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De Keere, K.; Sarpila, Outi; Vonk, L.

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# Looking Right for the Job: Appearances, Unequal Chances, and Gatekeeping in the Labor Market

Kobe De Keere, Outi Sarpila, and Laura Vonk

## 1 Introduction

Aesthetic requirements have become a norm in contemporary labor markets. As discussed in previous chapters of this handbook, beauty (or attractiveness), in particular, is often perceived as a resource that enhances employability (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Nickson & Warhurst, this volume). However, this is, as research shows, not always the case. At least part of the research tradition that views beauty as a quantitatively measurable attribute demonstrates that beauty does not always confer financial or labor market advantages, especially for women (Kukkonen et al., 2024; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; see also Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). In other words, these studies suggest that employers do not necessarily value or prioritize beauty uniformly but may even 'penalize' employees for being good looking. Instead, qualitative sociological research on beauty emphasizes that beauty is not only valuated but also evaluated differently in various labor market contexts because evaluation criteria and practices are inevitably situationally embedded (Elias et al., 2017; Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014). This leads us to consider that perhaps employers are not always most drawn to candidates that merely 'look good.' Perhaps it is more, or at least equally, about finding an employee who looks 'right' for the job.

More recent sociological study on appearance, work, and occupations has indeed drawn some attention to the distinction between 'looking good' and 'looking right' and shown that being 'presentable' and 'doing it right' for a job does not necessarily equate physical attractiveness or beauty (Vonk, 2021; Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Sarpila et al., 2024; cf. Marquis et al., 2024). In fact, the original literature on aesthetic labor also stems from the idea of 'looking right.' However, subsequent literature has primarily focused on exploring the significance of beauty in the workplace. As Nickson et al. (2003, p. 190) suggest, even in the retail and hospitality sectors, 'it is important to note that all organizations have an aesthetic appeal, but the form of aesthetic being offered may vary from one type of service organization to another.' This does not mean that appearance is less relevant as a source of inequalities at work. However, it prompts us to consider whether conceptualizing appearance only through looking 'good'—instead of looking right for a situation, purpose, or job—makes us partly blind to how looks inform career success. When referring to

K. De Keere (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: k.dekeere@uva.nl

O. Sarpila
University of Turku, Turku, Finland
e-mail: outi.sarpila@utu.fi

L. Vonk
Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, The Hague, The Netherlands
e-mail: l.vonk@wrr.nl

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'looking good,' we understand it is mainly defined by beauty and attractiveness, although we know that it is not a universal definition of looking 'good' (for discussion, see Nickson & Warhurst, this volume). In this chapter, we contrast this notion of 'looking good' to the concept of 'looking right.'

The significance of appearance and looking right in the workplace pivots our attention to the importance of the process of evaluating and selecting job candidates. Access to occupational positions is often guarded by specialized professionals, also called gatekeepers. These gatekeepers, such as recruiters, hiring managers, and personnel advisors, are tied to sector and organization-specific demands and conditions when making hiring decisions. Consequently, larger structures of inequality are rarely shaped top-down but more often rest on evaluative processes such as norm-setting, signaling, categorization, comparing, and legitimatizing (Lamont et al., 2014). Looking closely at the way appearances are being evaluated and sometimes used as a signaling tool for being the right (looking) person for the job allows us to unpack how labor market inequalities in terms of class, gender, race, and age are not always the result of personal biases or universal preferences, but emerge out of context-specific practices, criteria, and logics.

The importance of looking professionally 'right' instead of just 'good' guides us to essential questions. How is looking 'right' for a job assessed in labor markets? How do gatekeepers make decisions on appearances, and how do they justify these? How is this related to looking 'good' and, more generally, to aesthetic concerns about appearance and grooming? Moreover, to what extent do gatekeepers contribute to regulating looking 'right' in the labor market? As we have learned in other sections of this handbook, several reasons have been provided by economists and (social) psychologists for why employers might value looking 'good' in hiring: because it indicates unobserved qualities that the employers value, because beauty itself is appreciated for enhancing productivity, or simply because employers prefer to reward good looks (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Wolbring, this volume). However, to offer a framework to tackle the questions concerning looking right, we review previous work on 'aesthetics at work' and integrate this into the sociology of valuation and evaluation (SVE), (critical) management and organizational studies, and cultural sociology. In terms of looking 'right,' rather than looking 'good,' these processes and practices involve three crucial aspects we further delve into in the first part of our chapter: (1) the notion of 'fit' within the labor market, (2) the logic of gatekeeping practices, and (3) complexity of unspoken aesthetic norms. The second part of the chapter shifts the focus to the pre-entry phase, which is examined through the analysis of an empirical case: aesthetic advice given by staffing agencies on their websites. We conclude the chapter by discussing how the concept of looking 'right' could be more effectively incorporated into future research.

## 2 The Importance of Looking 'Right' in Hiring

### 2.1 Looking 'Right' and Fitting In

The adage that employers are looking for 'the best person for the job' contains both a lie and a truth. Concerning the former, it perpetuates the—often disproven—belief that the labor market operates based on meritocratic (and rational) logic. However, it speaks the truth about the peg-in-hole reality of labor market selection. It is more often about fitting in than simply being the best. However, this fitting in can be interpreted in multiple ways. For the sake of an overview, we distinguish three main approaches. First, the personnel psychology and management studies that focus on people-organization fit; second the critical organization studies on homophily, the glass slipper, or the ideal worker; and third cultural sociological research on cultural matching. What we perceive as fitting in and the significance of appearances can be interpreted differently depending on the perspective.

The first approach can be found in personnel psychology and management studies focusing on

people-organization fit. This perspective assumes that a better alignment between the individual worker and the job or working environment boosts productivity, motivation, and job satisfaction (for review, see Kristof, 1996). Therefore, an individual's personality, values, and goals become integral to managers' assessment processes, determining whether an employee or candidate can truly enhance organizational output and success.

This view on labor market fit aims not only at understanding the relationship between workers and organizations but also at improving it (O'Reilly et al., 1991), particularly by developing better predictive measures and aligning with a human capital approach to soft currencies (see Becker, 1964). Here, the fit is conceptualized as primarily a technical problem on an individual and organizational level that can be solved by improving HR policies. Consequently, this literature largely ignores that personalities or value preferences are not innate but rooted in the social background characteristics of people and that employees not only have minds but also bodies and appearances that are perceived, judged, and even policed by employers. So, while it contributes to measuring the importance of fit, it does not allow us to unpack how appearance and inequalities are intertwined in the labor market.

Critical organization studies is a second strand of research that examines fit by mobilizing concepts such as homophily, the glass slipper, or the ideal worker. Here, the search for fit is not conceptualized as something managers need to achieve but rather as an (often unconscious and even unwanted) outcome of individuals' tendency toward homophily. Due to in-group biases (Brewer, 1979) and social identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), people tend to prefer those similar to themselves in terms of, for instance, race or gender, resulting in homogeneity (Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Rivera & Owens, 2021). While this research tradition has been instrumental in uncovering inequalities in terms of educational background, gender, and race, it has generally ignored the bodily dimension of employment and selection.

In contrast, Karen Ashcraft's (2013) theoretical notion of the 'glass slipper,'[1] which shares with the homophily approach a critical focus on similarities and does not ignore the importance of looks, appearances, and bodies. According to her, occupational groups and employment sectors are associated with specific traits and features, both physically and symbolically, that are being projected on occupational members. This leads to—often class-based—social closure and inequalities because occupational groups seek exclusivity to protect ownership over their expertise, resources, and status (Abbott, 1981). One of the consequences of this is the creation of a 'prototypical practitioner,' somebody who not only has the necessary skills and credentials but also has the right embodied social identity and even looks the part. Hence, it is not about just looking good but having the right bodily fit.

Feminist organizational scholar Joan Acker (2001, 2006) offers a similar critical perspective on labor market fit with her concept of the 'ideal worker.' However, she adds a deeper structural analysis by examining how gender, race, and class intersect in shaping organizational dynamics. Acker challenges the preconception that organizations are neutral entities and workers can be disembodied. Instead, we need to acknowledge that there are many implicit assumptions underlying how employers select and reward employees. First and foremost, the abstract worker has 'no body and thus no gender' (2001, p. 395). Under the guise of neutrality, however, the ideal worker is a collection of traits, capabilities, and bodily dispositions that employers favor. In fact, by presenting the ideal worker as 'unencumbered' and un-bodied, gendered, classed, and racial inequalities are not ignored but instead perpetuated. Concerning appearance, while employers may not verbalize a preference for a particular look or style, this does not negate the existence of implicit yet performative ideas about what the ideal worker is supposed to look like. This perspective has proven instrumental in uncovering

[1] Cinderella is a metaphor referring to a fairytale where the glass slipper fits only a certain person but not others. In the story, it fits Cinderella but not her 'ugly' stepsisters.

gender-based inequalities within organizations and the broader labor market.

A third way to conceptualize fit in the labor market, and closely related to the previous one, is informed by Bourdieu's (1984) proposition that culture is a symbolic resource people rely on to defend and improve their social positions. This approach interprets a potential fit between employer and employee as a 'cultural match' achieved through mobilizing 'cultural capital.' It is well established that leisure time activities, taste preferences, and other biographical signals function as status markers that reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984). It is, therefore, unsurprising that these also play a crucial role in job selection procedures (De Keere, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Rivera, 2016). According to this perspective, these cultural signals act as class markers, allowing hiring managers or employers to recognize themselves (or their organization) in the candidates, thus arriving at a habitus-induced match (Rivera, 2016). At the same time, it is surprising how relatively little attention research has paid to appearance as a cultural class signal.

The ethnographic research of Lauren Rivera (2016), however, on 'cultural matching' in top-tier corporate firms in the United States, did consider appearances. Besides showing how matching occurs through constructing class-based narratives on the candidates, she also found that matching goes beyond merely signaling the right taste but also includes performing a certain aestheticized self. The most popular candidates eventually displayed a *polished* look (2016, p. 94), which entails dressing formally and maintaining a well-groomed appearance. Following this and drawing on interviews with employees at a major accounting firm in the UK, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019) confirmed this corporate demand for a polished style. However, in talking to managers in the television industry, they observed a distinct preference for a different form of personal appearance, termed *studied informality* (2019, p. 137), characterized by a casual wardrobe and relaxed bodily demeanor.

This difference between 'studied informality' and 'polish' shows that the value of the soft currency of appearances is highly situational. Clothing, as Friedman and Laurison point out (2019, pp. 134–144), might serve as seemingly harmless symbols. Yet, they play a powerful role in recognizing the other as similar and arriving at trust, appreciation, and connection among colleagues. In professions where evaluating merit proves challenging, such as the creative sectors, cultural capital, expressed by choice of clothing, comes with even more substantial benefits, playing a crucial role in assimilating, maintaining one's position, and advancing professionally (Friedman & Laurison, 2019, p. 202). So, while appearances play an overall role in class reproduction, what is eventually valued is job, sector, and industry specific. Hence, knowing how to look 'right,' more than how to look 'good,' plays a vital role in achieving a cultural match and, subsequently, getting ahead in the labor market.

## 2.2 The Logic of Gatekeeping Practices: Evaluating the Right Look

When faced with the challenging task of assessing people, gatekeepers rely on different strategies such as evaluative storytelling, comparison, or typecasting (e.g., Stevens, 2009; Hamann & Beljean, 2021) while drawing on local knowledge and applying field-specific and tacit norms (Posselt, 2016; Darr & Mears, 2017). First and foremost, the gatekeepers engage in *recognition work* (Darr & Mears, 2017; De Keere, 2022). To do so, gatekeepers not only assess what candidates write in their CVs or motivation letters or share during job interviews but also how they look. When looking for new employees, employers often begin with a preconceived type or ideal worker, as Acker called it, and then assess to what extent candidates match this predefined type. It is, for example, no coincidence that there are very few CEOs with (light) blond hair, as they align less with the cultural stereotype (of blond as less intelligent) and thus are not cast as a strong corporate leader (Takeda et al., 2005). This can come down

to reading into the smallest details. As Pajunen (2021) demonstrates, even changing glasses for a job interview influences the chances of being liked and getting hired. Consequently, people's physical attributes, often associated with social origins, such as ethnic background, skin color, body type, or class, are read as markers of suitability (Ndobo et al., 2018).

For employee gatekeepers, candidates' appearances are, semiotically speaking, moving targets that need to be evaluated on multiple levels simultaneously while holding multiple meanings (Vonk & De Keere, 2025). First, research shows that a physical feature deemed highly attractive for one job can be completely disregarded for another. The look of fashion models serves as a classic example here. The beauty standards for high-fashion models certainly do not apply across the entire sector. While edginess and looking 'unusual' are highly appreciated among avant-garde designers, models for the mainstream retail market must look recognizable and 'natural' (Mears, 2011). Similar variations in aesthetic criteria can be found on the broader job market. Within the same organization, recruiters view tattoos or foreign accents as undesirable for front-stage jobs but do not consider them relevant for back-stage jobs (Timming, 2015). Ultimately, it comes down to the gatekeeper recognizing the right look depending on the task or job.

In this respect, gatekeepers always account for multiple parameters simultaneously. They must evaluate suitability within the organization (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020), find a fit with the brand (Pettinger, 2014), and please customers (Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Walters, 2018; Boyle & De Keere, 2019). Gatekeepers in the service sector especially carefully look for workers who embody several of these demands at once, which leads to intricate yet strong forms of exclusion. In a Western context, they often aim to cater to their more wealthy, white, middle-class customers by choosing white, thin, young employees who already emulate a middle-class habitus (Boyle & De Keere, 2019). At the same time, they might exoticize their staff by selecting lighter-skinned racial others in an attempt to signal progressiveness. As Kyla Walters (2018) demonstrated, clothing stores sometimes seem to prefer candidates who look racially ambiguous as a cautious way to diversify their brand. So, there is undoubtedly a peg-in-hole logic, yet there are always several possible fits as there are always multiple requirements that need to be met.

On top of this, bodily features also enter the evaluation process because they are perceived as signals for other qualities (Vonk & De Keere, 2025). Population survey research shows that certain body types are associated with specific occupational stereotypes and class positions, which is in line with the idea of class slipper. For example, while a businessman is more often viewed as corpulent, an artist is seen as skinnier, and a manual worker as muscular (Vandebroeck, 2016). Similar examples can also be found in other quantitative studies, where it has been shown that attractiveness does not correlate with stereotypical perceptions of men in working-class occupations (Sarpila et al., 2024), does not necessarily help women get hired in specific fields (Kukkonen et al., 2024), or decreases the likelihood of lower-status individuals being invited to job interviews in general (Marquis et al., 2024). Therefore, gatekeepers can read bodies as fitting more or less into occupational prototypes.

However, appearances are also interpreted as specific indicators of competencies or capacities. Tso's study (2024) of businessmen culture, for instance, showed how good grooming is viewed in the Japanese corporate world as a sign of masculinity and professionalism. Grooming is crucial for demonstrating power and hierarchy, especially when confronted with signs of aging, such as balding or changes in body type. In China, on the other hand, as Ren (2024) shows based on interviews with 73 recruiters, professionalism is strongly associated with an athletic demeanor. A candidate with a fit body type is more easily read as someone with self-discipline and ambition. Similarly, Huzell and Larsson (2012) argue that when recruiters in Sweden seek good-looking candidates, they assess aesthetic criteria and athletic attributes. Based on a survey of HR managers, they found that employers prefer athletic-looking candidates because this signals

health and stamina, reducing the likelihood of absence or rehabilitation due to sickness. Furthermore, soft skills, which are cognitive and thus non-physical capacities, can also be encoded in bodily features. For example, the study on racial discrimination by Moss and Tilly (2001) powerfully demonstrated how employers attribute certain skills, abilities, and attitudes to skin tone. White-skinned candidates in the United States were seen as more communicative and better at solving problems than their Black counterparts.

In sum, what constitutes this right aesthetic fit depends on organizational demands, job type, sector standards, occupational stereotypes, and country norms, which inform gatekeepers' evaluation. Instead of assuming universal standards of beauty, we need to be attentive to how definitions and criteria of what is deemed a suitable look are heavily situated and depend on context. This makes job selection for both parties involved an intricate and ambiguous process, the outcome of which is often unclear. Because of this, gatekeeping recognition work often challenges meritocratic norms and leads to issues of discrimination and exclusion. It is, therefore, unsurprising that aesthetic norms and criteria on appearance are rarely explicit but hidden and unspoken.

## 2.3 Unspoken Norms of Appearance

While it falls within the duty of gatekeepers to select the right person for the right job, the norms in which this ideal type is couched are almost always implicit. Even in the case of explicit beauty work such as fashion modeling, finding the right 'look' remains elusive, intuitive, and implicit (Mears, 2011). It is not about simply going over a list of criteria for acceptable visual features. The lack of explicit norms can only be partially attributed to the inherent nature of assessing visual cues requiring practical, instead of declarative, knowledge (De Keere, 2022; Kuipers et al., 2022). The legitimacy problem is another critical reason why career gatekeepers rarely explicitly express or list their specific appearance standards.

In most employment sectors, the worth of workers is not expected to be formally determined by their appearances. The prevailing belief in the—questionable (Young, 1958)—ideology of meritocracy as the guiding principle of the labor market (Dobbin, 2009) stands in stark contrast to looks entering as selection criteria for career success. Consequently, aesthetic norms are morally complex for labor market intermediaries and gatekeepers, as they entail uncertainty regarding the justifiability of accepting or rejecting candidates based on their looks (Vonk & De Keere, 2025; Vonk, 2024). While some aspects of people's appearances can be understood as malleable and can thus be worked upon and achieved, such as clothing, hygiene, or haircut, other features, such as skin tone, voice timbre, or body type, are seen as ascribed and thus out of the 'jurisdiction' of gatekeepers. This distinction—although ambiguous—between achieved and ascribed means that employment chances depend on aspects of the self that can only be partly manipulated and on aesthetic hierarchies based on unequal power relations (Bordo, 2003; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). Not everyone is able to meet the standard, and not everyone is equally able to use their self-presentation to their advantage (Sarpila et al., 2020). Norms on appearance can thus be seen as illegitimate and pushed under the surface, nonetheless powerful. This leads to moral unease as gatekeepers must make decisions based on acceptable criteria, which requires legitimizing the ambiguous and flawed criteria they employ (De Keere, 2022, 2025).

On top of that, due to societal shifts, these criteria can change over time. Walters' (2018) research on aesthetic labor in the retail industry demonstrates how the definition of employees' 'right look' is an ongoing process, making standards very elusive. She shows how Black female workers in clothing stores suddenly gained permission to wear their hair in, for instance, small braids, a style that had previously been deemed as 'wrong' or unacceptable. Because the top management wanted to start communicating the right kind of 'employee diversity,'

typically, black-associated hairstyles became part of the acceptable appearance. However, situations can also end differently. Dahlin's (2013) study on Danish parking attendants, on the other hand, indicates that employers sometimes wanted to avoid hiring workers who looked 'too much like a parking attendant.' This involved the avoidance of stereotypical class indicators, such as tattoos. On the other hand, the ambiguous-looking 'right' policy means that, for example, hiring a person from an ethnic minority who embodies the right ethnic diversity but could still be denied wearing religious symbols as part of their working uniform. Hence, the right look is always convoluted as it inevitably entails both aesthetical and ethical concerns.

The fact that norms on appearances are elusive and hidden is a challenge not only for gatekeepers but for job seekers and workers as well. How to conform to an ideal or try on the glass slipper if that ideal or slipper is (at least) partly hidden and sometimes even changing? As pointed out earlier, achieving the right look is not as easy as simply putting on a well-ironed suit. It requires localized and adaptive knowledge of sector-specific norms and a feel for nuances in cultural codes and standards (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). As shown, for example, by Van den Berg and Arts (2019), tech workers can freely wear hoodies or flip-flops to work. In contrast, others unemployed might face repercussions, even from social services, for wearing the exact same attire to a job interview.

Literature has shown how employees comply with aesthetic norms *on the job* (e.g., Boyle & De Keere, 2019; Mears, 2014; Misra & Walters, 2022) and how co-workers can be involved in upholding these through judgment, peer pressure, and gossip (Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Vonk, 2021). However, for (new) job seekers, it is more of a challenge to grasp what these aesthetic norms entail and are dependent on external advice on how to 'brand themselves' and increase their 'employability' (Wee & Brooks, 2010) through looking right. While earlier studies have shown that professional advice can have regulative power over individuals in shaping their positions toward work (De Keere, 2014; van den Berg, 2019), so far, little work has been done on how aesthetic advice is diffused and shared with workers *pre-entry* employment (important exceptions are van den Berg and Vonk 2020; Vonk, 2024).

## 3 Pre-Entry Regulation of Looking 'Right': A Case Study

To illustrate how labor market intermediaries, such as gatekeepers, are involved in determining 'looking right,' we investigate how they diffuse appearance standards. We depend on data from a larger research project that delineated the various kinds of aesthetic guidance provided to job seekers by staffing agencies in the Netherlands (see Vonk, 2024). This includes a content analysis of the online communication of 20 of the largest staffing agencies in the Netherlands. After an initial open coding of 49 relevant individual web pages, where essential themes and contradictions in the advice were identified, 13 advice articles were selected for a more in-depth study. This is the data we rely on to illustrate the cultural contradiction in 'looking right' for a job.

### 3.1 Fitting In

Reading the online advice, you learn as a job seeker that a job interview is primarily intended to assess whether you could fit in. This means resembling the people who are already employed, making the candidate immediately look like a colleague:

> "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; 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)

While the advice is mainly directed at clothing, 'the image of the organization' certainly also pertains to workers' bodies, which are racialized, aged, gendered, classed, and so on. Similar to what Acker (2001) argued, based on the notion of the ideal worker, organizations often enforce implicit norms by silencing the embodied reality of being an employee (or job candidate).

Continuing on this emphasis on 'fitting in,' the advice on the We Talent webpages goes further in explaining how to discover what these 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' (We Talent).

However, for 'intuition' and 'tone of emails' to be informative for how to look, situationally specific cultural knowledge is expected. Hence, looking right comes down to cultural matching, requiring the right cultural capital (Rivera, 2016; Friedman & Laurison, 2019). A conversation with a hiring manager (orally or by email) might be helpful for 'insiders,' but for those lacking context-specific cultural knowledge, it loses its informative value. By presenting this advice as simple and neutral, these webpages are legitimizing the privileges of cultural capital. It simultaneously normalizes the importance of looking right while presenting aesthetic fit as achievable. Consequently, by saying that one has to fit the contextual norms while not verbalizing what these norms are, exclusionary practices are allowed to seep in without the possibility of being challenged. Eventually, when a job seeker does not manage to fit in aesthetically, these same webpages suggest self-exclusion*:* 'When you feel that you have to divert too much from your personal style in order to meet expectations, you should ask yourself if this is really the right place for you' (We Talent).

The data contained many similar passages on other web pages that express the idea that adapting your appearance too much is generally a bad idea because having to change your personal style on a daily basis would eventually make you chronically unhappy. It legitimizes the exclusion of those who do not fit in aesthetically and promotes self-elimination of those who do not immediately feel that they have 'the right look.'

Attracting the 'right' candidates and rejecting the 'wrong' ones is one of the core tasks of staffing agencies. In line with Ashcraft's (2013) glass slipper idea, the agencies' standards on looks justify exclusions, thus restricting access to certain occupations. Essentially, only those who can play the part, by how they dress and look, will enter the pool of candidates, contributing to social closure around an occupational group, which eventually translates into unequal labor market opportunities.

### 3.2 Be Your Informal Self

A second common piece of advice that staffing agencies champion is that each candidate should definitely express their authenticity and individuality through their appearance, clothing, and presentation style. Most agencies advise that, although overdressing is a safe option, you do run the risk of not looking authentic and misaligning with the 'vibe' of the workplace:

> 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)

By emphasizing the importance of informality at work, instead of offering clear advice, these online communications actually complicate the matter for job seekers trying to find out what to wear. We read simultaneously that overdressing is safe while at the same time being told that one should feel comfortable and at ease. As staffing agency Driessen explains on their webpage, formal attire will always be too generic to express yourself truly. Consequently, job candidates should not only put in the effort to fit in but should also find the right type of self-presentation (through, for example, clothing) to express their authentic personality.

According to this advice, showing your true self is not merely about looks but a way of displaying one's talents and complete personality.

Appearances matter when bringing these to the fore. Job seekers are thus discouraged from deviating too much from their 'natural' and personal style because it would entail covering up an essential part of their personality. Hence, showing one's true colors is good for both parties involved: job seeker and gatekeepers (see also De Keere, 2014).

### 3.3 Conformist Authenticity

As a result of having to fit in while being their true self, job seekers are forced to curate their style of self-presentation carefully. Tempo-Team, for example, tells their 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)

Appearances should not distract by standing out, as it would mean that the glass slipper would not fit, yet at the same time, one needs to be recognizable and not too generic. Again, rather than formulating clear norms, which could be explicitly exclusionary, the agencies offer the ostensibly neutral message that looks should not distract and should, therefore, not stand out. However, these 'neutral' messages offer instead a legitimation for exclusions: a candidate is not rejected due to having piercings but because her true self did not come across as her appearance distracted from them. In order to express their authentic yet fitting self, job seekers should not work too hard on modifying their looks yet be willing to leave out what might be misinterpreted.

In sum, while these staffing agencies present their aesthetic advice in a frivolous and casual way, it can leave the job seeker more confused than informed. Navigating the paradox between fitting in and being oneself demands field-specific knowledge and cultural capital. Consequently, not making any norms explicit leads to silent exclusion and self-exclusion. Moreover, being rejected based on one's appearance can be morally repackaged as an argument about personality mismatch and not finding one's true self (De Keere, 2023, 2024). So, 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 facilitates occupational closure, cultural matching, and discrimination based on an (unspoken) template of the ideal worker. Thus, the logic of inequality can potentially be quite different from traditional appearance-based discrimination that has been mostly related to group memberships. In other words, looking 'right' is not just about who appears to belong to a specific gender, ethnic group, or age group but rather about demonstrating or failing to demonstrate cultural knowledge in the eyes of gatekeepers, leading to unequal treatment.

## 4 Conclusion and New Avenues for Research

In this chapter, we have focused on examining how looking 'right,' as distinct from looking 'good,' is linked to appearances and inequalities, especially in the workplace. We recognize that looking right can relate to appearance-based inequalities in two critical ways. Looking right (or wrong) can be associated with expressing social categories valued by the employer through external cues. In this case, looking right as a source of social inequalities involves more 'traditional' discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or age, which is also discussed in other chapters of this book (see Kühn & Wolbring, this volume; Mason & Mitgaard, this volume). However, looking right also produces and reproduces inequalities more subtly through various cultural cues evaluated by gatekeepers and intermediaries. Therefore, labor market inequalities are not only a result of unconscious biases but also of active and situationally embedded decision processes. However, gatekeepers can still be unaware of how they read bodies and recognize others as fitting (or not fitting) the 'ideal worker.' In this context, looking 'right' appears to be a difficult-to-define soft currency in the labor market that is hard to pinpoint. This also enables non-merit-based hiring

decisions, often fostering intuitive and gut-feeling hiring decisions (Rivera, 2016; De Keere, 2022).

From the job seeker's perspective, this makes this problematic because they are led to believe that the code of cultural and aesthetic expression can be cracked. The empirical case, in turn, illustrates how the staffing agencies produce standards of looking right during the pre-entry phase. The analysis highlights a paradox in staffing agencies' aesthetic advice. Job seekers are urged to conform to organizational norms while expressing their authenticity. This dual requirement perpetuates exclusion by rewarding those with the 'right' aesthetics and cultural knowledge. In essence, the advice leads to social closure based especially on cultural capital.

The tension between looking 'right' and looking 'good' offers important avenues for future research. In this chapter, we demonstrated that standards for aesthetic evaluations and their legitimization occur already in the pre-entry stage. Further studies are needed to analyze this stage of the labor market moment more profoundly. For example, the visual materials of organizations in connection with recruitment announcements could provide rich material, allowing us to map out the standards of looking 'right.' Additionally, the meanings job candidates attribute to this content and how different types of texts and images influence job application decisions remain up for investigation.

While previous research has focused on hiring situations, there is still much to unpack by examining the importance of appearance-based fit. In general, directing attention more toward how gatekeepers' perceptions of looking 'right' are formulated could provide interesting insights into why, for example, job candidates evaluated as attractive in population surveys may not always succeed (either in the lab or real job markets). Innovative methods such as Q-sorting could shed light on studying HR managers' and other employee gatekeepers' aesthetic perceptions.

In addition, the suggestion that future research should pay more attention to gatekeepers and their role in the (re)production of appearance-related inequalities expands to include their social background. This suggestion stems from the fact that we know very little about how the characteristics of gatekeepers influence the appreciation of particular appearances. Previous examinations have mainly relied on quantitative methods and focused on the role of gender in the (e)valuation of attractiveness (see Wolbring, this volume). However, how recruiters' social class background, and more specifically, their taste toward styles of self-presentation (e.g., grooming and clothing), influence evaluations of job candidates remains shrouded in mystery. Taking such perspectives into account in the future would provide significant additional insight into the logics of appearance in the hiring process and labor markets more generally.

Labor market intermediaries such as gatekeepers are, in fact, agents of inequality, and their decisions in the workplace are not limited to individual hiring decisions but have an impact on entire career trajectories and, therefore, larger economic inequalities (Rivera, 2020). Against this backdrop, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to research on appearance and labor market inequalities to understand how gatekeepers make their decisions. There remains plenty to examine in how employers evaluate, compare, and select between workers and the role looking 'right' plays in this process. When investigating the role of appearances, we should move beyond quantitative paradigms that merely assess the impact of being 'more or less' attractive. Rather than focusing on heavily mediatized questions like, 'Are better-looking people more successful?', we should direct our attention to the context-specific appropriateness of appearances and the cultural knowledge required to align with the employer's aesthetic templates.

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**Kobe De Keere** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and the director of the Cultural Sociology Program Group at the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research. He is affiliated with the Weatherhead Research Cluster on Comparative Inequality & Inclusion at Harvard University and is a

Fellow of the Norbert Elias Foundation. His research lies at the intersection of cultural and economic sociology, focusing on how moral concerns shape economic valuation and evaluation. He has recently published in journals such as *Socio-Economic Review*, *Organization*, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, and *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

**Outi Sarpila** is a Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Centre at the University of Turku. Between 2023 and 2026, she is serving as a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku. Sarpila has led two externally funded research projects focused on themes of appearance and inequality. The most recent of these, funded by the Research Council of Finland, has partially facilitated this handbook project. Sarpila's background is in economic sociology, and she has specialized in quantitative research on appearance. Her research on these themes has previously been published in journals such as *Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, and *European Societies*.

**Laura Vonk** is currently working as a Researcher at the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, WRR), where she develops long-term policy advice based on scientific insights in an interdisciplinary team. She recently completed a PhD project on the aesthetic regulation of workers in the Dutch post-industrial labor market. As part of this project, she previously published work on peer feedback regarding work aesthetics, on aesthetic advice from labor market intermediaries, and, together with Marguerite van den Berg, on the temporality in dress work of precarious workers.

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