

Do you like my hairstyle? A study of the effects of appearance discrimination on employment chances in Nigeria

ADEKOYA, Olatunji <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4785-4129>>, AJONBADI, Hakeem and MORDI, Chima

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37138/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

ADEKOYA, Olatunji, AJONBADI, Hakeem and MORDI, Chima (2026). Do you like my hairstyle? A study of the effects of appearance discrimination on employment chances in Nigeria. The International Journal of Human Resource Management. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Do you like my hairstyle? A study of the effects of appearance discrimination on employment chances in Nigeria

Abstract

Research on appearance-based discrimination is growing, yet limited attention has been paid to how hairstyle influences perceptions of employability, particularly outside Western contexts. This study investigates how visible hairstyles function as markers of aesthetic labour and shape perceptions of employability in the Nigerian labour market, drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combines an experimental face perception survey with follow-up interviews of hiring managers. While the survey shows that applicants with visibly unconventional hairstyles are rated less favourably, especially men and those applying for customer-facing roles, the interviews reveal deeper cultural meanings attached to grooming standards. Hiring managers described hairstyles not only as markers of organisational fit but as visual cues of discipline, moral character, and social respectability. These interpretations were shaped by intersecting influences, including cultural norms, religious values and institutional branding concerns. The study contributes to research on aesthetic labour and intersectionality by demonstrating how professionalism is constructed through culturally specific logics of appearance, with implications for workplace inclusion and HR policy in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: aesthetic labour, discrimination, hairstyles, intersectionality, Nigeria, recruitment and selection

Introduction

The rise of the importance of worker corporeality in the service sector has resulted in organisations' increasing focus on recruiting employees who "look good" and "sound right" (Williams & Connell, 2010; Karlsson, 2012), sometimes leading to labour marginalisation (Butler, 2014; Timming, 2017a). Hence, a growing body of scholarly research in the sociology of work and on the social consequences of looks and physical appearance (Mears, 2014; Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017) has emerged, particularly as appearance affects employment chances (Timming et al., 2017a; French et al., 2019).

Prior studies on aesthetic labour have examined the nature of "lookism" and its linkage to appearance discrimination, particularly in organisations where employees have direct or face-to-face contact with customers (Warhurst et al., 2012; Baumann et al., 2016; Rajan-Rankin, 2018). Aesthetic labour "is the practice of screening, managing, and controlling workers on the basis of their physical appearance" (Mears, 2014, p. 1330). For instance, extant research has examined the impact of body and appearance modifications, including visible tattoos, body piercings, hairstyling (Nell Trautner & Kwan, 2010; Baumann et al., 2016; Adisa et al., 2021) and speech dysfluencies, such as accents, dialects, and stammering (Butler, 2014; Timming, 2017a) on perceived and actual employability. While most studies have found that these modifications engender negative perceptions about the wearer, leading to social stigma and employment discrimination, only a few studies (e.g., Timming, 2017a; Miller, 2021; Uzunogullari & Brown, 2021) have pointed to the positive outcomes, particularly in sectors (e.g., entertainment) where they are perceived to be desirable and considered attractive. It is important to note that while visibility pressures are often most pronounced in customer-facing roles (Baumann et al., 2016; Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017), appearance-based judgements also spill over into non-customer-facing contexts and are frequently intensified for people of colour,

especially Black women, given the widely documented debates about the “professionalism” of textured and natural styles (McGill Johnson et al., 2017).

The aesthetic labour literature is largely Western-centric, focusing on dominant norms in white-majority, post-industrial societies in North America and Western Europe. These contexts have historically shaped global human resources (HR) practices through colonial legacies, media representations, and transnational corporate practices (Ayentimi et al., 2018; Adisa et al., 2021). This bias reflects a broader trend in employment relations research, which often neglects perspectives from developing countries, particularly in Africa, despite their diverse and complex labour market dynamics (e.g., high levels of informal employment, strong religious and cultural influences on workplace norms, and postcolonial legacies) that shape professional standards and employer expectations (Omotoso, 2019; Adisa et al., 2023). Moreover, unlike most studies that have concentrated on body modifications (particularly tattoos and body piercings) in the West, in this paper, we empirically investigate how hiring and non-hiring managers in an under-researched, non-Western context (specifically, Nigeria) react to variations in hairstyling, particularly as they may affect one’s employment chances. Our main assumption is that, inasmuch as studies have shown that Nigerian employers and employees discriminate against wearers of tattoos and body piercings based on social stigma and stereotypes associated with these forms of body modifications (Mensah et al., 2018; Adisa et al., 2021), likewise, wearers of unconventional hairstyles in Nigeria may also be confronted with the same, or similar, barriers to employment. By unconventional hairstyles, we refer to hairstyles that deviate from what is generally accepted or perceived as “normal.” It is important to note that we do not equate tattoos with hair texture or heritage. Whereas tattoos are typically volitional and hair textures are not, our concern is with how visible cues are read as (un)professional by organisational actors, including both hiring and non-hiring managers, whose perceptions may directly or indirectly influence recruitment decisions.

Therefore, our research uses face perception methods to examine the effects of hairstyle on employment chances in Nigeria. We adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining an experimental quantitative survey featuring visual stimuli with follow-up qualitative interviews. The visual stimuli allow participants to rate job applicants based on realistic facial presentations, while the interviews provide deeper insights into hiring managers' perceptions of unconventional hairstyles in recruitment decisions.

This study makes three key contributions to HRM and organisational research. First, it advances scholarship on aesthetic labour by demonstrating how hiring decisions in Nigerian workplaces are influenced by visible hairstyle choices, particularly those deemed unconventional or non-conforming. While aesthetic labour is often studied in Western, service-based settings, our study shows how appearance expectations operate in a postcolonial, religiously conservative, and culturally moralised labour market. In this context, grooming becomes a proxy for discipline, respectability, and institutional trustworthiness, especially in customer-facing sectors. Second, the study extends HRM research by highlighting how hiring managers' aesthetic judgments are shaped not merely by organisational image concerns, but by overlapping cultural and moral norms. This challenges universalist assumptions in global HRM about professional appearance and underscores the importance of context-sensitive recruitment practices. Third, this study contributes to intersectional HRM scholarship by illustrating how hairstyle-related exclusion in the Nigerian context reflects a combination of locally salient norms, including cultural expectations of decency, moral upbringing, and modest self-presentation, rather than relying solely on familiar Western categories such as race or gender. This approach aligns with calls to make intersectionality more contextually grounded and culturally sensitive (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Peticca-Harris et al., 2025; Primecz & Mahadevan, 2025).

This paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the concept of aesthetic labour, followed by the historical and cultural contexts of hairstyle-based stigma and discrimination. Next, we discuss the research methods and analytic procedures employed, followed by a reporting of the results. We conclude by discussing the study's key findings, its theoretical and practical implications, and the limitations and directions for future research.

Aesthetic labour and appearance-based hiring

The service and retail industries have long been scrutinised by scholars due to the increasing prevalence of aesthetic labour within employment relations (Cutcher & Achtel, 2017). Warhurst et al. (2000, p.4) define aesthetic labour as “a supply of ‘embodied capacities and attributes’ possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment.” This concept emphasises corporeality in the employment process, particularly within interactive service work (Dean, 2005). Aesthetic labour demands that individuals are visually and socially appealing, rendering appearance not merely incidental but intrinsic to employability (Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016; Rajan-Rankin, 2018). Sheane (2012) expands this, describing aesthetic labour as the sale of an approved body, face, and social mannerisms required to sustain the corporate image. Similarly, Tsaura et al. (2015) argue that companies monitor and regulate employee appearances primarily to influence customer perceptions, explaining the pervasiveness of uniforms and grooming codes.

Aesthetic labour has important implications for employment decisions. Research has shown that perceptions of facial attractiveness (Patel & Wolfe, 2021; Timming, 2019), accent (Timming, 2017a), and body modifications such as tattoos and piercings (French et al., 2019; Adisa et al., 2021) can significantly shape hiring outcomes. Hancock and Tyler (2000), in their study of cabin crew recruitment, revealed that appearance expectations extend beyond formal

employment contracts, with aesthetic presentation treated as a critical, albeit unwritten, component of job performance.

While the social-justice case against appearance-based discrimination is well established in the literature, the business case is equally relevant. From a marketing and service-quality standpoint, aesthetic labour directly links to perceived brand value and customer satisfaction. Studies show that frontline employees' appearance and demeanour affect consumers' emotional responses and loyalty (Hall & van den Broek, 2012; Baumann et al., 2016). Employers may therefore frame aesthetic standards as a commercial strategy to ensure consistent brand delivery and to minimise customer-defection risk. At the same time, over-reliance on narrow beauty norms creates inefficiencies, limiting talent pools and increasing turnover among employees who are forced to conform to rigid appearance ideals (Waring, 2011; Karlsson, 2012). Thus, the challenge for organisations and HRM functions lies in balancing brand coherence with equitable inclusion, recognising that appearance diversity can also enhance authenticity and service connection (Sheane, 2012).

The emphasis on desirable corporeality within employment decisions points to the "fragmented distribution of exchange value of workers' bodies" (Dean, 2005). Employers seek a 'fit' between a worker's physical appearance and organisational branding, selecting individuals not just for skills but for their embodied alignment with company image (van den Berg & Arts, 2019). Hence, aesthetic labour is both a commercial resource and a potential mechanism of exclusion. Thus, employees hired based on aesthetic appeal must continually manage and maintain their appearance to preserve their employability. Work demands increasingly extend to specific body structures, dress styles, grooming habits, and cosmetic practices, all aimed at producing a socially acceptable and commercially valuable appearance (Sheane, 2012). From a managerial perspective, aesthetic labour allows employers to recruit candidates who already embody brand values, thereby reducing training costs and minimising

risks of customer dissatisfaction (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). However, this commodification of embodied characteristics, though strategically rational, also reinforces inequality by privileging those who naturally conform to aesthetic ideals (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Butler, 2014).

A critical distinction must be drawn between customer-facing and non-customer-facing jobs. Employees in customer-facing roles are subjected to stricter aesthetic controls because they directly symbolise the organisation's brand image to external audiences (Nickson & Korczynski, 2009). In these roles, the body becomes a site of organisational branding, requiring employees to "look good and sound right" to meet aesthetic and emotional labour demands (Williams & Connell, 2010; Karlsson, 2012; Timming, 2016). In contrast, workers in non-customer-facing positions often experience more relaxed aesthetic standards but remain governed by implicit norms of professionalism (Karlsson, 2012). Consequently, visible attributes such as hairstyle can heavily influence hireability, especially where "fit" and "professional" appearance are equated with competence (Stevens & Connelly, 2024).

Importantly, understanding aesthetic labour through the lens of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) allows us to move beyond treating it as a uniform process and to interrogate how appearance intersects with broader systems of power, culture, and context (Primecz & Mahadevan, 2025), as well as social categories such as race, gender, class, religion, and nationality (Davis & Zarkov, 2017; Borzoo, 2025). This approach moves beyond surface-level critiques of discrimination by revealing how systems of power shape which appearances are valued or penalised in specific contexts. For instance, Borzoo (2025) argues that aesthetic evaluations are not simply about beauty but about how embodied traits interact with labour market stratification. Similarly, Majumder and Arora (2023), in their study of beauty work in India, demonstrate how class, caste, and gender intersect to produce aesthetic exclusions that are not reducible to appearance alone.

Peticca-Harris et al. (2025) further emphasise that aesthetic labour contributes to the production of “precarious subjectivities,” particularly for those whose bodies do not conform to dominant ideals. In their work, they show that aesthetic norms render some workers hyper-visible and others invisible, not on the basis of competence but on their distance from normative embodiment. Tekeste et al. (2025) similarly show that aesthetic labour in the UAE operates through a “tri-racial” hierarchy, where race, accent, and nationality intersect to shape aesthetic value. Thus, intersectionality not only illuminates how aesthetic judgements are unequally distributed within societies, but also how these dynamics differ across contexts.

This broader perspective is especially relevant when comparing Western and African labour markets, where aesthetic norms and their social meanings, despite some similarities, are shaped by different historical, cultural, and institutional forces. In many Western settings, aesthetic labour has evolved alongside consumer-oriented branding cultures and liberal equality discourses, creating contested spaces around appearance, including legal disputes over religious attire, hair, and tattoos (Nickson, 2022; Lewis & Aune, 2023; Mavropoulos, 2024). Despite widespread diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives – programmes that promote fair representation and equal opportunity within organisations (Roberson, 2006) – these standards often remain fragile, reversible, and implicitly racialised (Payne-Patterson, 2023; Walk-Morris, 2024). Inclusion is frequently conditional, and grooming codes continue to mirror dominant norms around whiteness, femininity, and class (Borzoo, 2025; Murray & Bohannon, 2025).

By contrast, in Nigeria, aesthetic expectations are deeply intertwined with colonial legacies, religious morality, and communal respectability (Adisa et al., 2021, 2023). Here, expectations around “neatness,” modesty, and conventional hairstyles are shaped by postcolonial values that link grooming to character, discipline, and employability. These norms are not solely about corporate branding, but reflect broader cultural scripts about identity, class

mobility, and moral order (Omotoso, 2019; Adisa et al., 2024). Intersectionality allows us to see that aesthetic labour in Nigeria does not simply replicate Western beauty standards, but instead operates through distinct hierarchies shaped by generational values, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. As Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) note, non-Western contexts do not represent a lack of intersectionality but exhibit their own complex interplay of power, identity, and embodiment.

Finally, while aesthetic biases often result in exclusion, not all appearance-based evaluations are inherently discriminatory. Scholars argue that we must distinguish between aesthetic judgments grounded in practical concerns (e.g., hygiene or safety) and those rooted in stigmatisation or moral policing (Waring, 2011; Butler & Harris, 2015). However, intersectionality reminds us that even seemingly neutral standards may privilege certain bodies while disadvantaging others, reinforcing inequalities under the guise of professionalism. In sum, intersectionality enriches our understanding of aesthetic labour by revealing not just who is included or excluded, but how and why these processes unfold differently across cultural and institutional landscapes.

Given that non-Western contexts remain under-examined in aesthetic labour research, this study contributes by exploring how hairstyle-based appearance judgments operate in Nigeria across different role types. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Job applicants with visible unconventional hairstyles have lower hireability ratings in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: Job applicants with visible unconventional hairstyles have lower hireability ratings in Nigeria when applying for a customer-facing role than a non-customer-facing role.

The historical and cultural contexts of hairstyle-based stigma and discrimination

Stigmatisation is a social process through which individuals are devalued based on attributes deemed undesirable by dominant socio-cultural norms (Goffman, 1963; Stuber et al., 2008; Flanagan & Lewis, 2019). In the case of physical appearance, this often relates to socially constructed ideals of “professionalism” shaped by colonial histories, racialised standards, and gendered expectations. One of the most visible and contested of these appearance markers is hair. In African societies, including Nigeria, hair has long held cultural significance. Traditional hairstyles conveyed social messages about age, ethnicity, spirituality, and community belonging (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Omotoso, 2019). Hair was not simply decorative, but also a symbolic and embodied form of identity.

Colonialism disrupted these meanings by imposing Eurocentric grooming ideals, with straightened or subdued hairstyles promoted as respectable, professional, and civilised (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). These colonial logics devalued African hair textures and established aesthetic hierarchies that persist today (Henning et al., 2022). As Donahoo (2022) and Mbilishaka et al. (2020) note, colonial grooming standards were institutionalised across public and private domains, shaping expectations in education, employment, and media. These ideals have become naturalised in many Nigerian workplaces, where professional grooming still reflects colonial, patriarchal, and religious standards (Adisa et al., 2023, 2024). Men are typically expected to wear short, low-cut hair or be bald, while women are expected to wear tidy, modest styles such as natural weaves or low braids (Vincent, 2019). Hairstyles, such as locs, dyed hair or non-traditional extensions that deviate from these standards, are often perceived as inappropriate, especially in conservative or faith-based settings (Omotoso, 2019; The Conversation, 2019).

Intersectionality theory helps illuminate how hair-based stigma operates through interlocking systems of race, gender, class, and religion. Appearance is not judged in isolation but is filtered through multiple social hierarchies that shape which bodies are read as professional or employable (Brady et al., 2017; Trusty et al., 2023; Borzoo, 2025). In Nigeria, moralised grooming standards reflect both postcolonial respectability politics and patriarchal codes of order and discipline (Adisa et al., 2024). These norms often operate covertly, legitimising appearance-based exclusion under the guise of professionalism. As Peticca-Harris et al. (2025) and Carrim & Nkomo (2016) argue, aesthetic expectations are often entangled with broader judgments of moral worth, respectability, and class mobility, particularly in postcolonial contexts, where identity markers are interpreted through histories of both race and gender subjugation.

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma as a "spoiled identity" remains analytically useful when paired with intersectionality theory. Atypicality – the deviation from normative grooming or appearance codes – can trigger negative social evaluations that may affect one's employment chances (Timming, 2016; Timming et al., 2020), but these are rarely about aesthetics alone. Instead, such evaluations are shaped by how a person's appearance intersects with broader systems of race, gender, and class. For example, Majumder and Arora (2023) show how caste, skin tone, and gender intersect in India's beauty and wellness sector to intensify stigma for lower-caste women. Similarly, Tekeste et al. (2025) demonstrate how, in the UAE, the aesthetic expectations of employers align with racialised and gendered national hierarchies, privileging Western and lighter-skinned workers while penalising others for identical aesthetic expressions. These studies underline that the stigma of aesthetic deviance is not uniformly applied but is shaped by intersectional configurations of power.

Furthermore, as Doldor and Atewologun (2020) argue, identity-based stigma responses must be understood as contextually situated, shaped by local cultural norms and intersecting

power structures. In Nigeria, the social evaluation of atypical appearances operates through these layered systems of meaning, where aesthetic nonconformity is read not just as unprofessional but also as morally suspect or socially deviant (Adisa et al., 2021). This process reflects how aesthetic judgments intersect with gendered, religious, and post-colonial hierarchies to reinforce exclusion. Employers, particularly in customer-facing sectors, often interpret unconventional hairstyles as signals of poor fit, using presumed customer preferences or organisational branding needs to justify exclusionary hiring practices (Timming et al., 2017b). However, these justifications often mask deeper structural biases, illustrating how ostensibly “neutral” aesthetic standards can reproduce systemic inequalities. This logic further underpins our hypotheses that job applicants with unconventional hairstyles will receive lower hireability ratings (Hypothesis 1), and that these penalties will be more pronounced in customer-facing roles (Hypothesis 2).

Appearance-based stigma also intersects with gender in complex ways. While many studies focus on Black women’s hair experiences in Western contexts (Donahoo, 2022; Trusty et al., 2022), recent research suggests these dynamics are more nuanced and context-specific. Summers et al. (2022) show that younger Black women often internalise workplace respectability norms as a form of identity negotiation, while Daniels et al. (2025) find that older women reclaim natural hairstyles as symbols of agency and well-being. Meanwhile, Timming (2017a) and Tranter & Grant (2018) suggest that men may face harsher penalties for appearance deviance in patriarchal cultures, particularly when grooming norms are closely tied to authority and discipline. In Nigeria, these dynamics appear gendered, in that male applicants with unconventional/atypical hairstyles may be viewed as rebellious or unserious, while women, though still judged, may encounter slightly greater latitude, particularly in urban spaces where Afrocentric beauty discourses are more visible (Adisa et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesise a gendered bias in Nigeria’s employment landscape:

Hypothesis 3: Female job applicants with visible unconventional hairstyles have higher hireability ratings than males in Nigeria.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design to explore how aesthetic labour, specifically through conventional and non-conventional Afro-hairstyles, affects perceptions of hireability within the Nigerian context. The research was carried out in two distinct but interrelated phases. The first phase involved a quantitative experiment, in which participants evaluated digitally manipulated images of job applicants. The second phase followed with a qualitative inquiry, comprising interviews with hiring managers who had participated in the initial experiment. This design enabled the study not only to measure aesthetic bias empirically but also to contextualise and deepen understanding through the lived experiences of decision-makers in real-world hiring contexts.

Phase one: quantitative experiment

Experimental Stimuli

The experimental phase employed a facial perception methodology, using photographs of faces captured with neutral expressions and frontal positioning (zero-degree angle), sourced from a publicly available professional database (www.3d.sk). The control group consisted of twelve faces (six male and six female) displaying conventional Afro-hairstyles commonly perceived in Nigeria as professional and disciplined, including closely cropped or bald heads for men, and black or dark-brown plaited or neatly woven hair for women. Such styles align with long-standing cultural and organisational expectations of tidiness, modesty, and moral respectability. Stimulus groups were generated by digitally altering the control images using Adobe Photoshop to reflect a range of unconventional Afro-hairstyles (i.e., those that visibly depart from these accepted grooming norms). For male faces, added styles included cornrows,

dreadlocks, sponge twists, and brightly coloured hair. For female faces, styles included coloured wigs or plaits (excluding colours black, dark brown), dreadlocks, and sponge twists. These were selected to represent contemporary but socially contested appearances within Nigerian workplaces, often associated with youthfulness or nonconformity. This process yielded a final sample of thirty images (twelve control and eighteen experimental), all of which were used in the experimental task. Examples of the visual stimuli are provided in Figure 1.

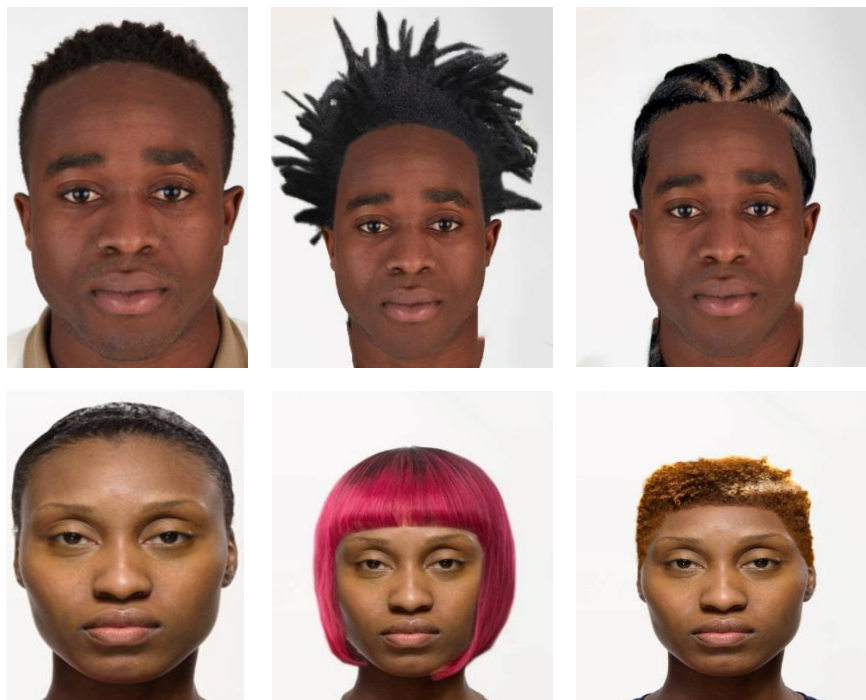


Figure 1: Samples of control group images (far left) and stimulus group images (middle and far right)

Sample and procedure

Data were collected using an online picture-based survey administered via Google Forms, following institutional ethical approval. Participants were working professionals with a minimum of one year of employment experience, recruited from several Nigerian states (including Lagos, Osun, Oyo, Kwara, Edo, Kano, Ogun, Abuja, and Port Harcourt) and across diverse service sectors (including banking, education, retail, telecommunication, hospitality, legal, consultancy, and healthcare). Recruitment employed a snowball sampling strategy,

initiated through the authors' professional WhatsApp groups, personal contacts, and alumni networks. The recruitment message invited participants to complete an online hiring evaluation task. Participation was strictly voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. As an incentive, each respondent was provided 1,500 Nigerian Naira (approximately USD 1) to cover the cost of data purchase required to access and complete the survey.

A total of 189 individuals (93 men and 96 women) completed the survey. The sample was diverse in terms of age, religious affiliation, and education level. Most participants (over 90%) held at least a bachelor's degree. Age categories were as follows: 18–25 (27%), 26–35 (45%), 36–45 (12.7%), 46–55 (11.6%), and 55 and above (3.7%). Religiously, 75.1% identified as Christian, 24.3% as Muslim, and 0.5% as Atheist.

Given that the participants were both hiring managers (24.3%) and non-hiring managers (73.7%), all participants were instructed to assume the role of a recruiter evaluating a pool of equally qualified job applicants. The inclusion of non-hiring managers was intentional, reflecting both the aspiration that they may become future hiring professionals and the broader aim of capturing societal attitudes toward non-normative appearance cues.

Participants were presented with the thirty facial images and asked to rate their likelihood of hiring each individual on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = extremely likely and 5 = extremely unlikely. The task was split into two sections. In the first, participants rated the images for customer-facing roles (e.g., cashier, waiter/waitress, teacher, doctor), while in the second, they rated the same images for non-customer-facing roles (e.g., factory worker, chef, night-time janitor). While role examples were provided, the analysis focused more on the overall contrast between customer-facing and non-customer-facing jobs, rather than on any particular jobs or industries.

Analysis

The data from the survey were analysed using a mixed design analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test both main and interaction effects. The independent variables were hairstyle type (conventional vs. unconventional), job role (customer-facing vs. non-customer-facing), and applicant gender (male vs. female). The dependent variable (hireability rating) was operationalised as the mean score on the five-point Likert scale (1 = Extremely likely to hire; 5 = Extremely unlikely to hire) assigned to each image condition.

Two sequential analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 28) to provide analytical depth. Analysis 1 examined the main effects of hairstyle, job role, and applicant gender on hireability ratings, identifying the independent contribution of each variable. Analysis 2 investigated the interaction effects among these factors to determine whether the influence of hairstyle differed across role type and applicant gender. Partial eta squared (η^2) was reported to indicate effect sizes. Before analysis, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked and met.

Results

Main effects

Table 1 reports the results of the main effects of the mixed ANOVA. The analysis revealed a statistically significant main effect of hairstyle type on hireability ratings, $F(1, 11332) = 368.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .0315$, indicating that the applicants' hairstyles significantly influenced participants' perceptions of employability. Applicants with conventional Afro-hairstyles ($M = 2.83$, $SE = 0.02$) were rated as significantly more hireable than those with unconventional Afro-hairstyles ($M = 3.26$, $SE = 0.02$), with a mean difference of 0.43. While the effect size ($\eta^2 = .0315$) is classified as small to moderate, the direction and magnitude of the difference suggest

that normative hairstyle grooming standards exert a consistent and measurable bias in hiring contexts.

A significant main effect of role type was also observed, $F(1, 11332) = 226.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .0196$, with applicants rated for customer-facing roles ($M = 3.09, SE = 0.02$) perceived as less hireable than the same applicants rated for non-customer-facing positions ($M = 2.75, SE = 0.02$). The mean difference of 0.34 underscores the salience of role visibility in triggering aesthetic judgments. These results suggest that organisations tend to pursue aesthetic controls on employee appearances more stringently in customer-facing settings due to their symbolic and branding functions. Therefore, hiring managers may be more inclined to enforce hair grooming norms where the employee serves as a public-facing representation of the organisation.

In contrast, there was no significant main effect of applicant gender on hireability, $F(1, 11332) = 0.005, p = .941$, suggesting that gender, in isolation, did not influence participants' assessments. The negligible effect size implies that male and female applicants were treated similarly in terms of baseline hireability ratings, independent of hairstyle or job role. This finding should not be misinterpreted as an absence of gender bias altogether but rather highlights that gendered differences may emerge more meaningfully in interaction with other variables, such as hair grooming and presentation, as evidenced in subsequent interaction effects below.

Table 1: Summary of the Main Effects (Hairstyle, Role Type and Applicant Gender)

	Mean Rating		Mean Difference	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
	Conventional	Unconventional				
Hairstyle	2.83	2.40	0.43	368.42	< .001	.0315
Role Type	2.79	2.45	0.34	226.71	< .001	.0196
Applicant Gender	2.63	2.61	0.02	0.005	.941	.0000

Interaction effects

Table 2 reports the results of the interaction effects. A significant interaction was found between hairstyle type and role type, $F(1, 11332) = 11.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .00103$, indicating that the negative impact of unconventional Afro-hairstyles on hireability was amplified in customer-facing roles. Applicants with conventional Afro-hairstyles were rated 3.05, while those with unconventional Afro-hairstyles were rated 2.53, showing a substantial mean difference of 0.51. In contrast, the mean difference was 0.35 in non-customer-facing roles ($M_{\text{conventional}} = 2.62; M_{\text{unconventional}} = 2.28$), suggesting that appearance-based bias was more intense in positions with public visibility. This supports the idea that in customer-facing jobs, visual cues such as hairstyle operate as a form of symbolic branding, where adherence to normative appearance standards becomes a proxy for perceived professionalism and organisational fit.

The interaction between hairstyle type and applicant gender was also statistically significant, $F(1, 11332) = 23.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .00207$. Here, male applicants with unconventional Afro-hairstyles were rated 2.36 on average compared to 2.90 for males with conventional Afro-hairstyles, with a notable mean difference of 0.54. Female applicants also experienced a penalty ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.32$), but it was less severe ($M_{\text{conventional}} = 2.77; M_{\text{unconventional}} = 2.45$). This pattern reveals a gendered asymmetry in aesthetic judgments, where men are more harshly evaluated for hair grooming deviations. In the context of Nigeria, where patriarchal norms intersect with Westernised professional standards, men with locs, braids, or coloured hair may be seen as violating implicit expectations of conformity, discipline, or authority more than women with similarly non-conventional Afro-hairstyles.

Together, these findings suggest that aesthetic discrimination in hiring decisions is not neutral or uniformly applied. Instead, it is filtered through sociocultural logics of visibility,

gender, and conformity, whereby both the role’s symbolic function and the applicant’s gender shape how hairstyles are interpreted and evaluated.

Table 2: Summary of the Interaction Effects

Interaction Condition	Mean Rating		Mean Difference	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
	Conventional	Unconventional				
Customer-facing	3.05	2.53	0.51	11.65	< .001	.00103
Non-customer-facing	2.62	2.28	0.35			
Male Applicants	2.90	2.36	0.54	23.48	< .001	.00207
Female Applicants	2.77	2.45	0.32			

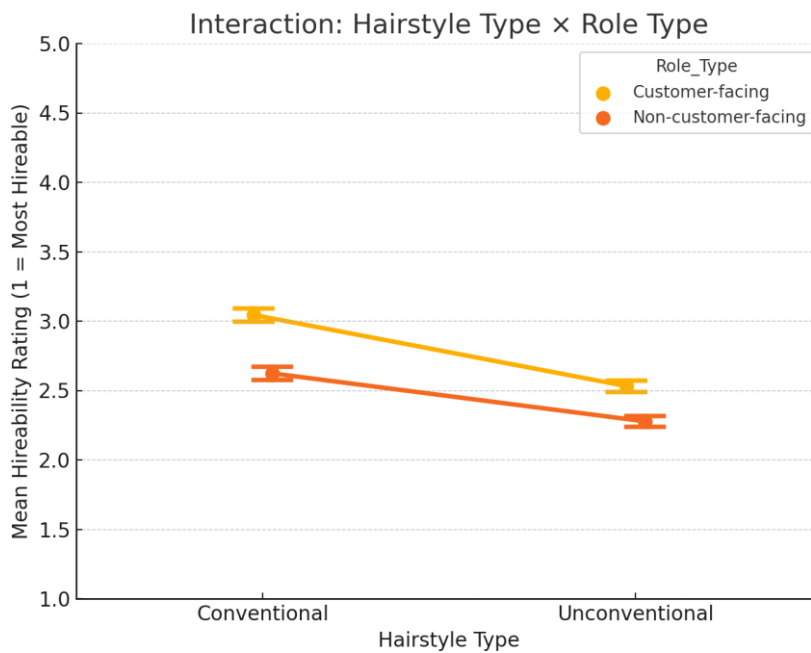


Figure 2: Mean Hireability Ratings for Conventional vs. Unconventional Hairstyles Across Role Types.

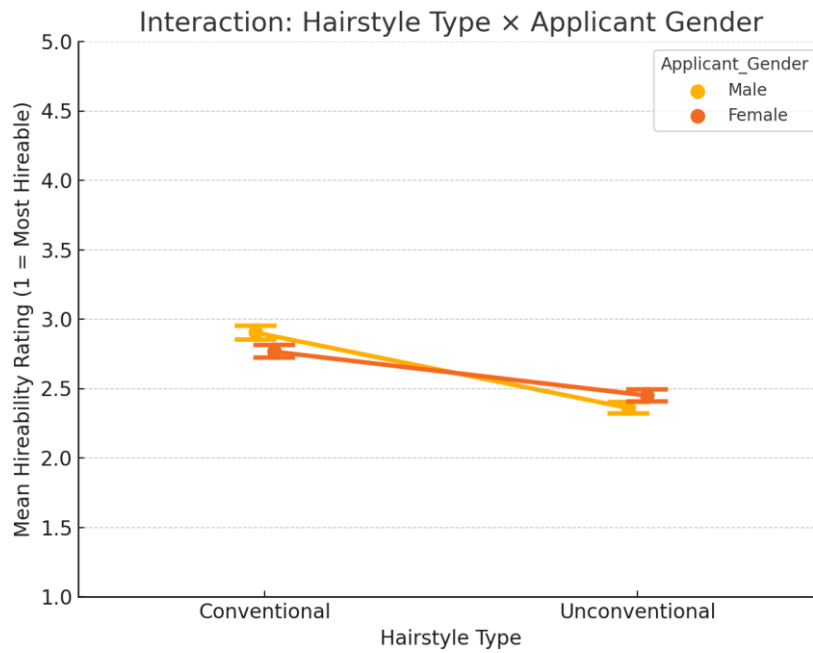


Figure 3: Mean Hireability Ratings for Conventional vs. Unconventional Hairstyles Across Applicant Gender.

Phase two: qualitative interviews

Following the survey, a qualitative phase was conducted to contextualise and further interrogate the findings from the experimental data. This involved follow-up interviews with hiring managers who had participated in the initial experimental phase and had indicated their willingness to be contacted for further research. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity across industries and job roles. The aim was to explore the rationale behind appearance-based judgments and investigate how hiring managers interpret the influence of hairstyles within organisational settings. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, resulting in a final sample of 17 participants. All interviewees had prior or current recruitment experience and provided their consent. This enabled direct reflection on the stimuli, allowing for methodological complementarity and coherence. Before the interviews, we re-sent the images from the survey to ensure participants were familiar with the visual stimuli

used in the earlier phase of the study. A summary of the participants' demographic profile is presented in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

The interviews were conducted remotely by two researchers via Zoom, MS Teams or WhatsApp Video, depending on participants' availability and preference. Each session lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 1) designed to probe the managers' experiences, interpretations, and organisational pressures related to hairstyle-based judgments. The main questions addressed perceptions of professional appearance, gender norms in hair grooming, client-facing role expectations, and potential organisational policies around employee presentation; follow-up questions were included to probe participants' responses further. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants' names were concealed using pseudonyms representing popular Nigerian names to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

All interviews were conducted in English, Nigeria's official language and the common language among educated professionals. Although participants occasionally used local idioms or Pidgin English to illustrate points, these were retained in transcripts and contextually annotated during coding. The interviewers were Nigerian nationals with shared cultural familiarity, which reduced linguistic barriers and minimised misinterpretation of cultural nuances. However, they ensured they did not interview individuals with whom they had close personal relationships. To further mitigate social desirability bias, interviewers emphasised confidentiality and encouraged respondents to discuss broader industry practices rather than personal or organisational decisions. Following each session, reflexive notes were recorded to

capture contextual cues that might influence interpretation, supporting a culturally grounded analytic process.

Following data transcription, we analysed the data using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, applying a deductive approach guided by the study's theoretical framework and hypotheses. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts. Second, a priori codes were developed from key theoretical constructs identified in the literature, such as professionalism, cultural and gender norms, and organisational branding, and used to structure the initial coding frame. Third, codes were collated and sorted into potential themes based on conceptual similarity. Fourth, codes were collated and compared to theoretical expectations using a pattern-matching logic to identify areas of convergence and divergence between anticipated and observed patterns (Sinkovics, 2018). Fifth, we defined and refined the themes, clarifying their scope and narrative contribution. Finally, we produced the report, selecting examples to illustrate each theme. Through this structured process, we developed three main themes: perceptions of hairstyle and professionalism, the role of cultural and gender norms, and the influence of organisational branding and client expectations. These themes provided deeper contextual insights into the quantitative findings and highlighted how managerial perspectives might reinforce or complicate the observed patterns. Table 4 summarises the thematic analysis process.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Results

Perceptions of hairstyle and professionalism

Across interviews, hiring managers drew strong connections between hairstyle and perceptions of professionalism. Hairstyle was repeatedly described as a visible signal through which applicants communicated discipline, seriousness, and organisational fit. In this sense,

professionalism extended beyond competence or qualifications. It became a visibly performed attribute, evaluated through how well applicants' appearance aligned with established expectations of what a "serious" worker should look like. Azeez, a male bank manager, reflected this logic:

Appearance is part of professionalism and can often speak to your competence level. I don't think any job applicant should expect to be taken seriously when they come to an interview with hairstyles that are not 'normal'... You have to respect yourself as a professional because this is not a YouTube or social media content-making company where things like hairstyles might not really matter... In banking, you are the face of people's money, and your look must show discipline and reliability.

At face value, Azeez's reasoning reflects the conservative aesthetic expectations typical of banking environments worldwide. Yet his comments also reveal how professionalism is interpreted through moralised language. To "respect yourself" suggests that acceptable hairstyle choices signify not only competence, but also maturity, restraint, and proper social upbringing. The idea that unconventional hairstyles are incompatible with serious work indicates that aesthetic conformity functions as a proxy for character. Through this framing, hairstyle becomes less about hygiene and more about demonstrating that one understands and accepts the behavioural norms associated with respectable employment.

Peju, a female medical ward manager, expressed similar expectations in relation to the healthcare sector:

In the nursing profession, you can't simply appear with a hairstyle that does not look professional... I have not witnessed such in my over 23 years of experience...and if I see anyone with some of the types of hairstyles I saw on the survey, trust me, I won't even think twice before making a rejection decision... Patients and their relatives need to feel

that you are tidy, organised, and disciplined, and your hair is one of the indications of these things...

Here, hairstyle becomes an indicator of reliability and emotional reassurance. Peju draws direct links between grooming and patient trust, positioning hair as part of a broader moral expectation that healthcare workers embody order, calm, and self-control. Although hygiene standards undoubtedly play a role in such settings, the language of “discipline” and “tidiness” also reflects deeper symbolic meanings, as the professional body must appear controlled and contained. Through this lens, unconventional hairstyles risk unsettling expectations of stability, not because they are inherently unhygienic, but because they disrupt the visual script associated with credible caregiving.

A broader cultural interpretation of professionalism surfaced in Fatimah’s account, where grooming was seen as an expression of values:

You cannot separate how you look from how people see your values, whether as part of your religious values or the traditional Nigerian upbringing... In Nigeria, appearance says a lot about your character, not just your style. As a lady, you must ensure you wear hairstyles with the right colours, whether it is black, a dark brown or burgundy colour. Even if you wear wigs, don’t just come in with those bright colours because people will look at you as being unserious and irresponsible... As a man, it’s even better that you are bald than for you to come to work with those hairstyles with colours or very long hair...

Fatimah’s comments show how assessments of professionalism intersect with moral and social expectations that extend beyond the workplace. Hair does not simply communicate style; it also serves as evidence of responsibility, self-discipline, and respectability. In this way, professional judgments are layered, drawing on organisational expectations, cultural scripts

about propriety and notions of modesty. These intersections reveal how professional standards are shaped by overlapping systems of morality and social order.

This moralised logic was also evident in contexts where visual presentation was tightly tied to customer perception. Hakeem, a hotel manager, explained:

See, I don't really have anything against looking different, as long as it is a tidy hairstyle and not one that makes you look like a criminal or prostitute... For example, I was willing to give one lady applicant who came with a bright yellow wig a chance, but when I asked if she would change the hairstyle, she said no, leaving me no choice but to also reject her application. I can't take that risk in hospitality because guests will judge us immediately...so it makes sense that if you're going to apply here, you need to maintain a professional look.

Although framed as a business decision that directly points to customers' judgments, Hakeem's justification links hairstyle to morality and social threat. Unconventional hair becomes associated with criminality or sexual impropriety, labels that reach far beyond aesthetic taste. From an intersectional perspective, what appears to be a brand-management consideration is entangled with social hierarchies that classify certain bodies as more risky or inappropriate than others. The "risk" is therefore not only economic; it is also symbolic, rooted in fears about deviation, respectability, and public judgment.

Taken together, these accounts show that perceptions of professionalism in this context are not always neutral or universal. While hairstyle may signal specific organisational standards, it can also serve as a screening device through which broader moral and cultural expectations are enforced. Intersectionality clarifies that these standards derive simultaneously from organisational logics, colonial legacies of bodily discipline, and moral frameworks embedded in everyday life. Professionalism, therefore, is not simply about competence but a

regulated aesthetic performance through which applicants demonstrate belonging, reliability, and respect for the established social order.

The role of cultural and gender norms

While participants commonly linked appearance to professionalism, their judgments were also shaped by deeply embedded cultural and gender norms. These codes shaped what was considered “appropriate” or “respectable” in professional settings, often making grooming a site of social classification. Across the interviews, unconventional Afro-hairstyles were evaluated not just on visual terms, but through broader cultural narratives tied to home training, gender roles, religion, and national identity. Viewed through an intersectional lens, hairstyle becomes a visible marker through which race, gender, class, and cultural identity intersect to regulate access to professional inclusion. Folake, a female store manager, described how aesthetic presentation reflects broader moral and social values:

In our society, looking respectable is not optional at all. It shows you have home training and respect for others. So, if you look untidy with your hair or put on a non-traditional hairstyle, you are at risk of a backlash, which will also affect your chances of being employed.

Folake’s language draws on familiar Nigerian cultural scripts, particularly “home training,” which signifies proper moral upbringing, discipline, and respectability. In this framing, professional appearance is not merely a matter of personal preference or hygiene but of social conformity and moral worth. Aesthetic nonconformity is interpreted as a rejection of communal norms and, by extension, as a sign of irresponsibility. Intersectionality is a useful lens for exploring how these moralised aesthetic judgments might disproportionately affect those already at the margins of dominant respectability standards; for instance, younger

applicants, religious minorities, or individuals whose appearance diverges from traditional norms due to lifestyle, gender expression, or generational shifts.

Similarly, Kunle, a male managing director of a small enterprise, grounded his hiring decisions in traditional values:

If a person's hair gives a negative look, they won't be taken seriously. There is this popular proverb that "you are addressed the way you dress", and one's hair is part of their dressing... In fact, in Nigeria, we have a saying that simply translates into saying that there's a way you dress to the presence of someone you consider important. In this context, it means that if you consider the job or profession important, you won't dress unprofessionally even for a job interview.

The proverbs, as Kunle notes here, function as a cultural script that legitimises aesthetic regulation. His comments underscore that appearance is not judged in isolation but within a wider moral economy that links physical appearance to respect, seriousness, and cultural intelligence. Intersectionality is useful here to explain how these cultural standards often disadvantage applicants whose gender expression, generational orientation, or aesthetic choices fall outside dominant norms. Kunle's perspective frames deviation as evidence of disregard for professional spaces and implicitly excludes those who express identity outside traditional codes.

A key way this exclusion plays out is through gendered expectations, particularly the stricter scrutiny of men's hairstyles. Ayodeji, a male customer relationship supervisor at a microfinance bank, articulated this gendered asymmetry:

Men must be disciplined; hair is part of that. A man with braids or coloured hair is not serious to us. You can't command respect from others if you have such weird hairstyles,

and I wouldn't even dare recruit such a person because I would need to be accountable to my branch manager for making such a bad decision

Ayodeji's framing presents masculine professionalism as synonymous with control, authority, and minimalism. While women may be afforded limited flexibility under the guise of feminine self-expression, men's hairstyles are policed as direct reflections of discipline and leadership. An intersectional reading highlights how aesthetic expectations intersect with gender and institutional power. Men who diverge from these narrow norms, particularly in highly regulated sectors, risk not only rejection but the perception of undermining hierarchical order. Importantly, Ayodeji's concern about being "accountable" to his manager illustrates how these aesthetic norms are enforced not just individually but institutionally, making recruiters active participants in sustaining gendered professional ideals.

In contrast, women were afforded somewhat more aesthetic leeway, though still under restrictive cultural and religious constraints. Olamide, a female practice group leader at a law firm, explained:

Even the Scripture encourages us to dress modestly and decently, but nowadays, you hear women say things like "dress to impress" or "dress to slay," and some even call themselves "slay mama" and all those nonsense names, all in the name of fashion and wanting to become trendy on social media and in public spaces... No, I can't accept such behaviour in the workplace, and we even have our office uniforms anyway.

She further critiqued the existing double standards, reflecting on the ways traditional African hairstyles for men had been delegitimised through colonial and gendered lenses:

...Even cornrows that has its origin from ancient Africa has become a taboo for men because it is associated with femininity... You can tell that we have been brainwashed since the colonial era, and it has become an unacceptable hairstyle in this day and age...

Olamide's insight reveals that gender norms around grooming are shaped not only by local traditions but also by colonial histories that devalue African aesthetics and recode them as unprofessional or inappropriate hairstyles. Here, the analysis extends beyond the gendering of hair to examine how race, colonial history, and masculinity intersect to define what is acceptable. The rejection of hairstyles such as braids or cornrows on men, which originated from Africa, illustrates how African cultural expressions have been reinterpreted through colonial binaries of "civilised" versus "uncivilised" appearance, disproportionately penalising men who wear these styles in professional settings (Onwuka, 2022; Quampah et al., 2023).

In sum, these narratives show that aesthetic judgments in Nigerian workplaces are not merely a matter of taste or hygiene but are saturated with moral and cultural expectations. Hair becomes a proxy for assessing social belonging, discipline, and credibility. Through the lens of intersectionality, we see how these judgments operate unevenly and are shaped by the interplay of gender, class, religion, and postcolonial legacies.

The influence of organisational branding and client expectations

Across the interviews, participants repeatedly described how hiring decisions were shaped less by personal aesthetics and more by what they framed as organisational image management. Unconventional Afro-hairstyles, particularly those involving bright colours or non-conservative cuts, were viewed as potential threats to institutional reputation. These judgments were largely shaped by assumptions about customer preferences and market expectations, particularly in customer-facing sectors. Azeez, a male bank manager, explained:

When someone walks into our banking hall, the first thing they see is our staff. So, if you have someone with crazy-coloured hair or something wild, what does that say about our professionalism? Hair is part of the image we sell.

Here, Azeez's logic extends beyond personal preference. For him, employees function as living extensions of the brand, what aesthetic labour scholars describe as an "embodied billboard" (Frew & McGillivray, 2005) or "doing the brand" (Cutcher & Ahtel, 2017). While certain institutions are globally associated with conservative appearance norms, Azeez's use of terms such as "crazy-coloured" and "wild" suggests not only market-based reasoning but also a moralised boundary of acceptability. From an intersectional perspective, this aesthetic branding disproportionately targets individuals whose self-expression deviates from hegemonic visual norms. Importantly, these aesthetic markers are not evaluated neutrally but are interpreted through embedded cultural ideas about control, seriousness, and customer trust.

Similar expectations were evident in the catering and hospitality sectors, where managers internalised these aesthetic norms as essential to their brand identity. Funke, a female catering services manager, remarked:

I have seen a few colleagues in my industry encouraging such hairstyles because they themselves wear them. I don't think it's appropriate and I won't hire anybody with such a hairdo... It's something that we were discouraged about during my culinary school days, because it doesn't portray professionalism and will not speak well of my brand.

Funke's comment reveals how aesthetic discipline is often institutionalised through training and professional culture, long before any hiring decision is made. Her concern that certain hairstyles "do not speak well" of her brand reflects a moralised view of professionalism, in which aesthetics symbolise one's seriousness, credibility, and values. What is presented as a neutral branding decision becomes, in practice, shaped by the intersection of institutionalised norms and aesthetics.

Beyond internal branding, participants also cited customer expectations as powerful forces in shaping their decisions. Managers were very conscious of how customers might react

to employees' appearances, often pre-empting potential backlash by enacting strict grooming norms. Kunle, a male managing director of a small enterprise, expressed this view:

...We want our customers to be able to recognise us for our professionalism, so we will not employ someone who will tarnish our brand image... We hold our company's values dear to us and can't risk our reputation being stained because of a hairstyle that is frowned upon by customers... I understand that some men might like braided hair or a Mohawk because they want to look good, but we also have a reputation to look good in front of our customers.

Kunle's reasoning illustrates a displacement of aesthetic judgment from the organisation to its customers. In this framing, bias against Afro-hairstyles is not prejudice but precaution, framed as risk management. However, intersectionality reminds us that these risks are not evenly distributed, as aesthetic traits more commonly associated with non-conforming masculinity (e.g. Mohawks, braids on men) become liabilities, while more mainstream styles are normalised. As Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) show, even when power operates through market logic, it reflects deeper cultural scripts about respectability and conformity. What is treated as "unprofessional" here is not just a matter of brand alignment but a moralised boundary of acceptable self-presentation.

This moral logic was especially salient in the education sector, where grooming was linked to social responsibility, as Shola, a female secondary school principal, described:

Parents pay for their children to be trained well in our school, so you can imagine what the consequences will be when they come across teachers with these types of [unacceptable] hairstyles. We have to be role models to these kids, so wearing some of these unacceptable hairstyles can reflect a bad reputation for our school. Even if I were

a parent, I would withdraw my child from such a school because, as I said before, it could be an avenue to corrupt the students into liking such hairstyles.

Shola's view illustrates how grooming becomes a symbol of moral influence. In this framing, unconventional hairstyles are not merely distracting but also treated as potentially corrupting. Her concern extends beyond image to the moral example teachers are expected to set. The reference to "corrupting students" indicates that appearance is evaluated within a framework of parental trust and institutional respectability. This reflects how aesthetics become interwoven with cultural constructions of leadership and morality, particularly in professions that carry social authority.

Even when participants personally expressed tolerance for aesthetic diversity, they often deferred to institutional expectations. In many cases, hiring decisions reflected a fear of internal scrutiny or customer complaints. Hakeem, a male hotel manager, described how his preferences were overridden by organisational accountability:

As I have said before, I don't really have an issue with many of the hairstyles from the survey, but I have bosses that I report to, and they have expectations of how our staff look, so why would I want to be questioned for hiring someone outside such expectations... We operate in an industry where we need to portray a consistent and positive brand message to our customers...

Hakeem's reasoning demonstrates how aesthetic conformity is reinforced through hierarchical structures. Even when individual bias is absent, institutional pressures lead to exclusionary practices. He does not outrightly reject non-conforming hairstyles because of personal belief but because deviating from norms could jeopardise his standing. Here, "professionalism" becomes a managed aesthetic, upheld not by explicit policy but by unwritten rules and layers of accountability.

In sum, these accounts reveal how branding and market expectations shape a visual regime of professionalism that transcends personal bias. Hiring managers consistently interpreted hairstyle within a broader matrix of institutional credibility, customer trust, and social respectability. Intersectionality helps clarify how these visual norms are not neutral. They are often rooted in moral codes and institutional logics that favour conservative expressions of identity, limiting space for aesthetic autonomy.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, we examine how visible hairstyles function as markers of aesthetic labour and shape perceptions of employability in the Nigerian labour market. Understanding these judgments is important for explaining how “professionalism” becomes visually constructed and how access to employment can be shaped by appearance-based criteria rather than capability alone. While prior work has highlighted the role of aesthetic labour and embodied professionalism, especially in service work (Karlsson, 2012; Baumann et al., 2016; Rajan-Rankin, 2018), far less is known about how these dynamics unfold in African contexts, where historical, cultural, and institutional norms intersect. To address this gap, we combined survey data capturing broader societal attitudes with in-depth interviews focused specifically on hiring managers. Although hiring managers were a minority in the quantitative sample, they were the sole participants in the interviews, allowing us to probe more deeply into the cognitive and organisational logics shaping recruitment decisions. This mixed approach enables us to show not only what respondents think about unconventional hairstyles, but also how these beliefs are operationalised in hiring practice.

Our findings reveal that hairstyle choices become powerful signifiers of professionalism, employability, and social respectability in Nigerian workplaces. Notably, participants frequently justified their judgments in terms of organisational fit or anticipated

customer reactions. Yet our findings also show that these assessments are underpinned by layered intersections of cultural morality, institutional accountability, gender norms, and aesthetic regulation. As Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) argue, intersectionality is not solely about fixed identity categories but about how visible differences become contextually meaningful through organisational cultures and power dynamics. Hiring managers consistently evaluated hairstyles as visual proxies for discipline, competence, and adherence to expected social conduct, rather than simply as matters of personal taste. In doing so, they transform appearance into a moral and organisational filter through which candidates are either included or excluded. These insights extend existing research on aesthetic labour by showing that standards of professional appearance in this context are shaped not only by functional or market-driven logics, but also by culturally embedded and morally infused expectations. Rather than being neutral markers of professionalism, hairstyles are evaluated through social scripts that reflect ideals of order, respectability, and appropriate identity performance.

This study makes three key empirical contributions. First, it confirms that Afrocentric hairstyles, particularly when perceived as unconventional or gender non-conforming, are often treated as incompatible with prevailing standards of professional appearance in Nigerian workplaces. This reflects not only internalised organisational norms but also a broader moral logic in which grooming signals attributes such as trustworthiness, maturity, and social propriety. While these dynamics echo patterns observed in the global aesthetic labour literature (Nickson, 2022; Peticca-Harris et al., 2025), the specific moral and cultural logics invoked by hiring managers in our study, such as “home training,” religious modesty, and communal respectability, situate these judgments within a distinctly local moral framework. Rather than suggesting a binary between Nigerian (or non-Western) and Western norms, our findings highlight how aesthetic standards may travel across contexts yet are locally interpreted through overlapping moral, religious, and cultural scripts. This suggests that aesthetic judgments are

not only workplace constructs but cultural artefacts shaped by both global pressures and local value systems.

Second, these findings show that hiring decisions are shaped by a logic of moral risk management. Participants regularly interpreted unconventional hairstyles through a lens of anticipated customer reactions, potential reputational damage, and hierarchical accountability. These narratives reveal that aesthetic norms are maintained not only by personal bias but also by institutionalised and relational pressures. Even when managers claimed neutrality or tolerance, they often deferred to perceived customer preferences or senior leadership expectations. Such justifications align with the framing of employees as “embodied brands” or “doing the brand” (Cutcher and Ahtel’s, 2017), but this study extends that logic by showing how the brand itself is moralised, particularly in customer-facing sectors. As prior research, including Majumder and Arora (2023), has shown, appearance becomes a terrain where social hierarchies are preserved under the guise of professionalism.

Third, while women in the study experienced regulation within the bounds of modesty and traditional femininity, the findings highlight a more acute regulation of men’s hairstyles, as certain styles were widely associated with unseriousness, deviance, or poor moral character. This asymmetry points to the gendered burden of aesthetic discipline in postcolonial organisational settings. While aesthetic labour has often focused on women’s bodies (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Summers et al., 2022), this study adds depth by showing how men’s deviation from normative masculinity is read as a violation of leadership credibility and social order. These findings mirror arguments by Tekeste et al. (2025) that intersectional subjectivities, especially when they contest dominant norms, become sites of surveillance and exclusion.

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study contributes to the aesthetic labour literature by demonstrating that professionalism in the Nigerian context functions as a culturally embedded aesthetic performance, shaped not only by organisational norms but also by moral expectations tied to gender, religion, class, and postcolonial histories. While prior scholarship has identified the commodification of employee appearance (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Hall & van den Broek, 2012), this study shows that such commodification is intertwined with communal ideas of respectability. For example, managers often invoked proverbs or religious principles when evaluating applicants' appearance, suggesting that professional aesthetics in Nigeria are upheld not only to sell a service but also to maintain social coherence and moral legitimacy. This points to a hybrid logic of regulation that is market-based yet culturally moralised, especially in postcolonial contexts where bodily presentation remains a marker of social discipline (Peticca-Harris et al., 2025).

Intersectionality theory is vital for interpreting how these aesthetic judgements are unevenly distributed across bodies. Rather than treating intersectionality as a checklist of identity categories, this study follows calls from Davis and Zarkov (2017) and Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) to treat it as a conceptual lens for analysing how power operates across shifting contexts. As Primecz and Mahadevan (2025) argue, discrimination does not always require overt reference to race, gender, or class; it can be triggered by "signs of difference" that destabilise normative expectations in a given setting. In this study, unconventional hairstyles functioned as such signs. The data show that even in a largely racially homogeneous context such as Nigeria, bodies are read as deviant or risky when their appearance signals subaltern masculinity or a failure to embody moral decorum. This aligns with Brady et al. (2017), who note that appearance becomes a site where identity is negotiated under the pressure of cultural expectations and institutional visibility.

This study also engages with the broader conversation about postcolonial aesthetics and the governance of bodies in professional settings. While participants did not explicitly reference colonial histories, their emphasis on seriousness, decency, and controlled appearance aligns with longstanding disciplinary discourses that have historically positioned African styles as unruly or unprofessional (Onwuka, 2022). The rejection of traditionally Afrocentric hairstyles, particularly on men, was often justified through culturally moralised terms, which may reflect how colonial standards have been localised and sustained through contemporary norms. This builds on Borzoo's (2025) call for intersectional approaches that account for the historical and geopolitical dimensions of aesthetic regulation, especially in contexts where Western-influenced aesthetic standards are treated as universal or neutral. Rather than relying on overt racial hierarchies, aesthetic exclusion in this context operates through layered moral and institutional expectations that echo colonial discipline.

The findings also highlight how intersectionality plays out within context-specific moral and cultural hierarchies. As Peticca-Harris et al. (2025) argue, intersectional analysis must account for localised configurations of power and exclusion. In this Nigerian setting, aesthetic judgments were not explicitly framed in terms of race, but were more often articulated through concerns about cultural respectability, gender norms, age-appropriate conduct, and moral presentation. These dimensions intersect to shape perceptions of what constitutes professional appearance. Respectability politics emerge as a critical axis, with grooming practices evaluated not only for professional suitability but for alignment with prevailing moral codes. This deepens Carrim & Nkomo's (2016) and Lewis & Aune's (2023) work on identity regulation and religious norms by showing how grooming functions as a contested site where professionalism, morality, and social conformity intersect.

Practical implications

One key takeaway from this study is the need for HR professionals to critically assess the assumed neutrality of grooming and appearance standards in recruitment. Although hiring managers often frame hairstyle judgments as linked to customer expectations and perceptions or brand image, the findings reveal that such standards are often culturally and morally saturated rather than objectively job-relevant. This echoes Trusty et al. (2022), who argue that appearance norms can function as racialised and gendered scripts that systematically disadvantage individuals whose identities do not align with dominant aesthetic expectations. HR leaders should therefore interrogate whether aesthetic expectations genuinely reflect the demands of the role or whether they merely reproduce inherited social norms. Organisations might implement structured recruitment frameworks that limit the influence of subjective appearance-based judgments and ensure interviewers are trained to distinguish between customer-facing presentation and cultural bias.

Our study also demonstrates that organisational grooming standards are often maintained not through explicit policies but via informal norms, professional training, and role modelling from senior staff. This reflects Nickson's (2022) insights on aesthetic labour, in which bodies are "trained" into conformity through implicit institutional culture. HR departments should therefore extend their inclusion efforts beyond formal policy to tackle how aesthetic expectations are internalised and policed on the ground. Developing more inclusive definitions of professionalism, through participatory workshops, visual diversity campaigns, or HR-led co-design of inclusion activities, can help employees and managers recognise the culturally contingent nature of grooming norms (Ram et al., 2022; Özbilgin et al., 2025). For example, instead of reinforcing the idea that Afrocentric or gender-nonconforming hairstyles are "unusual," organisations could provide visual materials and training that normalise a wider range of appearances. As Borzoo (2025) suggests, promoting diverse beauty and grooming

practices within professional spaces is not merely symbolic but structurally important in challenging aesthetic inequality.

Finally, our findings underscore the importance of embedding intersectional awareness into HR decision-making. While hairstyles were the visible object of evaluation, judgments about acceptability may become even entangled with broader assessments of gender performance, age, class, and perceived deviance. Consistent with Carrim and Nkomo (2016), aesthetic evaluations often act as proxies for deeper assumptions about respectability and authority. HR teams must be alert to how these evaluations disproportionately affect applicants at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities, even when race is not the overt axis of bias. Practically, this means moving beyond surface-level diversity initiatives to examine how aesthetic criteria may compound structural disadvantage. Tools such as structured interview guides, hiring rationale audits, and blind CV reviews can reduce reliance on visual cues that emphasise cultural fit over job competence. Additionally, HR leaders should invest in training hiring managers to recognise and challenge aesthetic bias, not only to avoid reputational risk, but to model a more inclusive understanding of professional identity. As Trusty et al. (2022) argue, critical HR development involves empowering decision-makers to reflect on how their own biases and organisational cultures shape perceptions of professionalism.

Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations that provide avenues for further inquiry. First, although hiring managers constituted the majority in the qualitative evidence and offered privileged insight, being the minority in the survey requires that future studies gather larger samples of actual hiring professionals or triangulate employer and customer perspectives to capture a broader understanding of aesthetic judgment. Second, while intersectionality informed our interpretation, the available data did not allow systematic comparison across

multiple intersecting identities. Subsequent research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how hairstyle judgments vary by gender, age, sector, region, or organisational type. Longitudinal approaches would also help assess whether aesthetic expectations evolve alongside generational shifts or changing global debates on natural hair and cultural expression. Additionally, comparative work across postcolonial states might explore how aesthetic norms travel and change across African and diasporic contexts. A decolonial perspective would further highlight how contemporary aesthetic hierarchies in workplaces continue to reflect colonial disciplining of the African body. Finally, our analysis concentrated primarily on formal workplaces. Different dynamics may exist in entrepreneurial, creative, or informal sectors where non-conforming aesthetics may be more readily accepted or even valorised. Comparative studies across sectors could help identify organisational conditions that enable broader definitions of professionalism.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

- Adisa, T. A., Adekoya, O. D., & Sani, K. F. (2021). Stigma hurts: exploring employer and employee perceptions of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. *Career Development International*, 26(2), 217-237.
- Adisa, T. A., Mordi, C., & Timming, A. R. (2023). Employment discrimination against indigenous people with tribal marks in Nigeria: the painful face of stigma. *Work, Employment and Society*, 38(3), 787-808.

- Adisa, T. A., Nickson, D., Ogbonnaya, C., & Mordi, C. (2024). Aesthetic labour outcome and experience of individuals with tribal marks in Nigeria. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(3), 425-453.
- Ayentimi, D. T., Burgess, J., & Brown, K. (2018). HRM development in post-colonial societies: The challenges of advancing HRM practices in Ghana. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 18(2), 125-147.
- Baumann, C., Timming, A. R., & Gollan, P. J. (2016). Taboo tattoos? A study of the gendered effects of body art on consumers' attitudes toward visibly tattooed front line staff. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 29, 31-39.
- Borzoo, S. (2025). Intersecting gender, race, and class in the labor of beauty: toward integration of oppression and subversion. *Sociology Compass*, 19(7), e70085.
- Brady, J. L., Kaya, A., Iwamoto, D., Park, A., Fox, L., & Moorhead, M. (2017). Asian American women's body image experiences: A qualitative intersectionality study. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 41(4), 479-496.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Butler, C. (2014). Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(5) 718–734.
- Byrd, A., & Tharps, L. L. (2014). When black hair is against the rules. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/opinion/when-black-hair-is-against-the-rules.html?_r=0
- Callaghan, G., & Thompson, P. (2002). 'We recruit attitude': the selection and shaping of routine call centre labour. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 233-254.

- Carrim, N. M. H., & Nkomo, S. M. (2016). Wedding intersectionality theory and identity work in organizations: South African Indian women negotiating managerial identity. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 23(3), 261-277.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Cutcher, L., & Achtele, P. (2017). ‘Doing the brand’: aesthetic labour as situated, relational performance in fashion retail. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(4) 675–691.
- Daniels, G., Khadaroo, A., Hur, Y. J., Searing, C., Terrelonge, D., & Zeilig, H. (2025). “I am now being who I am and I’m proud of it”: Hair related personal and social identity and subjective wellbeing of older Black women in the UK. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 37(2), 111-130.
- Davis, K., & Zarkov, D. (2017). EJWS retrospective on intersectionality. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 24(4), 313-320.
- Dean, D. (2005). Recruiting a self: women performers and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(4), 761–774.
- Doldor, E., & Atewologun, D. (2021). Why work it when you can dodge it? Identity responses to ethnic stigma among professionals. *Human Relations*, 74(6), 892-921.
- Donahoo, S. (2023). Working with style: Black women, black hair, and professionalism. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(2), 596-611.
- Flanagan, J. L., & Lewis, V. J. (2019). Marked inside and out: an exploration of perceived stigma of the tattooed in the workplace. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 38(1), 87-106.

- French, M.T., Mortensen, K., & Timming, A. (2019). Are tattoos associated with employment and wage discrimination? Analysing the relationships between body art and labour market outcomes. *Human Relations*, 72(5), 962-987.
- Frew, M., & McGillivray, D. (2005). Health clubs and body politics: Aesthetics and the quest for physical capital. *Leisure Studies*, 24(2), 161-175.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Hall, R., & Van den Broek, D. (2012). Aestheticising retail workers: Orientations of aesthetic labour in Australian fashion retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 85-102.
- Hancock, P., & Tyler, M. (2000). 'The Look of Love': Gender and the Organization of Aesthetics. In J. Hassard, R. Holliday, & H. Willmott (eds) *Body and Organization*. London: Sage.
- Henning, T., Holman, M., Ismael, L., Yu, K. Y., Williams, L., Shelton, S. J., & Perez, M. (2022). Examination of hair experiences among girls with Black/African American identities. *Body Image*, 42, 75-83.
- Johnson, T. A., & Bankhead, T. (2014). Hair it is: Examining the experiences of Black women with natural hair. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 2, 86-100
- Karlsson, J. C. (2012). Looking good and sounding right: Aesthetic labour. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 51-64.
- Lewis, R., & Aune, K. (2023). Aesthetic labor in religious contexts: Women encountering modest dress in the workplace in the UK and Saudi Arabia. *Fashion Theory*, 27(5), 709-735.

- Majumder, M., & Arora, S. (2024). Intersectional inequalities and invisibilization in organizations: The case of Indian beauty and wellness services. *Journal of Management*, 50(3), 1029-1065.
- Mavropoulos, A. (2024). Cosmetic surgery and the Christian body: comparative ethical reflections from orthodox and catholic traditions. *Religions*, 16(1), 8.
- Mbilishaka, A. M., Clemons, K., Hudlin, M., Warner, C., & Jones, D. (2020). Don't get it twisted: Untangling the psychology of hair discrimination within Black communities. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 90(5), 590–599.
- McGill Johnson, A., Godsil, R. D., MacFarlane, J., Tropp, L. R., & Atiba Goff, P. (2017). The “good hair” study: Explicit and implicit attitudes toward Black women’s hair. Perception Institute. <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/TheGood-HairStudyFindingsReport.pdf>
- Mears, A. (2014). Aesthetic labor for the sociologies of work, gender, and beauty. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1330-1343.
- Mensah, E., Inyabri, I., & Mensah, E. (2018). The discourse of tattoo consumption among female youth in Nigeria. *Communicatio*, 44(3), 56-73.
- Miller, L. (2021). Deracialisation or body fashion? Cosmetic surgery and body modification in Japan. *Asian Studies Review*, 45(2), 217-237.
- Murray, C., & Bohannon, M. (2025). *IBM reportedly walks back diversity policies, citing ‘inherent tensions’: Here are all the companies rolling back DEI programs.* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2025/04/11/ibm-reportedly-walks-back-diversity-policies-citing-inherent-tensions-here-are-all-the-companies-rolling-back-dei-programs/>

- Nell Trautner, M., & Kwan, S. (2010). Gendered appearance norms: An analysis of employment discrimination lawsuits, 1970–2008. Williams, C.L., & Dellinger, K. (Ed.) *Gender and Sexuality in the Workplace* (Research in the Sociology of Work, Vol. 20), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 127-150.
- Nickson, D., & Korczynski, M. (2009). Aesthetic labour, emotional labour and masculinity. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(3), 291-299.
- Nickson, D. (2022). Aesthetic labour and discrimination. In Lashley, C. (ed.) *Prejudice and Discrimination in Hotels, Restaurants and Bars* (pp. 32-48). Routledge.
- Omotoso, S. A. (2018). Gender and hair politics: An African philosophical analysis. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 12(8), 5-19.
- Onwuka, E. (2022). Hair Braiding for Men is Not Part of African Culture — Abuja Residents. <https://www.westafricanpilotnews.com/2022/10/10/hair-braiding-for-men-is-not-part-of-african-culture-abuja-residents/>
- Özbilgin, M. F., Erbil, C., Tekeste, M., & Gundogdu, N. (2025). HR-Led Co-Design for Neuroinclusion: A Critical Pragmatist and Sociotechnical Systems Approach to Transforming Neuronormative Organisations. *Human Resource Management Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.70018>
- Patel, P. C., & Wolfe, M. T. (2021). In the eye of the beholder? The returns to beauty and IQ for the self-employed. *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 15(4), 487-525.
- Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., & Walker, L. S. (2016). Revisiting the beauty is beastly effect: Examining when and why sex and attractiveness impact hiring judgments. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27(10), 1034-1058.

- Payne-Patterson, J. (2023). *The Crown Act: A Jewel for Combating Racial Discrimination in the Workplace and Classroom*. Policy Memo. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/crown-act/>
- Peticca-Harris, A., Murgia, A., Alberti, G., & Ivancheva, M. (2025). Intersectionality and precarious subjectivities: Within and beyond labour and organisational perspectives. *Organization*, 32(7), 933-953.
- Primecz, H., & Mahadevan, J. (2025). Intersectionality as a conceptual lens for advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in international business studies: newer developments from critical cross-cultural management studies and their insights for the business case. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 21(1), 59-75.
- Quampah, B., Owusu, E., Adu, V. N. F. A., Agyemang Opoku, N., Akyeremfo, S., & Ahiabor, A. J. (2023). Cornrow: A medium for communicating escape strategies during the transatlantic slave trade era: Evidences from Elmina Castle and Centre for National Culture in Kumasi. *International Journal of Social Sciences: Current and Future Research Trends (IJSSCFRT)*, 18, 127-143.
- Rajan-Rankin, S. (2018). Invisible bodies and disembodied voices? Identity work, the body and embodiment in transnational service work. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 25(1), 9-23.
- Ram, M., McCarthy, I., Green, A., & Scully, J. (2022). Towards a more inclusive human resource community: Engaging ethnic minority microbusinesses in human resource development programmes targeted at more productive methods of operating. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32(3), 540-554.
- Roberson, Q. M. (2006). Disentangling the meanings of diversity and inclusion in organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(2), 212-236.

- Sheane, S.D. (2012). Putting on a good face: An examination of the emotional and aesthetic roots of presentational labour. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 33(1), 145-158.
- Sinkovics, N. (2018). Pattern matching in qualitative analysis. In: Cassell, C., Cunliffe, A. L. & Grandy, G. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods: Methods and Challenges* (pp. 468-484). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stevens, A., & Connelly, C. E. (2024). Not a good fit? The roles of aesthetic labour, gender, race, Indigeneity, and citizenship in food service employment. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 35, 664–684.
- Stuber, J., Meyer, I., & Link, B. (2008). Stigma, prejudice, discrimination and health. *Social Science and Medicine*, 67(3), 351-357.
- Summers, L. M., Davis, T., & Kosovac, B. (2022). Hair we grow again: Upward mobility, career compromise, and natural hair bias in the workplace. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 70(3), 202-214.
- Tekeste, M., Nickson, D., & Hadjisolomou, A. (2025). “Still the White man’s world?” Exploring visible and invisible intersectional dynamics and aesthetic labor-related inequalities among English language teachers in the UAE education sector. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 32, 2197-2210.
- The Conversation (2019). In Nigeria, dreadlocks are entangled with beliefs about danger. <https://theconversation.com/in-nigeria-dreadlocks-are-entangled-with-beliefs-about-danger-123463>
- Timming, A. R. (2017a). Body art as branded labour: at the intersection of employee selection and relationship marketing. *Human Relations*, 70(9), 1041–1063.

- Timming, A.R. (2017b). The effect of foreign accent on employability: a study of the aural dimensions of aesthetic labour in customer-facing and non-customer-facing jobs. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(3), 409–428.
- Timming, A. R. (2019). *Human Resource Management and Evolutionary Psychology*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Timming, A., Baumann, C., & Gollan, P. (2020). Consumer preferences for gender typicality in front-line services staff in the United States vis-à-vis South Korea: an experimental approach. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(8), 1839-1864.
- Timming, A.R., Nickson, D., Re. D. and Perrett, D. (2017). What do you think of my ink? Assessing the effects of body art on employment chances. *Human Resource Management*, 56(1), 133–149.
- Tranter, B., & Grant, R. (2018). A class act? Social background and body modifications in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 54(3), 412–428.
- Trusty, J., Ward, D. A., Good-Perry Ward, M., & He, M. (2023). Hair bias in the workplace: A critical human resource development perspective. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 25(1), 5-26.
- Tsaura, S-H., Luohb, H-F., & Syuea, S-S. (2015). Positive emotions and behavioral intentions of customers in full-service restaurants: Does aesthetic labor matter? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 51, 115–126.
- Uzunogullari, S., & Brown, A. E. (2021). Negotiable bodies: employer perceptions of visible body modifications. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(10), 1451-1464.

- van den Berg, M., & Arts, J. (2019). The aesthetics of work-readiness: Aesthetic judgements and pedagogies for conditional welfare and post-fordist labour markets. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 298–313.
- Vincent, D. (2019). Nigeria’s youth are facing police brutality because of their hair. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/head/article/46234/1/nigeria-lagos-black-hair-police-force-brutality>
- Walk-Morris, T. (2024). *DEI is a Lightning Rod for Controversy—But the Practice isn’t Dead*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/worklife/article/20240304-us-corporate-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-programme-controversy>
- Warhurst, C., & Nickson, D. (2007). Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(1), 103–120.
- Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Witz, A., & Cullen, A.M. (2000). Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: some case study evidence from the ‘New’ Glasgow. *The Service Industries Journal*, 20(3), 1-18.
- Warhurst, C., van den Broek, D., Nickson, D., & Hall, R. (2012). Great expectations: gender, looks and lookism at work. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*, 5(1), 72–90.
- Waring, P. (2011). Keeping up appearances: aesthetic labour and discrimination law. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(2), 193-207.
- Williams, C. L., & Connell, C. (2010). “Looking Good and Sounding Right”: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality in the Retail Industry. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 349-377.

Table 3 Summary of participants' demographic profile

Pseudonymised names	Gender	Age	Religion	Industry	Role
Femi	Male	37	Christianity	Food Services	Restaurant Manager
Hakeem	Male	45	Islam	Hospitality	Hotel Manager
Folake	Female	46	Christianity	Retail	Store Manager
Azeez	Male	42	Islam	Finance and Banking	Bank Branch Manager
Tolu	Female	53	Christianity	Retail	Store Manager
Shola	Female	49	Christianity	Education	Secondary School Principal
Chidinma	Female	37	Christianity	Hospitality	Hotel Manager
Chidozie	Male	41	Christianity	Media and IT	Project Manager
Fatimah	Female	34	Islam	Catering Services	Hub Manager
Chidi	Male	41	Atheist	Food and Hospitality	Bar Manager
Kunle	Male	49	Christianity	Retail	Managing Director
Funke	Female	42	Islam	Catering Services	Manager
Ayodeji	Male	46	Christianity	Financial Services	Customer Relationship Supervisor
Olamide	Female	38	Christianity	Legal Services	Practice Group Leader
Peju	Female	52	Islam	Medical Services	Ward Manager
Abdul	Male	38	Islam	Hospitality Services	Front-Office Manager
Tobi	Male	44	Christianity	Management Consultancy	Director

Table 4 Thematic Analysis (Key Themes and Codes)

Illustrative quotes	First-order codes	Second-order categories (codes consolidation and conceptual categories)	Main themes
<p>We don't endorse just any type of hairstyle here because we don't want to tarnish our image and identity... Yes, hairstyles matter, and we don't recruit people with just any hairstyle that doesn't speak well of them. (Hakeem)</p> <p>It's important to think about how you look on the job because appearance really matters... (Chidi)</p>	<p>Neatness equals competence; Unconventional hair raises red flags; Expecting a certain image; Professional look is non-negotiable; Personal style must not overshadow company image; Unconventional hairstyles are seen as "too bold" for corporate settings; First impressions matter; Appearance is part of professionalism; Appearance is judged based on looks</p>	<p>Hairstyle as a proxy for professional identity and competence; Unconventional hairstyles as risk factors</p>	<p>Perceptions of hairstyle and professionalism</p>

<p>I don't necessarily have an issue with some of the hairstyles that are considered non-traditional, but the Nigerian society's connotation of good hairstyles will influence whether you are hired or not if you attend an interview with such hairstyles (Chidozie)</p> <p>Yes, there are very clear hairstyles that men and women should wear... If you wear any other hairstyle, you would be seen as an outcast and be a target for the police. (Fatimah)</p>	<p>Hairstyle is indicative of professional seriousness and responsibility; Men's hair shows their level of discipline; Women can express themselves more, but only in moderation; Nigerian culture respects neatness, not attention-seeking; Societal acknowledgement of appearance as a sense of family reputation and representation; Decency cannot be overshadowed by trend; Looking responsible is an important cultural tradition</p>	<p>Cultural expectations of respectability and professionalism; Patriarchal standards of male appearance; Conditional freedom for women's expression</p>	<p>The role of cultural and gender norms</p>
<p>People with 'abnormal' hairstyles may not be trusted by our customers, that's just the way I see it...for these reasons, I have to protect the image of my business. (Folake)</p> <p>People already have negative impressions of hotel staff; they think that because it's a hotel, then staff sleep with customers...so employing someone with these types of hairstyles will only worsen the situation. (Chidinma)</p>	<p>One's face is the face of the brand; Hair is part of the company image; Selling a certain look; Dissimilar looks will get clients confused; Customer (non) acceptance of looks; Clients' expectations matter; Clients' sensitivity to image and reputation; Questioned accountability and responsibility for atypical staff; Uniformity as an essential part of branding</p>	<p>Hair and brand representation; Client expectations and market sensitivities; Conformity as a strategic decision</p>	<p>The influence of organisational branding and client expectations</p>