

# Appearance between professionalism and work-related stress among marketing employees

Ann-Christin Sollerhed<sup>a,\*</sup> and Åsa Bringsén<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Faculty of Teacher Education, Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden*

<sup>b</sup>*Faculty of Health Sciences, Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden*

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Appearance and body language are key components of non-verbal communication and play an important role in the service and marketing sector.

**OBJECTIVE:** The aim was to explore experiences and perceptions of appearance issues related to work among employees in the marketing sector in Sweden.

**METHODS:** Interviews were conducted with 15 marketing and communication employees (five males, ten females), at multinational companies and a university. Thematic analyses were conducted, and content was organised in two themes with sub-themes: 1. Appearance from a resource perspective (Appearance benefits; Physical activity resources; Age benefits). 2. Appearance from a demand perspective (Adaptation to gender roles; Investment in appearance; Adaptation to situation and culture).

**RESULTS:** The findings showed that appearance was perceived as a resource for professionalism, work engagement and career in various ways. Appearance-related issues were not considered on organisational work level, but employees perceived unspoken demands to look good and appropriate to represent the company brand. The employees spent a considerable amount of time, money, and effort on appearance.

**CONCLUSION:** Appearance creates dualistic questions and points out several dilemmas that the individual struggle to solve, which creates stress in work. The character of unspoken demands on appearance and absent communication on organisational level make the stress-coping strategies complicated and the stress coping is mostly left for the individual to handle. A gender difference shows that compared to men, women more often experience negative stress generated by appearance-related issues in work. Education and actions at the managerial level of companies are needed.

Keywords: body image, job satisfaction, coping strategy, dressing, work engagement

## 1. Introduction

Appearance norms, especially attractiveness i.e. good looks and beauty, are shaped by cultural norms,

society and community standards [1, 2]. A so-called appearance culture dominates in most post-industrial societies, where for instance media is constantly delivering messages about how we should look and what we should do to achieve the “perfect look” [3, 4], which might cause distress [5, 6]. A good appearance gives advantages in society in general, as well as within the labour market for getting a job, and also

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\*Address for correspondence: Ann-Christin Sollerhed, Faculty of Teacher Education, Kristianstad University, Elmetorpsvagen 15, SE- 291 88 Kristianstad, Sweden. E-mail: ann-christin.sollerhed@hkr.se.

entails economic consequences [7, 8].

Appearance is related to the concept of body image, which is defined as a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body and involves how a person sees themselves [9]. The body in itself is important for people in self-presentation and appearance, but also for the process by which individuals attempt to control the impression others form of them [10]. Body image is a multidimensional construct, consisting of cognitive, behavioural and affective components [11], as well as the value individuals place on different dimensions of their bodies. Since body image is a result of a complex process based on individuals' interaction with their social and cultural context, factors of importance for body image can be related to a variety of social contexts at different societal levels [12], for example in a working life context.

People's perceptions of their body vary and can be both positive and negative. Appearance-related dissatisfaction seems to be more common among women than among men [13, 14], but is now so common that it can be considered as normative, regardless of gender [15]. Perceptions of body image are involved in working life and people spend time and effort to eliminate body dissatisfaction to reduce stress reactions. Not only the body itself, but also the clothing has an important effect on the impressions formed by other people – you are what you wear [16]. Managers and employees who are well-dressed and groomed are perceived by others as more intelligent, hard-working and socially acceptable than those with a more casual appearance. Furthermore, they perceive themselves differently based on the clothing. Attitudes to one's body are associated with self-esteem [17–19] as well as impaired social functioning and subjective well-being [20]. Appearance issues can thus be related to both resource perspectives and demand perspectives.

The job demand resource model discusses if work-related resources and demands have an impact on professional performance [21–23]. Job resources include physical, psychological, social, and organisational factors that have a positive influence on work engagement, which in turn facilitates work-related goal achievement and personal development and reduces the negative impact of job demands [21–23]. Work engagement, defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption” [24] (p.74), mediates the positive effect of organisational identification on job satisfaction [25]. A sense of identity, job satisfaction and work engagement, have

positive organisational effects on health and disease prevention among employees [26]. Meaningful work is about the work, but also about a sense of the self, and about finding a balance between the two [27]. People can use varying degrees of their selves and own resources in work role performances, which has implications for both their work and experiences of their work [28].

Appearance and body language are key components of non-verbal communication and play an increasingly important role in organisations in general and in the services sector in particular [29–31]. For service and marketing organisations, the interaction between front-line personnel and the customer is crucial as the employees should create a high-quality service and sell the brand [32, 33]. Thus, for employers it is vital to have employees in marketing and communication not only with high morals and good attitudes, but also with the right appearance in that they look and sound good [34], especially those in the service and the business sectors [7].

Based on the assumption that front-line marketing personnel interact face to face with customers and sell a high-quality service in that they look and sound good, understanding factors for employees' perceptions of appearance between professionalism and stress in working life are challenging and complex. Thus, the aim of the study was to explore experiences and perceptions of appearance issues related to work among employees in the marketing sector in Sweden.

## 2. Materials and method

### 2.1. Study design

Data was collected using individual interviews with a semi-structured approach, due to the aim of exploring marketing employees' experiences and perceptions of appearance issues related to work. The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' workplaces by the same interviewer, and the same central questions were raised, but with the possibility for the interviewees to develop their answers in a broad manner. A semi-structured interview guide is used for the gathering of data with a variety of perspectives [35].

The length and depth of the interviews varied according to the participants' engagement in the interview, but they generally lasted between one and two hours. The interviewer created a conversational climate to get the interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences [36]. Fifteen employees

were individually interviewed, based on the principle of saturation [37]. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim before analysis.

## 2.2. Participants

The sampling was done in two steps. In the first step, suitable human-intensive workplaces were selected based on the study focusing on the experiences and perceptions of employees in the marketing sector and opportunity to include participants with varying perspectives. Two workplaces represented marketing in the private sector and one workplace represented marketing in the public sector. In the second step, potential participants in the companies were informed and invited to participate in the study. Seven of the interviewees were employed at multinational companies (47%) and eight of them at a university in Sweden. The interviewees worked as marketing or financial managers, or communication officers and managers. The average age was 42.7 years ( $SD=10.05$ ). Five of the respondents were males (33%). The average age among the males was 45.0 years ( $SD=3.00$ ) and among the females 41.6 years ( $SD=12.19$ ).

## 2.3. Analysis

A combination of thematic analysis [38] and qualitative content analysis [39, 40] was used to identify patterns in the employees' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of appearance-related issues. The analytic procedure was considerably more pre-structured than traditional grounded theory and enabled both an inductive and abductive perspective to be gained in the analysis. A conventional coding process from the transcribed text data was derived [41] in five steps: familiarisation, generating themes and sub-themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally presentation of findings [42–44]. The technique of both thematic and qualitative content analysis was found to be meaningful in this explorative inductive study with a focus on appearance issues related to work [45].

## 2.4. Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human subjects, and all procedures in the study were in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Swedish law on research ethics (SFS 2003:460). The

Research Ethics Committee (EPN), Lund University approved the study (Dnr: 2016:59). The participants were informed about the study in general, and voluntariness as well as confidentiality, and written informed consent was obtained.

## 3. Results

The study resulted in a rich body of material based on the varying experiences and perceptions of the participants. The variation of the findings showed no direct link to the sociodemographic characteristics and years of experiences of the participants. The content analysis revealed in two themes with adherent sub-themes. The theme *Appearance from a resource perspective* included the sub-themes *Appearance benefits*, *Physical activity resources* and *Age benefits*. The second theme was named *Appearance from a demand perspective* and was constituted of the sub-themes *Adaptation to gender roles*, *Investment in appearance* and *Adaptation to situation and culture*.

### 3.1. Appearance from a resource perspective

#### 3.1.1. Appearance benefits

The findings showed that the participants were quite consistent in their views of an ideal appearance functioning as a resource in working life. To look good and appropriate was considered important and meant, for example, not to be fat, preferably to be tall, and it was seen as an advantage to be fit and to look well-trained. Looking good was related to attractiveness, and an attractive look was seen as an advantage in working life in general and especially in business settings. The perception of attractiveness was related to the whole body, but facial appearance was said to be most closely related to attractiveness.

A beautiful face was seen as an important resource in work situations, but facial expressions were emphasised to be important in working life, regardless of beauty. The interviewees described how they reacted to other people's facial expressions and thought that their own facial expressions were important for communication with other people in business situations. The participants' said that an attractive face functioned as a resource in working life, and the haircut as well as makeup were mentioned as means to look good. However, the interviewees found it difficult to speak about their own facial appearance in the interviews, and no one described themselves as good-looking.

Body height was also considered an appearance aspect of relevance in working life, and almost all interviewees commented on their own height. To be tall was, for instance, seen as a resource creating an advantage in working life.

*I am used to being the tallest and if I meet someone else who is as tall as I am, I am surprised and interested. As a boss my tallness has been very useful. It gives me a natural authority.*

The interviewees who were tall perceived they had status and authority just by entering the room and described how they never had to do anything particular to attract attention in working groups.

### 3.1.2. Physical activity resources

All interviewees, except one, were physically active in their daily life and some of them were passionate exercisers on a high level in a variety of sports. They connected success in working life to being in good shape, to being fit and to feeling strong. To look well-trained and fit was thus important and shaping the body in physical activity (PA) was a conscious strategy related to working life. Fitness gave them a feeling of being able to do what they wanted to do without any constraints from their body. The well-trained look was seen as attractive and to feel fit boosted their self-confidence and promoted a self-confident appearance. Besides being a resource for looking fit and well-trained, PA was reported to be the most important source for resilience and for recovering from work stress. Absence from PA caused by temporary illness, injuries or lack of time made the participants feel distress. When physically active, they felt their head was flushed clean, and stress was reduced.

*I clear up my head and things fall into place. Things that it may take me several days to solve at the desktop pop up right when I am out running. Thus, I solve the problems much better when I am physically active, and I feel much less stress.*

The participants described how they gained endurance capacity in PA, and their stamina was connected to being able to sustain tough demands in working life. The self-perceived physical capacity and memories of the well-functioning body, which created feelings of being free and strong, were mentally recalled in tough work situations to strengthen self-confidence. They described how memories of strenuous PA gave them a feeling of strength, which sometimes were mirrored in their appearance.

*I feel unbeatable when I exercise, especially when I run. It does not have anything to do with competition with someone else; it is just a deep feeling of being able to do what I want to do. I can rely on my body, and when in a tough work situation, I remind myself of this feeling. And maybe it is visible in my appearance.*

### 3.1.3. Age benefits

Age-associated changes in appearance were sometimes described as positive in relation to working life. For instance, men becoming grey-haired was related to authority and advantage in working life.

*In fact, it has been mostly positive for me to become grey-haired, it gave me a kind of authority early in my working life. They never treated me as a juvenile. Now when I am 40, it is extremely good. My peers lose their hair and become bald, and I still have all my hair. I think it is the charm of the grey temples; it is easier for a man to become grey-haired and more difficult for a woman.*

Women experiencing age-associated changes in appearance as positive was rare but also present in the findings. Being an older woman was for instance associated with less need to fight for the position at work and not being considered a threat to the career of younger male colleagues any longer. Women's ageing also seemed to function as a resource for professional relationships with male colleagues, which was explained by male colleagues no longer considering the older woman as an attractive potential life partner.

*I am best right now. I am on top. I know my job and I am almost never off work as many younger people with children are. I am an incredibly good organiser. I am in good shape, my eyes are clear, but the wrinkles around my eyes betray me and I know that I am treated differently than my male colleagues with wrinkles. Their wrinkles are a guarantee of life experience, mine of age!*

## 3.2. Appearance from a demand perspective

### 3.2.1. Adaptation to gender roles

Good looks and attractiveness have previously been described as a resource in working life, but the interviewees also described it as negative to look too good/to be too attractive, especially for women. Appearance could then get in the way, become the focus and the professional competence of the attrac-

tive woman diminished. Being short was another appearance issue that could get in the way of women being regarded for their professional competence. One woman, shorter than average, said she was aware of her shortness all the time and tried to compensate to feel confident.

*I always wear high heels to become a little taller. As I look upon myself as an underdog because of my height. I have developed a special competence for looking beyond other people's appearance. I try to see their competence without being disturbed by the appearance. As I work as a recruiter, I have contributed to the employment of several underdogs.*

The negative experience of being short has thus resulted in awareness and ability to focus on competence and see beyond appearance in work situations.

Both tall women and men said that short men sometimes acted defiantly and in an exaggerated manner when they met tall people. One of the tall women perceived that her height seemed to be a threat to short men, which affected the professional relationship negatively.

*Sometimes I am taller than men and I feel that they become bothered. I always look people in the eye. It can be problematic for short men to look upwards to look into my eyes. I perceive that they are not comfortable looking up at a woman. I never get used to the reactions from short men. To look up is the reality for most women, but I do not think that they feel offended by looking up to look a man in the eyes.*

The participants perceived an unspoken demand to look young, but at the same time to have much work experience from many years in the profession. A gender difference was seen, with the women emphasising youthful appearance more than men. The participating women, and especially the older women, perceived that youth was a marker of attractiveness with higher status in working life. Ageing was sometimes described as depressing based on being related to decreased status in working life for women. To look too young was, however, also seen as negative for status and authority, again especially among the women. Some of the young women perceived they looked too young and tried to dress to look older. One woman in her forties described her looks as too girly, which lowered her status.

*I am short and blonde, and I think I look quite young even though I am over 40. I think people perceive me as stupid or unintelligent if I look too girly. If I bring out my youthful appearance, I think the stupid look will be exaggerated. I dress in a more ladylike way because I do not want to be perceived as a person without an IQ, like a bimbo. It is important for me to be perceived as professional and not girly.*

Women's balancing appropriate clothing choices was experienced as another factor that caused stress, which was reinforced in international contexts. The women described how they felt uncomfortable and sometimes offended in business meetings with men from countries with pronounced male hegemony, for example Arabic countries. None of the participants had received any support or guidance on how to cope with negative appearance-related experiences in business meetings or other work situations.

### 3.2.2. Investment in appearance

The employees invested time, commitment, and money in their appearance, to be representative as well as to look good and appropriate for work. For instance, weight was perceived as an appearance issue of relevance in the participants' work role and several of the interviewees described their difficulties in maintaining a normal weight. The participants perceived that it was not important to be thin, but they feared being fat.

*I am satisfied with myself and my body, however I am mad at myself because I could have stopped five kilos ago!*

Normal weight was thus described as important in working life, but weight was not associated with self-confidence and authority in the same way as body height was.

The participants' commitment and company loyalty resulted in them spending a considerable amount of money on clothes for work, which sometimes caused distress in relation to their family budget. The participants described how they included the clothing style consciously in their appearance for professionalism in working life. If not properly dressed, they thought it could be problematic to maintain their authority and status in the business. They were careful to dress professionally, but kept their own style to feel confident, otherwise they did not feel professional anyway.

*If I am going to meet people in business, I cannot wear my “own” clothes. Well, all clothes are my own, but I mean I must dress up in a more official way and still keep my own style. It is like both dressing up and dressing down at the same time! The dressing cannot be too fancy.*

The phenomenon “to dress down” seemed to be a conscious strategy for feeling confident and was mentioned several times by the participating women. They described how they had to balance their clothing, as it was considered important to look good but without promoting attraction in any way. The women were very careful about dressing well and not being offensive, tasteless, revealing, or sloppy.

*I choose dresses with quite high neckline, skirt length below the knees and I choose shoes with only a medium high heel. Sometimes I want to use other dresses and shoes I have in my wardrobe, but I always think that I must feel confident and professional and not give people any reason to have opinions about my appearance. Yet they have. Sometimes they say I am dressed for a party. I do not know if it is a negative or a positive comment. Most of the time I think it is negative, but I do not know why.*

Positive comments from close colleagues on clothes, shoes, or haircut were perceived as pleasant and increased confidence. However, comments on the body itself or comments on attractiveness from businesspeople in meetings were perceived as embarrassing and negative, which instead decreased confidence.

### 3.2.3. Adaptation to situation and culture

The findings show how appearance was related to professionalism by the interviewees. They perceived they were a part of the company brand, where their business competence and their appearance were in focus. The interviewees experienced no pronounced dress code or appearance requirements related to their professional role. It was, nevertheless, described to be important to look well-groomed and professional in general and particularly regarding clothing choice. The interviewees said that they spent much time on dressing and adjusting their appearance as they thought the different work situations required. The confusing role shift in different meetings and the cultural differences in clothing when travelling and meeting customers abroad were described as stressful.

*Although I work in a highly technological business and handle huge machines where clothes may seem unimportant, the clothes are extremely important. I know that I cannot meet our big customers in other countries without being dressed up in an expensive suit. I am a marketing manager, but I am also an engineer and an expert on the machines, so sometimes it becomes confusing when dressing. Once I had to take off my tie and crawl under a big harvester in my Armani suit*

The participating managers expressed feelings of responsibility regarding correct clothing, as role models, and thereby included their own appearance in their leadership strategy.

*I think a lot about the way I dress. I am old enough to dress properly, I am used to it. When I started working, we wore a shirt and tie, then I moved abroad, and we wore a suit and tie every day. I dress up because it is professional, but also because I want to. Above all I am a manager, the boss, so I am aware of my role as a marker of the style. The clothes are a hallmark of your status, the closer to the leadership you get, the more conventional your attire.*

Besides the spontaneous role model responsibility taken by managers, the interviewees recalled no official discussions or support regarding adaptation of appearance to their professional role or requirements for adaptation to various work situations.

## 4. Discussion

The findings showed that the interviewees experienced several dilemmas regarding appearance issues related to work. These dilemmas will be discussed below in terms of job resources vs job demands related to work engagement and stress.

### 4.1. Appearance as a resource and unspoken job demands.

The interviewees experienced that appearance on one hand was a positive resource for work professionalism, but on the other hand was an unspoken requirement which quite often was perceived as stressful. They tried constantly to fulfil the vague and unspoken demands on appearance. To look right and appropriate, to feel professional, was demanding but also considered a work-related resource for the par-

ticipants. Resources linked to the sense of ability to control and impact on the environment are important for the individual [46]. Although the job demands about appearance issues were vague and unspoken on an organisational level in this study, the employees perceived appearance to be an important resource for professionalism and for achieving work goals, thus it was seen as a job resource. Job resources are organisational aspects that function to achieve work goals [22]. Regarding appearance as a job resource, it seems to be mutually related to personal resources. Dynamic relationships among job resources, personal resources, and work engagement have been shown to have positive practical implications [47].

The interviewees were highly engaged in representing the company in an acceptable and appropriate way, which can be seen as work engagement [24, 48]. Their work engagement in looking good and right in representing the company's brand in the best way, along with self-protection to achieve a sense of ability and control in different situations, made them create their own job resources. Job resources are essential for personal development and work engagement and to reduce job demands, and are associated with physiological and psychological costs [49]. In this case, time, money and energy spent on appearance and on coping with stress could be seen as costs to reduce job demands. It can be concluded that appearance issues were perceived as both resources and demands. The lack of organisational support for appearance issues generated work stress among the employees.

#### 4.2. *Balanced look for professionalism*

Another dilemma was how to balance looks. The interviewees perceived appearance and dressing as unspoken job demands and made efforts to look good and appropriate, for example they tried not to be fat, to be fit and to dress appropriately. However, it was described as walking on a knife edge, as very subtle to balance between looking good or looking too good. To look too good could tip over to attraction and get in the way of competence, which could diminish the aura of professionalism. Appearance is strongly associated with an individual's own persona and body and self-presentation [11], but is also the process by which individuals attempt to control the impression others form of them [10]. Both men and women were eager to look good, but some gender differences were identified. The women experienced that the demands on looking good were stronger for women than for men, and they referred to situations

in working life where they were exposed to stressful situations related to appearance. They felt that an overly attractive appearance could easily be detrimental and reduce the professional impression they wanted to convey. At the same time, they wanted to be good-looking for self-confidence, and they described difficulties in balancing their looks. It has been shown that attractiveness seems to predict self-esteem significantly more strongly in females than in males [50]. The women described how they felt uncomfortable and sometimes offended in business meetings with men from countries with pronounced male hegemony, for example Arabic countries. The focus on their appearance and attractiveness became pronounced and were obstacles to their professionalism. It has been concluded that foreign executives doing business in Arabic countries must be prepared to operate in a special way and to be patient in business negotiations and adapt carefully to the environment [51], which was described as stressful, especially for the women. Appearance has been identified as more of a problem for women than men, but body appreciation increases among older women [52]. Balancing the look is a delicate task that requires knowledge and resources of people in the marketing professions. The balancing act often generates stress, especially among women. The low or non-existent formal support from organisational level further increases stress.

#### 4.3. *Investment in appearance*

Besides the physical and mental effort involved in the shaping the body in PA, the interviewees also invested a considerable amount of money in purchasing and maintaining their workplace wardrobe. Their work engagement and determination to spend money on clothes for work from their family budget caused distress. On the other hand, it also gave them self-confidence to achieve work goals when properly dressed. A positive attitude towards influence on work engagement is related to goal achievement and personal development and reduces the negative impact of job demands [21–23, 53]. The way people are dressed, in the sense you are what you wear [16], was perceived as important for the impression others form of them [54]. Money and time spent on dressing were seen as necessary investments as appearance seemed to function to increase efficacy, to reduce stress, to support the employees' efforts to manage the job demands, and also to prevent the demands having a negative impact on goal achievement at

work. Emotional demands and dissonance relate negatively to work engagement when self-efficacy is low [47]. It can be discussed whether emotional demands and consonance relate positively to work engagement when self-efficacy is improved by satisfaction with appearance.

#### 4.4. *Appearance and bodily aspects*

The body height was emphasised for appearance, status, and authority in working life among both men and women, while short stature was perceived as negative. Men are usually taller than women and the tall women in the study experienced themselves to be a threat to short men, which made the communication more difficult. Physical stature seems to play an important role in occupations where social interactions are part of the professional work [55]. A tall body is seen as an indicator of health [56] high ability and masculinity [57] and is rewarded in the labour market [58–60]. Furthermore, a relationship between height and self-esteem has been shown [61]. To sum up, body height seems to be an important aspect of appearance related to status in the business world.

The interviewees were cautious about their weight and strived to keep a normal weight. They emphasised that it was not so important to be thin, but it was important not to be fat. The drive for thinness and the fear of being fat are separate yet related constructs, representing approach and avoidance mechanisms in persons [62]. The appearance ideals described by the participants strongly conformed with beauty ideals in mainstream Western culture, which is characterised by thinness/leanness, muscularity, and youth [63–65]. Social media shows an overrepresentation of women with thin and toned body types, and men as muscular with lean bodies. However, attractiveness among men is less narrowly defined when compared to beauty ideals for women [64], which can be related to females reporting more body dissatisfaction compared to men [65]. Gender is thus a significant risk factor for the development of body dissatisfaction, which can be related to the female interviewees' description of a more complex and stressful experience and perception of appearance related to work in the marketing sector.

The impact of faces is shown in our impressions of people as well as in our behaviour towards them [66]. The interviewees emphasised the importance of looking people in their eyes. The eyes and facial expressions were described to be extremely important for the creation of a trust-inspiring meeting with

the business partners. The face seems to be the most important body part in the first few seconds of a meeting and when it comes to social interaction. A person with an attractive face is often attributed with positive qualifications [67], for example happiness, intelligence, success and health. Individuals who are considered to have beautiful and attractive faces, seem to have advantages in both private and working life [66]. The interviewees wanted to be attractive, i.e. have an attractive face, but still not be too attractive so that it got in the way and diminished professionalism. The effects of appearances go beyond physical attractiveness and include the impact of face-based social attributions, i.e. the extent to which a person has a competent-looking or trustworthy-looking face [68, 69], which seemed to be important for the interviewees.

#### 4.5. *PA and fitness for appearance and self-esteem*

According to the interviewees, PA and fitness were prerequisites for good appearance, but also for self-confidence, increased resilience towards stress and to load energy for work. A well-trained and fit body was important for one's status and authority. A fit body was seen as a good look and showed the work done on it both intentionally and unintentionally. Fitness sends out an impression of health and strength, but also affects a person's own self-esteem positively. PA and fitness have been found to be closely related to positive self-esteem [70], perceived work ability and health-related quality of life [71–73]. It has also been shown that PA affects mental health and resilience to stress [74, 75] and leads to better cognitive functions [72, 76]. According to the interviewees, PA and fitness were not only important for appearance, but also of great importance to cope with the stressful tasks in the business world. They connected PA to success in working life, and fitness to being able to do what they wanted to do without any constraints from the body. It has been shown that physically active people, compared to their inactive counterparts, are significantly more satisfied with their bodies, physical appearance, fitness, and health [77]. PA is connected to a positive body image [78], and a positive body image is a predictor of PA [79], thus there is a reciprocal relationship. Appearance-driven PA to correspond with an ideal can, however, also result in the development of a negative body image with adherent less positive health effects. For instance, research has shown that fitspiration, a social media trend for promoting



exercise and healthy food habits, can have negative unintentional body image effects resulting in body dissatisfaction [80]. A high risk for exercise addiction and appearance anxiety among gym users is another example of negative effects from appearance-driven behaviours related to PA [81]. However, the interviewees' positive descriptions of PA can thus be an indication of a balanced relationship between PA and their desire to look good, in relation to the current Western appearance ideal. They invested time and effort in PA in order to do better at work and to look fit, which sent out a message that they were successful in their working life [82]. The wish to be fit and to be able to do better at work can be interpreted as part of work engagement [21, 22].

#### 4.6. Ageing and appearance

The interviewees experienced a dilemma when it came to ageing and appearance. On one hand, a young look was positive for appearance, but on the other hand, to look too young and juvenile was seen as negative for the impression of competence and professionalism. Ageing and having many years in the profession were linked to work experience, which has a positive and significant influence on employee work performance [83]. However, the negative effects of ageing on appearance were emphasised. A gender difference was identified. Ageing in working life was perceived more negatively among the interviewed women than among the men. It has been shown that females are valued for attractiveness and youth, and ageing therefore moves women away from the ideal, while constructions of masculinity emphasise competence, power, and self-control, qualities that may well increase with age [84]. However, the older women also experienced benefits of becoming older in the workplace despite the lost attractive appearance. Being older, they perceived it was easier to cooperate with men. They were not a threat to the young males in the career competition any longer and they were not seen as attractive sexual partners. Thus, they were treated more like partners at work, which could be seen as a relief and less stressful [85]. The risk of body dissatisfaction seems to decrease with age [65], especially among women. Research has shown how comparisons with age peers and the identification of being older, with the adherent privilege of having lower appearance-related expectations and demands, can result in a positive body image among women [86]. Overall, a young look was seen as the ideal appearance, and ageing affected

the appearance in a negative direction and reduced resources.

#### 4.7. Strengths and limitations of the study

The limitations of the study should be mentioned. The study was small-scale and included only 15 interviews, which can be a limitation. On the other hand, as it was a qualitative study the aim was not to generalise but to gain a deeper understanding about employees' experiences and perceptions of appearance-related issues in the business and marketing sector. In this kind of study there is always a risk that the analysis of the interviews may be affected by the researchers' pre-understanding. To diminish the risk, the researchers collaborated in the analysis and discussed the risks throughout the analysis process. The strength of the study is that the interviews were performed in a conversational climate which allowed the interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences in a welcoming atmosphere. The study increased the understanding of unspoken dilemmas and conditions in working life among marketing employees. Ethical considerations stated in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Swedish law on research ethics were met in the study. This qualitative interview study provided in-depth data, which provides insights for further research such as large-scale investigations about appearance-related issues in the business sector.

## 5. Conclusions

Appearance-related issues are largely included in job resources important for work performance and work engagement among employees in the marketing sector. To look good and right is linked to the employees' sense of ability to control and impact their professional performance and work career. Appearance creates dualistic questions for the individual and points out several dilemmas that the individual struggles to solve constantly, which creates both negative and positive stress in work situations. A gender difference shows that women more often experience negative stress generated by appearance-related issues in work situations, with an adherent link to inequality in working life. There is thus a need for increased communication, reflection, and support on an organisational level, in the marketing sector in general, but also with a focus on gender and equality issues.

The organisational support from companies seems to be low or non-existent for appearance-related issues, while the unspoken demands on appearance are high. The character of unspoken demands on appearance and absent communication and discussion about appearance-related issues at the workplaces make the stress-coping strategies complicated and the stress coping is mostly left for the individual to handle. The study highlights that appearance-related issues are important for professionalism and work engagement but are largely ignored by companies on an organisational level. Education and actions in appearance-related issues on companies' managerial level are needed. Further studies on this topic are warranted.

### Informed consent

The principle of written informed consent was applied in the study. Potential participants were informed about the study in writing and orally. The information described the purpose and process of the study, the method used and publication plans. The information also included confidentiality assurance, the principles for voluntary participation and included contact information to the researcher and organization behind the study. The written information also included a form for obtaining a written informed consent. All participants signed and returned the written informed consent prior to participation.

### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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