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Fitting in and being unique: How online aesthetic advice from temporary work agencies legitimises exclusions

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the aesthetic advice posted by temporary employment agencies on their websites. These agencies organise a substantial part of the Dutch labour market and they are known to apply exclusionary practices in their strategies of recruitment and selection in order to meet employers' preferences. This article sheds light on (1) the content of the advice; (2) how it legitimises 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 and empty advice posted on websites may enforce exclusions in the temporary work labour market.

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Introduction

Temporary work agencies 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 organise a substantial part of the Dutch labour 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

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read by large audiences. In fact, many are primarily written for the purpose of attracting traffic to temp agencies' websites. A manager from one temp 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). In the Dutch labour market, temp 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 organisations 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, temp agencies profit from legitimising different forms of exclusions.

The present study acknowledges that giving aesthetic advice and legitimising aesthetic criteria is both practically and morally complex. A first, and practical, difficulty is that aesthetic norms are dependent upon context. Sectors and organisations 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; Vandenbroeck, 2016) and skin colour (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. Aesthetic advice is therefore potentially morally complicated as it can involve reproducing sexist, racist, ageist, and body-type related norm. Given these complexities, this study aims to clarify the following questions: (1) What is the content of the aesthetic advice posted on temp agencies' websites?; (2) How is the importance of aesthetics for finding work discussed and legitimised?; (3) In what ways does the advice serve the purposes of the temp agencies?

Online aesthetic advice from temp agencies is an interesting case for studying the questions at hand. Firstly, because these organisations are both intermediaries and gatekeepers, meaning that on the hand they are commercially invested in adhering to employers' (exclusionary) wishes while maintaining a brokering position catering to both employers and job seekers/employees. Many agencies have a special section on their website on ethics in which they explicitly state that they do not discriminate and that they promote equal chances. As intermediaries, they have an interesting position: their clients (i.e. employers) pay them to recruit and hire workers. Their business model hence requires of them to find and hire workers that fit what employers are looking for. Secondly, these generic online pieces of advice are interesting 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. Thirdly, these advice articles are interesting because they are evidently what people looking for aesthetic advice online will actually find. Because of their dominant position as brokers, the temp agencies diffuse standards – even beyond their own clients. Moreover, the advice is aimed at people who are precariously employed or unemployed and hence circumstantially compelled to work on finding employment. Finally, given that recruitment and hiring increasingly takes place online – through platforms such as LinkedIn, hiring webpages and through online personality tests – temp agencies' websites are an interesting location for studying aesthetic advice for job seekers. These websites can be regarded as expressions of how the relevance of aesthetics in (temporary) work is discussed. Analysing them offers a way to gain insight into the values and norms within the temporary work sector (Pauwels, 2005, p. 609). It can be argued that the online information can even reinforce offline practices and beliefs regarding the role of aesthetics in job application procedures (Pauwels, 2005, p. 605).

This study is based on an in-depth content analysis of aesthetic advice articles found on thirteen websites of temp agencies, selected from a larger corpus of online advice articles from temp agencies based on considerations of data richness and representativeness of the temp agency sector (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Extensive reading of the material shows that the advice is strikingly empty and meaningless. As the advice not helpful for those job seekers actually looking for aesthetic advice, this article 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 legitimised and how the paradoxical advice of fitting in while being authentic promotes (self-) exclusions. It concludes that the seemingly 'neutral' empty advice posted on websites for marketing reasons has the potential to enforce exclusions in the temp agency labour market, thus serving the temp agencies' commercial interest.

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 aestheticised 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 server'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; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020).

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 organisations. 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, pp. 134–140). 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 flipflops and hoodies to work, whereas the unemployed might be penalised 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. Aesthetic 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 flipflops illustrates: not everyone is able to meet the standard, and not everyone is equally able to use their self-presentation to their advantage. This is partly because some things are fixed, such as face, height, size, skin colour, hair, age, while being important for esteem and status (Van Campen & Versantvoort, 2014; Vandenbroeck, 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 labour opportunities, which temp agencies on their websites claim to find important. Rather than an asset to be employed by anyone (cf. 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 temp agencies in their aesthetic advice to job seekers.

Contradictory advice on job finding

Style, grooming, demeanour and dress are 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 (see 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 organisation in order to be hired. This ‘fit’ is classed, raced and gendered, and is expressed through aesthetics and styles of self-presentation. Studies on job application procedures confirm that aesthetic performances matter for finding work *in general*. This is partly due to physical beauty, but importantly also to bodily displays of class. In the elite organisations Rivera (2012) studied, employers expressed a preference for candidates who expressed similar classed lifestyle and preferences (Ingram & Allen, 2019). But also for entry-level jobs showing cultural fit is important (Moss & Tilly, 1996).

Accordingly, it might be expected that advice on job finding centres on the message that creating a ‘match’ with the organisation is key. However, in a post-industrial service economy, the right kind of self-presentation does not allow for a standardised 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 labour 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, 2019) 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 & Jacobssen, 2004, p. 8), not only by employers, but also by government and social services and educational institutions. Key to this ‘personal marketability’ (Vallas & Cummins, 2015) is demonstrating attitudes such as adaptability and flexibility, and about showing potential (see also: Handley, 2018, p. 242). 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 organisation 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 temp agencies, this study further explores this tension and its

implications for inequality. Innovatively, this study integrates the temp agencies' commercial logic of attracting visitors to their websites into the analysis of aesthetic advice for work.

Case: 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 organise a relatively large proportion of work in the labour market. The Dutch labour market as a whole is quite deregulated, with one in three workers not having a steady work contract (Dekker, 2017, p. 69). The amount and percentage of workers on a temp agency contract have risen steadily over the past decades, to 4% in 2016 (Webbink, 2017) – the highest number in the EU, with exception of Slovenia.

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 staffing for mostly low-skilled work (manufacturing, cleaning, transport) there are also highly specialised departments and full agencies focusing on specialised workers (technical and medical staff, nurses, managers) (Tijdens et al., 2006).

More than 500 temp agencies are officially registered with the sector organisation ABU ('Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen', which can be translated as 'General Federation of Temporary Employment Agencies'). However, the five 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 audience, with establishments in commercial centres in cities and towns 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 relevant results – not only from different types of employment agencies such as temporary work agencies, recruitment agencies, and job boards, but also from government agencies, style advisors, management websites, newspapers, and magazines. Logically, only the advice articles by temp agencies were selected for the first

round of analysis. However, it is interesting to note that even a general online search for aesthetic advice leads to employment agencies' websites; this illustrates that what is analysed here is actually what people find when they are looking for aesthetic advice for work. In order to ensure that the case selection is relevant, I extended my search method. Using the member overviews of ABU ('Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen') – the sector organisation for temporary work agencies in the Netherlands – I additionally looked for the aesthetic advice on the websites of the twenty largest temp agencies in the country.

A preliminary exploration and open coding of a set of 49 advice texts from employment agencies and job boards led 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 specifying my open research question. With a theoretical focus on the tension between self-responsabilisation and the importance of aesthetics for inequality, I decided to focus on temp work agencies and to narrow down the number of cases to allow for an in-depth analysis. A smaller number of interesting cases allowed for repeatedly revisiting 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. In practice, this meant that after exploring the full set of websites, I selected the cases that are most informative in the sense that the advice was most elaborate (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 229–233). The organisations 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 temp agencies (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 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 are present in the sample. The rationale for this combined strategy was acquiring both richness of data while ensuring a certain degree of representativeness. As such, thirteen relevant cases were selected for in-depth analysis. An overview over the selected cases can be found in the Appendix. The data collection took place between March and June 2020.

The online context is important to take into consideration when analysing the online advice (Pauwels, 2005). I have therefore not only looked into the textual elements, but 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 familiarisation 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 and legitimations for the relevance of aesthetics, dealing with structural inequalities, 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* organisations post them on their websites, I have contacted the organisations offering the advice analysed in this article. Four organisations 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 temp workers want to reach as many (relevant) job seekers as possible, the number of unique visitors to the temp agency's website is a key 'selling point' for temp agencies.

The emptiness of the aesthetic advice

The aesthetic advice analysed here is posted on websites of temporary work agencies – often large, well-known organisations. 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 of an author. The absence of authors makes it unclear whose views or opinions are expressed. 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 organisations. For instance Randstad, the Netherlands-based and largest temp work agency world-wide, has prominently placed ‘8 tips for preparing for a job interview’ on their website, one of which is ‘choose the right clothes’. Placing aesthetic advice under such general advice normalises the labour going into finding the right clothes and style for a job interview. Additionally, temp agencies sometimes post aesthetic advice on their section with current blogs. 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 temp agencies I interviewed. This section briefly describes the style and form of the advice pages found on websites of temp agencies.

Despite temp agencies’ pervading promise to help job seekers create the ‘perfect’ look, the advice is ambiguous, if not absent. The content of the advice under investigation here is strikingly not concrete or practical. 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 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 organisation (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;
- Making a fresh presence

(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 organisation 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 outright emptiness of the advice makes 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 certain aesthetic aspects and details without actually informing readers on how to get them right. Consequently, rather than helping job seekers increase their chances of finding a job, the empty advice serves as a reinforcement of the importance of aesthetics for finding 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. In all other websites, the purpose of the pictures is not directly clear. I suggest that the vague use of images (with the exception of YC) 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: all people displayed in the pictures are white, slim, and young and conform to gendered norms. As such, the visual material posted by the temp agencies reproduces hegemonic norms of what a professional looks like. Reproducing these norms and the discourse on the importance of aesthetics for finding work can 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. The importance of aesthetics 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 the reader to tell them how to assemble the 'perfect' outfit:

Yess! You get to go on an interview! Super! Of course you have to prepare for the job interview, and your outfit is equally important for leaving behind 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 emphasised – it is equally 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 leave behind a great impression. The tone is enthusiastic and extremely informal and the choice of words suggests that the temp agency is there to help the job seeker. They know just 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 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, temp agencies' business case 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 'rising [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 mentioning of social inequalities related to appearances. None of the texts discuss how certain aesthetics may impede employment chances, for instance due to racism, ageism, body shape or size, 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 labour market with systemic exclusions and inequalities is bound to be paradoxical. Tempo Team – one of the major temp work agencies in the country – tells its readers that they should not wear hats to 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 labour 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 temp 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 temp agencies, as it encourages potential candidates to adapt their aesthetic performance in order to appeal to employers, while legitimising 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 emphasises two contradicting points: (1) make sure your self-presentation matches the style of the organisation and (2)

be yourself and express individuality, comfort and confidence. These imperatives have of course been identified and analysed (Adkins & Lury, 1999; De Keere, 2014; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Nevertheless, within the context of professional aesthetic advice they are an interesting starting point to scrutinise the legitimisation 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 organisation has its own dresscode 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 behind 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 raced, aged, gendered, classed, etc., bodies. 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(n e-mail) conversation might indeed be informative for ‘insiders,’ but for those lacking context-specific cultural capital it is not informative at all. By emphasising the supposed simplicity and neutrality of reading cultural codes, the advice pages legitimise the privileges of cultural capital. The advice normalises and essentialises 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 achieve fit 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 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 organisation 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 someone unhappy. This type of advice not only legitimises exclusion of those who do not fit in aesthetically but also promotes self-elimination of those who do not immediately feel at ease.

Attracting the ‘right’ candidates and rejecting the ‘wrong’ ones is one of the core tasks of temp agencies. In line with Parkin’s (1974) conceptualisation 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. The discourse in which the importance of ‘aesthetic fit’ is explained and emphasised, 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 temp agencies, as this discourse legitimises 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 organisations advice to ‘overdress,’ i.e. dress a bit too formally when in doubt, they also emphasise 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 finds that classic formal attire such as a tie and suit do not fit the workplace of today. Personal branding is increasingly important on the labour market and part of this is wearing clothes that bring your personality to the front. (Driessen)

In aestheticised, 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 informalisation 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 – they also need to find the right form of self-presentation to express their personality.

Perhaps somewhat contradictory, 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 front. Readers are therefore discouraged to divert from their own personal style, because that would mean that they would hide or cover up their personality. 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. Presto, you’re in the spotlight. (Tempo Team)

A normalising 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 temp agencies convey the seemingly neutral message that looks should not distract and should therefore not stand out. This repertoire offers a legitimization for exclusions: a candidate is not rejected because of her piercings, but because her qualities did not come across in the interview due to her distracting appearance.

The advice encourages readers to leave out all decoration in order to show what is under the surface. However, as Miller (2010) aptly states: if you peel off all layers and outside decorations, there is absolutely nothing left. In contrast to the idea that self-presentation *makes* the person into what s/he thinks s/he is, the advice assumes that self-presentation *represent* the subject. The self, here, is what is found inside and accessories such as piercings, jewellery and make-up are seen external frivolities that conceal or disguise the inner ‘true’ self. This notion of subjectivity assumes a ‘natural self’ that exists outside of culture (see also Woodward (2007, pp. 34–48). 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’. Moreover, it calls upon job seekers’ sense of

entitlement for presenting themselves, promoting self-exclusion among the less entitled.

The analysis illustrates a paradox in the aesthetic advice from temp agencies. The contradictory main dogma's are fitting in and expressing authenticity and uniqueness. That is, job seekers should both work on their self-presentation in order to show they fit within the organisation, yet, they should also express personality, authenticity and uniqueness. Both these dogma's 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, pp. 1–19).

Conclusions

This article looks into the aesthetic advice posted by employment agencies on their websites and explores (1) the content of the advice; (2) how it legitimises the importance of aesthetics for finding work; and (3) how the advice serves the purposes of the temp agencies. Given the absence of actual advice, it appears that the advice is not primarily intended to serve readers and job seekers. Rather, agencies attempt to attract traffic to their websites by posting such advice. By attracting visitors, 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 emptiness of the aesthetic advice itself has the performative potential to legitimise 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 dogma's 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 legitimises exclusions and encourages self-exclusion.

The advice emphasises 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 raced) character of fit. Rather than problematising the tendency of recruiters to select applicants who resemble them, the

advice urges job seekers to make sure they resemble the people at the organisation they are applying to. Accordingly, the advice legitimises the exclusion of those that do not (and perhaps are not able to) fit in, and legitimises 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 normalised 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.

It appears that the purpose of the advice is not so much helping job seekers. The advice is not intended to clarify or explain how self-presentation matters in finding work. Rather, 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 is, attracting visitors, i.e. potential job candidates to the website. This reminds us of Adkins’ (2008, pp. 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 temp agency.

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Appendix: Data sources

Organisation	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