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The Dark Side of Employer Branding – Aesthetic Labour and Employer Attractiveness in the Beauty and Cosmetics Industry

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of Aesthetic Labour on employer branding within the cosmetics industry. Traditionally, beauty and cosmetics firms are associated with positive connotations such as elegance, glamour, and attractiveness, driven by professional marketing strategies. Aesthetic Labour, the employment of workers who visually represent the company's brand image, extends beyond customer-facing roles to influence the overall company image and employer brand. This thesis investigates how these Aesthetic Labour practices shape perceptions and expectations of prospective employees, particularly focusing on Generation Z, who prioritize diversity and inclusion.

Through semi-structured interviews with twelve Generation Z employees and former employees of well-known cosmetics firms, this research uncovers the dual nature of the industry's employer branding, one being the glamorized image that is carried to the outside, the other highlighting the downsides of the glamorized effect. While a polished, glamorous image attracts applicants, it often leads to unrealistic expectations about the work environment. The study finds that although employees experience a supportive and enthusiastic work culture, they also face internal pressure to maintain a specific aesthetic standard. This pressure, albeit not officially mandated, is perpetuated through internalized norms and possibly biases in the hiring process.

The findings reveal that Aesthetic Labour practices influence employer attractiveness by creating a desirable but often unattainable image. This study contributes to the understanding of Aesthetic Labour's role in shaping employer brand perceptions, highlighting the need for cosmetics firms to balance their branding strategies with inclusive and diverse employment practices to meet the evolving expectations of the modern workforce.

Keywords: aesthetic labour; employer branding; cosmetics industry; generation z

1 Introduction

Beauty and cosmetics firms come with a reputation, standing for elegance, glamour, graceful aging, attractiveness, aesthetics, and much more. It is hard to miss that all the words related to the word beauty and cosmetics are positively connotated, only rarely inducing negative feelings. This may be due to the professional marketing of not only the products themselves but also the marketing strategies of the companies behind the products, which for years have been created to perfection by professionals to seem desirable, appealing, and prestigious. For centuries, beauty standards have existed, and cosmetics firms' promises to help users obtain the idealized look have certainly added to the industry's glamorous feel. Although cosmetic products themselves have been around for thousands of years, the market capitalization of the beauty industry started to gain traction after the 1920s (Peiss, 2000). Marketing beauty standards to households became the standard program of every cosmetics firm, leading to a huge increase in consumption and driving the value of the beauty industry up to USD

430 Billion globally in the year 2022 (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

Although most marketing campaigns were aimed at attracting the consumer – mainly females – to the product itself, every bit of the brand's representation to the outside is displayed in product marketing campaigns. Especially at beauty counters, employees that represent the brand to the consumer adhere to certain beauty standards to be able to sell the product better, silently saying: "By buying our products, you could also look like this." This concept is known as *Aesthetic Labour (AL)*. This means that employees are hand-picked by the companies, depending on whether they have the right look according to company standards and helping to shape their brand image (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a). The term was most prominently defined by Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson in 2000, originating from earlier research done on emotional labor by Arlie Hochschild, which examined how workers manage their emotions to meet job requirements. Aesthetic Labour extends this idea to the visual and physical attributes that employees bring to their roles, particularly in the service sector (Warhurst et al., 2000). It is plausible that

this exact image may have expanded from frontline workers into the office, creating a company image with a similar perceived aesthetic. This concept influences not only the brand but also the company image, therefore also influencing the employer brand (EB).

The concept of the employer brand is derived from marketing literature and first became relevant in the 1990s when several marketing experts began to research the importance of retaining employees for a company's profit due to the war of talent during the late 20th century (Martin et al., 2011). More and more, employees were referred to as "internal customers," which is how the first concepts of the Employer Brand started being developed. In these concepts, employees are viewed as customers, explaining that "it is easier, cheaper, and more profitable to keep existing customers than recruit new ones" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 185. Ambler and Barrow first defined the employer brand as the combination of "functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 187, which has laid a foundation for countless further studies that explore the way companies and jobs are viewed by (potential) employees Alniaçık and Alniaçık, 2012. These studies entail keywords like *Job Attractiveness*, *Employer Branding*, *Employer Image*, *Internal Marketing*, and *Job Perception* and have been significant in changing the way that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is viewed from a scientific perspective (Martin et al., 2011).

Even now, much of recent research still refers to these findings. Ambler and Barrow, 1996 found that the concept of "Employer Brand" is primarily seen as equivalent to corporate culture by employees. Key components for creating a good EB include creating awareness of the company itself, so the "company's performance, market position, reputation and product brand(s)" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 197, as well as psychological benefits, which are derived from these aspects. Both aspects enable a company to "recruit, retain and motivate the best people" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 197. Building from the employer brand concept, academics later used these findings to create models that showcase what (prospective) employees value in an organization. The most significant model that has been derived from Ambler and Barrows findings is the Employer Attractiveness model (EmpAt in short) by Berthon et al., 2005, including the dimensions of employer attractiveness, which are impacted by the employer image, which in turn is shaped by EB practices, as well as external aspects and internal realities (Barnett et al., 2006). The way that AL plays into the employer brand shall be researched in this thesis and may put into light a darker side of employer branding.

1.1 Problem Definition

Aesthetic Labour has long been a concept that is viewed critically in the academic world. Rating employees so superficially leaves a bad aftertaste, especially as a new generation, Generation Z (short: Gen Z), is entering the labor market, demanding employers to represent topics like diversity, inclusion, or sustainability (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Paral-

els to the beauty industry can be drawn through the fashion industry, where even in 2024, brands like *Brandy Melville* are getting exposed for not selling inclusive clothing and only employing a certain type of person – one that matches the company and brand image: *young, skinny, white* (Die Presse, 2024). The fact that this image is harmful and outdated is hardly negotiable. A similar discussion has been ongoing for years with the fashion giant *Abercrombie & Fitch*, which was first sued in 2004 for discriminating against people of color, allowing them to work only in the back storage rooms, again in 2009 and 2015, and most recently in late 2023 (Fonrouge, 2023). Every time, the lawsuits entailed discrimination against employees who did not have the typical look or abuse and sexualization of those who did. As the ex-CEO of the firm, Mike Jeffries, stated in 2006: "*We go after the cool kids. We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely*" (Mike Jeffries 2006 in Loftus 2013, 11. 5ff), openly excluding anyone not fitting his image of the company.

Most literature focuses on frontline employees of the retail and hospitality industries, mainly feeding from scandals that arise every few years. Aesthetic Labour literature has rarely touched on looks in an office setting, nor has the beauty and cosmetics industry been closely looked at. May this be due to a lack of scandals in the beauty industry? In the fashion industry, articles are regularly published, displaying the lack of inclusive sizes (Dion & Tachet, 2019), greenwashing (Alizadeh et al., 2024), or the specific exclusion of certain target groups (Lies, 2021); *Brandy Melville* and *Abercrombie & Fitch* being prime examples of the topic's relevance even today. More quietly, scandals formed in the cosmetics industry, including scandals concerning animal testing or the exclusion of certain groups. Over the years, however, it has become a norm for cosmetic products to be labeled as vegan or cruelty-free (Santos et al., 2023) and well-known beauty brands like *MAC Cosmetics* or *Fenty Beauty* have increased their product ranges to include over 40 skin shades each (Frisby, 2019), showing a shift in the industry towards diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion in branding and marketing campaigns have become much more relevant, highlighting the importance of an employer creating a space for everyone to feel included (Campbell et al., 2023). However, several authors argue that "pretty privilege," an expression that summarizes the privilege of conventionally attractive people, is still common, meaning that employees who fit the company's look and image are more likely to be hired (Talamas et al., 2016).

Especially in the cosmetics industry, one may quickly assume that the glamorous art of living that is portrayed through marketing campaigns depicts the way of life of that company's employees. Striving for a similar look, lifestyle, or aesthetic, applicants may look past aspects that are negatively connotated with the brand, or that would usually make an employer seem unattractive to them. The industry's general popularity cannot be denied, as firms like

the industry leader L'Oréal regularly publish statistics that showcase their high number of applications each year (e.g., L'Oréal 2020), whereas less glamorous industries, like the rail industry, struggle to find suiting talents, despite offering the same functional benefits (Wallace et al. 2012; see definition of functional benefits in chapter 2.1.1). That the cosmetic industry's companies are automatically connected to beauty and aesthetics is undeniable. Product marketing allows a consumer to see which looks they could attain through the product's use, creating a desire for a connection to that brand and a "sense of belonging" to a brand (Vonk, 2020). By having this demand for aesthetics on the one hand and a push for diversity and inclusion on the other, a new challenge for the industry is presented. AL as a framework can help in analyzing this problem.

1.2 Research Goal and Relevance

According to Warhurst and Nickson, 2007b, Aesthetic Labour is the "employment of workers with desired corporate dispositions" (p. 107), ultimately contributing to the "production and portrayal of a distinct and defined corporate image" (p. 107). In combination with the earlier mentioned employer brand, the concept can be seen as a contributor to a desired perception and employer image to the outside. While most research in the field has been done on employees in the frontline service area, including jobs in hospitality and retail (Karlsson 2011), only limited research has been done on how the concept of Aesthetic Labour can be applied to office jobs and how frontline employees and photos that are broadcast through an employer website or marketing campaigns affect the employer image, in turn affecting the employer brand that is used to recruit new talents. Furthermore, there is barely significant literature focused on the beauty and cosmetics industry. EB is embedded in most companies to make them more attractive to applicants. Aesthetic Labour shall serve as a concept that will help in gaining a new perspective on EB, showcasing tensions and challenges that may arise from EB. The way this shall be done is through gaining an in-depth understanding of Aesthetic Labour, which mainly involves the appearance and demeanor employees are expected to maintain in certain industries as a part of their job roles. By understanding this concept and how it impacts brand image, this thesis will add depth to existing literature on Aesthetic Labour while also serving as a paper that critically illuminates EB.

Understanding the connection between the two concepts and critically highlighting some aspects that influence the employer image will not only feed into a research gap but will also allow employers or human resource specialists to gain insights into how their intentional (as well as unintentional) branding practices influence their brand image and therefore affect talent attraction, retention, and motivation, allowing them to improve recruitment and employee well-being strategies, especially as Gen Z is taking over the labor market. To best uncover the connection of these concepts in the cosmetics industry, semi-structured interviews with people who are currently or have in the past been employed in

a well-known cosmetics firm shall be conducted. According to McKinsey & Company, 2023, new standards, including diversity and inclusion, have been defined by Gen Z, and this study will focus mainly on young talents. The specific focus on Gen Z employees will allow us to get an understanding of which image of the cosmetics and beauty industry is engrained in the minds of even the younger generation. Organizations will benefit in understanding what makes them attractive to young talents, as their "knowledge, skills and fresh insights drive innovation and, in the long run, competitive advantage" Ružić and Benazić, 2023, p. 97.

In this study, young talents from Gen Z are defined as people born no earlier than 1995, have less than four years of professional work experience, and have significant experience in the beauty and cosmetics industry. Within this core group, the EB concept, as well as aspects influencing the employer brand, will be researched. By combining EB with AL literature, it can be assumed that Aesthetic Labour practices, like marketing campaigns, employee representation, or media coverage, shape expectations in the type of employee as well as work inside the company, are valued when making the application decision and may form expectations, that are not fully met inside the company. These assumptions lead us to the following research questions:

RQ1: *How do Aesthetic Labour practices in the beauty and cosmetics industry influence the perceptions and expectations of prospective employees?*

This research question aims to find out what applicants **expect** of a job in the industry concerning the type of person working inside the company, as well as the job inside the company itself. To gain information on both topics, interview questions shall lead to responses that entail perceptions of a company that were built before considering them as an employer, emotions that applicants had toward the brand, and first touchpoints with the company. A focus will be laid on brand image portrayed through Aesthetic Labour practices in marketing campaigns or through laborers. This first question aims to find out whether AL is expected by applicants before entering the firm as an employee.

Secondly, the **values** of employees will be evaluated to see whether they align with general findings from EB literature, as well as the earlier mentioned values like inclusion and diversity. Therefore, the second research question reads:

RQ2: *To what extent do job seekers prioritize aesthetic aspects, such as brand image and lifestyle portrayal, when evaluating potential employers in the cosmetics industry?*

This second research question will help to understand how big the impact of aesthetic practices is on the employer brand. Interview questions will include comparisons and drawing parallels to other companies and job opportunities, as well as help to understand the influence of the aesthetics of the brand on the application decision-making process. Lastly, both the expectations and values shall be compared

to the reality, so the **experience** in the firm, once employed, leading to the last research question:

RQ3: *How does the perception of a job in the cosmetics industry that is shaped by Aesthetic Labour practices differ from the experience within the company once employed?*

With this last question, we aim to find out how much the brand image of a prospective employee (before employment) and their expectations overlap with the experience inside a company. This will help in distinguishing whether Aesthetic Labour adds to employer branding in a positive, negative, or neutral way and how the concept influences the overall brand image. This question aims to figure out whether the perceived image outside the firm seems more glamorous than the job itself is and will help uncover discrepancies between brand image and reality.

As mentioned above, this thesis aims to investigate the elements that contribute to employer attractiveness in the cosmetics industry, focusing on the effects of employer perceptions that stem from Aesthetic Labour practices. By conducting qualitative research in this area, employees of cosmetics firms have an opportunity to add their perceptions and experiences, creating a holistic picture of a cosmetic company's image from the application to the job itself. As the connection of Aesthetic Labour to employer image, specifically for office jobs, has never been investigated, this research will fill a gap in existing literature. Additionally, practical insights for cosmetics companies looking to enhance their employer branding strategies to attract and retain young talents can be provided.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The way this thesis shall be structured to finally be able to answer the above-named research questions is the following. First, a literature overview of all earlier mentioned concepts will be conducted. At first, employer branding, the formation of the employer image, and factors of employer attractiveness will be explained to gain a holistic understanding of the way employers themselves can actively shape their organizational image. After that, Aesthetic Labour as a framework and the ideal self will be investigated to critically highlight EB. A general understanding of the strategic portrayal of a certain lifestyle or persona and how that affects a (prospective) employee's attraction to one firm will also be provided by this. Finally, the connection of both concepts will be laid out to understand how they impact one another. This literature overview will help in understanding the impact of Aesthetic Labour on the employer image. Following the literature overview, the research objective will be formulated. After that, the methodology for answering the before-defined research questions, including the research design and process, data analysis method, as well as critical factors and limitations in the process, will be laid out. After that, the findings of the conducted research will be described to discover potential patterns, themes, or categories in the collected data.

In the following section, there will be a discussion including the interpretation of these findings, and from those, practical implications and directions for future research will be identified. A short conclusion will round up this thesis.

2 Theoretical framework

To be able to gain a broader understanding of the research that has been done in all of the above mentioned areas, a thorough literature review will be done in this chapter. All literature has been peer-reviewed and published in serious academic journals, including but not exclusive to journals like the *Journal of Brand Management*, the *International Journal Of Advertising*, *Personnel Review*, the *Journal of Marketing*, or the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Several of these journals focus on marketing-related topics, as employer branding actually stems from marketing literature rather than human resource management (HRM). However, the concept's relevance in HRM will be looked into further in the following chapters.

Literature was identified mainly through platforms like Google Scholar, which led to academic articles across the research platforms ELSEVIER, Springer, Wiley, SAGE Publishing, IEEE Xplore, ScienceDirect, and more. Articles were filtered by year, first excluding any literature that appeared before 2010. It quickly became clear that many of the still-used and relevant models were created and discussed before this date, which is why older articles and research were also taken into account. However, recent studies using these models were always included in the search. Going from there, the snowballing method was used to find more suitable research on all topics.

To begin this chapter, the concept and backgrounds of employer branding from the employer's point of view will be looked into in detail. This includes the general concept of employer branding and its use in recent research. As employer branding impacts the *image* of a company as well as its *attractiveness* as an employer, both of these concepts were looked into in more detail. As the aim of this thesis is to research the impact of the Aesthetic Labour concept on the employer brand, the concept of *Aesthetic Labour* was investigated thoroughly. To explain its connection to employer attractiveness, the *ideal self* was also researched.

Keywords that were used to find suitable research on these topics include 'employer brand,' 'employer branding,' 'employer attractiveness,' 'employer image,' 'employer reputation,' 'Aesthetic Labour,' and 'ideal self'.

2.1 Employer Branding in Companies

The concept of the employer brand originally stems from general branding practices, which are a part of marketing literature. Applying branding practices to HRM is called *employer branding* in literature (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). To gain a broad overview of Employer Branding (short: EB), an introduction including a definition, relevant studies, and related concepts will be given in the following.

2.1.1 Employer Branding

Employer branding and the employer brand first became a term in the early 1990's. Defined for the first time by Ambler and Barrow in 1996, the employer brand is "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 187. The reason for their extended research on employer branding practices was the realization of the correlation between the good quality of employees and the quality of the sold product or service. The researchers divide the employer brand into three main factors that a brand can offer a potential employee and that are parallel to the benefits "that a conventional (product) brand offers to consumers," namely functional (what is the use), economic (material or monetary rewards), and psychological (feelings like belonging, direction, or purpose) benefits Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 186f. For a firm to attract as many good potential employees as possible, their employer brand should cover all three of these benefits. The researchers base their findings on concepts similar to EB: corporate culture and identity, internal marketing, and corporate reputation. Within their research, they applied the concept of EB to each of these (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Corporate *culture and identity* are defined by Hiller and Verdier, 2014 as the "shared beliefs and preferences among members of one organization," particularly between different levels of hierarchy, creating a strong corporate identity for individual employees Hiller and Verdier, 2014, p. 94. *Internal marketing* is what the company does to create a stronger corporate identity for their employees, or as defined by Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000, "a planned effort using a marketing-like approach to overcome organizational resistance to change and to align, motivate and interfunctionally co-ordinate and integrate employees towards the effective implementation of corporate and functional strategies to deliver customer satisfaction through a process of creating motivated and customer orientated employees" Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000, p. 454. Lastly, *corporate reputation* is the way a company is viewed not only internally by its employees but also externally by stakeholders, which may impact the way the general public and (potential) employees view the company (positively and negatively). According to Cruise O'Brien, "reputation is developed based on the observation and assessment of consistent behavior over time" (O'Brien 1995 in Ambler and Barrow 1996, p. 190), indicating that the more positive attention a company attracts, the more positive its reputation will be, making it a more attractive employer.

It is clear as to why Ambler and Barrow decided to disclaim the possible connection of these concepts to that of the employer brand. Although all three concepts are different from one another, they have certain overlaps that the EB concept can combine. In EB, the "similarities between HR and regular (product) brand marketing" are recognized, therefore permitting "their functional skills to be used in each other's areas" Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 190. The concept is needed to keep employee commitment high for existing

employees as well as attract new ones.

Ambler and Barrow's definition of EB was later used as a foundation of numerous studies in the field and continuously developed by further researchers. Sullivan re-defined EB in 2004, calling the concept "a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm" (Sullivan 2004 in Backhaus and Tikoo 2004, p. 501), which depicts a more accurate definition of what EB actually does: manage awareness and perceptions. In the same year, Backhaus and Tikoo defined employer branding as a process of "building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors" Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p. 502 by applying general branding principles to HRM. Later, Edwards, 2010 explained the term by comparing it with principles from marketing and branding that are applied to HR initiatives (Edwards, 2010), emphasizing Ambler and Barrow's internal marketing approach. This is further supported by Ružić and Benazić, 2023 research on employer attractiveness – they state that a marketing approach is the most effective in attracting people by effectively implementing marketing initiatives to obtain a wanted behavior from their target audience (Ružić & Benazić, 2023); in this case, the job application to the company. Sivertzen et al., 2013 later defined EB as the process of "building employer identity directed at existing and potential employees, to differentiate the firm from its competitors" Sivertzen et al., 2013, p. 474. All in all, it can be said that the concept of EB is a process that applies marketing and branding principles to HR practices to manage the perception of a company, both internally to existing employees and stakeholders, as well as externally to potential new employees. To break down both sides a bit more and make the understanding of the concept easier, we will mainly focus on the external audience in this thesis, where EB "encompasses how the organisation exposes itself and how others evaluate the organisation as an employer" and how "employer branding is used to increase employer attractiveness and improve corporate reputation" Sivertzen et al., 2013, p. 474. Generally, EB is "about promoting a clear view of what makes an organization desirable and different from an[other] employer" (Theurer et al., 2021).

The way EB is normally implemented into an organization is by applying branding principles that stem from marketing to HRM. Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004 describe this as a three-step process – first, a value proposition is developed, stating the firms' most attractive values, taking into account things like employer image, organizational culture, and impressions of product or service quality. Later, this value proposition is marketed to potential employees or recruiting agencies. In the last step, the value proposition is also marketed internally to ultimately create a workforce that is motivated by the company's values and hard to imitate by others. The goal of this is not only to attract new potential employees to a firm but also to encourage existing ones to stay with and support the company. Furthermore, Backhaus and Tikoo argue that marketing an employer

brand not only targets the wanted talents but also enhances the product and corporate brands (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Presumably, this is a mutual relationship, indicating that the quality and popularity of the product's brand also affect the popularity of the organization as an employer. Generally, the two authors summarize that "employer brand associations form **brand images**, which in turn, affect **attraction** to the firm" Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p. 507, two concepts that will be looked into in more depth in the following.

To conclude, employer branding is the practice of curating an image of a company as an employer to make it more attractive to potential suitable applicants. To do so, general branding and marketing approaches are applied to HRM to actively shape the image of the company as an employer.

2.1.2 Employer Image

By managing awareness and perceptions as an employer, a certain image of the brand is created. The term *employer image* is often used synonymously with the term *employer reputation*. However, several authors argue that there is a small difference between the two. Barnett et al., 2006 note that the "image is the perception that external observers have of the firm," whereas "reputation is the net result of the aggregation of these perceptions" Barnett et al., 2006, p. 28. Sivertzen and colleagues simply describe employer reputation as a valuable resource in the resource-based view, representing a set of characteristics that have been projected onto an organization by the general public due to previous actions, ultimately leading to a competitive advantage or disadvantage (Sivertzen et al., 2013). As this definition does not specify whether this projection of characteristics occurs at a single point in time or over a longer period, it aligns more closely with Barnett's definition of employer image. This realization highlights the difficulty in distinguishing between both terms.

According to Barnett et al., "image can be shaped but not controlled by an organization" Barnett et al., 2006, p. 34 due to external factors that influence the company's reputation. A company can implement branding practices to improve the employer image, essentially painting a picture of the organization and communicating it not only internally but also externally (Sivertzen et al., 2013). Creating a coherent organizational image will affect not only employee attraction to a company but even more customer and consumer attraction. The more aware a consumer is of a brand and the more likely they are to use and identify with that brand's products, the more likely they are to later apply for a job at that brand, so shaping an employer image really begins by shaping a brand image (Collins & Stevens, 2002).

Collins and Stevens, 2002 also distinguish two dimensions of employer brand image, one being the general attitudes toward a company and the other being perceived job attributes by prospective employees, that are shaped by publicity like paid media, sponsorships, positive word-of-mouth endorsements and recruitment advertising (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Lievens and Slaughter, 2016 defined organizational image as an outsider's beliefs, whereas

organizational insiders', so mainly employees', company image was compared with *organizational identity* (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Generally, it can be said that employer image is shaped by a combination of external perceptions and internal realities, reflecting how outsiders view the organization based on visible and communicated aspects. In the course of this thesis, the terms employer, organizational, and brand image will be used interchangeably, as they all contribute to shaping one image.

Researchers have long been studying employer image, trying to find out what the factors impacting the image are and how they can be internally controlled. A summary of diverse findings tells us that a company's image should be consistent over time to increase credibility (Theurer et al., 2021), attract and retain talents (Biswas & Suar, 2016) whilst also being personal enough for employees to identify themselves with the image, internalizing it and living for it more strongly (Brannan et al. 2015). Maintaining a positive image generally helps an organization for recruitment and retention purposes of high-performing employees, enhancing employee performance and building organizational prestige for a competitive advantage, in turn attracting even better talents, improving customer perceptions and investor confidence (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Aspects that positively impact the employer image include the level of innovativeness (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), and effective communication of brand values (Sivertzen et al., 2013).

In studies, Sivertzen and colleagues (2013) describe the employer image from a resource-based view, indicating that the image is an important factor in contributing to a competitive advantage, highlighting the strategic importance of managing the employer image. In another study, Brannan and colleagues (2015) explored how the employer image affects identity work. The researchers focused specifically on the service sector, in which employer branding encourages employees to internalize the desired brand image, influencing both their self-identity and organizational identity. This study specifically highlights the *ideal self*, which is a version of the self that one wishes to be. By being able to identify with an organization's brand image, employees become more motivated to work there as they are more committed to organizational goals (Brannan et al. 2015). Biswas and Suar, 2016 also took a social identity approach, where employer image is especially impacted by organizational prestige, which stems from diverse information sources. These may include "reference groups' opinions, words-of-mouth, public relations, external controlled information, and internal communication regarding the outsiders' perception about the company" Biswas and Suar, 2016, p. 60. The more a (potential) employee identifies with this information, the higher the organizational prestige and, therefore, the work motivation as well as pride to be employed at the said firm becomes (Biswas & Suar, 2016). In this research, it becomes especially clear how important the alignment of external perceptions with internal realities is to maintain a positive employer image.

Especially in the hospitality and retail sectors, where Aesthetic Labour practices are common, workers are employed to help shape a company's image. This way, "image-oriented service managers [...] shape the brand's value proposition and differentiate themselves from competitors" Pounders et al., 2014, p. 670. Even one of their first academic papers on the concept of AL by Warhurst and Nickson in 2007 emphasized how important Aesthetic Labourers were for the "production and portrayal of a distinct and defined corporate image" Warhurst and Nickson, 2007b, p. 107, showing the impact of the concept on company perception to the outside.

In conclusion, the employer image is dynamic and influenced by various external aspects. Effective management of the employer image is integral to employer branding, contributing to the attractiveness of the organization as an employer. Reis et al., 2017 demonstrated that employer attractiveness is formed through a combination of instrumental aspects, such as job security and work-life-balance, and symbolic elements, which are "characterized as human traits that applicants attribute to the employer, such as sincerity, cheerfulness, and excitement" Reis et al., 2017, p. 1965. Studies like these show the intertwinement of the employer image with employer attractiveness, which will be discussed more in-depth in the following.

2.1.3 Employer Attractiveness

To be able to distinguish one company from various competitors and appear as the most attractive employer, companies can use the employer attractiveness model when curating an image that they would like to carry to the outside in their EB practices, shaping the employer image. Essentially, EB is done by a company to portray an image to applicants and (prospective) employees, which directly influences employer attractiveness (Reis et al. 2016). Soon after EB became relevant in the late 90s and early 2000s, researchers started focusing on elements that make an employer attractive to employees. One of the first models to effectively summarize the most important elements of employer attractiveness was developed by Berthon, Ewing, and Hah, who in 2005 developed the employer attractiveness model, or *EmpAt*, in short. Their study laid a foundation for organizations to adapt their EB practices and shape their brand image to be able to attract the "right talents" even more effectively and gain a competitive advantage in the recruitment of skilled employees (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). Berthon and colleagues defined employer attractiveness as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" Berthon et al., 2005, p. 156 and conducted a study on over 680 university students to create a five-factor model. Originally, 32 items were identified and then clustered into groups and ranked by relevance. The groups are *interest value*, *social value*, *economic value*, *development value*, and *application value*. Interest value describes a relatively subjective value, with its most relevant item being the employer's valuing of the employee's creativity. Social value describes the relationship that one employee may have with other colleagues, the most important items being

a good relationship with colleagues and having supportive or encouraging colleagues. Economic value best describes the value of remuneration, compensation packages, and more. Development value describes the possibilities for personal and professional growth and development of an individual, most importantly, allowing the employees to feel good about themselves. Lastly, the application value depicts how "hands-on" an employee can work and apply newly learned skills within the organization (Berthon et al., 2005). In a literature overview done on employer attractiveness by Anke Dassler et al. in 2022, attractiveness factors were summarized and again divided into three groups: *transactional attributes*, including compensation, benefits, training, and development; *relational attributes*, including leadership style, work-life balance; and lastly *ideological attributes*, much like symbolic elements as described by Reis et al. These include the company brand, ethics and CSR, social media presence, and reputation (Dassler et al., 2022).

As a special focus in this thesis lies on young talents, special attention was laid on more recent studies that research employer attractiveness to young professionals, especially from Generation Z. Gen Z is defined as anyone "born after 1995, are in their early 20s and have just finished, or are about to finish, their university education" Lassleben and Hofmann, 2023, p. 546. According to a study done by Lassleben and Hofmann, 2023, Gen Z values most a fun work environment, a positive team environment, supportive relationships with colleagues and superiors, as well as flexibility concerning work hours and locations, attractive remuneration and investments in their development (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). Ružić and Benazić, 2023 confirm in their study that "acceptance and a good relationship with colleagues" (p. 95) is the most important factor for Gen Z in the workplace. The two researchers discovered that material working conditions like salary are less important. It is interesting to see that this study found that the factor that is least important to Gen Z is an organization's market activities, including innovative and high-quality products or services (Ružić & Benazić, 2023), an aspect that was previously named as positively impacting employer image (see chapter 2.1.2 Employer Image). Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık had similar findings in 2012 – in their study, they researched the different levels of importance of several factors of unemployed people vs. currently employed people. They, too, found that market value, including things like innovative and high-quality products or services or the opportunity to apply what was previously learned, was less important to Gen Z. They did, however, find out that the importance of this factor grew, the older the respondent was (Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık, 2012). Furthermore, Lassleben and Hofmann, 2023 found that Gen Z ranks aspects like opportunities to apply what has been learned, CSR, and other perks lower. However, as mentioned in the introduction, market research institutes have found the rising demand for diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, so CSR, in Gen Z (McKinsey & Company, 2023), indicating the need for further research on this generation. All in all, Gen Z values most the work environment, including their relationship with colleagues. Ac-

cording to several studies, market activities that shape the employer image are not as important.

To summarize, employer branding is what an employer actively does to positively impact their image and make them attractive as an employer. The employer image can be shaped by EB. However, it is additionally impacted by external factors that are not always in the hands of the organization. Employer attractiveness is shaped by the expectations a (prospective) employee has of an organization. The greater the overlap between these expectations and what is branded by an employer, combined with the company's image, the more likely a potential employee is to apply to that organization. Figure 1 helps in better showcasing the links between these three factors.

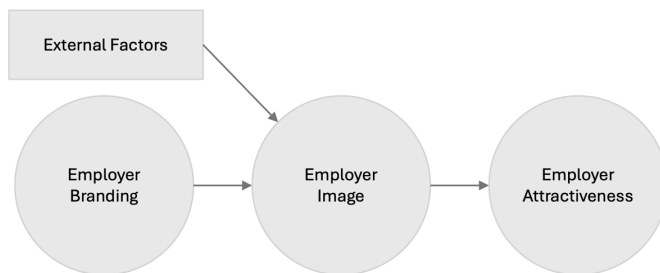


Figure 1: Employer Branding, Image and Attractiveness. Own Illustration.

One aspect that is rarely discussed in these studies is the impact of frontline workers on the brand as an employer and employer attractiveness. Oftentimes, brands decide to market their products by employing frontline workers who have the “right” look. This is especially done by retail clothing companies. Prominent examples of companies that implement this concept include brands like *Abercrombie & Fitch* or *Brandy Melville*, but can also be found in airline companies, hospitality, gastronomy, and more (Warhurst et al., 2000). This concept is also called *Aesthetic Labour* – the concept and its impact on EB will be highlighted in the following.

2.2 The Impact of Aesthetic Labour on Employer Branding

Aesthetic Labour was first defined by Warhurst, Nickson, and colleagues in 2000 when they started noticing a rise in job advertisements that required a certain look from the job candidate. This was predominantly noticeable in the retail and hospitality sectors but was later extended by researchers into the performing arts, hairdressing, or airline industries (Butler, 2014). Known companies that were often associated with these specific types of lookism include Disney, Monarch Airlines, Burton's Retail Group, Hooters, and others (Warhurst et al., 2000). The authors first described the concept as “a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment” Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 4. It is noticeable that all research done since this first definition by Warhurst and colleagues continues to focus on frontline workers in the service and

hospitality sectors. So far, no research has been done on the impact of Aesthetic Labour on employer branding and its impact on organizational attractiveness. This is why, in the following, besides explaining Aesthetic Labour and its theoretical implications alone, the concepts of the *ideal self* will be explained to connect the concept of Aesthetic Labour to employer branding.

2.2.1 Aesthetic Labour

The concept of Aesthetic Labour has appeared in academic papers occasionally over the years. Each research on the topic will give a similar definition of the concept. While Mears defines Aesthetic Labour as “the practice of hiring employees based on their looks, which scholars have documented as a growing practice in the interactive service sector” Mears, 2014, p. 1330, the scholars Luoh and Tsaur, 2023 more recently defined it as “utilizing one's appearance or social attributes to create and present a professional and marketable image” Luoh and Tsaur, 2023, p. 1266. Both definitions emphasize looks being a part of a job that needs to be fulfilled. The researchers Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006 added personality as a part of Aesthetic Labour, impacting the way people are perceived as well. They conclude that a combination of both an aesthetic appearance as well as the right personality is necessary in Aesthetic Labour (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). Warhurst et al., 2000 also added to their original definition of Aesthetic Labour, implying that employers themselves shape and train aesthetic capacities and attributes into ‘competencies’ or ‘skills,’ resulting in a coherent ‘style’ of employee (Warhurst et al., 2000). Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006 criticize this, as personality as well as maintaining an aesthetic appearance take place outside of work, increasing pressure on employees. They also note that this pressure is more predominant in females rather than in males.

In general, researchers emphasize the value of soft skills over an employee's experience or technical skills, mainly focusing on subjective factors like perceived attractiveness, dress sense and style, as well as grooming, but also an employee's ability to relate well with people (Mears, 2014). Generally, most studies that have been done on Aesthetic Labour focus on the fashion, retail, and hospitality industries, as these are the ones with the most amount of customer contact through front-line workers, who are often the employees that are subject to Aesthetic Labour. In these studies, it is emphasized that Aesthetic Labour is not only about looking good but also about sounding right to attract the desired target group into shops or hotels (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a). This subjective screening is already executed during the recruitment process; it can, however, also expand into the actual job through training, controls, or even sanctions, all part of a managerial strategy to shape the right brand image (Mears, 2014), promote products or services of organizations and sell an organizational image to customers (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). The more that the brand image that is shaped by employees aligns with customers' interests, the more likely these are to lower in-

terpersonal barriers and increase feelings like trust towards employees and the brand itself (Pounders et al., 2014).

The researchers Cutcher and Achtel (2012) researched exactly this problematic of the concept, citing recruitment pages like the Australian brand General Pants, stating that “ugly need not apply” (Swan 2012 in Cutcher and Achtel 2017, p. 675). As it is clear, this company implemented Aesthetic Labour for its brand to have more of an appeal for the “right” type of clientele to enter the store. With this approach, they cause “potential applicants to self-discriminate and de-select from jobs requiring an aesthetic they believe they do not possess” Cutcher and Achtel, 2017, p. 675f, a process which can be applied to many brands, whether they purposefully do so or unintentionally create an image like this. Cutcher & Achtel go on to explain that fashion retailers not only sell a product but more so a lifestyle, a statement that can be applied to the cosmetics sector, too. This includes hiring employees that “think regularly about the brand, about how to translate the brand and how to present themselves as artefacts of the brand” (Harquail 2006, p. 168 in Cutcher and Achtel 2017, p. 676). The researchers later carried out a study to gain more insights into the brand attachment of Aesthetic Labourers, involving 19 semi-structured interviews. They found that all respondents were positively tuned towards the brand when first recruited, identifying themselves with the brand’s looks and values. Only later did they become less content with the brand itself after experiencing Aesthetic Labour as obligatory, having to adhere to rules and strict dress codes rather than allowing their style to be a simple part of their identity (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017).

The reason why Aesthetic Labour is particularly popular amongst employers is because it aids in curating a coherent brand image and attracts the targeted consumer. Furthermore, it has been proven that aesthetic elements like stylistic choices may increase perceived status and, therefore, power behavior (Baldessarelli et al., 2022). In a study done by Laura Vonk in 2020, the impact that employees have on the brand image was researched even further. To expand the findings by Cutcher and Achtel, 2017, where aesthetics, specific looks, and appearance are predetermined, Vonk analyzes how peers and colleagues influence aesthetics in the workplace. She does not limit her study to frontline and service sector employees but rather describes the work environment apart from the type of job. Instead, the author’s focus lies on informal norms, organizational cultures, and peers that provide valuable insights into an organization’s brand. Vonk also realizes that an aesthetic evaluation begins from the recruitment process onwards, where the selection of new employees is often based on a “cultural match,” which also includes subjective factors like speech and style (Vonc, 2020).

Aesthetics, in general, significantly influence the market success of products and services. These aesthetic values, as noted by Lies, 2021, offer an added value beyond the functional benefits of a product, which is also known as *hedonic consumption*. This approach to aesthetics has many parallels with the creation of identity, established through affilia-

tions such as “group membership, social class, and other demographic characteristics” Lies, 2021, p. 107. The aesthetic evaluation of a product often leads to a halo effect, where the positive perception of a product or a brand extends to enhance the brand and organizational image. Potential employees will mirror this perception of beauty with their “ideal selves” – the person they want to be and think they will be when using this brand’s products and being employed within this organization (Lies, 2021).

In conclusion, Aesthetic Labour is the practice of hiring employees based on their looks and personalities to help shape and maintain a uniform company image. The implementation of this practice can lead to self-discrimination and de-selection from jobs requiring certain aesthetics (Lies, 2021), increased pressure to maintain aesthetic standards (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017), and increased power distance through colleagues (Vonc, 2020) in (potential) employees, showcasing the problematic of the concept. Why companies address the ideal self, nonetheless, will be discussed more in the following.

2.2.2 The Ideal Self

The concept of the ideal self helps in understanding not only consumer but also employee behavior. The following chapter will explore how a brand image will bridge the gap between the actual self (who people are) and the ideal self, who people aspire to be, through employer branding impacted by Aesthetic Labour.

According to Kim and Sullivan, 2019, the ideal self is often applied in a marketing strategy called *emotional branding*, which is a strategy used to better address customers and their affective states. This approach helps brands to build a strong consumer-brand attachment through sensory experiences or storytelling. For example, sensory branding leverages the sense of sight to create memorable experiences, while storytelling will involve consumers emotionally, allowing them to see themselves as a part of a brand’s narrative. Experiences like these will help consumers better identify with a brand, as people are always looking for products and experiences that resonate with an image of their “ideal self” (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Furthermore, emotional experiences help create a brand personality, which can also be used to convey the ideal self – the brand personality may be mirrored in an individual’s personality, creating a higher bond and loyalty to one brand (Guthrie et al., 2008). The aesthetics of products can also be linked with the ideal self. Lies, 2021 argues that choosing products with an appealing design affirms the consumer’s sense of self, enhancing their self-esteem and aligning with their ideal self. Lies names fashion companies that exploit this by marketing their products as tools to enhance attractiveness, thereby helping consumers achieve their aspirational selves (Lies, 2021). This implies that the concept of the ideal self can also be applied to the cosmetics sector, which is known for selling products to enhance beauty. Not only will the use of products help achieve the look of the ideal self, but it will also aid in mirroring either

their own personality or one they aim to achieve (Guthrie et al., 2008).

Cutcher and Achtel, 2017 furthermore discuss how the ideal self is not only prominent in consumers themselves but also in the workplace. They focus on Aesthetic Labourers in the retail sector who strive to live up to the ideal self the brand represents, modeling clothes and adopting brand standards as a part of their personal and professional identities. This work allowed them to develop a certain taste in clothing, a sense of fashion, and a personal aesthetic, allowing them to become subject to “the admiring gaze of others,” giving them the role they were “striving to live up to... the self [they] would like to become” Cutcher and Achtel, 2017, p. 687. However, some of these Aesthetic Labourers did voice fatigue beginning to form, as they sometimes felt they were playing a role of their ideal self rather than portraying their authentic selves. Vonk, 2020 extends this discussion onto the organizational level, illustrating how aesthetic norms and cultural fits within a company influence how well an employee will fit in or how well they are perceived and valued within the company. Aesthetic norms that belong to the evaluation of a potential employee are formed by peers and can often showcase status inequalities, highlighting the complex dynamics of Aesthetic Labour, the ideal self, and the cultural norm of certain companies (Vonk, 2020).

Malär et al., 2011 named the example of the cosmetics industry and their branding efforts on consumers, stating that cosmetics have long been marketed as products that enhance beauty and bring consumers closer to an ideal version of themselves. Notably, the authors also introduce the term “actual self,” which has been becoming more prominent in recent years. This concept focuses more on the portrayal of an imperfect version of a target group, as consumers are looking for more authenticity in marketing, something especially the brand *Dove* has been implementing for years. After conducting their study, the authors did find higher levels of emotional brand attachment when branding efforts focused on the actual self. Still, aspirational branding to achieve the ideal self works well, however, mainly on consumers with low involvement, self-esteem, or self-consciousness (Malär et al., 2011).

The ideal self is a concept that explains people’s need to fit into their environment and become the version of themselves they strive to be. This chapter has explored how emotional branding, product aesthetics, and workplace norms, all creating a version of a brand that portrays a desirable lifestyle, leverage the ideal self to create strong consumer and employee engagement. However, some studies critically evaluate the concept, scrutinizing it for being outdated and pointing out that consumers build up a much higher level of emotional attachment when campaigns focus on the actual self. By understanding and addressing the aspirations of the ideal self, as well as its shift towards the preference of the actual self, companies can better align their branding strategies with the desires and motivations of their audience. This integration of the ideal self into branding and organizational culture is intricately connected to Aesthetic Labour, demon-

strating how brands and workplaces shape and are shaped by the aspirations of individuals. It can be concluded that the portrayal of an ideal persona will shape not only the employer’s image but also the expectations of a (potential) employee.

2.3 Conceptualizing the Links between Aesthetic Labour and Employer Branding

The above-named concepts can all be connected. While employer branding, image, and attractiveness are very closely related in a construct where one influences the other, the concepts of Aesthetic Labour and the ideal self mainly impact employer image. In Figure 2, I show the intertwinement and reciprocal effects of the following concepts: Employer Branding, Employer Image, Employer Attractiveness, Aesthetic Labour, as well as the Ideal Self.

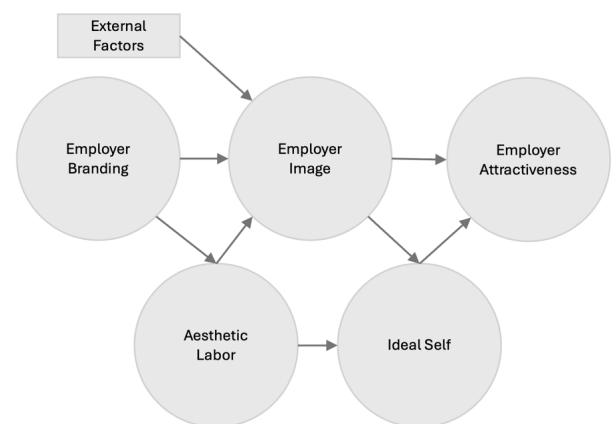


Figure 2: Connection of Employer Branding and Aesthetic Labour. Own Illustration.

Employer branding integrates principles of marketing to enhance a company’s image as an attractive place to work. Aesthetic Labour plays a significant role in this context by intentionally contributing to the formation of an employer image that promises psychological benefits like a sense of belonging or purpose next to functional and economic benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The aesthetic appeal of employees can enhance a company’s image by embodying the qualities the brand portrays. This specifically applies to sectors like fashion retail and hospitality, as well as beauty retailers, where employees’ appearances can reflect a brand’s prestige and aesthetic values, thus attracting customers who aspire to similar ideals (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017). By creating a self-identity for employees through the application of AL, employees will have an easier time imagining themselves as a version of their ideal selves in that organization. This self-identity will enable “a sense of security and a source of meaning” (Brannan et al. 2015, p. 32), rendering an employer more attractive. As “workers are likely to seek opportunities and relations that reinforce their sense of self, rather than those which contravene these notions” (Brannan et al. 2015, p. 33), the importance of focusing on the

portrayal of a certain lifestyle in employer branding is underlined. Through good EB, employees can identify with a brand in two ways: their *social self* as a professional skilled worker and their *ideal self* (Brannan et al. 2015). Furthermore, the Aesthetic Labour performed by employees helps in maintaining a consistent brand image that consumers recognize and trust. The alignment of employee appearance with brand values can reinforce consumer perceptions of quality and desirability, directly influencing brand image (Pounders et al., 2014).

To summarize, AL acts as a concept influencing and being a part of the EB strategy. Primarily, this strategy mainly targets consumers of the brand. However, exactly these consumers are the ones creating a company- and, therefore, employer image in their heads. To what extent exactly the employer image in the beauty industry is impacted by this concept shall be investigated further in the following study.

3 Research Objective

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate whether aspects of Aesthetic Labour exist within the cosmetics industry and how this impacts the employer image and expectations towards companies in the industry as an employer. This investigation aims to bridge the gap between employment expectations that may be formed through the implementation of AL and the reality inside the company. The concept of Aesthetic Labour was chosen to highlight employer branding in the beauty and cosmetics industry from a critical point of view.

Through the preceding literature overview, assumptions can be made that connect EB to AL. First, it can be assumed that Aesthetic Labour practices, like marketing campaigns, employee representation, or media coverage, shape expectations in the type of employee and work inside the company. To see whether this assumption is true, research question number 1 is posed:

How do aspects of Aesthetic Labour in the cosmetics industry influence the perceptions and expectations of prospective employees?

Secondly, by combining the two theoretical frameworks, it can be assumed that Aesthetic Labour is valued to a certain degree by applicants when deciding to apply to a company. Reaching the ideal self plays a big role in this assumption, leading to research question number 2:

To what extent do job seekers prioritize aesthetic aspects when evaluating potential employers in the cosmetics industry?

Lastly, it can be assumed that Aesthetic Labour acts as a factor in shaping expectations about work inside the company by portraying a certain lifestyle to the outside. Through past research, it can be assumed that these expectations are not fully met inside the company. This leads to the third research question:

How does the perception of a job in the cosmetics industry that is shaped by aesthetic aspects differ from the experience within the company once employed?

Most existing research on Aesthetic Labour focuses on its direct impact on customer interactions, with little attention given to how it influences perceptions of the corporate brand among potential employees. Furthermore, it is notable that the concept has rarely been connected to the beauty and cosmetics industry, although branding strategies in the cosmetics industry often focus on beauty and aesthetics, glamorizing the use of beauty products through marketing campaigns. This is why it is plausible that the glamorized image of models or beauty retail workers has the same effect on the employer image of the cosmetics industry as the use of Aesthetic Labourers in retail and hospitality. The actual connection of the glamorized view of cosmetics companies shall be researched in depth through the following study.

By combining both literature on EB as well as AL, it can be assumed that Aesthetic Labour may shape the employer brand and thereby impact job seeker perceptions in one of two ways. The employer image may become overly glamorized, attracting many talents that align their own values and wishes with those that are portrayed by the company. Conversely, potential candidates might feel excluded and deselect themselves from a job if they perceive that their appearance does not align with the brand's aesthetic standards. This remains to be researched.

By identifying the connection between Aesthetic Labour and employer branding, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how aesthetics influence employment dynamics in the cosmetics industry. It is expected that the findings will feed into both academic discussions as well as practical HR and brand management strategies, particularly in industries where aesthetic factors play a significant role.

4 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this study to explore the connections between Aesthetic Labour and employer branding in the cosmetics industry. To find the connections between all the above-described concepts and answer previously defined research questions, a qualitative approach was chosen, specifically using semi-structured interviews. The chapter is split up into the research design and process, including the sampling strategy and method, the data collection method, and the research process, followed by the data analysis method, and ends with critical factors and limitations in the process of the research.

After having viewed the literature on Aesthetic Labour, it is clear that only little research has been done on office workers, as well as in the beauty and cosmetics industry. Instead, past research has focused mainly on frontline service employees. Connecting Aesthetic Labour to employer branding in

Table 1: Overview Interview Respondents

Interview No.	Age	Gender	Experience at Company (in months)	Division	Active in Company (Y/N)
1	24	F	22	Decorative	Y
2	26	F	24	Skincare	Y
3	24	F	6	Haircare	N
4	24	M	6	Skincare	N
5	24	F	10	Decorative	N
6	25	F	6	Haircare	N
7	26	M	6	Decorative	Y
8	24	F	6	Perfumery	N
9	25	F	6	Decorative	Y
10	25	M	6	Skincare	N
11	22	F	6	Decorative	N
12	23	F	4	Perfumery	Y

the beauty and cosmetics industry can be done by conducting interviews with (former) employees who can compare the external image and expectations to the reality inside the company, especially in office jobs.

4.1 Research Design and Process

To help reach this research objective, a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured open interviews will be taken. The reason for this approach is due to the topic's very subjective and emotional nature. Concepts like aesthetics can almost not be quantified, nor can general attractiveness, employer attractiveness, or image. All concepts are very emotionally charged and individual to each person, handling complex phenomena like perceptions and personal narratives. This is why a quantifiable suggestive approach would not achieve the desired results within this study. By leading semi-structured interviews, a general guideline will allow the researchers to find connections between the two concepts of employer branding and Aesthetic Labour whilst also giving the interviewee the space for a personal narrative about their experiences. This may also help in gaining insights into experiences that have not previously been considered.

By conducting these interviews, answers to the previously defined research questions will be given.

4.1.1 Sampling Strategy and Method

As the focus of this study is on Gen Z and its seemingly changing values in the labor market, the sample will be chosen according to the following criteria. Interview respondents should be of age but still a part of Gen Z. This means that respondents should be born no sooner than 1995 and be no older than 29 years of age at the time of the interview, as these were all conducted in the first half of 2024. Furthermore, respondents should have relevant work experience in the beauty and cosmetics industry to be able to speak on their

accumulated experiences. Lastly, respondents should have no more than three years of professional work experience in total to be able to best remember a time before employment and reflect on their expectations of work in the industry. To conclude, a purposive sampling method was used to select participants who met the criteria. As most (past) employees can speak on their experience in this sector, the search for suitable interviewees should be relatively easy and can be done through the interviewer's network, as well as suitable social media platforms like LinkedIn. Furthermore, by implementing the snowballing method, contacts will be asked for a recommendation of further potential participants who will later be contacted. This way, it can be ensured that there is a good mix of personalities and companies represented to be able to draw a conclusion.

Through this sampling method, a total of twelve fitting interview participants were identified, ensuring a comprehensive set of data for in-depth analysis. Table 1 showcases general information on the interview candidates. All interviewees had a maximum of three years of working experience when entering the company. The respondents all belonged to Gen Z, as they were no older than 29 years of age when interviewed for this thesis. All questioned participants had a past of working for well-known brands from the beauty and cosmetics sector, including decorative cosmetics, haircare, and skincare brands, and were able to give insights into five of the biggest companies in the industry.

Table 2: Interview Guideline

General information	Values		Expectations	Experience	
	First brand touchpoints	Decision to apply	Expectations of job	Realities in job	Aesthetic standards
Age	First memory of the brand	Influence of company's focus on beauty and aesthetics	Expected work culture	Confirmation of expectations	Personal fulfillment of aesthetic standards
Duration of employment (in months)	Emotions in connection with the brand	Importance of specific aesthetic elements	Expected type of person	Differences to expectations	Origin of aesthetic standards
Category of employment in cosmetics sector		Influence of portrayed lifestyle through company		Differences to employer promises	
		Elements that influenced brand image			
		Comparison to other companies			

As can be seen, especially the gender distribution in this study reflects gender distribution in the real world quite well. Most participants were active in the decorative cosmetics sector, meaning mass consumer make-up brands that are sold at drug stores and perfumeries. Most candidates had a short-term work experience of roughly six months at the company through a timely limited internship, leaving the company afterward. Of those employees who have already left the company, only one would not consider working there again.

4.1.2 Data Collection Method

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their narratives and experiences. To structure the interviews, an interview guideline was developed, covering three main groups along the research questions to ensure that each question can be answered and no relevant information is missing. The main groups included questions on values, expectations, and experience and were created using a deductive approach, according to Mayring, 2010, using the information that was taken from literature and from those forming assumptions that later led to the research questions. To ensure consistency throughout the interviews, all categories shall be included in every interview. However, depending on the answers of the participants, further questions may be added, modified, or left out. Questions shall allow participants to reflect on their thoughts and emotions towards a certain brand before having been employed there and compare those to thoughts and emotions that re-shaped as soon as they were employed in said company. The following table (see Table 2) shows how questions are categorized and sub-categorized. Each column shows one category of questions that will be asked, and below them, sub-categories in accordance with questions that will be asked.

The full interview guideline has been attached in Appendix A. The interview will begin with questions about initial touchpoints with the brand of the company the interviewee is currently employed in, already leaning into the company's focus on aesthetics and beauty. After that, questions about the interviewee's time of application will be posed to find out how the company's aesthetic focus influenced the decision to apply and how important aesthetic components were in the decision-making process when deciding to take a job at this company over another one, concluding the "values" section of the interview. In the next set of questions, respondents were asked to narrate their expectations after receiving a job offer from the company. This block includes questions about their expectations of the job itself, company culture, well as the type of person that works there. In the last category, the interviewee's current view of the company is compared to their initial impressions to gain an understanding of whether the glamorized view of the company, if there ever was one, to begin with, has changed. This structured approach ensures that all relevant dimensions are explored while providing the flexibility to delve deeper into the interviewees' narratives as opportunities arise.

By categorizing the questions into these three groups and additionally encouraging interviewees to share more than just responses to direct inquiries, the interviews will capture a broad spectrum of experiences, from initial impressions to evolved perceptions. This method will not only confirm the structured research approach but also enrich the data with spontaneous insights, providing a more holistic view of the influence of Aesthetic Labour on employer branding.

4.1.3 Research Process

Of the twelve interviews, eleven were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Google Meets for flexibility. One of the

interviews took place on the campus of the University of Economics and Business Vienna in a private room, ensuring privacy and a safe place for the former employee to speak about their experiences. Before interviewing the respondents, a few minutes of small talk were held to make them more comfortable. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed using automatic transcription software, and proofread for accuracy. Generally, measures were taken to protect the privacy of participants, including the anonymization of all respondents' private data and securing digital files. All interviews were transcribed using an intelligent verbatim transcription method, meaning that filler words like "um" or "uh" were removed to improve readability unless necessary for context. For full data protection, all company names were replaced by placeholders. Initially, all interviews were meant to be held in English. In two of the interviews, however, the language had to be switched to German after the first few minutes, as it was the interview candidates' mother tongue, and they were able to express their experiences much more clearly. For this case scenario, interview questions were carefully translated beforehand to ensure homogeneity. Later, the interview transcripts were translated back to English with careful precision to be comparable to the other interviews.

The interviews had an average duration of 30 minutes, which was enough time for respondents to give insights about their experiences. The shortest interview had a duration of only 20 minutes, while the longest one took 38 minutes.

4.2 Data Analysis Method

To analyze the interviews and gain insights into Aesthetic Labour and employer perception that have not been previously discussed in literature, a deductive approach along the previously defined categories will be most suitable. According to Mayring, 2010, the deductive approach is best used when sorting statements into a before-defined category, allowing for a structured analysis of the interviews. As interviews were conducted rather openly, allowing room for additional questions, the deductive analysis approach can be combined with an inductive approach, if needed, resulting in a mixed-methods qualitative content analysis. To conduct this, the first interviews were thoroughly read, and statements were categorized into three pre-defined categories (values, expectations, and experiences). Any statements that stand out and do not fit into these primarily defined categories will be highlighted to remain open to creating new categories or reiterating the existing ones. Data will be coded and categorized using the MAXQDA software.

4.3 Critical Factors and Limitations of Data Analysis

The concept of Aesthetic Labour concentrates on frontline service workers that represent a brand, thereby shaping its image. The concept is widely applied to the retail and hospitality industries. Known cosmetics brands do work with frontline employees as well, especially at beauty counters in stores like *Douglas* or *Sephora*. It is worth noting, however, that most known cosmetics brands, including *L'Oréal* and its

sub-brands or *Henkel's* brands like *Syoss* and *Schwarzkopf*, are sold in stores like *BIPA* and *dm* in Austria, where the looks of a service employee cannot be controlled by the brands themselves. Besides Aesthetic Labour, marketing campaigns including commercial models of a certain beauty standard, as well as product reviews by trusted role models, may help shape the brand image.

One limitation of this study could include an interviewee's distorted recollection of their experience when working for the brand or when remembering a time before employment at that brand. This is also known as a type of cognitive bias, which occurs when someone is trying to confirm preexisting beliefs by searching for, interpreting, and remembering information that aligns with their beliefs, ignoring contradicting evidence. A cognitive bias is a distorted memory of the past that is not objective and not an accurate recollection of the past. This often occurs when trying to make a decision based on experience – experience is distorted to simplify the decision-making process (Soprano et al., 2024). As recalling emotionally charged memories, like ones connected to role models or favorite brands, cognitive bias may impact the results of this study. Furthermore, employees may not want to speak out on their (current or past) employer in a critical manner. To mitigate this risk, anonymity in all aspects shall be guaranteed to ensure honesty and for interview respondents to feel safe.

In general, the concept of Aesthetic Labour leaves much room for critique, with some authors stating that it "teeters on illegal job discrimination, given the close coupling between appearance and protected categories of race, sex, ability, age, and religion" Mears, 2014, p. 1330. Over the years, a perfect image of companies in the cosmetics and beauty sector has been curated, allowing one to assume that the company stands for and represents only one certain type of person, along with a certain standard of beauty.

The concept of Aesthetic Labour has most definitely gone through several changes over the past years. Through the use of social media, voices of discrimination have gotten louder over the years, "cancel culture" has become big online, and companies are scrutinized for employing only a certain type of person rather than giving equal chances to anyone in the industry. A specific example of this in the retail industry was *Abercrombie & Fitch*, who even went through lawsuits for letting go of people who did not adhere to the company's "look policy," excluding plus-sized shoppers from their clothing lines, as well as claims of looks-based discrimination in their employees (Mears, 2014).

Although it seems as though many of these issues have been resolved or left in the past, a certain image may have still stuck to industries like beauty and retail that are automatically connoted with a certain look. To dive deeper into this critical evaluation, the findings of the interviews will be looked into and discussed over the next chapters.

5 Findings

When conducting the interviews, it became clear that most (former) employees had a similar experience at the company, as well as a certain image that was, at least partially, confirmed. First, values shall be presented, second, expectations, and lastly, experiences.

5.1 Employee Values

When asking respondents about initial brand awareness and perception, most had a very positive image of the brand before applying to work there. This was influenced by market presence, connection to ads as seen on the media, like on television, but also through the connection of an emotional memory or a person they trust being a consumer of that brand. Interestingly, female respondents had a more pronounced first memory of their initial brand awareness, inducing a positive overall response and connotation to the brand. Having role models using and trusting the products of a certain brand builds a first point of contact that curates a positive brand image from an early age. Male respondents more often consciously remember their first touchpoint with a brand to be much later in life, for example, when informing themselves on good, reputable employers or when becoming

aware of the products for personal use and interest that developed later in life. However, through the brands' general omnichannel presence, especially on social media, television, and directly at the point of sales (in drugstores like Bipa, dm, Rossmann or perfumeries like Douglas or Sephora), a high brand awareness was given for all respondents. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that almost all interview respondents work or worked for well-known companies or brands. This leads to an overall very positive image of the industry, as well as the employers themselves. Words used to describe the image of their employer include *luxurious*, *aesthetic*, *prestigious*, *sophisticated*, and *professional*. Several respondents mentioned that the products these companies sell symbolize a luxury for them, a treat that they would not purchase or be able to afford every day. Furthermore, respondents often connected the industry to picture-perfect marketing campaigns, through which their image is shaped to be glamorous, shiny, or even glittery. One respondent summarized the image as *"It shines, it glitters, I'd say. A shiny image. I can't describe it better"* (Interview 4, ll.58 f). A summary of all adjectives used to describe the image of the industry can be seen in Table 3, sorted in alphabetical order.

Table 3: Company Image

Interview No.	Company image
1	Aesthetic, exciting, luxurious, picture perfect, prestigious, sophisticated
2	Expensive, high-quality, luxurious, professional
3	Aesthetic, glamorous, luxurious, professional
4	Established, glittery, shiny image
5	Prestigious
6	Clean, positive, shiny
7	Aesthetic, expensive, prestigious, inclusive
8	Authentic, clean, exclusive, modern, high-end, luxurious, progressive
9	Aesthetic, clean, colorful, expensive, luxurious, modern, playful, trendy
10	Innovative, prestigious, reputable
11	Expensive, glamorous, high-glam, luxurious, progressive, shiny
12	Aesthetic, expensive, glamorous, luxurious, modern

The positive image that is intentionally curated by the companies, connected with trust that was induced by role model's use of the products, played a big role when deciding to apply for a job in the industry, specifically at certain companies selling products they already used. Through personal interest and trust that was built towards the brand as a consumer, respondents had a greater urge to "be a part of it," one candidate responding with *"the better it looks, the more glamorous and exciting, the more I personally [...] wanted to work there and be a part of that somehow, a part of the company and maybe also the lifestyle they market"* (Interview 1, ll. 200 ff). This statement shows that the image that is

portrayed by a company to the outside, including glamour and polished, perfectly curated marketing campaigns, does have an impact on the company's attractiveness as an employer. Through having used the products even before employment, respondents wanted to embody an ideal version of themselves, turning them into a consumer of the products first and later into an employee. Almost all respondents underlined the need for a basic interest in the products and the industry, and this can be watched across all observed companies. The brands' general marketing strategies also made a big impact on their decision to apply, especially when they portrayed a specific image or lifestyle the applicants wished

to achieve. Respondent 8 mentioned, *"I think it was almost the prerequisite that I wanted to apply there because I saw that they somehow radiate exactly what I wanted to be. They have the same image of beauty of aesthetics. My wish was to create a campaign like that and somehow participate creatively and also represent the company in this way"* (Interview 8, ll. 102 f).

Another aspect that was named by several of the respondents was *prestige*. A company's good reputation positively impacts the employer's image, playing a big role in an applicant's decision to apply. This was especially relevant for the male respondents, who initially did not have an emotional connection to the company from being a consumer of the products themselves. However, several females mentioned this aspect additionally to highlight the company's good overall reputation. As stated before, most respondents worked for well-known companies in the industry, which would look good on the CV.

Other aspects that influenced the decision to apply included the portrayal of the company as modern, inclusive, and progressive, an image that has been built up by several companies in the industry over the past few years.

When it came down to deciding between two companies in the cosmetics industry, general efforts of employer branding and attractiveness became relevant in the decision-making process. Here, functional and economic benefits like *professional development*, *pay*, or *geographic proximity* became crucial for the decision. Mainly, however, several respondents did talk about colleagues (interns) whose main motivation to apply to the job was the company's *prestige*, one respondent stating: *"People just want to go there because it says something about themselves"* (Interview 5, l. 307). Several respondents did mention turning down jobs in the food industry or for other FMCG companies, implying that they valued the image and products inside the beauty and cosmetics industry more greatly.

This concludes the findings of the first section of the interview that focused on the values of (former) employees. While functional and economic benefits do remain important for the application decision, it is clear that very many applicants are pulled in by the company's positive image, prestige, and portrayal of a lifestyle to the outside.

5.2 Expectations

In the next step, the respondents were asked about their expectations of work inside the company, specifically how they imagined company culture and the type of person that worked there. Respondents were not explicitly asked to describe the way employees would look, but rather, which type of person they expected to work in the industry. The question was purposefully posed openly to see whether looks played an important role in the expectations of a future employee. Most respondents did describe the way they imagined a potential colleague to look like. One respondent even went as far as describing a persona. *"It would be a female person. Middle-aged. Not too old, but also not super, super young. [...]"*

I think young people bring in this new spirit, which always represents this novelty. [...] Very modern and innovative in terms of mindset. And also, in terms of appearance, the way the person looks physically. Probably more sporty. Also, this clean girl aesthetic. Simple, clean. 'I take care of myself'. 'I have the need to take care of myself'" (Interview 6, ll. 178 ff). There was a very clear image of a person working in this industry. Most other respondents also had a clear image in their minds when describing what they expected their future colleagues to look like. Respondents mentioned that they thought employees would be mainly *female*, have a *beauty affinity*, be *chic*, *fashion- and cosmetics-conscious*, *beautiful*, *"styled to a T"*, fit into a *European standard image of beauty*, described as blonde hair and white skin. They would always be *put together*, very *neat*, and have *perfect skin*. This description oftentimes fits the persona the companies use to advertise their products and brands. *"You think that they really embody what the brand embodies"* (see interview 2, ll. 190 f). It is noticeable that all respondents who mentioned the looks of employees used very positively connotated words to describe these looks. In Table 4, adjectives that were used to describe expected employees are cumulated.

However positive the expected looks of prospective employees were, the expected personalities of employees differed and included positive as well as negative characteristics that employees might have. Expected positive characteristics included words like *hard-working*, *ambitious*, *innovative*, *professional*, and *creative*. However, in this category, many respondents included negatively connotated words like *snobby*, *strict*, *arrogant*, *superficial*, *mean*, *elbow-mentality*. One respondent even explicitly mentioned being afraid of these traits, stating, *"I was scared that the people working there were also kind of like, how do you say it, a bit snobby"* (Interview 2, ll. 125 f).

A few respondents also mentioned having a prejudice in thinking the type of person who purchases the products would also work for the brand, which is where adjectives like *wealthy*, *elitist*, *academic*, or *snobby* came into play, being underlined by statements like *"I assume that the people who buy the brand also work for the brand"* (Interview 2, ll. 180 f).

Some respondents spoke about the origin of this image they had of an employee in the beauty and cosmetics industry. Here, it is evident that pop culture, movies, and television shows, as well as the company's own branding and marketing campaigns, shape general expectations. Some respondents named movies like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Ugly Betty*, or *Mean Girls*, where employees that work in this industry are portrayed the way they described them: having a put-together look on the outside but having rude and condescending character traits. Others mentioned their role models having a decisive factor in shaping their image of a person inside that industry, labeling the women seen on popular television shows like *Germany's Next Topmodel* as *ungrateful* and even *bitchy*; an image that has spilled over to the respondents.

Respondents were also asked about their expectations of the general working culture and the job itself. It was no-

Table 4: Expectations

Interview	Expected Characteristics	Expected looks
1	Hard-working, performance-oriented, ambitious, motivated	–
2	Snobby	Luxurious, wealthy, upscale
3	Multi-cultural, innovative, professional	Picture-perfect, beauty affinity, eye on aesthetics, female-dominated
4	Elitist, academic	Sparkling, formal, chic, fashion-& cosmetic-conscious, female, young
5	Communicative	Embody aesthetics and beauty, girly, chic
6	Modern & innovative mindset	Clean, shiny, well-groomed, beautiful, female
7	Diverse, strict, formal, superficial, arrogant	Aesthetic, put together
8	Like-minded, creative, driven	Standard European beauty image, uniform
9	Professional, creative, outgoing	Colorful, neat, wearing makeup, outgoing, eye for aesthetics
10	Fancy, extroverted	“Marketing girlies”, fancy, put together
11	Mean, elbow-mentality	Ideal of beauty, perfect skin, put together, dressed up, chic, picture-perfect, blonde, white
12	Hard-working, ambitious, motivated, arrogant	Beautiful, chic, put-together

ticeable that the positive image they had of the company beforehand also translated to the expectations about the job. Respondents were very excited to work at a well-known company, expecting them to be modern employers with flat hierarchies, well thought-out, professional, serious, and dynamic processes. Respondents had hoped to be a part of the strategic creation of campaigns and be able to creatively give individual input. This shows how positively the company image that was curated before even applying, through marketing campaigns and word-of-mouth, as well as external representation through employees, also impacts the expectations in the work itself.

To conclude the section on expectations, it can be said that expectations were set by the image that already existed inside the prospective employees' minds, mainly shaped by media.

5.3 Experience

To be able to compare these initial expectations to the reality of working inside the company, interviewees were then asked to compare their expectations to their experience. Here, results can be split up three-fold. There were positive and negative changes in perception, as well as confirmations in expectations. In general, it was interesting to see that respondents who, at the time of the interview, were still currently employed at the company mentioned far more positive aspects rather than negative ones.

Positive changes were perceived, especially concerning the characteristics of colleagues and other employees. Expected negatively connotated characteristics like *arrogance* or *snobbiness* were retracted and replaced by words like *human*, *approachable*, *diverse*, *creative*, *unique*, or *warm*. Colleagues inside the team were enthusiastic about the products, through which a positive work environment was created. Colleagues connected through personal interests and joy in beauty, were proud to work in the industry, and showed themselves to be very supportive towards others. Many respondents did expect the employers to be rather modern and not conservative. However, even those who did not think about this before mentioned the companies being very modern, progressive, and colorful. One respondent said, “We are moving away from the [...] socially constructed image of beauty, and there is simply a lot of progress” (Interview 1, ll. 87 ff) concerning positive developments in the direction of consumer needs, especially in terms of sustainability, diversity, or in aiding disabled people in recent years. Through an overall positive experience, many of the respondents still feel an emotional connection to the brand even after employment, opting for the products of the brands they worked for or feeling a sense of pride when seeing the products in stores.

Besides a very positive and uplifting work environment in general, some aspects were perceived more negatively than originally expected. Many of the respondents were disappointed in the strategy, seeing many things pre-dominated

through the parent company or simply repeating old ideas, taking away strategic and creative elements from the job. Because of this, one candidate even said: *"I kind of already lost hope a bit that it could really be my dream job"* (Interview 8, ll. 191 f). Some respondents who completed an internship mentioned a relatively flat learning curve, repetitive tasks, and little innovation inside the team. In general, processes were described to be slow rather than dynamic, leading to overtime. On the other hand, when there was innovation, there was very much pressure to be innovative, leading to employees crying or having anger outbursts. Market research results were partially even faked to secure internal budgets, and processes were not as thought out as expected. Through this, one candidate stated that *"this glamorous and professional image that I had of many brands has disappeared a bit"* (Interview 3, l. 173). Another aspect that was mentioned here was how competitive the work environment in general was. Although inside the teams, a positive overall attitude ruled, there was constant pressure and competition to rise in hierarchy or to secure a full-time job after an internship. There is only little negotiation leverage, as the companies know very well that there are hundreds of applicants who will work for them under their own conditions. Through this, especially in larger companies, work could seem impersonal, and other colleagues could even seem a bit arrogant.

A confirmation of expectations was seen, especially concerning the look of employees who work in the beauty and cosmetics industry. As expected, colleagues and other employees in the industry had a general interest in beauty and luxury, expressing their interest through clothing and makeup, achieving a very *upscale, chic, perfectly coordinated* look. As one respondent stated, *"You have a certain expectation which people go to [company] and are interested in it. And that's how it is"* (Interview 4, ll. 184 f), mentioning that you expect employees to be fashion- and cosmetics-conscious. Another respondent also confirmed this by stating employees personify the *"core concept of aesthetics and beauty. [...] That's what the people on average embodied very strongly"* (Interview 5, ll. 169 f). Throughout the interviews, it was noticeable that many respondents mentioned a very uniform, homogenous look. Although some respondents mentioned a development towards more diversity, many stated that everyone has a certain look, and many follow a classic (European) beauty ideal – as one respondent stated: *"It definitely is one certain type of person that works there, we're very similar; we all look the part"* (Interview 12, l. 203 f). This was so noticeable throughout the different companies that many even asked themselves whether this was purposefully or intentionally done to maintain a certain image to the outside. Beauty standards were noticed especially in customer-facing roles, like in sales or marketing and event departments – departments in which employees play a representative role to the outside. One respondent connected this realization to the origin of their image of the industry beforehand, stating: *"They always take as representatives people who best address the potential employee in their opinion. And so you can see again, okay, those are the type of*

people who work there. And that spreads, that goes through at some point. Once you've seen it once, you probably transfer it directly to several people" (Interview 6, ll. 199 ff). Several respondents can imagine that this is a selection bias that already takes place during the employment process, during interviews, or even through pre-defined criteria that AI goes through when evaluating CVs and motivational letters in the company's web interface. Whether or not companies evaluate applicants by their looks, which would indicate the targeted use of Aesthetic Labour, could not be confirmed. However, many respondents indicate in their statements that there is a preference, one respondent assuming that *"maybe in marketing you have a lot of touchpoints to customers, especially to end-consumers. Maybe there's a reason why and they do it on purpose"* (Interview 11, ll. 308 ff). All statements with assumptions about a selection bias can be found in Appendix B.

Fulfilling a certain aesthetic standard is not only a part of the selection process but can additionally be observed inside these companies. Although maintaining a certain look is not obligated by the company, a certain internal pressure is noticed by the respondents, stating they want to look nice, wear makeup, and dress chic to fit in. Pressure is noticed by most respondents, especially females, to adhere to a beauty standard, put additional thought into outfit choice, and to represent the brand, even act as a brand ambassador for the company. Male respondents did not notice this pressure as much, comparing it to a level of professionalism that would be found in every industry. According to many of the female respondents, the entire company culture is built up around acquiring and maintaining a beauty standard, and even though individuality is celebrated more and more, there *"is a certain culture here, and you have to fit in. And if you don't fit in, then it's not for you to work there"* (Interview 5, ll. 180 f). Some respondents even mentioned that it was noticeable the higher in the hierarchy employees were, the more they fit into a classical standardized beauty image, indicating that, to be promoted, you do have to fit into the company's standardized look. Some respondents did discuss the changing image of beauty inside the industry, stating that it was oftentimes the older generations that still hold on to an outdated image of work inside the industry, their mindset still being different and holding on to the etiquette that was established when they began working. *"For them, it was just a lot more classic, and if you dressed less chic, you might have been perceived as less"* (Interview 9, ll. 305 f).

One respondent touched more deeply on this changing image of the beauty industry in general, stating that it is a process. They are excited to *"see how this image will change in general as soon as the younger generation, even younger than me, enter the job market and carry their own image of the beauty industry with it. I think they are already growing up with a completely different image"* (Interview 11, ll. 237 ff). Whether or not this will change intentional or unintentional selection biases remains to be discovered in the future.

To summarize the findings about the experience inside the company, it can be said that some respondents were

blinded by the industry's shining image and disappointed when seeing behind the scenes. The perfect image that is portrayed to the outside not only shapes product brands but also the employer brand. By perceiving a very clean and perfect image, applicants may automatically assume that the processes behind the final product also run more smoothly, leading to disappointment in the long run. It is clear that aesthetic standards are very much a part of the work culture inside these companies, leading to internalized pressure to fit in. To conclude, one respondent mentioned that the way a company portrays itself to the outside world, both through employer branding as well as through general product marketing, will naturally attract applicants who identify with those products and see themselves in that lifestyle (see interview 1). Another respondent's reply adds to this statement: in the experience of respondent 2, there is a very cohesive, uniform standard concerning looks in departments that work a lot with consumers to keep up a certain image. To credibly sell a brand to the consumer, they should "fit in" to the brand and radiate the brand's image and values, which, in a superficial industry, includes fitting the look. *"When you work for the brand, use the brand, AND embody everything they promise, so you don't have pigmentation spots, you don't have wrinkles, then, of course, the whole picture becomes more credible. And of course, that influences the brand image, and the trust people have in the products enormously"* (Interview 2, ll. 314 ff), indicating a reason why beauty and cosmetics companies may intentionally be applying Aesthetic Labour practices.

6 Discussion

In the beginning of the thesis, three research questions were posed, whose aim it was to find the connection between Aesthetic Labour and employer branding. The first research question aimed to find out, *how Aesthetic Labour practices influence the perceptions and expectations of (prospective) employees*. Through the interviews, it became clear that, for all respondents, brand image was not only formed by classic EB strategies. For many respondents, aspects like brand knowledge and loyalty, as well as identification with the products influenced the image of the company and brands more than standard EB practices – especially for females, that were exposed to the brands and products from a very young age. By seeing consumers in perfumeries or watching role models like their mothers use and trust the products, a positive image and connection was automatically formed from a young age. This fits to the research of Pounders et al., 2014, who also mentioned rising trust in a brand, the more aligned it is with customers interests. Furthermore, models in beauty campaigns portrayed an ideal that respondents mentioned they wanted to follow and be a part of (Guthrie et al., 2008; Kim & Sullivan, 2019). This shows that many of the female respondents were consumers of the products first, before wanting a look behind the scenes and deciding to apply. Male respondents often times had less of an emotional connection to the companies and brands, looking for things like prestige or a "big

name" for the CV. For them, brand loyalty grew more strongly during and after employment (Cutcher & Achter, 2017). It is true, however, that the image that is created through product marketing campaigns influences the expectations of the respondents on the type of person who works in a cosmetics firm (Barnett et al., 2006; Collins & Stevens, 2002). When asked to describe the type of person who could work in a cosmetics company, most named traits that adhere to the classical beauty standard. Many respondents had a very clean, professional, perfect image of beauty and cosmetics companies. This could be due to the clean, high-gloss campaigns with models that show no or only little signs of imperfection. For years, the cosmetics industry used this classic approach to sell a product promise. Meanwhile, more and more campaigns include unedited models, with pigmentation spots or wrinkles, utilizing the *actual self* to speak to consumers (Malär et al., 2011). Still, it seems as though the old image prevails in the minds of many. It is possible, that the image that is formed when the first touchpoint with the brand is created, often at a young age, through watching role models, remains engrained into people's minds and is hard to change. Even with cosmetics companies' recent efforts to show more inclusion and diversity in marketing campaigns, a very high-glam, picture-perfect image remains.

To conclude, Aesthetic Labour practices, including the hiring of employees due to their looks or utilizing a certain type of model in marketing campaigns do have an impact on brand and therefore employer image. As Luoh and Tsaur described in their research paper published in 2023 on the hospitality industry, a parallel can be drawn to the beauty industry, where the assumption can be confirmed, that Aesthetic Labour practices influence both brand and employer image.

The second research question aimed to find out, *to what extent job seekers prioritize aesthetic factors, such as brand image and lifestyle portrayal, when evaluating potential employers*. As it was previously presumed, it is safe to say that the portrayal of an aesthetic look and lifestyle through employees as well as marketing campaigns have an effect on a company as an employer and the image of the workplace (Luoh & Tsaur, 2023). Here, many respondents, as expected, mentioned wanting to be a part of what the brands portrayed and wanting to look behind the scenes of the picture-perfect image they had from the outside. Mainly female respondents were pulled by the image and lifestyle, and even more so if they already used and trusted the products. Often times, young girls get acquainted with brands through people they trust. This could be their mom, aunt, or other role models. Surely, this too has a connection to the ideal self – by seeing the products that trusted role models use, emotional values like their own interest, trust and loyalty in the brand grow (Lies, 2021). This familial connection played a notable role in shaping respondents' perceptions and trust in the brand before even considering it as an employer. Male respondents, especially when they had no touchpoints to the products at all, did not consider lifestyle portrayal or other aesthetic factors as part of their decision to apply and take the job. Again,

rational factors like functional and economic benefits (see chapter 2.1.1; Ambler and Barrow 1996) were weighed more strongly. Generally, symbolic elements of the employer were weighed more strongly than instrumental elements (Reis et al., 2017) – these became more relevant when deciding between two companies in the cosmetics industry. In this case, symbolic elements can be viewed as the company and employer image that is shaped by Aesthetic Labour practices. It was also interesting to see, how few respondents mentioned diversity and inclusion as a reason for company attractiveness. Apparently, the aesthetic image that was portrayed for so many years still prevails and changing a mindset will take longer than trying to change a company's image. To conclude, Aesthetic Labour practices along with its consequences did play a role when respondents decided to apply.

Lastly, it was researched, *how the perception of a job in the cosmetics industry, that is shaped by aesthetic aspects differs from the experience within the company, once employed.* In the beginning, when exploring respondents' image before employment, relatively many negatively connotated adjectives, like snobby, superficial and arrogant were named to describe expected characteristics. However, many of these descriptions were redefined, as soon as the respondents started working inside the company and getting to know colleagues. Respondents mention noticing that a lot of effort is made inside the company to upkeep a certain image to the outside. A few respondents mentioned that even inside the office building, the entry halls are usually very glamorous. However, a few floors up, the office building could belong to any other company. It is as though the entry hall is used as a showcase for the company, to impress potential clients, including flagship stores, luxurious coffee bars or photo walls. It is noticeable that in departments, where employees have much contact with (potential) customers, a certain look and aesthetic is sustained, to keep up a certain image (Mears, 2014). Here, it really becomes evident, that cosmetics companies are not only selling beauty enhancing products, but they are also selling a lifestyle in every single area (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017). Besides keeping up the image, these companies operate just as any other business does internally. When asking respondents about their experience inside the company, the consensus on the *type of person* working there was very positive. They emphasized, how well you can develop your career based on interests, being motivated by very driven colleagues, and adjectives used to describe employees of those companies turned positive, including more words like *ambitious, engaged* and *enthusiastic*. This really shows that some of the characteristics that are associated with a certain "look" are much more superficial and negatively connotated than the reality shows.

It is true, that a certain appearance was upheld in all companies. Although there were no official rules or a dress code, most respondents did feel pressured to maintain a certain standard. This is mainly because of an internal pressure – most employees that work for these firms have a very high interest in beauty, so they do showcase it to the outside. This in turn creates an internal pressure for other employees

and, although they are not forced to, they still dress a certain way and maintain a certain look to fit in. Especially in leading managerial positions, employees embody the epitome of what the beauty industry stands for, which shows, that if you want to climb the career ladder, you should embody what the beauty industry stands for on a daily basis. As maintaining a certain look needs to be conducted outside of work, this pressure to do so may very much turn negative, into a psychological burden (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). To conclude, employees do have a preference for luxury, beauty and aesthetics and showcase that in their own styling, while still having humane, friendly, open-minded mindsets.

Aesthetic Labour is not implemented as strictly in office working cultures, and not regulated by the employers themselves. This shows the main difference to frontline workers, where employees are purposefully picked based on their looks (Luoh & Tsaur, 2023; Mears, 2014; Warhurst et al., 2000). However, several respondents mentioned, that there may be a bias on HR side, as (almost) all employees working for these companies portray a uniform image of beauty to the outside (Vonk, 2020). Would someone, that is not interested in maintaining their looks, be offered the same job opportunities? The strategic implementation of Aesthetic Labour as employer branding strategy cannot be confirmed. It can be assumed, however, that openly communicating the implementation of Aesthetic Labour practices, especially in a world that values inclusion and diversity more and more, would be more harmful to a company than it would do good (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017).

Concerning the working culture inside these companies, several employees were disappointed to look behind the scenes of a company that, to the outside, is portrayed as picture perfect. Internal processes do not work as good as imagined, there was a lack in development of strategy, there was less structure than expected, tasks became repetitive, and the learning curve (especially within internships) became relatively flat. One respondent stated, that *"this glamorous and professional image that I had of many brands has disappeared a bit"* (Interview 3, ll. 173 f), because they now know how they are managed internally. This re-shapes the employees' employer image, which is shaped by the combination of external perceptions and internal realities (Sivertzen et al., 2013).

To answer research question number three, the perception that employees had of companies in the cosmetics and beauty industry does differ from the reality inside the company concerning work inside the company as well as the characteristics of employees. However, expectations concerning the look of employees can be confirmed, confirming the assumption that employers may strategically or unintentionally be curating a uniform look throughout the company (Vonk, 2020).

In general, based on the analysis of the conducted interviews, it can be said that especially media including television, movies, and social media, marketing campaigns, as well as employees themselves shape the brand image. By portraying this image of beauty and aesthetics to the outside, people

that are interested in these product categories, often times already including the products of these brands in their private lives to become a version of their ideal self (Kim & Sullivan, 2019), are more likely to apply here. The EB practices, that are implemented by companies in the beauty and cosmetics industry seem to work, as all respondents described very similar personas, when speaking of their colleagues.

The image that applicants have of a company is generally influenced by marketing campaigns and personal relations, which goes along with the branding process of Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, see chapter 2.1.1). By winning over consumers first, they will most likely obtain a positive image of the company itself, and want to be a part of it, turning consumers into applicants and later employees. The respondents that were interviewed for this study did all work for very reputable employers, that, through branding strategies, improved their image as an employer. The good employer image was important to all respondents; however, male respondents mentioned it more predominantly. This may be due to their interests in the brands and products themselves being lower. As stated in chapter 2.1.2, factors that positively impact employer image include innovativeness, CSR initiatives and the effective communication of brand values. Especially the latter is communicated very strongly by companies in the beauty and cosmetics industry, to allow strong employee identification with the company and its brands (Brannan et al. 2015).

The companies' general attractiveness was also mentioned in many of the interviews. When comparing Berthon and colleagues' EmpAt model to the statements of the respondents, it becomes clear that interest value, social value, and development value were very interesting to the respondents in the beauty and cosmetic industry. Only two of the respondents mentioned economic value, showing that it is rather unimportant in the industry. One respondent stated that *"as an applicant, [you] have bad cards to ask for much more payment in the application process. Because they know very well there are 250 other people in line who absolutely want this job. [...] Just because it's an aesthetic company"* (Interview 5, ll. 312 ff). Here, you can see how unimportant economic value is at first when the main goal is to enter the company. Ružić & Benazić also discovered this in their study, stating that material working conditions are less important for employer attractiveness Ružić and Benazić, 2023, see chapter 2.1.3. Application value was something that the respondents did not mention when speaking of their attraction to the company before employment. However, it quickly became clear that, even in an aesthetic company, it is important to have tasks that are not too repetitive. As stated in Chapter 2.1.3, Gen Z especially values a fun work environment, a positive team environment as well as a supportive relationship with colleagues and superiors. The interviews partially confirmed this, with respondents highlighting the positive and familial work environment within teams, making these companies attractive to them (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). This does, however, not explain why respondents applied to the companies in the first place, as this was not the image they had of companies

within the beauty industry beforehand.

All respondents confirmed that Aesthetic Labour was not an official prerequisite by the employer, unlike in the retail industry. However, they do still have very much control over the type of person they employ, and employees (respondents) do notice a very cohesive look inside the company, which might imply either a bias on the HR side or internal, not communicated aesthetic standards. It does make sense for large companies that sell products that enhance beauty to work with ideal images, especially to win over consumers with low self-esteem (Malär et al., 2011). Through marketing campaigns, brand ambassadors, and even employees that all follow one image, consumers will be more likely to purchase these products, feeding into their own ideal selves (Lies, 2021). The coherent portrayal of brand images throughout the cosmetic and beauty industry creates an image of the self that consumers want to follow. Ultimately, this even feeds into the desire to be employed at the company. Many respondents mentioned this, stating things like *"I really wanted to be a part of it"* (Interview 2, ll. 75) or *"I think it was almost the prerequisite that I wanted to apply there because I saw that they somehow radiate exactly what I wanted to be. They have the same image of beauty, of aesthetics"* (Interview 8, ll. 101). Cutcher and Achtel, 2017 touch on "selling a lifestyle" when hiring employees, an aspect that was mentioned several times and, therefore, underlined through this study. Whether or not this leads to self-deselection of other candidates could not be researched (see Cutcher and Achtel 2017), as all respondents did have a job in the industry.

It can be said that the portrayed and advertised image somewhat distort the reality of work in a company. Automatically, recipients assume that the perfect portrayal of the industry can be transferred to the way of working inside the company, which is often untrue.

7 Practical Implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study mainly shows that all that glitters is not gold. Employer branding through the use of Aesthetic Labour, aesthetic campaigns, and brand ambassadors is a great way for companies to curate a "picture-perfect" image of themselves to applicants. As it became clear, the image that employers in the industry curated does not always match up with the realities inside the companies. For young applicants, it may be interesting to look past this initially curated image and rank employers based on attractiveness factors that are more important to them.

7.1 Practical Implications

This study is interesting, especially for HR specialists working in the beauty and cosmetics industry and focusing on a more diverse representation inside the company. As it is clear that Aesthetic Labour practices can lead to negative effects, like self-discrimination or deselection from specific

jobs, HR specialists inside the industry could ensure that more inclusive, diverse, and unbiased employer branding practices are implemented within the company. To prevent selection biases when employing new personnel, companies in the beauty industry may consider outsourcing their hiring processes to unbiased third parties to ensure equal opportunities for all applicants, independently from their looks.

Another topic that was briefly touched on was the psychological burden that may arise from the pressure of fitting into the look that is predominant in the industry. Managers inside these companies should, primarily, gain a broad understanding of the impact of aesthetic standards and, going from that, implement employee well-being programs that support things like mental health and job satisfaction.

7.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include the selection of the sample, which was briefly discussed in the methodology section of this paper. The sample was predominantly female, which reflects the gender distribution in the industry but may limit the understanding of Aesthetic Labour practices from a male perspective. Furthermore, the cultural background of the respondents was very similar, likely influenced by Western beauty standards. This limitation means that the findings might not be entirely applicable to other regions with different cultural norms and aesthetic standards. In future research, a larger sample size, including a more balanced gender representation as well as a bigger geographical distribution, could be taken into account.

Respondents were asked to recall memories and experiences from before their employment, which could lead to a retrospective cognitive bias. This retrospective approach may introduce bias, as memories can be selective and influenced by subsequent experiences. Participants might have unintentionally omitted or altered details over time. A future study could focus on interviewing two focus groups, one that has not been employed in the industry yet, and comparing those findings to a sample group that is currently employed in the industry. Furthermore, the study focused on employees with relatively short-term experience (maximum of three years) and included a high proportion of interns. This may limit the understanding of how Aesthetic Labour practices impact long-term employees and those in higher-level positions within the organization, which could also indicate an idea for future research focusing on the long-term impact of Aesthetic Labour practices.

In general, it was noticeable that interview respondents who were currently still employed in the company they were speaking about utilized more positive language to describe their experience, being more careful to talk about confidential details. This also represents a limitation in this study that may have been prevented through additional measures to make respondents feel safe and comfortable in the interview setting.

Additional directions for future research include conducting expert research with HR professionals to uncover whether

there is a strategy behind the assumed selection bias that was found in this study. Furthermore, to be able to effectively implement employee well-being strategies, the effects of Aesthetic Labour on employee (un-) well-being, including aspects like job satisfaction or aesthetic pressure, could be conducted. This way, employee well-being programs can be implemented more precisely.

By addressing the practical implications and pursuing further research in the area, companies in the beauty and cosmetics industry can ultimately enhance their employer branding strategies, create a more inclusive work environment, and improve overall employee satisfaction and performance.

8 Conclusion

All in all, it can be said that Aesthetic Labour does play a significant role in the office work environment of cosmetics companies. Investigating the influence of the concept on employer branding within the cosmetics company has yielded significant insights into how indirect factors, beyond traditional employer branding strategies, shape the perceptions and expectations of prospective employees. This study highlights that brand image and loyalty, often established through early exposure to products through role models or family, as well as marketing campaigns, play a crucial role in forming an attractive employer image. The research underlines the role of Aesthetic Labour in the cosmetics industry, revealing that it not only affects customer-facing roles but is also applicable to internal organizational culture. The portrayal of an ideal aesthetic and lifestyle through marketing and employee appearances significantly influences job seekers' decisions, particularly among those already familiar with the brand. However, this study also reveals a discrepancy between the external, glamourized image and the internal realities of working within these companies, with some employees experiencing a mismatch between expectations and actual working conditions. Contrary to companies in the fashion and retail industry, cosmetics companies do not openly recruit only "good-looking" personnel, leaving them out of controversial discussions in the media.

In Generation Z, there is a noticeable rise in the demand for corporate social responsibility, particularly in terms of diversity and representation. Many respondents observe an increase in diversity-focused and inclusive marketing campaigns from their employers. Although this shift is viewed positively, many employees still report a sense of uniformity regarding the employees within the company. This indicates that a changed external image does not necessarily reflect internal change or that internal change takes far longer to implement than external marketing campaigns. Furthermore, this finding suggests that while Aesthetic Labour may be exclusionary, it does not significantly harm the employee's experience within the company or, more importantly, a company's reputation as long as a different, more inclusive image is portrayed outwardly.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between Aesthetic Labour and employer branding in the beauty and cosmetics industry. The findings of this study hold valuable implications for both academic discussions and practical HR and brand management strategies, particularly in industries where aesthetics play a significant role. All in all, Aesthetic Labour represents a darker side of employer branding that has not been researched in this context before.

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List of Abbreviations

AI Artificial Intelligence

AL Aesthetic Labour

CSR Corporate Social Responsibility

EB Employer Branding

EmpAt Employer Attractiveness

FMCG Fast-Moving-Consumer-Goods

Gen Z Generation Z

HR Human Resources

HRM Human Resource Management

SHRM Strategic Human Resource Management