

**‘LOOKISM’ AND LABOUR MARKET EXCLUSION: A MULTI-THEORETICAL
ANALYSIS OF TATTOOED JOBSEEKERS’ EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS AND
LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT**

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Abstract

Employing a multi-theoretical approach that combines cultural and aesthetic labour theories in this study, we explore employment perceptions of tattooed job applicants and the long-term employment implications in Nigeria. Our analysis of in-depth interviews with fifty young Nigerians (ages 17-25) and forty Human Resource (HR) recruiters offers a nuanced understanding of how body art intersects with cultural norms and aesthetic labour in the Nigerian job market. Shedding light on the long-term effects of aesthetic work choices on employment, our findings show that, rather than a form of self-expression, tattoos function as ‘aesthetic liability’. Results illuminate how Nigerian hiring, evaluations, and employment prospects for tattooed people are shaped by cultural norms, religious beliefs, and aesthetic expectations. We conclude by offering critical insights into theoretical implications and practical implications for HRM scholars and practitioners in shaping employment practices in Nigeria’s evolving job market.

Keywords: culture, employability, new workforce generations, organisational aesthetics, recruiters, tattoos, Nigeria.

Introduction

In Nigeria, the productive (youth) populace makes up 70 percent of over 200 million people in the country, with approximately 62 percent of the total population below twenty-five years old (Afolabi, 2021). Recently, the rise in the prevalence of tattoos (excluding tribal marks) among young Nigerians reflects a global shift towards greater acceptance of body art within one's identity. The existing literature (e.g., Adisa et al., 2021, 2023, 2024) suggests that employers in Nigeria often hold a negative view of visible body art in the workplace, which influences their hiring decisions and professional evaluations of tattooed individuals. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the employability and employment prospects of tattooed individuals in various sectors and workspaces in Nigeria, potentially leading to the exclusion and non-utilisation of a productive populace.

Not all employers have fully embraced the cultural shift towards accepting body modifications, which has led to biases in hiring practices (Mahwinny & Betts, 2024). This research addresses the increasing prevalence of tattoos among young Nigerians and the limited empirical attention to its impact on employability by disaggregating recruiter attitudes and highlighting the economic consequences of discrimination amid high youth unemployment. While previous studies have largely focused on the general stigma associated with tattoos, they often fail to account for the nuanced ways cultural perceptions influence hiring practices across different sectors. This study fills that gap by offering a sector-specific analysis, comparing traditional corporate settings with more liberal industries, such as the creative sector, to understand how visible tattoos may be received differently depending on the professional context.

Discrimination against tattooed job seekers significantly reduces their likelihood of securing employment, which contributes to the growing number of unemployed youths in Nigeria, thus undermining human capital potential and perpetuating a cycle of underemployment among a demographic critical to the nation's economic development. For instance, Nigeria's unemployment rate, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2021), is 33.3 percent, with youth unemployment at a concerning 42.5 percent. According to extant literature, by 2025, Gen Z will make up 27 percent of the workforce; demanding new engagement strategies and a different mindset from organisations to attract and retain top talent (Staglin, 2022; Mahwinny & Betts, 2024).

Moreover, this research distinguishes itself by employing a multi-theoretical framework that combines cultural theory with aesthetic labour perspectives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how traditional beliefs interact with global trends in body art acceptance. It moves beyond the binary view of tattoos as either expressions of personal identity or markers of deviance, instead exploring the employment prospects and long-term implications for tattooed job seekers, particularly among youth. By investigating these dynamics and connecting them to the broader issue of youth unemployment, the study not only addresses critical gaps in the literature but also advocates for inclusive hiring practices that value individuals beyond physical appearance, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and forward-looking Nigerian workforce.

Research on tattoos in Nigerian-specific context remains limited and significant gaps remain. To date, empirical research (Adisa et al., 2021, 2023, 2024) has largely uncovered the bias against visible tattoos in Nigeria, showing that both employers and employees hold negative opinions on the subject, associating tattoos with unprofessionalism and deviant behaviour deviance (Ekenedo & Elechi, 2020). Other scholars examine the complications associated with tattoo-wearing and how university students perceive tattoos (Ezeibekwe et al.,

2016; Ayanlowo et al., 2017). They conclude that young people are embracing tattoos, while broader society continues to stigmatise them. Other studies (e.g., Mensah et al., 2018; Edward & Abayomi, 2018) highlight how religious and sociocultural preconceptions in Nigeria influence corporate values, leading to the stigmatisation and discrimination of individuals with visible tattoos and body piercings (Akas & Nwofor-Molokwu, 2020). In Nigeria, where youth unemployment is high and cultural norms are changing, the increasing trend of tattoos, especially among young people, makes it crucial for us to understand how this trend affects hiring decisions and professional evaluations based on applicants' appearance. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the long-term employment implications of tattoos in the Nigerian context. By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to the promotion of inclusive hiring practices that prioritise individuals' qualities beyond their physical attributes. The findings of the study could play a crucial role in developing strategies to utilise Nigeria's youth workforce and prevent the undervaluation of talent and skills based on appearance biases. It may influence workplace diversity and inclusion discussions in Nigeria, leading to policies that prevent appearance-based discrimination, promote equal employment opportunities, foster inclusive workplaces, and create a more equitable and efficient labour market.

The word 'tattoo' requires clarification in relation to tribal markings. Despite both being forms of permanent body modification, tattoos are largely decorative or expressive, whereas tribal marks hold distinct sociocultural significance. African cultures use etched or cut tribal marks on the skin to denote ethnicity, social status, and cultural heritage (Ade, 2021).

Tattoos are personal choices, while tribal marks are a cultural practice typically performed in childhood and often without the child's consent (Edward & Abayomi, 2018). Tattoos also blur the line between personal identity and professional presentation. Scholars assert that tribal markings are fundamental aspects of cultural identity and heritage, contributing to a sense of

belonging and historical continuity (Mensah et al., 2018; Ojo & Saibu, 2018). Yet, there is a challenge relating to the need to balance respect for cultural traditions with the imperative to uphold individual rights and autonomy.

Our focus on the Nigerian context is premised on limited empirical research, notwithstanding the commonplace occurrences of bias against visible tattoos in Nigeria (Adisa et al., 2024). We ask the following research question:

How do perceptions of tattooed job applicants shape the future trajectory of Nigeria's labour market and workforce dynamics?

We employ a multi-theoretical approach that combines cultural and aesthetic labour perspectives to answer our research question. Examining tattoos in Nigeria requires a cultural lens, given the interplay between traditional values and modern business practices. Incorporating cultural theory enables an appropriate examination of the relationship between tattoos and employment opportunities in Nigeria. Comprehending cultural nuances clarifies professional perspectives on tattoos. This approach allows us to examine how cultural capital functions in Nigerian workplaces. Aesthetic labour theory examines how physical appearance and self-presentation are commodified in the labour market (Warhurst et al., 2000; Tews et al., 2020). This theoretical approach applies to the analysis of the interaction between visible tattoos and professional appearance expectations in Nigerian workplaces. It helps reveal how organisations may implicitly or explicitly regulate employees' bodies and how these expectations affect tattooed candidates' employability (Chia & Timming, 2023).

Exclusive reliance on cultural theory might neglect workplace presentation practices, while aesthetic labour theory might overlook cultural influences on perceptions of tattoos in Nigeria. The selected multi-theoretical approach overcomes the limitations of using a single theory. It provides a more comprehensive and intricate grasp of the impacts of tattoos on job

opportunities and workplace integration. The integration of both theories in this study enables a comprehensive analysis of how cultural perceptions of tattoos intersect with professional aesthetic standards, shaping the employment experiences of tattooed individuals. This approach ensures that the study is contextually relevant and capable of informing both theoretical discussions and practical human resources (HR) strategies.

This study focuses on Nigeria's abundant youth population (aged 17–25) and recruiters in different sectors. By analysing recruiters' perceptions, measuring the impact thereof on hiring decisions, and investigating sectoral differences, the present study contributes to the extant literature by highlighting the potential competitive disadvantage of discriminating against tattooed candidates. Additionally, our study advocates for organisations to adopt more inclusive hiring practices, thereby accessing a broader talent pool to ensure fair treatment and equal opportunities in the hiring process.

The following section is a comprehensive review of the extant literature on tattoos in the workplace and an introduction to the multi-theoretical framework underpinning this investigation. The research methods are then explained, and the findings of this empirical inquiry are presented. The research concludes with a discussion of these findings; their implications for theory and practice; the research's limitations; and recommendations for future research.

The systemic labour-market rejection of tattooed jobseekers

While tattoos are becoming more commonplace worldwide, their effect on employability is still debated, especially in traditional cultures. Previous studies show that those who choose to bear tattoos may experience employment discrimination and encounter negative professional perceptions, especially in conservative professional cultures (Timming, 2015, 2017; French et al., 2018; Tews & Stafford, 2019, 2020; Henle et al., 2022). The stigmatisation of tattoos

contributes to broader issues of social inequality and exclusion, as people with tattoos are often unfairly categorised and marginalised (Tews & Stafford, 2020a, 2020b; Oluyadi & Wenjin, 2023). The job-seeking process can be challenging for tattooed people, who feel compelled to hide their tattoos, especially for those who see their body art as a part of their identity (Foltz, 2014). Thus, balancing the personal right to expression with organisational image and client perceptions creates a substantial challenge in human resources management (HRM) (McLeod, 2014).

Research to date suggests that a person's visible tattoos affect their employment opportunities (Timming, 2011, 2015, 2017; Hill, 2016; Mendez, 2016; Nickson, 2022). Timming et al. (2017) demonstrates that body modifications serve as significant markers, resulting in the systemic rejection thereof in the labour market. Tattoos are often viewed as unprofessional and harmful to an organisation's image because they represent a departure from traditional corporate values that prioritise conformity and uniformity or are associated with reliability and competence (Baumann et al., 2016; Cutcher et al., 2017). For example, past research shows that visible tattoos clash with professional appearance standards, potentially harming a brand's image (Flanagan & Lewis, 2019; French & Timming, 2019; Eisenhut, 2021). Additionally, tattoos are portrayed as disruptive physical behaviours that oppose typical professional standards, showing a lack of conformity and fit within an organisation (Summers et al., 2018; Eisenhut, 2021). Concerns about client and stakeholder opinions may lead employers to avoid hiring those with visible tattoos (Timming et al., 2017). Individuals who display tattoos experience stigma in professional settings, as their tattoos are viewed as distractions and symbols of non-conformity. Applicants' unprofessional appearance can result in them experiencing prejudice and bias during recruitment processes because HR considers their appearance to be potentially harmful to the organisation's reputation (Brallier et al., 2011; Summers et al., 2018).

Tattoos occupy a complex symbolic terrain within the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape. Tribal markings, an African tattooing tradition, are accepted as deeply rooted in tribal identity and as significant life events (Edward & Abayomi, 2018; Ade, 2021). Acceptance of the global popularity of tattooing contrasts with the persistent negative perceptions relating to tattoos within conservative Nigerian society. Traditional Nigerian beliefs and values often consider tattoos as abhorrent and markers of Western cultural intrusion that cause moral decay, a lack of professionalism, religious backsliding, social disruption, rebellion, spiritual deviance, or criminal behaviour (Akas & Nwofor-Molokwu, 2020). Cultural and religious beliefs in Nigeria shape how tattoos are viewed in professional settings, going beyond just looks to include spiritual judgements, branding body art as unprofessional, wrong, and socially unacceptable, which reinforces negative opinions (Adisa et al., 2021, 2023, 2024).

Extant literature points to a complex relationship between cultural norms and aesthetic work while arguing for a more inclusive understanding of professionalism that embraces diverse self-expression (Lichy et al., 2024; Ruggs & Hebl, 2022). Tattoos are more than mere aesthetic choices – they represent intricate social narratives constantly shaped by complex cultural interpretations and professional assessments. Understanding the interrelationship between appearance and employment opportunities, especially the nuances thereof, is essential. By combining cultural theory and views on aesthetic labour, this study investigates the multifaceted nature of perceptions on tattoos and their impacts on long-term employment prospects in Nigeria.

Tattoos in Nigerian workplaces are a ‘discrediting attribute’: Multi-theoretical grounding

The effect of employees’ tattoos on an organisation’s brand is a major concern for employers because brands rely on consistent, controlled, and visible images (Warhurst et al., 2000; Brallier et al., 2011). This study thus explores the employment-related perceptions of

tattooed job applicants in Nigeria through a multi-theoretical lens – the integration of cultural and aesthetic labour theories to examine the socio-cultural and economic implications for tattooed candidates. The choice of these theoretical frameworks is grounded in their relevance to understanding the complex interplay between cultural norms, aesthetic values, and labour-market outcomes.

Cultural theory provides a critical lens through which to examine the societal and organisational perceptions of tattoos and body piercings. On the other hand, aesthetic labour theory emphasises how employees' physical appearance and embodied capacities are commodified and mobilised by employers to create a desired brand image and service encounter (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001; Brallier et al., 2011). Integrating cultural and aesthetic labour theories allows for a nuanced analysis of how tattoos influence employability in Nigeria. Cultural theory helps explain the symbolic meanings attached to tattoos, while aesthetic labour theory highlights the practical implications of these meanings within the labour market (Hofstede, 2001; Schein, 2010). This intersection is crucial for understanding how cultural prejudices and aesthetic expectations converge to shape the employability of tattooed individuals.

Past research has used the cultural and aesthetic labour theoretical perspectives to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural and aesthetic labour in shaping employment opportunities and outcomes, including how tattoos are a focal point for assessing suitability for employment in industries in which corporate image is paramount (Warhurst et al., 2000; Nickson et al., 2001). For instance, some studies reveal how cultural perceptions and aesthetic standards influence hiring practices and career trajectories (Ezeibekwe et al., 2016; Ojo & Saibu, 2018; Akas & Nwofor-Molokwu, 2020). Additionally, research shows how cultural artifacts, like tattoos, are imbued with meaning and how these meanings are negotiated within social interactions (Hill, 2016; Ekenedo & Elechi, 2020). Furthermore, tattoos, as cultural

symbols, can signify rebellion, deviance, or non-conformity, which can shape employers' perceptions and hiring decisions (Nickson, 2022). Altogether, the extant literature highlights the relevance of cultural capital and aesthetic conformity in securing employment, suggesting that tattoos, which deviate from conventional aesthetic norms in places like Nigeria, may disadvantage candidates in the labour market (Antonellis et al., 2017; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006).

This research explores the perceptions of employers relating to tattooed job applicants and their long-term implications for employment in Nigeria. The study's focus on employment-related perceptions of tattoos echoes argument that aesthetic labour plays a crucial role in shaping employment opportunities and outcomes (Witz et.al., 2017). Tattoos, therefore, become a focal point for assessing suitability for employment in industries where corporate image is paramount (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010). As a corollary, the study accounts for and attempts to theorise how employment-related perceptions of tattoos impact the employment of tattooed Nigerian job applicants.

The study's insights, collected employing a multi-theoretical approach described above, illuminate how organisations in Nigeria may exclude or marginalise tattooed candidates based on their perceived failure to fit the organisational brand or customers' expectations (Nickson, 2022). This exclusion does not just relate to job applicants' physical appearance but also to the cultural and social connotations associated with tattoos, which can be seen as incompatible with the desired organisational image (Timming et al., 2017).

In Nigeria's service-oriented sectors, where customer-facing roles are prevalent, the visual presentation of employees is critical. Tattoos, being visible and often unique, can be perceived as disrupting this controlled image, posing a risk to brand integrity (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010). Tattoos in Nigerian workplaces function as what Goffman (1963) terms a 'discrediting attribute'.

Research context and methods

This research stemmed from an observation by one of the researchers, who is involved with recruitment and training consultancy work in Nigeria. The researcher observed that some job applicants were excluded from participating in a youth empowerment programme because of their tattoos. Based on an interpretivism approach, this study qualitatively explores young people's and HR recruiters' live experiences in order to provide detailed insights on the phenomenon under study. This approach was chosen because of one of the researchers' interests in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although qualitative and interpretive research often lacks generalisability (Saunders et al., 2019), it allows for the acquisition of rich, qualitative data to explore the long-term implications of work-related perceptions of tattoos and tattooed candidates for employment in the Nigerian labour market.

Data collection and sample

The study relied on non-probability sampling, applying purposive and snowballing techniques for data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were recruited through the researcher's consultancy collaborations with two Nigerian organisations. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established based on two key characteristics. The first participant group comprised individuals aged 17–25 who were prospective employees, while the second group consisted exclusively of HR recruiters. This screening process enhanced the study's validity and reliability by ensuring the selection of informed participants (Gioia et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2015). The sample comprises two groups of participants: 1. student representatives from the foremost universities in Nigeria and 2. HR recruiters working in diverse occupational sectors in Nigeria. The purposive sampling method was used for recruiting the student participants – at undergraduate and postgraduate levels – to capture diverse perspectives. The

snowballing technique was used to recruit HR recruiters from various occupational sectors in Nigeria. Through a chain referral system, the first author reached out to recruitment agents (who are friends of this author), and the recruited agents further reached out to other recruiters (Dudovskiy, 2018). The study included a total of 90 participants: 50 young individuals (aged 17–25; 23 male, 27 female) and 40 HR recruiters (aged 30–70; 25 male, 15 female), all of whom were interviewed. To maintain anonymity, as promised in the consent to participation form, pseudonyms replaced real names in the analysis of the interviews. The duration of each interview was 45–60 minutes. Tables 1 and 2 below provide an overview of the participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the HR recruiters.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sector	Years in service
Kewe	67	M	Education	34
Feyisayo	40	F	Manufacturing	14
Ife	35	F	Health	4
Ige	59	F	Health	25
Femi	62	M	ICT	16
Ope	35	F	Education	10
Gee	45	M	Banking and finance	15
Beth	40	F	Real estate	10
Kolajo	67	M	Religious services	30
Kay	45	M	Banking and finance	3
Olaitain	39	M	Banking and finance	5
Kemi	37	F	Banking and finance	7
Ikechukwu	33	M	Accounting	7
Bijay	33	M	Education	2
Yemo	30	M	Agriculture	3
Folake	29	F	Hospitality	2
Yomi	?	M	Manufacturing	8
Tafa	32	M	Accounting	6
Yele	65	M	Education	35
Roger	68	M	Legal	45
Ugonna	?	F	Education	12
Bisola	38	F	Entertainment and media	7
Tunde	70	M	Education	35
Collins	36	M	Construction	10
Feranmi	30	F	Hospitality	4
Amad	38	M	Health	13

Sheikh	37	M	Civil service	9
Amata	47	M	Manufacturing	15
Oriyomi	52	M	ICT	20
Ike	40	M	Civil service	9
Muyiwa	40	M	Manufacturing	13
Evans	45	M	Entertainment and media	9
Oni	56	M	Oil and gas	11
Sade	60	F	Civil service	11
Nkechi	38	F	Beauty	2
Ikenna	47	M	Construction	2
Chioma	50	F	Oil and gas	15
Supo	39	M	Civil service	10
Omole	42	F	ICT	13
Fatima	45	F	Legal	

Table 2. Demographic profile of the young participants (aged 17–25 years old).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Tattooed?
Doyin	22	M	Yes
Sharon	19	F	Yes, a small one
Taiwo	22	F	No
Zion	20	M	No
Dejo	20	M	No, but wants one
Cossy	21	M	No
Barakat	21	F	No
Victor	25	M	No
Esther	17	F	No
Nana	24	F	No, but wants one
Biodun	22	M	No
Nonso	21	F	No
Priscilla	18	F	Yes, but inconspicuous
Ope	22	F	Yes
Muaz	19	M	Yes
Timi	22	M	No
Ruth	20	F	No
Umoh	21	F	No
Wale	19	M	No
Bisi	18	F	No
Yinka	19	M	No
Bims	23	F	No
Philips	24	M	No
Toyosi	25	F	No
Emmanuel	25	M	No
Tomisin	24	F	No
Itunnu	25	F	No
Gracie	23	F	No
Tochi	21	M	No
Jola	17	F	No

Ogogo	19	F	No, but wants one
Akeem	21	M	No
Rotimi	23	M	No
Tomi	19	M	Yes, a small, concealed one
Kingsley	22	M	No
Bunmi	22	F	No
Itohan	17	F	No
Kemi	19	F	No
Deji	18	M	Yes, but always covered
Fadeke	21	F	No
Ng	23	F	No
Ogogo	22	F	No
Taiye	25	F	No
Dele	17	M	No
Godspower	20	M	No
Fiyin	18	F	No
Dapo	24	M	No
BJ	19	M	No
Dave	17	M	No
Itoero	22	F	No

Data analysis procedure

The interview process continued until the point of data saturation was reached – when no further unique data was being found. Besides the interview data, the interviewer also kept an observation diary to document their reflections, analytical thoughts, and decisions during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed interpretively. The data analysis was based on a data-driven thematic approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). During the analysis of the transcribed text, significant, recurring phrases and keywords relevant to the research were highlighted. This led to the identification of recurring patterns of meanings that were repeatedly highlighted by the study participants. Guided by the three major steps of thematic analysis (Pratt et al., 2006), the data was analysed inductively, enabling two of the researchers to track participants’ responses while organising keywords, exemplary phrases, and focusing on emerging themes across interviews (Glaser and Holton, 2005; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). First-order codes, then second-order codes, and the overarching themes were determined through provisional categorisation by means of the open-coding method for data

reduction (Gioia et al., 2013). The initial coding was reviewed by a fourth researcher, and together, all the researchers discussed and consolidated themes as well as confirmed the accuracy of the themes. These processes provided external validation and thus enhanced the study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data analysis relied on the adopted theoretical perspectives and literature review to ensure the reliability and validity of the study findings (Huang et al., 2015; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Table 3 below summarises the coding and themes. The analysis gave rise to the identification of four major themes that shed light on the long-term employment-related impacts of employers' perceptions of tattooed Nigerian job applicants.

Table 3. Data structure.

First-order concepts

I believe tattoos *should not* be allowed in the work environment. Clients and customers may have dissenting opinions, which can affect the business's image and patronage.

Tattoos show a high level of irresponsibility. It gives the organisation a wrong identity and thereby a loss of patronage. Its implications on work have to do with customers' perceptions about the tattooed individual and the organisation as a whole.

It may give a bad impression or give rise to a bad perception of our organisation among potential customers, which may kill potential business within the corporate environment.

It will create a wrong impression about the workplace and the personalities at workplace.

It is not a very familiar thing in our Nigerian culture. In the Nigerian context, a tattoo-wearer may be good as an entertainer or a factory worker. It is not completely frowned upon in the ICT space, especially the younger generation.

The formal/traditional workplace may be resistant to it for a little longer. But our creative sector, like the arts, movies, sports, and music, will keep accepting it at a steady but not fast pace.

Tattoo is almost taboo in our Nigerian context. It may take a while for it to catch on in Nigeria, but we will see bits of in the tech, music, and other creative sectors.

In the education sector? No. The tattooed candidate may be a bad influence on the students. Not in our current climate. Maybe yes for a less formal sector, like the creative industry.

We place appearance over everything. We are quick to judge people by the way they look rather than what they have to offer.

There are companies who see people with tattoos as being irresponsible with their body, and so, they see them as being irresponsible. It is saddening that I am not recruited because of the way I have chosen to beautify myself instead of being recruited because of my competencies and skills.

Nigerians like profiling people before they hire them, even though that is a very myopic way of thinking. In a real sense, what a person puts on their body should be nobody's business and should not affect whether or not they will be hired – what should be the determining factor is the person's qualifications and experience.

In a Nigerian society riddled with pseudo-ethical beliefs, tattoos limit your chances of getting a job.

Having a tattoo can reduce your chances of getting recruited by some companies. What do you think happens when people's chances of employment are hindered? The people rejected are added to the unemployment list.

Some companies believe having a tattoo on one's body is a testament to their irresponsibility. Therefore, it is an automatic disqualification to draw tattoos in a conspicuous area (or areas) of the body. Automatic disqualification results in continuous unemployment.

A lot of Africans consider a tattoo as something that is not morally right and that people with tattoos are not trustworthy. This is too sad, because competent and skilled candidates may remain unemployed because of their tattoos.

Second-order themes

The ability of tattoos to make a certain impression

Implicit and explicit bias against tattooed individuals due to traditional values and the religious-based nature of Nigerian society

Placing restrictions on visible tattoos because people/businesses prioritise a traditional or certain image in order to appeal to clients/customers

Perceptions of tattoo-wearers based on the work environment/sector

The tattoo as a symbol of a lack of professionalism in a conservative field or corporate environment

The lack of receptivity in the Nigerian work environment to the aesthetics of tattoos

The prioritisation of a candidate's appearance over their skills and competencies as a criterion for their qualification or disqualification

Basing hiring decisions on a candidate's skills, experience, and qualifications – not looks

The profiling of applicants based on their appearances overshadowing their competencies, experience, and character

Losing talented employees due to appearance-based discrimination

The impacts of emphasising a person's appearance rather than their merits on their career prospects or employability

Tattoos as an index for employability as a barrier to navigating employment hurdles and to career progression

Nigerians' rejection of tattoo wearers limits employment possibilities

The increase in the national unemployment rate due to perceptions on tattoos

Aggregate dimensions

Aesthetic judgements as a pedagogical tool for organisational branding and corporate image: HR recruiters' perspectives

Industry-specific perceptions of tattoos influencing employability
HR recruiters' perspectives

'Lookism' driving the loss of talented individuals
Youth perspectives

Underutilised skills as a facilitator of unemployment and underemployment
Youth perspectives

Source: Researchers

Research findings

Four overarching themes emerged from our qualitative thematic analysis (informed by cultural and aesthetic labour theories) of the interview data. These four themes were further categorised into two groups: 1. the perspectives of HR recruiters and 2. The perspectives of youths, as discussed below.

Aesthetic judgement as a pedagogical tool for organisational branding and corporate image: Human resources recruiters' perspectives

Cultural traditions, religious views, and Nigeria's conservative society have influenced many respondents to associate tattoos with criminality, rituals, spiritual deviance, rebellion, or moral decay. Many of the interviewed HR recruiters considered tattoos to be markers of deviance, immorality, and unprofessional conduct. This finding is consistent with those of existing research on the impacts of cultural norms and societal values on organisational behaviour and employee selection (Baumann, et al., 2016; Antonellis, et al., 2017; Nickson, 2022). Because of ingrained cultural prejudices, job candidates with tattoos are considered problematic by recruiters. As a result, the hiring of tattooed applicants is hindered.

Tattoos are dangerous and sinful for a Christian. It is viewed as an act of irresponsibility and immoral. Such an applicant may not be a serious-minded worker and a lover of the high life. I can't employ an applicant with tattoos. They may influence other workers negatively (HR, Kewe).

Tattoos don't make those with tattoos on their body look responsible. They look like cultists. I cannot employ any applicant with a tattooed body. The applicant with a tattooed body will be considered a cultist and could introduce cultism into the company. They do not seem like serious-minded people. Well, Nigerians are Nigerians – we should respect what is in line with our culture and with our value system. Tattooing is a foreign and Western cultural activity. I will definitely not recruit someone with a tattoo (HR, Feyisayo).

Tattoos for me don't portray seriousness or readiness to work. It is a bad attitude... I will *not* employ an applicant with a tattoo. It is a sign of irresponsibility, and the body, as God's image, should be kept intact. It is a bad omen. To me it shows a violation of God's instruction not to tattoo the body (in Leviticus 29:28). It also shows me a dishonouring of God's property, which is the body (1 Corinthians 6:20) (HR, Kolajo).

Aesthetic labour theory argues that physical appearance is crucial for employment in jobs involving customer interactions (Tews and Stafford, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2017). Furthermore, HR recruiters, who generally emphasise professional appearance and cultural fit (where visual conformity implies professional competence), avoided hiring candidates with visible tattoos for roles involving direct customer interaction.

The corporate domain is formal. The visible tattoo doesn't conform with it. It gives the organisation a wrong identity and thereby a loss of patronage. It may give customers a bad impression or a bad perception of our organisation, which may kill potential business. The company will look irresponsible in the face of customers. I won't be hiring someone with a tattoo (HR, Gee).

It depends on the placement of the tattoo on the body. If it's visible, it exhibits recklessness and immaturity. If it's hidden, it expresses discretion. If I can see the tattoo from across the desk, I can't hire such a person (HR, Tafa).

It depends on the role. For customer-facing teams – no tattoos. Tattooed candidates are carefree, and not disciplined. If the tattoo is prominent and visible, I won't recruit the candidate. I can't lose my customers or sales because of my employees' appearance (HR, Feranmi).

Perceived as a significant impediment to organisational corporate image and brand, the interviewed HR recruiters emphasised the importance of employees' physical appearance, and personal style, especially the significance of maintaining a 'professional' appearance, often defining this in ways that exclude visible tattoos. This approach aligns with aesthetic labour theory, which highlights how physical appearance is commodified in the labour market (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2017).

The ability to trust (a person wearing a tattoo) is questionable, especially when it's a front-burner image of the company. A client may be afraid to deal with them. It gives the organisation a wrong identity (HR, Folake).

I want to see my staff as always responsible. I established my company for profit-making, and I do not want anything to stand in the way of that. Hence, I will not accept any showcase of tattoos. Appearance shows manner. People with tattoos might have prospects, but they also put a company at the edge of failure, because employees with tattoos reflect poorly on the employers (HR, Yemo).

A person wearing tattoos is perceived as being unserious, irresponsible, uncultured, and delinquent by most interviewers – especially when a tattoo is very loud and visible. This may give a bad impression or a bad perception of our organisation to a potential customer, which may kill potential businesses (HR, Olaitan).

The above narratives about visibility and concealment align with Goffman's (1959) concept of 'passing', according to which stigmatised individuals may attempt to hide their stigmatising attributes. Evidencing a preference for candidates who conform to traditional norms and standards of appearance, these subjective accounts of the interviewed HR recruiters reinforce this notion. However, the findings show no link between employees' tattoos and job performance.

(The presence of a tattoo or not) does not matter to me, as long as the employee has the required skills for the role. Yes – if she or he merits it. The candidate only needs to be qualified and trained for the job! It's his or her brain that does the job, not his or her tattoo. However, I will counsel the person to respect God's temple, the body, and cease such a habit (HR, Femi).

Tattoos have nothing to do with the job. If candidates are sound enough, their attitude is great (hoping the tattoo does not give a mental bias), and they are capable of doing the job, then they can have the job. I would employ an intelligent and talented candidate regardless of his or her tattoo (HR, Ike).

My only consideration for employment is product knowledge or the ability to learn. Tattoos have nothing to do with a person's ability to deliver on the job. I have no prejudice against anyone bearing tattoos, if he or she comports himself or herself professionally – because I focus on the applicant's skills and ability to deliver on the job (HR, Bisola).

Tattoo placement and visibility considerably affect how people perceive them, with hidden tattoos considered in a more positive light (Timming, 2015).

In conclusion, the participants believed that tattoos create a perception of unprofessionalism and could harm a company's reputation. This viewpoint is common in sectors like finance, law, and education, which link professional image to conventional looks and dependability.

Industry-specific perceptions of tattoos influencing employability: HR recruiters' perspectives

In Nigeria, where conservative appearance norms prevail, the acceptance of tattoos varies across industries, according to HR recruiters. Reflecting a bias rooted in cultural conservatism, tolerance for tattoos is higher in creative, informal sectors – such as advertising and fashion – which encourage creative self-expression (Timming, 2015). Conversely, conservative fields – such as healthcare, accounting, banking, finance, and education – uphold rigorous aesthetic guidelines, mirroring societal professionalism norms (Timming & Perrett, 2016).

The formal/traditional workplace may be resistant to tattoos for a little longer. But our creative sector, like the arts, movies, sports, and music, will keep accepting it at a steady but not fast pace (HR, Bijay).

[People with tattoos are] irresponsible and dirty. Most people with tattoos do not work in our formal/traditional sectors. I don't like seeing them. In the creative sector, though, it will gain acceptance, because it is a mark of 'belonging' to a creative group. Tattoos may pass in an industry like entertainment (HR, Collins).

It is not a very familiar thing in our Nigerian culture, but it is not completely frowned upon in the ICT space, particularly among the younger generation. I don't mind job applicants having them, but the tattoos should not be visible. They are a major distraction. Provided they can be covered, I would employ a tattooed candidate (HR, Oni).

There is an implicit expectation for employees to present themselves in a manner that aligns with conventional standards of professionalism in some sectors and the wearing of tattoos can conflict with these aesthetic norms, particularly in formal sectors (Henle et al., 2022).

The ethics of a profession may require one's body to be clean before one can render a particular service. This can be seen in the case of a blood transfusion. Before a person can donate blood, one of the prerequisite things is that she or he must not have a tattoo on his or her body. Tattooed persons are prone to have infected livers, according to reports. They may be infected with viral diseases, e.g. hepatitis or HIV/AIDS. It would be unethical in the healthcare sector (HR, Ige).

A tattoo may be a distraction from learning in the education sector. A tattooed candidate may be a bad influence on the students. Not in our current clime. Maybe yes for a less formal sector, like the creative industry (HR, Yele)

It all depends on the preferences of the company, the illustration of the tattoo, and where it is drawn because it puts off recruiters in Nigeria if it's visible. So, I would advise young people to be wise in their tattoo placement. We are still in Nigeria (HR, Bisola).

To build a more inclusive and diverse workforce, organisations may need to revise their policies and definitions of professionalism, acknowledging that visible tattoos do not compromise an individual's skills or organisational image. Some HR recruiters advocate for (non-tattoo-friendly) sectors to adopt a more nuanced and accepting approach and leverage the unique qualities and talents of all employees, regardless of their physical appearance.

I have a liberal attitude towards wearers of tattoos, as I consider them to be expressing their fundamental right of choice. People with tattoos should not be discriminated against – they should be free to work anywhere, provided they are qualified and trained for their position! It's a bit laughable to deny a qualified person a job simply because of an insignificant tattoo. Probably putting in place protective laws for tattoo-wearers may help (HR, Roger).

The culture of a work environment determines workers' attitudes to tattoos. Those in the conservative field or corporate environment see tattoos as unprofessional. The conservative work culture in Nigeria is not

receptive to the aesthetics of tattoos. However, times are changing, and organisations need to take cognisance of this change so as not to risk losing talent (HR, Evans).

The work environment in Nigeria will have no choice but to fall in line with global practice in this regard. The Nigerian workplace will need to focus on the suitability of the employee rather than to consider personal, tangential, or irrelevant issues (HR, Beth).

'Lookism' driving the loss of aesthetically talented individuals: Young demographic perspectives

Cultural theory illuminates how deeply ingrained cultural norms and societal values are in shaping Nigerian perceptions of tattoos in employment. Religious beliefs associating tattoos with spiritual transgression and weak morals strengthen these perceptions (Ekenedo and Elechi, 2020). A tension was reported by many participants between conventional Nigerian values and job prospects for those with tattoos, which is frequently associated with a loss of gifted employees due to appearance bias. The study findings are consistent with an academic discourse on discriminatory labour markets and the demand for inclusive recruitment (Baumann, et al., 2016; Cutcher, et al., 2017; Tews and Stafford, 2020).

Implicit and explicit bias against tattooed individuals is due to traditional values, culture, and the religious nature of the society. Some companies believe having a tattoo on one's body is a testament to their irresponsibility. Therefore, a tattoo is an automatic disqualification (Young, Bims).

In a Nigerian society, riddled with pseudo-ethical beliefs, tattoos limit your chances of getting a job. We place appearance over everything. We are quick to judge people by the way they look rather than what they have to offer. People tend to see anybody who has a tattoo as an irresponsible person, which is not supposed to be such. Having a tattoo can reduce your chances of getting recruited by some companies. It's something that is not cool, as it limits the chances of talented candidates getting recruited (Young, Nana).

Most of the Nigerian society considers stuff like tattoos and piercings as indecent. This negatively affects the recruiter's perception of the recruit, because the conservative nature of the Nigerian culture still allows tattoos to be viewed negatively, and the way a person looks largely affects the perceptions of recruiters (Young, Akeem).

Young people largely feel workplace culture prioritises superficial judgements over genuine merit – a focus on looks rather than skills, experience, and character. Insisting on a meritocracy, the young participants argued that hiring processes should prioritise a candidate's qualifications, skills, and experience above all else.

A person's value isn't determined by appearance and fashion. Their character, value, and abilities should be placed over their appearance. A lot of Africans consider a tattoo as something that is not morally right and that people with tattoos are not trustworthy. It's a shame on the system. Given the way Africans think, it's definitely going to affect someone who has a tattoo in a place. This is too sad, because competent and skilled candidates may remain unemployed because of their tattoos. (Young, Barakat).

The continuous focus on insignificant aesthetic issues like tattoos impacts people's employment chances and career advancement. A tattoo is nothing but ink on the skin! The question should be if the person is qualified and trained for the job! It's his or her brain that does the job, not his or her tattoo. In a real sense, what a person puts on their body should be nobody's business and should not affect whether or not the person will be hired – what should be the determining factor should be the person's qualifications and experience (Young, Nonso).

Tattooing is an art, and I have no issues with it. In fact, I'd like to have one, too, but I have to think of what is readily accepted in my clime. It is saddening that I would not be recruited because of the way I would have chosen to beautify myself instead of being recruited because of my competencies and skills. The perceptions of tattooed candidates will have implications in the long term in relation to companies missing out on key competencies and skills (Young, Doyin).

In sum, young Nigerians say that the cultural and religious prejudice against tattoos in Nigeria is a major obstacle to employment for people who have or want tattoos. This stigma is reinforced by societal norms that prioritise conservative appearance standards in professional environments. This perpetuates job bias against those with tattoos, which significantly impacts Nigeria's employment future.

*Underutilised aesthetic skills as a facilitator of unemployment and underemployment:
Youth perspectives*

Beyond calling for a merit-based system over an appearance-based system, the young demographic advocates for more progressive attitudes towards tattoos, as ongoing stigma can result in prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment. This bias can lead to the systematic exclusion of qualified candidates based on their appearance, resulting in the underutilisation of a productive workforce segment.

In terms of the Nigerian context and work environment, such stigma should be stopped in our society. A lot of intelligent and smart people are roaming the society jobless, all because of how the government has failed to provide jobs for its citizens, and some corporate bodies or organisations have been turning down qualified people because of the notion of a tattooed person being ‘irresponsible’ (Young, Ogogo).

In Nigeria, tattoos are yet to be accepted, and this could result in a loss of skills and talent, further exacerbating the unemployment problem in the country. There is a need to put an end to the seething resentment of persons who wear tattoos in Nigeria (Young, BJ).

Tattoos should not affect a person’s career prospects or employability, but the African system has placed undue emphasis on appearance rather than merit. Basing hiring decisions on physical appearance rather than on value, skills, and qualifications leads to a loss of talent, and these all result in the long-term implication of lasting unemployment (Young, Muaz).

The long-term career trajectories of tattooed individuals suffer from these prevailing cultural and aesthetic biases. Tattooed candidates often face discrimination in hiring processes, thus limiting their opportunities for career advancement and professional development (Timming et.al, 2017). Influenced by global cultural trends and media exposure, the young demographic calls for a change in aesthetic labour expectations and the acceptance of tattoos as an element of personal expression.

The work environment in Nigeria will have no choice but to fall in line with global practice in this regard. The workplace will necessarily evolve the creed of the suitability of the employee rather than the consideration of personal, tangential, or irrelevant issues (Young, Fiya).

Change is a constant factor in life, so the work environment in Nigeria will have to adapt to global changes and trends in order to remain relevant or lose out on employing good hands. A tattoo is a way in which some people like to express themselves; it does not mean the person is bad or unruly. We need to get that Stone Age mentality out of our heads. People with tattoos should not be discriminated against – they should be free to work anywhere. Otherwise, we will be losing qualified and trained talent (Young, Umoh).

We as a people and a country need to open our minds and focus on what is most important, like people's attitudes, kindness, love, and functionality among other things, instead of focusing on insignificant aesthetic issues, like tattoos. It is wrong to try to impose your moral standards on other people – live and let live. We need to work on our perceptions as a country and be forward-thinking on some issues (Young, Akeem).

Although advocating for more progressive attitudes towards tattoos, some of the young people interviewed explained that to navigate complex institutional, religious, and cultural expectations, according to which a job candidate's visual appearance is evaluated according to prevailing professional standards, tattooed candidates and those who intend to have tattoos should be discreet regarding the placement of their tattoos.

We are still in Nigeria. Applicants with a tattoo should cover up properly when going for any job. Some organisations frown upon tattoos, while some – according to their ethics, morals, or religion – don't accept tattoos. Given the way Africans think, it's going to affect someone who has a tattoo in a place that is not covered by his or her clothing, especially if it's in a corporate organisation. (Young, Itohan).

Some companies are not worried about tattoos, while some see it as a criterion – that is, to be eligible for the job, one must be clean and have blemish-free skin. Some companies believe having a tattoo on one's body is a testament to their irresponsibility. I feel that society should stop profiling people with tattoos. It's a fashion we should start appreciating, and we should recognise its value and importance. However, this is Nigeria. Nigerians like profiling people before they hire them, even though that is a very myopic way of thinking. Young people need to be wise here. It's either we keep the skin blemish-free or hide the tattoo from visibility (Young, Godspower).

Having a tattoo can reduce your chances of getting recruited by some companies. It's something that looks cool to me. Being able to have what you feel on your skin is a good feeling. In as much as I like it, I have had to reconsider so that it doesn't block my hiring chances. It is saddening that I would not be recruited because of the way I have chosen to beautify myself instead of by considering my competencies (Young, Zion).

In sum, the subjective accounts of the interviewed young people reveal that the systematic exclusion of tattooed candidates from the workforce has far-reaching consequences for Nigeria's economic development and social cohesion. Employers may be limiting the talent pool, thus stifling innovation, productivity, and competitiveness. The marginalisation of tattooed individuals can lead to increased social inequality, frustration among youths, and a potential 'brain drain' as skilled workers seek opportunities in more accepting environments abroad (Tews et al., 2020; Mahwinny and Betts, 2024)

Discussion

Despite existing research on Nigerian society's perceptions of tattoos, the impact thereof on employment across industries and the resulting discrimination or potential market advantages remain understudied. This study explored the employment perceptions of tattooed job applicants and the long-term employment implications of wearing tattoos in Nigeria. This study applied a multi-theoretical approach (a combination of cultural and aesthetic labour theories) to its qualitative analysis of narratives collected from HR recruiters and young people aged 17 to 25 years old. This study builds on and advances existing scholarly work on tattoos and the workplace by applying cultural and aesthetic labour theories to the Nigerian context, showing how tattoos are perceived as negative cultural capital that hinders employability. Unlike Western views of tattoos as self-expression, Nigerian recruiters often see them as unprofessional or deviant. The study introduces the idea of "permanent aesthetic decisions with perpetual professional consequences" and identifies four themes: visual conformity, identity

suppression, contextual acceptance, and aesthetic gatekeeping. The study reveals that visual conformity significantly shapes HR recruiters' perceptions, with bodily/visual conformity often equated to professionalism, making visible tattoos a perceived threat to corporate image and brand identity (Theme 1). This is further reflected in industry-specific perceptions (Theme 2), where tattoos are seen to diminish employability prospects. Additionally, themes of contextual acceptance and aesthetic gatekeeping (Themes 3 and 4) underscore the prevailing belief that tattoos undermine work ethic, competency, or professional skill, thereby reinforcing a cycle of youth unemployment and contributing to the loss and underutilisation of competent human capital within Nigeria's labour market.

Providing insights into how cultural attitudes and workplace expectations intersect to influence the employability of tattooed candidates in the Nigerian context, the study themes and findings suggest that there is an implicit expectation for employees to present themselves in a manner that aligns with conventional standards of professionalism in some workplaces, especially in sectors like education, banking, corporate services, and customer-facing roles. Tattooed candidates may face significant biases during the recruitment process, which limits their employment opportunities (Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2017). The findings show the persistent stigmatisation of tattooed individuals in Nigerian workplaces, contrary to the growing acceptance thereof in Western contexts. Employers and co-workers often held prejudiced views, perceiving tattoos as unprofessional or as indicative of undesirable traits, such as a lack of seriousness or a propensity for deviance. This perception is compounded by societal views that often associate tattoos with negative stereotypes (Adisa et al., 2021, 2023, 2024).

These negative perceptions of tattoos affect the hiring chances and career trajectories of tattooed individuals, creating unemployment due to 'lookism'. The long-term implications of these persistent aesthetic biases can lead to chronic underemployment or unemployment for

those with tattoos. The stigmatisation of tattoos can also affect employee retention, as individuals may feel compelled to hide their tattoos or seek employment in more accepting environments. The focus of this study has been ‘lookism’ – discrimination or prejudice based on a person’s physical appearance, particularly when individuals are judged, treated differently, or face systemic biases because of their looks. Lookism reflects a reality that many tattooed jobseekers in the Nigerian job market face. Even if hired, tattooed employees might find themselves limited to roles with less visibility or opportunities for advancement, perpetuating a cycle of economic disadvantage and social marginalisation. The need to conform to aesthetic standards can lead to a homogenisation of the workforce, limiting the range of perspectives and ideas within organisations (Antonellis et al., 2017). Although this is not the main focus of the present research, it is, however, noteworthy that anecdotal evidence reveals that the lack of diversity may have broader implications for organisational innovation and adaptability.

Regarding the level of acceptance of tattooed candidates by employers in various sectors of the economy, most sectors exhibit low tolerance for tattooed applicants, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Acceptance of tattoos across Nigeria’s work sectors.

Sector	Level of Tattoo Acceptance
Accounting, banking, finance	Low
Agriculture	Low
Civil service	Low
Construction, manufacturing,	High
Education	Very low
Entertainment, beauty and creative industries, media	Very high
Health	Low
Hospitality	Low

Information communication technology	High
Legal	Low
Oil and Gas	Low
Real Estate	Moderate
Religion	Very low

Source: Researchers

Thus, employers, especially in conservative industries such as accounting, banking, and law, require tattoos to be covered in order to meet client expectations and industry standards. Modern workplaces, especially in the creative and tech sectors, are embracing visible tattoos, recognising them as a personal expression that does not detract from an individual's skills or capabilities. Differing industry acceptance levels show that tattoo stigma is dependent on context.

The intersections between cultural aesthetics, embodied work, and employment access within Nigeria's labour market are evidenced herein, adding to both the theoretical and practical comprehension of appearance-based bias. The study's multi-theoretical framework, which combines cultural and aesthetic labour theory, yields three key theoretical contributions.

First, the analysis extends aesthetic labour theory by demonstrating how tattoos function as negative cultural capital in the Nigerian employment context. Prior research in Western contexts viewed tattoos as self-expression (Timming, 2015). In terms of Nigeria, the study reveals that tattoo-wearing hinders employment prospects, functioning as 'aesthetic liability' because of cultural disapproval. The HR recruiters' responses reveal ingrained cultural views of tattoos as markers of nonconformity, which confirms Bourdieu's (1986) idea of embodied cultural capital yet inverts its positive implications.

Second, the findings also show the process of the 'cultural authentication of professional aesthetics', whereby local cultural norms significantly influence what constitutes acceptable

workplace appearance. This finding extends Warhurst and Nickson's (2001) study of aesthetic labour, which highlights the role of the cultural context in shaping the 'looking-good' component of employability.

Third, the results of the present research also contribute to the understanding of the long-term effects of aesthetic work choices on employment. Unlike temporary aesthetic modifications, tattoos represent what we conceptualise as 'permanent aesthetic decisions with perpetual professional consequences'. This temporal dimension extends to current theoretical frameworks by highlighting how early aesthetic choices can create enduring barriers to employment opportunities. The HR recruiters' accounts reveal that there are limited opportunities for professional redemption once candidates are categorised as 'inappropriately modified', suggesting aesthetic path dependency in career trajectories.

Collectively, the study themes underscore systemic appearance-based discrimination, especially within conservative sectors, positioning tattoos as a structural barrier to inclusion and upward mobility in Nigeria's evolving yet culturally entrenched labour market.

Implications for practice and policy

The study findings have implications for organisations, HR practitioners, policymakers, and individuals' career strategies in Nigeria, suggesting a need for more nuanced approaches to appearance-based judgements in professional settings. The discrimination against tattooed candidates highlights a need for more inclusive HRM practices in Nigeria. As workplaces become more diverse, HRM must navigate the complex interplay between personal expression, cultural heritage, and organisational culture. Employers should reconsider operating according to rigid appearance standards that may not reflect an individual's professional capabilities. Organisations may need to develop dynamic policies that reflect evolving cultural norms while maintaining professional standards. In addition to being aware of current cultural and aesthetic

norms, organisations need to recognise that these are evolving and develop long-term career strategies that leverage employees' skills and adapt to changing perceptions.

The potential for appearance-based discrimination raises important questions about the need for legislative protection against aesthetic bias in employment decisions. Policymakers may need to consider enacting legislation that protects employees against appearance-based discrimination while allowing for necessary professional standards and support initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace. This is especially important considering that the contemporary vision of an individual's workplace identity has grown to include their (tattooed) identity, having taken into consideration variations in the needs of the new workforce generations (Zoomers, millennials, alphas) and the practicalities of the situation (Flanigan & Lewis, 2019). Anti-discrimination policies may need to address tattoos as a form of personal expression resulting from the need to balance employee rights with organisational image concerns. Nigerian society can promote inclusivity and challenge aesthetic prejudices to build a more diverse and equitable workforce, benefiting both individuals and organisations.

The government and businesses need to develop and enforce anti-discrimination policies that explicitly prohibit appearance-based biases, including those related to tattoos, in hiring assessments. As a matter of policy, lookism should be incorporated into current anti-discrimination laws or employment regulations to ensure the fair treatment of tattooed individuals facing appearance-based discrimination. The researchers argue that diversity and inclusion training for HR professionals should be mandated by law. This will ensure that HR professionals and hiring managers are trained to recognise and mitigate unconscious biases related to appearance, including tattoos, during recruitment processes. There is a need for sector-specific guidelines on appearance standards. The present study reveals that some industries have low or very low levels of tattoo acceptance. These sectors of the economy, which have rigid aesthetic standards (see Table 4), should reassess and adapt their employee

appearance policies to accommodate evolving cultural norms and forms of individual expression, such as tattoos. Long-term monitoring of lookism-related unemployment and underemployment is necessary. Consequently, policymakers must continuously monitor the economic and social consequences of lookism, particularly its contribution to unemployment and underemployment among Nigerian youth, especially tattooed individuals. This may require the establishment of research initiatives and labour market surveys to track the prevalence of appearance-based discrimination and its effects on the hiring of tattooed youth.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends cultural and aesthetic labour theories by demonstrating how tattoos function as a form of *negative cultural capital* in the Nigerian job market. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *embodied cultural capital*, the research reveals that tattoos are perceived as markers of deviance and unprofessionalism, shaped by prevailing cultural and religious norms (Adisa et al., 2021; Mensah et al., 2018). It introduces the concept of "*permanent aesthetic decisions with perpetual professional consequences*," showing how tattoos create lasting barriers to employment - what the study terms aesthetic path dependency, whereby early body modifications result in enduring exclusion from mainstream professional opportunities (Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2017).

Additionally, the research advances aesthetic labour theory by uncovering the *cultural authentication of professional aesthetics*, where local standards dictate acceptable workplace appearance (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). This challenges the universality of aesthetic labour expectations by highlighting the role of culture in shaping employability norms, especially in conservative societies like Nigeria. Together, these findings reframe *lookism*—the bias based on physical appearance - as a structural form of discrimination (Antonellis et al., 2017), deepening our understanding of how cultural aesthetics and labour market dynamics intersect in postcolonial and transitional economies.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although this study has provided valuable insights into employers' perceptions of tattooed job applicants and the long-term effects of tattoo-wearing on Nigerian employment, it does have some limitations, which indeed constitute opportunities for future research in the broader areas of tattooing and tattooed candidates. First, the study's focus on young people aged 17–25 years old may not reflect generational variations in tattoo perceptions. The study is also limited to urban areas and may not fully represent rural perspectives. The reliance on self-reported data from young people may carry the risk of response bias. Likewise, the consideration of only the cultural context of Nigeria may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions. Regional differences and the impact of educational background on workplace tattoo perceptions warrant further investigation. Future studies could explore the experiences of tattooed employees who have navigated the Nigerian job market in order to identify strategies for overcoming stigma. Future research could also explore how perceptions of tattoos vary across different Nigerian regions and investigate potential interventions to address aesthetic discrimination in recruitment practices. Furthermore, there is a need for more comprehensive data on the impact of tattoos on career progression and job satisfaction among Nigerian youths. Scholars may consider undertaking longitudinal studies to assess changes in perceptions over time and explore interventions that can mitigate biases against tattooed individuals in the workplace. Comparative studies with other African countries could provide insights into how different cultural contexts shape the evolution of aesthetic labour norms.

Conclusion

This study, which employed a multi-theoretical approach, has been a qualitative examination of the employment-related perceptions of tattoos in Nigeria and the long-term career prospects for tattooed Nigerians. The study highlighted how 'lookism'

disproportionately affects tattooed jobseekers, exacerbating unemployment and underemployment among Nigerian youths. The interplay between cultural values and aesthetic labour underscores the complexities faced by tattooed individuals in the job market. By addressing these biases, HR professionals can create more inclusive and equitable workplaces that value diversity in appearance and expression. The acceptability of the culture of tattooing in the Nigeria context is weak compared to acceptance in the West. The study also highlighted that employers retain the right to set boundaries on the expected and required appearance of employees in the workplace, albeit within the confines of the state's employment law (Cutcher et al., 2017; Flanigan & Lewis, 2019).

As Nigeria continues to engage in global business practices and cultural influences, the dynamics of traditional values and modern expressions of identity will continue to evolve. Organisations, individuals, and policymakers must navigate this changing landscape, striking a balance between respecting cultural norms and fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces. With the increasing number of tattooed persons, the future world of work could be that in which a greater percentage of the skilled, talented, and productive workforce falls among the tattooed (Flanigan & Lewis, 2019). By fostering a more inclusive workplace culture, organisations can benefit from a diverse workforce that values skills and qualifications over appearance.

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