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*Ethnographic vignettes on aesthetic labour in precarity*

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# Who can wear flip-flops to work? Ethnographic vignettes on aesthetic labour in precarity

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs)**Marguerite van den Berg and Josien Arts**

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**Abstract**

A central aspect of post-Fordist labour, many claim, is that the personal and the professional are increasingly intertwined. Especially in precarious urban sectors such as the interactive services, the aesthetic presentation of self is part of the product or service offered. Indeed, the separation between consumption and production, between private and work is no longer so strict for many, especially, in terms of aesthetics. Steering clear from sweeping statements about post-Fordism, however, this article offers an empirical examination based on ethnographic vignettes of one particular object that, perhaps surprisingly, appears in self-presentations for labour: the Adidas flip-flop. The Adidas flip-flop became salient in two studies in the Netherlands, in particular, one on the implementation of the Participation Act, which organizes welfare since 2015 and stipulates that it is forbidden for welfare recipients to 'obstruct employment by dress or personal hygiene'. Case managers in Dutch welfare offices, it turned out, often cited the Adidas flip-flop as the ultimate example of an object that would obstruct employment and by consequence is cause for a welfare penalty. At the same time, the Adidas flip-flop is the preferred footwear of tech entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, a surprising fashion item on runways and the highly valued item of Mario, a respondent in one of the ethnographic vignettes. Across several locations, therefore, we ask what aesthetic and moral interpretations of the Adidas flip-flop are offered, by whom and in what context. This allows for (1) an innovative view of aesthetics for labour, (2) an assessment of what that tells us about post-Fordist labour markets and (3) an understanding of how post-Fordist aesthetic norms can be especially opaque though important for those in precarious positions.

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**The Adidas flip-flop: from Silicon Valley to welfare offices**

In the summer of 2015, Adidas flip-flops, or slides or shower shoes (the navy and white striped plastic footwear), had their fashion moment. They appeared in fashion shoots, on runways and even on celebrity feet at fashion parties. One of the characteristics of fashion is of course the appropriation of unlikely symbols, so the presence of shower shoes may not be surprising. The trend was, however, and interestingly so, often attributed to a not-necessarily-fashionable role model: Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook. Zuckerberg is known for appearing in business meetings in Adidas flip-flops and a hoodie. This ‘look’, if you will, was made famous by and popularized in the movie about the rise and success of Zuckerberg and Facebook: *The Social Network*. It has become a symbol of the unconventionality of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and of a new generation of nerdy billionaires. Although the flip-flops and the hoodie have become the object of some jokes and scrutiny online, Zuckerberg is not taken any less seriously for wearing them to meetings. Perhaps even on the contrary, unconventionality can, in some contexts, be a sign of status (Bellezza et al., 2013; Hutson, 2013).

While we are aware, therefore, that the aesthetic liberties taken by Zuckerberg are intricately linked to his gender, race and class position, this article takes the sudden fashionability of Adidas flip-flops as a starting point for an investigation of aesthetic labour in post-Fordist precarious labour markets. Zuckerberg is not the only one in the new economy wearing the same outfit for private and professional contexts. For many in the creative industries, in tech companies, in academia, and in marketing or design, the personal and the professional look exactly alike. In fact, to express an authentic, informal, original self has become important in many sectors and not just for those in high-status jobs (compare McRobbie, 2016). The Dutch tech entrepreneur Steven Schuurmans, for example, was quoted in a Dutch daily newspaper to ‘expect much from (my) people, I like it when everyone can be themselves’. Their ‘self’ was their most informal self, and he went on to explain how wearing flip-flops and shorts work best for him (Hijink, 2016).

By contrast, in Dutch welfare offices, the Adidas flip-flop is considered grounds for penalties. Welfare clients, it seems, are not invited to be their most informal self, but rather to leave their private self at home. In the 2015 Dutch Participation Act, aesthetics were for the first time an explicit criterion for deservingness of income support. Tracing moral evaluations of the Adidas flip-flop will therefore allow for an exploration of morals and aesthetics for post-Fordist labour. To be sure, the Netherlands is not alone in restructuring welfare in such a way that it becomes ever more conditional. In fact, aesthetics were already shown to be important arguments in conditional welfare in the United Kingdom and the United States, which has generated research that mentions dress advice and aesthetic training in the context of welfare and job coaching (see, for example, Brodtkin, 2015; Dwyer, 2000; Gatta, 2014; Marchevsky and Theoharis, 2008; Nickson et al., 2003). However, these studies have not addressed how certain garments or objects can have diverse meanings in different work contexts. We will explain the

Dutch Participation Act and instances of its implementation at length below, but for now, it is important to note that in the context of our research, the Adidas flip-flop was one of the objects that, according to welfare case managers, never ‘goes’ in a work context and was evidently so ‘wrong’ that wearing flip-flops to job interviews could legitimize financial penalties and, therefore, effectively limit access to welfare rights. In this article, therefore, we focus on the material object of the Adidas flip-flop to shed light on personal-professional calibrations in aesthetic performances for work in precarious post-Fordist urban labour markets.

To examine how the (Adidas) flip-flop is interpreted aesthetically and morally in different contexts, we focus on evaluation ‘as it happens [...] in practices and experiences’ (Lamont, 2012: 205). Following Lamont et al., we understand these practices as emanating from ‘the mobilization of shared categories and classification systems through which individuals perceive and make sense of their environment’ (Lamont et al., 2014: 574). Evaluation practices can be analytically divided into two steps: valuation (determining what is of value) and evaluation (assessing whether a person or an object meets the established standards). In other words, first the relevant standards for determining an entity’s value in a certain context (in this article, determining what is appropriate dressing for work) have to be specified and agreed upon. The second step is to actually assess whether a person or object (in this case, a person wearing Adidas flip-flops) meets the established standards. Evaluation involves categorization and legitimation (Lamont, 2012: 206), which are entangled processes that can produce hierarchical classification systems, in terms of what is more or less valuable (and the underlying criteria), as well as in terms of who has the power and legitimacy to define and institutionalize this, and evaluate accordingly. These evaluation practices are often implicit and underexposed, but their effects are very tangible for the people involved. The research questions guiding this article are, therefore, how is the material object of the Adidas flip-flop evaluated aesthetically and morally across a range of work-related settings? and what does this tell us about the aesthetics of post-Fordist labour?

## **Post-Fordism, dress and the materiality of immaterial labour**

### *Materialities of post-Fordist immaterial labour*

Many scholars have claimed that post-Fordist work ‘demands the whole person’ (Lorey, 2015: 5). Workers’ affect, sociality and aesthetic appearance are mobilized for the ‘immaterial’ labour of the 21st century. To understand such entanglements of the personal and the professional and their consequences, scholars have focused on contemporary labour as subject to precarization (Lorey, 2015), as ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie, 2016) or ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]). In these literatures, aesthetics are often mentioned as pivotal, but far less often the point of focus. In Hochschild’s (2012 [1983]) famous study of flight attendants, for example, their aesthetic appearance and some of the labour that is necessary for it is part of the exploration, but in the end, it is the *emotional* labour that flight attendants offer that Hochschild is interested in. While there is a literature on aesthetic labour in the sense of working towards beauty ideals (for a recent

overview see Elias et al., 2017; see Holla and Kuipers, 2015 for an exploration of the concept of ‘aesthetic capital’) and aesthetics as an employer’s selection criterion (e.g. Warhurst et al., 2000), negotiations of aesthetics by workers or those trying to enter the formal labour market *for work contexts* is as yet far less studied. It can be expected that standardizations of the ‘presentation of self’ such as uniforms are far less prevalent, but at the same time, it would appear to be an overstatement to say that for everyone in this economy, ‘private’ aesthetic performances ‘go’ for work contexts too.

One reason for this reshuffling of aesthetic performances for work is the surge in service sector employment (McDowell, 2009). Many workers now engage in ‘immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato, 1996), which is not to say that there is no material aspect to this labour. On the contrary, the materiality of immaterial labour can be found in workers’ performative bodies (compare Lorey, 2015): in smiles, hairstyles and footwear. Besides the affective (McRobbie, 2016) and emotional dimension (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]), workers indeed perform an ‘aesthetic labour’ on their bodies (Elias et al., 2017). Arguably, the personal/professional or private/work distinction that characterized Fordism is increasingly ambiguous in post-Fordism, and this appears to be true for both highly educated workers *and* those in bottom-end precarious jobs (McDowell, 2009), for workers in the much celebrated ‘creative industries’ (McRobbie, 2016) *and* low level service jobs. Instead of dressing in uniforms, many workers are required to engage in a continuous and everyday interpretation and calibration of the self-work relationship. Being able to judge whether Adidas flip-flops ‘go’ for work or not, therefore, has become a far from straightforward task.

## Dress

Dress, we argue, is an incredibly important though often understated or even overlooked aspect of contemporary work. Dress is possibly the most tangible part of the presentation of self. Clothing is one of the principal means of relating to the social world, as emphasized by classic theorists such as Bourdieu (1998 [1984]), Goffman (1959) and Simmel (1957 [1904]). Clothing, accessories and cosmetics mediate the relationship between the individual and the work environment (cf. Woodward, 2007). In dressing for work, aspects of the self are externalized through material objects (Miller, 2010; Strathern, 1979; Woodward, 2007). Dress requires skill and is often (whether consciously or not) strategic, as in 1980s ‘power dressing’ by business-women (Entwistle and Mears, 2012). In much Western theorizing on dress, clothing is looked at primarily as superficial and in the realm of semiotics (Miller, 2010). Rather than looking at the object itself (its material properties, how it feels, the combinations in which it is used), scholars have looked at what certain objects *symbolize* or what they represent (Miller, 2005, 2010). This particular interpretation of what clothes are and how they should be evaluated will prove important in our empirical research as well. However, it is through our tracking of a particular material object that we find out these interpretations. To focus on an object like the Adidas flip-flop is not to say that this particular object is somehow more important or exemplary than, say, jeans or dresses. The point of our article is, rather, that zooming in on the Adidas flip-flop helps us to gain insight into how material objects are used in presentations of self and how they become salient in evaluations of those selves.

To summarize, under post-Fordist conditions, aesthetics is not a superficial pastime. It is an integral part of forms of work that demand the self to be actualized *in* work. Examining moral and aesthetic interpretations of the Adidas flip-flop can help us understand these entanglements, while at the same time, remaining conscious of the rather strict boundaries between the personal and professional that are still in place for some people and under some conditions. In Dutch welfare offices, as we are about to show, such strict separations of the personal and professional realm are put in place daily. These find their translation in aesthetic advice given and sometimes in punishing transgressions: personal–professional blurring is not for everyone. It may well be that under post-Fordist conditions, some are called to creatively perform an ‘authentic self’ or even a conscious non-conventional self at work, while others are called to leave this ‘private self’ at home.

## Cases and approach

To answer our research questions, we draw on pieces of data from two separate research projects in ethnographic vignettes: (1) a project on moral judgements in Dutch welfare offices and (2) an earlier project on social policy practices more widely. First, we use ethnographic data collected on aesthetic judgements made by case managers at the municipal re-integration service of the city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in January–May 2016. This ethnographic fieldwork was preceded by 18 in-depth interviews in spring/summer 2015 on the practical translations of the Participation Act, aesthetics and unemployment, and practices of case managers in three Dutch municipalities. In these interviews, the importance of appropriate dressing for work became especially salient in Rotterdam, which informed the ethnographic study. During the fieldwork, Josien Arts was present at the re-integration service, for 2 or 3 days a week. This service employs around 30 case managers (as well as team managers, administrative personnel and security officers). She observed, and sometimes actively participated, in approximately 70 formal moments in which case managers interacted with each other (in team meetings) or interacted with welfare recipients (during the general information meeting, workshops and scheduled individual conversations). In addition, she informally interacted with case managers in the hall way, at the coffee machine and during lunches.

Second, we use ethnographic data that Marguerite van den Berg collected in 2009–2010 for a project on social policy practices in Rotterdam. For this project, the researcher participated in policy practices aimed at advising and ‘guiding’ (the emic term: *begeleiden*) mostly mothers in childrearing for 14 months (see van den Berg, 2013 for more on this project). In one particular encounter in this ethnographic research, the Adidas flip-flop became salient, and it is this particular piece of ethnographic data that offers a counter point or contrast to the data presented about moral evaluations in the context of the Participation Act. It forms a contrast in terms of aesthetic and moral interpretation that has some power in exploring contemporary tensions and ambiguities in aesthetic labour and dress.

Based on these ethnographic vignettes, this article zooms in on the quite intense problematization of the flip-flop in aesthetic and moral judgements of welfare agents in the Netherlands and the way in which wearing flip-flops has become grounds for welfare penalties in Dutch conditional welfare. Aesthetics now form a newly emerging *formal*

criterion for retaining welfare rights in the Netherlands, as stipulated in the recent introduction of a new law in the Netherlands: The Participation Act. Organizing basic welfare and income support, the January 2015 law stipulates that an appropriate appearance is now an obligation for welfare recipients. To be precise, the law states that it is prohibited for those in welfare to ‘obstruct employment by dress or personal hygiene’. Local welfare offices (the execution of the law in the Netherlands is decentralized) are now thus able to give benefit-sanctions (up to a couple of hundred euros per month for several months) to welfare recipients who ‘obstruct’ employment by dress and/or personal hygiene. This means that since the introduction of this law, arguably more so than before, welfare agents are involved in making aesthetic judgements.

Especially in times of austerity (as was the case when we did the research, in the decade following the global financial crisis), welfare arrangements are under scrutiny. Those who are unemployed are under severe pressure to exit or eschew welfare. Increasingly, public opinion and governments consider *individuals* responsible for their unemployment, stressing the need for individuals to readjust their selves to market expectations. Similarly, those with jobs in the post-crisis economy increasingly deal with insecure and precarious working arrangements, likely to increase the importance of the daily calibration of aesthetic performances. In the current competitive and tight job market, then, as well as in conditional welfare arrangements, aesthetics form an extra criterion for selection for jobs and benefits and an extra strategy for distinction on the part of job seekers. Employers as well as case managers in welfare offices zoom in on the highly personal, on the body’s presentation, dress, smell and hygiene to judge citizens’ deservingness of financial support. As it turned out, Adidas flip-flops became something of a symbol of a lack of deservingness in our research.

## Various interpretations of wearing flip-flops to work: ethnographic vignettes

### *Vignette 1: the flip-flop as inappropriate dress for work*

As part of a larger project on moral judgements in Dutch welfare offices, Arts conducted ethnographic research at the municipal re-integration programme called ‘Work Pays Off’ in Rotterdam. This service is located in an office building in Rotterdam, not far from the city centre. During a period of 15 weeks, welfare recipients are obliged to participate in two 3-hour-long workshops a week. The workshops are meant to help recipients write or improve their résumé and letter of application, to make use of social media, broaden their network and learn to apply for jobs. Moreover, recipients learn about their ‘personal strengths and weaknesses’, ‘current labour market opportunities’ and ‘how to sell themselves’. An example of this is the recurring assignment to formulate an answer to the three following questions: ‘Who am I? What do I want? What am I good at?’ By answering this, welfare recipients are supposed to combine knowledge about themselves with knowledge about the labour market, in order to find ‘their place’ in it. Learning how to present oneself aesthetically is seen as part of ‘showing yourself’ to potential employers. To do this, case managers advise recipients on personal hygiene and dress and encourage them to present themselves accordingly. In this case, therefore, aesthetics were used in a

pedagogical move to help welfare recipients challenge personal work boundaries. They were very much invited, first, to think of work as needing to fit their most private characteristics and, second, to understand aesthetics to be vital in this calibration.

The importance of what is 'appropriate' and what is 'inappropriate' dressing for work became salient during the fieldwork. It was a recurring topic that even got explicit attention during a formal meeting for case managers in which an external 'image consultant' held a presentation about 'the language of clothing', as she called it. From the field notes:

The image consultant continues: 'There used to be strict norms about how you were supposed to dress. The rules were known: if you were a man, you would wear a suit with a tie, for example. Nowadays, the rules are more loose and there is more uncertainty and discussion about what is appropriate and what isn't. It is good to keep discussing that, also here (at the welfare office)'. One case manager responds: 'Here we surely don't have discussions about clothing'. Another case manager responds to her colleague: 'Yes we do! There is a lot of discussion going on, especially during summer. (About) what is too naked'. The first case manager replies: 'Yes, discussions with job seekers, but not with each other'. The second case manager does not agree and says: 'We do too among each other, a lot even! (About) whether you are allowed to wear flip-flops or sandals'. At this moment, other case managers join the discussion. Although everyone in the room seems to agree that flip-flops are not allowed (nobody is going against it), there is explicit disagreement about whether or not this has been formally agreed upon (and institutionalised into the departmental protocol). 'What about sandals?' one of the case manager asks. Another case manager responds: 'Open shoes are allowed as long as toes are not visible'. I hear someone else saying that 'that is not formally agreed upon either'. To which yet another case manager, seemingly annoyed by the discussion, replies: 'those are things that go without saying (*het zijn vanzelfsprekendheden*)'. A few case managers start making jokes and laughingly say: CM (case manager) 1: 'At the department of Work and Income one is easily overdressed'. CM 2: 'That is the opinion of people who are themselves underdressed'. A third case manager responds in a serious tone: 'Here at Work Pays Off, we are constantly among job seekers. We have to set a good example'.

For the image consultant, as well as the case managers, dress is seen to be an important aspect of the presentation of self in the work environment and quite explicitly understood in a semiotic fashion: clothing is a 'language'. Moreover, continuous negotiation about appropriate dress is encouraged by the image consultant, whereas case managers prefer explicit and concrete rules about what is and is not allowed, to cope with the uncertainty regarding aesthetic presentation in contemporary labour markets. For some, these rules merely apply to job seekers (the emic term for welfare recipients) as discussions about appropriate dress concern only them ('Yes, discussions with job seekers, but not with each other'). For others, however, these rules should apply to case managers themselves as well, if only because of their exemplary role for job seekers. Interestingly, even though the image consultant tried to discuss case managers' dress, they repeatedly shifted the discussion towards welfare recipients' dress, indicating (and sometimes even explicitly stating) that appropriate dress is more relevant for job seekers. Moreover, what is striking, is the agreement on the inappropriateness of flip-flops ('those are things that go without saying'), especially Adidas flip-flops.

### *Vignette 2: the flip-flop as reason for confrontation*

The prevailing agreement that flip-flops are inappropriate is illustrated by another meeting one of us attended several months later. In this meeting, one of the case managers presented the ‘House rules of Work Pays Off’ (*huisregels van WerkLoont*). These rules are meant for the job seekers, but because case managers allegedly do not enforce them, the team manager had asked one of the case managers to present the rules during this team meeting. From the field notes:

The case manager continues her presentation with a slide that shows 6 concrete rules for what does not ‘go’: ‘Caps, Drinking in the training rooms, Track suits/pants, Representatief (translates best as “presentable”), Slippers (*the Dutch emic term for flip-flops*), Headphones’. She discusses every item separately, spending more time on some items than on others, depending on the number and length of responses from her colleagues. [...] Flip-flops are discussed only very briefly. Once the presenting case manager shows the slide on this topic (which shows a pair of Adidas flip-flops), the team manager immediately intervenes by saying: ‘Adidas flip-flops seem obvious to me (*lijkt me duidelijk*), you confront a job seeker with this’.

For the case managers in Rotterdam, flip-flops, and Adidas flip-flops in particular, were a, or even *the* recurring, example of ‘inappropriate’ dressing for work. A welfare client wearing them was considered an obvious reason for confrontation.

### *Vignette 3: the flip-flop as grounds for welfare sanction*

The flip-flop was in fact the first example given in our interviews of an item worn by a welfare recipient that legitimated a financial penalty. In this case, a woman appeared for a job interview for a position as desk clerk at the airport wearing flip-flops:

- CM (Case manager):** Yes, she wore flip-flops. She came to the interview on slippers. That was way off, yes.
- I (Interviewer):** So you get that information from the employer? He or she calls you and says: ‘This didn’t go through, because this woman came on flip-flops and we didn’t think this was a good idea’? So how do you decide if this is to ‘obstruct’ and therefore basis for a penalty?
- CM:** Well, ‘obstruct’ ... if an employer says ‘no’ it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?
- I:** So then the employer really decides it is obstruction?
- CM:** Yes
- I:** and why are flip-flops then ‘way off’?
- CM:** Eh, I’m not sure exactly, that decision is really the employer’s to make.

Other case managers we interviewed were much more outspoken on flip-flops and why they are inappropriate, although they did not always become grounds for sanctions. Flip-flops were spontaneously brought up often in the series of interviews we did and in several cases, even the brand Adidas was explicitly mentioned.

### Vignette 4: the flip-flop as leisure wear

When we asked a case manager what she considered 'inappropriate' she mentioned:

- CM:** Oh, you know, the standard stuff, like men coming in with Adidas sports flip-flops, those are the kind of things that you come across relatively often. And then I'm just going to talk to them about it.
- I:** So why are flip-flops inappropriate?
- CM:** Well, that is very ... [...] that depends, I guess, on what kind. I'm wearing sandals myself now (the interview was done on a hot day in June). So I bought these, with open toes and I guess some colleagues think that this doesn't 'go' either. But ... sometimes you have these flip-flops that are more like sandals, you know? That's a different category. Then I think it is a little more dressed, but maybe it is still inappropriate. But Adidas flip-flops: no. They belong on a poolside, at home or on the beach. That is just very obvious like: 'Hey: there's a line there'. [...] In a way it is similar to track suits. Some people say: 'Yeah, but if I'm going to be a sports instructor, I can go on an interview wearing a track suit, right?' But you know: 'if you're going on an interview for a dentist, you don't go in your green dentist's suit and a farmer doesn't go in his overalls either, you know? So it is important it is 'representatief'/presentable somehow'.

In these quotes, it is apparent that post-Fordist personal–professional blurring is not for everyone and in every situation. While the welfare recipients were asked to mobilize their most private self in their search for paid employment, the Adidas flip-flop as a possible aesthetic translation of this private self was very clearly banned. In the case of job seekers trying to exit welfare, it appears, stricter boundaries and rules apply than for Mark Zuckerberg. Adidas flip-flops are here coded as leisure: they are too personal and informal. They reveal too much of the body (toes, feet) and are associated with the typical leisure activities of swimming and sports. Crossing the symbolic boundary ( 'Hey, there's a line there!') can result in serious consequences, ranging from (more or less obligatory) dress coaching to rejection by employers and the above-mentioned financial penalties. The Adidas flip-flop is, thus, clearly evaluated as inappropriate footwear for work contexts by the case managers. The observations show the processes of categorization and legitimation (Lamont, 2012) with regard to the evaluation of dressing for work. If flip-flops are categorized as 'sandals' or 'open shoes', they are evaluated as appropriate. Adidas flip-flops however, do not fit this category, although the relevant criteria for this classification are not made explicit. It is interesting to see so much agreement about the categorization of Adidas flip-flops (as 'leisure-item' and 'not representatief'/presentable), while at the same time, its legitimation is contested. Some case managers legitimize the inappropriateness of Adidas flip-flops through normalization ('it's obvious'), others deem it necessary that it is institutionalized into rules and regulations, in order to be able to evaluate welfare recipients accordingly. Yet others use a market logic ('if an employer says "no" ...'). Moreover, when pressed, the case manager also mentions a further complication: dressing for the work context of a job interview does not,

necessarily, mean dressing for the job. It means something else, something more vague and generic: to dress ‘representatief’/presentable. What ‘representatief’/presentable means is opaque and sometimes indecipherable to many in the current labour market, we argue, and we will illustrate this further with the following (ethnographic) vignette.

### *Vignette 5: appearances should fit work*

First it is important to show that it is not just that welfare services and the case managers we interviewed and observed were concerned with appropriateness as an end in itself. In some cases, that was in fact the primary focus as it has been in earlier historic periods in civilizing efforts of various kinds (van den Berg & Duyvendak, 2012). Rather, what was at stake was the much more specific fit of appearance and particular jobs and economic fields. This fifth vignette, though not about flip-flops, is illustrative of this logic that we found more generally: the logic that appearances should fit work and that in service sector jobs and especially jobs in commercial services, appearances are extra important, especially when compared with industrial jobs. Our respondents, therefore, themselves connected the stress on appearance to a changing economy and to a decline in industrial and manufacturing jobs. One of the case managers, for example, stressed:

‘It depends on what type of work and what type of appearance. Someone with 34.000 piercings – you won’t be able to place them with *de Bijenkorf* (a luxury department store). [...] I mean you can say: “well, we have an opening at *de Bijenkorf*,” but there are certain requirements, you know. [...] And someone that would not fit there when it comes to appearance, wouldn’t fit in terms of character either. Usually the two are connected. And I can tell you that, imagine we do make-overs (my wife watches those shows) and we change the appearance of someone, but the person is essentially still the same. You could perhaps start with your job at *de Bijenkorf*, but you would be out in a week because you just don’t fit into that world and you shouldn’t have tried.

In my own caseload, I see mostly men that go for technical jobs. Why technical? Because that is where the requirements are least difficult, in terms of criminal records, but also, they don’t whine about ...’

**Interviewer:** ‘A shirt?’

**Respondent:** ‘If you go to the first interview, no one cares about how you are dressed. As long as you are there on time, work hard and really apply yourself, no one will bother you with that’.

For this case manager, ‘placing’ clients was easier, relatively speaking, because he had many leads to jobs in industrial sectors. He did, however, stress the need for certain appearances in certain sectors (while being inclined to call that ‘whining’). He made clear that for him, piercings and shirts do not matter but that he was acutely aware of the importance of aesthetics for contemporary labour markets. For this respondent and many like him, the focus was not so much on civilizing the poor but much more on creating fits between clients and the contemporary urban economy. Importantly, this fit is not easily manufactured as appearance should also relate in a real way to the person’s character or private self: if

there is no fit, there will be problems. In other words: just dressing for the job is not quite enough, one should be the person that fits the job more widely speaking.

### *Vignette 6: Mario – the flip-flop as signifier of the wrong kind of money*

The following piece of data is from the second research project on policy practices in Rotterdam. We will not go into the specifics of that research project (for more information, see van den Berg, 2013), but for this article, it is important to know that van den Berg participated in a wide range of social work policy programmes that focussed on parenting. One of the programmes in this ethnographic study was targeted at poor, often unemployed parents of children below the age of 4. In this programme, the parents were ‘guided’ (the emic term) not only in their parenting practices but also in their daily lives more broadly, including in their encounters with the state. The guidance in this programme was put in practice in large part by interns training to become social workers. It was in this context that van den Berg met the new father Mario and interacted with him in a series of encounters during 6 months. Mario and his girlfriend at the time had just had a baby. He was unemployed and lived in a rundown apartment (formally Mario and his girlfriend did not live together) with little to accommodate a newborn. He was for these reasons quite desperate to find work in the formal job market. He did not have much experience in the formal job market and had spent most of his childhood in the Dutch Antilles (former Dutch colonies – islands in the Caribbean). Because he was below the age of 27, he had to visit the municipalities’ *Jongerenloket* (the Youth Office) for assistance with finding a job and applying for acute financial support. The Intern that ‘guided’ Mario, and van den Berg, went with him and his girlfriend on one of his many visits to what he experienced as an extremely frustrating and bureaucratic institution. From the field notes:

We’re waiting again in the hall of the Youth Office for the ‘work-officer’ after we’ve just spent much time waiting for the ‘financial support-officer’. There is a different desk for every question Mario has. He is playing with the baby while waiting. The whole endeavour takes incredibly long and we have to leave with none of Mario’s pressing issues adequately addressed. Mario is angry. He complains to his girlfriend, in part in his native language Papiamentu. When I ask him what he thinks is the problem exactly, he responds that the woman behind the desk looked at him in a particular way. He says: ‘She looks at my golden rings and she doesn’t trust me. I don’t want welfare at all’. He gets even more angry and then says: ‘They’re weird in this country, they’re sending us back home now, we have to come back tomorrow. They want to know everything there is to know about you, but I am black. They look at my Adidas flip-flops and my NY Yankees cap and she may think I have doekoe (money) and I’m hustling (*hosselen*) on the street you know? I’m so tired of all this’.

For Mario, Adidas flip-flops are part of his best summer outfit. They are a sign of relative wealth for him: they are, after all, brand shoes. Using different definitions of worth (cf. Lamont, 2012) than the case managers do, Mario categorizes Adidas flip-flops as objects of value, which is legitimized by the price of the flip-flops as well as the brand name. For him, Adidas flip-flops do not signify leisure and are not part of an ‘inappropriate’ dress style. On

the contrary, they are among the best items he owns. Even though his assessment after the disappointing encounters at the Youth Office is that his flip-flops may signify the wrong (informal, criminal) kind of wealth together with his race, golden rings and NY Yankees cap, his flip-flops were still part of a way of dressing for an occasion in which he was desperately hoping to be taken seriously as a future employed citizen. This shows a tremendous discrepancy with the valuation and assessment of the welfare case managers that resulted in inter-subjective agreement regarding the Adidas flip-flops as 'obviously inappropriate'. For Mario, it is not as clear-cut as it may seem for those on the other side of the welfare desk that Adidas flip-flops signify an unwillingness to work. For him, rather, their perceived disapproval of the flip-flops signals a racist evaluation. For the case managers, wearing flip-flops is as clear as it gets: once told that flip-flops are inappropriate, welfare recipients who continue to wear them are apparently *consciously obstructing employment* and therefore both deserve financial penalties and are undeserving of financial benefits.

### Interpretations: the Adidas flip-flop as too personal and a sign of moral worth

What becomes clear here is not only a very particular, if you will, white middle-class interpretation of what is 'obviously appropriate' but also a very particular understanding of aesthetics on the part of the case managers. For them, aesthetics are not embodied and durable, as so much sociology of the body has taught us. Instead, welfare recipients can just be *told* not to wear a certain item and then they 'know'. This transferral of knowledge or simplistic pedagogy then legitimates quite far-reaching government intervention because to not change your appearance after this pedagogical moment is considered obvious obstruction of work and therefore signifies a lack of deservingness of welfare benefits. Those looking for entry in the formal job market are, then, considered to have either a simple lack of knowledge about aesthetics or a lack of deservingness. Aesthetic performance becomes a skill that can be quite easily learned, superficial enough to change easily and therefore morally problematic if it is not the 'right' performance.

The emic use of the word 'representatief'/presentable is especially interesting in this context. Other than the term 'respectable' or 'appropriate', the Dutch term 'representatief' invokes the expectation that something is 'represented' by a certain aesthetic performance; that to look 'representatief' means to 'represent' a firm, a category of people, a concept. It invokes, in other words, the concept of representation in the meaning of a 'visual embodiment of something' (Williams, 1976: 269). By using the term 'representatief', the case managers employ a concept of clothing as text. The material object of the Adidas flip-flop then becomes merely a symbol for obstruction and therefore of a lack of moral worth. In the vignettes, both welfare case managers and Mario focus on dress' representational properties, on what dress communicates or symbolizes, thereby conceptualizing dress and appearance in a semiotic fashion (compare Hall, 1997; Miller, 2010). Clothing then, in the words of Daniel Miller (2005), 'becomes reduced to its ability to signify something that seems more real [...] as though these things exist above or prior to their own materiality' (p. 2). In a sense, part of the pedagogy in the welfare offices was, in fact, to *teach* a semiotic interpretation of clothing to recipients – to see 'clothing as language' (the exact phrase used in one of the workshops). Welfare recipients who

showed up in flip-flops because of the comfort they offered on hot days were pressed upon them the idea that they were insufficiently conscious of what they *represented*, what they communicated when they wore these very symbolic items.

The evaluation of wearing flip-flops is, thus, more than an aesthetic evaluation: it constitutes a *moral* judgement (compare Lawler, 2005). Dressing ‘appropriately’ becomes a sign of job market readiness and welfare deservingness. Wearing flip-flops is coded by many of the case managers as a sign of not wanting to exit welfare, of not trying, of not being active, of ‘obstructing’ and therefore of being insufficiently worthy of benefits. It is this final interpretation that ultimately legitimates the financial sanctions in the new Dutch law.

For some, preparing a performance that will be evaluated as morally worthy is therefore becoming ever more opaque and undecipherable. For Mario, Adidas flip-flops were part of his best outfit – brand items no less – that he assumed would be read as a sign of wealth. This brings into focus that case managers’ interpretation that flip-flops were so ‘obviously wrong’, that wearing them would easily constitute grounds for a penalty is based on a lack of understanding of just how deep and durable aesthetic preferences and performances can be. This is in line with much Bourdieusian research showing similar disparities in evaluations. To name just one example, when one of Philippe Bourgois’ (2003) female respondents in his famous ethnography of marginalization in America’s inner cities needed to dress for a job training programme, she wore a ‘skin-tight, yellow jumpsuit’ (p. 162) that was evaluated by others (it is not entirely clear by whom in Bourgois’ book) as ‘tacky’, leading Bourgois to conclude that ‘symbolic power is expressed through wardrobes’ and ‘obviously, the problem is deeper than not having enough money to buy straight-world clothes’ (p. 161). Indeed, in the cases we described above, the issue is deeper than not having the money or willingness to wear shoes instead of Adidas flip-flops. In fact, what is at stake is that personal–professional blurring may be open and necessary for some in this economy, but that at the same time and for many, personal aesthetic preferences are still grounds for penalties, legal or otherwise. If dressing is indeed an act in which we externalize aspects of the self through material objects, an important interpretation of the above materials is that the Adidas flip-flop is only appropriate if it is an externalization of a self that is otherwise also of high status. If that self is marginalized (as with Mario and most welfare recipients), so is the Adidas flip-flop as the material externalization of it.

## Conclusion and discussion

We have followed the object of the Adidas flip-flop around some work-related contexts to show the tension between newly acquired room to manoeuvre creatively in post-Fordist labour markets on the one hand and the continued limitations to aesthetic performances in that same labour market on the other hand (as exemplified by the case managers’ judgements and Mario’s frustration). In this article, we have sought to answer the following two questions: How is the material object of the Adidas flip-flop evaluated aesthetically and morally across a range of work-related settings? and what does this tell us about the aesthetics of post-Fordist labour?

In answering the first question, we have shown how different standards of evaluation result into various ways of interpreting Adidas flip-flops in the context of dressing for work. According to the case managers in Rotterdam, Adidas flip-flops are inappropriate, signalling unwillingness to work and lack of welfare deservingness. This evaluation is based on the conceptualization of clothing and footwear as symbolic and ultimately superficial: Adidas flip-flops are a symbol of obstruction because (1) welfare recipients should simply know that they are inappropriate or in any case should stop wearing them as soon as they are taught and (2) wearing material objects is always an act of representation, and Adidas flip-flops represent leisure and unwillingness to find paid work in the labour market. Importantly, therefore, Adidas flip-flops are thought of as an expression of an inappropriate private self *and* as an expression welfare recipients should depart in a move towards the adaptability to service economies needed in order to become someone else for their future labour participation. For the case managers and perhaps also Dutch lawmakers, wearing flip-flops signals, ultimately, an unwillingness to change the self to fit market demands, and this is why this act legitimizes financial penalties. According to Mario's standards of evaluation however, Adidas flip-flops are valuable objects and appropriate dress as a job seeker. He, too, considers them to be symbolic objects, but for him, it is inconceivable that they should signal unwillingness or obstruction. On the contrary, they signal his success and his backstage labour of preparation for his encounter with the state. Considering the way in which Adidas flip-flops have become a fashion object, as well as associated with the unconventionality and success of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, the way in which Mario evaluates these objects is not as far-fetched as it may seem to welfare case managers. However, the fact that he is not in a paid job, let alone an unconventional tech-company CEO, forfeits his position as legitimate judge (compare Lamont, 2012). Moreover, we have shown that evaluation practices can indeed 'have real consequences for access to material and non-material resources' (Lamont et al., 2014: 595). The right to welfare support is lost when prevailing ideas about appropriate dress for welfare clients is agreed upon and institutionalized, and consequently, case managers' evaluation practices lead to welfare sanctions.

It is important to note here that what is at stake in the above vignettes is more than just a new phase in civilizing offensives or a new form of discipline. What our data shows is that there is much more ambiguity to dress norms under post-Fordism than there was in Fordism, often caught in the emic language of 'fit' between a person and a job. Cleanliness and a decent appearance no longer cut it: the unemployed are asked to perform authentic selves too, authentic selves that somehow match what an urban service economy requires. They, too, are asked to blur the lines between their personal and professional lives. When, however, that self prefers plastic footwear welfare clients have crossed a line.

Perhaps there has always been exclusion from the labour market on aesthetic grounds. To be sure, there is an enormous body of work in sociology and other social sciences showing the subtle and less subtle workings of the reproduction of inequality. We argue, however, that our case study of the Adidas flip-flops points to both this continued relevance of aesthetics and the habitus for social inequality *and* a new dynamic of post-Fordism. In labour markets where manufacturing and industrial jobs are no longer available and new employment opportunities arise in the consumption and service industries, aesthetics matter in new ways. The different interpretations of the Adidas flip-flop

are an example of a ‘cultural dislocation of the new service industries’, to use a phrase of Bourgois (2003: 114). Moreover, at the same time that aesthetics are becoming more and differently important, those precariously employed and those outside of paid labour markets are called upon in training programmes to find their ‘true self’, their ‘talent’ and their ‘passion’. In the welfare offices in Rotterdam, too, they were asked to blur the private–professional lines to find a job. They, too, are invited to entangle the personal and professional in new ways; they too are invited or even obliged to participate in labour that demands their whole self. Therefore, it is all the more confusing when some expressions of that self are grounds for welfare penalties and strict aesthetic boundaries between the personal and the professional are drawn in welfare offices.

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