

Dress codes and appearance at work body supplements body modification and aesthetic labour

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Disclaimer

This is an independent, evidence-based research paper produced by Dr Vandana Nath, Professor Stephen Bach and Dr Graeme Lockwood of [King's College London](#).

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Executive summary

This report discusses the findings of a study that examined employee perceptions and experiences of, and organisational policy and practice in, the area of dress codes and appearance management at work.

Significance of dress norms and appearance for organisations

Dress and appearance standards were perceived to offer the organisations in our sample a number of benefits. Broadly, the advantages included alignment of employee appearance with the organisation's brand, the professionalisation of a job role, attendance to health and safety concerns, and the creation of a sense of organisational identity.

As might be expected, the majority of respondents emphasised the need to project a brand-congruent physical appearance to external service recipients, largely cited as being professional or exhibiting an appropriate image. Attending to self-presentation was perceived to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the firm's product and / or service offering.

The business-case for appearance management was generally based on wider assumptions surrounding what organisation-specific service recipients or society in general, might find acceptable versus unaesthetic or objectionable.

Organisational policy and practice

Dress codes were more explicit and comprehensive in larger organisations compared to smaller firms, and for employees in public-facing roles. However, implicit dress norms operated across the sample, with smaller firms resisting the institution of official appearance guidelines due to the more informal nature of labour practices in some of these workplaces. Public sector respondents and larger employers stated that they consulted with staff associations and/or trade unions in relation to dress and appearance policy, where relevant.

On the whole, although dress and appearance issues appeared quite significant in terms of representing the organisation's brand, these issues were not discussed with applicants during recruitment and selection processes. Appearance features were taken for granted in most cases and potential employees were expected to demonstrate their fit with the organisation by dressing according to industry or company standards and by presenting a certain look.

The demonstration of one's religious identity through appearance was met with disapproval during the hiring process in one case. Opinions were at times quite strong in relation to visible tattoos and body piercings at work. Individuals with visible tattoos / piercings appeared to be stereotyped and faced stigma within particular organisational contexts, and indeed within more traditional firms. Here, an individual's perceived (un/) aesthetic qualities appeared to serve as a proxy for other personal, character-related attributes during selection.

Training in appearance management was not widespread, except in larger organisations where health and safety standards needed to be adhered to or where a professionalisation agenda was being pursued in the workplace (for example in the Emergency Services).

Section heads and line managers were predominantly tasked with monitoring and upholding dress and appearance norms. There were reported variations however in appearance monitoring and enforcement within and across organisations. Individual manager predilections, the centrality of health and safety regulations and the importance ascribed to brand performance appeared to dictate the approach taken in regulating employee appearance.

The appearance enforcement strategy in most organisations largely revolved around using humour or having an informal word with the employee who went against accepted appearance norms; however, most of the larger firms in the sample also had more formal processes where recurrent transgressions might be recorded and included in the appraisal process.

While none of the respondents mentioned witnessing the use of formal procedures in their organisation, the larger firms as expected, had disciplinary processes in place which could take into account persistent dress / appearance related violations. However, the threat of disciplinary action was reportedly seen as sufficiently effective in eliciting compliance with dress codes.

Employee perceptions and experiences of appearance norms

Several employees in the sample used dress and appearance standards to their advantage and highlighted the many benefits offered by dress norms in their organisation / sector, including its positive effects on self-esteem. Work performance was also perceived to be enhanced particularly in interactive service roles because of the favourable impressions made on service recipients, thereby preventing client disengagement.

Despite a few employees recognising and even providing examples of potentially discriminatory organisational practices of hiring and promotion decisions being influenced by individual appearance features, most individuals in our sample readily accepted the dress and appearance norms within their sector. Some employees clearly defined the problems that appearance standards could create for people who 'went against the grain' including the inevitability of being judged based on dress and appearance and facing workplace discrimination.

Employees who reported being typecast on occasion due to their religious dress and appearance, or because of their body modifications, seemingly adjusted to the perceived prejudice by justifying such attitudes as ignorant, or by engaging in strategies to overcome biases (for example, concealing their non-traditional identity markers or searching for employment in more inclusive workplaces).

Challenges of managing employee appearance

Dilemmas were raised about the effectiveness of both explicit and implicit dress and appearance norms. Selective enforcement and the presence of prejudicial attitudes could also affect employee attraction and career progression, and potentially present legal challenges for organisations.

A number of recommendations are made based on the study's findings, including the need for employers to recognise and address appearance-based prejudices in the workplace through initiating more transparent and structured interviewing processes and providing ongoing unconscious bias training for those involved in staff selection. It is clear that employers need to be educated further about the moral implications and the legal ramifications that could arise when specifying dress codes and employee appearance issues at work.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Dress codes and appearance at work are becoming a more salient issue in the workplace, prompted by high profile legal cases and uncertainties amongst employers and employees about what acceptable dress codes and appearance norms constitute. Employers often have multiple objectives for dress codes, seeking to ensure a safe and healthy working environment and promoting the company's image and brand proposition. Employer requirements need to be fair, proportionate and non-discriminatory, taking account of individual expectations about appearance standards and their wish to display facets of their identity, for example in the form of their religious faith or body art. According to XpertHR (2015), many employers are actively managing employee dress and appearance at the workplace. Based on their 2015 survey of 578 employers in the UK, it was reported that:

- almost three-quarters of the sample had dress code policies in operation
- the greatest benefit of introducing dress norms was seen as 'setting standards' in relation to the workplace culture
- tattoos and piercings were allowed in around 41% of the organisations surveyed

An earlier survey on the same topic indicated that just over half of the employers in their sample (N=218) stated that their dress codes elicited employee complaints (XpertHR, 2011). Consequently, uncertainties about what is fair and legal are made more complex by shifting societal norms and values. Employees bring these differing and increasingly diverse expectations to work and employers need to be able to justify their dress codes and appearance rules. Evidence of societal shifts that are permeating the workplace includes an increase in body piercings and tattoos. Piercings are extremely widespread with almost a half of women aged 16-24 estimated to have a non-earlobe piercing (Acas, 2014). In addition, many employers especially in service industries are becoming more preoccupied with the physical appearance of their workforce that extends beyond dress codes to wider issues of aesthetic labour and appearance management.

In some cases these norms are explicit and formal, but often they are much more informal and implicit. Employers regard establishing dress codes and deciding the ways in which to accommodate employees' displays of faith and/or body modifications as a complex and sensitive issue. There is very limited research and policy guidance in this area and usually good practice guidance is confined to the legal dimensions of these issues. There is less consideration of how employees experience and adapt to employer requirements, in what ways employers devise and implement dress codes and appearance standards and how broader stakeholders address this HR agenda. We also know little about how dress codes and appearance norms vary by sector, job role or size of the organisation. The topic therefore requires further investigation.

This report presents the results of an interview-based, qualitative study that examines dress code policies and appearance management at the workplace. A component of the research comprised an analysis of relevant legal cases. The data reported here was collected between December 2015 and June 2016.

1.2 Research aims

The research was commissioned by Acas to explore issues surrounding dress codes and appearance management in UK workplaces and their impact on employment relations. The research aims addressed include:

- the ways in which dress codes and appearance management are important for organisations

- organisational policy and practice in relation to dress codes and the physical appearance of employees
- employee perceptions and experiences of appearance norms
- the HR and employee relations (ER) challenges of managing dress codes and employee appearance

1.3 Research method

Dress codes and appearance management is a more prominent issue in certain sectors (broadly service industries) and occupations (mainly those involving frontline interactive work). Initial discussions with Acas officials indicated that their interest extended beyond dress codes and norms to include the broader management of appearance, often associated with aesthetic labour. These are especially prominent issues in sectors such as retail, hospitality and transport and in general associated with frontline customer service work. HR and legal issues also arise in managing occupations subject to formal uniform policies, such as the Emergency Services, and these policies often have consequences for displays of body art or religious belief. The sample was selected purposefully to fulfil the research aims and priorities. Our sample comprises 33 interviews with key stakeholders that devise and implement dress codes and appearance standards as well as employees and other stakeholders subject to, or with a specialist interest in this topic.

Respondents include:

- business owners and senior managers
- HR directors and specialists
- line managers
- trade union officials
- policy advisors (for example, from Acas)
- employees and faith group leaders

The sample combines individuals that provide insights into national level policy and practice, but concentrates on workplace experience to understand how employers, line managers and employees deal with dress code and appearance issues at work.

The research was conducted in 3 phases. Firstly, a literature review was undertaken that examined scholarly work on dress codes, appearance at work and aesthetic labour. An analysis of relevant legal cases was also undertaken. The population of individual case records with a dress code component was accessed electronically from a variety of legal databases. The cases raised important legal data relating to the application of dress and appearance codes by employers. The cases examined both employment tribunal and appellate decisions.

In addition, an extensive document search was conducted that yielded a large number of employer policies relating to dress codes, especially in education and health. Acas also provided data on calls to the Acas helpline (in one region) that identified concerns and queries relating to dress codes. However, in general, these queries are not necessarily identified and coded separately so the number was relatively small.

Secondly, following full ethical approval from King's College London, semi-structured interviews were conducted with our sample of respondents. The interviews typically lasted 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed, prior to coding and further analysis. Each respondent is reported on an anonymous basis but provided with an identifier to highlight their role, sector, and if their views and experiences relate to their current or former employer. By the end of June 2016, 33 interviews were undertaken across all categories of stakeholders in the planned sample.

Each interview addressed:

- if the organisation had a dress code and the rationale for it
- the type of dress code (explicit or implicit) and who it applied to
- its main features
- in what ways dress codes and norms were communicated to the workforce
- the HR challenges of implementing and managing dress codes and appearance norms

Discussion extended beyond a narrow definition of 'dress' to include body modifications and faith symbols. Thirdly, the data was coded and analysed, and integrated with the legal analysis and the literature review in writing the report.

2. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on body supplements, body modifications, and aesthetic labour in organisations. This is followed by a review of the UK's legal context in relation to dress and appearance management at work.

2.1 Body supplements: clothing and accessories

The manner in which people dress at work might be considered mundane or trivial and issues relating to attire can be easily disregarded in studying workplace relations. Clothing however, can play a significant role in shaping the employment experience, particularly for frontline service workers.

Individual dress practices are interlinked with one's identity (Entwistle, 2015) and clothing is found to shape the wearer's self-perception and subsequent behaviour (Adam and Galinsky, 2012; Karl et al, 2013). Dress can provide a cue to one's personality and can be adopted to manage impressions during interactions (Goffman, 1959).

Dress and general appearance can therefore act as a stimulus to shape how an individual is perceived by others (Johnson et al, 2014). As a result organisations continue to have a vested interest in managing employee self-presentation, and monitoring and regulating the workforce for non-compliance. One method of encouraging and ensuring that employees follow organisational preferences is through the maintenance of explicit (or implicit) dress regulations.

2.1.1 Rationale for dress norms

Dress norms can take various forms. This ranges from explicit and formal dress codes that are written and detailed and often included in employee handbooks to implicit, often unwritten norms that are sometimes mentioned at recruitment and selection stages and overseen by line managers.

For certain occupations, workplace uniforms or prescribed dress codes are the standard. Public services (for example, healthcare - [see case study 2.1](#), policing) and several other professions (for example, law) are archetypal in this respect. In other arenas, more fluid and indeed evolving conceptions of formal, smart, smart casual and so on are instituted.

As with dress, organisations sometimes regulate body accessories. Jewellery, badges and wristbands, for example, that may (or may not) be linked to the religious, social, aesthetic or political beliefs or orientations of an individual can be at odds with managerial preferences. Employer motivations to manage dress and appearance at work, however, are varied and overlapping.

Dress norms can be seen to:

- protect workers' health and safety (Pearson et al, 2001)
- accentuate, or mask, hierarchical divisions at work (Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993)
- limit offensive/'inappropriate' workplace attitudes and behaviours (Plaut, 2008)
- distinguish and make employee groups identifiable to external clients / provide legitimacy (Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993)
- help manage customer perceptions and relations (Sundaram and Webster, 2000)
- suppress individuality and encourage conformity (Pearson et al, 2001)
- build organisational identity (Kemp and Dwyer, 2001)
- communicate professional / role identity (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997)
- deliver on equality and diversity initiatives (Borstorff and Kimber, 2011)

- comply with legal regulations (for example, in terms of avoiding gender discrimination; see also '[Legal provisions relating to dress codes](#)' section 2.4)

Case study 2.1: Uniform policies and client engagement: case of the National Health Service (NHS)

Organisations use dress codes for a variety of reasons (see '[Rationale for dress norms](#)'). Uniforms are designed to help members of the public identify staff quickly and seek assistance from the correct member of staff. Making employees identifiable to clients is only one organisational goal; however where uniform policies seek to fulfil a variety of purposes, difficulties may arise. Uniforms are frequently used as a means to enhance a sense of professionalism and identity amongst staff, but paradoxically this may make it more difficult for clients to identify staff if the number of uniforms proliferate, uniforms are changed frequently or they are worn on some occasions but not on others.

This is a problem evident in the NHS. It has a complex division of labour with many different occupations and a large number of different uniforms that vary between hospitals and type of service (staff working in mental health services for example often deliberately do not wear uniforms). In one case, hospital managers were trying to strengthen the professional identity of groups like health care assistants (HCAs) and their uniforms became more similar to nursing staff but their roles remained distinct. Observational research during just one shift on one ward in an acute hospital detailed the following staff uniforms:

- ward manager (dark blue top with white piping)
- Band 6 nurse (dark top with dark blue lapels)
- Band 5 nurse (dark blue top with pale blue lapels)
- Band 5 newly qualified nurse (first six months: white lapel)
- matron (maroon top)
- health care assistant (HCA) (chocolate/coffee top)
- bank HCA (all white top)
- student nurse (white top/thin gold and blue stripes on the collar and arms)
- phlebotomist (white top with maroon piping)
- pharmacist (white top with grey piping)
- occupational therapist (white top with green piping)
- physiotherapist (white t-shirt)
- physiotherapist assistant (green t-shirt)
- domestic (white top with thin vertical blue stripes)
- ward assistant (pale blue top with white piping)
- ward clerk (dark blue shirt with a 'spots in squares' pattern)
- porter (pale blue short sleeved shirt)
- cardiographer (pale blue top with dark lilac piping)

Although staff wore name badges to identify themselves, these were often hard to read. A consequence of this large variety of uniforms is that only about two-thirds of patients could tell the difference between a nurse and an HCA. This has important implications for patient' assessment of the care received. Survey data indicated that patients who could tell the difference between HCAs and nurses reported a significantly more positive hospital experience. Interview data indicated that the ability to identify the right member of staff was very important in receiving timely and appropriate care, for example, in relation to pain relief.

Source: Based on Kessler et al (2010)

In relation to the service sector, the physical appearance of employees can be particularly relevant in managing customer perceptions and the perceived success of client interactions. Indeed, organisational investment in finding and projecting the 'right look' to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace is increasingly evident, particularly in the retail and hospitality sector (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).

An XpertHR survey (2015) covering 578 employers in the UK suggests that approximately three-quarters of this sample have dress codes in place with appearance policies helping to reinforce the internal culture of the firm (41.2%) and assisting in the identification of employees to the public (19.5%).

Customer surveys also increasingly query the service recipient's satisfaction with employee appearance. For example, Tesco's online customer feedback form includes a consideration of whether staff are dressed smartly and appropriately. Another case in point is Virgin Atlantic (see case study 2.2) which additionally points to the gendered discourse surrounding dress in organisations and the perceived association between emotions and attire at work.

Case study 2.2: Virgin's redesigned red uniforms

Virgin Atlantic's flying crew are clearly identifiable by their red uniforms. The organisation is known for its attention to detail in dress and for making a substantial investment in their clothing line for in-flight staff, using designer Vivienne Westwood for example.

The following was stated in their 2013 press release relating to their newly designed uniforms for female employees:

"The suit is in the iconic Virgin red and the silhouette extremely feminine to fit all shapes and sizes. The jacket enhances the female form with the aid of cleverly placed bust pleats, a nipped in waist and a curved hip line and the pencil skirt which looks deceptively simple from the front then reveals a cheeky dart and double pleat at the back." (Virgin Atlantic, 2013)

In an interview that unveiled Virgin's redesigned red uniforms, Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Group, pointed to the perceived link between clothing and job performance:

"If you dress in clothes that make you feel you look good, you're gonna smile, you're gonna be happy, you're gonna do your job a lot better." (Virgin Atlantic, 2014)

Relevant to the Virgin case is also the more recent concept of erotic capital (Hakim, 2011) seen as a combination of beauty, sex appeal, and social and self-presentation skills. One's sexuality under these circumstances, part symbolised through choice in dress and accessories, is labelled as a 'talent' that generates value for individuals and organisations. In relation to gender-specific requests by organisations, those that sexualise the presentation of female staff can be deemed as sexist, and be experienced by workers as 'humiliating' and 'dehumanising' (CIPD, 2016a).

Alternatively, uniforms can be perceived as a protection from unwanted objectification (Erickson, 2004). Companies might have explicit guidelines which state that provocative dressing is not tolerated in the work arena. For example, the dress code policy of an NHS foundation trust states that employees should 'avoid wearing anything which could be construed as inappropriate, provocative or offensive' (Cumbria Partnership NHS, 2013). Here, modesty in clothing is underlined as a way of de-emphasising one's sex appeal.

These notions, however, are subject to changing societal perspectives and indeed uniforms and accessories that appear unobjectionable to an organisation might be construed as offensive by employees in certain contexts. For example, female staff on Virgin Rail have previously refused to wear newly introduced uniform blouses due to them being 'see-through' (Landau, 2013).

Recent research suggests that instituting dress codes can provoke employee complaints, demotivate staff and create risks associated with discrimination claims (XpertHR, 2015).

2.1.2 Dress implications for employees

Clothing practices can have material consequences for individuals in terms of either helping or hindering their employability (Nickson et al, 2005) or career advancement (Brower, 2013), and can play a role in determining job satisfaction and performance (Bowman and Hooper, 1991).

In a recent experimental study, it was demonstrated that dress, as a result of its symbolic value and associated physical experience, can influence the perceptions and behaviour of the wearer within a relevant context (Adam and Galinsky, 2012). Dress as a medium of appearance has been found to act as a powerful tool in exhibiting personality (Naumann et al, 2009).

Relatedly, subtle changes in attire have been found to influence others' perceptions of the wearer's confidence, success and trustworthiness (Howlett et al, 2013). Such value judgements shape the nature of work interactions and can have consequences for employee conduct and wellbeing at work.

In terms of exploiting one's erotic capital, Hakim (2010) admits that there are potential negative repercussions for employees, mainly in the form of sexual harassment at the workplace (largely directed at women), but the author does not elaborate on the resultant implications for employee wellbeing. An organisation might employ a particular style of dress that accentuates an employee's 'sex appeal' which could inadvertently create a hostile work environment and encourage sexual advances by customers, exacerbating stress and emotion management demands at work (Seymour, 2000).

In *Marentette v. Michigan Host, Inc* [1980], the court, for example, acknowledged that requiring an employee to wear a uniform that resulted in them being subject to insults, taunts and physical abuse from customers might constitute sexual harassment. Furthermore, Gurung and Chrouser (2007) reveal that encouraging provocative dressing can lead to female objectification rather than an appraisal of their competency at work. Relatedly, the more critical literature points to how dress can signal servitude and customer superiority (Korczyński and Ott, 2004; Seymour, 2000).

While work-related dress can further a particular type of role or gender performance (Brower, 2013) ([see also case study 2.3](#)), specific forms of clothing can also be viewed as empowering. Several non-profit organisations such as Dress for Success and Smart Works, in addition to interview-related training, provide appropriate and professional interview clothing and accessories for women on low incomes to enhance their employability. Indeed, people are primed to use appearance strategies for the transition into the work arena (Cutts et al, 2015) and to demonstrate a fit with a job or an organisation.

Case study 2.3: High heels: a tall order?

A female receptionist was sent home by her employer for refusing to wear high heels. It was not clear why the employer thought the wearing of flat shoes would have a detrimental effect on her job performance.

The company stated:

"In line with industry standard practice, we have personal appearance guidelines across many of our corporate locations. These policies ensure staff are dressed consistently and include recommendations for appropriate style of footwear for the role."

Following considerable criticism of their dress code, the company decided to modify their personal appearance rules and female employees may now choose their own footwear (Guardian, 2016).

In response to a resultant online petition calling for a ban on forcing women to wear high heels at work, the UK government responded by stating:

"The government takes this issue very seriously and will continue to work hard to ensure women are not discriminated in the workplace by outdated attitudes and practices." (UK Government and Parliament Petitions, 2016)

To be lawful, a dress code must not be discriminatory and should be applied equally to all staff. Restrictions on choice of dress and appearance do not have to be identical for both sexes provided that taken 'in the round', they are imposed to an equal degree. Only if the requirements, taken as a whole, place an unequal burden upon one of the sexes, will they be challengeable.

A dress code that requires a female receptionist to wear high heels is not likely to be considered reasonable, as the employer would probably be unable to justify the wearing of such footwear as a requirement for such employment. Drawing on a related example, in *Owen v Professional Golfers' Association* (2000) (Unreported), a dress code prohibiting women from wearing trousers was held to be discriminatory by the Employment Tribunal.

2.2 Body modifications: tattoos, piercings and other

One's employability and experience of work can be shaped by decisions relating to body modifications, defined by Johnson et al (2014:1) as the use of cosmetics, sun tanning, piercings, tattoos, dieting, exercising and cosmetic surgery. Visible tattoos, piercings, hair colour, and body shape can all be hypothesised as being associated with one's physical attractiveness, and relatedly with employment-related outcomes (Anderson et al, 2010).

A recent experimental study suggested that candidates with visible body art were likely to face prejudice and discrimination that could have a negative influence on organisational hiring decisions (Timming et al, 2015). The visibly tattooed can experience societal stigma and managers in particular industries can demonstrate negative or guarded responses in providing job offers to candidates with visible body art (Hart, 2014; Timming, 2015).

Organisational branding and perceived customer expectations dominate the rationale for management-led control of such personal features. It is noteworthy however that some organisations have started to reconsider their strict 'no tattoo' policies for frontline staff. For instance at Starbucks, an employee-initiated online petition aimed at altering the organisation's tattoo policy has met with some success. Workers have been allowed to display tattoos on the condition that the tattoos are 'tasteful' and not visible on the face or throat (Bradford, 2014).

Interestingly, employer predispositions towards body modifications are not only seen in frontline service settings but also in non-customer facing roles (see case study 2.4).

Case study 2.4: Tattoos and employment in a non-customer facing role

Several incidents have arisen where people have either been refused employment or been asked to leave as a result of body art. In one illustration, a female worker at a radio station had a tattoo over her foot and ankle. Company policy did not prohibit tattoos but required them to be covered. The employee made no effort to cover the body art and was dismissed.

Because the employer's action did not constitute discrimination under any protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 (see also '[Human Rights Act and dress codes](#)'), a discrimination action could not succeed. The claimant could not challenge the decision of her dismissal as unfair as she had not worked at the radio station long enough to sustain an unfair dismissal action (Guardian, 2014).

Overall, therefore, dress and appearance norms in organisations might be implicit or explicit, with varying levels of attention to detail and covering a diverse range of appearance-related features. Appearance standards might be instituted for particular job roles or indeed be more widespread within the organisation.

Additionally, many issues relating to dress norms and appearance preferences closely relate to the notion of aesthetics in organisations and the increasing demands of aestheticised labour in the marketplace. This link is examined in the following section.

2.3 Aesthetic labour

Aesthetic labour represents particular types of workers who are appraised as 'looking good' and 'sounding right' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). The term denotes the commodification of employees' faces, voices and appearance for the delivery of aesthetic performances at work (Witz et al, 2003). Certain forms of managing appearance at work might attempt to aestheticise the workforce, or alternatively, organisations might prescribe physical image norms in order to limit the 'unaesthetic' aspects of one's self-presentation.

The management of aesthetic performances take several forms, including the creation of implicit or explicit organisational standards in relation to one's body (Timming, 2015), voice and accent (Nath, 2011), dress (Spiess and Waring, 2005), and accessories (Pettinger, 2005).

In the last decade, academic research on aesthetic labour demands within organisations has expanded. This growth is connected with increased research into customer service work, given the broader economic shift from manufacturing to services. While conceptions of aesthetic labour appear to be rooted in frontline customer service debates, there has been wider ongoing experimental research demonstrating how one's perceived attractiveness and physical appearance has a propensity to shape selection decisions (Cann et al, 1981), performance evaluations (Drogosz and Levy, 1996) and promotions (Morrow et al, 1990) within organisations.

Real-time interactive customer service work settings (face-to-face and/or voice-to-voice), in particular, have the propensity to demonstrate intentional or unconscious managerial bias towards the aesthetic appeal of their frontline staff. In the UK, for example, studies have revealed how the retail and hospitality sector predominantly showcase aesthetic workers, where body shape and form becomes subject to management policy and intervention (Pettinger, 2005; Warhurst et al, 2000; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010).

It has been suggested that customers can find it hard to evaluate quality both prior to and during service consumption, and its appraisal might even be challenging after service delivery (Berry, 1995). Hence, aestheticising various aspects of employee appearance can demonstrate organisational attempts to make the intangible elements of service offerings more tangible and cater to (perceived or real) customer expectations and preferences.

2.3.1 Visual aesthetics and branding

Case study 2.5: Abercrombie and Fitch branding

Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F) has built its reputation in the 'looks marketplace' over several decades. The company has been well known for the branding of its employees, where 'attractive' and 'cool' frontline staff adhere to carefully determined dress and appearance standards which range from hair colour and styles to the ideal length of one's nails (Deery and Nath, 2013; Kaplan, 2015). In 2006, A&F's former CEO Mike Jeffries made a comment which has been considered to be a rationale for their recruitment policy (Walker, 2013):

"That's why we hire good looking people in our stores... because good looking people attract other good looking people, and we want to market to cool, good looking people. We don't market to anyone other than that."

Explicit targeting of 'good looking people' has given rise to some negative perceptions of the company (Change.org online petition, 2013).

A 2015 article published in The Independent collated a number of employee experiences that highlighted potentially discriminatory in-store work practices; the allegations from employees included racism, weightism, religious discrimination, and the sexual harassment of female employees – all attributed to the nature of the organisation's appearance norms (Dearden, 2015).

In one US case, A&F declined to hire a job applicant (a practicing Muslim) because the headscarf that she wore conflicted with Abercrombie's employee dress policy. In this case, it was held that an employer may not make an applicant's religious practice, confirmed or otherwise, a factor in employment decisions (Talbot, 2015).

Backlash from consumers and employees alike and falling share prices reportedly led to the company's reconsideration of its appearance controls and product lines. Hiring practices at A&F are now set to be 'more inclusive and diverse' with staff being allowed to follow 'more individualistic' appearance styles (Talbot, 2015).

Symbolically, physical appearance cues can act to differentiate the service provider and the service provision from competitors. Aesthetic labour demands have inherent parallels with principles of branding in the marketing literature. Brands aim to differentiate their product or service from their competitors and create better awareness and recall of their distinct offering (Wood, 2000).

In addition to embodying proficiency, organisations may want to create an environment that activates visceral emotions in customers and portrays a brand personality associated with human overtones such as warmth, sophistication, excitement, raciness or ruggedness (Aaker, 1997).

Dress codes, uniforms and other appearance-related policies can act as a constant reinforcement of the organisation's brand, with the development and deployment of certain employee attributes aimed at aesthetic consumption. As organisations can also be arenas that sell more than a product or a particular service, the frontline worker plays a significant role in delivering and managing the intangible aspects of service work. Such image management, especially in highly aestheticised workplaces (Hall and van den Broek, 2012) can result in negative outcomes for consumers, employees and employers ([see case study 2.5](#)).

Employees themselves however have been found to recognise the value of self-presentation at work and the need to portray an image that is consistent with an organisation's branding strategy (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). This is not just an issue for traditional employees but also for the self-employed who may impose particular norms on themselves and indeed feel a pressure to conform to

implicit dress and appearance codes in an industry. For example, Harvey et al (2014: 466) reveal that their sample of self-employed physical trainers used 'instrumental peacocking' as a way to strategically attract service recipients and elicit goodwill.

As highlighted previously however, inordinate attention to the physical attributes of existing or potential employees can carry negative consequences for both individuals and organisations. Mahajan (2007) asserts that attractiveness standards in organisations limit employee agency and can have damaging consequences (particularly for women's) financial and social wellbeing.

Appearance policies are said to have a negative association with self esteem and are positively related to prejudice and objectification – the perceiving and labelling of bodies in terms of appearance rather than attending to features of competence or job performance (Mahajan, 2007).

Attention to one's physical features may also result in social physique anxiety or the apprehension experienced by individuals as a result of the real (or imagined) evaluation of one's body by others (Hart et al, 1989).

Where employees experience a discrepancy between organisationally required aesthetic standards and their personal identity, it can result in value-conflicting aesthetic dissonance (Timming et al, 2015), feelings of being stigmatised, and the exacerbation of managing negative emotions during work and customer interactions (Nath, 2011).

Research however is still limited in terms of understanding the service recipient's experience of aesthetic labour performances and its link to perceptions of service quality.

An experimental study (involving a hypothetical restaurant scenario) suggested that formal aesthetic controls (such as uniforms) can have a negative effect on customer perceptions of trust and service quality (Paul et al, 2015).

Other research suggests that while aesthetic labour might influence the emotional state of customers positively, it does not necessarily shape the future purchase or recommendation intentions of customers (Tsaur et al, 2015). Interestingly, Pounders et al (2015) contend that service employees who look alike are likely to trigger negative consumer reactions particularly when aesthetic practices have the potential to appear contrived.

In relation to body modifications, Baumann et al (2016) demonstrated that tattoos act as a potential liability for employees in service settings, who might have to overcome negative perceptions and customer dislike of body art.

2.3.2 Visual aesthetics and HR implications

The nature of aesthetic appeal differs by context. Management preferences, organisational, industry, locational and societal effects tend to influence the subjective appraisals of workforce aesthetics and shape the notion of what constitutes 'a good look'. The company's place in the market (for example, mass-market, up-market) and the target consumer segment also plays a part in determining the degree of aesthetic regulation (Pettinger, 2005).

Recruitment and selection practices that emphasise aesthetic attributes, as expected, tend to be informal (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007) with selection decisions possibly consisting of 'blink moments' where rapid judgments are made in relation to candidates passing a first impression test (Gatta, 2011: 59). Here, disability discrimination, gendered (Pettinger, 2005), class-related (Timming, 2005), ageist (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007) and racist practices (Wissinger, 2012) might be concealed and reproduced through aesthetic justifications and explanations based on an organisation's branding strategy.

The training of employees in aesthetic 'skills' and the inclusion of aesthetic criteria in monitoring and appraisal processes tend to be greater in highly aestheticised company markets (Hall and van den Broek, 2012). As revealed by Warhurst and Nickson (2007), organisational capacity to eliminate job applicants with undesirable appearance attributes at the recruitment and selection stage can explain circumstances where training in aesthetic skills is limited.

Aesthetic labour practices may additionally contradict values of diversity and inclusion within organisations. Managing diversity has gained a higher profile within the HR community and refers to the systematic commitment on the part of organisations to recruit and

retain employees from a wide variety of backgrounds. This emphasis on inclusion enables organisations to recognise and value difference and draw on a diverse workforce to enhance employee wellbeing and service quality.

A workforce that is respected and valued will be more engaged and in turn will demonstrate more commitment in providing services to clients. A corporate culture that acknowledges and promotes diversity and attends to concerns of discrimination in the workplace can enhance feelings of trust and contribute to employee wellbeing and performance (Armstrong et al, 2010).

Conversely, a climate that disregards prejudicial attitudes and behaviours risks facing disgruntled employees, lawsuits and damaged organisational reputation. For example, in *Whiterod v Karen Millen Fashion's Employment Tribunal* (2014) an employee claimed that the employer's dress code required staff to be of a particular size, stature and appearance and that the employer's actions constituted a breach of the contract of employment (Schell, 2014). The Employment Tribunal dismissed the claim, concluding that the implied duty of mutual trust and confidence had not been breached.

The case however does illustrate the ill feeling that can arise by the introduction of rules relating to physical appearance and the hostile reactions it might elicit. Relatedly, a recent case against Cecchini's Bistro was upheld in the Tribunal with a female employee being awarded in excess of £3,500 after winning a sex discrimination and harassment claim. In this instance, the owner-manager had requested the claimant, a waitress, to wear her hair down, dress in a skirt and put on a 'full face of make-up' so that she could be 'easy on the eye' for customers (CIPD, 2016b). See also '[Sex discrimination and dress codes](#)' (section 2.4.2.1).

Dress and appearance, as stated previously, also function as signalling devices. While certain elements of one's look (typically) cannot be manipulated (for example, facial features, skin tone), other appearance choices can demonstrate what a person has decided to publicly communicate about their personal selves (for example, through visible tattoos, jewellery or accessories of religious significance).

Symbolically, such communication has relevance for others' appraisals of factors such as an individual's group membership, social, political or religious allegiance, lifestyle salience, and professionalism. The appraisers own values, personality, gender, age and cultural/religious background can play a part in drawing conclusions about others (for example, Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005; Galen et al, 2014; Koch et al, 2015).

These judgements also occur in a context in which people are expressing their individual identity more publicly and the boundaries between the private and the public (including the workplace) are becoming more fluid. Such trends have important implications for HR practice and employment law. The legal context is discussed in the next section of the report followed by a presentation of the findings.

2.4 Legal provisions relating to dress codes

The following aspects of legal regulation are relevant to employer codes on dress and appearance.

2.4.1 The law

Equality Act 2010

An employer's dress code policy must not contravene prohibited discrimination in respect of the following protected characteristics listed in section 4 of the Equality Act 2010:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race
- religion or belief
- sex

- sexual orientation

Direct discrimination

Direct discrimination occurs when the reason for a person being treated less favourably than another is a protected characteristic listed in section 4 of the Equality Act 2010. Section 13 defines direct discrimination as: "A person (A) discriminates against another (B) if, because of a protected characteristic, A treats B less favourably than A treats or would treat others."

To succeed in a direct discrimination claim, a person must establish that they have been less favourably treated than an appropriate comparator. In *Burrett v West Birmingham Health Authority* (1994) female nurses were required to wear a cap as part of their uniform while male nurses had to wear jackets with epaulets. Ms Burrett claimed this was a discriminatory requirement as the caps were demeaning to women. The Employment Appeal Tribunal held that as the requirement to wear a uniform applied to both male and female nurses, the fact that the uniforms differed, and the applicant objected to one part of the uniform did not amount to less favourable treatment on grounds of sex. Her belief that the requirement to wear a cap was demeaning was held not to be determinative of whether or not there was less favourable treatment.

Indirect discrimination

Indirect discrimination arises when all groups are treated equally, but the effect of the provision, criterion, or practice imposed by an employer has a disadvantaging effect on one group, unless the requirement can be justified. For example, a Sikh boy who was refused entrance to a school unless he cut his hair and stopped wearing his turban was indirectly discriminated against (*Mandla (Sewa Singh) and Another v Dowell Lee and Another* – 1983).

Harassment

The definition of harassment is set out in section 26 of the Act.

Person A harasses another (B) if:

- A engages in unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, and
- the conduct has the purpose or effect of:
 - violating B's dignity, or
 - creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for B

A also harasses B if:

- A engages in unwanted conduct of a sexual nature

For example, if an employer prescribed a dress code that required staff to dress in a sexual or provocative style, this might constitute harassment, particularly if it encouraged a third party, such as a customer or another visitor to harass a staff member (*Marentette v Michigan Host, Inc* (1980)).

Human Rights Act 1998

Section 3(1) of this Act provides, so far as it is possible to do so, primary legislation and subordinate legislation that must be read and given effect in a way which is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights 1950. The provisions of the [Human Rights Act 1998](#) that might be relevant to dress codes is Article 9, which lays out the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and Article 10, the right to freedom of expression.

2.4.2 Case law and dress codes

In *Boychuk v HJ Symons Holidays* (1977), it was held to be a fair dismissal when an employer had warned an employee about wearing a badge proclaiming 'lesbians ignite'. The decision to dismiss was considered to fall within the band of reasonable responses because the employee had contact with the public and the badge was likely to cause offence. In such circumstances, it was viewed as appropriate for an employer to regulate employees' attire (Flynn, 1995). Dress code provisions are often concerned with promoting a particular corporate image or trying to ensure employees in customer-facing roles present a neat and tidy image to customers.

The courts have generally demonstrated a marked unwillingness to interfere in managerial prerogative and have left business largely unfettered to determine rules relating to dress unless they are deemed to contravene the law on discrimination or freedom of expression under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) 1950. Indeed, *Schmidt v Austicks Bookshops Ltd* (1977) stated: "An employer is entitled to a large measure of discretion in controlling the image of his establishment, including the appearance of staff."

A particular risk for an employer is failure to apply a dress code policy in an even-handed and uniform manner. To appreciate the approach adopted by the courts, it is beneficial to examine several different categories of case law, including sex discrimination and dress codes; race, religion, or belief discrimination and dress codes; human rights and dress codes; and transgender and dress codes.

2.4.2.1 Sex discrimination and dress codes

To establish that a dress code constitutes direct discrimination, it has to be established that less favourable treatment of a particular sex has occurred by the application of the dress code rules (Smith and Baker, 2013). The courts have adopted an 'in the round' approach or package approach to the comparison. Appearance codes are compared 'in the round', and not on an item-by-item basis (Connolly, 2011:110).

Several cases have discussed the meaning of less favourable treatment. In *Schmidt v Austicks Bookshops Ltd* (1977), female employees who worked in a bookshop were required to wear skirt overalls at work, while men were not permitted to wear a t-shirt. Schmidt complained that the fact she could not wear trousers was unlawful sex discrimination. The Employment Appeal Tribunal rejected her claim, concluding that there was in force rules restricting dress and governing appearance which applied to men and also applied to women although, obviously, women and men being different, the rules in the 2 cases are not the same. Thus, as long as the employer enforced the rules even-handedly, so far as comparison is possible, it will have treated women and men alike.

The Schmidt approach was upheld in *Smith v Safeway Plc* (1996). In that case, the employers' appearance code placed restrictions on hair length, which applied to men only; women were allowed to have long hair provided it was tied back. A male delicatessen assistant was dismissed because his ponytail became too long and could no longer be contained under his hat.

Mr Smith's complaint was that the dress code was discriminatory because only women could keep long hair and they would not have been dismissed for having long hair. The Court of Appeal considered the hair codes and held that the dress code enforced a common standard of smartness and conventional standards even-handedly, and taken as a whole, it could not be considered that either gender was treated less favourably. It was stated that it was necessary to show not merely that the sexes were treated differently but that the treatment accorded to one was less favourable than the treatment accorded to the other.

In *Hutchieson v Graham and Morton Ltd* (2007), the employer required a female manager to wear the same type of nylon overalls worn by the rest of her team while male managers were allowed to wear suits. An Employment Tribunal held that this constituted sex discrimination because it suggested the claimant was of lower seniority than her male counterparts. Thus, treating workers of the same level differently might bring a risk of legal challenge. Two cases demonstrate how requiring male employees to adhere to a stricter dress code than women can result in a successful sex discrimination claim (Cirell and Benn, 2007).

In *Pell v Wagstaff and Wheatley Hotel*, a male applicant was refused employment as a server at a hotel bar because of the length of his hair. The Employment Tribunal held that this amounted to direct sex discrimination.

Similarly, in *Jarman v The Link Stores Ltd* (2004), a male worker was subject to disciplinary action for wearing an earring and female employees were not. It could also be contended that a requirement for men not to wear earrings at work may contravene article 10 of

the European Convention on Human Rights 1950 (the right to freedom of expression). To date, no cases have been decided on this basis (XpertHR, 2005).

The case law determines that restrictions on choice of dress and appearance do not have to be identical for both sexes provided that, taken 'in the round'; they are imposed to an equal degree (Smith and Baker, 2013: 272). Only if the requirements, taken as a whole, place an unequal burden upon one of the sexes, will they be challengeable (Connolly, 2011: 113).

The 'in the round' approach is problematic because it permits different treatment of the sexes. McColgan (2005) observed that the approach of the courts enables the facilitation of gender stereotyping that employers can reinforce, through dress codes, the very stereotypes of male as serious, responsible, and mature and female as decorative handmaidens, which disadvantage women at work.

2.4.2.2 Transgender and dress codes

The coalition government's [Transgender Action Plan](#) issued in 2011 states that 88% of transgender employees have experienced discrimination or harassment in the workplace (2011:8). Employers need to consider providing a reasonable approach to the application of the dress code, particularly during the transition from one gender to another. Issues that an employer might need to accommodate include hair length and style, use of makeup, and the wearing of jewellery (Reed, 2011: 13).

However, while a transgender person might have a degree of protection, the same might not be true of someone who cross-dresses. In *Kara v Hackney Council* (1995) (Blu, 2007), a tribunal held that prohibiting a cross-dresser from wearing a skirt was not discriminatory. The Employment Tribunal considered that the employer was concerned about the 'appropriateness' of dress in a 'business-like organisation' rather than equality. It is interesting to note that Kara did not work in a customer-facing role (Blu, 2007: 286).

This decision was upheld by the ECHR in *Kara v United Kingdom* (ECHR 1998) where the court stated:

"The Commission considers that employers may require their employees to conform to certain dress requirements which are reasonably related to the type of work being undertaken, for example, safety helmets, hygienic coverings, uniform. This may also involve requiring employees, who come into contact with the public or other organisations to conform to a dress code which may reasonably be regarded as enhancing the employer's public image and facilitating its external contacts." (p4, para 5)

2.4.2.3 Race, religion, or belief discrimination and dress codes

Race discrimination claims commonly arise in respect to dress and appearance codes when blanket uniform policies, criteria, or practice that can indirectly discriminate against particular employees are applied. In *Malik v British Home Stores* (1980), British Home Stores would not allow Malik, a Muslim woman, to wear trousers and she was successful in her complaint of indirect discrimination. In *Singh v Greater Manchester Police* (Guardian, 2009), a Sikh officer was asked not to wear a turban during riot training; this requirement was held to be indirect race discrimination.

In *Noah v Sara Desrosiers* (trading as Wedge) (2007), the claimant was Muslim and applied for the position of stylist at a salon owned by the respondent. The claimant wore a headscarf, which she considered essential to her religion. The respondent did not hire the claimant, considering the wearing of a headscarf made her unsuitable for the post. The respondent made it clear that if an employee in her salon wore any type of head covering she would ask them to remove it. It would not be consistent with the promotion of the business for employees to cover their hair. The claimant complained of direct and indirect discrimination. While the claim of direct discrimination was rejected, the complaint of indirect discrimination was well founded.

In *Azmi v Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council* (2007), Mrs Azmi was employed at a junior school as a bilingual support worker. Mrs Azmi asked whether she could wear a veil when teaching with male teachers. Mrs Azmi was informed that she could wear a veil while

working around the school but that she must remove it whilst teaching, because obscuring the face and mouth reduces the nonverbal signals required between student and pupil. Essentially, it was determined that she carried out her work more effectively when not wearing a veil. The claimant complained of indirect discrimination. The court found that the local authority had applied a provision, criterion, or practice that put persons of Mrs Azmi's religion at a disadvantage when compared with others and that there was a potential case of indirect discrimination. However, there was objective evidence that when she was wearing the veil, children did not engage with her as well as when she was unveiled.

2.4.2.4 Human Rights Act and dress codes

In *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom* ECHR (2013), 2 Christian claimants who had not been successful against their employers in the UK courts under the discrimination legislation brought their cases to the European Court of Human Rights (*Eweida v British Airways plc* 2010; *Chaplin v. Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital NHS Foundation Trust* 2010). In relation to the first claimant, Ms Eweida, it was held that she had the right to wear her cross under Article 9 ECHR 1950, which accorded employees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that, in general, individuals had the right to manifest their religious beliefs so long as it did not impinge on the rights of others. In the event of a conflict, an employer must balance this right of an employee against the rights and freedoms of others. The European Court of Human Rights considered that her employer, British Airways', uniform policy aimed to protect its corporate image but impinged on Eweida's religious freedom.

The second claimant, Ms Chaplin, brought a similar claim. Chaplin was a nurse in a hospital who was prevented from wearing a cross at work (*Chaplin v Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital NHS Foundation Trust* 2010). The ECHR held that there was interference with her freedom to manifest her religion, however, rejected her claim because the interference was proportionate to achieving a legitimate aim, which was the health and safety of nurses and patients.

The claimants are distinguished in that the first worked in a private company and the aim of the uniform policy was to achieve a particular professional corporate image, and the second claimant worked in a hospital where the dress code was based on health and safety considerations (Squelch, 2013: 50).

Following the decision in *Eweida*, the Equality and Human Rights Commission drafted guidance for employers that advised them to treat requests relating to religion seriously and to consider how to accommodate these requests unless there were cogent or compelling reasons not to (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2013).

Another area that raises discrimination and freedom of expression issues and is becoming controversial concerns employer attitudes towards employees or job applicants with tattoos. Several incidents have arisen where people have either been refused employment or been asked to leave as a result of body art. For example, a female cafeteria employee who had a tattoo and facial piercings left her employment after her employer presented her with a standards of dress guide that stated visible tattoos and facial piercings were not setting a good example and should be covered (BBC, 2014).

At present, individuals displaying tattoos, piercings, and other body modifications are not protected under the Equality Act 2010. It should be noted that the disability discrimination provisions contained in the EA 2010 cover severe disfigurements (for example, scars, birthmarks).

However, disfigurements relating to tattoos which have not been removed, or piercings for decorative or other non-medical purposes, are explicitly excluded from the definition of severe disfigurement - see [Regulation 5 of the Equality Act 2010 \(Disability\) Regulations 2010](#) (SI 2010/218).

Nevertheless, the prohibition of tattoos, piercings, and other body modifications might result in disgruntled employees and the possibility of challenges to employer policies on the grounds that they constitute a breach of human rights.

2.4.3 Concluding remarks

Dress code policies give rise to a number of complex legal and employee relations issues. If an employer does not handle these difficulties sensitively, it can lead to dissatisfied employees and legal challenges.

On the whole, the law has taken a conservative approach, largely upholding the right of management to decide on appropriate dress in the workplace, subject to laws on discrimination and freedom of expression. However, employers should consider taking a more enlightened view, one of reasonable accommodation to allow for freedom of dress unless the restriction is necessary for a proportionate and legitimate reason.

3. Findings

The findings are organised around 3 themes that reflect the research aims of the study. Firstly, we elaborate on the significance of dress codes. This sub-section deals with the variety of motives that organisations, employees and trade union members put forward to emphasise the role of appearance norms at work. Secondly, we explore organisational policy and practice surrounding dress and appearance management at work and employee attitudes and experiences of the same.

For clarity, this section is further divided into employer and employee attitudes and practices relating to (a) body supplements in the form of uniforms, other clothing and accessories, and (b) body modifications encompassing tattoos and piercings.

Finally, the main HR and ER challenges relating to the management of dress codes and employee appearance are identified and discussed.

3.1 Significance of dress and appearance for organisations

3.1.1 Organisational brand management

The majority of respondents in the study stressed the significance of organisational representation and the management of their firm's image through attire. As anticipated, owners and senior managers in both small and larger organisations highlighted the need for employees to present themselves in line with the firm's brand positioning and the normative expectations of appropriate, professional and indeed aesthetic standards in their respective sectors.

With all the employee respondents either working in visible or public roles, the importance of customer service and customer expectations alongside professional norms had a strong influence on appearance standards.

A café owner who described the company's brand as artisan and contemporary explained:

"I would say in a work environment, given that we service predominantly professional people - that's our customer base, I guess we have a brand positioning and so you've got to be true to that and appropriate to that." (owner-manager, café)

Other respondents stated:

"You have to put on a professional image that is obviously linked to how you look too." (senior HR manager, railways)

"I'm talking now from the uniform perspective – which sets very clear standards around what people should be wearing in what circumstances...depending on whereabouts you are and what you're doing. And that would standardise how you should behave and it's more around professionalism." (senior manager, emergency services)

The interviews also revealed the importance of managing the organisation's brand by showcasing the organisation in a manner that furthered the service recipient's belief in the credibility of the brand offering. The trustworthiness of the organisation's service or product

was closely linked to one's physical appearance through uniform, makeup, issues surrounding the (in)visibility of tattoos and piercings, and even employee physique in certain cases.

(The rationale for dress codes is) "Consistency . . . of brand, and following through so that you've got attention to detail. If that's one of the things that you want to be known for and recognised for, then that has to be in every single aspect of what you do. It means that the tray tables have to be cleaned in a certain way and your makeup has to be done in a certain way." (former employee, airlines)

"You don't have to actually wear their clothes but they do strongly recommend it. If you don't wear their clothes, the items have to be similar. . . they have to look as if they were made by [the organisation] in case a customer says 'oh I like your shirt, where did you get it?'" (employee, fashion retail)

"When you talked to people [employees], most of the people had played sports, had worn [the brand] at some point. And they also really emphasised that it's much easier to sell the product, because it was like retail and selling. So if you say 'oh I always wore these shoes when I played and they're really comfortable', it makes it much easier to sell . . . you probably wouldn't take a lot of advice from someone who wasn't massively athletic-looking... perhaps it might be a bit tougher." (former employee, sports retail)

One participant also emphasised the need for uniformity in dress when operating across national borders, albeit accommodating local cultural and stylistic distinctions in personal presentation.

"So people pick up the mood music [in relation to dress], and that's the reason as well why we have people from our overseas offices come here and spend time with us, so that they kind of acquire a way of doing things... similarly our office in Rome will be staffed by Italian people; hopefully they'll be style-setters in the Roman style." (owner-manager, software and communication technologies)

Organisational brand was also reportedly managed where firms had to adhere to dress impositions by particular nation states. As elucidated by a pilot working for an international airline:

"When we go to the Middle East, females by law have to have a headscarf. That's put onto them by the foreign State and as a company we have to abide by that . . . [the company] want the whole picture, so they will supply a headscarf or whatever else in the colour of the airline." (airline pilot)

3.1.2 Managing client perceptions

A demonstration of care and the business-logic of appearance management was predominantly based on observations and assumptions about societal expectations of, and distaste towards, certain appearance-related features. This is exemplified in the following quotes surrounding body supplements and modifications. The accounts demonstrated how appearance-related policies could be seen by management and by employees as playing a role in minimising negative reactions towards unconventional appearances:

"I think if you're a customer and someone was dressing that way [referring to 'being scruffy and unkempt, with tattoos all up the neck and piercings'], especially with it being a local authority - especially being in the public sector, you would feel that the local authority doesn't care about the service [funerals] that they're providing to you, they don't care about your loved one because actually they can't provide someone who is being respectful of themselves." (HR advisor, local authority)

"I know that a lot of people would feel uncomfortable, a lot of older people would feel uncomfortable [interacting with employees sporting tattoos]. People from certain cultures wouldn't feel comfortable interacting with people with a tattoo . . . we are academia first but closely a business as well. If our customers and our clients are starting to say - our students are starting to say, that we don't want to be served or we don't want to come to a place where people with tattoos on their face are teaching us or serving us, then it's going to be an issue for the university." (employee, university student support services)

"Always suits for meetings! I actually think that part of it is that that's what clients like to see. That actually we work in this very traditional world and certain clients kind of enjoy the experience of coming in to this building, the kind of traditional service that you get and they want to see their barristers wearing traditional suits." (barrister)

For the majority of employees in our sample, the demonstration of both individual and brand credibility to service recipients through physical appearance and visual cues was seen as vital. Perceptions of appropriate standards seemingly reinforced their role and status and facilitated effective job performance (also discussed further in ['Dress, work role and performance' section 3.2.2.4](#)):

"If you come in with a firm, authoritative voice, looking the part, then the majority of times people will respect what you're saying . . . to give someone something negative to focus on about how you look, isn't going to help your cause in the slightest - 'Who are you to tell me what to do, you look like a sack of crap'." (staff member, emergency services)

"I think one of the things for me is because I'm an early career academic, I think it's important to present myself more formally... in part because I think students respond better to it... if I looked like a wreck or a state and I was informal, then you'd get quite low expectations of who I am and what I do." (teaching staff, university)

Cultural dress was also viewed as a positive factor in rapport-building with clients:

"If someone African, for example, is going to an African family, then perhaps it wouldn't be such a problem if they were wearing more of an African dress because that person would trust them and build rapport with them." (HR advisor, local authority)

The issue of appearance in relation to personal credibility was stated as being particularly significant to younger staff and additionally to women who worked in male-dominated work environments. For example, a female participant from the legal profession explained how wearing a suit jacket enabled her to be taken seriously by clients and helped her overcome biases in relation to her 'seeming younger and less important'. Echoing these sentiments, others stated:

"When I walk into that room and I'm advising a senior manager, maybe they would not take me seriously if I was advising a senior manager wearing a bright red outfit or whatever . . . when I came on, for example, I think they were maybe expecting someone a little bit older when I walked in, and I think sometimes I have to work at building up people's trust because I am younger." (HR advisor, local authority)

Case study 3.1: Look at competition

Dress and overall appearance as a source of competitive advantage was highlighted in our study. During the interviews, participants compared their personal and organisational dress sense or norms to those of their competitors and industry standards. Conscious benchmarking of clothing and uniforms against rival firms was particularly reported in the legal services, other high-end private services, and in airlines.

Demonstrating this facet in the legal profession, a respondent stated:

"Well ultimately we're selling legal services, right? I've had this said to me by one of my bosses - 'look, we're obviously competing with lots of different law firms and there'll be law firms out there who will constantly just be wearing very sleek, amazing clothes, and they'll turn up to meetings and look amazing. And if we turn up not wearing a suit and, you know, just looking a bit rough . . . people will think that they are the better law firm.'" (principal associate, law firm)

Source: Respondent interviews

3.1.3 Being identifiable, having legitimacy and signalling job status

Organisationally prescribed uniforms, in particular, served as an identifier of a job role, making employees more visible to service recipients, and provided legitimacy. This could be a legal requirement and be particularly relevant for employees in public services:

"From a legal perspective we have to be identifiable to general members of the public . . . so a lot that we wear [identifies us] just to remove any doubt." (staff member, emergency services)

In relation to issues surrounding identifiability and prestige, another participant suggested how uniforms could signpost hierarchy and also help to differentiate service expectations within the organisation:

"We're in the uniform of the company and regarded usually fairly high up within the company - both visibly and also metaphorically within the hierarchy of the company, flying the airplane, responsibility - all of it . . . The cabin crew are seen all the time, they're very nice, they're paid to be very nice, they'll be charming and they'll be interactive, yet [for customers] to see us [pilots] is also quite nice, like I say, it's special or different." (airline pilot)

Legitimacy through attire is seemingly gained by impressions created about expertise. A participant additionally stated how mirroring client dress and presentation facilitated more equal relations and helped in overcoming visible divisions during business negotiations:

"It's a sort of leveller as well - everyone that's in a suit, the people on the other side of a table would be wearing one as well, and so it does remove any barriers in that respect." (Owner-manager, software and communication technologies)

Relatedly, a senior official with a wide range of industry experience discussed the possibility of uniforms and appearance norms as serving to strategically elevate the status of job roles and benefit employees in lower-skilled occupations by providing them with an enhanced and more professionalised work image. The intention in these instances might additionally revolve around attracting and retaining employees in lower-skilled jobs where employee turnover might be particularly prevalent.

"If you look at restaurants, how are you going to make front-of-house as it is in some restaurants and in some countries, one of the best jobs you can get . . . now, if you're just going around and you're not sort of presented as 'this is the best person in the restaurant, second only to the chef', then how are you going to get that sense of esteem and pride in terms of what you do? How do you get people who are essentially waiting on other people to actually say 'crikey, that's good, you know, that's a real great job to have - that's a really professional job to have'." (senior manager, government agency)

3.1.4 Safety perspectives

Safety performance rationales were cited by 5 respondents in the sample. An interviewee in the transport sector explained how safety indicators were routinely collated by the firm and therefore various dress prescriptions (for example, high-visibility clothing, hard hats, boots, etc) were seen as encouraging the safety behaviour of employees and thereby enhancing the safety climate of the organisation.

In this example, different colours of hats as seen in the quote below, helped with the identification of safe numbers of trainees and seasoned employees at work at any given time:

"Dress code is particularly important for our men on the track, so our engineers, our operatives, our maintenance guys that are out on the track on a regular basis have to be equipped to do that job in a safe fashion. So they all wear high-vis, they all wear hardhats, if you are training you wear a different coloured hat . . . so that we know when people are out on the tracks, we can see who is qualified and who is minding or supervising somebody who is training, because we couldn't have a load of particular hats out on the line doing work without people supervising them. I suppose it's like wearing a learner badge on your car if you're driving. That's how the system operates . . . all sorts of protective clothing that they wear is really critical to the type of job they do. Without it they couldn't do their job properly, the safety processes and procedures would not be as effective." (senior HR manager, railways)

For the emergency services, safety clothing regulations included additional guidelines relating to acceptable or unacceptable hairstyles and jewellery. Similarly, due to security measures in airline travel, cabin crew members reportedly followed stringent uniform guidelines. Additionally, employee wellbeing in different climates and conditions also needed to be taken into account when designing uniforms.

"So we'll go from extremes where we're in 40 degree plus heat - is it [uniforms] too restrictive, does it breathe, is it horrible, is it the right size, do you have the fit, and then we're also in Canada in the winter in minus 28 [degrees]. So again - is it [uniform] safe, do you need a jumper, do you need an external coat, do we have enough extremity scarves - all that has got to be accounted for within a year. And they'll want a common theme through that with the company . . . the uniform is with a certain thread running through and the whole thing has to tie in . . . When we're in the cockpit we derobe our ties, partly for security, partly for comfort, partly because we don't really need them. Because on every facet you can say that certain bits have a safety implication... So wedding rings and rings - you can't wear them. Necklaces, as long as they are invisible when you're wearing them, which means they're not supposed to be like a dog collar, they're supposed to be sort of quite small." (airline pilot)

In fresh food preparation areas, a trade union respondent emphasised the importance of prohibiting nail varnish, false nails or nail jewellery in addition to avoiding strong perfumes and aftershaves. A café owner further indicated that dress norms in her business were linked to food hygiene issues and were also intended to avoid safety-related hazards:

"I ask people to, at minimum, comply with the food hygiene rules. So there are rules around keeping your hair tied back, not wearing jewellery, not having beyond like a wedding ring and studs is pretty much what it is, not wearing nail varnish. So basically stuff that can get in to the food, so there's a set of rules around that. So that's kind of our minimum standard. And then the people are covered, so they wear aprons to protect the food and to protect their clothes." (owner-manager, café)

3.1.5 Organisational culture and identity

The rationale of building and maintaining a sense of organisational identity through dress and appearance was cited by management respondents. Symbolically, dress could be seen to reinforce group affiliations and loyalties. Highlighting the utility of uniforms as furthering a team-approach to work, the following manager indicated how dress functioned as an internal leveller in terms of de-emphasising organisational hierarchy and reminding employees of their common purpose:

"When you're wearing your high-vis, there is a sense that you have an identity to an organisation. So from their [employee] perspective, I think they very much feel part of a team when they're on the track and that's probably strengthened by the wearing of the high-vis. So I think from their perspective it's about being part of a group..." (senior

HR manager, railways)

Revealingly, another participant discussed a perceived cultural and simultaneous dress-related change during an office relocation exercise, additionally demonstrating the potential connection of employee presentation to organisational architecture and space:

"It's that kind of seriousness attitude. So we've now moved to this very swanky new state of the art, all glass [building] . . . and it's got all the latest kind of technology and you go in to the building and it's just like 21st century standard. Since we've moved in, I've noticed people change their dress. Why have they done that? It's because they now associate themselves with something better and they feel they need to be part of it. It's an image thing; they feel they're letting the firm down by not raising their game." (regional director, accounting firm)

3.2 Organisational practices and employee experiences relating to dress and appearance

Given the variety of purposes that dress and appearance norms appear to serve in organisations (as identified in 'Significance of dress and appearance for organisations' section 3.1), it was important to understand how employers and employees further viewed appearance codes and how these were implemented and adhered to. The next sub-section reveals the extent to which appearance norms are made explicit within firms.

Next, the findings in relation to employer and employee attitudes and practices relating to body supplements and modifications are highlighted. Here, the role of several organisational processes including hiring decisions, training, monitoring and disciplinary procedures within organisations are recognised to inform the discussion of HR practices in relation to dress and appearance.

3.2.1 Explicit and implicit appearance policies

While the participants acknowledged the ubiquity of particular industry-wide dress norms and those relating to their organisations, dress codes and appearance standards were unsurprisingly more formalised and comprehensive in the larger organisations within our sample and where health and safety standards were enforced more strictly. For example, the airline pilot discussed the presence of a detailed booklet in relation to uniform-wearing, the principles of which needed to be adhered to by all cabin crew members.

At some large workplaces, specific appearance standards were agreed by unions and staff associations, where present. While employee participants were not always certain about the detailed content of appearance codes, most individuals had a broad understanding of what was deemed as acceptable or unacceptable in their workplace.

Summing up their appearance policy, a respondent stated:

"All of our kit has to be smart, we have to be presentable, tattoos are quite a limitation, we have nothing visible in short-sleeves, hair has to be neat, makeup to a minimum, piercings are a no-no. I believe females can wear studs in their ears . . . Smart hair, clean, presentable, and that's pretty much the gist of it". (Staff member, emergency services)

The presence of an explicit appearance policy was largely absent in the smaller to mid-sized firms. In these environments, there was a general expectation that employees would be socialised into the culture of the firm and learn the dress norms through day-to-day observation. Acceptable dress and appearance was understood in some cases to either mirror client attire or that of the business owner / senior management:

"As you might have noticed, most people here wear jeans and trainers and jumpers and it's completely fine, even with client meetings because that's what the clients are wearing, that's what [the owner] wears, and so it's accepted." (Senior manager, Design firm)

The manager quoted above did however explain the circumstances under which she might be prompted to formalise the unstated dress norms. The frequency and magnitude of appearance-related indiscretions by employees could instigate the process of formalising the appearance objectives of the organisation. Indeed, where employers feel that appearance boundaries are being tested it could spur management to make explicit the taken-for-granted expectations within the firm. Such formalisation was seen to legitimise appearance beliefs and provide an official platform to regulate the image of employees.

In such instances and as recounted below, employees and their managers are likely to be provided latitude in interpreting the suitability of appearance by adopting more ambiguous guidelines relating to appropriate dress:

"I can't remember what I put in the handbook when I wrote it a few years ago but we don't [have an appearance policy for staff] on the basis that we hope when people first start working here, they see what other people are wearing and kind of match that . . . If, for example, we did have a problem with dress, then I would be inclined to update the handbook either to put a section on dress or make it more explicit that this is what's expected, so if there was problem I could refer back to it. But it would be something vague like 'you're expected to be wearing [firm]-appropriate clothing'." (senior manager, design firm)

In certain instances, it was reported that appearance criteria were made explicit in relation to certain employee groups (for example, customer service / public-facing job roles) and not others. Overall however, the interviews revealed a general consensus that both implicit and explicit limits were placed on employee individuality and choice when it came to dressing-up and dressing-down at work. A management respondent additionally explained the appearance expectations for employees on dress-down Fridays:

"We also have casual Fridays when everybody is allowed to come casual - not too casual . . . Ugg boots are not allowed. That's my personal belief that they're not good for the business . . . that is in the handbook that not even on casual Friday can you wear that. Even for the casual I would still expect it not to be home-wear. A tracksuit would probably not be allowed either. Jeans, yes. T-shirts, yes. Again nothing strappy or off the shoulder, it is still an office, OK, you don't need to wear a suit and tie, heels and a blazer, but it still is a corporate environment. I would also expect if a person has a casual Friday meeting [with an external client], then it would transpire in their dress code as well and not be casual at all." (Senior HR manager, Property and Finance)

Dress codes might also be reviewed in light of emerging appearance issues within the workplace. Where employees might attempt to personalise the uniform or test the boundaries of dress and appearance in the organisation, it could prompt a formal rewriting of codes. Additionally, in the Emergency Services case, a senior manager emphasised that the uniform and general appearance policies were reviewed and tightened up in response to the ongoing professionalisation of the work role:

"Attitudes hardened in the last three or four years to it [tattoos], it was about a whole professionalism piece, and that's where we've had some really clear uniform guidance policies - no tattoos, clear on the hair, clear on the jewellery."
(senior manager, emergency services)

The following sub-section elaborates on the distinct attitudes and practices found in participant discussions surrounding body supplements and body modifications.

3.2.2 Attitudes and practices relating to body supplements: Uniforms, clothing and accessories

3.2.2.1 Employability and selection processes

Generally, it appeared that applicants were filtered based on their appearance during the selection stage, but organisational expectations were rarely discussed with candidates. Therefore applicants were usually not given the opportunity to talk about the reasons why they might be dressed in a certain way or about their willingness to conform to the organisation's appearance norms. Individual dress and appearance styles were taken for granted to the extent that addressing such issues was deemed as unnecessary

during selection and typically not up for negotiation.

As one HR manager put it:

"If you've chosen that industry, you've probably chosen to be in this attire... I've chosen to come here and I've chosen to abide by these rules." (senior HR manager, property and finance)

Various reasons could be hypothesised as contributing to a silence surrounding a candidate's appearance during the hiring process, including its potentially sensitive nature, perceived legal ramifications, fear of appearing discriminatory in relation to class / socio-economic background, age, religion, nationality and so on.

One of the main assumptions vocalised by managers in our sample revolved around the expectation that applicants would have done their homework about the company and its culture in order to demonstrate their fit with the organisation. By presenting themselves in a manner that contradicted organisational or industry norms, the applicant was negatively evaluated as demonstrating a lack of interest, poor judgement, a lack of credibility and an inability to represent the organisation's brand:

"No, I never (discuss appearance preferences during the interview) . . . if somebody comes for a job I merely look at him and think well he's smart enough to go in to anybody's house, he's sensible enough, he talks alright and that's how I would actually gauge his credibility." (Owner-manager, Removals Company)

"I've had people apply, well walk in off the street and say 'have you got a job' . . . but what's amazing is that people are not prepared – I mean if you did that and you were serious, you would have your CV and you would be dressed appropriately. But they haven't got their CV on them, they're not looking their best and you're like 'what's this, how serious are you?'" (owner-manager, café)

"What would you think if a person for a very high-level senior position came in with sneakers, jeans and a creased shirt? What kind of impression does that make? What kind of impression will it make for potentially meeting clients? It already sets questions - what impression will you make representing our company?!" (senior HR manager, property and finance)

It is interesting to note that in relation to clothing choice, employers might not object to candidates over-dressing for a particular job role. This might not be seen as a barrier to employment but merely as enthusiasm and additionally a feature that could be 'fixed' if the candidate met other selection criteria.

However, as explained previously, underdressing and inappropriate wear can be construed as unacceptable by managers and raise questions about the amount of prior research a prospective employee has undertaken to demonstrate their fit with the organisation.

"We do sometimes have interviewees that show up in a suit and it's usually when they're a bit younger, whether it's for an internship position or, you know, for a kind of more junior role. And I don't hold it against them but there is the idea that if you have a good sense of [the owner] and if you have a good sense of [the company], you should pick your outfit according to that . . . If someone's over-dressed I think that they'll be able to then under-dress for the part once they start. My concern would be more if I was working somewhere more formal and they turned up too casually, because I think that's a harder step sometimes to go to . . . if you don't actually own the clothing or you're not comfortable wearing it." (senior manager, design firm)

3.2.2.2 Dress-related training

Considering the capability of firms to exclude candidates with undesirable or inappropriate appearance characteristics during the hiring process, training in self presentation was not widely provided, and instead organisations (particularly smaller firms) predominantly relied on socialisation to orient employees to the appearance norms and practices within the company.

One participant, while discussing a previous employment context in the legal profession, however, did allude to the organisation's provision of a clothing consultation for trainees. Importantly, where dress codes were part of a health and safety plan and / or the professionalisation agenda, more formal and detailed guidelines were provided to employees, particularly during orientation.

"During the training course there's half a day set aside where they [the organisation] are point blank, specifically showing them [staff] how to attire themselves and what the uniform is, what level of cleanliness or quality it should be."
(airline pilot)

"How to maintain their uniforms, how to wear their uniforms, yes, that all comes as part of the package of being trained to be on the track." (senior HR manager, railways)

"You're issued with your uniform, you're shown how to care for it, how to clean it, you're given a few pointers . . . And for the subsequent 15 weeks or whatever, every morning you're inspected, and anything that you've let yourself down with how you've turned out is pointed out to you. If it becomes a continuing issue, then some remedial assistance can be given . . . so it's drilled in to you fairly early on and it's pointed out what's acceptable. There are presentations on dress codes and I know that there's been some posters appear to show what's acceptable and what isn't." (staff member, emergency services)

Case study 3.2: socialisation prior to the interview

Our employee interviews revealed an anticipatory engagement with issues of dress before the first job interview encounter. The discussions revealed a variety of sources that informed employee attitudes relating to 'appropriate' industry / organisation-related clothing standards, including parental and schooling influence, advice during assessment days, observing firm representatives at job fairs and indeed, guidance drawn from the wider media. As one participant recounted:

"I guess I started thinking about it [dress and appearance] more when I started thinking about applying for jobs in law because then you'll go to like open days or there's like a couple of diversity access schemes . . . and they'll give you like advice on what to wear for the interview and it would be like don't wear bright colours, don't wear tight-fitting dresses, don't have a really loud like statement handbag, don't do this, don't do that, blah, blah, blah".
(junior associate, law firm)

Source: Respondent interviews.

3.2.2.3 Dress and brand commitment

All employees in the sample (including senior managers) alluded to how they themselves, and their colleagues, presented the face of the organisation. In their effort to represent themselves and the organisation's brand, certain employees voluntarily demonstrated additional care and attention to detail, especially when liaising with external clients. In preparation for meetings for example, a senior manager revealed:

"If we have clients coming in who I don't know or we're going to a meeting, I wouldn't wear this [pointing to her semi-casual attire] in particular if we were going to one client, just because in my mind for that client it's too casual. I know the person we're meeting and they're kind of public people that I can look at on the internet and think 'oh well, this is not appropriate that I'm wearing this, I need to wear something slightly nicer'." (senior manager, design firm)

Another participant stated:

"The thing that you learn immediately is that you should always have a suit jacket in the office because at any moment if a client turns up, you can shove it on and look smart...and I quickly put some heels on to try and look a bit more formal." (principal associate, law firm)

3.2.2.4 Dress, work role and performance

In terms of the performance advantages offered by appearance norms at work, employees cited pride in their work, greater confidence levels, a focus on the task at hand, more creativity (for example, particularly where employees had experienced informal appearance norms / during awaydays), and smoother interactional experiences with customers. A former employee in the finance industry additionally pointed out how dress could help navigate gender-related stereotypes at work:

"I definitely think that some people would say that when they're more comfortably dressed, then it's easier for them to work because they're comfortable and what they're wearing is not constricting. I think you could make the case that if you have to wear a nice outfit and you're more formally dressed, then you could feel like you're more in charge or if you have to go to a meeting where people have to take you seriously, through what you're wearing you can portray whatever persona you're trying to portray to that person. It's like how you see you and then how other people perceive you, and I think again it depends on the industry. I definitely know in finance that if people were distracted by what you were wearing, they wouldn't get over the distraction and you could be the most brilliant person and that would probably be the first comment especially men would make - it's like suicide." (former employee, finance)

"It's [uniform] going to focus your mind a little bit? Yes. A clean person does clean work, a scruffy person – that. It's more than just the public looking at you and thinking along those lines...if you've got a little bit more pride generally in how you've turned out, then hopefully that's going to be reflected in the standard of work that you produce. So you're going to try a little bit harder, take yourself a little bit more seriously, not cut corners, that sort of thing." (staff member, emergency services)

On the wearing of heels, a female barrister commented on how she "absolutely hated" wearing them albeit acknowledging that she dressed in them within the courtroom environment because of its possible association with better posture and its felt relationship to 'power' and a more professional look:

"I mean I think in some senses in the courtroom it can make you feel more powerful, partly just because often the judge is sitting at a raised level and if you're quite short like I am, actually you're kind of looking up. The difference in height is really quite pronounced. So sometimes wearing heels for me is actually just to raise me up a bit." (barrister)

Relatedly, transgressions in dress or inappropriate clothing were also reported to be included in individual performance reviews (see also ['Appearance monitoring and enforcement'](#) section 3.2.5):

"One of my friends told me about somebody in his trainee intake who had like worn whatever she'd been wearing for those six months... like the same style every day for six months, and it wasn't mentioned until her review at the end." (junior associate, law firm)

A few employees who were not supplied with uniforms in fact revealed that they would welcome uniform standards to limit both their cognitive and monetary expenditure on work attire.

"I think they're [uniforms] really positive and sometimes I really wish I had a uniform because it's just so easy to decide what you're going to wear every single day. And it's also the expense as well, buying clothes for work." (employee, council)

Where clothes were not issued by the firm, some employees additionally stated that they had set aside particular clothes for work, allowing them to 'slip into their work role' more easily.

"I quite liked having very clear work clothes and non-work clothes, even though I wasn't in uniform. But I still had clothes that I only wore to work and I wouldn't wear any other time. That was my work outfit - that was my work head if you like." (former employee, airlines)

"I do have certain rituals for getting ready for class, like putting this [jacket] on... I'd never wear this anywhere but this university... I look like an old professor and I kind of feel like one and I act like one, you know. I mean lecturing is acting half the time." (teaching staff, university)

3.2.2.5 Dress management outside work hours

Dress and uniform as a representation of the organisation's brand and values presents certain dress-related responsibilities outside the work arena. In certain cases, these responsibilities were outlined explicitly by the organisation in terms of what employees cannot be seen doing in corporate uniform:

"I'm not allowed to wear the [the organisation's] uniform anywhere but at work. So I don't transgress those lines . . . you can't be seen holding a drink...or smoking, or shopping . . . however old-fashioned you believe it to be or whether smoking [is negative], [the airline] don't want their persona, their corporate image, their core key values that they put across to all their clients - the world, to be associated with certain elements." (airline pilot)

The delineation between work and non-work wear was also welcomed by certain participants in the sample as expressed in the previous section. The first narrative below, points to how formal dress might be discarded after stipulated working hours within the office boundaries. This self-regulation draws on the comfort imperative while the second example points to how distinct work and non-work clothing can create better mental boundaries between work/life spheres:

"We'll work quite late into the night, and so I used to have a policy of once it got to 8 o'clock I would put jeans on . . . to change, once people had gone. Well like you'd just crease your suit and it's uncomfortable sitting for a long time. Because if I was wearing a tight skirt or something, you're just like 'actually, if I'm going to be here for another 3 hours, why do I have to be sat in this suit?'" (principal associate, law firm)

"It's sort of a routine thing . . . it's like putting on any sort of uniform, it makes you conscious that you're in this special environment. And some people like it because then you can go home and you're conscious that you're not formal. I think I'm very aware that I'm obviously a different person during the week from the weekend . . . I think it's helpful for some people to feel like there's a break." (trainee solicitor)

3.2.2.6 Complexities: perceptions and experiences of dress norms

As can be inferred from the findings thus far, clothing can play a significant role in signalling one's employability. Our findings suggest the conscious / subconscious mental processes that are aligned with such image appraisal might also (potentially mistakenly) shape perceptions of competence and one's career mobility:

"I have recently heard there's one individual who does wear more casual clothes. And I have heard rumblings to the effect that she has missed out on work because people perceive her as not dressing formally enough in chambers... So just fall in line and be judged upon your intellectual capabilities and then you know, wear what I want outside of work." (barrister)

While adherence to appearance standards can be seen as beneficial in making the job role and one's 'skills' more salient in certain circumstances, one respondent discussed how her work uniform exacerbated the status differential between herself and customers, thereby negatively influencing her perceptions of the interaction:

"I don't want to generalise but sometimes they [customers] see us as worth less than them, either literally in terms of pay or in terms of intelligence, which could be due to how we're dressed, because we're just wearing tennis shoes and skirts and things like that and a lot of people come from their workplace, so they'd be wearing a suit or something or like smart clothes." (employee, pub)

In some cases a stringent check on dress adherence could also result in employees rebelling against feelings of being infantilised. Commenting on other staff in the organisation, one respondent stated:

"I think they've complained about [the uniform] a fair bit, they lobby for change or flexibility in our company constantly. Men saying 'why can't we have an open shirt' . . . I think it's just that they're kicking back about why they're oppressed - why am I always told this at every briefing? I do what I'm required to do, I turn up as I'm required to turn up, yet I still go through this noose of being treated like a child. Right, shoes, trousers, shirt ironed, jacket, tie, name badge... I can dress myself, I'm a sodding adult, let me." (airline pilot)

It should be noted that where employees felt they were unable to voice concerns relating to organisational dress norms, their work experiences were further affected in a negative manner. As explained in the quote below, heavy-handedness in enforcement can leave employees unnerved at work and the experience might live on with individuals who feel insecure about expressing their concerns:

"It was unsettling for me because I didn't quite understand it [the need for formalwear], but I didn't voice that, I adapted, I just went to a different environment and I brushed off my suits and started wearing a suit . . . I've never thought about why it was unsettling . . . I guess I've got negative connotations of formalwear – when you're forced to wear formalwear, and it comes down to when I was a 16-year-old kid doing my work experience in an accounting company. And I was actually sent home for what I was wearing and that really unsettled me . . . And obviously as a 16-year-old kid being told off by a senior person – I didn't want to answer back and it just made me think that whatever I was wearing, I would have come in and done the same job and he seemed to overreact. And that I guess has stayed with me. Wow, he felt so uproared [angry] by what I was wearing and I wasn't even that casual." (employee, university student support services)

Additional perspectives on being 'different'

A Muslim respondent in our sample also discussed her choice of wearing a headscarf as part of her dress at work. Whilst sporting this difference in attire, she revealed how she used her personality to compensate for the stereotypes associated with Islamic headwear.

"I find that I have to perhaps try a little bit harder to get my personality across because people might just be slightly wary about me, you know..... I think perhaps they might think that I might be a little bit reserved or something like that, which is completely the opposite really. So perhaps I need to get a bit more of my personality across and I find that I have to try a little bit harder just to make sure that they realise I'm just like them basically." (employee, council)

Indeed, some workers anticipated the difficulties of being in a minority in terms of workplace dress and appearance. On mirroring his line-manager's appearance, one participant stated:

"He [the line-manager] makes a conscious effort to wear a suit every day . . . he's chosen that because that's what he thinks is appropriate. So for you to wear something opposite to what your line manager wears, you're causing conflict . . . if he's an analytical person, he might sit down one day and say 'I wear this every day, he wears the total opposite every day, why is that?'" (employee, university student support services)

3.2.3 Attitudes and practices relating to body modifications: Tattoos and piercings

3.2.3.1 Employability and selection processes

It is notable that 2 employment contexts (the emergency services and the airlines) in our sample reported setting expectations relating to body modifications at the pre-employment stage, either in the application form or during assessment exercises:

"But it's about professionalism, isn't it? And at the training school they [management] said 'why have you got a tattoo there? No, we're not accepting you'. Because she (applicant) hadn't signed her contract she found herself without a job. I said 'well how stupid are you, at what point did you think a tattoo on your head was going to be acceptable?'" (Senior manager, Emergency Services)

"When you're interviewed, when you have your application form, we are to give a complete breakdown of our physicality, our height, our weight, a few select measurements. Eye colour and our hair colour and our hairstyle, we have to supply a picture, and also any piercings or any tattoos at all. That's at the application stage and that is governed. [Someone with a visible tattoo]... they won't usually get through the application stage." (Airline pilot)

The presence of visible tattoos was seen as controversial in a number of other instances. A participant discussed how people with tattoos, piercings or unusual hair colours were 'written off' at her former workplace in the financial sector as such identity markers were seen as too radical for external clients.

As explained in the quote below, visible body modifications are likely to be stigmatised in certain sectors, appraised as unprofessional and 'too alternative', and could raise questions about a person's identity, their judgement, and their ability to conform to the expectations and demands of work. The respondent went on to query the fairness of such perceptions and associated practices:

"I've been on interview panels and people have walked in with tattoos showing... And I believe they've been judged. [Prompt - in what way are they being judged?]. Negatively - it's given the wrong impression. I believe that from discussions that we've had as a panel that it's put people off. I guess we're dealing with stereotypes. The type of people that have tattoos aren't the type of people that people feel comfortable with maybe . . . And the individuals that I'm talking about - one was a neck tattoo. When I thought about getting a tattoo before, people around me have said 'make sure it's in a place that you can cover'. So someone that chooses to have a tattoo in a place that they can't cover, they're going against the grain and maybe that is the issue that people have with that - it's about an individual that's going against the grain." (employee, university student support services)

While theoretically all potential employees are unknown quantities, it was worrying that in terms of one's employability, being dissimilar to a manager or unfamiliar in terms of one's appearance could pose a risk to individual candidates during the hiring process, shoring up questions about employer intolerance, prejudice and discrimination. As selection processes are largely shrouded in subjectivity and can be more informal in smaller firms, visible body modifications and those that might intersect with race or religion (such as the length of hair or beards) could be justified by employers as the basis on which to reject a candidate for particular positions, especially in instances where a customer-centric logic is drawn upon.

"Because of the customer-facing role, because they're dealing with, depending whether it's adults or children, they're dealing with vulnerable clients. And if a social worker's going in to your home to deal with that client and they're covered in tattoos, there is a stigma around tattoos, you know - there really is, and I don't think that customers would take kindly to that." (HR advisor, local authority)

"If you had somebody with a tattoo that was pitching for some advisory work - you know, you've got to remember we bill our clients several hundred thousand pounds for the project, they want the best of the best to do the work for them.

Any kind of impression of 'well I'm a bit laidback' or 'I'm not as serious as you want me to be', that may work against us." (regional director, accounting firm)

"I mean tattoos on the face I would certainly have frowned at and also long hair – no, I wouldn't have gone with that either.... And I don't think customers would like that. Religion wouldn't worry me at all - everybody's entitled to it. A turban, I'd worry a little bit about turbaned people because usually they're a different religion and a different culture altogether, and going in to peoples' houses with somebody with a turban on - I wouldn't dislike them but I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it on principle. Not because I dislike them or anything like that but just the fact that I'm not ready for that yet." (owner-manager, removals company)

Additionally, considering that the owner-manager respondent above had quite strong views which were opposed to body modification, we asked him what he might do if employees decided to get a tattoo after joining the firm; he responded:

"If such a thing happened [someone getting a tattoo after being employed], I would take into consideration what sort of worker he was and if it was going to make any difference to his attitude and also his attitude to other people. And as long as the tattoo wasn't too invasive, I think I'd turn a blind eye to that. I mean I'm not prejudiced against anybody because they're tattooed, but I wouldn't actually employ somebody to start a job that I thought 'perhaps he might completely cover his whole body with tattoos'. I wouldn't like it... and I don't think customers would like that." (owner-manager, removals company)

Relatedly, as suggested in written correspondence received from a union that organises across a number of private industries in the service sector, employers are duty-bound to accommodate an employee's appearance features if they were presented during the hiring stage. This perhaps further legitimises and makes significant organisational screening of appearance-based features before selection decisions.

"In recent years there have been slightly more queries around tattoos, piercings and hair colour. The advice we give is that staff must adhere to the uniform policy. However if they were employed with visible tattoos, piercings and their hair colour, the company cannot then expect them to change this after their appointment." (union official)

Interestingly, the airline pilot in our sample suggested that cabin crew were likely to 'get sacked' if members had a significant coverage of tattoos or piercings that they were unable to conceal. He explained that because of the stigma attached to body modifications, some of his colleagues even resorted to medical laser treatment to have their tattoos removed.

3.2.3.2 Concealability, the content of tattoos and job performance

One of our participants who had tattoos which he concealed at work spoke about keeping them hidden on account of the barrier and interactional unease that revealing his tattoo might possibly cause. He later went on to suggest that revealing his body art would hinder his promotion prospects.

"Yes, it is [inconvenient concealing the tattoo], but I see it as a balanced inconvenience. It's like I've got something I don't want people to see, so I do this [cover it up]. But as I see it, it would perhaps cause them [students] discomfort because of their customs and their expectations . . . by the end of it they'd be fine because we'd all get to know each other, but at the start I think that would have put a barrier between me and them . . . We're an international university, so now we have to deal with not only Western standards but also standards from other countries that may be even less tolerant than we are of tattoos or skin markings." (teaching staff, university)

The respondent above however did not see his tattoos as 'job-stoppers' (the term denoting visible tattoos that cannot be easily concealed). However he did believe that if he had visible tattoos, he would not have been given an academic job at his current

institution. Another participant with several tattoos stated:

"Actually that has been a conscious decision of mine not to [have potentially visible tattoos], so if I'm wearing a shirt, like a long-sleeved shirt, none of my tattoos are visible, so nothing above the neckline and then nothing past the cuff. So that's been a conscious decision for my future employment." (front of house, leisure centre)

Tattoos were widely perceived as a barrier to promotion where increased visibility could disadvantage individuals in terms of career progression. Having aesthetic barriers in the workplace meant that individuals understood that they would hit a glass ceiling in certain industries.

Indeed, in terms of the categorical decision to situate tattoos where they might be visible, one participant associated these choices with negative personality-related traits:

"You've got a lot of your body, if you so wanted to do that in your own time you can show, portray, and exploit whatever you want. I think it shows a particular trait of irresponsibility or wantonness - that you don't care about the rest of the world, which is a bit more of a deliberate thought about having it on your hand or your face or your neck." (airline pilot)

On the prospects of promotion, an employee shared her insights relating to tattoo and appearance-based discrimination at her workplace:

"The only thing I know where it's [tattoos] been a problem is if you try to move in to corporate . . . that's what happened to [a co-worker]. He was telling us that he had problems - corporate had problems with his appearance because he had rather long hair and he had tattoos on his arms and stuff like that. They told him something along the lines of he doesn't have the demeanour of a manager . . . and he was quite frustrated by that. He was saying that they didn't really appreciate his appearance and the hair." (employee, pub)

Overall, as explained previously, individuals believed that the strategic management of certain markers proved advantageous in the labour market. Here, employees weighed up the costs and benefits of 'being themselves' at work. An employee with a septum piercing discussed these negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of her identity:

"I think what's more integral to my personality is my cultural identity ... and the piercing is more aesthetic. There are certain things that I won't compromise in a job setting, for instance, a lot of my friends told me to leave out the fact that I'm [states ethnicity] and that may or may not contribute to getting more jobs, but that's something that's really integral to me... But if for whatever reason I had to take out my piercing, I feel like it wouldn't really be as important. It would be upsetting because I like how it looks, but I wouldn't be devastated the way I would be if, for instance, I had to continue concealing that I'm [states ethnicity]." (employee, pub)

Case study 3.3: Body modifications and a generational divide?

Our findings indicate perceptions of generational divide on the subject of tattoos and body piercings. Certain interviews revealed that not only were 'traditional' and 'older' managers seen as more averse to body modifications but also customers:

"It's just interesting that actually you've kind of got the trainees coming in, the millennials wanting their tattoos and their nose piercings . . . and then you've got, at the very top of the organisation people who . . . [in their day] women couldn't even wear trousers at work." (Principal Associate, law firm)

"People are fascinated with tattoos, except for the older generation. Obviously back in the biker days or the football hooligan days, they see people with tattoos as thugs. I've had people look at me funny [in relation to visible tattoos] and a few weeks ago some woman in about her 50s looked at me and went 'oh look at your ears'. I went 'thanks, thank you very much, yes, my ears are stretched'."
(Assistant manager, pub)

However, attitudes towards body modifications are not necessarily or solely associated with generational differences. Our findings also revealed the possibility of class-related assumptions, lifestyle, socio-cultural or religious influences as shaping perceptions relating to body modifications.

Source: Respondent interviews

Visible tattoos and body piercings were not regarded as problematic for all employers in the sample. The sector, owner preferences and organisational culture can dictate the level of acceptance towards such appearance features. It is also noteworthy that an owner's / line manager's judgment on the genre of the tattoo and the breadth and extent to which tattoos and piercings were visible, as explained previously, also determined the appropriateness of such outward features in candidates.

"Well the industry has changed quite a lot, I guess that's gone along with like the social culture of having tattoos as well. Because it's an aesthetic industry, tattoos now socially are an aesthetically pleasing thing for the body, so I think it's gone along with that, that the industry is actually quite accepting of that. You're getting a lot of your fitness bodybuilders, so people that are doing more sort of like modelling-type bodybuilding, they're covered in tattoos." (Front of house, leisure centre)

"I think they just hire people that look similar to the manager, and the manager happens to have arm tattoos, so he's OK with that." (Employee, Pub)

"If I had like some crazy dragon tattooed on my chest and wandered around, I can understand why people would be like 'well it's different and it's noticeable and it's going to make people be like, well, why does she have a dragon on her chest'. If I've got a little star behind my ear, people are like 'fine'." (Principal Associate, law firm)

A few employees suggested that they would welcome a greater opportunity to 'be themselves' at work. In reality this also meant "bringing out one's personality" to a greater extent thereby increasing their level of comfort during interactions with others at work.

Interestingly, in relation to tattoos and the advantages of employee self-expression, a senior manager in the Emergency Services relayed that while tattoos could indeed be a positive talking point during interactions and an icebreaker, body art was generally deemed as altogether unacceptable.

3.2.4 On being 'good looking': physical features and body shape

Some employees in the study were aware of their firm's or a competitor's strategic inclination towards hiring specific demographics or a particular look to further the uniqueness of the service provided.

"Aesthetics, shape, size, all these things are hugely weighted in the recruitment at [a rival airline] . . . sex sells, they're up there, they're glitzy, they're in your face, they're bang, big, vibrant, all skirts, long legs, this, that, blonde, tall, vivacious, lovely, massive . . . So it's all very scripted, it's like you're going on stage, it's done, it's cameras, lights, cameras, action, bang, pizzazz." (airline pilot)

"I think it's [appearance in hiring decisions] probably pretty important. I think a lot of people probably wouldn't admit to it because they think they'd get in trouble but I think physical appearance plays a big role in [the theme park]. I think there's a lot of people who are [away from the public eye] most of the time probably for [the company's] own strategic

reasons, and then you have the people who look nice, and they're happy and preppy and all sorts of things . . . they are going to be out with the people – in the public a lot more. So I think it [appearance] probably plays a lot bigger role than anyone would want to admit." (former employee, theme park)

Class-based aesthetics, with access to monetary and cultural capital, was also acknowledged as playing a role in furthering the outcome of a physically fit or 'good looking' workforce.

"People just like people to be good looking. Like [a former company] is a very good looking place. Some of that comes from money, having money and you can make yourself look better and maybe that's part of it. You know, if they look healthy, vital, whatever, it just says the fittest are surviving over the ones that aren't. If you're a genius and fat, then people would overlook that fact, but you definitely can't be crap and fat." (junior associate, law firm)

In certain instances however there was also the recognition that such organisational practices mitigated against policies of diversity and inclusion. The participant below commented on the typical employee at her firm being young, 'aesthetically pleasing' and in full-time education:

"This shop in particular is a company that has built its brand completely on the image. That's their strength and that's what makes them stand out. So obviously they're not going to want a diverse workforce in terms of just hiring anyone . . . they do hire quite a specific type of people . . . it's basically people who work part-time and who want [the job] to complement their studies, and it's really young people as well." (employee, fashion retail)

3.2.5 Appearance monitoring and enforcement

This sub-section discusses features and experiences of appearance monitoring at work. Both employers and employees in the sample mentioned section heads or direct line managers as being largely responsible for ensuring that appearance standards of the organisation were upheld.

However, inconsistencies in appearance monitoring and enforcement were reported, with the rigorousness and the nature and extent of sanctions being dictated by (a) line manager preferences, (b) the extent to which employees needed to engage in brand performances for an external audience, (c) the degree of organisational emphasis on projecting a professional image, (d) the importance placed on health and safety regulations, and potentially also (e) the amount of investment the firm made in relation to clothing provision.

Management respondents stated:

"I mean every team is different, that's the problem, and it all starts at the top and then works its way down and it depends what the [manager], the team leader is hot on . . . But there are [staff] who are really hard on other colleagues because their shoes aren't clean, things like that. And I quite like that in a way because it sets a standard." (senior manager, emergency services)

"I ask people to, at minimum, comply with the food hygiene rules . . . And we recommend safety footwear and stuff like that but it's not essential – if people don't wear it, it's not enforced . . . it's not a high-risk environment." (owner-manager, café)

"We don't give a clothing allowance . . . But actually I'd say that in most instances where people get a clothing allowance, I can imagine that there could be a lot more issues around dress. Because then if you're giving someone money to do something, you therefore have a say in what they wear and how they dress and what they buy. And I just think that is not something I really want to be involved with." (senior manager, design firm)

Case study 3.4: Dress and appearance design and 360-degree monitoring?

Airline cabin crew are highly visible to the public, both at the airport and in-flight. To maintain a professional and specific brand image and safeguard appropriate safety standards, uniform and general appearance were reportedly regulated by a variety of sources. The airline pilot in our sample emphasised the involvement of various departments (such as marketing) in the design and adaptation of standards:

"Personally, appearance is key . . . so the appearance of the uniform is looked at, designed and scrutinised all the time . . . it's scrutinised all the time by the company, by marketing, by the management . . . does it need a revamp, does it need a change, does it need a refresh, is it intrinsically key with our core values, is it smart enough, is it modern enough . . . there is a fashion element but [also] is it safe, is it efficient. [Regarding scrutiny] . . . So there's those who design it, who make it, who upkeep it . . . management day-to-day keep an eye on it, and then again us on the airplane or us as pilots and the senior cabin crew are also responsible for everyone underneath us." (Airline pilot)

The possibility of explicit peer-monitoring and 'bottom-up' policing of dress and appearance standards at work were hinted at but apparently rarely undertaken by junior staff.

Source: Respondent interview

Interestingly, one employee commented on the more strategic placement of reminders in their organisation where brand performance was particularly vital for business success. Here, self-monitoring was seen to be encouraged by the firm by building mirrors into the workplace architecture to emphasise the need to check one's look prior to customer interaction:

"[The theme park's] dress code's very strict because that's something that they're known for, so they supply absolutely everything . . . they supply the pants [trousers], the shirt, belt, hat, whatever goes along with it and you have to wear it – you have to wear all those clothes and then your hair has to be a certain style, your nails, you can't have nail polish, you can't have jewellery. Guys have strict rules on facial hair and stuff like that . . . In the parks there were full-length mirrors. So the point is that you have to look at yourself and make sure you are in the look . . . you're supposed to monitor and check one last time before you start interacting with guests." (former employee, theme park)

In other contexts, where codes were seen to be particularly important, varying levels of latitude towards dress requirements might also be evidenced based on manager idiosyncrasies, the location of the office (one respondent commented on how a particular regional location and the norms of that area influenced the amount of make-up that employees applied) and the perceived severity of employee lapses in adhering to organisational appearance standards. For example, some safety regulations within the emergency services might be prioritised over other image-related features that might not necessarily be ranked highly in terms of enforcement.

In relation to tattoos and piercings, a senior manager emphasised particular situations where such features could be ignored (largely as there were no written policies against them), nevertheless, highlighting when it would be appropriate to intervene and advise employees to keep tattoos hidden:

"It's a real question about tattoos and piercings – there is nothing that says what you should or shouldn't do, but I think it is very difficult for an individual to be taken seriously with a tattoo . . . I would [say something to them] if they were going up to see a minister, I would say 'make certain you keep that covered . . . for your own protection'." (senior manager, Civil Service)

When it came to enforcing appearance standards, one manager described sending company-wide emails to remind all employees of firm-appropriate attire when she noticed a single individual demonstrating indiscretion. This strategy avoided singling out employees individually. The most common first step in procedures involved the line managers 'having a word' with employees who contravened

presentation standards.

Conversations of this nature in some cases were reported as being sensitive and therefore awkward because of their perceived personal nature, especially where appearance standards were not formalised and explicit within the organisation. As pointed out below:

"I did have to have a conversation [with an employee about his dress] . . . he was sort of embarrassed . . . I mean if I have to have the conversation again – like a formal conversation – I would probably write it down somewhere so there was a paper trail, for lack of a better term. I think for me it would be a lot harder if a woman was wearing a skirt that was super short or like their cleavage was hanging out or the clothes had holes in them or things that were fundamental about their style, and them as a person, because I think that you kind of choose what you wear and how you express yourself . . . I would struggle a lot more with that because that's very subjective."

"Well it's an unwritten dress code – it's completely unwritten . . . There are a number of people who do administrative or junior technical roles who probably have some mental health issues and are pretty grubby. And I've had a word with him [an employee] quietly and he says 'people don't respect me', and I say 'perhaps if you wore clothes that were a little less obviously threadbare, if you can afford it . . . you know, people do judge you by what you wear.'" (senior manager, Civil Service)

Furthermore, the relationship between the line manager and employee could often dictate how appearance-related discussions were initiated and received. Some participants claimed that managers resorted to the use of humour in good faith or teasing to 'correct' employees.

Close affiliations, or conversely, difficult relationships between managers and employees could translate into selective enforcement or reticence in addressing issues relating to appearance at work. It should be noted that such variations in enforcement have the potential to shape fairness perceptions in a negative manner and invite feelings of perceived favouritism at work.

"I think people gradually just started doing whatever they wanted with the dress code. Because it wasn't like if you do this – then this happens. It's like if you do this, then depending on who you are, then depending on the situation, and then depending on [the line manager's] mood, then that's the outcome. So people were willing to test it I think . . . And I mean when [a particular employee] was an acting manager but it wasn't his formal job, I think he felt rather uncomfortable telling people off unless it was something that's really terrible. So I think that it would have been enforced more had the owner been there more frequently." (employee, pub)

"On a day-to-day basis, it should be the section managers that are responsible for their teams out on the track. The problem we have is the relationships that have been developed and if you've been working with people for 30 years and suddenly you become their boss, it's very difficult to create that sense of hierarchy within the organisation because it's a home for a lot of them, it's a community. So if you say to Bert 'put your hardhat on you numpty, your head will get damaged' or 'you'll get injured', Bert might turn round to Bob and say 'eff-off Bob, I don't give a sh** about you', even though Bob's his boss, because Bob - he goes to the pub with him on a Friday night and has been for the last 20 years. Or Bob might even be his dad, you know, that's the nature of the relationships we're dealing with." (senior HR manager, railways)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most comprehensive disciplinary procedures based on appearance in our sample related to the airlines and the emergency services (see also case study 3.5), although they reported rarely witnessing an escalation of appearance-related issues as most members conformed to required standards. Furthermore, informal and normative pressure at work seemed to limit repeated appearance-related transgressions.

Case study 3.5: Managing and enforcing dress codes in the emergency services

High-profile public services need to be immediately identifiable to the public and colleagues alike and therefore detailed uniform codes are standard. These policies contribute to a sense of professionalism, specify expected standards and reinforce team work. They also have a key health and safety role in providing safety and security for staff. The purpose of the dress code in the Emergency Services reflects these aims. It includes portraying a 'favourable professional image of the service', enhancing 'customer service and reassurance to the public', increasing 'an individual's confidence, respect and credibility' and ensuring a 'consistent, fair and corporate approach'. The dress code is detailed and specifies the circumstances under which certain items should or should not be worn. Religious headwear can be worn, in specified styles and colours, but must be compatible with health and safety requirements.

Uniforms therefore form part of their occupational identity and provide protection and public recognition for staff in the emergency services. Responsibility for high standards is not only confined to senior managers, but also line managers and colleagues and peers. At the same time, changing societal norms and expectations requires continual reiteration of uniform standards, but this is usually handled relatively informally by line managers and colleagues. Nonetheless, infringements can be handled via the disciplinary procedure if required:

"There is [a disciplinary procedure], it's very clear . . . we're a uniformed service, we're disciplined, if you're told to get a shave, cut your hair, whatever, you do it." (Staff member, Emergency Services)

Use of the disciplinary code is unusual for uniform infringements:

"There is a procedure, yes, that ultimately can end up in discipline. I mean basically in an extreme set of circumstances, there's a clear order here, there's a clear policy and you've breached that and I've now told you not to do it . . . they may make comments on your appraisal, they may make comments, you know, a line manager may and ultimately it could end up in a discipline. I've never seen one and I see every complaint . . . I think it would have to be really well written-up with a lot of paperwork showing that this is deliberate and then fine, OK, I can live with that then, but I've never seen it." (senior manager, emergency services)

In general, line managers and colleagues maintain standards:

"Sometimes a [senior member] will need to step in, but it's only if it becomes an issue more than anything. If somebody comes in unshaven, then the first person that's going to say anything is – razor break this morning or something – it's going to be one of your colleagues. But if it becomes a constant issue, then a [senior member] potentially will step in." (staff member, emergency services)

But there is recognition that vigilance is needed to maintain standards:

"About 3 or 4 years ago there was a period of some of the kids that we had coming in looked absolutely dreadful, and a lot of us older serving members made issue with it, so something was done about it. I think in particular there were a couple of people that refused to cut their hair, so they were given the opportunity to resign. As silly as that, but is having nice hair more important than looking capable of doing the job? We have a set down requirement as far as dress code goes, meet it or bye-bye." (staff member, emergency services)

Source: Respondent interviews and documentation

It should be noted however that several employees, in both large and small firms within our sample, were unaware of repercussions relating to non-adherence as they had never directly seen anyone contravene appearance policies at work.

Additionally, many employees had not necessarily seen an explicit policy relating to dress and appearance, and therefore were often unsure about the company's position on for example, visible tattoos, piercings, religious symbols, or other body supplements.

3.3 HR/ER challenges of managing dress codes and employee appearance

Overall, our findings reveal widespread links between perceived employee aesthetics and the management of a company's brand. Dress codes might additionally be central to meeting various health and safety standards within firms. The interviews, however, also highlight certain uncomfortable, problematic and clearly discriminatory attitudes and practices within firms, particularly at the pre-employment stage.

This section outlines various HR/ER issues that organisations encounter in determining and managing employee appearance. Reference is also made to certain legal complications that might arise under these circumstances.

While all the trade union officials we communicated with noted that dress and appearance were not frequently raised issues by members or indeed, by employers, they relayed certain challenges relating to:

- dress codes in hot weather and the provision of clothing / footwear to accommodate certain medical conditions
- the practicality of clothing (including its fit)
- clothing for women (inappropriate / provocative dress; maternity wear)
- the provision of staff uniforms and organisational budgets for dress
- appropriate uniforms for employees undergoing gender reassignment
- religious dress
- facial hair
- increasing numbers of queries about body modifications

Furthermore, management and employee responses raised concerns relating to both explicit and implicit appearance codes and their selective enforcement. The interviews also suggested the presence of prejudicial attitudes which could negatively influence employee attraction, career progression and retention, and have moral and legal implications for organisations.

3.3.1 Recruitment and selection and career progression

Our interviews with faith leaders, management and employees indicated the potential vulnerability of people encountering appearance-related discrimination in the labour market. Appearance expectations could be linked to idiosyncratic employer conceptions of aesthetic appeal and also be associated with wider industry characteristics and standards. In particular, certain business owners / managers seemed to be dismissive of candidates based on dress and appearance on account of personal or social stereotypes associated with particular physical traits (for example, tattoos). Additionally, in one instance we uncovered clear discriminatory attitudes on the grounds of religion and dress, justified on the basis of perceived customer prejudice and preference.

Such biases might be tempered by a more structured approach to interviewing and by training managers and employees involved in selection decisions to pay attention to cognitive biases when processing the physical appearance of individuals.

While observing an evident lack of diversity in the organisation, a management respondent illustrated the positive steps taken at her firm in relation to educating employees about unconscious bias during recruitment and selection:

"If you're a line manager, you have to do a course on recruitment and it talks about unconscious bias and all those sorts of things. And it says don't recruit in the image of yourself." (senior HR manager, railways)

Prejudices and stereotypes can have obvious negative consequences for one's employability and these can be internalised by the affected individuals, causing them to self-select into certain industries and job roles. A manager at a tattoo studio observed that while body modifications were becoming 'mainstream', it tended to impair the job opportunities of individuals. He went on to explain that the studio he worked at in fact discussed potential job-related discrimination with clients prior to service provision:

"We do make sure, especially when younger people come in . . . we say to them 'are you sure you want the tattoo done on that spot', for example, 'because we know that even though people are pretty open-minded about tattoos and piercings these days, it's not fully accepted just yet' . . . So we make sure to tell them 'what do you want to do in the

future and if you're going to get a normal job, the company you will/might want to work for in a few months or in a few years' time, might not allow you to look that way'." (manager, tattoo studio)

While it might be difficult for government to institute body modification-based discrimination regulations, employers should be aware of the risks in alienating potentially talented workers in these instances and of inadvertently drawing negative attention to potentially biased practices within the organisation. Although one of our respondents displayed a certain resignation to appearance-based discrimination, she felt reassured in the seemingly lower emphasis on employee 'looks' during recent selection decisions by her company:

"Well I think they [the firm] place quite a lot of emphasis on the way you look, and I don't think that's a good thing. But then again I knew that when I signed up, I was expecting it. They have now relaxed their work policies quite a lot and they're being more open-minded [in selection], which I think is really good." (employee, fashion retail)

Our research suggests that issues relating to such bias also surface in career progression within firms. Training in unconscious bias and discrimination should be more widespread, ongoing and include matters relating to performance evaluation as well.

If organisations show bias in their recruitment processes it also makes them vulnerable to claims of discrimination related to the protected characteristics listed in section 4 of the Equality Act 2010 as illustrated in the case of Noah v Sara Desrosiers (trading as Wedge) (2007).

There is the additional possibility that bias in recruitment procedures might be brought to the attention of the Equality and Human Rights Commission who has the power to investigate employer practices. The Commission can, through the use of their investigatory powers, together with advice, guidance, conciliation and, where necessary, litigation, facilitate changes in practice to ensure organisations meet their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998.

3.3.2 Explicit or implicit appearance norms?

One of the dilemmas relating to dress norms is how explicit these should be. Clearly, appearance-related health and safety regulations are required by law and those relating to the identifiability of employees in public-facing services are of particular value. There is a clear need for making these explicit and addressing them separately at work.

Smaller firms should also take into account the point of explicit communication with staff relating to safety-critical dress to avoid hazards in the workplace. Where norms were implicit, management respondents largely expected employees to take their cue from owners, colleagues or clients. While this approach appears commonsensical, it might be useful for management to consider diversity issues and take a more positive and progressive attitude to dress code guidance.

From a legal standpoint, it is common and permissible for an employer to require staff to comply with dress codes when they commence employment. Where work rules are silent as to dress or appearance requirements, it is likely to be implied in the employment relationship that a worker will dress in a conventional and business-like manner suitable for the employer's business.

An employee is also under an obligation to obey reasonable and lawful orders, which cover requirements relating to dress and appearance. An issue that an employer might need to consider is how they deal with a situation where they do not have existing dress rules for staff when they commenced work but subsequently want to introduce them. For example, an employer informs existing workers that they must not have tattoos on display. This could constitute a contractual change and an employer might risk a claim for breach of contract if he seeks to enforce it in an unreasonable manner (see reasonable notice requirements for changes to contractual terms in *United Bank v. Akhtar* [1989]).

Furthermore, if an employee with 2 years' continuous service was dismissed for having a tattoo the employer might face an unfair dismissal claim.

An employer should carefully consider the legal issues involved when introducing a dress code to avoid unreasonable and unnecessary restrictions. The organisation will need to develop sensible rules and requirements for imposing dress and appearance rules on employees. If challenged on a dress code rule it will be important for the employer to be able to justify the restriction imposed and to demonstrate that it is not merely a matter of personal preference.

Some practical examples might include:

- a ban on workers from wearing any type of jewellery – rules against wearing jewellery may discriminate on religious grounds
- the implementation of a policy requiring all customer-facing male staff to wear a tie – for some people, wearing a tie might cause discomfort to the skin and it might constitute disability discrimination not to make a reasonable adjustment to the dress code for the person concerned
- the introduction of a 'no beards' policy – a rule forbidding beards may discriminate on religious grounds
- a manager introduces a 'no headwear policy' because he dislikes the baseball caps his delivery drivers wear – a rule forbidding the wearing of any headwear may discriminate on race or religious grounds
- an employee who wears a turban is told by his employer to remove it following a complaint from a customer – a rule that requires Sikh employees to remove their turbans will be discriminatory unless justifiable
- an employer dismisses a long-serving male manual worker for refusing to have his hair cut – this might be an unfair dismissal, as long as his hair length was not detrimental to his employer's business or the performance of his duties (*Catharell v Glynn Nuttall Ltd*, 1981)
- instructing an employee to refrain from wearing an eyebrow ring – this might constitute a reasonable and lawful order in terms of a dress code required for employees working directly with customers

It is necessary for employers to ensure that dress and appearance codes are fair, reasonable, and proportionate in the workplace. Management need to communicate dress codes clearly and articulate the reasons behind rules, standards and requirements. They should avoid applying a dress code in such a way as to constitute workplace discrimination.

Employers might also want to avoid a situation where an employee is so disgruntled with the imposition of a dress code that they resign and make a claim of constructive unfair dismissal. As stated by a manager with extensive experience in employment relation matters:

"Employment Tribunals decide things on 'reasonableness grounds', so what is reasonable is a shifting feast, it depends on the nature of the organisation, it depends on the nature of the job, it also depends on the level of the job." (senior manager, government agency)

3.3.3 Cost and quality concerns

Whether dress expectations are explicit or implicit, cost and quality issues can be significant in relation to self-presentation and in employees representing the organisation's brand. Our interviews revealed that where uniforms and safety-related dress was paramount to the job, clothing was provided by the organisation.

However, where dress was not monetarily sponsored by the organisation but deemed important for brand representation, there were unstated expectations that employees would invest in their clothing and appearance. Owner-managers for example suggested that they 'paid enough' to cover such costs or that building tenure in the organisation would allow staff to eventually afford the investment in dress and personal appearance.

As alluded to in '[Dress, work role and performance](#)' (section 3.2.2.4), the monetary outlay on clothing at work could be seen as a work obligation that was not welcome by all.

Organisations might benefit by attending to such employee concerns and engage with staff in relation to their expectations of attire, and relatedly, discuss and potentially ease the financial burdens associated with implicit or explicit presentation demands.

The following narration was also insightful in pointing to likely predicaments in relation to brand representation. The participant discussed how he felt limited in his ability to portray the organisation's desired brand image through appearance given the company's attendance to costs instead of quality issues. Under such circumstances, health and safety imperatives might also be called into question:

"It's a double-edged sword. On one side we're expected to portray this level of outward reflection - being perfect, and one point that I find frustrating is that they mandate this and they give us shocking quality which just looks awful sometimes. It's just got worse and worse and worse and worse, cheaper and cheaper and cheaper, shorter and shorter, poorer quality, you know. It used to be a tailored suit, now it's kind of a tailored suit, it's an off-the-shelf and then altered. It used to be purely cotton shirts because if you got in a fire, breathing, going to hot climates, it was comfortable. Now they're polyester and cotton." (airline pilot)

3.3.4 Challenges in managing dress adherence

'[Appearance monitoring and enforcement](#)' (section 3.2.5) identified various concerns in relation to the monitoring and enforcement of dress expectations at work. Here, the role of line management was seen as particularly important in terms of their relationship, even-handedness and method of eliciting the co-operation of staff. This could be doubly challenging when safety concerns needed to be addressed ([see also case study 3.6](#)).

In 2 of our cases, long-serving staff were seen as less amenable to the introduction of new expectations in self-presentation. In the airline example, the issue of life-stage was also cited and fresh recruits were seen as more accepting of, and amenable to, change:

"Longevity of service for cabin crew . . . we still have those who are very comfortable, very experienced . . . but also very opinionated because they've been here for 25, 30, 35 years." (airline pilot)

In such instances, management might wish to draw on good practice guidelines in relation to change management by communicating with and involving staff in the design and implementation of certain practices. This is particularly important where health and safety regulations are concerned. The lack of managerial discretion in dress enforcement can also have health implications, as one trade union official suggested:

"Managers have the discretion to relax the dress code in extreme hot or cold weather. Our members complain that this discretion is rarely used." (written correspondence from a union organising across a number of private industries in the service sector)

As dress and appearance-related issues can be sensitive and difficult to discuss with employees, it is important to provide managers with guidance in relation to tackling challenging conversations, and to make them aware of the legal implications concerning safety, equality, human rights and contractual issues. Furthermore, dealing with issues relating to culture, religion, gender and sexuality might be seen as requiring a particularly thoughtful approach.

Case study 3.6: Safety standards and dress code enforcement in the railways

A major concern of dress in certain organisations relates to health and safety implications. In the railways, our respondent discussed the occasional, problematic aspects of enforcing safety clothing because of the close and informal relationships that had developed between workers and managers and additionally stated:

"I would say there is a lot of box ticking going on within the organisation. So when I go out on a safety tour, oh it's [. . .] from the executive team coming out to check we're doing what we should be doing, stand by your beds, put your hardhats on, put your gear on, everybody's got to be looking like they're doing the job properly. But when my back's turned, are they doing that? I don't know." (senior HR manager, railways)

The intended and actual behaviour of employees was also cited to differ because of prior employee (in) experiences with stringent adherence to specific attire and because of work pressures and deadlines. It is noteworthy that workload demands can intersect with appearance based issues where employees can underestimate the importance of adhering to safety standards relative to meeting the broader goals of the organisation. For example:

"People think that it [uniforms] doesn't matter, so if you have worked on the trains for a number of years – 'well I didn't do it like this 10 years ago so why do I need to do it like this now?' People are also trying to cut corners. The guys are under a lot of pressure to meet targets and as a consequence of that I think sometimes safety and the importance around wearing uniforms correctly are perhaps not adhered to, because they're trying to meet their targets. Well, if you've got to take an extra 5 minutes to get dressed before you go out on the line or you've got to check somebody else before they go out on the line, it's slowing you down." (senior HR manager, railways)

Source: Respondent interview

3.3.5 Diversity and inclusion

Several appearance-related concerns identified in the report (for example, in relation to recruitment, training and career progression) revolve around a sound understanding of diversity and inclusion practices and the moral and business-case of attending to such concerns.

Some participants in our sample were deeply aware of either being at the receiving end of discriminatory practices or indeed cited examples of others as being subjected to negative scrutiny based on their look. In relation to body modifications for example, an assistant manager complained:

"Well I think body modifications and tattoos - if people don't want to hire them because of that, I think that is discrimination, it's the same as sexism, racism, you can't judge someone by the way they look. My friend, he's covered in tattoos and he's the nicest person you'd ever meet. So you can't really discriminate someone who's covered in tattoos or body modifications, thinking 'oh he's a weirdo, why has he done that to his body, he could be a maniac'. It's like no, you can't judge a book by its cover." (assistant manager, pub)

Citing the interactional advantages of being more authentic at work and the importance of diversity within organisations, another employee commented:

"I feel like if you were too strict like 'oh you must do this, oh you must wear this', I think that would take away some of the personal interaction. But I understand there's also considerations of branding, from a marketing perspective, but I think in terms of customer relations it would be better if you were allowed to be yourself and just be who you want I guess. I think that [telling people how to look] excludes a certain type of people. For instance, certain jobs like police officers in Canada, you couldn't wear your turban until very recently. I think by enforcing it in customer-facing roles you're kind of excluding certain people from applying, either subtly or quite directly. So I don't know, I think people appreciate seeing diversity. I understand what they're trying to do but I think it's misguided sometimes." (employee, pub)

Indeed, expressing an appearance-related identity could be important for individuals and present itself as integral to one's life outside of work. It is possible that increasingly employees attend to organisational signals and practices in relation to diversity when they consider employment opportunities and decisions of whether to continue offering their skills and commitment to an organisation:

"I think actually that's kept me here [current organisation] over the years –that I can express myself and I can essentially do what I like with my own appearance within reason. You know, being tasteful and not vulgar... it's made me a lot more conscious about the type of place that I'd want to be employed at and my sense of enjoyment really out of my employment, because I enjoy certain things in my personal life that if I hadn't had the freedom to say get tattoos or things along those lines, I'd be missing out." (front of house, leisure centre)

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the ways in which dress codes and appearance policies impact on organisations and company practice. The research has also explored employee perceptions and experiences of organisational appearance norms and the challenges of managing dress codes and employee appearance at work.

It was evident from our interviews that employee dress codes and appearance-related issues were considered as an important element of managing an organisation's brand and reputation. A recurrent issue that was highlighted by participating managers and employees was the need to project a professional and firm-appropriate image to external service recipients with the aim of bolstering organisational credibility and increasing employee identifiability.

In some cases, meeting health and safety standards and reinforcing workplace identity and organisational culture through dress and appearance was emphasised.

Given the significance of employee dress and appearance, however, there were variations in how explicit organisational expectations were. The context of the firm largely shaped an employer's approach to dress codes, with larger organisations and those with public-facing employees demonstrating more explicit and comprehensive appearance guidelines. These rules usually covered prescriptions relating to both body supplements and body modifications.

In smaller firms, employee appearance was taken for granted to a greater extent with dress norms functioning more implicitly and informally. Intention to formalise implicit appearance norms might however have surfaced if managers encountered recurrent problems of enforcing dress standards at work.

In terms of recruitment and selection, the majority of participants confirmed that dress and appearance expectations were not discussed overtly. The appraisal of a candidate's suitability for a job nevertheless did include a consideration of their physical self-presentation.

An individual's aesthetic qualities were also seen as proxies for other personal attributes and abilities during selection. The presence of tattoos and piercings in particular drew mixed opinions from employers and employees. While certain employer-managers and employees reported a more accepting attitude towards tattoos in the workplace, in other contexts (for example, within more traditional organisations), body modifications were not seen as particularly favourable and in some instances were viewed as a legitimate reason for withholding a job offer.

Organisational investment in appearance management training was largely absent. Cases in our sample where ongoing effort and investment was evident included the railways, airlines and the emergency services, where there were significant health and safety issues in relation to dress. Here, the importance of employee identifiability was also discussed.

The rigour with which appearance norms were enforced was found to vary across the sample, and in certain instances was reported as being inconsistent, embedded in individual employee-manager relationships and dependent on line manager preferences.

Disciplinary procedures were almost never used as employees largely adhered to the dress norms of the organisation. Given the perceived sensitive nature of self-presentation, the main method of dealing with employees who did not adhere to appearance expectations was engaging in one-to-one discussions or by using humour to instigate change.

While the use of humour was not seen by the participants in our study as problematic, management should be concerned about the potential sensitivities surrounding personal appearance and the possible negative outcomes for those at the receiving end, such as embarrassment, feelings of being harassed or victimised and possible alienation.

Our findings suggest that where enforcement of dress was not even-handed, employees were seen to push boundaries in relation to the regulations. It is noteworthy that several employees in the sample accepted and indeed welcomed organisational directives on dress and appearance. Evidently, one's physical appearance was seen as linked to the emotional experience of work.

Employees discussed how uniforms and other dress policies enhanced their feelings of self-esteem, positively impacting job performance particularly during service interactions and offering a 'priming effect' for better work focus. These findings suggest that organisational dress norms can indeed have a constructive role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviour.

However, a few respondents described how they strategically used their personalities to compensate for their 'unconventional' appearance or attempted to conceal their identity markers to limit a negative reception at work. This was particularly so in the context of tattoos, piercings and religious symbols.

Organisational prescriptions and prohibitions relating to body supplements and body modifications that seemingly enhance the aesthetic appeal of employees while limiting (the perceived) unattractive elements of one's physical presentation can have negative consequences for workplace inclusion and diversity.

In certain industries or organisations, hiring practices that take employee aesthetics into consideration can have a disproportionate impact on those who do not necessarily demonstrate certain class or style attributes, and can negatively impact on individuals with particular disabilities, certain socio-economic backgrounds, or those of a certain age, ethnicity or religion.

Moreover, as outlined in chapter 2, concerns surrounding aesthetic labour demands can negatively impact on the employability of certain individuals. Indeed, in some cases, the customer-centric argument could be arbitrary and at times, unlawful.

While certain dress and appearance-related practices might appear reasonable or required by law insofar as they concern the health and safety of workers, our study reveals a number of organisational practices that point to subtle or indeed more obvious forms of prejudice and discrimination in hiring practices.

Furthermore, the idiosyncratic application of dress and appearance policies can have negative implications for employee work experiences and can also shape fairness perceptions in relation to promotional opportunities within organisations. Employees can agonise over organisational appearance expectations particularly where they feel unable to voice their opinions or provide feedback on dress norms. Therefore it would be beneficial for companies to review their implicit norms and explicit dress codes on a regular basis and involve employees in the process.

Disseminating information relating to appearance expectations might also invite feedback from employees, and signal a more fair and tolerant organisational culture by acknowledging the plurality of interests within the workplace. Indeed, our cases revealed that consultation processes with staff associations and / or trade unions in relation to company dress and appearance policy would be advantageous. Here, managers might also benefit from relevant training to increase their confidence in addressing sensitive, appearance-related issues at work.

Organisations need to be aware of the legalities surrounding dress codes and appearance norms. Irrespective of the legal position however, it may be time in a modern, progressive, and multicultural society for employers to reasonably accommodate the wishes of workers with respect to dress and appearance unless there is some compelling business case not to.

Reasons that employers give for imposing dress or appearance codes are that the application of such rules are necessary for operational reasons or that they allow the promotion of a distinct organisational culture (Hay and Middlemiss, 2003).

An analysis of case law reveals that the most common justifications advanced by employers for a particular dress code relate to:

- employees portraying a professional image

- corporate identity
- health and safety
- common smartness and attractive appearance, both of which promote an appropriate image and help develop good customer relations

Employers in the retail, hospitality, and transport sectors may want to adopt a dress code that promotes a particular company image. Case law illustrates that, in principle, it is reasonable for an employer to prescribe such requirements relating to the attire of workers.

Employers want to ensure that staff in customer-facing roles fit the company image. However, cases such as *Noah v Sara Desrosiers* (trading as Wedge); *Owen v Professional Golfers' Association*; *Malik v British Home Stores*; *Singh v Greater Manchester Police*; and *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom* demonstrate that while an employer might attempt to argue that the dress code is required to promote the organisation's image or brand, this argument will be defeated if the code results in less favourable treatment of an employee.

For example, a claim may be defeated on the grounds of national origin if the code prohibits certain kinds of ethnic dress or an employee's religious practices or if a worker is refused reasonable adjustment to the dress code because of a disability. Banning a female accountant from wearing a hijab because one of the firm's clients is a Christian organisation is unlikely to be justified while insisting that a Sikh man working in food production cover his beard for reasons of hygiene would be (Taylor and Emir, 2015: 296).

It would appear that the law pertaining to dress codes is far from clear and is still emerging. The balance of advantage seems to lie with the employer to determine the requirements of dress that best suit the image of the business in the interests of entrepreneurial freedom.

To some extent, this relegates equality under the law to a secondary consideration (Schiek, 2004). However, as Wynn-Evans (2008) observed, case law in recent years has indicated that those employers who wish to adopt dress codes need to do so with considerable care and flexibility both in the drafting of policy and in enforcing it to avoid claims of constructive or unfair dismissal, unlawful discrimination, and victimisation.

Evidently, the management of dress and appearance at work presents employers with certain challenges in terms of balancing the needs and preferences of various stakeholders along with a consideration of the law.

Several practical approaches can be adopted by organisations to deal with such issues and a summary of the guidelines are highlighted in case study 4.1. While an 'anything goes' policy might be too radical, organisational attitudes in relation to dress and appearance should reflect ongoing changes in society.

What is considered conventional in relation to dress and appearance may change with time, and employers may be expected to modify their dress and appearance codes to reflect those changes. Being sensitive to issues of diversity and inclusion could further a positive corporate image, helping to attract and retain employees who desire latitude in expressing facets of their personal identity at work.

Case study 4.1: General guidelines: managing dress and appearance at work

Be attentive to recruitment techniques and advertising content (for example, how employees are portrayed visually) to promote equality and encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds.

Establish transparent, fair and consistent selection procedures.

Create awareness and put forward fair and clear reasons for dress and appearance requirements.

Provide ongoing training to deal with unconscious bias and discrimination, particularly for individuals on selection panels and for line managers who handle day-to-day issues relating to dress and appearance.

Consider how organisational dress and appearance policies might disproportionately impact on particular groups or individuals (for example, in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic background) - accordingly, seek to review practices and display some flexibility to accommodate employee preferences.

In relation to health and safety, make codes explicit, educate employees and maintain even-handed enforcement.

Where uniforms are stipulated, feedback should be elicited on its comfort and appropriateness.

Provide opportunities for staff to participate in determining appearance policies and a forum to voice their preferences and grievances, either individually or through staff associations and trade unions.

Equip line managers and others undertaking performance reviews with the confidence and knowledge in appropriate techniques (both formal and informal) of dealing with sensitive appearance-related issues.

Consider how various monitoring and enforcement methods might impact on employees, either positively or negatively.

Undertake periodical reviews of explicit policies and implicit appearance expectations; be informed about developments in discrimination law, diversity and inclusion practices and contemporary changes in society; consider both legislative requirements and progressive practices with the aim of balancing the needs and interests of the organisation and its employees.

Build a commitment to diversity and maintain a culture of tolerance and respect for individuality within the organisation.

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Appendix A: list of cases

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Schmidt v Austicks Bookshops Ltd (1977) IRLR 360

Singh v Greater Manchester Police (Guardian 2009)

Smith v Safeway Plc (1996) IRLR 456

United Bank Ltd v Akhtar (1989) IRLR 507

Whiterod v Karen Millen Fashions ET (2014)

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