Graduate dress code

How undergraduates are planning to use hair, clothes and make-up to smooth their transition to the workplace

Beth Cutts, Tristram Hooley and Julia Yates

Abstract: *This article explores the relationship between students' identities, their ideas about professional appearance and their anticipated transition to the world of work. It is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 13 students from a vocationally-focused university in England. It was found that participants viewed clothing and appearance as an important aspect of their transition to the workplace. They believed that, if carefully handled, their appearance could help them to fit in and satisfy the expectations of employers, although some participants anticipated that this process of fitting in might compromise their identity and values. The article addresses students' anticipated means of handling the tension between adapting to a new environment and 'being themselves'. It is argued that the way this process is handled is intertwined with wider facets of identity – most notably those associated with gender.*

Keywords: *appearance; career; clothing; gender; graduate transitions; identity*

Beth Cutts is a Researcher and Tristram Hooley (corresponding author) is Professor of Career Education in the International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1 GB, UK. E-mail: t.hooley@derby.ac.uk. Julia Yates is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology, University of East London, UK.

Undergraduate students inhabit a world governed by a series of shared, implicit rules and conventions. Their habitus includes an understanding of what language to use in seminars, what is expected in an essay and what it means to be late for a lecture. It also includes a set of understandings about what it is appropriate to wear in different contexts and how best to present oneself aesthetically. Of course, not all students dress the same; indeed university is a time when many people choose to experiment with their appearance. However, regardless of sub-cultural affiliation, students perform their identities within the context of the habitus of the university. While the rules may be complex, fluid and contextually situated, by the end of a three-year university course an undergraduate is likely to be clear about what is expected, acceptable and valued. On graduation, a newly emerged graduate may start a job. The new environment in which they find themselves presents as a new habitus, which the graduate, if they want to fit in, will need to identify, analyse and adopt. The resulting changes in appearance and behaviour denote a change in identity from student to worker.

The various roles adopted by individuals in different aspects of their lives are discussed by Goffman (1959)

as a form of performance. Individuals perform different roles, or 'parts', in different situations, according to predetermined unspoken rules (*ibid*, 1959). Butler (1988) applies this idea of performativity to gender, arguing that clothing, hair and make-up are carefully chosen to perform a gender role as well as an occupational or social role.

This article examines graduate transitions using this concept of performance and explores the following questions.

(1) How do current undergraduates perceive appropriate career conduct and appearance?
(2) How do different participants' ideas about career conduct and appearance vary?
(3) How do students perceive that they will have to change their conduct and appearance in order to make a successful transition to the world of work?
(4) What resources do students believe exist to support them in making this transition?

Graduate transitions and the performance of identity

There is an extensive literature examining graduate transitions. Much of this is considered from the perspective of the university, often with a focus on the knowledge, skills and behaviours universities should develop in their graduates to prepare them for the transition to work (for example, Bridgstock, 2011; Hager and Holland, 2006). Other research examines the kinds of labour-market outcomes that university graduates can expect (for example, Purcell *et al*, 2012).

An alternative way to regard graduate transitions is to concentrate on the interplay between the graduates' own performance of their identity and the interpretations that others, such as graduate employers, make of that performance (Holmes, 2001). Holden and Hamblett (2007) argued that graduate transitions combine both conscious and unconscious choices and acts. Individuals adapt themselves to new circumstances both through conscious performance and by unconsciously adapting to new environments, internalizing 'common sense' ideas about what constitutes appropriate business wear and behaviour.

We have drawn on Goffman (1959) to conceptualize this process of graduate transition. He views social settings as staged dramas, with individuals playing different parts, underpinned by a shared understanding of expected behaviour. Goffman suggests that whenever we meet anyone we automatically look for signs or symbols that will provide information about that person. This information is useful because it tells us what to expect and how to behave. The individuals in an

interaction express themselves and analyse each other, reaching a 'working consensus' of how to interact together. Goffman notes that we are not always comfortable with the role we are required to play and, in these situations, we may use symbols quite deliberately to communicate this incongruence. Ibarra (2005) and Parmentier *et al*, (2013) not only offer alternative theorizations of identity transition, but also highlight the way in which identities are 'tried on' in ways that allow individuals to negotiate the processes of both fitting in and standing out.

Identity is composed of personal identity (the self-knowledge that derives from our uniqueness) and social identity (self-knowledge based on our similarity to others). Social identity is derived from the knowledge that you are in a group and able to draw on a range of material, cultural and psychological benefits (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Our social identities contribute to both our self-esteem and our self-concept (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Self-esteem is enhanced as we choose to associate ourselves with groups whose members we admire and groups which we feel will confer on us a higher status. Our self-concept is maintained when we are part of groups which share some of the qualities which already constitute part of our existing personal identity (Dutton *et al*, 1994).

We each inhabit a range of identities related to the fields within which we operate. These include home, work and social and religious groups. In the context of graduate transitions to the workplace, the notion of 'work identity' is particularly important. This concept encompasses a number of more specific work-related identities (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013) which could include career, occupational or organizational identities.

Appearance offers one way that individuals can express their identities within the fields that they inhabit. The literature suggests that there is a range of career benefits for those who present themselves in a way that is appealing to their colleagues and employers. Hooley and Yates (2014) summarize this literature, arguing that an advantageous career image comprises physical beauty, inter-personal skills and aesthetic self-presentation.

For a graduate, new to the workplace, analysing and identifying their new habitus can be challenging: codes of appearance are complex, subtle and rarely stated overtly. In some cases employers will enforce a dress code (Hazen and Syrdahl, 2010); more usually, dress codes are implicit and need to be assimilated by new entrants to the workplace. Mismatches in expectations can, at their most extreme, result in censure, disciplinary action or even legal proceedings (Hazen and Syrdahl, 2010).

There are social limitations to the identities that are allowed to be performed in the workplace. Employers' constraints on the wearing of trousers, skirts, long hair or make-up are in essence requirements for people to perform their identity, and particularly their gender identity, normatively. Often the constraints on performance are subtle, shaping the way that identity is performed rather than prohibiting it altogether. Thus while it may be expected that a female employee will wear a skirt, where that skirt is deemed to be too short (or too long), the wrong colour or style, it may invite comment and or censure. The complex, context-specific subtleties of these mores allow us to find examples of women who have been dismissed for wearing no make-up as well as those who have been dismissed for wearing too much make-up (Hazen and Syrdahl, 2010).

Creating the right career image is not straightforward: it requires a complex set of alignments between the individual and the field they inhabit. The literature refers to the notion of 'aesthetic labour', highlighting the considerable efforts that workers make to ensure that they gain the maximum advantage from their appearance.

Methodology

A grounded theory approach was adopted for the research. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is a method for inductively generating theory (Patton, 1990). It offers a systematic approach to analysis whereby a theory is developed that is grounded in the words, behaviours and perceptions of the participants. It is thought to be particularly useful in arenas where there is not an existing theory (Crooks, 2001).

The grounded theory approach taken in this study was interactive and interpretive (Charmaz, 2006). Theory was developed from the perspective of the participants, with researchers analysing the data, interpreting it – noting patterns and relationships, abstracting the themes, identifying concepts – and finally theorizing. Interviews were undertaken with current undergraduate students and analysed in order to build concepts and theory (Carey, 2012). The literature review developed alongside the research, as new themes presented themselves (Cohen *et al*, 2007).

Recruitment of participants was undertaken via word-of-mouth, producing a convenience sample from a single university. In part, a snow-ball approach was taken to recruitment; one interviewee would suggest an acquaintance who would be willing to participate in the research, and so on. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews, conducted by a second-year undergraduate student. The interviews were based on a series of questions relating to appearance and behaviour in a graduate workplace. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable method because they allow for a variety of responses whilst keeping the participant focused on a specific topic (Carey, 2012).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were stored and analysed using Nvivo (a qualitative analysis software package). The interviews were coded in order to organize the data and assist analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Individual codes were gradually joined together to form concepts which developed as more interviews were conducted, eventually leading to identifiable patterns in the interviews (Carey, 2012). Multiple individuals (the three authors cited) were involved, independent of each other, in the coding process, in order to ensure an objective, non-biased approach. Where possible, the construction of codes was guided by the respondents' own phraseology and semantics so that definitions were not based entirely on the coders' preconceptions (MacQueen *et al*, 1998). Overarching categories, made up of a combination of codes, were then agreed upon according to the data assembled (Cohen *et al*, 2007).

Participants

Thirteen undergraduate students (8 female and 5 male) were interviewed. Participants were second or third-year undergraduates, from a range of disciplines, studying at a vocationally-focused university in England.

Nine of the interviewees had made the move to university immediately after completing their A-level studies.[1] The other four participants were mature students, three of whom – aged between 25 and 26 – had worked for a number of years after completing their A-levels, with the fourth having returned to university at the age of 46. The participants had a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Nine were white British; two were mixed-race, one was Nigerian and one was South African. Varying religious backgrounds were also included. Participants were either of Christian denomination, agnostic, or did not identify with any religious beliefs. The interviewees were enrolled in a range of different degree courses: there were six students studying English, three studying biology, two studying psychology, one studying electronics and one studying textiles.

Table 1 provides a summary of each student interviewed, including their age, gender, ethnicity, degree subject and career aspirations. The sample is not intended to be representative and so caution should be exercised when considering how these findings might be more widely applied. The students were drawn from a single university and included more female participants than males. Whilst some variety of ethnic background

Table 1. Summary information about the participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Degree subject and year of course	Career aspirations
Participant A	26	Female	Filipino–British	English 2nd year	Publishing, teaching or management
Participant B	21	Female	South African	English 2nd year	Librarianship or lecturing
Participant C	46	Female	British	Psychology 2nd year	Research
Participant D	22	Male	British	Biology 3rd year	Unsure, possibly laboratory work
Participant E	25	Male	British	English 2nd year	Primary or secondary school teacher
Participant F	21	Female	British	English 2nd year	Primary school teacher
Participant G	21	Female	British	Biology 2nd year	Laboratory assistant
Participant H	25	Male	Nigerian	Electronics 2nd year	Electronics installation engineer or electronics designer
Participant I	21	Male	British	English, 2nd year	English teacher
Participant J	21	Male	British	English 2nd year	Advertising/management
Participant K	22	Female	Estonian–British	Biology 3rd year	Would like to work with people, and possibly in a management position
Participant L	21	Female	British	Psychology 2nd year	Unsure, interested in mental health
Participant M	21	Female	British	Textiles 2nd year	Textiles design

and religious belief is illustrated in the sample, this is not intended to be representative. This was intended to be a in-depth qualitative study which dealt at surface level with concepts and enabled the generation of theory. The 13 semi-structured interviews generated a large amount of rich data which support this aim. One possibility for further research would be to follow this present investigation with larger-scale studies, perhaps including quantitative elements, with sample frames designed to investigate more precisely how career image is perceived across the wider student population.

Results

Four major themes became apparent in the interviews.

(1) *Being judged on appearance.* Participants were clear that appearance was important for successful transition to the labour market. Dress, hair, tattoos and make-up were discussed as facets which students planned to use in order to smooth this transition.
(2) *Fitting in.* Participants discussed various ways in which they could use dress and appearance to integrate into a working environment.
(3) *Being yourself.* Although participants regarded dress and appearance as offering tools to fit in, they also

saw them as a way of expressing their individuality. The tension between fitting in and 'being yourself' was discussed.
(4) *Gender.* Gender played an important role in the way many of the other themes were discussed. This was clear both through the different ways in which our male and female participants discussed issues of appearance and in the way that participants interpreted that the nature of workplace appearance was overtly gendered.

Theme 1: Being judged on appearance

Participants felt that individuals are judged on their appearance, particularly during the interview process and in the early days of their employment. For example, Participant L said, 'It is the first thing that they [interviewers] judge you on. What you look like and what you're wearing.'

This view that appearance is a key factor in job selection was common, with participants suggesting that appearance could make or break a job interview. Participant E stated that they felt appearance was a highly important factor in the interview process, claiming that 'obviously people do still go on image'. Furthermore, when asked how important appearance is at an interview, Participant L stated it is simply as

'really important'. Participants also felt that appearance would be crucial in the performance of some roles. This was perhaps more the case in positions which involved interacting with the public or with clients. Participant H indicated this, suggesting that 'You might be taken more seriously by some clients you know when they see you nice and neat'. Participant B iterated this point, saying 'I think when you're face-to-face, [. . .] you have to sort of dress in a manner that's appropriate'. Students articulated a strong agreement about the necessity of a certain level of appearance in customer-facing positions.

Theme 1a: Tattoos/piercings. Tattoos and piercings were seen to carry negative connotations in a graduate workplace. Participants felt that tattoos are seen to represent certain personality traits, as Participant F demonstrated: 'I mean again there are always preconceptions I suppose of people with tattoos and piercings of what their personality is like, and certain traits of those sorts of people'. Some felt that people are prejudiced against people with tattoos. As Participant I said, 'If you've got tattoos people think you're a bad influence, or a subversive influence'. Participants largely agreed that piercings were inappropriate for the workplace, often stating, as did Participant K, that they are not professional:

> 'If you've got body piercings – I don't think it looks very professional. You should minimise them or use clear ones. It's not something that people like all that much, especially with facial piercings.'

There was some dissent about the matter of tattoos. For example, although Participant E began by saying 'you shouldn't really be covered in tattoos; it just sends the wrong message', he rethought this initial assumption, saying 'Now I feel like I'm a lot more relaxed about it, it's just life'. Other participants agreed that tattoos should not be a problem, viewing objections to them as unfair prejudice. For example, Participant F said, 'I mean how can you discriminate a person that's like everyone else just because they've got a tattoo on their face or somewhere that's harder to hide. But they're just like everyone else.' Several participants suggested that if a tattoo was not deliberately offensive, then there was no reason to judge the individual negatively. For example, Participant A argued that, 'So long as they [tattoos] are not vulgar, like, rude or anything then I don't see the problem with them anymore. You see a lot of people with the odd star or something here and there, it doesn't make me judge them.'

Participants made a distinction between the tattoo as a signifier in its own right and the tattoo as a carrier of signification. They feared that employers adopted a negative attitude simply from the fact of an individual having a tattoo, while they argued that it was important to consider the meaning and content of the tattoo itself.

Theme 1b: Make-up. Make-up was discussed in terms of how it would signify in an interview or workplace. This issue was very clearly linked to gender. One of the challenges the female participants felt they faced was judging the amount of make-up to apply. Too little, and they feared they would come across as less professional and polished; too much and they felt they might not be taken seriously. As Participant C suggested,

> 'Evening make-up for going out tends to be heavier and more dramatic than daytime. It's supposed to be understated – seen as a professional not a dolly-bird. The more made-up you are, you've got that image of being more vacuous. It tends to revert to that very old stereotype.'

The decision is made more complex by the participants' sense that the 'right' image varies from one role to another. Client-facing roles were thought to require a higher degree of effort regarding one's appearance, and more make up. Participant B discussed this complexity:

> 'I know there's a lot of debate over whether, you know, does a woman have to wear make-up to work all the time. But, you know, certainly if you're doing like a job where you're, um, front of house type thing, you're dealing with the public, potential clients or whatever, it's kind of good to be doing that.'

Theme 1c: Hair. Several students discussed extremes of hairstyle. Participants felt that hair has to be smart, and that the workplace is not somewhere to display hairstyles that make someone stand out as obviously different to their colleagues. This was examined by Participant J, who said,

> 'I still think that you have to have a degree of formality with your hair – that sounds a weird way to say it but I'm sure you know what I mean. No bright blue hair Mohawk kind of style. Slightly conservative is what I would say.'

Although participants felt that hair should be 'slightly conservative', they also reinforced the importance of aesthetic labour in the performance of a graduate or workplace identity. Participant A considered her own hairstyle choices for an interview, and decided that 'In terms of hair and things I would probably make more of an effort, my hair is just generally all over the place but I'd put it up neatly and out the way'.

Theme 1d: Facial hair. Facial hair was also discussed in detail by participants. Variations of facial hair, from clean shaven to full beard, were considered. Some participants felt that it is advisable either to be clean shaven or to have a well-groomed beard, because stubble gives the impression of laziness and lack of effort regarding personal appearance. Participant J was very specific about what style of facial hair is acceptable in the workplace: 'Facial hair I think is to the point where you either are clean-shaven or you have a beard that's neatly groomed. I think stubble is an awkward line to tread.'

Other participants thought that 'stubble' was acceptable, but agreed that it has to be neat. For example, Participant K said that, 'I do think a man should like have a clean shave – not clean but quite neat. I don't mind a bit of hair but you hope presentable'. Some participants held the view that it is advisable to be clean-shaven. They felt that being clean-shaven would weigh in the favour of an employee as opposed to a colleague who is unshaven. Participant H made a clear comparison between the ways a clean-shaven employee is judged as opposed to an employee with facial hair: 'If an employee is clean-shaven it makes him look a lot more smart compared to his companion who isn't'.

Theme 2: Using appearance to fit-in – appropriate dress for the job

Participants were able to discuss professional attire and what it entails and to articulate a vision of what 'appropriate dress' is in the graduate workplace. Some felt that this focus on appearance was relevant because organizations are judged, in part, on the appearance of their staff. This was Participant J's opinion, who stated, 'You are representing that facet of their job, or their like service so, you have to sort of dress in a manner that's appropriate'.

While participants recognized that appropriate appearance would vary across different professions they also frequently employed a meta-standard by talking about professionalism and professional dress. Certain clothes were seen as important to professionalism, although 'professionalism' was often defined very loosely and the reason for a connection between it and certain type of appearance was not clearly articulated. Participant S tried to express the rationale behind professional dress codes:

'I don't know where it started. I guess, professionalism and that's linked direct to being in a suit and for girls like blazers and stuff like that. And I think it is so engrained now it is going to stick. It's sensible, if you just dress smart for a job. . .. You're

there to work at the end of the day. But I don't see the problem with being smart. I don't think people should change their values, you know, I'd listen to somebody for what they've got to say not how they dress. That can happen I know it can. I think it can help though [. . .] Whether it's right or wrong I dunno [sic] but it's bound to happen. Other people might think it.'

Participants often explored these issues on various levels. Questions that were raised included:

- What constitutes professional attire?;
- Could I appear in a way that aligns with my understanding of professional attire?;
- Why it is important to appear in this way?; and
- Is it right that appearance should be so important?

As can be seen from the above quotation from Participant S, participants were not always able to resolve the answers to these questions in consistent way. Thus it was possible not only to feel that it was not fair that appearance matters so much, but also to feel that it is important to be 'smart' or to appear 'professional'.

Theme 2a: Expectations of others. Interviewees discussed the importance of meeting the expectations, in terms of dress, of their colleagues in a workplace. Participant A expressed an awareness of the judgement of her colleagues, claiming, 'You have to appeal to those sorts of people who are all about looking right and dressing right'. Participants anticipated that there was a level of appearance that they would have to meet in the workplace. Again, they understood that this is connected to specific, work-appropriate clothing. For example, Participant B stressed, 'There is a certain standard that people kind of expect from you and I don't think it's kind of moved on too much from you know the sort of suits and that kind of business type wear'.

Theme 2b: Strategies for dressing 'appropriately'. Whilst identifying certain formal dress codes and expectations of the workplace, participants discussed the need to adapt to specific jobs and places of work. Professional appearance was not perceived as simply being imposed by employers through dress codes. Rather, as indicated above by Participant A, they felt that their future colleagues, clients and customers would want them to look a certain way. Most participants felt that it was important to understand these expectations and to try and fit in with them. They examined various strategies for doing this. Participants planned to decipher appropriate clothes for the job by looking at what other employees were wearing. Participant E saw this as a simple and obvious process: 'Basically I would

judge it on what everyone else was wearing'. Participant B elaborated on this process, explaining,

'You sort of pick up what's acceptable, like, you know, to what extent are like jeans acceptable in a work place and everything so, you kind of pick that up and notice it and think well, I can kind of get away with that but not that, so you do kind of alter it based on workplace custom anyway.'

Participants were happy to adapt their appearance for different jobs. They felt that different jobs required different clothes because they would be dressing for different audiences. Participant A considered certain jobs in terms of appropriate attire, concluding that

'. . . whichever job I went for would change the way that I dress. If it was like a high end business sort of job I would definitely go for the power clothes, but for teaching and things like that, you want to be friendly and approachable.'

Participant L showed no concern about adapting in this manner to the different dress codes required by different jobs and employers, stating, 'If there are rules, aren't you just going to follow them? If I have to wear a uniform or business dress, that's fine, I don't really mind.'

The idea of 'appropriate' dress raises a wide range of questions about the transmission of hegemonic values. What is clear is that the participants recognized that this was unlikely to be a straightforward process of being told what to wear. Rather, they anticipated that they would be participating in a community and would have to internalize its values. However, this leaves unanswered the question about how these workplace community values are developed and in whose interest they operate. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

Theme 3: 'Being yourself'

Fitting in with the workplace was discussed in conjunction with retaining elements of individuality. Most participants felt the need to integrate and be accepted in the workplace, but many were concerned about losing their personal style. Some felt that there should be less rigidity with regard to work-wear. Participant B advanced this viewpoint:

'I think when it comes to personal style and things, if you want to wear something and no-one else likes it, well that's your lookout and you should be allowed to do that more'.

Although Participant L, as demonstrated by her quoted response under Theme 2b, seemed comfortable with playing by the rules, she began to question them as the interview progressed, asking, 'Why should I dress so differently? Like I know you have to dress differently, you have to dress smartly, but I just don't know why.'

Theme 3a: Showing personality through appearance. Many participants felt that formal wear and uniform restricted individualism. Although they understood the need to dress appropriately, many wanted to display elements of originality in their appearance. Participants often deliberately dressed to stand out, rather than fit in. Participant K claimed, 'I would be the one who would wear something different. I never wanted to look like everyone else – I'll wear what I want to wear.' Participants regarded tattoos and piercings as ways to express personality and be different from others. Participant A expressed dislike for the lack of individuality allowed in certain roles. She wanted her employers to be interested in her as an individual, and connected this with being able to express herself through appearance. She said that,

'. . . in the pub [as a workplace], you're not allowed piercings, tattoos, or anything that intimates that you have anything to your personality other than the job. And I absolutely hate it that they aren't interested in you being a person. [. . .] You're not so much an individual, you're just a cog in the machine.'

Theme 3b: Formal wear inhibits relationships. Other participants also discussed concerns about being a 'cog in the machine' and wished to show elements of individuality. They said that they believed that how one chooses to dress was a way of demonstrating personality and that formal wear prevents individuals from doing this. As a result, participants stated that formal wear inhibits relationships with colleagues. Participant I claimed that, 'you can't identify with someone in a suit'.

Participants stated that people assess personalities through appearance and, as a result, if you were to change your appearance your personality would appear to alter. Students regarded this as problematic because it could affect relationships with colleagues. As Participant B said,

'When I first started at the library I was like what am I going to wear, so that people know what I'm like from the off. [. . .] You can't drastically change yourself in front of them [colleagues] at all because you know it'll get commented on and it might affect your colleagues' relationship with you.'

Participants indicated that elements of appearance which highlight something more of the individual than their work are often appealing and aid relationships. It was suggested that colleagues with tattoos and piercings might be easier to form friendships with because they demonstrate elements of their personality. Participant A, for example, said, 'If I'm dealing with someone who's got a little tattoo [. . .] it just intimates to me that she's got a life outside of work and that she's approachable'. This reiterates Participant I's problems regarding people in a suit: students want to see signifiers they can use to build common ground with colleagues, and formal attire and dress codes reduce the space for these signifiers to be displayed.

Theme 4: Gender – dress codes are simpler for men

The first three themes – being judged on appearance, fitting in and 'being yourself' – all highlighted certain gender differences. Overall, it became apparent that issues relating to appearance are more straightforward for men to negotiate. Participant B demonstrated this perception, saying that, 'Men kind of get that one outfit that they come to work with'. This idea was reiterated, with participants repeatedly suggesting that the only thing males can wear for an interview is a suit. For example, Participant E said that, 'I'd wear a suit [to an interview]. There's nothing else you can wear really.'

Theme 4a: Formal dress codes for women are complex. Whilst participants felt that making a decision about clothing was straightforward for men, this was not felt to be the case for women. Unlike the suit for men, for women the term 'smart clothing' is not attached specifically to any one outfit; rather, there are numerous ways for a woman to look well turned out. Participant C offered suggestions for the variety available to women:

> 'We can wear skirts, we can wear trousers, we can wear flats, we can wear heels. You can have smart within anything now can't you.'

Participants regarded fashion as having a strong influence on women, even when considering clothing for interviews. Participant A was overwhelmed by the influence of fashion on interview attire:

> 'When I see people going for interviews it's like a fashion parade there as well. You've got your fancy pencil skirts and all these different colours, and I think the fashion industry is definitely targeting girls in particular.'

Theme 4b: Women are judged more than men. Female participants discussed various ways in which their appearance could be interpreted. Clothes that might be seen as more feminine or, alternatively, more masculine were discussed. They felt that women were required to conform to certain styles of dress. Participant B discussed dress in terms of gender, for example claiming that,

> 'If you wear a dress you might be a bit more feminine than if you were wearing like jeans and a t-shirt or something like that. [. . .] I do think there is probably a certain amount of pressure on women to look a certain way.'

Participants also talked about how women in smart clothing can be perceived negatively and, perhaps, as challenging. They saw this as specifically linked to women rather than men. As Participant A said,

> 'I think this is a big thing that's associated with women though. I don't think it's so much to do with men. If a woman dresses well and knows what she wants she's scary for some reason.'

Smart dress can easily be misinterpreted, and participants commented that women could easily look as though they were dressed 'to go clubbing' rather than for an interview. Participant E, a male participant, highlighted this difficulty for women, suggesting that, 'It's a fine line with women though isn't it, they can look smart or like they're on a night out'. This links back to what Participant C said, as quoted in Theme 1b, regarding levels of make-up: too little doesn't look professional, too much makes the woman look like she's on a night out.

Theme 4c: Men are judged too. Whilst participants cited more instances in which women are judged negatively for what they wear, some were also able to describe how this might apply to men. One example related to earrings. Participant I felt his earring was something with which he could express his identity, but that it might be viewed negatively. He said that, 'If I was a teacher, I wouldn't take my ear piercing out, because you can't be defined by what you do. Then that's all people ever know about you.'

A female participant highlighted this issue of men wearing earrings. She had been employed on a temporary basis as an exam invigilator at a school. The school had requested that the male caretaker of the school remove his earring. The caretaker agreed to do so, provided the same policy was in place for female employees. As Participant L narrated the example,

> 'They have a new head teacher and one of the caretakers got told that he had to take his earring out and he was, ''. . . right, OK, fair enough, I'll take it

out but all the women in the school have to take theirs out as well''. At the end of the day, it was only an earring. I thought it was crazy.'

When asked why certain piercings are 'the norm' and others have not become so, Participant L found it hard to provide any further reason, and said simply, 'I don't know. I've never really asked myself why.'

Discussion

Students' ideas about appearance as it relates to making the transition from university to work have been examined. The interviews demonstrated that participants anticipated being judged on their clothing, hair, make-up and other elements of appearance. They imagined that these judgements would be made both as a series of discrete assessments (does your hair look smart?), but also as an overall assessment regarding career image (Hooley and Yates, 2014) and the ability to perform an identity that fits with both graduate and worker roles.

Participants discussed ways in which they could identify the expectations of others in terms of appearance, and how they could adapt to fit in with these expectations. Many also valued being able to express their own personal style in their appearance, and hoped to be able to retain this ability within their career image. Participants anticipated various ways to use appearance to make the transition from student to graduate employee, something which seemed to be more straightforward for males than for females. Female participants felt they were faced with a wider range of options with regard to smart clothing; they also felt that their appearance signified in more complex ways than male appearance, although this distinction does not rule out completely complications for men.

Graduates understand the impact of career image

Participants stated that they recognised the value in looking 'appropriate' at work. They understood instinctively the impact that an appropriate 'career image' has on various elements of career success. They acknowledged that appearance, including clothing, personal grooming and general attractiveness, was an important resource which they could use both in their current lives as students and to gain access to and succeed in a graduate work environment. The participants stressed the particular role that appearance plays in creating a positive first impression, reflecting empirical evidence regarding the impact of appearance during recruitment (Toledano, 2013). Their grasp of what to wear at work was nuanced, because they appreciated that different looks were appropriate for

different contexts, and that individual traits are inferred from particular symbols (a suit being associated with intelligence, for example).

Tensions in performing career image

Two overarching themes that emerged from the data were 'fitting in' and 'being yourself'. Participants stated that they struggled with finding a career image which allowed them to maximize the workplace advantages associated with an appropriate appearance whilst maintaining their own identity. This tension can be seen in the light of a number of different theoretical frameworks.

Hogg and Terry (2000) suggested that a social identity needs to allow an individual to maintain a self-concept. A graduate career image which is far removed from the image the graduate portrays outside work could indicate a misalignment between the social identity developing at work and the self-concept which is perhaps better reflected in the outside work persona.

A period of tension could be thought to be inevitable during the process of transition from one identity to another (Ibarra, 2005). The conflict described by the participants in this study could be that of the 'liminal' period, identified by Ibarra, as the graduates try on a 'tentative self' to help in determining whether they have made the right choice. According to this framework, graduates who experience this tension between fitting in and being themselves will eventually resolve either to embrace their new identity or find an alternative identity to try.

The participants' experience of identity conflict could offer some support for Ramarajan and Reid's (2013) proposal that work and non-work identities are becoming less distinct in the modern workplace. The graduates in this study seemed to report that they would find a work place image which combined work and non-work identities more palatable: as one participant reflected, 'You can't be defined by what you do'.

In terms of Hall's notion of 'self-production' (Hall, 1996), participants do not become graduate employees but, rather, they enact the roles anticipated for them; they do not see themselves being teachers or scientists but, rather, performing these roles. In this way a graduate might seek to keep their identity unchanged by their new role whilst they temporarily play the role of the graduate employee in the workplace. Graduates might hide symbols of their personal identity such as tattoos or piercings whilst at work, but reinstate them after leaving the workplace.

A second tension which emerged was that between choosing the career image which best enhances one's career and choosing one which engenders the most positive relationships with colleagues. As discussed in

theme 3b, some participants felt that there was a tension between performing their role as graduates and workers and building common ground with their co-workers in their new work-based social circle. This reported tension would be an interesting topic for further exploration in the light of identity theory, which might lead to the expectation that graduates would find that their new career image both allows them to 'look the part' and enables the development of good relationships with colleagues.

Much of the literature on identity suggests that 'fitting in' plays an important part in developing relationships in a particular social group. In the workplace there is evidence that employees of a particular organization have a similar social identity, because individuals are attracted to, selected for and retained in organizations whose identity chimes with their own (Peters *et al*, 2012).

Goffman highlights the social and interactive nature of the process of fitting in. He discusses the idea of 'performance teams' as a mechanism for the management of social and group identity. Performance teams rely on a shared understanding of what behaviour and other symbols are expected as a badge of group membership, and on a cooperative effort between all members of the group to maintain this group front. Group identities, such as those maintained in a workplace, require a concerted effort on the part of each and every member of the group. Breaking rank threatens the projected selves of everyone in the group, and it is this which could explain why a new recruit or an interview candidate needs to look 'right' (Huffcutt *et al*, 2001). Any sign at a job interview that an applicant might fail to behave as the group identity requires may make the existing group members feel that their own social identities are under threat.

These theories might lead us to assume that a career image which reflects the dominant social identity of the organization would also lead to positive working relationships. The participants in this study showed some resistance to the idea of portraying a homogenous image. This could reflect an underlying lack of ease with the new identity or a struggle with the transition.

A third tension identified was most keenly felt by the female participants. Some of the women interviewed reported having to balance a number of competing alternatives when selecting an outfit for the workplace: smart but not dressed up, professional but not masculine, attractive but not sexual. Within the enactment of any graduate job, gender appears to add complexities to the performance. Female participants foresaw far more difficulties regarding self-presentation in the workplace than male participants, and female depictions of what to wear in the workplace were more varied than those of males. The variety in female responses regarding appropriate appearance illustrates that 'there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender' (Butler, 1988). There is no single obvious way to perform a career image for female employees.

Kelan argues that women are in 'a double bind, which means that if they are perceived as too masculine, they are seen as not enough of a woman, and if they are too feminine, they do not fulfil the role of the ideal business professional' (Kelan, 2013). Attaining a balance between perceived femininity and masculinity was considered by several participants in this present study.

The final tension identified involves notions of agency and power. Hazen and Syrdahl (2010, p 62) concluded that 'employees generally do not like to be told what to wear, how to wear their hair or how to express themselves' and this was reflected in the responses of some of the participants in this study ('I'll wear what I want to wear'). Other participants seemed clear that the employer called the shots ('If there are rules, aren't you just going to follow them?'). A third dimension was offered by the idea of 'fitting-in' with colleagues, suggesting that subtle social pressures can exert considerable influence on individuals' decisions about their appearance. In many ways these tensions between individual preferences, social pressures and employer expectations regarding appearance reflect broader concerns about the extent to which individuals are able to control or manage their careers in the face of social and organizational expectations.

Career image as knowledge and skill

One way to conceptualize a graduate transition is as a process of skill development. In such a conception successful transition is the preserve of those who have the necessary employability skills. The findings from our study could suggest that learning how to present oneself in the workplace constitutes one of these employability skills. Côté (2002) provides some conceptual support for this idea, by describing individuals as making 'identity investments' which 'involve a strategic development of ''who one is'' on the basis of exchangeable resources like abilities, appearance and interactional skills' (Côté, 2002). Appearance is a 'resource' which can be used to make progress in the workplace: making use of this resource requires skill.

The idea of appearance as an employability skill has some limits. Despite their sophisticated understanding of the role of appearance, participants usually based their understanding of workplace appearance on tacit knowledge and assumptions. In general, participants

found it difficult to articulate an underlying rationale. Many participants discussed appearance at work as being 'common sense'. A number felt that dress codes for interviews and in a workplace were obvious and stemmed from a pre-determined set of rules. However, the ability of individuals to access and reproduce this pre-determined rule-set is likely to be dependent to some extent on their existing cultural capital.

Participants discussed certain aspects of their appearance in a particular field with a sense of inevitability, recalling Althusser's statement that 'individuals are always-already subjects' (Althusser, 1968). As the participants noted, any given career already has a number of expectations attached to it. Different dress codes were attached to different careers based on students' assumptions and ideologies rather than on any detailed research that they had undertaken. This notion of an implicit dress code is an illustration of Bourdieu's concept of habitus which states that individuals enact performances to be socially acceptable without necessarily being able to explain why such enactments are necessary (Jenkins, 1992).

Responding to these observations requires not just 'appearance skills' but also a capacity for social analysis and critique. Such a critique might notice both the dress codes and how such dress codes were transmitted and policed, ultimately asking why a code was necessary and in whose interests it lay.

Conclusions

The path from graduate to worker is fraught with challenges. Previous literature has identified the importance of developing an appropriate set of skills and attitudes for the work place, and has emphasized the impact on the transition of factors such as student debt and social and cultural capital. This study has focused on the area of appearance and career image and has examined these issues from the perspective of graduates. Our participants demonstrated some sophisticated and nuanced attitudes towards career image in the workplace, acknowledging the status quo but wanting to find a way to make it work for them as individuals. The participants were sufficiently strategic about their career ambitions to be prepared to present themselves in such a way as to make the most of the aesthetic advantages they might possess, but were keen to find a way to maintain their individual identity alongside their new role.

The evidence from the participant interviews has been considered in the light of literature on identity and performance and highlights the complexity of the process. Graduates are making choices about significantly more than what to wear at work: their

choices are about who they want to be, and they are aware that their decisions will have an impact on their future career trajectories, their personal relationships and their self-concept.

The evidence of the importance of career image coupled with undergraduates' engagement with the issues suggests that there is a need for further research, thinking and the development of practice. How employers, consciously and subconsciously, approach these issues in their recruitment and management practice is one area for possible further exploration. Careers professionals' and other educators' acknowledgement and framing of these issues when preparing students for transition are likely to be equally important. How you look, and how you are looked at, are clearly significant issues with regards to how people make the transition to and operate in the workplace. Whether it is desirable for career image to be actively acknowledged, and developed as an employability skill, remain open questions which, we would argue, merit greater attention.

Notes

[1]In the UK except Scotland, A-levels are qualifications in a specific subject typically taken by school students aged 16–18; the equivalent in Scotland is the Higher. A-levels and Highers are used in particular as entrance qualifications for undergraduate studies at university in the UK. See also: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/A-level; and https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/overview.

References

Althusser, L. (1968), *On Ideology*, Verso Books, London.

Bridgstock, R. (2011), 'Skills for creative industries graduate success', *Education + Training*, Vol 53, No 1, pp 9–26.

Butler, J. (1988), 'Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol 40, No 4, pp 519–531.

Carey, M. (2012), *Qualitative Research Skills for Social Work*: *Theory and Practice*, Ashgate, Farnham.

Charmaz, K. (2006), *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis,* Sage, London.

Coffey, A., and Atkinson, P. (1996), *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*: *Complementary Research Strategies*, Sage, London.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2007), *Research Methods in Education*, 6th edition, Routledge, London.

Côté, J. (2002), 'The role of identity capital in the transition to adulthood: the individualization thesis examined', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol 5, No 2, pp 117–134.

Crooks, D.L. (2001), 'The importance of symbolic interaction in grounded theory research on women's health', *Health Care For Women International*, Vol 22, No 1/2, pp 11–27

Dutton, J.E., Dukerich, J.M., and Harquail, C.V. (1994), 'Organizational images and member identification', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 39, No 2, pp 239–263.

Glaser, B.G., and Strauss, A.L. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research,* Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, IL.

Goffman, E. (1959), *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,* Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

Hager, P., and Holland, S. (2006) *Graduate Attributes, Learning and Employability*, Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

Hall, S. (1996), 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', in Hall, S., and du Gay, P., eds, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London, pp 1–18.

Hazen, L., and Syrdhal, J. (2010), 'Dress codes and appearance policies: what not to wear at work', *The Colorado Lawyer,* Vol 39, No 9, pp 55–63.

Hogg, M.A., and Terry, D.J. (2000), 'Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol 25, No 1, pp 121–140.

Holmes, L. (2001), 'Reconsidering graduate employability: the "graduate identity" approach', *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol 7 No 2, pp 111–119.

Holden, R., and Hamblett, J. (2007), 'The transition from higher education into work: tales of cohesion and fragmentation', *Education + Training*, Vol 49, No 7, pp 516–585.

Hooley, T., and Yates, J. (2014), '"If you look the part you'll get the job": should career professionals help clients to enhance their career image?' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03069885.2014.975676?journalCode=cbjg20#.VZpcVkbT79Y (accessed 06 July 2015).

Huffcutt, A.I., Conway, J.M., Roth, P.L., and Stone, N.J. (2001), 'Identification and meta-analytic assessment of psychological constructs measured in employment interviews', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 86, No 5, pp 897–913.

Ibarra, H. (2005), 'Identity transitions: possible selves, liminality and the dynamics of career change', *INSEAD Working Paper Series*, INSEAD, Fontainebleu Cedex, France.

Jenkins, R. (1992), *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London.

Kelan, E. (2013), 'The becoming of business bodies: gender, appearance, and leadership development', *Management Learning*, Vol 44, No 1, pp 45–61.

MacQueen, K.M., McLellan, E., Kay, K., and Milstein, B (1998), 'Codebook development for team-based qualitative analysis', *Field Methods*, Vol 10, No 2, pp 31–36.

Parmentier, M., Fischer, E., and Reuber, A.R. (2013), 'Positioning person brands in established organizational fields', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol 41, No 3, pp 373–387.

Patton, M. (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Peters, K., Ryan, M., Haslam, S.A., and Fernandes, H. (2012) 'To belong or not to belong: evidence that women's occupational disidentification is promoted by lack of fit with masculine occupational prototypes', *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, Vol 11, No 3, pp 148–158.

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Atfield, G., Behle, H., Ellison, R., Luchinskaya, D., Snape, J., Conaghan, L., and Tzanakou, C. (2012), *Futuretrack Stage 4: Transitions Into Employment, Further Study and Other Outcomes,* HECSU (Higher Education Careers Service Unit), Manchester.

Ramarajan, L., and Reid, E. (2013), 'Shattering the myth of separate worlds: negotiating non-work identities at work', *Academy Of Management Review,* Vol 38, No 4, pp 621–644.

Tajfel, H., and Turner, J.C. (1986), 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', in Worchel, S., and Austin, W.G., eds, *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Burnham, Chicago, IL, pp 7–24.

Toledano, E. (2012), 'The looking-glass ceiling: appearance-based discrimination in the workplace', *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender*, Vol 19, p 683.