n.d.) *Organizational Body Work: Efforts to Shape Human Bodies in Organizations*.
- McVeigh B (1997) Wearing ideology: How uniforms discipline minds and bodies in Japan. *Fashion Theory* 1(2): 189–214.
- Mead GH (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mears A (2015) Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent. *American Sociological Review* 80(6): 1099–1122.
- Miller D (2010) *Stuff*. Cambridge: The Polity Press.
- Ocejo RE (2017) *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Orlikowski WJ and Scott S v. (2015) Exploring Material-Discursive Practices. *Journal of Management Studies* 52(5): 697–705.
- Paring G, Pez e S and Huault I (2017) ‘Welcome to the whiteboard, the new member of the team’: Identity regulation as a sociomaterial process. *Organization* 24(6). SAGE Publications Ltd: 844–865.
- Pratt MG and Rafaeli A (1997) *Organizational Dress as a Symbol of Multilayered Social Identities*. Source: *The Academy of Management Journal*.
- Rafaeli A and Pratt MG (1993) *Tailored Meanings: On the Meaning and Impact of Organizational Dress*. Source: *The Academy of Management Review*.
- Rahmouni Elidrissi Y and Courpasson D (2021) Body Breakdowns as Politics: Identity regulation in a high-commitment activist organization. *Organization Studies* 42(1).
- Reckwitz A (2002) *Toward a Theory of Social Practices A Development in Culturalist Theorizing*.
- Sarpila O, Kukkonen I, Pajunen T, et al. (2021) *Appearance as Capital: The Normative Regulation of Aesthetic Capital Accumulation and Conversion*. Sarpila O, Kukkonen I, Pajunen T, et al. (eds). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.
- Siciliano M (2016) Disappearing into the Object: Aesthetic Subjectivities and Organizational Control in Routine Cultural Work. *Organization Studies* 37(5). SAGE Publications Ltd: 687–708.
- Tavory I and Timmermans S (2014) *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tynan J and Godson L (2019) *Uniform: Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World*. Tynan J and Godson L (eds). London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Warhurst C and Nickson D (2007) A new labour aristocracy? Aesthetic labour and routine

interactive service. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(4): 785–798.

Warhurst C and Nickson D (2020) *Aesthetic Labour*. London, UK: Sage.

Widdows H (2018) *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Witz A, Warhurst C and Nickson D (2003) The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization. *Organization* 10(1): 33–54.

Woodward S (2007) *Why Women Wear What They Wear*. Oxford: Berg.

6

Conclusions:

Making appearances matter for work

Yay, you've been invited for a job interview! But now it becomes *really* complicated: what clothes should you wear to the interview? (staffing agency Young Capital)

How do you look 'right' for work? Who determines aesthetics norms for work? And how do work aesthetics affect work? Perhaps this staffing agency makes a fair point about work aesthetics by stating 'now it becomes *really* complicated'. This dissertation demonstrates that 'getting it right' aesthetically is more intricate than merely following instructions and that the regulation of work aesthetics can profoundly impact workers.

The present study was guided by the following question: *How does the regulation of workers' aesthetics in the Dutch post-industrial labor market take place?* Post-industrial work dominates the Dutch labor market, and aesthetics play a significant role in this type of labor. Previous studies on aesthetic labor primarily examined how employers, motivated by commercial interests, exercise control over the aesthetics of workers, for instance through employee selection, supervision, and monitoring (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Williams & Connell, 2010). Various studies also reveal that workers are regulated by their work conditions to invest considerable effort in attaining the 'correct' aesthetics, leading individuals to be preoccupied with achieving the right work aesthetics even outside of work and within their personal lives, resulting in self-alienation (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Holla, 2018). However, this work offers only a limited understanding of the processes of aesthetic regulation and its consequences. In the introduction and subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I argue that the literature on aesthetic labor overlooks significant forms of worker regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Burawoy, 1982; Paring et al., 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Vallas & Hill, 2018). To gain a better and more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic regulation of workers, I argue that we should not view it solely as a consequence of direct coercion at a specific moment, but as a process that unfolds at various moments and involves different actors. Furthermore, we should consider aesthetics not just as an outcome of regulation, but also as something that itself regulates.

My dissertation demonstrates how the aesthetic regulation of workers occurs: 1) through aesthetic advice from staffing agencies to job seekers emphasizing and legitimizing the importance of aesthetics for finding employment; 2) through organizational gatekeepers who problematize, but also legitimize appearances as hiring criteria; 3) through co-workers who provide subtle and not-so-subtle feedback on each other's aesthetics; and 4) through both the symbolism and materiality of work uniforms, which, if worn at work, regulate the practices and experiences of workers. Many workers of course do not wear a uniform at work, but this final case, more broadly, extends our understanding of what the materiality of (regulated) work

aesthetics do in regulating workers. This structure follows a sequential logic: from pre-entry regulatory advice to the gatekeeping moment, and finally, to regulation in the workplace. The findings highlight that aesthetic regulation is not confined to specific moments or ceases at a given point; it is an ongoing process. Moreover, I demonstrate that aesthetic regulation is a two-way process: aesthetics are regulated, but I also show how aesthetics themselves regulate workers. Lastly, my research reveals that aesthetic regulation often occurs in implicit and even concealed ways, and that the various actors involved in the regulation often hold ambivalent views towards it yet still try to justify it. Nevertheless, they actively reinforce the importance of aesthetics for work and of certain aesthetic norms through various forms of advice, legitimation, and feedback.

Returning to the title of this dissertation, this means that we must understand the matter of appearances for work in two ways. In the first sense of the word, appearances matter and they are made to matter in complex and subtle ways. In the second sense of the word, this dissertation demonstrates that the materiality of work appearances itself also does something to workers. Work aesthetics are not a superficial matter but can deeply permeate the experiences and practices of workers, partly through their material properties. This means that aesthetic labor, like Hochschild's emotional labor, is not a superficial performance but something has profound effects. In this dissertation, I illustrate this through the 'extreme case' of work uniforms, but the same can be said for the vast majority of workers who do not wear uniforms but whose work aesthetics are equally regulated. The advice, comments, feedback, and legitimizations from various sources influence how they shape their appearances and with what materials they do so. The finding that aesthetic regulation is a two-way process suggests that, in turn, it influences their experiences and work identities.

In sum, aesthetic regulation is performed by different labor market actors, often takes on implicit forms, and goes in two directions. I will substantiate these central findings by presenting the findings from my case studies to illustrate precisely *how* regulation occurs.

Findings from the case studies

In **Chapter 2**, I answer the question *How does pre-entry regulation in the shape of aesthetic advice take place?* by analyzing the aesthetic advice provided by staffing agencies on their websites. These pieces of advice regulate job seekers in two important ways. Firstly, they emphasize that aesthetics are a crucial requirement for employment by stating that achieving the 'right' look is one of the most important elements in preparing for a job interview. For instance, a staffing agency states that aesthetic preparation is just as vital as the content-related preparation, while several

other agencies inform workers that their appearance presents a unique opportunity (rather than a risk) to make a good impression during a job interview. Secondly, they stress the importance of the candidate's style aligning effortlessly and authentically with that of the organization. Although these pieces of advice acknowledge the significance of aesthetics in job applications, they offer scant concrete guidance on how to do it 'right' (which is not surprising given the contextual nature of aesthetic norms and evaluations (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Kuipers, 2015)). Instead, the advice often boils down to just 'be yourself' and do not adapt your style too much, but make sure your aesthetics 'match' with the organization you are applying to. The combination of authenticity and fit creates a tension, as fit generally requires a cultural match based on class background (De Keere, 2023; Rivera, 2012).

To resolve this uneasy tension between the importance of authenticity and fit, the staffing agencies frame the advice as being in the job seeker's interest. For example, one agency states: 'When you feel that you have to divert too much from your personal style in order to meet the expectations, you should ask yourself if this is really the right place for you'. The implication is that if you cannot be 'yourself', you will not be happy in that workplace. These pieces of advice thus reproduce the notion that outward appearance reflects inner essence (Miller, 2010) and assert that a seamless aesthetic match serves as an indicator that you will feel comfortable and content in a company. This demonstrates how both the importance of aesthetics in job applications and the significance of an aesthetic match are legitimized: appearance is a reflection of a 'true' self, making it informative for gatekeepers and also for yourself, as if you do not naturally match aesthetically, then you apparently do not belong there and will not be happy in that job. This encourages self-exclusion and presents exclusions based on aesthetics as being in the job seeker's interest (which is somewhat similar to what De Keere (2023) found in his study on hiring).

Despite the heavy emphasis on aesthetics, nowhere does it simply state: you need to look good because it appeals to customers or clients. Instead, aesthetics are presented as indicators of personality or essence, and thereby, as a valid criterion in selection processes. Furthermore, the outright denial of structural exclusion based on aesthetics implies that staffing agencies are indeed aware of the inequalities and exclusions associated with the importance of aesthetics. For example, in advising not to wear headgear like a cap or hat during an interview, one staffing agency states: 'Do you wear headgear because of your religion? No problem of course! Just keep that on'. However, empirical studies reveal severe discrimination against women who wear a hijab, for instance (Fernández-Reino et al., 2022).

In sum, at first glance, advice might appear to be aimed at providing help (Cummins & Blum, 2015; Skeggs, 2009). However, these pieces of advice from staffing agencies to job seekers prove to be of little practical use and assistance. Instead, they regulate job seekers pre-entry, even before they start working, by teaching them (1) that their

aesthetics are crucial for finding employment, and (2) that an aesthetic ‘mismatch’ is a legitimate reason for rejection (and is also in their own interest). This reveals that aesthetic regulation also takes place pre-entry and in ways that are more subtle and ambiguous than direct instruction.

After investigating pre-entry advice, we look into the sequentially significant next stage in the job market: **chapter 3** focuses on the job interview itself and the evaluation of candidates. More specifically, here co-author Kobe De Keere and I examine the positions of gatekeepers regarding the role of appearance in the recruitment process by answering the question: *How do gatekeepers legitimize appearances as hiring criteria?* On the one hand, gatekeepers problematize this role and believe that appearance should not matter. However, at the same time, they acknowledge that appearances *do* play a role in their evaluations of job candidates. This position exemplifies what I also found in chapters 2 and 4 concerning aesthetic regulation: it may not be deemed appropriate, but nevertheless several labor market actors are actively involved in this type of regulation. In chapter 3, we show how gatekeepers resolve this contradiction by providing reasons to justify why appearance should be considered in their evaluations. From the interview data, we discern three cultural repertoires for legitimizing appearances as hiring criteria.

The first repertoire is that beauty is productive. This repertoire largely aligns with the well-known commercial repertoire described in the literature on aesthetic labor (e.g., Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). For external recruiters – those conducting job interviews for other organizations – appearance is also important because they want to select candidates who align with the preferences of their clients. For instance, external recruiter Marc explains that one of his clients places importance on their employees not having piercings or tattoos. While Marc questions whether or not this is discrimination, his primary concern is to adhere to the client’s request. According to this repertoire, it may not be desirable to exclude people based on personal preferences regarding appearance, but it is deemed less problematic to consider appearance as a criterion when it is to meet the preferences of others, such as clients or customers.

Secondly, gatekeepers legitimize the importance of appearance by asserting that appearances express personality. In the interviews, gatekeepers often directly connected appearance to personality or charisma (*‘uitstraling’*). Although they were unable to explain precisely what ‘charisma’ is or how it can be observed, they still believed it to be a legitimate criterion in job interviews. This repertoire reconceptualizes the ‘superficial’ or frivolous aspect of appearance into something more profound, charisma and personality, thus legitimizing its importance in the hiring process.

Although it is evident that evaluations based on appearance and aesthetic norms

are, among other things, racialized and sexist (Kuipers, 2015; Monk et al., 2021; Wissinger, 2012), gatekeepers assert, thirdly, that looking right is a matter of effort. By claiming that everyone is equally capable of looking right by putting in the effort, the right appearance during a job interview becomes a sign of motivation, and the significance of appearance becomes essentially meritocratic. This perspective overlooks the unequal valuation and acceptance of different bodies and the cultural knowledge required to look appropriate. For example, recruiter Jeannette states: ‘Whether someone is representative in that sense is not so much about beauty, but about the total picture. Are they fat and wearing a tight top? Nothing wrong [with being] fat, but if you wear a tight top [then] something is wrong. You have to dress accordingly’. This illustrates how gatekeepers deny structural exclusion (in this case, related to body size) and reshape it into something that applicants are personally responsible for.

This chapter teaches us two important things about how aesthetic regulation takes place. Firstly, it shows that organizational gatekeepers, who play a significant role in elevating the importance of aesthetics for work by having the decision-making power over who gets hired, are ambivalent regarding the significance of aesthetics in job interviews. While many previous studies demonstrate that aesthetics play a role in gatekeepers’ evaluations, and simply assume that these gatekeepers have no moral objections to it, this study reveals the struggles of those making the decisions. Secondly, it once again illustrates that aesthetic regulation often takes on obscure forms. Gatekeepers do not outright state *that* and *how* appearances matter; instead, they claim that appearance is about something else entirely, thus both legitimizing and concealing the importance of aesthetics for work.

In **chapter 4**, I present my study on the regulation of aesthetics in the workplace by co-workers. Through interviews with precariously employed workers in the creative sector and interactive service sector, I explore how peers provide each other with aesthetic feedback in workplaces where there are no formal aesthetic guidelines. This means that this feedback is not grounded in a formal hierarchy or established aesthetic norms. The question I answer here is: *How are peers involved in the regulation of workers’ aesthetics at work?*

Co-workers often give each other feedback in implicit ways, such as through jokes or humor. For example, Lara states the following: ‘Sometimes a colleague is a little bit sexy and then we say something fun like ‘hello there!’ [laughs]. So we give each other feedback on that.’ This example illustrates how peer feedback is often ambiguous, both in content and form. The feedback is typically not openly and directly expressed; rather, it is concealed through humor, gossip, or offered as assistance. This ambiguity does not mean, however, that the feedback has little effect on the receiver.

Similar to the gatekeepers in chapter 3, the workers involved in this type of

regulation also explain it using the prevalent commercial logic. Especially in the hospitality industry, some employees express the importance of their colleagues aesthetically aligning with the style of the company, which is also reflected in how the hospitality workers in chapter 5 appreciate their co-workers all looking similar when at work. However, above all, many workers seem to value their colleagues showing that they ‘match’ through their aesthetics. For instance, Samuel mentions receiving comments from several colleagues when he wore a jacket to his job as a teaching assistant at a department of a university that is emphatically informal in style. Aesthetic regulation by peers, in this sense, is driven by something deeper than merely appealing to customers for commercial success; it is deemed important that colleagues do not divert too far from the aesthetic norms within the context and that they hence show that they ‘belong’ in that particular work context.

Furthermore, contrary to what Lara suggests in the above citation, receiving feedback is often not perceived as ‘fun’ at all. For instance, when Anne wears a knee-length black dress in the summer, a colleague asks her if she is going to the beach. Anne’s discomfort with this remark goes beyond her appearance alone; she feels extremely uneasy and fears that she will no longer be taken seriously at work. Although these peers have no formal hierarchical power, their aesthetic judgments are deeply felt and have serious effects on how people feel and act at work. In the context of this dissertation, it is relevant to note that aesthetic regulation – even by peers, and even in the absence of formal guidelines – can have profound consequences that intrude upon feelings of professionalism and self-worth.

This chapter demonstrates that informal processes of aesthetic regulation in the workplace are linked to processes of distinction and taste judgments, which has important implications in terms of the reproduction of inequalities. Aesthetic feedback by peers often takes on implicit and even concealed forms, is generally experienced as uncomfortable (both by the giver and the receiver), and yet, it is taken very seriously and felt deeply. This form of regulation illustrates that aesthetic feedback, also when it is not given in the context of hierarchical work relations, can strongly impact the feelings and experiences of workers. Hence, this chapter emphasizes that aesthetic regulation is an ongoing process that continues even after people are employed in an organization, and that it is not only done by employers but also by co-workers, and often in obscured ways.

In **chapter 5**, I explore a form of aesthetic regulation that is explicitly top-down and enforced: the use of work uniforms. The question addressed here is: *How do work uniforms regulate work practices and identities?* Through interviews with employees in two cases of interactive service sector work – train conductors and wait staff in upscale restaurants in Amsterdam – I examine what uniforms, specifically their materialities, do to the practices and work identities of employees. This study

reveals three ways in which the uniform functions as a specific technique of top-down regulation by employers that goes far beyond appearance alone.

Firstly, the uniform creates a sense of responsibility among workers. This is partly due to the feeling of being visible to guests or travelers, which gives rise to the idea that certain expectations will be placed on the worker regarding availability or helpfulness. For example, hospitality worker Madelief, who sometimes performs administrative tasks at the bar of the restaurant in her own clothes before changing into her uniform, says the following: ‘(...) if I haven’t changed my clothes yet, I feel less responsible for the guests coming in’. Train conductors also indicate that when traveling to or from work, they often cover their uniform with their own coat to avoid getting questions from passengers. The uniform helps to ensure that employees feel and behave responsibly at work even in the absence of direct supervision from a manager because it impacts their own sense of duty and what they believe others expect from them. Even without a manager assigning tasks, the uniform prompts them to work.

Secondly, the material properties of the uniform influence the body postures and movements of workers, and they normalize body shape. For example, a stiff and sturdy uniform encourages an upright posture, while it may hinder certain movements, thus continuously and physically reminding employees of the style of self-presentation and interactions expected of them. For instance, Tijn, a staff member at a Michelin-starred restaurant, describes himself as a relaxed and easy-going person, but as soon as he buttons up his uniform, according to him, ‘a switch is flipped’, both mentally and physically: ‘So you start moving differently’. Tijn’s physical experience of the uniform – stiff, cautious movements – aligns with the personality and performances expected of him in the posh and expensive restaurant: he is not meant to be his loud and exuberant self, but polite and reserved. The uniform, therefore, serves as a constant physical reminder of the performance expected of him at work. The same applies to body size: workers experience the fit of their uniform as a benchmark for how much they should weigh.

Finally, uniforms can contribute to employees redefining their own boundaries and interests. A uniform can create the feeling of being someone else or playing a role, and as a result, as explained by an upscale hospitality worker, it may lead to accepting sexually inappropriate comments and behaviors from guests. Conductors are even trained to use the uniform as a technique to deal with verbal abuse from passengers, as they are taught not to take insults and threats personally but to see them as directed towards the uniform. My respondents confirm that they indeed apply this technique and find it useful. As such, the uniform functions as a tool for workers accepting risk and abuse.

This chapter teaches us that aesthetic regulation is a two-way process: regulation not only leads to specific work aesthetics, but work aesthetics also regulate work.

I demonstrate that aesthetic regulation, in this case in the form of an enforced standardized work outfit, can have profound consequences for workers. Both the symbolic and material aspects of a mandated work uniform can impact work identities and contribute to the redefinition of personal boundaries and the acceptance of aggression and danger at work. Given that even non-mandatory work aesthetics are regulated, as demonstrated in the first three case studies, this also has implications for how we should understand the consequences of aesthetic regulation for non-uniformed workers. More than the literature has shown so far, work aesthetics can, in this way, contribute to the alienation and exploitation of workers.

Together, these case studies demonstrate that aesthetic regulation is an ongoing process, often occurring in implicit and ambiguous ways, and that it operates in two directions. My approach to aesthetic regulation as a continuous process involving various actors enabled me to illustrate how the regulation of workers' aesthetics can take place in more implicit ways, deeply influencing the experiences of employees. This is relevant for the understanding of aesthetic labor because it teaches us that the aestheticization of work is more intricate than previously acknowledged, affecting the alienation of workers in ways that have not yet been described. This has implications: 1) for the alienation of workers; 2) for how exclusions and inequalities are shaped within organizations; and 3) for comprehending the processes of society-wide aestheticization.

Implications

First, aesthetic regulation has profound consequences for workers that go far beyond simply adjusting one's appearance or self-presentation. The importance of having the 'right' aesthetics is deeply felt, as exemplified by my respondents' reactions to negative feedback from peers. Failing to meet aesthetic standards can lead to feelings of shame, of social discomfort, and of being perceived as incompetent. This can contribute to self-exclusion or accepting exclusion based on aesthetics. Furthermore, my research shows that a regulated aesthetic appearance for work (as exemplified for the 'extreme case' of a work uniform) can contribute to workers' alienation going far beyond the aesthetic mismatch observed by Warhurst & Nickson (2020). Uniformed workers indicate that they feel like representatives of the company when wearing a uniform, and that they are more willing to accept verbal and sexual abuse because it is 'not personal' and simply part of the dangerous work situations they have to endure. This indicates that the effects of wearing a regulated work outfit are not just superficial, but that they deeply impact workers. Given that also non-mandatory work aesthetics are regulated, the same can be argued for non-uniformed

workers. Hochschild's (1983) analysis emphasizes how emotional labor leads to self-alienation and exploitation as workers are taught to manipulate their own feelings and experiences for the commercial benefit of the company they work for. Building upon this and extending this argument to aesthetic labor, Entwistle & Wissinger (2006) and Holla (2008) demonstrated, through various cases in the modeling industry, how aesthetic labor can also lead to self-exploitation and alienation. Their analyses focus on workers who must apply self-discipline and sacrifice their entire selves to achieve often unrealistic beauty ideals. My research complements this by demonstrating how regulated aesthetics and their material properties can also result in workers' exploitation and alienation as workers are taught through their aesthetics that they are 'playing a role' or representing the company, and therefore they should not take violence and danger personally. This illustrates how aesthetic labor is not a superficial performance, but can deeply penetrate workers' experiences of their work and of themselves at work.

Second, this dissertation has implications for the understanding of how exclusions and inequalities are shaped within organizations. The labor market and employment organizations are significant sites for the production and reproduction of inequalities. These exclusions occur along the lines of gender, race, and class, which goes against the law and against dominant societal norms (Dobbin, 2009; Van Pinxteren & de Beer, 2016). Often, exclusions are not explicit but occur through cultural repertoires that are generally perceived as morally acceptable within organizations. For instance, Acker (1990, 2006) analyzes how the image of the 'ideal worker' as always available, disembodied, and without responsibilities outside of work reproduces systemic inequalities related to class and gender. Those who perform caregiving tasks, taking care of children or elderly family members, do not fit within the framework of the ideal worker. By placing such particular demands on availability and motivation, the image of the ideal worker contributes to the structural exclusion of certain individuals – in this case, women and people from a working-class background. Moss & Tilly (1996) make a similar argument regarding soft skills and race. They demonstrate that in entry-level job application processes, the evaluations of applicants by managers are often strongly influenced by race. However, these managers do not attribute their negative evaluations of black candidates to racism but to 'soft skill' criteria, thereby legitimizing their essentially racist evaluations and selections.

My research demonstrates that aesthetics also serve as a vehicle for the reproduction of systemic inequalities and exclusions. Through their ambiguity and the emphasis on commonly accepted idioms such as 'authenticity' or 'charm', the importance of aesthetics for work can seem permissible or even innocent. However, aesthetic norms are symbolic constructs that are often inherently sexist and racist. For example, Monk's (2021) findings reveal that being considered unattractive

has greater consequences for black individuals than for white individuals in the United States. Despite race and gender not being permissible evaluation criteria in job interviews, chapters 2 and 3 show that aesthetics do influence hiring decisions and that gatekeepers acknowledge this. This influence is often concealed; staffing agencies and gatekeepers for instance translate the importance of appearances into criteria of aesthetic fit and of what one's appearance supposedly reveals about their personality. These aesthetic evaluation repertoires legitimize exclusions along the lines of class, gender, and race. Furthermore, chapter 5 demonstrates that enforced work uniforms may better suit certain body types than others, which also holds potential for exclusion. As such, the importance of aesthetics in the context of the labor market is a means through which structural inequalities are reproduced. At the same time, it functions as a way to dismiss issues such as racism and sexism as merely aesthetic concerns, thus making them appear less illegal or harmful.

Third and finally, this study complements our understanding of processes of society-wide aesthetization. The literature on aesthetization argues that aesthetics are becoming increasingly important for a growing number of individuals (Kuipers, 2022; Sarpila et al., 2021; Widdows, 2018). Kuipers (2022) explains this development through the rise of work in the interactive service sectors, the emergence of media and consumer cultures, social democratization, and new media. What this literature still largely overlooks, but what my research clearly demonstrates, is that in the context of work people hold rather ambivalent attitudes towards aesthetization and aesthetic regulation. Concerning the emphasis on and enforcement of aesthetic norms, it is consistently evident that various actors conflictingly feel: we really should not, but we are doing it anyway. Of course, earlier studies have shown that aesthetization places significant pressures on individuals (Elias et al., 2017), and that there are unequal societal norms regarding aesthetics (Sarpila et al., 2020). So we already understand that people sometimes struggle with the aestheticization of work and society as a whole. My research builds forth upon this by illustrating that even those who endorse the significance of aesthetics and specific aesthetic norms hold reservations against them, or at the very least express moral ambivalence towards aesthetic regulation.

Future directions

In addition to these insights, this dissertation also prompts new questions that future lines of research could address. First, a different selection of cases and respondents could potentially yield new insights and a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetic regulation. Second, different research methods could complement the current findings and offer additional perspectives.

As for the first point, the positioning of this study within the Dutch post-industrial labor market is relevant for the interpretation of my analyses and findings. I examined the regulation of aesthetics in types of post-industrial work that are primarily associated with aesthetic labor. In that sense, it is not surprising that I found regulation to take place in various ways, and that its significance was legitimized by different actors. On the other hand, the respondents were mainly individuals who do not experience specific forms of marginalization. Mostly, they were people who are white and able-bodied. This sample, therefore, reinforces my arguments about the omnipresence of aesthetic regulation and its serious consequences; even for my respondents who perhaps do not experience societal marginalization, aesthetics and aesthetic regulation are significant matters.

It is important for future research to build on this by specifically examining the experiences of individuals who do not so easily conform to the general societal aesthetic norms. For the aural dimension of aesthetics, Butler (2014) investigated how people who stutter are limited in the tasks they are assigned and allowed to perform, and how they themselves rationalize these exclusions. However, there are few studies on individuals who visibly do not entirely meet dominant aesthetic norms, such as people with skin conditions or larger bodies. Nickson et al. (2016) showed that even a small increase in women's body mass index reduces their job opportunities in the service sector. However, we know little from the aesthetic labor literature about how gatekeepers specifically deal with body shape in their evaluations (although several gatekeepers in chapter 3 subtly hinted to it) and about the experiences of individuals with larger bodies engaged in aesthetic labor. Research in this area could provide further insights into 1) how aesthetics are applied and legitimized as evaluation criteria in situations where appearances are more prominently present due to not fitting general societal norms, and 2) the experiences and consequences of aestheticization of the labor market for individuals who do not conform to dominant aesthetic norms.

Regarding the second point, the studies in this dissertation could be complemented by observational studies. Three out of my four sub-studies are based on various methods of in-depth interviewing, such as wardrobe interviews and video-elicitation interviews. These methods have proven useful in allowing individuals to narrate stories about their practices, experiences, and reflections. After all, to gain insight into how individuals experience the aesthetic feedback from their co-workers, how they perceive wearing a uniform, and how gatekeepers reflect on the role of appearance in job applications, interviewing is an appropriate and suitable method. However, what people say they do is not always the same as what they actually do (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). It would be intriguing to further supplement the insights from my dissertation with observations of how peers actually give each other aesthetic feedback and how gatekeepers evaluate applicants, with considerations related to aesthetics at

play, following real job interviews. This calls for a different research design centered around observations. Especially given the finding that people clearly hold somewhat ambivalent views regarding aesthetic regulation, it is not unlikely that interview data may be influenced by social desirability bias. Observations would complement this by providing direct, unfiltered accounts of what people actually do in context.

Appearances matter for work. This is not an immutable fact, nor an abstract macro given. The regulation of work aesthetics – that is, the ways in which appearances are made to be important and aesthetic norms are reinforced – is a process that occurs in everyday practices and interactions, and that goes in two directions. At different points in the process of finding and having a job, appearances are *made* to matter. Various actors are involved in aesthetic regulation – sometimes in direct ways, but also through unclear and implicit forms of regulation. It is precisely this opacity and ambivalence surrounding the significance of aesthetics in work that results in significant yet underestimated consequences for the alienation of workers, for the structuring of inequalities and exclusions in the job market, and for processes of society-wide aesthetization.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://about.jstor.org/terms>
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality Regimes Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 20(4), 441–464.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: producing the appropriate individual. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(5), 0022–2380.
- Burawoy, M. (1982). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(5), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013501956>
- Cummins, E. R., & Blum, L. M. (2015). “Suits to self-sufficiency”: Dress for Success and Neoliberal Maternalism. 29(5), 623–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215591949>
- De Keere, K. (2023). *Justifying employee gatekeeping: a video-elicitation and comparative study on resolving moral unease during hiring*. <https://osf.io/Sp69w/download>
- Dobbin, F. (2009). *Inventing equal opportunity*. Princeton University Press.
- Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (A. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47765-1_1
- Entwistle, J., & Wissinger, E. (2006). Keeping up appearances: Aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review*, 54(4), 774–794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00671.x>
- Fernández-Reino, M., Di Stasio, V., & Veit, S. (2022). Discrimination Unveiled: A Field Experiment on the Barriers Faced by Muslim Women in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcac032>
- Friedman, S., & Laurison, D. (2019). *The class ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged*. Policy Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Holla, S. (2018). *Beauty, work, self: How fashion models experience their aesthetic labor*. University of Amsterdam.
- Kuipers, G. (2015). Beauty and distinction? The evaluation of appearance and cultural capital in five European countries. *Poetics*, 53, 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.10.001>
- Kuipers, G. (2022). The expanding beauty regime: Or, why it has become so important to look good. *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 13(2), 207–228. https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00046_1
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. The Polity Press.
- Monk, E. P., Esposito, M. H., & Lee, H. (2021). *Beholding Inequality: Race, Gender, and Returns to Physical Attractiveness in the United States 1*.
- Moss, P., & Tilly, C. (1996). “Soft” Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men’s Employment Problems. *Work and Occupations*, 23(3), 252–276.
- Nickson, D., Timming, A., Re, D., & Perrett, D. (2016). Subtle increases in BMI within a healthy weight range still reduce womens employment chances in the service sector. *PLoS One*, 11(9).
- Paring, G., Pezé, S., & Huault, I. (2017). ‘Welcome to the whiteboard, the new member of the team’: Identity regulation as a sociomaterial process. *Organization*, 24(6), 844–865. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508416686407>
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 999–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412463213>
- Sarpila, O., Koivula, A., Kukkonen, I., Åberg, E., & Pajunen, T. (2020). Double standards in the accumulation and utilisation of ‘aesthetic capital.’ *Poetics*, 82(June 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101447>
- Sarpila, O., Kukkonen, I., Pajunen, T., & Åberg, E. (2021). *Appearance as Capital: The Normative Regulation of Aesthetic Capital Accumulation and Conversion* (O. Sarpila, I. Kukkonen, T. Pajunen, & E. Åberg, Eds.). Emerald Publishing.
- Skeggs, B. (2009). The moral economy of person production: The class relations of self-performance on “reality” television. *Sociological Review*, 57(4), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01865.x>
- Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). *Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press: Enterprise Culture in an Age of Precarity*. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614563741>
- Vallas, S. P., & Hill, A. L. (2018). Reconfiguring Worker Subjectivity: Career Advice Literature and the “Branding” of the Worker’s Self. *Sociological Forum*, 33(2), 287–309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sof.12418>
- Van Pinxteren, M., & de Beer, P. (2016). *Meritocratie: Op weg naar een nieuwe klassensamenleving* (M. van Pinxteren & P. de Beer, Eds.). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462983397>
- Van den Berg, M., & Vonk, L. (2019). The new discomforts of precarious workers: Wardrobe matter, insecurity and the temporality of calibration in dress work. *The Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119892402>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2020). *Aesthetic Labour*. Sage.

- Widdows, H. (2018). *Perfect me: beauty as an ethical ideal*. Princeton University Press.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). "Looking good and sounding right": Aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>
- Wissinger, E. (2012). Managing the semiotics of skin tone: Race and aesthetic labor in the fashion modeling industry. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427591>

Summary
Nederlandse samenvatting
Appendix
Dankwoord

Summary – A MATTER OF APPEARANCES How workers’ aesthetics are regulated in advice, hiring, and at work

For a job interview, as well as for a regular workday, people generally invest a considerable amount of time, effort, and energy into looking good. This is not just driven by vanity. Aesthetics have become increasingly important, affecting for instance job opportunities, salaries, status, and recognition. The ‘right’ aesthetics are often a condition for being hired, and it is common for employers to set appearance-related standards for employees, particularly in the service and creative sectors. This aesthetization of work puts substantial demands on individuals in terms of time, effort, and mental strain. Moreover, it contributes to the exclusion of certain individuals and bodies. These far-reaching consequences raise questions about how, when, and by whom the importance of aesthetics for work and specific aesthetic norms in the workplace are reinforced. In this dissertation, I therefore answer the question: *How does the regulation of workers’ aesthetics in the Dutch post-industrial labor market take place?* Based on four qualitative case studies, I argue that aesthetic regulation is an ongoing process performed not only by employers but also by other labor market actors, that it often takes on implicit and even concealed forms, and that it is a two-way process as work aesthetics also regulate workers.

Aesthetic regulation begins even before someone applies for a job. In **chapter 2**, I demonstrate how staffing agencies, through online advice given to job seekers, teach prospective workers that their aesthetics are crucial for their chances of finding work and how they justify the significance of appearances. My content analysis of advice on the websites of employment agencies reveals that this advice is often inutile and not concrete, and that it mainly emphasizes the importance of authentically ‘being yourself’ while having a natural aesthetic alignment with the organization. This uncomfortable tension between the importance of authenticity and the need to resemble other individuals within the organization is resolved by framing the advice as being in the job seeker’s interest. Employment agencies assert that aesthetics reflect individuals’ true nature and that aesthetic alignment is therefore a key indicator of a job seeker’s suitability for an organization. These findings contribute to understanding how aesthetic regulation occurs even before potential employment and how this type of regulation takes place through advice.

Chapter 3 is focused on the subsequent pivotal phase in the job-seeking process: the job interview. In collaboration with co-author Kobe De Keere, I analyze the ambivalent stance of organizational gatekeepers towards the role of appearance in job application procedures, drawing from 40 interviews conducted within Kobe De Keere’s ‘Hiring on taste’ project. Gatekeepers acknowledge the significance of appearance while, contradictorily, expressing that they themselves believe that aesthetics should

not matter in application procedures. They resolve this contradiction by applying three recurring cultural repertoires to legitimize appearances as selection criteria. The first repertoire holds that beauty is productive, resembling the commercial repertoire as commonly described in aesthetic labor literature. Second, gatekeepers legitimize the importance of appearance by claiming it is not about looks, but about ‘charisma’, and that aesthetics are indicative of personality. Although they cannot explain what charisma is or how personality precisely manifests through aesthetics, these selectors legitimize the importance of appearance by recontextualizing it from something superficial to a matter of personality, making it seem more profound and relevant. Third, gatekeepers argue that looking good is simply a matter of effort. By asserting that putting in effort enables everyone to look ‘good’ to an equal degree, they transform the ‘right’ appearance during a job application into a sign of motivation, thus making the importance of appearance inherently meritocratic. This overlooks the unequal valuation and acceptance of different bodies and the cultural knowledge required to appear ‘right’. While previous studies demonstrated that aesthetics influence gatekeepers’ evaluations and assumed that these gatekeepers have no moral issues regarding the role of aesthetics, this study exposes ambivalence among those making hiring decisions. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates how the importance of appearances in job application procedures is legitimized, thus adding to a better understanding of the implicit ways in which aesthetic regulation takes place.

In **chapter 4**, I analyze how colleagues are implicated in regulating the aesthetics of workers in the workplace. From my analysis of 28 wardrobe interviews with precariously contracted workers in the creative and service sectors (conducted by a small team of researchers as part of the project ‘Dress Work in Precarity – The Aesthetics of Precarious Urban Labor Markets’, led by Marguerite van den Berg), it becomes evident that colleagues provide each other with feedback, but that the forms and content are generally quite ambiguous. Peers often do not directly address each other but convey feedback through humor, gossip, or advice. Similar to the gatekeepers in chapter 3, the workers involved in regulation explain this through the conventional commercial logic, but many workers seem particularly concerned that their colleagues demonstrate a ‘match’ through their aesthetic appearance. While this feedback is not given within a hierarchical power dynamic and mostly relates to matters of taste, it is often taken very seriously by the recipient, to the extent that they question their own professionalism after receiving negative feedback. This chapter shows that aesthetic regulation is an ongoing process that continues once individuals are employed within an organization. Moreover, this type of regulation is not solely performed by employers but also by colleagues, often through subtle and implicit means.

Finally, in **chapter 5**, I demonstrate how aesthetic regulation in the workplace

is a two-way process: aesthetics are not only *regulated*, but also *regulate*. Through 23 interviews with train conductors in the Netherlands and service personnel in top restaurants in Amsterdam, I explore how uniforms worn at work, and specifically their materiality, influence employees' work practices and work identities. Firstly, uniforms foster a sense of responsibility among workers. Therefore, uniforms aid in inducing employees to feel and behave responsibly at work when there is no manager or supervisor present, since uniforms intervene in their own sense of their role and what they believe others expect of them. Even without a manager assigning tasks, uniforms encourage workers to actively perform work tasks. Secondly, the material attributes of uniforms impact workers' body postures and movements and normalize body shape. Uniforms serve as constant physical reminders of the performance expected of workers and function as a benchmark for employees' body size. Lastly, uniforms can contribute to employees redefining their own boundaries and interests. A uniform can induce the feeling in its wearer of playing a role or of being a different person, and this effect is employed by organizations to teach workers to not take verbal aggression personally and hence view it as less offensive. This study reveals that aesthetic regulation is dual: regulation not only leads to specific work aesthetics, but work aesthetics also regulate work. It also demonstrates that aesthetic regulation, here in the case of enforced standardized work attire, can have profound implications for workers.

Earlier studies indicated that aesthetic regulation occurs through employers, via explicit norms and requirements. My findings that aesthetic regulation is often subtle and even concealed, that it occurs at various moments and involves various actors, and that it operates in two directions, are crucial for understanding workers' alienation due to aesthetic labor, the role of aesthetic labor in the persistence of inequalities and exclusions within organizations, and for our understanding of the aestheticization of the labor market and society.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Voor een sollicitatiegesprek, maar ook voor een normale werkdag, steken mensen doorgaans behoorlijk wat tijd, moeite en energie in er 'goed' uitzien. Dat is niet alleen maar uit ijdelheid. Hoe je er uitziet, doet er in toenemende mate namelijk toe voor bijvoorbeeld de kans op een baan, voor salaris en voor je status en waardering. De 'juiste' esthetiek is vaak een voorwaarde om aangenomen te worden, en het is gebruikelijk dat werkgevers eisen stellen aan de verschijning van medewerkers - zeker bij banen in de dienstensector en creatieve sector. Dit vraagt veel van mensen qua tijd, moeite en mentale belasting. Bovendien draagt dit bij aan het uitsluiten van bepaalde mensen en lichamen. Deze verregaande gevolgen roepen vragen op over hoe, wanneer en door wie het belang van esthetiek voor werk en specifieke esthetische normen op het werk bekrachtigd worden. In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik daarom hoe esthetische regulering plaatsvindt. De centrale vraag was: *hoe vindt de regulering van de esthetiek van werkenden in de Nederlandse postindustriële arbeidsmarkt plaats?* Op basis van vier kwalitatieve deelstudies stel ik dat esthetische regulering een doorlopend proces is, waar niet alleen werkgevers maar ook andere actoren bij betrokken zijn, dat het vaak verholde vormen aanneemt, en dat esthetiek niet alleen gereguleerd *wordt* maar ook zelf reguleert.

Esthetische regulering begint al voordat iemand ergens solliciteert. In **hoofdstuk 2** laat ik zien hoe uitzendbureaus door middel van online adviezen aan werkzoekenden leren dat hun esthetiek van doorslaggevend belang is voor hun kansen op een baan, en hoe ze uitleggen dat dit belang terecht is. Mijn inhoudsanalyse van adviezen op de websites van uitzendbureaus leert dat deze adviezen zelden concreet en bruikbaar zijn voor werkzoekenden, en dat ze voornamelijk het belang benadrukken van authentiek 'jezelf zijn' en van een natuurlijke esthetische match hebben met de organisatie. Deze ongemakkelijke spanning tussen het belang van authenticiteit en toch moeten lijken op de andere mensen in de organisatie lossen de uitzendbureaus op door het advies te framen als in het belang van de werkzoekende. Ze stellen dat esthetiek een reflectie is van wie mensen 'echt' zijn, en dat een esthetische match daarom een belangrijke indicator is van of een werkzoekende past bij een organisatie. De bevindingen dragen bij aan het begrijpen van hoe esthetische regulering al voor een mogelijke indiensttreding plaatsvindt, en hoe regulering in de vorm van advies plaatsvindt.

In **hoofdstuk 3** staat het daaropvolgende mogelijke moment in het proces naar een baan centraal: het sollicitatiegesprek. Samen met co-auteur Kobe De Keere analyseer ik, op basis van 40 interviews die zijn afgenomen binnen zijn project 'Hiring on taste', de ambivalente houding van selecteurs ten opzichte van de rol van uiterlijk in sollicitatieprocedures. Zij erkennen dat uiterlijk ertoe doet in hun evaluaties van kandidaten, maar problematiseren dit ook, en ze lossen deze tegenstrijdigheid op door

middel van drie terugkerende culturele repertoires om uiterlijk als sollicitatiecriterium te legitimeren. Het eerste repertoire is dat schoonheid productief is, en lijkt daarmee op de commerciële logica die vaker beschreven is in de esthetische arbeid literatuur. Ten tweede legitimeren selecteurs het belang van uiterlijk door te stellen dat het gaat om ‘uitstraling’ en dat esthetiek een indicator is van persoonlijkheid. Hoewel ze niet konden uitleggen wat uitstraling is en hoe persoonlijkheid precies uitgedrukt wordt door uiterlijk, legitimeren de selecteurs op deze manier het belang van esthetiek door het te herconceptualiseren van iets oppervlakkigs naar persoonlijkheid, wat het diepzinniger en relevanter lijkt te maken. Ten derde stellen de selecteurs dat er goed uitzien simpelweg een kwestie is van moeite doen. Door te stellen dat door moeite te doen iedereen in gelijke mate in staat is om er ‘goed’ uit te zien, wordt het ‘juiste’ uiterlijk bij een sollicitatie een teken van motivatie, en het belang van uiterlijk bij uitstek meritocratisch. Hiermee veronachtzamen zij de ongelijke waardering en acceptatie van verschillende lichamen en de culturele kennis die nodig is om er ‘juist’ uit te zien. Waar eerdere studies aantoonde dat esthetiek meespeelt in de evaluaties van selecteurs, en daarbij aannemen dat gatekeepers daar geen morele bezwaren tegen hebben, laat deze studie ambivalentie zien: het hoort niet, maar we doen het toch. Ten tweede laat dit hoofdstuk zien hoe esthetische regulering verhuld wordt door middel van culturele repertoires die het belang van uiterlijk in sollicitaties legitimeren.

In **hoofdstuk 4** analyseer ik hoe collega’s betrokken zijn in de regulering van de esthetiek van werkenden op het werk. Uit mijn analyse van 28 ‘wardrobe interviews’ (afgenomen samen met een klein team van onderzoekers binnen het door Marguerite van den Berg geleide project ‘Dress Work in Precarity – The Aesthetics of Precarious Urban Labor Markets’) met werkenden met een flexibel contract in de creatieve sector en dienstensector, blijkt dat collega’s elkaar feedback geven, maar dat zowel de vorm als de inhoud doorgaans nogal ambigu zijn. Zij spreken elkaar vaak niet direct aan, maar doen dat in de vorm van grapjes, roddel of advies. Net als de selecteurs in hoofdstuk 3, leggen de werkenden die betrokken zijn in regulering dit uit aan de hand van de gebruikelijke commerciële repertoires, maar bovenal lijken veel werkenden het belangrijk te vinden dat hun collega’s laten zien dat ze ‘matchen’ door middel van hun esthetische verschijning. En hoewel deze feedback niet gegeven wordt in een hiërarchische machtsrelatie en doorgaans neerkomt op een kwestie van smaak, wordt het door de ontvanger vaak heel serieus genomen. Dit hoofdstuk onderstreept dat esthetische regulering een proces is dat ook doorgaat wanneer mensen eenmaal in een organisatie werken. Deze regulering wordt bovendien niet alleen gedaan door werkgevers, maar ook door collega’s, die dat bij uitstek op verholde manieren doen.

Tot slot laat ik **hoofdstuk 5** zien hoe esthetische regulering op het werk twee kanten op gaat: esthetiek is niet alleen dat wat gereguleerd wordt, maar reguleert ook zelf. Door middel van 23 interviews met treinconducteurs en bedienend personeel in

toprestaurants in Amsterdam onderzocht ik aan de hand van de ‘extreme’ case van werkkunsten, en specifiek de materie van uniformen, wat een gereguleerde werk-esthetiek doet met de werkpraktijken en werkidentiteiten van medewerkers. Ten eerste zorgt het uniform voor een gevoel van verantwoordelijkheid bij werkenden. Het uniform helpt om te zorgen dat medewerkers zich verantwoordelijk komen te voelen en gedragen op het werk wanneer er geen leidinggevende toezicht houdt, omdat het ingrijpt op hun eigen gevoel van wat hun taak is, en op wat zij denken dat anderen van ze verwachten. Ook zonder de aanwezigheid van een leidinggevende die taken toebedeelt, zet het uniform aan tot werken. Ten tweede hebben de materiele eigenschappen van het uniform invloed op de lichaamshouding en manier van bewegen van werkenden, en normaliseren ze lichaamsvorm. Uniformen fungeren als een constante fysieke herinnering aan de ‘performance’ die van werkenden verwacht wordt, en vormen een ijkpunt voor de lichaamsomvang van werkenden. Tot slot kunnen uniformen eraan bijdragen dat medewerkers hun eigen grenzen en belangen herdefiniëren. Zo kan een uniform het gevoel geven iemand anders te zijn of een rol te spelen, en wordt het als techniek gebruikt om verbaal geweld niet als persoonlijk, en daardoor minder kwalijk, te nemen. Dit leert ons dat esthetische regulering dual is: regulering leidt niet alleen tot een bepaalde werk-esthetiek, maar werk-esthetiek reguleert ook werk. Dit laat zien dat esthetische regulering, hier in de vorm van een afgedwongen gestandaardiseerde werk-outfit, diepgaande gevolgen kan hebben voor werkenden.

Eerdere studies toonden aan dat esthetische regulering plaatsvindt door werkgevers, door middel van expliciete normen en vereisten. Mijn bevindingen dat esthetische regulering vaak juist verhuld en subtiel is, dat het op verschillende momenten en door verschillende actoren gedaan wordt, en dat het tweezijdig plaatsvindt, is belangrijk voor het begrip van de hoe esthetische arbeid bijdraagt aan de vervreemding van van werkenden, voor de rol van esthetiek in hoe ongelijkheden en uitsluitingen in organisaties ge(re)produceerd worden, en voor het begrip van de esthetisering van de arbeidsmarkt en samenleving.

Appendix

Data sources for chapter 2

Organization	Category	Link to advice page
Young Capital	Specific target audience: young and educated	https://www.youngcapital.nl/sollicitatietips/sollicitatiegesprek
We Talent	Specific sector or job type: construction	https://www.wetalent.nl/sollicitatiehulp/blog/7-kledingtips-voor-een-succesvol-sollicitatiegesprek/
Tempo-Team	General, large agency	https://www.tempo-team.nl/sollicitatie/sollicitatiekleding
Walters People	Specific sector: finance	https://www.walterspeople.nl/carriere-advies/vier-kledingtips-voor-je-eerste-werkdag.html
Pro-Assistance	Specific sector: management support	https://www.pro-assistance.nl/wat-trek-je-in-de-zomer-aan-naar-je-werk
Driessen	Specific sector: public sector	https://www.driessen.nl/samenslim/sneakers-aan-stropdas-om-op-naar-het-werk/
Receptioniste.nl	Specific sector: management support	https://www.receptioniste.nl/nieuws/dresscode-op-warme-dagen
Randstad	General, large agency	https://www.randstad.nl/ontwikkelen/loopbaan/solliciteren/sollicitatiegesprek-voorbereiden
Unique	General, large agency	https://unique.nl/sollicitatietips/jouw-carriere/tips-sollicitatiegesprek
Timing	General, large agency	https://www.timing.nl/flexkrachten/vergroot-je-kansen/sollicitatiegesprek/
Manpower	General, large agency	https://www.manpower.nl/Blogdetail/39993800/44380007/Strak-in-pak-of-een-casual-look-voor-je-sollicitatiegesprek.html
Sparkling People	General	https://sparklingpeople.nl/blog/9-hoe-maak-je-een-goede-eerste-indruk
Start People	General, large agency	https://startpeople.nl/ik-ben-kandidaat/sollicitatietips/tips-voor-je-sollicitatiegesprek

Dankwoord

Op de voorkant van dit proefschrift staat mijn naam, maar zonder de hulp en steun van een heleboel mensen was dit werk niet tot stand gekomen. Ik wil een aantal mensen die belangrijk zijn geweest voor dit werk in het bijzonder bedanken.

Als eerste bedank ik alle mensen die bereid waren om hun verhalen, ervaringen en tijd te delen in de vele interviews die de basis vormen van dit onderzoek. Jullie belangeloze inzet en openhartigheid zijn de onmisbare basis van deze thesis. De - soms verbazingwekkend intieme en emotionele - gesprekken waren een bron van nieuwe ideeën en nieuwsgierigheid, en een aantal van de interviews zullen mij altijd bijblijven. Niet alle interviews zijn door mij afgenomen, en daarom bedank ik ook de verschillende collega's en student-assistenten die betrokken zijn geweest bij het afnemen en transcriberen van de interviews.

Marguerite en Kobe, ik ben jullie heel erg dankbaar voor jullie geweldige begeleiding. Inhoudelijk, maar ook in bredere zin op het gebied van werk en op persoonlijk vlak, heb ik veel van jullie geleerd. Wanneer ik vastliep in getwijfel, of wanneer er simpelweg wel erg veel andere dingen waren die gebeurden in het leven, hielpen jullie om het onderzoek in beweging te houden, en daarbij een balans te vinden tussen hoge verwachtingen en realisme over de mogelijkheden binnen de omstandigheden. Bedankt voor het delen van jullie kennis en wijsheid, en voor jullie aanhoudende betrokkenheid en vertrouwen. Ik ben blij dat ik de afgelopen jaren de kunst een beetje bij jullie heb mogen afkijken, en ik hoop dat ik dat in de toekomst mag blijven doen.

In de aanloop en beginfase van dit promotietraject zijn de steun en betrokkenheid van een aantal mensen onmisbaar geweest. Josien, dank voor de aanmoediging voor mijn plan om een onderzoeksvoorstel te schrijven en een promotiebeurs aan te vragen. De gesprekken die wij hier jaren geleden over gevoerd hebben waren doorslaggevend voor mijn vertrouwen in mijn onderzoeksplannen. Giseline, bedankt voor de fantastische begeleiding bij het aanvragen van de promotiebeurs en in de eerste fase van dit onderzoek. Ik heb veel van je geleerd, en ik blijf een bewonderaar van jouw werk.

Een bron van gezelligheid, leerzaam commentaar, eindeloze discussies en welkome afleiding waren (en zijn) mijn UvA-collega's en vrienden van de universiteit. In het bijzonder wil ik Thijs, Myra, Lieve, Michiel, Tara, Charlotte, Minke, Floris, Anna, Laila, Luisa en Christoph bedanken. En natuurlijk Laura en Fenna: wat was en is het fijn om met jullie eindeloos te praten over onderzoek, en vooral over een heleboel andere dingen.

Ook de collegialiteit en steun van mijn HvA-collega's waren belangrijk voor dit project. Floor, Joop, Hafid, Melissa, Mathieu, Angélique en Hoeby wil ik bedanken voor de fijne samenwerking, en voor het samen tot uitvoer brengen van heleboel mooie ideeën voor onderzoek en onderwijs. Ivo en Pao Lin, bedankt voor het vertrouwen, en voor het mogelijk maken om mijn onderwijswerkzaamheden zo veel mogelijk rondom mijn onderzoek te plannen.

In de vijf jaar waarin dit proefschrift tot stand kwam, stond het leven bepaald niet stil. Zonder de hulp en steun in vele vormen van mijn lieve (schoon-)familie en vrienden was het niet gelukt om een promotieonderzoek te combineren met een jong gezin. Papa, mama, Diny en Arnold: bedankt voor al jullie zorg en alles wat jullie doen. Bedankt voor de mooie cover, Jan-Willem. Marlien en Jasper, ik heb het getroffen met zulke fantastische vrienden. Dank voor het onvermoeibaar aanhoren en aanmoedigen, en natuurlijk voor het uitlenen van jullie huizen.

Sacha, dankjewel voor je eindeloze begrip, aanmoedigingen, wijze adviezen, verrassende inzichten, humor, en liefde. Wat heb ik ongelooflijk geluk met jou, Boris en Rowan!



The time, effort and energy people invest into looking good for work is not simply driven by vanity. Aesthetics have become increasingly important, affecting for instance job opportunities, salaries, status, and recognition. The ‘right’ aesthetics are often a condition for being hired and it is common for employers to set appearance-related standards for employees, particularly in the service and creative sectors. This aesthetization of work puts substantial demands on individuals in terms of time, effort, and mental strain. Moreover, it contributes to the exclusion of certain individuals and bodies. These far-reaching consequences raise questions about how, when, and by whom the importance of aesthetics for work and specific aesthetic norms in the workplace are reinforced.

In this dissertation, I look into how the regulation of workers’ aesthetics in the Dutch post-industrial labor market takes place. In four qualitative case studies, I show that aesthetic regulation is an ongoing process performed not only by employers but also by other labor market actors, that it often takes on implicit or concealed forms, and that it is a two-way process, as work aesthetics also regulate workers.

At different points in the process of finding and having a job appearances are made to matter. Sometimes in direct ways, but often through unclear and implicit forms of regulation. It is precisely this opacity and ambivalence surrounding the significance of aesthetics in work that results in significant yet underestimated consequences for the alienation of workers, for the structuring of inequalities and exclusions in the job market, and for society-wide aesthetization.

