Some of my Customers […] Take off Their Rolex Prior to a Client Meeting
Luxury Display at Work and the Social (Re)Construction of the Organizational Image

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ABSTRACT In this study, we follow-up on the social construction of an organizational image focusing on the role of luxury watches worn at work. In this way, we discuss the crucial role of employees' aesthetic appearance as a projector of organizational values to internal and external audiences. Drawing on the theoretical lenses of gestalt theory and the literature on aesthetics of labour, we examine the dynamics of luxury display in organizational settings via a qualitative approach, a netnography based on 193 topical entries. The netnography was guided by a pre-study conducting interviews with high level experts from the luxury watch industry. Our findings...
show that the display of a luxury watch at work can contribute to a harmonious organizational image. However, professional settings exist where the watch triggers an inconsistency in an employee's appearance relative to the organization that is being represented. Thus, disturbing the overall organizational image. Adopting a gestalt theoretical perspective to this social construction process, we define the "organizational gestalt": as a dynamic projection of organizational values informed and conveyed by aesthetic, organizational representations (in this study: employees’ wristwatches). We theorize that a gestalt-switch – a conversion of a previously stable organizational image – occurs when an employee's appearance projects values that conflict with the established aesthetic, organizational representations. As a consequence, the authenticity and credibility of the employee and the organization may suffer.

KEYWORDS: luxury display at work, aesthetics of labour, social construction, organizational image, gestalt-switch, netnography, luxury watch

Introduction

In 2010 Swiss bank UBS made headlines sending a dress code to its customer-facing staff that explicitly encouraged the use of a wristwatch, given that the watch carries the notion of "reliability and great care for punctuality". However, as wristwatches are often more than simple indicators of time, their display in an organizational setting can also be controversial. Anecdotal evidence shows that particularly luxury timepieces may lead to unwanted outcomes when worn at work. In a recent newspaper article, a reporter recalls a visit to the dentist, who was wearing a luxury watch during the treatment. Although the dentists’ work was satisfactory, the journalist concluded that she did not want to return to the dental practice, given the doubt that the organization might prioritize profits over patient well-being.

In this paper, we follow-up on this peculiar phenomenon drawing on an emerging research strand of organizational literature that engages with the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image in professional work settings. This research body stresses the processes involved in the formation of an organizational image, understood here as an aesthetic expression in the organizational context that is socially constructed and thereby grounded in “visual impression and expression”. In today’s organizational environments, where employees often stand representative for organizational products and services, their appearance moves centre stage in this social (re)construction process. As a first touching point between the organization and the external environment, the work appearance of front-line employees is a crucial element when
conveying organizational values and informing the organizational image. By drawing on the theoretical lenses of gestalt theory, and the literature on aesthetics of labour and branded labour, we examine the dynamics of luxury watch display in organizational settings. We build on a qualitative netnography based on 193 topical entries derived from one of the largest luxury watch online forums. The netnography is guided by the insights from a pre-study with interviews with high level experts from the luxury watch industry. The overall research question is: how does a luxury watch worn at work influence the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image?

Our findings suggest that the display of a luxury watch in an organizational setting can contribute to a harmonious organizational gestalt. A gestalt "refers to something which is stable in its dynamic nature, something which is recognizable as such as a result of a process which structures its inner form". Thus, an employee wearing a luxury timepiece can contribute to conveying an organizational gestalt to the internal and external audiences consistent with the values attached to the organization. For example, a portfolio manager wearing a luxury watch in a client meeting may contribute to constructing a positive organizational gestalt, indicating that his personal success and organizational success are linked. However, as shown in the introductory example, organizational settings exist where the watch triggers an inconsistency in an employee’s appearance relative to the organization that is being represented. Thus, a perception change arises when the appearance of the organizational member projects values that conflict with the established aesthetic, organizational representations. Therefore, a conversion of a previously stable organizational image – gestalt-switch – occurs, meaning that the external audience perceives the gestalt of the organizational image as irritated or scattered. As a result, the authenticity and credibility of the employee and the organization may suffer as the audience perceives the watch bearer to take advantage. Consequently, we define the "organizational gestalt": as a dynamic projection of organizational values informed and conveyed by aesthetic, organizational representations (in this study: employees’ wristwatches).

Theoretical background
The social (re)construction of an organizational image

Organizational literature has long discussed aspects of organizational image, identity, and reputation. In recent years, this discourse started to take a cross-disciplinary turn, engaging with the related marketing concept of branding. Organizational literature thereby takes up elements from the marketing literature but goes beyond the largely behaviourist and functionalist conceptualization of an organizational brand. As pointed out by Kärreman and Rylander, treating a brand as a mere marketing tool means that social and communicative processes involved in the construction, recognition, and
reconstruction of an organizational image are overlooked. However, these processes are essential for constructing an organizational image and ongoing branding processes in organizational settings. Thus, recent organizational literature is particularly suited to engage with important and peculiar organizational phenomena, such as the one described in the introduction, thereby departing where mainstream marketing literature typically ends.

Organization studies literature goes beyond marketing perspectives by recognizing the importance of both the internal and external organizational audience regarding the social construction of an organizational image. Consequently, emphasizing a broader perspective on the branding concept typically found in the marketing literature. Away from a narrow focus that is rather product and customer-centric, toward a broader perspective that considers a comprehensive set of internal and external stakeholders. In this regard, "the notion of branding relates to the practices of attempting to emphasize specific values to be associated with the organization and/or its products and services."19

In today’s corporate environments, which are often characterized by service firms, the product moves further into the background. Employees stand representative of the offered goods and services. In such organizational settings, "values to be associated with the brand need to be connected to the employees (and their capabilities and characteristics) rather than a physical product (and its capabilities and characteristics)."20 In this manuscript, we follow Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård’s understanding of an organizational image as an aesthetic expression that is socially constructed, grounded in ‘visual impression and expression.’ Crucial in this regard is the visual impression and expression of employees in relation to the internal and external audience and how they perceive and process this image.22 From this perspective, the organizational image is socially constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing manner, involving employees and the internal and external organizational audience.

**Gestalt theory and the organizational image**

To investigate the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image, we draw on "Gestalt" theory, which has a long tradition in social psychology and philosophy. Although there is no direct translation of the German word "Gestalt," the English words "appearance," "pattern," "shape," or "form" are close approximations. In the past, gestalt theoretical approaches have been used to explore complex systems that are characterized by human interaction and when it comes to the perception and aesthetics of organizations, which makes the theory particularly suitable for investigations into corporate image creation.

Gestalt theory focuses on perception and perceptual structuring with a holistic notion at its core: "perceiving is more than the summation of the sensations produced by stimuli."27 As depicted by
Bonacchi, a gestalt "refers to something which is stable in its dynamic nature, something which is recognizable as such as a result of a process which structures its inner form." Consequently, gestalt theory highlights the organization’s perceivable facets, such as a consistent corporate image or brand, as an aesthetic expression in the marketplace.

We argue that it is highly relevant to adopt a gestalt perspective to better understand an organizational image’s social construction in light of an internal and external audience. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the social construction of the gestalt of an organizational image in light of the expression and impression of employees’ aesthetic appearance in an organizational setting. To do so, we build on recent organizational literature that focuses on employees’ central role in projecting an organizational image.

**Aesthetics of labour, branded labour and conspicuous luxury consumption at work**

We discuss the social construction of an organizational image through the theoretical lenses of aesthetics of labour and branded labour, two related and complementary literature streams. At the core of this literature body are questions on how an employee’s appearance can positively or negatively convey the organizational image, thus, contributing to favourable or unfavourable perceptions thereof. The research thereby focuses on the organization’s internal and external relationships and the respective audiences, recognizing the critical role that employees’ physical appearance can play in image formation. Thus, whereas the aesthetics of labour literature focuses more on the internal organizational perspective, the branded labour literature is more concerned with the external view.

Past research on aesthetics of labour has discussed the adverse effects that can go along with an employee or job candidate having "the wrong look". Here, intrinsic or extrinsic physical ‘imperfections’ can be a source of bias and even lead to different forms of workplace discrimination. For example, service sector personnel are often judged by their physical appearance, whether they have a ‘desirable look’ that fits the organization. Attributes, such as body art and piercings, can be a potential disadvantage in this regard.

In addition to the research stream on aesthetics of labour, research about "branded labour examines employee appearance on the consumption side, with an emphasis on consumers' perceptions of front-line employees." In this regard, front-line staff’s actions and appearance are crucial, given that they represent the link that connects the organization with the external environment. Employees can be thought of as manifestations of the organization’s offerings and, as such, project the corporate image to the outside world.

When interacting with an internal or external audience, employees are, therefore, decisive actors contributing to the construction and reconstruction of an organizational image, and crucially positive or
negative perceptions of it. As depicted above, body art and piercings may appear as undesirable characteristics, raising issues for employees. However, recent research cautions that such attributes can also turn into an advantage, positively projecting specific organizational values in some contexts. In contrast to these previous studies, in this paper, we focus on a potentially desirable attribute, a luxury watch forming part of an employee's appearance.

Although luxury watches take up a substantial presence in the everyday workplace and organizational settings, their role in the overall dynamics between employees' appearance and the construction and reconstruction of an organizational image appears to be an overlooked aspect in current literature. Luxury watches are particularly interesting to study, as they form part of an employee's appearance and connect the individual to the work environment. As outlined by Woodward, accessories such as luxury watches mediate the relationship between the wearer and the work context. The watch as a material object of high value can convey aspects of the self to the external environment and may be worn for strategic reasons. Given that the watch represents an element of the employee's appearance, and as such, becomes part of the interaction with an internal and external audience, a luxury watch may, therefore, contribute to a favourable or unfavourable perception of the employee as well as the overall organization. Thus, the watch may play an important role in the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image and the way in which this image is perceived and processed by an audience. Consequently, by examining the role of luxury watches displayed by employees in organizational settings, we follow-up on the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image in the form of the "organizational gestalt." Thus, we strive to answer the questions: how does a luxury watch worn at work influence the social construction and reconstruction of an organizational image?

Methods
To answer the research questions, we adopt a qualitative research approach based on a netnography. The development of the netnography was informed by insights gained from a pre-study drawing on descriptive expert interviews with high level experts from the luxury watch industry. The netnography follows the approach of a non-participatory netnography study. Given the peculiarity and sensitive topic of luxury watches and their usage in organizational contexts, we adopt this approach to gain thorough insights into the complex and dynamic phenomenon of organizational image changes. In this regard, pre-study expert interviews combined with netnography are particularly relevant for entering niche communities, such as luxury watch users (users of a highly exclusive products), and exploring in-depth their mindset and reasoning processes. Thus, the research followed two stages:
First, expert interviews were conducted to make a quick and deep dive into the phenomenon of organizational image change.\(^{50}\) In the second stage, a netnographic study followed. In contrast to traditional ethnography, netnography helps to observe openly accessible information generated by an online community in an unobtrusive manner, thereby benefitting from naturally arising communication between the community members.\(^{51}\) Thus, the netnographic approach aimed at uncovering the deeper motivations, meanings, and attitudes of a large online community in displaying luxury watches in organizational settings. The netnographic study thereby benefited from the descriptions of the experts, highlighting the need to adopt an unobtrusive approach to tap into the reasoning processes of luxury watch owners and their experiences concerning the sensitive aspect of conspicuous luxury consumption in an organizational setting.\(^{52}\)

**Pre-study: expert-interviews**

We used pre-study expert interviews to dive into the phenomenon of organizational image change.\(^{53}\) The expert interviews thereby provided the opportunity to start the research project by gaining initial understandings of the luxury watch environment and approaching luxury watch display in organizational settings from multiple angles. In this manner, we carried out semi-structured interviews with experienced industry experts (on average, over 20 years) with diverse expertise fields. Interview partners were identified and contacted through information provided in a public database of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry\(^{54}\) combined with LinkedIn profiles.

Experts received a semi-structured interview guideline before the interview. Thus, it was ensured that the experts had a clear understanding of the interview objective. They could remain anonymous, stop the interview at any point, and leave questions unanswered. Appendix A\(^{55}\) lists the wording of the guiding questions that were asked to the experts. The interviews were conducted in March 2019, lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, and were conducted in English, with one expert responding in Italian. In accordance with interview partners, four of the five interviews were recorded. Experts included a luxury watch historian (face-to-face interview in Switzerland), a managing director (Skype interview), a principle of a luxury watch competence centre (phone interview), and two experts in managing positions in marketing and sales (face-to-face interview in Switzerland; phone interview), as well as customer services (phone interview). Experts were asked if they wanted to be quoted anonymously or with their identity. Quotations used further below indicate their decision accordingly by adding or not adding a name.
Table 1 Themes arising from the pre-study.

| Context                      | Macro themes (5)                          | Micro themes (17)                          | Representative data                                                                 |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Watch contexts               | Aesthetics perceptions                   | Positive perceptions                       | "It [the watch] is first a piece of art. (...) What is very strange with watches is actually the system, the mechanism is coming back to more than 200 years ago (...) It is something quiet old in terms of technology, but so magic when you start to wind your watch and you see it moving, (...) there is something which is, I would say extremely emotional." [Managing director, luxury market development company]. |
|                              |                                          | Aesthetics                                |                                                                                       |
|                              |                                          | Organizational brand carrier              |                                                                                       |
|                              |                                          | Luxury watch context                      |                                                                                       |
| Non-watch contexts           | Indifference                              | Neutral perceptions                        | "The general public is getting less and less aware of a watch." [Principle, luxury watch competence center] |
|                              |                                          | Lack of awareness                         |                                                                                       |
|                              | Ethical conflict                          | Negative perceptions                       | "Yes, it [referring to a luxury watch] can give a bad signal to the people in front of you. Especially if you are an official in politics or something like that." [Manager, luxury watch customer services] |
|                              |                                          | Lack of trust                              |                                                                                       |
|                              |                                          | Contradictory values                       |                                                                                       |
| Gestalt switch situation     | Perception change                         | Perception change                         | "Some of my customers that are working in the insurance industry take-off their Rolex prior to a client meeting. They are afraid that the watch could send a misleading message, for example, that they make a lot of money and that they might want to rip off their clients" [Manager, marketing and sales of luxury watches] |
|                              | Signalling                                | Signalling                                |                                                                                       |
|                              | Contradictory values                      | Contradictory values                       |                                                                                       |
|                              | Image adjustment                          | Image adjustment                          |                                                                                       |
|                              | Non-luxury watch context                  | Non-luxury watch context                  |                                                                                       |
| Digital organizational settings | Negative perceptions                      | Negative perceptions                       | "But then you have some clever bloggers that are very influential and suddenly spot a politician wearing an expensive watch and then decide to take him down online or something like this." [Principle, luxury watch competence centre] |
|                              | Digital environments                      | Digital environments                      |                                                                                       |
|                              | Amplifier of value conflicts              | Amplifier of value conflicts              |                                                                                       |
|                              | Beyond office space                       | Beyond office space                       |                                                                                       |
|                              | Digital audience                          | Digital audience                          |                                                                                       |
|                              | Non-luxury watch context                  | Non-luxury watch context                  |                                                                                       |

**Summarizing interviews: perceptions of luxury watches and organizations**

We first summarized the interviews in protocols and categorized them according to emergent and recurring elements. Table 1 summarizes the initial understandings that we gained from the interviews along with major themes (micro, macro), which we elaborate next,
The pre-study expert interviews revealed that perceptions of luxury watches worn by employees should be observed according to two broader environments: luxury watch contexts and non-luxury watch contexts.

### Luxury watch contexts: aesthetics perceptions

From the interviews, it became clear that organizational and professional settings explicitly linked to luxury watches represent a particular environment that has to be observed differently from other organizational environments when it comes to the display of luxury watches. In settings related to luxury watches, front-line employees wearing a costly timepiece on their wrist are seen as a natural element of the organizational environment. Here, the watch is also perceived from an intrinsic perspective that is focused on the aesthetic attributes of the watch, as one of the interview partners explained:

"It [the watch] is first a piece of art. (...) What is very strange with watches is actually the system, the mechanism is coming back to more than 200 years ago (...) It is something quite old in terms of technology, but so magic when you start to wind your watch and you see it moving. (...) there is something which is, I would say, extremely emotional." [Managing director, luxury market development company].

Thus, the front-line employee with a luxury watch on the wrist is perceived as a manifestation of the organizational product offerings as a carrier of the corporate image projected to customers.\(^5\) Therefore, positive perceptions toward the front-line employee and the organization are common, as the experts indicate. Consequently, conspicuous extrinsic consumption of luxury watches is seen as a desirable attribute of the work setting.\(^5\) However, this aspect can differ in non-luxury watch contexts.

### Non-luxury watch contexts: indifference, ethical conflicts, and gestalt switch situations

According to the experts, luxury watches worn by front-line employees have to be observed differently in contexts where watches are not the core element of organizations' daily business. An interview partner explained that not everyone might recognize a luxury watch and thus can have neutral or indifferent perceptions:

"The general public is getting less and less aware of a watch." [Principle, luxury watch competence center]

Another interview partner added that neutral or positive perceptions can shift given the function of the front-line employee relative to the represented organization:

"Yes, it [referring to a luxury watch] can give a bad signal to the people in front of you. Especially if you are an official in politics or something like that." [Manager, luxury watch customer services]
The expert drew a link between the luxury watch’s external audiences' perception as a negative indicator that may disturb the relation between the front-line employee and the represented organization. As specified by the expert, this may go along with a lack of trust due to contradictory values between the front-line employees flaunting of the luxury item and the organizational function occupied. Thus, an external audience may sense a potential ethical conflict. In a similar vein, another expert highlighted the fear of front-line employees wearing their luxury watch during client encounters, providing insights into a potential gestalt switch situation.

*Some of my customers that are working in the insurance industry take-off their Rolex prior to a client meeting. They are afraid that the watch could send a misleading message, for example, that they make a lot of money and that they might want to rip off their clients* [Manager, marketing and sales of luxury watches]

The expert’s remark on the moral conflict and the perception change that could follow from a luxury watch display in a client encounter is noteworthy. In a similar vein, another expert indicated a potential value conflict between the front-line employees' position and the external audience, discussing the example of a politician as an organizational representative:

*It would be kind of logical if you pay your representatives' tax money and then they wear a very expensive Rolex watch. It might, for a certain type of people, be a little bit felt as a betrayal. But I think it would be a very, very small number and the general public is getting less and less aware of a watch.* [Principle, luxury watch competence centre]

The expert described that social media plays a vital role as a digital extension of the organizational context in today's digital environments. In this sense, the front-line employee’s appearance as a first touching-point between an external audience and the organization may expand in terms of time and space. Thus, the perception of a front-line employee is not limited to the immediate moment as an in-situ experience, but captured and saved as a digital image; it can be distributed via digital means, reaching a broader audience that may see the watch bearer at any later point in time:

*But then you have some clever bloggers that are very influential and suddenly spot a politician wearing an expensive watch and then decide to take him down online or something like this.* [Principle, luxury watch competence centre]

The descriptions by the expert connect to and are also corroborated by news reports about organizational leader’s that were caught in social media scandals due to the luxury watch they wore as representatives of their respective organization.59
Netnography

Building on the descriptive insights from experts-interviews, we collected netnographic data to gain deeper understandings on a broader basis of the dynamics between employees’ appearance and the social (re)construction of an organizational image. In this regard, we looked for a suitable online community to collect netnographic data that fulfilled the following criteria: (1) the size of the community and number of posts (as an active community) (2) rich data in terms of thread length and post contents (3) diversity in forum members and interactions, and (4) relevant concerning the research question. After an online search that revealed several luxury watch communities (particularly on Linkedin, yet with a very small number of active members and few threads, unrelated to the research question), we selected the “Rolex forum” as a field site that corresponded to the above criteria. The Rolex forum is an online forum that is not affiliated with the luxury watch company Rolex. It represents one of the largest online forums related to luxury watches, given its user base of 246,588 registered forum members, which have contributed to numerous threads (710,559) and posts (10,581,797) related to multiple luxury watch brands at the data collection cut-off date in early August 2020. Thus, it represents an open discussion forum about multiple topics related to luxury watches, not limited to a single watch brand. The forum topic “Wearing a Rolex when meeting clients” appeared as the most suitable fit for the selection criteria, with 193 comments in total. The first comment was made in May 2016. The last comment was made in August 2016. Overall, 146 different forum members commented on the topic. 125 forum members made a single comment, and only 21 members commented more than one time. The four most active forum members commented more than three times: (clb521: 12 comments), (speedolex: 8 comments), (jdlc1406: 4 comments), (jmiicustomz: 4 comments).

Analysis and result: "wearing a rolex when meeting clients"

In line with netnographic data analysis, we used open-coding to iteratively label and categorize the forum data, thereby grouping the emerging data categories while moving between literature and nascent themes. Through this analysis, 33 salient second-order themes emerged. Subsequently, these themes were further refined into 6 first-order themes. Appendix B lists the themes together with representative quotes from forum members. The following results with exemplary quotes show the perceptions, attitudes, and broader thought processes of luxury watch owners, reflecting on wearing a luxury watch in organizational settings and professional interactions.

Personal values Many of the forum members stressed that wearing a luxury watch is important to them regardless of the context. They strongly associate the watch with personal values and positive
feelings. In this way, they see the luxury watch as an aesthetic object that serves as an expression of the wearer’s personality:

"I find that those of us who collect and wear watches because it's our hobby and passion manage to "pull it off" in all social and business situations quite well as we don't think of the watches as a "show of affluence". Rather, they are reflective of our enjoyment if anything and that is what shows to outsiders (if anything is evident at all)" [Mfrankel2]

Strong personal emotions and intrinsic values are linked to the display of the luxury watch. Thus, rather than making a connection with the organization or the audience, these forum members depict the watch as an object directly linked to their personality, detached from contextual aspects. Consequently, the watch is worn without additional considerations about external perceptions thereof.

**Indifference** Several forum members indicated that luxury watches represent a very particular item, which is not always noticeable in organizational contexts. Therefore, it may often be met with indifference. In terms of interactions with an external audience, it was stressed that clients may lack awareness of luxury watches, such that neutral perceptions prevail: "Unless it had diamonds on it, most people won't notice and even less will care" [forum member myc ritz]. The forum members also indicated that their personal attention for others wearing a luxury watch is high. Nobody has ever noticed…I have noticed many watches in client meetings myself though: chuckle:" [forum member LightOnAHill].

**Indicator for personal and organizational success** Another salient theme that emerged from the forum community is the perception of the luxury watch as an indicator of personal and organizational success. Several members made a direct connection between the display of the luxury watch and financial accomplishments, personal and organizational: "If I saw an attorney wearing a rolex compared to one with a Casio I would want the attorney with the Rolex because we view it as financial success, so they must be good at their job" [cpark]. Here, the luxury watch is perceived as a success symbol and indicator for competence, effort, and experience, which indicates the performance of the organization that the individual represents. In this regard, the luxury watch positively reinforces the organizational image that the employee projects.

**Value consistency: employee and organization** From the forum entries, it became clear that a luxury watch worn in an organizational setting can be an essential element to show the employees' fit and belonging to a specific organization. The watch can thereby serve as a linkage between the employee and the organization, indicating the belonging. The forum members specifically associated legal, wealth
management, medical, architectural, and design-related organizations with the display of luxury watches:

"Nobody has ever had a problem, but the position I’ve put myself in practicing law and my field make it easy and culturally acceptable. Presence is important in the courtroom, and wearing what I like and looks good to me causes me to project well." [LightOnAHill]

Thus, similar to the interview partners’ comments, these settings can be seen as luxury watch contexts. As such, the watch worn by the employee forms part of the organizational image. Further, forum members hinted that a luxury watch can be indicative of seniority within an organization, particularly concerning executive positions:

"When someone sees $7,000 on your wrist it also tells them you are a well-established executive in your industry, not some newb or retread trying to keep up in a $200 Seiko. I’m an EVP and when I hire 20 year veterans in my industry as VP’s or Directors, wristwear matters, if they want a six-figure job they’d better have some visible symbols that show they’ve been successful and care about the finer things." [speedolex]

Value inconsistency: employee and organization In contrast to the previous description, several forum members outlined a potential value inconsistency between the organization and an employee wearing a luxury watch at work. From an internal perspective, a luxury watch displayed to colleagues or superiors can be associated with personal value conflicts and discomfort, as some expressed. Particularly concern over judgment or misinterpretations by the internal organizational audience was raised, indicating that the watch may lead to unintended or adverse consequences for the wearer:

"I also used to work with people who were very frugal and if I wore a Rolex all the time they would say I would never need a raise since I can afford a Rolex." [Stelyos]

Therefore, some forum members remarked that the display of a luxury watch can be delicate and that they would refrain from wearing it in an organizational setting to avoid any form of conflict, especially when being new to an organization. Consequently, a luxury watch worn during a job interview was controversially discussed, with forum members mentioning that it may or may not correspond with organizational values and in- or decrease the applicants’ chances to join the organization. A crucial aspect appeared to be the notion that the wearer of the luxury timepiece could be perceived as asymmetrically benefitting from the organization:

"Wear your Rolex on your interviews. It would be way more uncomfortable if they didn’t see it until after you started a new
position. At that point they'll probably just assume it's a new pur-
chase and bad feelings could result around the office if they think
you bought it after the job offer. Certainly would make some
bosses feel like maybe they paid you too much. [904VT]

**Gestalt switch situation** A large part of the online community's dis-
cussion about wearing a luxury watch in an organizational context
centres on displaying a luxury watch when interacting with the organ-
ization's external audience. Meeting (new) clients was deemed to be
one of the most sensitive situations. Forum members mentioned that
when products or services are offered in a sales context, a luxury
watch may well be noticed by clients and may trigger adverse effects
for the wearer and the represented organization. Several second-
order themes emerged, underlining the characteristics of such a situ-
ation. In such a context, a luxury watch can signal contradictory val-
ues relative to the represented organization. As outlined, a taking
advantage perception may arise, such that clients may associate the
luxury watch with overpriced products or services:

"I think that if I wore a Rolex most of my regular guests would
probably notice as they also wear a Rolex. On the service side, I
would almost forecast reduced sales based on the perception of
taking advantage of people." [BSelby]

The luxury watch thereby enters the professional interaction as an
interfering signal, which the client connects to the organizational
offerings. Thus, a perception change may occur such that a client
perceives to be "ripped off." As a consequence, the client may refrain
from any present or future acquisitions with the organization. To
avoid potential adverse effects and perception changes in the eyes
of the client, forum members indicated to refrain from wearing a lux-
ury watch in such a situation or switch to a less costly watch: "I feel
the same way. On new clients where my Apple Watch. When at the
office where my Rolex. I do feel self conscious." [woodbine].

**General discussion and conclusions**

Luxury watches are desirable items frequently appearing in organiza-
tional settings and professional interactions. As elements of
employees' physical appearance, they can contribute to the social
construction of an organizational image, conveying values to an
internal or external audience. Thus far, organizational literature
has not yet examined their role in the dynamics between employ-
ees' appearance in an organizational setting and the social con-
struction of an organizational image. By drawing on the
theoretical lens of gestalt theory and aesthetics of labour and
branded labour, we respond to recent calls for more cross-discip-

linary research into the organizational image concept and its
related marketing concept of branding. Consequently, we adopt
an organizational studies perspective informed by cross-disciplin-ary literature to discuss the dynamics involved in the social (re)construction of an organizational image in the form of the "organizational gestalt".68

Based on a netnographic study that was informed by a pre-study with luxury watch experts, we gained insights into the way in which the aesthetic appearance of an employee wearing a luxury watch in an organizational setting can contribute to the social (re)construction of the organizational image. Through expert interviews, we started to approach the luxury watch environment from multiple perspectives. From the expert descriptions, we learned that employees' display of luxury watches might be perceived differently in what can be termed luxury watch and non-luxury watch contexts. In settings where the daily business conduct is connected to luxury watches, front-line employees are perceived as manifestations of the organizational products, as described in branded labour literature.69 This descriptive aspect was underlined by netnographic data showing that certain professional service firms are associated with the display of luxury watches. Thus, luxury watches worn by employees in these settings are seen as an aesthetic and desirable attribute of the organizational environment, connecting the employee's appearance with the organizational image.70 In these situations, a value consistency between the employee and the organization is indicated. The employee's appearance featuring a luxury watch expresses the values associated with the organization.71 Thus, employee and organizational values are in harmony, and the "organizational gestalt" appears as a stable image.72

In these situations, the luxury watch can be seen as an important artifact that carries the organization's values.73 The watch is not an explicit artifact (not bearing a logo), but more an abstract indicator of organizational principles. In this case, the values relate to the previous and ongoing accomplishment, competence, and experience of an organization. Thus, when it comes to the external audience, the employee's luxury watch depicts here a positive image of the organization highlighting success and performance in the marketplace.74 For example, a portfolio manager wearing a luxury watch in a client meeting contributes to constructing a positive image, indicating that his personal success and organizational success are linked. In this way, the 'organizational gestalt' may appear as authentic and credible to an external audience.75

"Maybe my "recklessness" will change if I lose a prospect or customer one day due to wearing a nice watch but as of now it hasn’t given me any issues. If they notice it, I honestly don’t think it will be a big deal, prospects and customers know that we are very successful because we make our customers successful." [Gus2]

As indicated by the comment, the watch thereby forms part of an employee's personality, and the distinction between the organization and employee's image becomes blurry.76 Accordingly, the netnographic data illustrate that employees use the luxury watch in a very
self-centred manner in organizational contexts. In this regard, the watch serves to express the personal identity and attract and manage the demand for their own "personal brand" or personal image. Thus, the employee conveys an image to the external and internal audience with individual values attached.

Our findings show that an internal audience may approach the employee’s appearance with indifference beyond positive perceptions. However, these perceptions may be subject to change and can also lead to reservations. This connects to previous research in the aesthetics of labour literature, in which elements of the employee’s appearance have been associated with potential value conflicts. A luxury watch can communicate contradictory values from an inside perspective, disturbing the relationship between the employee and the organization. Thus, in light of an internal audience, the individual employee’s personal image can conflict with the organizational image. As a result, a value inconsistency may arise, and the individual may appear less credible and face potential drawbacks:

“I also used to work with people who were very frugal and if I wore a Rolex all the time they would say I would never need a raise since I can afford a Rolex.” [Stelyos]

As outlined by aesthetics of labour literature, such drawbacks may even prevent an individual from becoming part of an organization, as the aesthetic appearance may be perceived as unfitting for the professional setting and the contact with clients:

“Wear your Rolex on your interviews. It would be way more uncomfortable if they didn’t see it until after you started a new position. At that point they’ll probably just assume it’s a new purchase and bad feelings could result around the office if they think you bought it after the job offer. Certainly would make some bosses feel like maybe they paid you too much.” [904VT]

One can argue that in such a situation, a dissonance between the employee’s personal image and the organizational ‘organizational gestalt’ arises, such that the values the employee projects differ from the organizational values. From an internal perspective, such a conflict between the personal image and the organizational image may come with disadvantages for the individual employee displaying the watch. However, from an outside perspective, it may also influence the overall organization in terms of the social construction of the corporate image in the eye of an external audience.

Theorizing gestalt-switch: a reconstruction of the organizational image

By conceptualizing the organizational image from a gestalt perspective, we offer a contribution to existing organizational literature.
shown above, a front-line employee’s appearance can successfully contribute to conveying an organizational image and organizational values to an external audience, such as consumers and the wider public. We argue (see the first part of Figure 1) that in this situation, the personal image of the employee is in line with the organizational image, such that an external audience perceives the "gestalt" of the organization as a single entity. Thus, a consistency or harmony of values between the front-line employee and the organization exists. In other words, the employee’s appearance is aligned with the organization's image, forming an authentic and credible 'organizational gestalt' conveyed to the external audience.

However, a perception change may arise when a front-line employee’s appearance contradicts the image and underlying values that the organization embodies and projects to the outside (as depicted in the second part of Figure 1). In such a case, a value inconsistency between the employee and the organization arises. This means that the employee’s physical appearance is not in line with the organizational values, and an external audience perceives the "gestalt" of the organization as irritated or scattered. A gestalt switch arises.

A core theme discussed in gestalt theory is the "gestalt switch or shift," which is often illustrated by Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit drawing. Among experimental psychologists and philosophers, the duck-rabbit analogy is known as an illustration of the fundamentally interpretive human perception. The drawing can be seen as a duck...
or as a rabbit, yet not as both at the same time. Whereas the drawing remains the same, the 'gestalt-switch' is attributed to a change in perception, "when one first experiences an image or entity in one way and then in a quite different way." Thus, an organization's gestalt may appear stable and positive for an external audience. However, a luxury watch worn by an employee may trigger a value inconsistency. This suggests that a gestalt-switch occurs when a previously stable image of an organization undergoes a conversion due to a front-line employee having a look that appears to conflict with the established aesthetic, organizational representations. In conclusion, and to summarize the above discussion on an organizational image's social construction, we define the "organizational gestalt": as a dynamic projection of organizational values informed and conveyed by aesthetic, organizational representations (in this study: employees' wristwatches).

Against this background, both organizations and employees need to watch for potential value inconsistencies that may trigger a gestalt switch. Consequently, as an organization or front-line employee, it will be difficult to win back customer confidence. Like a scientific paradigm shift, the previously favourable image of the organization and its representative is reconstructed to an unfavourable one. A duck turns into a rabbit. Once a favourable gestalt has switched to a "new" unfavourable one, it may be difficult to turn it back, as trust and credibility have to be regained.

Outlook, limitations, and future research

The workplace is crucial when it comes to the formation of an organizational image. In this social setting, employees' physical appearance increasingly moves centre stage, as a crucial aesthetic expression of organizational values. Focusing on the role of luxury watches worn at work, we followed-up on the social (re)construction of an organizational image in light of an internal and external audience. We thereby built on a qualitative approach involving pre-study expert interviews and netnographic data to gain insights into the dynamics between employees' appearance in the workplace and the formation of an organizational image. In light of the findings and the cross-disciplinary research that we drew on (gestalt theory, aesthetics of labour, and branded labour), we conceptualized the formation of an organizational gestalt and its restructuring – as a gestalt switch. Thus, this paper offers a new perspective to recent organizational literature engaging with the social processes involved in the organizational image construction and its marketing concept of branding. Not seeking to generalize, our findings may serve as a starting point for future research to further explore the role of other luxury items entering the workplace. A noteworthy example for departure might be the diamond ring of former French justice minister Rachida Dati, airbrushed in 2008 from Le Figaro's front page. Thus, future research may look into the degree to which luxury items as an aesthetic expression in the workplace can
represent a risk factor for the organizational image, trust, and reputation. What implications might go along for the organizational reputation and value when individual, organizational members flash luxuries? To what extent should an organization manage or control its organizational gestalt against the background of an internal and external audience?

Given this study’s exploratory nature, we drew on a qualitative study that is not without limitations. Pre-study interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of luxury watch experts. This approach was chosen to make a quick and profound dive into the topic but comes with the risk of respondents' bias and subjectivity. To counter this risk, we interviewed experts from diverse backgrounds and with long-term experience approaching the topic from multiple angles. Also, the netnographic data was limited to a sample from a U.S.-based luxury watch forum. Although representing one of the largest forums worldwide with forum members dispersed worldwide, forum comments tend to reflect the U.S. country settings. Thus, future research could go beyond this context and strive to compare and contrast insights from different settings. Additionally, future research may apply differing methodological approaches to look deeper into the gestalt-switch via, for example, social-psychology experimental research, ethnography, or in-depth content analysis of social media cases. Theoretically, future research may also take up other theories in light of potential value and power conflicts between organizations and their members and external audiences contributing to the construction of an organizational gestalt.

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7. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, “Silence of the Brands,” 226.
8. Hatch and Schultz, “Of Bricks and Brands: From Corporate to Enterprise Branding.”
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10. Biehl-Missal and Fitzek, “Hidden Heritage: A Gestalt Theoretical Approach to the Aesthetics of Management and Organisation”; Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations; Grondin, Psychology of Perception.
11. Timming, “Body Art as Branded Labour: At the Intersection of Employee Selection and Relationship Marketing”; Timming, “Aesthetic Labour.”
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46. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, “Silence of the Brands”; Sadaba and Bernal, “History as Luxury Brand Enhancement.”
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