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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.

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

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

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24 In this explorative study, our purpose is to produce in-depth information regarding how  
25 appearance-based discrimination occurs within the context of Estonian working life. The study  
26 offers unique and important knowledge of the topic in this context. To our knowledge, no previous  
27 studies of this nature have been carried out which have focussed on appearance-based  
28 discrimination in the workplace. Drawing on narrative inquiry (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne,  
29 1988), narratives which are based on the experiences of young women are constructed so that they  
30 can provide an insight into appearance-based discrimination within Estonia. The study adds  
31 knowledge to discussions which cover appearance-based discrimination in organisational life, with  
32 this being a research field area which has not previously received enough of a focus in terms of  
33 workplace discrimination (Rhode, 2009, Author C), at least from a contextual viewpoint. In line  
34 with Vickers (2009), we believe that the case study method adopted here, which stresses the  
35 understanding of the specific cases, can be a source of learning for readers by helping them to  
36 recognise, reflect on and aim to reduce appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. The  
37 case study approach has the potential to offer information and ideas into the sensitive and complex

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3 topic under investigation, which may not be reached using other approaches, such as a survey  
4 method (Mills *et al.*, 2010; Rowley, 2002; Tight, 2017). In all, we hope to offer information that  
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6 can be helpful in the study context by drawing attention to conventions, norms and stereotypes  
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8 based on appearance that can result in problems for employees and organisations.  
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14 The cases for this study involved women. **Women in the workplace in Estonia are tied more closely**  
15 **to the masculine corporeal realm than are men but, at the same time, there are embedded societal**  
16 **norms which entail women having to conform to a feminine role and ensure appearance-based**  
17 **beauty requirements (Aavik, 2015; Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021). Therefore, in the workplace,**  
18 **they tend to be evaluated much more strictly in terms of their appearance than are men (Burns,**  
19 **2004; Cavico et al, 2012, 2013; Harwood, 2007). In general, in Estonia, women face more**  
20 **discrimination than men in working life (World Economic Forum, 2022), and some of these**  
21 **problems are likely to take the form of appearance-based discrimination (Kaskla, 2003). To our**  
22 **knowledge, appearance-based discrimination has not before been made visible in the Estonian**  
23 **working life context, although, as Kaskla (2003) observed, appearance-based beauty requirements**  
24 **for women are typical in Estonia.**  
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## 42 **Context of the study**

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47 As in many other democratic countries, the Estonian Constitution forbids discrimination based on  
48 any grounds (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2). However, a study carried out by  
49 the think tank Praxis in 2015 found that managers and employers had little awareness of the  
50 legislation prohibiting discrimination in the recruitment process and that discrimination, especially  
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3 based on gender, was widespread in Estonian work life (Turk *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, awareness  
4 of the role and impact of stereotypes related to, for example, appearance in the recruitment process  
5 is low, and employers tend not to use measures to reduce discrimination in the process (Aavik *et*  
6 *al.*, 2020; Täht *et al.*, 2019).  
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14 Turk *et al.* (2015) pointed out that most employers in Estonia do not see any point in promoting  
15 equality. Both Täht *et al.* (2019) and Aavik *et al.* (2020) argued that little has changed at the  
16 workplace level in Estonia to advance equality over the past 30 years. According to these studies,  
17 organisations lack systematic and targeted actions to promote equality. A study by Ukhova (2020)  
18 found that inequality has not changed substantially since the post-socialist period anywhere in  
19 Central and Eastern Europe.  
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31 Estonian work life is highly segregated both vertically and horizontally. According to Eurostat  
32 (2019), Estonia had the highest gender pay gap in favour of men in the European Union in 2017.  
33 The wage gap has survived the transition period from communism to capitalism (Meriküll and  
34 Tverdostup, 2021). As in many other post-Soviet societies, Estonian women are well-educated and  
35 active in the labour market (World Economic Forum, 2022). This is related to the requirement to  
36 work full time under the Soviet regime (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). Soviet social  
37 expectations were, however, paternalistic with respect to women's roles and duties (Kaskla, 2003;  
38 Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021; Reingardiene, 2003; Vöormann, 2009). After the collapse of the  
39 USSR, one example of expectations for women in Estonia was beauty contests, which became a  
40 part of the national identity movement and created beauty norms for women. In the post-USSR,  
41 Estonian women wanted to look more like Western women and stressed opportunities for women  
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3 to assume an identity other than that of a Soviet working mother (Davidenko, 2018; Kaskla, 2003;  
4 Mihäilä, 2017). Social expectations regarding certain standards of beauty were reflected in job  
5 advertisements in the newspapers at the time, in particular in the search for frontline employees  
6 who were expected to meet the criteria of youth and attractiveness (Mihäilä, 2017).  
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14 In Estonia, gender roles have remained traditional, supported by pro-natalist views on motherhood  
15 and the understanding that housework is the responsibility of women (Kosyakova, 2018;  
16 Vöormann and Helemäe, 2016). Nevertheless, positive changes have occurred in society. For  
17 instance, in 2017, the government launched official career counselling to address gender  
18 stereotypes and started to promote general social and educational campaigns to raise public  
19 awareness about discrimination and address gender issues.  
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### 31 **Literature review**

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35 According to Warhurst and Nickson (2007, p. 132), appearance-based discrimination refers to the  
36 favouring of people perceived as better looking and penalising those perceived as less physically  
37 attractive or having the 'wrong look'. Since it can be intentional and implicit, employees often  
38 lack adequate evidence to prove discrimination on the basis of physical appearance (Bartlett, 2009;  
39 Selmi, 2016). Women often encounter unwanted emphasis on appearance (Cavico *et al.*, 2012,  
40 2013; Harwood, 2007; Mahajan, 2007; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Author C). All workplace  
41 discrimination causes stress and strain for employees (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014) as well as feelings of  
42 marginalisation (Dhanani *et al.*, 2018; Grandy, 2008; Rhode, 2009). It has negative effects on an  
43 individual's identity construction, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and it harms  
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3 the employer's reputation (Del Carmen Triana *et al.*, 2019; Grandy, 2008; Langlois *et al.*, 2000).

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5 The emphasis on appearance instead of an individual's capabilities and work performance is likely  
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7 to have a negative effect on the person's credibility, self-esteem and social power at work as well  
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9 as on their quality of life in general (Rhode, 2016). Discrimination is not only illegal in  
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11 organisations (Dhanani *et al.*, 2018) but also immoral because it violates the principles of human  
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13 dignity, justice and equality (Rhode, 2009, 2016).  
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19 Appearance-based discrimination in the workplace has gained attention in previous studies to some  
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21 extent (Toledano, 2013). The topic has been analysed especially from the viewpoint of lawsuits,  
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23 often in the U.S. context (e.g., Corbett, 2007, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Rhode, 2009, 2016;  
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25 Trautner and Kwan, 2010). Trautner and Kwan (2010) offered a comprehensive analysis of  
26  
27 appearance-based employment discrimination lawsuits from 1970 to 2008 in federal courts in the  
28  
29 United States. They concluded that both work organisations and courts tend to support appearance  
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31 norms that maintain traditional views about masculinity and femininity. Moreover, they found that  
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33 both women and men sued their employers for appearance-based discrimination, but women were  
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35 more successful in their claims than men. Requests concerning women's clothing, height and  
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37 weight were typical cases.  
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44 Harwood (2007) investigated the legal process and discrimination using court decisions in New  
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46 Zealand. In this analysis, it was shown that the law failed to address appearance-based  
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48 discrimination and that gender stereotyping existed in the legal process in New Zealand. Harwood  
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50 suggested that a valuable approach to reducing appearance-based discrimination would be to aim  
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52 to change the social attitudes of New Zealanders.  
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6 Toledano (2013) provided an overview of numerous studies from different disciplines. This  
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8 investigation showed that people who are evaluated as attractive in the workplace are seen as more  
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10 competent and successful compared to their counterparts who are not perceived to be as attractive.  
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12 In the context of employment, people who are seen as physically attractive tend to be hired more  
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14 often, get more promotions and be paid more than people who are considered less attractive  
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16 (Corbett, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Liu and Sierminska, 2014; Watkins and Johnston,  
17  
18 2000). The results of research on appearance-based discrimination, especially against women in  
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20 work life, have shown that it is difficult for women to advance in their careers because of their  
21  
22 appearance. For example, being small in stature can be understood to be negatively connected to  
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24 their credibility as managers (Author A). Martin and Barnard (2013) studied women in male-  
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26 dominated organisations and found that one of the main issues that led to discrimination was  
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28 women's physical appearance.  
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36 Covert or sometimes openly expressed demands for specific appearance types are based on norms  
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38 regarding the suitability of a person's appearance, which tend to emphasise 'attractiveness'. An  
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40 'unattractive' appearance can be an additional career hurdle (Corbett, 2007; Harwood, 2007;  
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42 Rhode, 2009, 2016; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Author C). According to Tolendo (2013),  
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44 evaluations based on appearance are simultaneously influenced by social norms and the interplay  
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46 of gender, race, age and other diversity dimensions. Kwan and Trautner (2009) found that many  
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48 studies concerning appearance in the workplace concentrated on people's motivations for  
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50 accepting appearance norms. The researchers argued that various benefits in hiring, career  
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52 advancement and salary as well as social and personal rewards (e.g., satisfaction at work, higher  
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3 self-esteem and positive perceptions of others) are linked to conformity to norms and people's  
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5 willingness to strengthen a social system that stresses attractiveness. Women in particular are  
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7 expected to meet social definitions of feminised attractiveness and follow the implicit and explicit  
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9 appearance norms of the organisation as part of the wage-labour exchange and as partners in a  
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11 psychological contract (Author C). Tolendo (2013) indicated that appearance norms and  
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13 expectations tend to be subconscious and therefore difficult to identify and prove.  
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19 Management can also specifically request that their employees 'look good'. Women in  
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21 organisations tend to especially be framed by their gender (Collinson, 2003, p. 541; Harwood,  
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23 2007), and their workplace selves are scrutinised by the objectifying male gaze in gendered and  
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25 sexualised organisational cultures. However, women may also critically evaluate other women's  
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27 appearances and participate in the projection of the self-policing gaze (Evans *et al.*, 2010, p. 116;  
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29 Author C).  
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35 The norms of appearance, which define what is considered attractive and unattractive, are shaped  
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37 by contextual norms (Mahajan, 2007), and therefore, discriminatory attitudes are powerful and  
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39 consistent precisely because they are often based on normalisation of fundamental biases and  
40  
41 prejudices (Puhl and Brownell, 2001). According to the framework by Ashford and Anand (2003),  
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43 the normalisation of behaviour (i.e., the process whereby practices become accepted and are no  
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45 longer questioned), such as appearance-based discrimination, is based on institutionalisation,  
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47 rationalisation and socialisation in organisational life.  
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3 Institutionalisation means that appearance-based discrimination rooted in expectations about a  
4 particular appearance is embedded in organisational norms, habits and processes. Rationalisation  
5 is linked to ideologies and beliefs, which are used to justify the discriminatory behaviour.  
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7 Socialisation occurs when inexperienced newcomers are taught, typically implicitly, to accept this  
8 kind of discrimination as permissible. In many organisations, normalisation is built upon  
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10 heterosexuality, attractiveness, whiteness and physical ability. Trethewey's (1999) study indicated  
11 that there is a fine line between an appropriate and inappropriate appearance code. Women are  
12 especially expected to 'reveal their bodies in very specific and specialised ways' (p. 443); revealing  
13 too much or emphasising the 'wrong' aspects of one's body can undermine a female employee's  
14 credibility or increase unwanted flirtation or sexualised comments.  
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## 28 **Methods**

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33 This study utilised an instrumental case study approach and narrative inquiry. In this approach, a  
34 case is analysed and used to understand the phenomenon of interest (Mills et al., 2020; Stake,  
35 1995). The strength of the instrumental case study approach is that it offers an entry point to  
36 understanding the complexity of the studied phenomenon, which is ethically sensitive by nature  
37 and often difficult to make visible and address (Campbell and Cowton, 2015). The term 'narrative'  
38 refers to a textual account of a sequence of the events in the working lives of the studied cases  
39 (Riessman, 2008). Within the narrative inquiry, various heterogeneous events were organised  
40 appropriately into descriptions, a process which is known as emplotment, in order to highlight how  
41 they relate to one another and how they form sequences (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988;  
42 Riessman, 2008). The use of emplotment allowed us to build up a narrative of each case so that  
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3 we could elaborate how the events were linked to each other. Emplotment offered a lens through  
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5 which we were able to account for the forms of discrimination which were taking place, why  
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7 discrimination was occurring in the first place, what specifically happened in each case, who was  
8  
9 involved, and what were the outcomes. Emplotment is of major significance in any narrative  
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11 inquiry because it makes it possible to explain various events which may be related to the  
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13 phenomenon being studied by building up a coherent narrative of events instead of simply listing  
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15 them (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988).  
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22 The research data consist of the narratives of/about three young Estonian women. In our study, a  
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24 minimum number of cases was not necessary, but the three cases used here helped us to gain  
25  
26 insight into and provide an intensive description of the topic under investigation (Vickers, 2009).  
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28 By selecting different cases, all of which dealt with some form of appearance-based discrimination  
29  
30 against young women within the context of the study, it was possible to explore and understand  
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32 similarities and variations in any such discrimination (Tight, 2017). According to Tight (ibid, p  
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34 162-163), multiple cases have the potential to form a description which is more intensely grounded  
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36 within broader empirical evidence, as compared to the outcome of studying a single case. Thanks  
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38 to their contextual nature, each of the cases are unique and useful for this study: they contribute to  
39  
40 the overall understanding of the complex and challenging nature of the phenomenon being studied,  
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42 ie. appearance-based discrimination, within the context of Estonian working life (Stake, 2005).  
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45 While conducting this research, we noticed that it was difficult to find people who were willing to  
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47 speak of the sensitive topic under examination. Contrary to court cases, which are common in  
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49 studies of appearance-based discrimination (Trautner and Kwan, 2010), we wanted to make visible  
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3 the voices of people who had been personally involved in the process of appearance-based  
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5 discrimination in the Estonian working life context.  
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10 To guarantee anonymity, the participants in the cases have been pseudonymised. The first case is  
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12 a personal description provided by a woman who experienced appearance-based discrimination in  
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14 the workplace (pseudonym Tiina). Thus, this case provides insight into a victim's experience. Data  
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16 for this case were gathered by means of an open interview. The interview outline covered four  
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18 thematic areas: career challenges, gender equality in the workplace, physical appearance and the  
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20 problem in question, and organisational culture. Tiina talked about her experiences with her male  
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22 manager and colleagues. The second case is a personal description told by a manager who  
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24 discriminated against a female employee (pseudonym Malle) based on her appearance. Through  
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26 this case, we gained insight into the viewpoint of a discriminator. During the interview, the  
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28 manager engaged in self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding of biased and discriminatory  
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30 treatment in the workplace. In both cases, in addition to recordings, the interviewer carefully made  
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32 notes and kept a research diary. The interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours.  
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40 The information for the third case (pseudonym Silvi) was collected from four different articles  
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42 published in daily Estonian newspapers. This case was seen as being appropriate, and was selected  
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44 because it yielded a degree of understanding on the part of both parties in regard to how  
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46 appearance-based discriminatory can occur in the workplace As the material originated from the  
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48 media, those journalists who wrote the articles which were analysed made choices regarding how  
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50 the case was presented. However, the voices of the parties involved were highlighted quite clearly  
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52 in the articles. The selection of this case served to add diversification to the sampling by drawing  
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3 into it not only the perspectives of the discriminated and discriminator, but also a new perspective  
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5 which surrounds active resistance towards appearance-based discrimination and the act of making  
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7 it public.  
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12 We used two criteria for finding the cases for our study. First, we wanted to address appearance-  
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14 based discrimination towards young women at an early stage in their professional careers. Prior  
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16 research indicates that young women especially suffer from discrimination in the Estonian  
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18 working-life context (Anspal *et al.*, 2010), and they may be particularly vulnerable to it during  
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20 their early career phase when they do not have an influential position in their organisation. Second,  
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22 since the focus of prior research on appearance has highlighted the service sector (e.g., retail and  
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24 hospitality industries) and ‘style labour market’ businesses (e.g., designer retailers and style  
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26 restaurants; Warhurst & Nickson 2007), we wanted to expand the scope by also targeting male-  
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28 dominated sector fields, such as defence and banking.  
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35 We used a theory-orientated method in our analysis, the aim of which is not to test a specific  
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37 framework but rather to emphasise the importance of the theoretical background and previous  
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39 research results as a lens through which the new data can be interpreted (Tight, 2017). In addition  
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41 to prior research results and relevant contextual knowledge surrounding the Estonian working life,  
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43 in this study we used normalisation as a framework (Ashford & Anand, 2003), as well as adding  
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45 in the idea of emplotment in order to be able to analyse and interpret the data. The analysis  
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47 proceeded as follows. First, the texts were read several times to thoroughly familiarise ourselves  
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49 with their content. Then, the text corpus was grouped according to specific descriptive categories  
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51 and related key ideas, including various forms of appearance-based discrimination, the outcomes  
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53 of such discrimination, key actors in the discriminatory interactions and the types of behaviour, so  
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3 that text blocks related to the topics could be built. Finally, we constructed the narratives of the  
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5 cases according to the idea of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1984).  
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## 10 **Analysis and discussion**

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15 Below, we present the outlines and analyses of the three cases.  
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### 19 *Tiina's narrative*

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#### 22 Outline of the case

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27 Tiina was a highly educated, internationally experienced and outspoken young professional who  
28 was considered attractive. Tiina was keen to work for the defence force, which is a male-dominated  
29 field in Estonia. Both the management board and her superiors praised her knowledge and hard  
30 work. Despite her achievements, her attractive appearance was always a topic of interest to her  
31 colleagues, whose comments Tiina experienced as sexist: 'I was there because, as it was gossiped,  
32 the head of the firm likes young, slim and blonde women. Despite work being exciting and  
33 interesting, I did not see much future for my career in such a work environment'.  
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46 *At the same time, her competence was often ignored, which depressed, embarrassed, and*  
47 *disappointed Tiina, as well as causing her a degree of stress, as highlighted in the following*  
48 *comment: 'I was able to get attention from someone, but it was almost always because of my looks*  
49 *and not because of my work results or expertise'. She also felt angry. She felt that the*  
50 *organisational culture of her workplace belittled women, which made it difficult for her and other*  
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3 women to advance in their careers. She heard that male colleagues were spreading rude and sexist  
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5 rumours about her – namely, that she was too young and too pretty to do her job well. Additionally,  
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7 she heard that some of her colleagues, both women and men, stated that she was only considered  
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9 a good employee because management found her appearance appealing.  
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14 Tiina spoke to the head of the organisation about her concerns. She said that she experienced the  
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16 behaviour as problematic and that she wished employees would be acknowledged for their work  
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18 rather than for what they wore or their appearance. Tiina described the manager's response, saying  
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20 that 'the manager, who was a middle-aged man and had always supported me, being more of a  
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22 mentor than a superior for me, agreed and said that this kind of behaviour was completely  
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24 unacceptable'. During the discussion, Tiina felt that the top manager understood her concern, was  
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26 uncomfortable with the attitude being exhibited by her colleagues and promised to do something  
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28 about the rude behaviour. Nevertheless, the discussion with the manager did not lead to any  
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30 concrete actions or results in the organisation. However, she did not ask the manager later whether  
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32 he had tried to make some changes in the workplace. Tiina believed that the manager failed to put  
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34 an end to the problem.  
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42 Tiina faced a dilemma: on the one hand, she loved her job, but on the other, she felt uncomfortable,  
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44 embarrassed and angry. She realised that the successful career that she had always dreamed of  
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46 would not be possible under such circumstances. She ended up leaving both the organisation and  
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48 the country to find a better work environment.  
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54 Analysis and interpretation  
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3 In this case, Tiina experienced gender-based discrimination towards her appearance. The gap  
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5 between the discriminatory practices and the desired equal treatment was normalised in the  
6  
7 organisational culture so that Tiina's struggle to cope with and change the situation on her own  
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9 had no impact. Although Tiina showed a willingness to stand up for herself by bringing the  
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11 problem to her manager, her position of power within the organisation was too weak to alter the  
12  
13 discriminatory and sexist habits. It should be noted that she did not raise her concerns directly with  
14  
15 the people who she felt were treating her badly. Thus, the problem was not discussed with those  
16  
17 persons who were the crux of the problem. Gendered appearance-based discrimination is a  
18  
19 sensitive topic, and it can be difficult for victims to make it visible and prove it in public. Similar  
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21 finding have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Bartlett, 2009; Selmi, 2016; Toleno, 2013).  
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28 The masculine culture of the organisation belittled Tiina based on her looks and by sexualising  
29  
30 her. Even though the manager showed politeness and expressed empathy towards Tiina in their  
31  
32 private discussion, he failed to secure change. Moreover, in this case, Tiina felt that the colleagues  
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34 engaged in practices of discrimination without giving them any thought (Ashford and Anand,  
35  
36 2003). Since Tiina chose not to make the problem visible to other employees, and the manager  
37  
38 failed to put an end to the problem, the discriminatory treatment continued to be considered normal  
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40 – and thus difficult to identify and change – within the organisation. According to Kaptein (2008),  
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42 the organisational characteristics that constitute the self-correcting capacity of organisational  
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44 culture; the degree to which unethical practices are made visible within the organisation; and the  
45  
46 degree to which they can be discussed, resisted and changed are crucial to the elimination of any  
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48 ethical problem. In Tiina's case, because the unfavourable gendered conditions were  
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3 institutionalised in the organisation's culture, the opportunity to transform the unethical norms and  
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5 practices within the organisation was lost.  
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10 Drawing on Ashford and Anand (2003, p. 14), an organisation that allows such behaviour is  
11 considered immoral today because it was immoral yesterday. Seen in the Estonian context, Tiina's  
12 experience may, on the one hand, be an echo of socially gendered expectations stemming from  
13 long-standing tradition and reinforced during Soviet times (Kaskla, 2003), which stressed  
14 paternalism with respect to women's roles and status, making it easy to regard women as  
15 employees without any real power (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). On the other hand, the  
16 sexualisation of Tiina's appearance and its connection to her perceived skills, which occurred in  
17 various arenas in the organisation, can be related especially to the sexualisation of the culture.  
18 After the end of the Soviet era, women's bodies began to receive increasing attention as sexual  
19 objects (Kaskla, 2003). These tendencies led to women in Estonian working life having to cope  
20 with undervaluation, undesirable attention and biased behaviour based on sex and appearance  
21 (Bienefeld *et al.*, 2007; Kaskla, 2003). This may have affected the organisational reality in this  
22 case.  
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### 42 ***Malle's narrative***

#### 43 44 Outline of the case 45 46 47 48

49 At the time, Malle was in her final year at university and specialising in hotel management. The  
50 hotel manager said that she knew it was Malle's dream to become a hotel receptionist, and Malle  
51 worked hard to achieve the best possible results in her training as an investment in her future  
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3 career. The manager described Malle as a friendly and helpful young woman, but she was  
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5 sometimes self-conscious because of facial skin problems, as she had many visible signs of acne.  
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10 The manager interviewed said that not long before graduation, Malle applied for a position as a  
11  
12 porter at the hotel. Malle passed the first stage of the application process (curriculum vitae and  
13  
14 application letter) successfully, but she failed during the second stage, which involved a face-to-  
15  
16 face interview with the hotel manager, the service manager and a human resources specialist, all  
17  
18 women. After a brief talk, the recruitment interview was over. The next day, Malle was sent a  
19  
20 rejection letter. The hotel manager admitted that the letter might have suggested to Malle that she  
21  
22 was not recruited because her appearance was considered unsuitable for the hotel's image,  
23  
24 although this was not explicitly stated in the letter. The position was given to a 'good-looking'  
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26 student from the same university programme.  
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33 The manager reported that a few weeks later, Malle was appointed to a final internship as part of  
34  
35 her studies at the same hotel. She worked in different positions during her internship, always  
36  
37 receiving excellent feedback from her supervisors and from guests. When Malle worked as a  
38  
39 receptionist, the rating for her reception services was even higher than usual. The hotel manager  
40  
41 said that at the end of the internship, she offered Malle a position in reception. Although the  
42  
43 compensation package was impressive, Malle turned the offer down. She told the manager that she  
44  
45 had heard rumours that her appearance was not considered suitable for customer service and that  
46  
47 she perceived a discriminatory attitude in the recruitment process. The manager knew and  
48  
49 understood that she had behaved inappropriately: 'Co-working with Malle during her internship  
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51 made me feel guilty about the decision we made in the recruitment process' (Malle's manager).  
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## 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

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3 of legitimising appearance-based discriminatory behaviour within the organisation, the  
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5 undervaluation of the demand for legality in the situation is likely to have been based on the  
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7 normalisation of unethical practices embedded in societal-level institutionalisation (Author D).  
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10 This interpretation is further supported by other research findings, which indicate that Estonian  
11  
12 employers tend to be unaware of the legislation prohibiting discrimination during the recruitment  
13  
14 process (Aavik *et al.*, 2020; Täht *et al.*, 2019; Turk *et al.*, 2015).  
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19 While in Tiina's case, the manager failed to put an end to the problem, Malle's complaint  
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21 ultimately had a positive impact on the manager's way of thinking: the manager's awareness of  
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23 appearance-based discrimination improved. The manager admitted her failure to tackle the ethical  
24  
25 problem in question, regretted the decision and realised that she had done wrong. Consequently,  
26  
27 in the end, the manager exhibited moral awareness (Carroll, 2000), even though it did not alter  
28  
29 Malle's decision to not accept a job with the organisation. Losing Malle, who was a service-  
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31 oriented, highly motivated and competent employee, may have contributed to the manager's  
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33 understanding of her problematic behaviour.  
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40 In Malle's case, the manager's initial behaviour was likely harmful to the self-esteem of the  
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42 employee, who was in the early phase of her career. It is important to note, however, that when  
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44 Malle raised the issue and made it visible, the manager listened to her and regretted what she had  
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46 done. This can be seen as a sign of the first step towards making changes to reduce discrimination.  
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### 51 *Silvi's narrative*

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54 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



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3 this during the first meeting with her, the manager replied that she could not remember what she  
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5 had said at that time.  
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10 In the end, Silvi was not only upset and sad but also angry. Afterwards, the male chairperson of  
11  
12 the bank publicly apologised to Silvi through the media and said that the manager would be  
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14 punished for her serious mistake. Nevertheless, Silvi filed a complaint with the Chancellor of  
15  
16 Justice of Estonia.  
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### 21 Analysis and interpretation

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23 Silvi's case is similar to Malle's in that her physical appearance was not considered appropriate  
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25 for the organisation during the recruitment process. As with Malle's case, Silvi's case is both a  
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27 legal problem in Estonia and an ethical problem (Rhode, 2009, 2016). Moreover, Silvi's gender  
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29 did not seem to play a role in her discrimination.  
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35 As noted in the outline, Silvi spoke of her experience with the press, which resulted in the manager  
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37 of the organisation publicly trying to deny the problem. As a result, no constructive discussion of  
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39 the problem took place between the parties involved. However, Silvi showed conviction, courage  
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41 and a personal willingness to stand up for herself by speaking publicly of the discrimination she  
42  
43 had experienced.  
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49 In this case, unlike the cases of Tiina and Malle, the reason for the discrimination was not so clearly  
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51 embedded in the values and habits of the organisation (Ashforth and Anand, 2003) but rather the  
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53 behaviour of an individual manager. This fits with the idea of a 'bad apple' within an organisation,  
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3 that is, that a certain individual rather than organisational conditions tends to be the driver of an  
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5 inappropriate act. The manager's discriminatory behaviour and lying in Silvi's case was not only  
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7 immoral but also illegal in Estonia (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2). The fact that  
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9 the manager later tried to save face with the media demonstrates that although Silvi was explicitly  
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11 discriminated against based on her appearance, the manager did not see her own behaviour as  
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13 improper.  
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19 However, the head of the organisation showed courage in admitting the problem, though this was  
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21 likely due to the publicity given to the case and the salience of the middle manager's dishonesty.  
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23 He made it clear, at least in public **communications**, that the manager was going to be punished.  
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25 However, reporting on the case did not reveal the nature of the resulting punishment. Kooskora  
26  
27 (2006) argued that often when Estonian companies display a sense of corporate social  
28  
29 responsibility, they do so because the issue is important for reputational reasons – not necessarily  
30  
31 for ethical reasons. The difference between the manager's behaviour and that of the head of the  
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33 organisation may also be a sign of a fragmented organisational culture. The top management may  
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35 not have communicated their organisational values and principles clearly in terms of  
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37 discrimination.  
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44 In this case, the protagonist, Silvi, adopted an active strategy of public resistance. She made an  
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46 official complaint, and fought for her right to be treated with respect and without discrimination  
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48 **with publicity which was provided by the media**. Although this may have meant a personal  
49  
50 sacrifice on her part, the publicity of the case may have resulted in better awareness of appearance-  
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3 based discrimination not only in the organisation but in Estonian society in general. Finally, the  
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5 manager's attempt to hide the problem damaged the reputation of the organisation.  
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## 10 **Discussion**

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15 A summary of the results is shown in Table 1.  
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19 Insert Table 1 here  
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24 Table 1 shows that despite the good education and good work performance of the three young  
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26 female employees in this study, each experienced different forms of appearance-based  
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28 discrimination, resulting many negative outcomes for both the employees and the organisations.  
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30 **The constructed narratives in this research** confirm earlier findings that in organisational life,  
31  
32 appearance-based discrimination can exist in both formal procedures and informal practices (see  
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34 Cavico *et al.*, 2012; Dipboye and Colella, 2005; Harwood, 2007; Trautner and Kwan, 2010).  
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37 According to Toledano (2013), employee interviews, hiring and compensation are typical roots of  
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39 appearance-based discrimination in the workplace. In this study, such discrimination occurred  
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41 especially as part of the organisational procedures of recruitment and hiring as well as career  
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43 management. Moreover, informal discriminatory practices, such as spreading sexist rumours and  
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45 undervaluing the role and competency of women, were prevalent in this study.  
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51 In Tiina's case, the traditional masculine organisational culture seemingly normalised  
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53 discrimination (Ashford and Anand, 2003), providing fertile ground for gendered appearance-  
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3 based discrimination against Tiina. As found by Martin and Barnard (2013), traditional masculine  
4 culture tends to be one of the main reasons for women's appearance-based discrimination in the  
5 workplace. Thus, it is possible that other women in the workplace have faced similar  
6 discrimination due to their gender. Many previous studies have suggested that physical  
7 'attractiveness' tends to contribute positively to an employee's success in working life (e.g.,  
8 Corbett, 2011; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Langlois *et al.*, 2000; Liu and Sierminska, 2014;  
9 Toledano, 2013; Watkins and Johnston, 2000; Author C). **Yet, interestingly,** Tiina's case also  
10 revealed the dark side of physical attractiveness for young women, whose 'good looks' are not  
11 necessarily beneficial but rather cause problems in their careers due to sexist attitudes and  
12 behaviour on the part of both male and female colleagues. The appearance-based discrimination  
13 against Tiina addressed in this study may be a legacy of the beauty expectations faced by Estonian  
14 women generally (Kaskla, 2003) and the sexualised attention given to (young) women's bodies  
15 (Mihăilă, 2017). **Although in Estonia women tend to face demands to meet appearance-based  
16 beauty expectations (Kaskla, 2003; Aavik, 2015; Meriküll and Tverdostup, 2021), and Tiina did  
17 indeed meet those expectations, the paradox was that looking attractive and beautiful was not an  
18 advantage to her within her specific workplace culture. In the masculine realm of her workplace  
19 her appearance became sexualised both by men and women alike, and that appearance also  
20 undermined her credibility as a competent employee.** In general, our study lends support to  
21 Trethewey's (1999) argument that women need to be able to reveal their bodies in an appropriate  
22 way in the workplace.

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51 Although previous research has argued that appearance-based discrimination against women is  
52 most often caused by men (e.g., Collinson, 2003), here, it was also practiced by women against  
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3 other women. We suggest that the evaluating gaze and discriminatory acts can be gendered in  
4  
5 complex ways in the Estonian working life context and perhaps elsewhere (Evans *et al.*, 2010;  
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7 Author C).  
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12 While Tiina's case can be said to present gendered appearance-based discrimination in a  
13  
14 particularly subtle and informal form (sexist rumours and belittling), in the cases of Malle and  
15  
16 Silvi, the discrimination was more explicit and easier to notice. Based on our findings, we cannot  
17  
18 claim that Malle's or Silvi's discrimination was based on either gender or age. It is impossible to  
19  
20 know whether a young man with a similar appearance as Malle or Silvi would have been treated  
21  
22 the same or differently. Thus, we can only say that the cases represent discrimination based on  
23  
24 specific appearance characteristics: visible skin problems and height.  
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31 In line with several studies (e.g., Author A; Rhode, 2009, 2016; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007;  
32  
33 Author C), we found that appearance-based discrimination, whether covert or overt, was harmful  
34  
35 to both the individuals and organisations. The investigated organisations lost talent, and especially  
36  
37 in the Silvi's case the reputation and image as employer suffered; this may cause problems for  
38  
39 future recruitment efforts and negatively impact collaboration with stakeholders. The studied  
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41 women's career prospects also likely suffered, and they experienced stress, decreased self-esteem,  
42  
43 frustration and disappointment (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014; Dhanani *et al.*, 2018; Toledano, 2013). In  
44  
45 general, discriminatory practices can foster organisational cultures in which appearance-based  
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47 discrimination is easily normalised (Ashford and Anand, 2003).  
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53 We believe that those organisations in which Tiina, Malle, and Silvi were employed should adopt  
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55 various measures to ensure the prevention of appearance-based discrimination and to avoid  
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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,  
5  
6 illegal, and unethical, tends to be difficult to recognise and even to have its existence admitted by  
7  
8 managers and other employees within their respective organisations. Therefore managers and other  
9  
10 employees within such organisations require more information about appearance-based and  
11  
12 gender-based discrimination within the workplace. Training employees to recognise unconscious  
13  
14 bias and prejudice, and power elements which are embedded in discrimination can help to raise  
15  
16 awareness in organisations. A case-based teaching method could be effective in achieving this  
17  
18 goal. Improving the transparency, discuss-ability, rules and formality of human resource  
19  
20 management (e.g., public recruitment, fair procedures and systems for reporting misbehaviour or  
21  
22 making complaints) could also be useful. Regular assessment and analysis of ethical practices in  
23  
24 the workplace (e.g., an ethics audit) can help the organisations and their management bodies to  
25  
26 recognise potential risks related to also this kind of discrimination and thus prevent damage  
27  
28 (Author B). Kantceva (2016) suggested that an effective way for any organisation to prevent  
29  
30 discrimination is to adopt best practices from more advanced organisations. It should not be  
31  
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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3 To our knowledge, no studies concerning appearance-based discrimination in the Estonian  
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5 working life context had been conducted previously. Thus, this study may be the first attempt to  
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7 tackle this problem. To extend our understanding of the topic in the study context, diverse  
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9 examples (e.g., different genders, age groups, occupations, languages, ethnic groups, social classes  
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11 and career phases) are needed. In future research, it would be beneficial to address appearance-  
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13 based discrimination through intersectional analysis as a way to explore different social positions  
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15 and categories.  
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22 The relationship between organisational and societal expectations regarding the topic of workplace  
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24 discrimination also requires more attention in the future. Multi-level analyses in different  
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26 organisational contexts would be a welcome addition to future research as well. Studying the  
27  
28 subject in other societies, whether other post-socialist societies or elsewhere, might also yield  
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30 valuable information about the societal and socio-cultural influences on organisational behaviour  
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32 with respect to appearance-based discrimination.  
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39 The topic of appearance-based discrimination requires more empirical research in Estonia and  
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41 elsewhere. This is especially true given the increased emphasis on appearance that is emerging due  
42  
43 to the visualisation of cultural presentation and communication. Discrimination on the basis of  
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45 appearance may also extend to men and other genders; the issue should be made part of a future  
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47 research agenda.  
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52 Finally, we believe that the case study and narrative inquiry approach used in this paper was a  
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54 relevant methodological choice because it yielded important knowledge on the topic. This kind of  
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3 approach can be considered a significant way of gaining knowledge about an ethically sensitive  
4 and complex issue by making it easier to understand and fully grasp the moral salience of the issue  
5 and people's experiences with it (Jackall, 1988). Moreover, instead of providing only a cross-  
6 sectional view, the application of narrative inquiry offered a means to reveal the temporal  
7 dynamics of the topic (Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 2008; Author A). In line with Campbell and  
8 Cowton (2015), we suggest that more qualitative studies on ethically sensitive issues in  
9 organisational life are needed because many ethical issues are essentially qualitative in nature.  
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## 21 **Conclusion**

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26 This study demonstrates that covert and overt discrimination based on an employee's physical  
27 appearance can occur in Estonian workplaces, even though discrimination and inequality are not  
28 tolerated in **official** public discourse, and all forms of discrimination are illegal in Estonia  
29 (Constitution, Amend. 15, Art. 12, Para. 1 and 2; Kaskla, 2003). Job-related decisions and  
30 behaviour based on subjective reasoning harm an employee's self-esteem and also result in the  
31 loss of talent as well as negative publicity for an organisation.  
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42 Based on the findings, we conclude that appearance norms, which frame perceptions of  
43 attractiveness and unattractiveness (Mahajan, 2007), may at times be rather narrow and  
44 stereotypical in Estonian workplaces. The studied cases indicate that an individual employee's  
45 physical appearance can be interpreted as 'too attractive', 'unprofessional' or 'strange' and be  
46 treated as an indication of a general lack of competence.  
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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