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**Appearance-based discrimination against young women in the workplace**

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**Appearance-based discrimination against young women in the workplace**

**Abstract**

**Purpose**

Appearance-based discrimination in workplaces based on an employee’s physical appearance is a legal and ethical problem. This study provides important research findings concerning such discrimination in Estonia.

**Methodology**

A qualitative case study strategy and narrative inquiry were used. The information which was gathered for the research consists of three cases which concern appearance-based discrimination against young women. Information for two of the cases was gathered together by means of open interviews. Information for the third case is based on articles which were found in Estonian daily newspapers.

**Findings**

Covert and overt discrimination based on an employee’s physical appearance can occur in Estonian workplaces, even though discrimination and inequality are not tolerated in public and all forms of discrimination are illegal in Estonia. The appearance norms, which frame perceptions of attractiveness and unattractiveness, may at times be rather narrow and stereotypical in Estonian workplaces. The attempts by employees to resist such discrimination in an early phase of their careers are generally not successful.

## Originality

Through real-life cases, this study makes empirically visible a problem at the workplace related to employees' physical appearance in Estonia. It makes suggestions for preventing this kind of discrimination in organisations. Narrative inquiry offers a fruitful approach for how researchers can address a sensitive problem, such as the appearance-based discrimination against the employees discussed in this study.

## Paper type

Original article/Research paper

## Keywords

Appearance; Case study; Discrimination; Ethical problem, Estonia; Gender, Narrative inquiry, Woman

**Introduction**

Previous studies have found that physical appearance can be a mechanism of discrimination in work life (e.g., Dipboye and Colella, 2005; Harwood, 2007; Mahajan, 2007; Puhl and Brownell, 2001; Rhode, 2009; Author C). According to Rhode (2009), of all the problems connected to discrimination, those linked to appearance have shown the least improvement over time, despite the fact that recent discussions and events (e.g., the #Metoo and #TimesUp movements) have increased interest in the topic. Appearance-based discrimination persists in both formal human resources management procedures and informal organisational practices (Dipboye and Colella, 2005). The centrality of appearance is accentuated by communication technologies that offer forums for an increasingly visual culture (Fardouly *et al.*, 2018). As a result, many organisations prefer to employ people who fit a specific appearance (Harwood, 2007).

Appearance-based discrimination in working life results in illegal discrimination (Cavico *et al.*, 2012; Harwood, 2007; Rhode, 2009). Moreover, it is an ethical problem (Geva, 2006; Harwood, 2007; Rhode, 2009; Author A) because it offends individual dignity and prevents equal opportunities for all. Dealing with the problem constructively is a challenge in organisational life. However, changing undesirable habits is also challenging. Inappropriate behaviour, which might have previously seemed innocent and fun, may nowadays be understood as insulting and harassing. The normative call for organisations to prevent all forms of discriminatory practices (DeSouza *et al.*, 2017; Kaptein, 2008) also challenges researchers to explore appearance-based discrimination in the workplace.

The present study utilises a case study approach and narrative inquiry to increase knowledge about workplace discrimination based on physical appearance. In this study, we focus on working life in Estonia using three exemplary cases. The focus here is on discrimination, which is based on employee's physical appearance traits that are not critical to work performance (Bartlett, 2009; Cavico *et al.*, 2013; Rhode, 2009). Our research questions are as follows:

- What kind of discrimination due to appearance took place in the exemplary cases?
- How did the appearance-based discrimination affect both the employees who were discriminated against and the organisation?

In this explorative study, our purpose is to produce in-depth information regarding how appearance-based discrimination occurs within the context of Estonian working life. The study offers unique and important knowledge of the topic in this context. To our knowledge, no previous studies of this nature have been carried out which have focussed on appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. Drawing on narrative inquiry (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988), narratives which are based on the experiences of young women are constructed so that they can provide an insight into appearance-based discrimination within Estonia. The study adds knowledge to discussions which cover appearance-based discrimination in organisational life, with this being a research field area which has not previously received enough of a focus in terms of workplace discrimination (Rhode, 2009, Author C), at least from a contextual viewpoint. In line with Vickers (2009), we believe that the case study method adopted here, which stresses the understanding of the specific cases, can be a source of learning for readers by helping them to recognise, reflect on and aim to reduce appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. The case study approach has the potential to offer information and ideas into the sensitive and complex

topic under investigation, which may not be reached using other approaches, such as a survey method (Mills *et al.*, 2010; Rowley, 2002; Tight, 2017). In all, we hope to offer information that can be helpful in the study context by drawing attention to conventions, norms and stereotypes based on appearance that can result in problems for employees and organisations.

The cases for this study involved women. Women in the workplace in Estonia are tied more closely to the masculine corporeal realm than are men but, at the same time, there are embedded societal norms which entail women having to conform to a feminine role and ensure appearance-based beauty requirements (Aavik, 2015; Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021). Therefore, in the workplace, they tend to be evaluated much more strictly in terms of their appearance than are men (Burns, 2004; Cavico *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Harwood, 2007). In general, in Estonia, women face more discrimination than men in working life (World Economic Forum, 2022), and some of these problems are likely to take the form of appearance-based discrimination (Kaskla, 2003). To our knowledge, appearance-based discrimination has not before been made visible in the Estonian working life context, although, as Kaskla (2003) observed, appearance-based beauty requirements for women are typical in Estonia.

**Context of the study**

As in many other democratic countries, the Estonian Constitution forbids discrimination based on any grounds (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2). However, a study carried out by the think tank Praxis in 2015 found that managers and employers had little awareness of the legislation prohibiting discrimination in the recruitment process and that discrimination, especially

based on gender, was widespread in Estonian work life (Turk *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, awareness of the role and impact of stereotypes related to, for example, appearance in the recruitment process is low, and employers tend not to use measures to reduce discrimination in the process (Aavik *et al.*, 2020; Täht *et al.*, 2019).

Turk *et al.* (2015) pointed out that most employers in Estonia do not see any point in promoting equality. Both Täht *et al.* (2019) and Aavik *et al.* (2020) argued that little has changed at the workplace level in Estonia to advance equality over the past 30 years. According to these studies, organisations lack systematic and targeted actions to promote equality. A study by Ukhova (2020) found that inequality has not changed substantially since the post-socialist period anywhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

Estonian work life is highly segregated both vertically and horizontally. According to Eurostat (2019), Estonia had the highest gender pay gap in favour of men in the European Union in 2017. The wage gap has survived the transition period from communism to capitalism (Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021). As in many other post-Soviet societies, Estonian women are well-educated and active in the labour market (World Economic Forum, 2022). This is related to the requirement to work full time under the Soviet regime (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). Soviet social expectations were, however, paternalistic with respect to women's roles and duties (Kaskla, 2003; Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021; Reingardiene, 2003; Vöörmann, 2009). After the collapse of the USSR, one example of expectations for women in Estonia was beauty contests, which became a part of the national identity movement and created beauty norms for women. In the post-USSR, Estonian women wanted to look more like Western women and stressed opportunities for women



to assume an identity other than that of a Soviet working mother (Davidenko, 2018; Kaskla, 2003; Mihăilă, 2017). Social expectations regarding certain standards of beauty were reflected in job advertisements in the newspapers at the time, in particular in the search for frontline employees who were expected to meet the criteria of youth and attractiveness (Mihăilă, 2017).

In Estonia, gender roles have remained traditional, supported by pro-natalist views on motherhood and the understanding that housework is the responsibility of women (Kosyakova, 2018; Vöormann and Helemäe, 2016). Nevertheless, positive changes have occurred in society. For instance, in 2017, the government launched official career counselling to address gender stereotypes and started to promote general social and educational campaigns to raise public awareness about discrimination and address gender issues.

**Literature review**

According to Warhurst and Nickson (2007, p. 132), appearance-based discrimination refers to the favouring of people perceived as better looking and penalising those perceived as less physically attractive or having the ‘wrong look’. Since it can be intentional and implicit, employees often lack adequate evidence to prove discrimination on the basis of physical appearance (Bartlett, 2009; Selmi, 2016). Women often encounter unwanted emphasis on appearance (Cavico *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Harwood, 2007; Mahajan, 2007; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Author C). All workplace discrimination causes stress and strain for employees (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014) as well as feelings of marginalisation (Dhanani *et al.*, 2018; Grandy, 2008; Rhode, 2009). It has negative effects on an individual’s identity construction, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and it harms

the employer's reputation (Del Carmen Triana *et al.*, 2019; Grandy, 2008; Langlois *et al.*, 2000).

The emphasis on appearance instead of an individual's capabilities and work performance is likely to have a negative effect on the person's credibility, self-esteem and social power at work as well as on their quality of life in general (Rhode, 2016). Discrimination is not only illegal in organisations (Dhanani *et al.*, 2018) but also immoral because it violates the principles of human dignity, justice and equality (Rhode, 2009, 2016).

Appearance-based discrimination in the workplace has gained attention in previous studies to some extent (Toledano, 2013). The topic has been analysed especially from the viewpoint of lawsuits, often in the U.S. context (e.g., Corbett, 2007, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Trautner and Kwan, 2010). Trautner and Kwan (2010) offered a comprehensive analysis of appearance-based employment discrimination lawsuits from 1970 to 2008 in federal courts in the United States. They concluded that both work organisations and courts tend to support appearance norms that maintain traditional views about masculinity and femininity. Moreover, they found that both women and men sued their employers for appearance-based discrimination, but women were more successful in their claims than men. Requests concerning women's clothing, height and weight were typical cases.

Harwood (2007) investigated the legal process and discrimination using court decisions in New Zealand. In this analysis, it was shown that the law failed to address appearance-based discrimination and that gender stereotyping existed in the legal process in New Zealand. Harwood suggested that a valuable approach to reducing appearance-based discrimination would be to aim to change the social attitudes of New Zealanders.

Toledano (2013) provided an overview of numerous studies from different disciplines. This investigation showed that people who are evaluated as attractive in the workplace are seen as more competent and successful compared to their counterparts who are not perceived to be as attractive. In the context of employment, people who are seen as physically attractive tend to be hired more often, get more promotions and be paid more than people who are considered less attractive (Corbett, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Liu and Sierminska, 2014; Watkins and Johnston, 2000). The results of research on appearance-based discrimination, especially against women in work life, have shown that it is difficult for women to advance in their careers because of their appearance. For example, being small in stature can be understood to be negatively connected to their credibility as managers (Author A). Martin and Barnard (2013) studied women in male-dominated organisations and found that one of the main issues that led to discrimination was women's physical appearance.

Covert or sometimes openly expressed demands for specific appearance types are based on norms regarding the suitability of a person's appearance, which tend to emphasise 'attractiveness'. An 'unattractive' appearance can be an additional career hurdle (Corbett, 2007; Harwood, 2007; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Author C). According to Tolendano (2013), evaluations based on appearance are simultaneously influenced by social norms and the interplay of gender, race, age and other diversity dimensions. Kwan and Trautner (2009) found that many studies concerning appearance in the workplace concentrated on people's motivations for accepting appearance norms. The researchers argued that various benefits in hiring, career advancement and salary as well as social and personal rewards (e.g., satisfaction at work, higher

self-esteem and positive perceptions of others) are linked to conformity to norms and people's willingness to strengthen a social system that stresses attractiveness. Women in particular are expected to meet social definitions of feminised attractiveness and follow the implicit and explicit appearance norms of the organisation as part of the wage–labour exchange and as partners in a psychological contract (Author C). Tolenado (2013) indicated that appearance norms and expectations tend to be subconscious and therefore difficult to identify and prove.

Management can also specifically request that their employees 'look good'. Women in organisations tend to especially be framed by their gender (Collinson, 2003, p. 541; Harwood, 2007), and their workplace selves are scrutinised by the objectifying male gaze in gendered and sexualised organisational cultures. However, women may also critically evaluate other women's appearances and participate in the projection of the self-policing gaze (Evans *et al.*, 2010, p. 116; Author C).

The norms of appearance, which define what is considered attractive and unattractive, are shaped by contextual norms (Mahajan, 2007), and therefore, discriminatory attitudes are powerful and consistent precisely because they are often based on normalisation of fundamental biases and prejudices (Puhl and Brownell, 2001). According to the framework by Ashford and Anand (2003), the normalisation of behaviour (i.e., the process whereby practices become accepted and are no longer questioned), such as appearance-based discrimination, is based on institutionalisation, rationalisation and socialisation in organisational life.

Institutionalisation means that appearance-based discrimination rooted in expectations about a particular appearance is embedded in organisational norms, habits and processes. Rationalisation is linked to ideologies and beliefs, which are used to justify the discriminatory behaviour. Socialisation occurs when inexperienced newcomers are taught, typically implicitly, to accept this kind of discrimination as permissible. In many organisations, normalisation is built upon heterosexuality, attractiveness, whiteness and physical ability. Trethewey's (1999) study indicated that there is a fine line between an appropriate and inappropriate appearance code. Women are especially expected to 'reveal their bodies in very specific and specialised ways' (p. 443); revealing too much or emphasising the 'wrong' aspects of one's body can undermine a female employee's credibility or increase unwanted flirtation or sexualised comments.

**Methods**

This study utilised an instrumental case study approach and narrative inquiry. In this approach, a case is analysed and used to understand the phenomenon of interest (Mills et al., 2020; Stake, 1995). The strength of the instrumental case study approach is that it offers an entry point to understanding the complexity of the studied phenomenon, which is ethically sensitive by nature and often difficult to make visible and address (Campbell and Cowton, 2015). The term 'narrative' refers to a textual account of a sequence of the events in the working lives of the studied cases (Riessman, 2008). Within the narrative inquiry, various heterogeneous events were organised appropriately into descriptions, a process which is known as emplotment, in order to highlight how they relate to one another and how they form sequences (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). The use of emplotment allowed us to build up a narrative of each case so that

we could elaborate how the events were linked to each other. Emplotment offered a lens through which we were able to account for the forms of discrimination which were taking place, why discrimination was occurring in the first place, what specifically happened in each case, who was involved, and what were the outcomes. Emplotment is of major significance in any narrative inquiry because it makes it possible to explain various events which may be related to the phenomenon being studied by building up a coherent narrative of events instead of simply listing them (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988).

The research data consist of the narratives of/about three young Estonian women. In our study, a minimum number of cases was not necessary, but the three cases used here helped us to gain insight into and provide an intensive description of the topic under investigation (Vickers, 2009). By selecting different cases, all of which dealt with some form of appearance-based discrimination against young women within the context of the study, it was possible to explore and understand similarities and variations in any such discrimination (Tight, 2017). According to Tight (ibid, p 162-163), multiple cases have the potential to form a description which is more intensely grounded within broader empirical evidence, as compared to the outcome of studying a single case. Thanks to their contextual nature, each of the cases are unique and useful for this study: they contribute to the overall understanding of the complex and challenging nature of the phenomenon being studied, ie. appearance-based discrimination, within the context of Estonian working life (Stake, 2005).

While conducting this research, we noticed that it was difficult to find people who were willing to speak of the sensitive topic under examination. Contrary to court cases, which are common in studies of appearance-based discrimination (Trautner and Kwan, 2010), we wanted to make visible

the voices of people who had been personally involved in the process of appearance-based discrimination in the Estonian working life context.

To guarantee anonymity, the participants in the cases have been pseudonymised. The first case is a personal description provided by a woman who experienced appearance-based discrimination in the workplace (pseudonym Tiina). Thus, this case provides insight into a victim's experience. Data for this case were gathered by means of an open interview. The interview outline covered four thematic areas: career challenges, gender equality in the workplace, physical appearance and the problem in question, and organisational culture. Tiina talked about her experiences with her male manager and colleagues. The second case is a personal description told by a manager who discriminated against a female employee (pseudonym Malle) based on her appearance. Through this case, we gained insight into the viewpoint of a discriminator. During the interview, the manager engaged in self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding of biased and discriminatory treatment in the workplace. In both cases, in addition to recordings, the interviewer carefully made notes and kept a research diary. The interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

The information for the third case (pseudonym Silvi) was collected from four different articles published in daily Estonian newspapers. This case was seen as being appropriate, and was selected because it yielded a degree of understanding on the part of both parties in regard to how appearance-based discriminatory can occur in the workplace As the material originated from the media, those journalists who wrote the articles which were analysed made choices regarding how the case was presented. However, the voices of the parties involved were highlighted quite clearly in the articles. The selection of this case served to add diversification to the sampling by drawing

into it not only the perspectives of the discriminated and discriminator, but also a new perspective which surrounds active resistance towards appearance-based discrimination and the act of making it public.

We used two criteria for finding the cases for our study. First, we wanted to address appearance-based discrimination towards young women at an early stage in their professional careers. Prior research indicates that young women especially suffer from discrimination in the Estonian working-life context (Anspal *et al.*, 2010), and they may be particularly vulnerable to it during their early career phase when they do not have an influential position in their organisation. Second, since the focus of prior research on appearance has highlighted the service sector (e.g., retail and hospitality industries) and 'style labour market' businesses (e.g., designer retailers and style restaurants; Warhurst & Nickson 2007), we wanted to expand the scope by also targeting male-dominated sector fields, such as defence and banking.

We used a theory-orientated method in our analysis, the aim of which is not to test a specific framework but rather to emphasise the importance of the theoretical background and previous research results as a lens through which the new data can be interpreted (Tight, 2017). In addition to prior research results and relevant contextual knowledge surrounding the Estonian working life, in this study we used normalisation as a framework (Ashford & Anand, 2003), as well as adding in the idea of emplotment in order to be able to analyse and interpret the data. The analysis proceeded as follows. First, the texts were read several times to thoroughly familiarise ourselves with their content. Then, the text corpus was grouped according to specific descriptive categories and related key ideas, including various forms of appearance-based discrimination, the outcomes of such discrimination, key actors in the discriminatory interactions and the types of behaviour, so



that text blocks related to the topics could be built. Finally, we constructed the narratives of the cases according to the idea of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1984).

**Analysis and discussion**

Below, we present the outlines and analyses of the three cases.

***Tiina's narrative***

**Outline of the case**

Tiina was a highly educated, internationally experienced and outspoken young professional who was considered attractive. Tiina was keen to work for the defence force, which is a male-dominated field in Estonia. Both the management board and her superiors praised her knowledge and hard work. Despite her achievements, her attractive appearance was always a topic of interest to her colleagues, whose comments Tiina experienced as sexist: 'I was there because, as it was gossiped, the head of the firm likes young, slim and blonde women. Despite work being exciting and interesting, I did not see much future for my career in such a work environment'.

At the same time, her competence was often ignored, which depressed, embarrassed, and disappointed Tiina, as well as causing her a degree of stress, as highlighted in the following comment: 'I was able to get attention from someone, but it was almost always because of my looks and not because of my work results or expertise'. She also felt angry. She felt that the organisational culture of her workplace belittled women, which made it difficult for her and other

women to advance in their careers. She heard that male colleagues were spreading rude and sexist rumours about her – namely, that she was too young and too pretty to do her job well. Additionally, she heard that some of her colleagues, both women and men, stated that she was only considered a good employee because management found her appearance appealing.

Tiina spoke to the head of the organisation about her concerns. She said that she experienced the behaviour as problematic and that she wished employees would be acknowledged for their work rather than for what they wore or their appearance. Tiina described the manager's response, saying that 'the manager, who was a middle-aged man and had always supported me, being more of a mentor than a superior for me, agreed and said that this kind of behaviour was completely unacceptable'. During the discussion, Tiina felt that the top manager understood her concern, was uncomfortable with the attitude being exhibited by her colleagues and promised to do something about the rude behaviour. Nevertheless, the discussion with the manager did not lead to any concrete actions or results in the organisation. However, she did not ask the manager later whether he had tried to make some changes in the workplace. Tiina believed that the manager failed to put an end to the problem.

Tiina faced a dilemma: on the one hand, she loved her job, but on the other, she felt uncomfortable, embarrassed and angry. She realised that the successful career that she had always dreamed of would not be possible under such circumstances. She ended up leaving both the organisation and the country to find a better work environment.

Analysis and interpretation

In this case, Tiina experienced gender-based discrimination towards her appearance. The gap between the discriminatory practices and the desired equal treatment was normalised in the organisational culture so that Tiina's struggle to cope with and change the situation on her own had no impact. Although Tiina showed a willingness to stand up for herself by bringing the problem to her manager, her position of power within the organisation was too weak to alter the discriminatory and sexist habits. It should be noted that she did not raise her concerns directly with the people who she felt were treating her badly. Thus, the problem was not discussed with those persons who were the crux of the problem. Gendered appearance-based discrimination is a sensitive topic, and it can be difficult for victims to make it visible and prove it in public. Similar finding have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Bartlett, 2009; Selmi, 2016; Toleno, 2013).

The masculine culture of the organisation belittled Tiina based on her looks and by sexualising her. Even though the manager showed politeness and expressed empathy towards Tiina in their private discussion, he failed to secure change. Moreover, in this case, Tiina felt that the colleagues engaged in practices of discrimination without giving them any thought (Ashford and Anand, 2003). Since Tiina chose not to make the problem visible to other employees, and the manager failed to put an end to the problem, the discriminatory treatment continued to be considered normal – and thus difficult to identify and change – within the organisation. According to Kaptein (2008), the organisational characteristics that constitute the self-correcting capacity of organisational culture; the degree to which unethical practices are made visible within the organisation; and the degree to which they can be discussed, resisted and changed are crucial to the elimination of any ethical problem. In Tiina's case, because the unfavourable gendered conditions were

institutionalised in the organisation's culture, the opportunity to transform the unethical norms and practices within the organisation was lost.

Drawing on Ashford and Anand (2003, p. 14), an organisation that allows such behaviour is considered immoral today because it was immoral yesterday. Seen in the Estonian context, Tiina's experience may, on the one hand, be an echo of socially gendered expectations stemming from long-standing tradition and reinforced during Soviet times (Kaskla, 2003), which stressed paternalism with respect to women's roles and status, making it easy to regard women as employees without any real power (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). On the other hand, the sexualisation of Tiina's appearance and its connection to her perceived skills, which occurred in various arenas in the organisation, can be related especially to the sexualisation of the culture. After the end of the Soviet era, women's bodies began to receive increasing attention as sexual objects (Kaskla, 2003). These tendencies led to women in Estonian working life having to cope with undervaluation, undesirable attention and biased behaviour based on sex and appearance (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). This may have affected the organisational reality in this case.

### ***Malle's narrative***

#### **Outline of the case**

At the time, Malle was in her final year at university and specialising in hotel management. The hotel manager said that she knew it was Malle's dream to become a hotel receptionist, and Malle worked hard to achieve the best possible results in her training as an investment in her future

career. The manager described Malle as a friendly and helpful young woman, but she was sometimes self-conscious because of facial skin problems, as she had many visible signs of acne.

The manager interviewed said that not long before graduation, Malle applied for a position as a porter at the hotel. Malle passed the first stage of the application process (curriculum vitae and application letter) successfully, but she failed during the second stage, which involved a face-to-face interview with the hotel manager, the service manager and a human resources specialist, all women. After a brief talk, the recruitment interview was over. The next day, Malle was sent a rejection letter. The hotel manager admitted that the letter might have suggested to Malle that she was not recruited because her appearance was considered unsuitable for the hotel's image, although this was not explicitly stated in the letter. The position was given to a 'good-looking' student from the same university programme.

The manager reported that a few weeks later, Malle was appointed to a final internship as part of her studies at the same hotel. She worked in different positions during her internship, always receiving excellent feedback from her supervisors and from guests. When Malle worked as a receptionist, the rating for her reception services was even higher than usual. The hotel manager said that at the end of the internship, she offered Malle a position in reception. Although the compensation package was impressive, Malle turned the offer down. She told the manager that she had heard rumours that her appearance was not considered suitable for customer service and that she perceived a discriminatory attitude in the recruitment process. The manager knew and understood that she had behaved inappropriately: 'Co-working with Malle during her internship made me feel guilty about the decision we made in the recruitment process' (Malle's manager).

## Analysis and interpretation

Malle's appearance was considered 'not so proper and attractive' to work in customer service. Her competency in the recruitment process seemed to be evaluated based more on her appearance than her work performance. This is obviously a legal problem in Estonia (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2) in addition to an ethical problem (Rhode, 2009, 2016). However, in this case, it is not evident that Malle's gender played a role in the discrimination.

In Malle's case, based on the hotel manager's description, it seems that unethical practices had not been deeply normalised by the organisational culture of the hotel. Instead, the practices seem to have been based more on the thinking of those who conducted the recruitment interview. At first, the recruiters were likely convinced of the legitimacy of their appearance-based discriminatory behaviour because of their belief that customer satisfaction would be threatened if a 'not-so-good-looking' person was working in the organisation. Without considering the potential negative effects on the organisation of the illegality and immorality of their behaviour, the recruiters believed that Malle's appearance would be harmful to organisational outcomes.

The recruiters' reliance on their 'rational' belief in negative business results obviously helped them distance themselves from the immorality of their behaviour. It is possible that the recruiters were conscious, at least to some extent, of the illegality and immorality of their actions, but they did not wish to think of it in such a light. Therefore, the business case rationale that managers in Estonian business life often tend to follow (Kooskora, 2006) was obviously preferred over morality and even legal obligations. Although in this case the rationalisation offered can be regarded as a means

of legitimising appearance-based discriminatory behaviour within the organisation, the undervaluation of the demand for legality in the situation is likely to have been based on the normalisation of unethical practices embedded in societal-level institutionalisation (Author D). This interpretation is further supported by other research findings, which indicate that Estonian employers tend to be unaware of the legislation prohibiting discrimination during the recruitment process (Aavik *et al.*, 2020; Täht *et al.*, 2019; Turk *et al.*, 2015).

While in Tiina's case, the manager failed to put an end to the problem, Malle's complaint ultimately had a positive impact on the manager's way of thinking: the manager's awareness of appearance-based discrimination improved. The manager admitted her failure to tackle the ethical problem in question, regretted the decision and realised that she had done wrong. Consequently, in the end, the manager exhibited moral awareness (Carroll, 2000), even though it did not alter Malle's decision to not accept a job with the organisation. Losing Malle, who was a service-oriented, highly motivated and competent employee, may have contributed to the manager's understanding of her problematic behaviour.

In Malle's case, the manager's initial behaviour was likely harmful to the self-esteem of the employee, who was in the early phase of her career. It is important to note, however, that when Malle raised the issue and made it visible, the manager listened to her and regretted what she had done. This can be seen as a sign of the first step towards making changes to reduce discrimination.

*Silvi's narrative*

Outline of the case

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6 Silvi was a 28-year-old psychology student who applied for a position as a loan consultant at a  
7 bank. Before this, Silvi had spent several years working internationally in service and sales without  
8 any complications. In a newspaper article, Silvi reported that she had received a friendly phone  
9 call from the human resource manager of the bank and been invited to a job interview. From the  
10 very first moment she entered the recruitment office, however, Silvi felt she was given a  
11 contemptuous and cold reception. Without introducing herself, a female manager told Silvi that  
12 she would have to take a test. Soon after, though, she was told that the option of taking the test had  
13 been cancelled. Silvi highlighted in the newspaper article that she was told the test would be  
14 pointless because of her physical appearance: 'You yourself should understand that you don't fit  
15 the position; you are different from other people'.

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31 Silvi was deemed 'different' because of her height, 120 centimetres. She made her negative  
32 treatment publicly known through the media and spoke to a journalist. The female bank manager  
33 admitted in the newspaper article that she had told Silvi that she was not suitable for the position  
34 of customer service representative. The manager, looking surprised, asked the journalist who wrote  
35 about the incident whether the journalist felt that such a person would be suitable for customer  
36 service.

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47 When talking to the journalist again later, the manager understood that she had made a mistake  
48 and changed her story, stating that Silvi had not been given the job because all the positions in the  
49 bank were already filled and that the confusion had been caused by a mix-up in internal  
50 communications within the bank. When the journalist asked the manager why she did not tell Silvi



this during the first meeting with her, the manager replied that she could not remember what she had said at that time.

In the end, Silvi was not only upset and sad but also angry. Afterwards, the male chairperson of the bank publicly apologised to Silvi through the media and said that the manager would be punished for her serious mistake. Nevertheless, Silvi filed a complaint with the Chancellor of Justice of Estonia.

Analysis and interpretation

Silvi's case is similar to Malle's in that her physical appearance was not considered appropriate for the organisation during the recruitment process. As with Malle's case, Silvi's case is both a legal problem in Estonia and an ethical problem (Rhode, 2009, 2016). Moreover, Silvi's gender did not seem to play a role in her discrimination.

As noted in the outline, Silvi spoke of her experience with the press, which resulted in the manager of the organisation publicly trying to deny the problem. As a result, no constructive discussion of the problem took place between the parties involved. However, Silvi showed conviction, courage and a personal willingness to stand up for herself by speaking publicly of the discrimination she had experienced.

In this case, unlike the cases of Tiina and Malle, the reason for the discrimination was not so clearly embedded in the values and habits of the organisation (Ashforth and Anand, 2003) but rather the behaviour of an individual manager. This fits with the idea of a 'bad apple' within an organisation,

that is, that a certain individual rather than organisational conditions tends to be the driver of an inappropriate act. The manager's discriminatory behaviour and lying in Silvi's case was not only immoral but also illegal in Estonia (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2). The fact that the manager later tried to save face with the media demonstrates that although Silvi was explicitly discriminated against based on her appearance, the manager did not see her own behaviour as improper.

However, the head of the organisation showed courage in admitting the problem, though this was likely due to the publicity given to the case and the salience of the middle manager's dishonesty. He made it clear, at least in public **communications**, that the manager was going to be punished. However, reporting on the case did not reveal the nature of the resulting punishment. Kooskora (2006) argued that often when Estonian companies display a sense of corporate social responsibility, they do so because the issue is important for reputational reasons – not necessarily for ethical reasons. The difference between the manager's behaviour and that of the head of the organisation may also be a sign of a fragmented organisational culture. The top management may not have communicated their organisational values and principles clearly in terms of discrimination.

In this case, the protagonist, Silvi, adopted an active strategy of public resistance. She made an official complaint, and fought for her right to be treated with respect and without discrimination **with publicity which was provided by the media**. Although this may have meant a personal sacrifice on her part, the publicity of the case may have resulted in better awareness of appearance-

based discrimination not only in the organisation but in Estonian society in general. Finally, the manager's attempt to hide the problem damaged the reputation of the organisation.

**Discussion**

A summary of the results is shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Table 1 shows that despite the good education and good work performance of the three young female employees in this study, each experienced different forms of appearance-based discrimination, resulting many negative outcomes for both the employees and the organisations. The constructed narratives in this research confirm earlier findings that in organisational life, appearance-based discrimination can exist in both formal procedures and informal practices (see Cavico *et al.*, 2012; Dipboye and Colella, 2005; Harwood, 2007; Trautner and Kwan, 2010). According to Toledano (2013), employee interviews, hiring and compensation are typical roots of appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. In this study, such discrimination occurred especially as part of the organisational procedures of recruitment and hiring as well as career management. Moreover, informal discriminatory practices, such as spreading sexist rumours and undervaluing the role and competency of women, were prevalent in this study.

In Tiina's case, the traditional masculine organisational culture seemingly normalised discrimination (Ashford and Anand, 2003), providing fertile ground for gendered appearance-

based discrimination against Tiina. As found by Martin and Barnard (2013), traditional masculine culture tends to be one of the main reasons for women's appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. Thus, it is possible that other women in the workplace have faced similar discrimination due to their gender. Many previous studies have suggested that physical 'attractiveness' tends to contribute positively to an employee's success in working life (e.g., Corbett, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Langlois *et al.*, 2000; Liu and Sierminska, 2014; Toledano, 2013; Watkins and Johnston, 2000; Author C). Yet, interestingly, Tiina's case also revealed the dark side of physical attractiveness for young women, whose 'good looks' are not necessarily beneficial but rather cause problems in their careers due to sexist attitudes and behaviour on the part of both male and female colleagues. The appearance-based discrimination against Tiina addressed in this study may be a legacy of the beauty expectations faced by Estonian women generally (Kaskla, 2003) and the sexualised attention given to (young) women's bodies (Mihăilă, 2017). Although in Estonia women tend to face demands to meet appearance-based beauty expectations (Kaskla, 2003; Aavik, 2015; Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021), and Tiina did indeed meet those expectations, the paradox was that looking attractive and beautiful was not an advantage to her within her specific workplace culture. In the masculine realm of her workplace her appearance became sexualised both by men and women alike, and that appearance also undermined her credibility as a competent employee. In general, our study lends support to Trethewey's (1999) argument that women need to be able to reveal their bodies in an appropriate way in the workplace.

Although previous research has argued that appearance-based discrimination against women is most often caused by men (e.g., Collinson, 2003), here, it was also practiced by women against

other women. We suggest that the evaluating gaze and discriminatory acts can be gendered in complex ways in the Estonian working life context and perhaps elsewhere (Evans *et al.*, 2010; Author C).

While Tiina's case can be said to present gendered appearance-based discrimination in a particularly subtle and informal form (sexist rumours and belittling), in the cases of Malle and Silvi, the discrimination was more explicit and easier to notice. Based on our findings, we cannot claim that Malle's or Silvi's discrimination was based on either gender or age. It is impossible to know whether a young man with a similar appearance as Malle or Silvi would have been treated the same or differently. Thus, we can only say that the cases represent discrimination based on specific appearance characteristics: visible skin problems and height.

In line with several studies (e.g., Author A; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Author C), we found that appearance-based discrimination, whether covert or overt, was harmful to both the individuals and organisations. The investigated organisations lost talent, and especially in the Silvi's case the reputation and image as employer suffered; this may cause problems for future recruitment efforts and negatively impact collaboration with stakeholders. The studied women's career prospects also likely suffered, and they experienced stress, decreased self-esteem, frustration and disappointment (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014; Dhanani *et al.*, 2018; Toledano, 2013). In general, discriminatory practices can foster organisational cultures in which appearance-based discrimination is easily normalised (Ashford and Anand, 2003).

We believe that those organisations in which Tiina, Malle, and Silvi were employed should adopt various measures to ensure the prevention of appearance-based discrimination and to avoid

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2  
3 damage to the business in question (such as in terms of reputation, motivation, work morale, or  
4 turnover). These exemplary and cautionary cases show how discrimination, which is harmful,  
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6 illegal, and unethical, tends to be difficult to recognise and even to have its existence admitted by  
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8 managers and other employees within their respective organisations. Therefore managers and other  
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10 employees within such organisations require more information about appearance-based and  
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12 gender-based discrimination within the workplace. Training employees to recognise unconscious  
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14 bias and prejudice, and power elements which are embedded in discrimination can help to raise  
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16 awareness in organisations. A case-based teaching method could be effective in achieving this  
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18 goal. Improving the transparency, discuss-ability, rules and formality of human resource  
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20 management (e.g., public recruitment, fair procedures and systems for reporting misbehaviour or  
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22 making complaints) could also be useful. Regular assessment and analysis of ethical practices in  
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24 the workplace (e.g., an ethics audit) can help the organisations and their management bodies to  
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26 recognise potential risks related to also this kind of discrimination and thus prevent damage  
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28 (Author B). Kantceva (2016) suggested that an effective way for any organisation to prevent  
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30 discrimination is to adopt best practices from more advanced organisations. It should not be  
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32 forgotten that organisations can learn from unsuccessful initiatives as well as from successful ones.  
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34 We think that the suggested measures are important enough to be deserving of consideration in  
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36 other organisations within Estonia and, most likely, elsewhere too in order to reduce appearance-  
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38 based discrimination in the workplace.  
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### 49 Limitations and future research

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To our knowledge, no studies concerning appearance-based discrimination in the Estonian working life context had been conducted previously. Thus, this study may be the first attempt to tackle this problem. To extend our understanding of the topic in the study context, diverse examples (e.g., different genders, age groups, occupations, languages, ethnic groups, social classes and career phases) are needed. In future research, it would be beneficial to address appearance-based discrimination through intersectional analysis as a way to explore different social positions and categories.

The relationship between organisational and societal expectations regarding the topic of workplace discrimination also requires more attention in the future. Multi-level analyses in different organisational contexts would be a welcome addition to future research as well. Studying the subject in other societies, whether other post-socialist societies or elsewhere, might also yield valuable information about the societal and socio-cultural influences on organisational behaviour with respect to appearance-based discrimination.

The topic of appearance-based discrimination requires more empirical research in Estonia and elsewhere. This is especially true given the increased emphasis on appearance that is emerging due to the visualisation of cultural presentation and communication. Discrimination on the basis of appearance may also extend to men and other genders; the issue should be made part of a future research agenda.

Finally, we believe that the case study and narrative inquiry approach used in this paper was a relevant methodological choice because it yielded important knowledge on the topic. This kind of

approach can be considered a significant way of gaining knowledge about an ethically sensitive and complex issue by making it easier to understand and fully grasp the moral salience of the issue and people's experiences with it (Jackall, 1988). Moreover, instead of providing only a cross-sectional view, the application of narrative inquiry offered a means to reveal the temporal dynamics of the topic (Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 2008; Author A). In line with Campbell and Cowton (2015), we suggest that more qualitative studies on ethically sensitive issues in organisational life are needed because many ethical issues are essentially qualitative in nature.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that covert and overt discrimination based on an employee's physical appearance can occur in Estonian workplaces, even though discrimination and inequality are not tolerated in official public discourse, and all forms of discrimination are illegal in Estonia (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2; Kaskla, 2003). Job-related decisions and behaviour based on subjective reasoning harm an employee's self-esteem and also result in the loss of talent as well as negative publicity for an organisation.

Based on the findings, we conclude that appearance norms, which frame perceptions of attractiveness and unattractiveness (Mahajan, 2007), may at times be rather narrow and stereotypical in Estonian workplaces. The studied cases indicate that an individual employee's physical appearance can be interpreted as 'too attractive', 'unprofessional' or 'strange' and be treated as an indication of a general lack of competence.



**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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**Table I** Summary of the results

	<b>Tiina</b>	<b>Malle</b>	<b>Silvi</b>
Appearance as a basis for discrimination	‘Too’ good-looking: blonde and slim	‘Too’ unattractive: visible skin problems	‘Too’ strange-looking: short stature
Genders involved in discriminatory behaviour	Male to female, female to female	Female to female	Female to female
Key reason for discrimination	Normalisation through institutionalisation	Normalisation through rationalisation	Individual act
Outcomes of the discrimination for the woman	Emotional outcomes: embarrassment, anger, stress. Behavioural outcome: exit from the job and country	Emotional outcomes: disappointment, decreased self-esteem. Behavioural outcomes: missed and rejected work offer	Emotional outcomes: sadness, anger, personal sacrifice. Behavioural outcomes: was not recruited, filed a complaint with the chancellor, potentially stigmatised as a difficult employee in the labour market
Outcomes of the discrimination for the company	Loss of talent; maintenance of discriminatory organisational culture	Loss of an employee with strong potential; emerging awareness of discrimination	Public damage to the organisation’s reputation and image, awareness of appearance-based discrimination improved