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# Aesthetic labour outcome and experience of individuals with tribal marks in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Research on body art as a component of aesthetic labour has predominantly focused on individuals with tattoos in the global north, but little is known about tribal marks as a key element of aesthetic labour that leads to discriminatory or prejudicial attitudes in the workplace. Tribal marks are facial inscriptions that symbolize clan, family, and ethnic affiliation, and serve to distinguish one sociocultural group from another. In this article, we examine the lived experiences of people with tribal marks in Nigeria by developing a theoretical framework based on literatures on aesthetic labour, social stigmatisation, and discrimination. Drawing on the accounts of 42 individuals with tribal marks, we demonstrate how aestheticized work environments, biased assumptions, and negative perceptions about individuals with tribal marks can lead to discriminatory or prejudicial behaviours at work. We further discuss the psychosocial consequences and explain why tribal marks are now perceived to be outdated and damaging to those individuals who have them. We offer a novel perspective on the existing knowledge about aesthetic labour and broaden our understanding of another form of 'lookism' in a non-Western context.

## KEYWORDS

Aesthetic labour; tribal marks; discrimination; stigmatisation; lookism; social identity theory; social categorisation theory; and similarly-attraction theory

## Introduction

Since ancient times, many African tribes have been recognised by the marks on their faces, acquired either as a means of identification or beautification (Adeleke, 2021). Among the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria, for example, tribal marks signify clan identity and affiliation, and distinguish one socio-cultural group from another (Ojo & Saibu, 2018). The marks are normally

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inscribed on the faces of children between the ages of three weeks to ten years old (see [Figure 1](#)). They are used to demonstrate family and ethnic identity, social class and status, royalty, and social affiliations (Akinbi & Aladenika, 2008), making tribal marks an important identity characteristic for beautification and socio-cultural esteem (similar to, but distinct from tattoos). Nonetheless, tribal marks appear to have outlived their purposes as modernity envelopes traditional African tribes. In Nigeria, as with many other countries, employers are now particular about aesthetic labour, employees' appearances, and other attributes that appeal to the sensibilities of customers and clients (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). As a result, individuals with tribal marks in Nigeria face a barrage of stigmatisation and discrimination, with serious social and psychological consequences. In this context, we examine the issue of facial marks in relation to aesthetic labour and consider the lived experiences of individuals with tribal marks, who were also interviewed for this research.

The starting point for this study is the assumption that 'when we put on a good face, we are claiming a set of approved social attributes—presenting an image of who/what we wish to be accepted as and taken for, by others' (Sheane, 2012, p. 145). As Goffman (1967) puts it, we have a good face when we present ourselves well and conform our outward appearance to others' expectations regarding, for instance, our profession. It could be described, in other words, as the selling of one's personified 'face', or approved social attributes, to create and preserve a professional and/or corporate image. This has implications for what some employers may regard as the most important personal characteristics of their employees in terms of physical appearance or 'having the right image', regardless of work-related skills, knowledge, and abilities. It also has implications for how organizations can manage the experiences of employees to promote an emotionally and aesthetically balanced work environment.

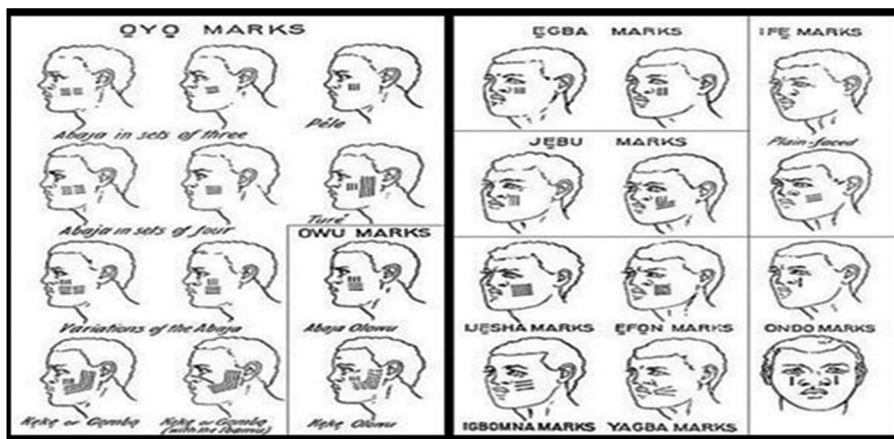
Aesthetic labour has been translated, then, as employment based on 'looking good' or at least having the 'right' look for any given organisational context (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). It focuses on managing and



**Figure 1.** A freshly tribal-marked Nigerian. Source: Ochui (2016).

controlling employees based on their physical appearance, raising serious employment issues that warrant thorough empirical research with significant policy implications. In particular, the emphasis on individual employees' appearance in aestheticized work environments has the potential to create 'lookism' as a form of workplace discrimination (Buton, 2015; Hamermesh, 2011; Rhode, 2010; Warhurst et al., 2009). In such circumstances, individuals with tribal marks visibly etched on their faces are subjected to stigmatisation, discrimination, and unfair treatment in the workplace. Their co-workers and managers may perceive them as lacking the approved social attributes that represent a professional and/or corporate image, while they may perceive themselves as physically inadequate.

In this study, we present an important qualitative investigation of aesthetic labour and its psychosocial consequences in a non-Western context, focusing on individuals with tribal marks in Nigeria. Although the extant literature is replete with scholarly works exploring different perspectives on tattoos and piercings, as key components of aesthetic labour (French et al., 2019; Timming, 2015; 2017; Timming et al., 2017), little is known about the significance of other body art or markings as elements of aesthetic labour in non-Western societies. Our research then broadens the extant literature on aesthetic labour by focusing not only on an understudied geographical region, but also on a specific yet important type of facial marks that are rarely considered in contemporary research contexts (see Figures 1 and 2). In doing so, we advance current understanding and, ultimately, shed new light on ongoing scholarly debates regarding the organizational and mental health implications of body art as a critical element of aesthetic labour. The practical significance of our research is further bolstered by a focus on service-oriented



**Figure 2.** The various patterns of tribal marks in South-West Nigeria. Source: Ozongwu (2012).

workplaces where employees' physical appearance is crucial to their interactions with customers and clients.

Our research makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it synthesises debates about aesthetic labour, drawing on the principles of social identity, social categorisation, and similarity-attraction to explain how those with tribal marking face social stigmatisation, and discrimination in the workplace. Thus, the paper creates a novel framework for assessing the impact of tribal markings on labour market outcomes in non-Western contexts. In practice, our research has implications for managerial policies on equality and diversity at work. As debates about lookism gain traction around the world, our research raises important questions about the appearance-based discrimination associated with tribal marks in Nigeria. Addressing these questions is essential for the advancement of research in the field and the development of appropriate responses to lookism and other forms of discrimination at both the societal and organizational levels. As discussed in the concluding sections of this article, our research provides recommendations for mitigating the negative psychological issues that arise from managing employees based on their physical appearance. The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on aesthetic labour followed by a consideration of the historical and cultural context of tribal marks. Then, we consider how the principles of social identity, social categorisation, and similarity-attraction contribute to our understanding of the social psychological process that gives rise to social stigma and discrimination among individuals with tribal markings. After that, the study's research methods are described before we report the research findings. Thereafter, we discuss the policy and managerial implications of the discrimination faced by those with tribal marks before concluding with considerations for future research.

### **Aesthetic labour in the workplace**

The existing body of knowledge on aesthetic labour has primarily focused on the kinds of skills and attributes that enable employees to look the part for their jobs (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). This argument is encapsulated in Warhurst and Nickson (2009, p. 388) assertion that aesthetic labour is concerned with 'workers' corporeal capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to the senses of customers' and which 'are organisationally mobilised, developed and commodified through training, management, and regulation to produce an embodied style of service'. Aesthetic labour, then, requires an individual to look good (i.e. have an appealing appearance) and/or have the right look (i.e. have the appropriate appearance) for their job roles. According to Sheane (2012), aesthetic

labour is the sale of an embodied face and the approved social features and attitude needed to generate and sustain the corporate image. Therefore, organisations tend to monitor employee appearance to create a good customer impression and enhance their social image (Tsauro et al., 2015).

The main thrust of the aesthetic labour framework suggests that an employee with the right ‘look’ is as important as an employee with the right skills, aptitude, and/or emotional disposition (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Hochschild, 1983). Literature on aesthetic labour has focused on individuals with the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ looks and the impact of their appearance—what is often described as lookism, the prejudicial and differential treatment that workers face because of their appearance (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). For example, Tews et al. (2009) demonstrate how applicant ‘attractiveness’ positively influences employability ratings in customer-facing roles, while Rudolph et al. (2009) and Levay (2014) show the negative effect of obesity on people’s job opportunities and its enduring workplace bias. However, it is not only at the point of entry into organisations that an employee’s appearance will be evaluated. Many organisations, particularly those which are customer/client facing, have stringent employee dress codes and standards of appearance, which encompass elements such as jewellery, clothing style, make up and personal grooming, hair style and length, and body art (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020).

Turning to the specific issue of body art, however, there is much talk about the extent to which tattoos have gone mainstream and are increasingly acceptable in Western societies. Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, Roberts (2016, p. 801) argues that ‘sociologists have, in large part, overestimated the mainstreaming of tattoos ... not all tattoos are equal, and there is a need to distinguish between visible and concealable tattoos.’ This distinction between visible and concealable offers, according to Roberts, offers ‘a more accurate picture of tattooing’s cultural position in contemporary Western society’ (p. 801). In simple terms, it is much more likely that those with visible, non-concealable tattoos will face stigmatization. Indeed, research has found that many employers have negative, prejudicial attitudes towards applicants having tattoos or piercings, and that some employers may not employ people with visible tattoos in customer-facing roles (French et al., 2019; Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2017).

To date, though, much of the literature on aesthetic labour has focused on Western contexts, and research examining aesthetic labour in non-Western contexts is relatively rare. Few studies, however, have highlighted the ways in which aesthetic labour interacts with national discourses and cultural constructs to create localised views of what denotes the ‘right’ look (see for example, Doshi, 2021; Maitra & Maitra, 2018

who discuss the importance of caste and class arising from the rural/urban divide in India). Indeed, Sarioğlu (2014, p. 45) contends that ‘the literature on aesthetic labour does not sufficiently recognise the role of national discourses and the cultural context for creating the corporate image and desired workforce’. In this regard, Sarioğlu (2014) and Sayan-Cengiz (2020) both usefully consider the issue of headscarf wearing by female employees in Turkish retail organisations, locating this discussion with ongoing debates over the religious/secular divide in Turkey. These authors found that some Turkish retail organisations exclude women who wore headscarves as it was felt that this would be incompatible with the urban, secular, educated middle- and upper-class customers with Western lifestyles. These studies of aesthetic labour in non-Western contexts are therefore important. Moreover, on the specific issue of body art as an important element of aesthetic labour, research has focused on tattoos and body piercings, with little consideration for other body art forms such as indigenous tribal marks. Consequently, it is important to understand tribal marks as an important example of body art, within a clear historical, social, and cultural Nigerian context.

### **Understanding the historical and cultural context of tribal marks**

Historically, the natives of southwest Nigeria have used tribal marks for beautification since before the advent of European colonisation (Meek, 1931; Ojo & Saibu, 2018). In this manner, tribal marks were considered fashionable and employed as a means of enhancing natural beauty, especially among the indigenous Yoruba people (Meek, 1931). However, the marks became more prevalent during the colonial era, when the slave trade became lucrative and was the primary form of local and international business (Fetera, 2019). As people were often separated from their families due to regional conflicts and the slave trade, it became necessary to scar their faces to indicate their clans and origins (Adeoye, 2013). Thus, people began to give their children and family members different facial marks in order to recognise them in the event that they would be freed from slavery after being captured.

Furthermore, tribal marks were used to identify members of the same town/village and people from the same lineage (Piero, 2014). An orthodox consensus among the Yorubas is that tribal marks keep ‘mischievous children’ (also known as ‘Abiku’) alive (Ochui, 2016). An Abiku ‘is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family’ (Mobolade, 1973, p. 62). Tribal markings are an age-old cultural practice that, unlike tattoos that are willingly and deliberately scripted on bearers’ bodies, are inscribed on the bearers without their consent, often in infancy and usually by their parents (Murdock, 2012). Tribal marks are lines inscribed on the cheeks, forehead, and temples, as well as under the



chin and occasionally in other locations. They may be slanted, vertical, and/or horizontal, on both cheeks and/or the forehead (see [Figure 2](#)).

However, due to modernization and cultural changes brought about by international campaigns, this tradition is disappearing (Piero, 2014). Tribal marks are fast becoming unpopular and irrelevant, especially among young people who perceive them as uncongenial and uncivilised (Ukiwe, 2018). This idea of tribal marks not being alluring to contemporary Nigerians has been occasioned by the growth in urbanization and cultural isomorphism (or the proliferation of certain privileged aesthetics/values into mainstream norms). Nigerian youths now increasingly see tribal marks as disfiguring and detrimental to their beauty (Ogunfowoke, 2015). Instead, they prefer tattoos, which are entirely the bearers' choice, to the 'coercive' traditional tribal marks (Akindele, 2017). Even though tribal marking practices are becoming unfashionable and sliding into obscurity, it is nevertheless important to recognise that many adults in Nigeria still live with tribal marks. The official count is unknown, though anecdotally, it is suggested that more than five million Nigerians are living with tribal marks. As a result, there has been much debate among members of parliament in Nigeria seeking to criminalise the practice of inscribing tribal marks on children (Ikeano, 2017). These debates reflect concerns around the place of tribal marks in modern Nigeria and in particular the potential for discrimination in employment.

### **Seeking to understand prejudice and discrimination towards people with tribal markings**

In exploring the negative attitudes towards tribal marks as a form of body art, it is crucial to consider the complex dynamics surrounding people's experiences with unconscious biases and unfair treatment, as well as their implications in workplace settings. By delving deeper into the field of social psychology and leveraging various theories, we gain a deeper appreciation for how these marks can activate stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, ultimately leading to the creation of divisive 'us' and 'them' attitudes. In this regard, we draw upon the principles of social identity, social categorisation, and similarity-attraction to offer a potential explanation for the stereotypical, prejudicial, and discriminatory attitudes faced by those with tribal markings in Nigerian workplaces.

As Trepte and Loy (2017) recognise social identity theory is an overarching theory, with social categorisation being a key subset of this broader theory, which seeks to understand how individuals define their identities regarding social groups. Social identity theory recognises how individuals seek to make sense of themselves and others within the social environment and more specifically Korte (2007, p. 172) notes how



'identity has become a popular lens to view organisational phenomena'. As part of this process individuals categorise themselves as belonging to various groups and within such a process within these groups exaggerate similarities amongst its members (ingroup) and similarly exaggerate differences with other groups (outgroup), leading to a tendency to view a person's ingroup more positively than those in an outgroup (Islam, 2014). Although Stoller et al. (2016) acknowledge that social categorisation will often group individuals based on what they call the 'big three' of sex, race, and age, they do recognise a number of other ways in which people may be categorised, e.g. occupation. Here we would also argue that in the context of Nigeria a sense of social identity and categorisation can occur based on whether individuals have tribal markings or not. As noted above a consequence of categorisation is the manner in which people respond differently to members of what they perceive as their ingroup compared to their outgroup, including being more partial and empathetic to members of their own group. Furthermore, as Liberman et al. (2017, p. 556) note, 'Beyond sheer partiality and greater liking of members of one's own group, some of the most invidious effects of social categories result from the biased belief systems that social categorization supports—including stereotypes for, essentialist beliefs about, and even dehumanization of members of some social groups.'

This notion of individuals being positively inclined and attracted towards people who are similar to themselves is also seen within the similarity attraction hypotheses. Similarities cover a range of elements, encompassing demographic (e.g. gender, ethnicity) and psychological factors (e.g. personality, values) (Abbasi et al., 2023). In simple terms, similarities in these various forms are more likely to lead to friendships and other close relationships. Importantly, though, Abbasi et al. (2023, p. 4) recognise that 'studies have found that actual similarity in external characteristics (e.g. age, hairstyle) is more predictive of attraction than similarity in psychological characteristics such as cleverness and confidence'. The key point here is that physical markers seemingly have the biggest impact, at least initially, with regard to whether people prefer being with certain people compared to others, including co-workers (Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008). Although first developed to understand relationships and interpersonal attraction generally there have been applications of this theory to the workplace. Abbasi et al. (2023) based on their systematic review of nearly 50 studies of similarity attraction within a workplace context conclude that similarity does lead to attraction within an organisational context, which in turn will drive employees' behaviour towards others in the workplace. As they further recognise this tendency to like people who are similar to ourselves has the potential to create a paradoxical situation in the workplace such that natural human instincts for

similarity have the potential to collide with national and organisational norms around discrimination. As they note:

People have a natural tendency to want to be with people like themselves and, without other influence, will choose to recruit people like themselves. Moreover, they prefer working with people like themselves ... But such behaviour can be exclusionary, discriminatory, and inequitable. Most countries have laws protecting many different categories of people from disadvantageous behaviour for this reason. Further, many, perhaps most, organizations have espoused values and adopt policies of equal opportunity and these policies police formal selection processes, performance appraisals, and promotion practices, and informal behaviour between employees (p. 38).

In sum, social identity, social categorisation and similarity attraction point to the manner in which through a process of establishing identity through categorisation there is a natural bias to be more attracted to and like people similar to ourselves and conversely often hold prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and even dehumanise people who are dissimilar to ourselves. In a workplace context, organisations, usually building on national level legislation outlawing discrimination for certain protected characteristics, have sought to challenge these natural instincts with support for the importance of diversity and inclusion to recognise, respect and value difference (CIPD, 2019) which means organisational members are less likely to categorise colleagues into 'us' versus 'them' social groups.

However, despite this normative view of organisations seeking to create an environment in which organisational members do not face prejudice based on their identity and how they are socially categorised, as we noted above there are many instances where people may face stigmatisation and discrimination, in this case due to their tribal markings. The concepts of social stigma and discrimination are socially constructed phenomena, which explains the reason for social exclusion in various contexts. Stigma is a process based on the stereotypical judgements accorded to individual features and qualities resulting from sociocultural norms, beliefs, and values that find specific attributes undesirable and unworthy (Flanagan & Lewis, 2019). According to Ramjattan (2015), stigmatised individuals may suffer from low self-esteem, which results in deteriorating physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. Moreover, stereotypes influence the perceptions of a group of people and the way they interact with others (mostly outside their groups) based on categorical information that leads to judgements and reactions to situations (Stone & Wright, 2013). This is because, from a young age, individuals learn to identify and link specific traits with a particular group of people from which they subconsciously create personal impressions of others (Maluwa et al., 2002). For instance, in Nigeria, people without tribal marks (especially younger people) have certain impressions that people with tribal marks do not have the right look and perceive them as undesirable.

Stigmatisation is highly related to humiliation and negative biases, which often leads to significant differences in attitudes (i.e. discrimination) towards the stigmatised individuals (Snape & Redmann, 2003). Discrimination is often a result of membership of a discredited group, which causes unfair and unjust treatment without an objective justification for their being socially excluded (Baruch et al., 2016). Discrimination is a primary social stressor that inhibits the successful integration of stigmatised individuals (such as individuals with tribal marks) into social groups at work, prevents wholesome informal collegial relationships, and promotes workplace humiliation such as bullying or physical and sexual harassment (Raver & Nishii, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2014). Outlining the theoretical thrust of this study, we argue that individuals with tribal marks are victims of aestheticized work environments, biased assumptions, and negative perceptions and are therefore stigmatised and discriminated against both socially and occupationally. This research therefore introduces a novel dimension (tribal marks) into the literature on aesthetic labour that will broaden our understanding of body art in non-Western contexts.

### Research method

Our research contributions are focused on the Nigerian context, a country with a population of over 200 million people (The CIA World Fact Book, 2021). Although there are more than 350 ethnic groups, the Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba constitute the majority (about 70%) of the population (Abara, 2012). Tribal or facial marks are relatively typical in Nigeria, especially among the natives of the southwest. Other tribes and regions in Nigeria also have tribal marks (Basden, 1966; Ukiwe, 2018) although the focus of this study is southwest Nigeria, a region of more than 32 million people (AOAV, 2020). The southwest comprise the natives of Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Lagos, Ekiti, larger parts of Kwara and some parts of the Kogi states. To explore these issues, we recruited a sample of employed individuals with visible tribal marks from southwest Nigeria. We concentrated on individuals who work in service (or customer-facing) jobs where aesthetic labour and the need to manage or control employees' physical appearances are important.

We adopted a qualitative approach by carrying out in-depth, semi-structured interviews and applying data-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim was to understand the experiences of people with tribal marks in the workplace, with a particular focus on the potential for them to face discrimination and the consequences that arise from being discriminated against. This approach was adopted for a variety of reasons. First, the qualitative method helps us capture the richness and diversity in terms of how participants ascribe meaning to their

environment and how they construct and reconstruct meanings in their everyday interactions (Martin, 2002). Second, qualitative research is a meaningful way of collecting images of reality and naturally occurring data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), thereby enabling researchers to study selected issues in depth using a small sample size (Ogbonna & Harris, 2002). Finally, the approach helps us to ascertain individuals' experiences in detail (McConville et al., 2020), which allowed us to explore the consequences of having tribal marks in great depth.

### **Sample**

The participants were selected using a snowball sampling strategy. The aim was to identify individuals who were knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation and could thus provide appropriate answers to our interview questions (Wong, 2008). The research sample consisted of 42 full-time employees who worked in a variety of service workplaces including banks, insurance companies, fast food restaurants, and law firms. The diverse range of participants in our sample, encompassing various occupations and positions, allows us to evaluate whether discrimination against individuals with tribal marks accounts for their organizational status and occupational hierarchy. We also employed participant referral sampling methods (Noy, 2008), wherein one participant recommended a friend or relative with tribal marks who could potentially participate in the study. Our participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds, including different genders, ages, places of work, positions, and the number of tribal marks on the faces. [Table 1](#) lists the details of the participants.

### **Data collection**

Data collection took place between June and July 2021, with support from the first author's professional network. As a Nigerian with tribal marks, the first author was able to establish connections with individuals in southwest Nigeria, which played a crucial role in recruiting a significant number of research participants. Out of the initial 158 individuals contacted, 42 gave informed consent to participate in the study. In line with our research protocol, participants received comprehensive information about the study's purpose and research procedures, as well as assurances that appropriate ethical standards would be strictly adhered to. The protocol also stipulated that each interview would begin with a series of introductory questions designed to establish rapport and ensure participants fully understood their role in the study. Moreover, to safeguard participants' comfort and avoid unbiased responses, the interviews were conducted at times and locations most convenient for the interviewees, such as restaurants and

**Table 1.** Participants' profile.

Participants' Name	Gender	Age	Places of Work	Positions	Lines of Facial Marks on the Face
John	Male	42	Law firm	Lawyer	16 lines
Paula	Female	40	Bank	Account officer	12 lines
Mary	Female	39	Insurance	Secretary	10 lines
Victor	Male	35	Restaurant	Chef	12 lines
Tolani	Female	37	Bank	Auditor	12 lines
Felix	Male	41	Bank	Account officer	14 lines
Caroline	Female	38	Law firm	Secretary	8 lines
Ben	Male	39	Law firm	Lawyer	12 lines
Akin	Male	41	Insurance	Insurance broker	10 lines
Benjamin	Male	39	Bank	Manager	8 lines
Dan	Male	32	Insurance	Insurance broker	16 lines
Kenny	Male	39	Insurance	Insurance broker	18 lines
Florence	Female	33	Restaurant	Chef	12 lines
Arthur	Male	38	Law firm	Lawyer	14 lines
Dan	Male	42	Law firm	Accountant	16 lines
Peter	Male	34	Insurance	Insurance broker	12 lines
David	Male	38	Bank	Business analyst	10 lines
Eleanor	Female	37	Restaurant	Restaurant attendant	14 lines
Ellis	Male	42	Insurance	Manager	14 lines
George	Male	40	Insurance	Assistant manager	16 lines
Gabriel	Male	32	Bank	Account officer	12 lines
Patricia	Female	34	Restaurant	Restaurant attendant	14 lines
Anthony	Male	40	Bank	Account officer	10 lines
Joseph	Male	40	Law firm	Lawyer	12 lines
Brenda	Female	34	Restaurant	Restaurant attendant	14 lines
Michael	Male	40	Insurance	Insurance broker	10 lines
Raphael	Male	39	Bank	Manager	12 lines
Sarah	Female	32	Restaurant	Restaurant attendant	14 lines
Smith	Male	40	Insurance	Insurance broker	8 lines
Morris	Male	37	Insurance	Insurance broker	15 lines
Amelia	Female	32	Restaurant	Supervisor	12 lines
Shade	Female	36	Restaurant	Chef	14 lines
Hector	Male	38	Insurance	Insurance broker	14 lines
Olivia	Female	32	Bank	Account officer	10 lines
Ava	Female	30	Restaurant	Chef	12 lines
James	Male	37	Bank	Assistant manager	14 lines
Samson	Male	40	Law firm	Lawyer	16 lines
Laura	Female	38	Insurance	Secretary	12 lines
Mia	Female	31	Restaurant	Chef	10 lines
Isabella	Female	28	Restaurant	Restaurant attendant	8 lines
Tony	Male	32	Bank	Account officer	10 lines
Pauline	Female	38	Law firm	Lawyer	12 lines

their own homes. Considering the study's focus on participants' experiences with tribal marks, an exploratory interpretative approach was used, with semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours each.

Before conducting the interviews, we compiled a topic list based on our research questions and relevant studies from the literature. This served as a valuable reference during the semi-structured interviews. For example, participants were asked to discuss their experiences with tribal marks and the potential consequences in the workplace, describe any specific instances where they felt discriminated against or stigmatized due to their tribal marks, and explain how these experiences affected their mental health and psychological well-being. We designed these questions to be open-ended, neutral, and non-leading, aiming to

encourage participants to share their thoughts, observations, and interpersonal interactions at work. The topic list was not exhaustive, implying that insights and ideas shared by participants in earlier interviews process were incorporated to refine the topic list for subsequent interviews. Despite the sample's diversity in terms of gender, occupation, state of origin, and number of tribal marks, the participants' experiences were remarkably similar, indicating data saturation. The interviews were conducted in English, as both the interviewer and participants were educated and comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences in this language. Moreover, English is an official language in Nigeria, facilitating smooth and easy conversations and expressions.

Only 15 of the participants agreed to have their voices recorded, while the other 27 expressed discomfort in documenting their psychological and behavioural experiences on tape. Regarding the latter, three research assistants were hired to take detailed notes of the interviews alongside the first author. These notes were later reviewed by another member of the research team to verify their accuracy, and to ensure that no pertinent information was omitted. To minimize the risk of identifying individual research participants, all data collected were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used to prevent individual responses from being linked to participants' identities. Participants were also informed of their unreserved right to decline any questions with which they were not comfortable or to withdraw from the study entirely. No participant withdrew from the study as all questions posed were satisfactorily addressed.

### ***Data analysis and procedure***

We conducted a data-driven thematic analysis using the step-by-step guide developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as well as the data analysis steps from Boeije (2005) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). Each of the 15 audio-recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim shortly after it took place. In addition, all 42 interviews were analysed interpretatively immediately after they were completed. Then, we created a narrative summary of each interview and applied open coding to identify preliminary key points and relevant details in the data (Boeije, 2005). At this stage, we tried to evaluate and understand the meanings of particular words or phrases in the data, as well as consider their various connotations and interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Next, we grouped the initial set of codes into categories based on their shared conceptual themes, and then color-coded the categories to facilitate the creation of thematic maps for further data analysis. At this point, the analytical process had progressed from an initial descriptive phase to a more analytical one. The investigator triangulation research strategy (Polit & Beck, 2004) was then

used to thoroughly review each step of the analytical process, thereby increasing the validity and credibility of your findings. Finally, the analytical themes that emerged from the interviews were sorted and reviewed to ensure that they fit consistently with the data and that any distinctions between themes were both logical and meaningful (Patton, 1990). [Table 2](#) summarises this hierarchy of themes.

**Table 2.** Basic themes, organizing themes, and theoretical dimensions.

Illustrative data extracts	Basic themes (Codes)	Organising themes	Theoretical dimension
Friends and colleagues will touch my tribal marks and pass derogatory comments on me. They catch fun doing that but for me, it is an assault.	Physical and verbal assault	Tribal marks: Agency of Stigma and Discrimination	Aesthetic labour, social stigmatisation, discrimination
My tribal marks have turned me to object of mockery, and it is shameful. I am sort of used to it because I have been experiencing it since my primary school days. Everyone calls me okola.	Object of mockery and shame		
Some people really don't like to be associated with tribal marks bearers...yes, because of their tribal marks. I remember in a social gathering someone just remarked angrily 'who invited this okola'...yes, the stigma, discrimination and rejection are that bad.	Rejection and exclusion		
I hate my tribal marks. They have brought so much mockery, disappointment, and discrimination to me...I would say the marks have placed me permanently on antidepressants, because I have been on them for more than seven years now... really depressing.	Feelings of depression	Tribal marks: A Harbinger of Health-Related Problems	
My tribal marks often cause me psychological stress. There is discrimination both with and outside the workplace. Colleagues will make insinuations about them...stranger outside work will also throw insulting banter at me. All of these are stressors that trigger momentary anxiety and recurring headache for me.	Psychological stress		
My tribal mark, my looks. I have been ashamed of them from my childhood, and the shame is even greater now in my adulthood...I have attempted to kill myself before. Something kept telling me 'kill yourself and end the shame', so I swallowed poison.	Mental health problems		
I used to ignore people that mocked my tribal marks, but there came a time that I could not endure it...I will react aggressively towards them and sometimes pounce on them, and a serious fight ensues.	Aggressive behaviour	Tribal Marks Provoke Behavioural and Social Issues	Aesthetic labour, social stigmatisation, discrimination
Not only do tribal marks not appeal to people, I think the marks also make me unattractive, and many of my mates don't like to socialise with me.	Social isolation		
I often deliberately avoid being with people because my marks make me look odd among others and, as always, there will be someone to make silly remarks about them...so, I don't like to mingle that much.	Withdrawal attitude	Tribal Marks and Employees' Attitudes Towards Work	
I do not owe anybody – not even my manager – who, at any slightest opportunity, mock my look my 100% performance or loyalty...Would I go out of way my to do anything for the organisation? I am sorry, I cannot. I just want to my basic duty and leave.	Lack of organisational citizenship behaviour		



During the process of analysing the data, the researchers met for briefings periodically to enhance the credibility of our research. This helped to establish trust in the data and analytical procedure, given that the authors are well-versed and experienced in conducting qualitative research. In addition, for cases that did not fit the authors' interpretations, a search for disconfirming evidence *via* purposive sampling was used as a source of rival interpretation. Furthermore, notes were taken following the interviews, detailing the researcher's subjective reflections and thoughts, including feelings about the problems encountered during the interview, impressions, and prejudices (a partial audit trial, e.g. Creswell, 2003; Polit & Beck, 2004).

## Research findings

### *Tribal marks: agency of stigma and discrimination*

Although tribal marks were once popular adornments in Nigerian society, they are now a source of unfair treatment and discrimination in contemporary workplaces across the country. The primary findings of this study relate to participants' experiences and accounts of discrimination and stigma based on their physical appearance. The following quote exemplifies the overall lived experiences of participants:

My tribal marks have turned me into an object of mockery. Colleagues will jokingly insult me. They make jokes about my tribal marks, and the manager has done nothing about it, even though I have reported these umpteen times (Victor, aged 35).

Indeed, Michael's account further reflected how his manager often orchestrated the derision of his physical appearance and used his tribal marks as a reason to deny him promotion.

He [the manager] calls me names and jokingly uses my tribal marks to mock me. Many times, other staff will join him in doing so. He rejected my application for the position of marketing supervisor because of my tribal marks. He said my marks will not appeal to the customers and gave the position to someone else (Michael, aged 40).

Michael's situation portrayed a typical aestheticized work environment in which individuals with tribal marks are subject to stigmatisation and discrimination, in this case being denied a promotion due to his physical appearance. This demonstrates how employers' expectations for having workers with the right aesthetic qualities could result in negative stereotypes and social discrimination against individuals with tribal marks. In turn, this has a number of behavioural and mental health repercussions, which are discussed below as part of our research findings.

### ***Tribal marks: a harbinger of Health-Related problems***

Several participants reported poor mental health outcomes as consequence of the stigmatisation, discrimination, and mockery they endured due to their tribal marks. They specifically described their struggles with depression and feelings of despair resulting from having tribal marks. A participant who worked in financial services commented:

It is very depressing and demeaning when your colleagues mock you and your manager treats you differently because you have tribal marks. In the first place, it was not easy for me to secure the job because of my tribal marks – my looks did not appeal to many employers. Now I have a job, but my tribal marks don't look right to my colleagues and manager. Their affronts and remarks about my marks are contemptuous and often make me feel repulsively different. It is very depressing. I wish I never had tribal marks (Tolani, aged 37).

Shade illustrated her struggles with depression and a persistent low mood she endured as a result of discrimination and unfair treatment due to her tribal marks. Her experience resonates with Ojo and Saibu (2018) assertion that bearers of tribal marks may experience reduced job opportunities due to prejudicial treatment from others.

I hate my tribal marks. They have brought so much mockery, disappointment, and discrimination to me at work, in my private life, and other places. I lost my relationship with my boyfriend, and I am not allowed to serve the customers at work – all because of my tribal marks. The manager said customers would not like my marks, and he could not risk losing customers. So, I am consigned to working in the kitchen. I would say the marks have placed me permanently on antidepressants because I have been on them for more than seven years now...really depressing. At first, I was managing the depression with some antidepressant pills. But it got worse, and I had to be admitted to hospital for a few weeks (Shade, aged 36).

Shade's account demonstrates not only the impact of appearance-based discrimination on victims' mental health, but also the potential ripple effects on the wellbeing of those around them. This raises serious concerns about how an aestheticized work environment, along with the stigmatization and discrimination it entails, can create conditions that expose individuals with tribal marks to acute psychological stress. As one interviewee noted:

My tribal marks often cause me psychological stress. There is discrimination at work because of them, and colleagues will often make insinuations about my tribal marks. Also, people outside work mock me. All of these are stressors that trigger momentary fear, loss of sleep, and recurring headaches for me (Kenny, aged 39).

Kenny's experience suggests that lookism based on tribal marks remains a significant obstacle in Nigeria's fight against employment discrimination. Importantly, our data reveals that, regardless of their positions, all participants reported similar experiences with their tribal marks. This finding offers critical insight into people's perceptions of tribal

marks regarding the ‘right look’ in modern-day Nigerian workplaces and how these views transcend a person’s occupational status. For example, as Raphael, a manager in a bank, highlighted:

It may be fashionable and acceptable in the past, but certainly not in today’s Nigeria. I think I don’t look right to people. My twelve-line tribal marks don’t appeal to them [especially young people], so I get a lot of derogatory remarks, insinuations, and abusive comments – both at work and outside of work...even from junior staff. It has destroyed my self-image and filled me with a huge self-hatred and self-disgust. It is psychological torture for me (Raphael, aged 39).

While aesthetic labour shapes employees’ corporeality and the physical embodiment of the corporate image (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Witz et al., 2003), individuals with tribal marks are seen as not having the right look and suffer acute psychological stress as a result. As another participant noted:

Tribal marks are old fashioned and are not normal [especially to young people] ...So, individuals with tribal marks are often treated with disdain. I experience it daily. Unfortunately, this makes me feel abnormal; angry with myself and angry that my grandmother that did it to me; and experience acute psychological stress (Laura, aged 38).

Lookism and discrimination against those perceived to lack ‘the right look’ or ‘a good look’ is thus a significant issue in contemporary Nigerian society and workplaces. This finding supports arguments that, in addition to gender and race, an individual’s physical appearance is a determining factor in whether people face acceptance or rejection in society as a whole, and in the labour market in particular (Bruton, 2015; Hamermesh, 2011). As reported by the current study’s participants, this is exacerbated by the psychological stress and mental health problems that people with tribal marks face at work.

As noted earlier, stigmatised individuals often suffer from low self-esteem, which can result in poor emotional and psychological well-being. Reflecting this point, all the participants reported mental health issues due to their tribal marks, noting how they often struggled to cope with the insults, insinuations, stigma, and discrimination they faced as a result. For example, Pauline, a lawyer, commented:

Many people don’t like my looks, and this has mentally affected me almost all my life...through primary and secondary school and university. People mock me, joke about my tribal marks, and leave me despondent. Now, at work, I have been rejected by clients because of my marks. They think that I am inept because I have tribal marks, so they ask the firm for a lawyer without tribal marks. I remember trying to persuade a client that my tribal marks have nothing to do with my ability and professionalism, but she wouldn’t listen. As a result of all these issues, I have developed a personality disorder and a dissociative disorder...I am on medication – it has been very traumatising.

Another participant described how the stigma and discrimination arising from her tribal marks led her to attempt suicide in an effort to end what she perceived as a life of shame and discontent:

My tribal marks, my looks. I have been ashamed of them from my childhood, and the shame is even greater now in my adulthood. People [in public places and at work, even customers] look at me and treat me differently and contemptuously. They throw jabs at me, mock my tribal marks – even when they don't know me. I have attempted to kill myself before. Something kept telling me 'kill yourself and end the shame', so I swallowed poison. I was saved in the hospital...My doctor said it is a mental health problem. I am now on medication and attending sessions with my doctors (Eleanor, aged 37).

The mental health issues that participants experienced often created behavioural concerns, which as outlined below, manifested in aggressive behaviour and social isolation.

### ***Tribal marks provoke behavioural and social issues***

Our findings show that the behavioural outcomes of having tribal marks are often negative and undesirable. Around half of the participants commented that they lacked the psychological strength and the capacity to endure the abusive language, insinuations, stigmatisation, discrimination, and mockery they face. Consequently, these factors often trigger aggressive behaviour. A key feature of the interviews was the extent to which participants reached a breaking point in response to the continual abuse, stigmatisation, and discrimination. In several instances, participants acknowledged that sometimes their treatment went beyond what they could tolerate, and this led to aggressive behaviour. As one commented:

I used to ignore people that mocked my tribal marks, but there came a time that I could no longer endure it...I reacted aggressively towards them and pounced on them, and a serious fight ensued (David, aged 38).

Reflecting our earlier recognition that participants often face discrimination and mockery regardless of their position in the organisation, James, an assistant manager, described how this led him to be aggressive in the workplace:

I warned them [my colleagues] several times to stop calling me *okola* [*okola* is a derogatory term of referring to an individual with tribal marks] and to stop making verbal jabs about my tribal marks. Even though I am the assistant manager – senior in rank to most of them – they would still do it. One colleague abused me about my tribal marks, and I slapped his face almost immediately. Mercifully, both of us just got a verbal warning from the manager. I found myself reacting aggressively towards my abusers...I think I can't take it anymore...why should my looks matter? Why should they be a subject of mockery? (James, aged 37).

In a similar vein, another participant's reaction to a colleague led to her dismissal:

Generally, individuals with tribal marks get insulted because of their marks, and I try very hard to ignore many of these insults. However, I had a colleague that always called me 'okola' and made verbal jabs about my tribal marks. She made the usual comments and I hit her...it led to a disciplinary, and we were both suspended then sacked. It was considered as counterproductive workplace behaviour and workplace aggression (Brenda, aged 34).

In addition to aggressive behaviour, a number of interviewees highlighted how their tribal markings would often lead to feelings of being alone or having few people to interact with regularly. Indeed, an analysis of the participants' accounts revealed social isolation as one of the outcomes of having tribal marks. For example, one participant recognised that 'Not only do tribal marks not appeal to people, I think the marks also make me unattractive, and many of my mates don't like to socialise with me' (Morris, aged 37). Similarly, another recognised how tribal marks had resulted in a lack of friends:

I think I don't have the right look. My tribal marks do not appeal to people and even to myself...People don't like them. I don't have many friends, both at work and outside of work. I am alone and it's very painful (Mia, aged 31).

Other interviewees indicated that they would often avoid social gatherings to avoid insults and people passing derogatory comments about their tribal marks:

I try to avoid people or going to gatherings because it will appear as if everybody is looking at me...I mean, looking at my tribal marks. I might look odd because it may be that I am the only one at the gathering [among the youth] that has tribal marks. Furthermore, I think the less I associate with people, the less abuse, and insinuations I get...So I often stay alone on my own (Amelia, aged 32).

As the above findings show, interviewees' experiences with their tribal markings led to feelings of isolation and outbursts of aggressive behaviour. Unsurprisingly, this often leaves them feeling unmotivated and unsatisfied within their workplace, as the next section details.

### ***Tribal marks and employees' attitudes towards work***

The findings of our study reveal that individuals with tribal marks are often stigmatised and feel withdrawn at work. This situation consequently affects participants' discretionary behaviours as members of an organisation. As one participant noted:

I do not owe anybody – not even my manager – who, at any slightest opportunity, mock my looks, my 100% performance or loyalty. I don't feel relaxed in the work

atmosphere...anyone will throw verbal jabs at me at any time. The manager treats me differently to how he treats other employees without tribal marks. Would I go out of way my to do anything for the organisation? I am sorry, I cannot. I just want to do my basic duty and leave (Patricia, aged 34).

Similarly, other participants recognised how the remarks by their manager and colleagues served to limit their commitment to the organisation:

I work in a place where I am the only one with tribal marks. The manager and colleagues mock my tribal marks and make me feel unwanted. I was denied a supervisory position because of my tribal marks. The manager said my marks may nauseate and drive out customers, and he retorted, 'I don't want to lose customers because of your tribal marks'. That remark really affected me. I don't care about a company that treats me like an outcast. Would I put in extra effort to help colleagues at work and the company? No...it can go down for all I care (Gabriel, aged 32).

Many of my colleagues make me feel unwanted and treat me like an outcast because of my tribal marks. The principal of the firm and clients also look down on me and throw unpleasant verbal jabs at me concerning my tribal marks. Cases have been withdrawn from me because clients don't like my tribal marks. This kills my spirit and ideas...and sometimes shuts me down. My looks do not appeal to the people I work with, so why should I bother with organisational performance, helping others, or organisational effectiveness? I don't care - I just do whatever I have to (Arthur, aged 38).

It is evident from these quotations that tribal marks are a significant factor in workplace behaviour. Having such facial markings could make individuals appear to be unacceptable to their colleagues, thereby creating a work environment in which they are aesthetically rejected.

## Discussion

In this study, we offer a fresh perspective on how the presence of tribal marks can result in discriminatory or prejudicial workplace experiences for bearers, seeking to understand the underlying social psychological basis of this discrimination. This research topic is pertinent to calls for a better understanding of body art as an element of aesthetic labour, as well as an appetite to bring the non-Western context into sharper focus. Indeed, Sarioğlu (2014) argued that the idea of aesthetic labour should be understood in culturally and historically appropriate contexts, considering what may be considered the 'right' look in these settings. Similarly, Sayan-Cengiz (2020) examined aesthetic labour in the context of headscarf wearing in Turkey, noting the potential consequences for those working in customer-facing roles. As our findings from the Nigerian context demonstrate, modernisation and westernisation have resulted in significant cultural changes, implying that what was once regarded as an honourable and fashionable tradition in the form of tribal markings is

now increasingly regarded as anachronistic, particularly among young people (Adeleke, 2021). The physical appearance of individuals with tribal marks no longer conforms to the social norms of today's Western-centric society, and as a result, individuals with such marks suffer from what we call 'tribal marks lookism'. Indeed, Corbett's (2011, p. 625) recognition that 'contemporary society seems to be utterly and completely obsessed with physical attractiveness' clearly has resonance in modern Nigeria.

Our investigation into the impacts of tribal marks in a non-Western context brings a new dimension to ongoing debates about lookism. As we noted earlier, lookism is subjectively reliant on visual perceptions that contribute to appearance-based prejudice or discrimination (Hamermesh, 2011; Rhode, 2010). Thus, consistent with the literature on aesthetic labour, as well as previous studies on social stigmatisation and discrimination (Flanagan & Lewis, 2019; Goffman, 1985; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Witz et al., 2003), our research demonstrates that the appearance of people with tribal marks can result in unfair treatment, insults, and mockery against them. This is largely because the labour market is dominated by people without tribal marks, and the presence of such facial markings can be interpreted as a misalignment with the concept of 'looking good' or 'looking right' in contemporary Nigerian workplaces. This situation is exacerbated by the idea that, unlike tattoos, tribal marks are increasingly perceived to be outdated and nonconforming to modern-day standards and perceptions of proper body art in Nigeria (Adeleke, 2021). Even with tattoos, there is considerable disagreement about whether they are welcome and acceptable forms of body art in Western societies, particularly in workplaces and, more broadly, in the labour market (Roberts, 2016; Timming, 2015, 2017). A more critical argument could be made for tribal marks in Nigeria, as their presence has the potential to negatively affect the workplace experiences of those who bear them.

Here, recourse to the complementary theories of social identity, social categorisation and similarity-attraction offers a framework to understand the underlying social psychological basis for the prejudice, discrimination and even dehumanisation towards those with tribal marking evident in our findings. More specifically social identity theory highlights how people see themselves and others (Trepte & Loy, 2017) and how this perception is based on the categorisation of people into groups. As highlighted above this process will often lead to those perceived to be in the out-group being seen in stereotypical terms, leading to negative and derogatory perceptions which in turn leads to prejudice and discrimination (Korte, 2007; Stolier et al., 2016), something clearly apparent for those with tribal marks in our findings. Within an organisational context this



process may be exacerbated further by the idea of similarity attraction theory, which highlights how people will naturally be attracted to and like people similar to themselves (Abbasi et al., 2023). Within the research reported here it seems clear that those with tribal markings are disadvantaged and marginalised, regardless of their occupations and positions within the organisational hierarchy, due to their dissimilarity from their colleagues. Indeed, in an earlier work Abbasi et al. (2022, p. 905) note the idea of dissimilarity-repulsion hypothesis, suggesting that the notion of repulsion suggests feelings of ‘abhorrence, loathing, disgust and hatred’. Although these same authors express the sentiment that such extreme emotions are largely uncommon or mitigated in working life the evidence presented here would suggest that those with tribal markings arguably do face such extreme emotions from their co-workers, with a range of deleterious outcomes.

By exploring the notion of body art from a Nigerian perspective, therefore, our research makes important theoretical contributions to the literature on aesthetic labour, which has been predominantly Western-centric, or to put it another way, has emphasized the experiences of individuals from non-Western societies. Specifically, we illustrate how the widespread practice of managing and controlling employees based on their physical appearance (viz. aesthetic labour) may result in adverse psychological and behavioural consequences for those with tribal marks in Nigeria. Most of our research participants expressed this viewpoint, reporting that they lacked the psychological strength and capacity to endure the abusive language, insinuations, stigmatisation, discrimination, mockery, and verbal jabs directed at them due to their tribal marks. They also described how others refuse to associate or socialise with them due to ‘tribal mark lookism’, facial and physical (un)attractiveness (Chiu & Babcock, 2002; French, 2002), or what Dean (2005) refers to as appearance-based differentiation. According to Goffman (1985), this concept is an aesthetic variant of stigma that operates subliminally against victims and induces abusers to avoid or deliberately withdraw from socialising with them. This argument resonates with Ebeheakey et al. (2016) findings that most people dislike associating with people who have tribal marks.

### **Policy and managerial implications**

Given its focus on levels of stigma and discrimination against those with tribal markings, the current study has several policy and managerial implications. With regards to policy, our findings have important implications for Nigerian government decision-making regarding intentional alteration of the human body for traditional, cultural, or social reasons.

It should be noted that there have been some national debates about the possibility of outlawing tribal markings. More specifically, the Nigerian Senate debated a bill in 2017 that would have prohibited facial mutilation, imposed penalties on those who engaged in it, and provided protections for those at risk. Ultimately, no national legislation was introduced, though a few states in Nigeria have enacted laws prohibiting the practice (Akinwande, 2021). Our research findings highlight the need for more concerted national debates aimed at addressing tribal markings and mitigating the negative consequences for a relatively large portion of the Nigerian population. We argue that the egregious workplace discrimination faced by those with tribal markings, as reported in this study, emphasizes the need for both policymakers and organizations to implement more targeted interventions that not only minimize the negative consequences of lookism but also promote equal opportunities for those affected.

Beyond the Nigerian context, there has been much debate around the introduction of legislation that seeks to explicitly prohibit appearance-based discrimination or lookism in society and the workplace (see Warhurst & Nickson, 2020 for an overview of this debate). However, only a few jurisdictions in the US and Australia have introduced such legislation, typically at a state or city level (Rhode, 2010; Warhurst et al., 2009). France is an exception, having passed a 2001 national legislation prohibiting discrimination and unfair treatment based on physical appearance. The law covers all forms of physical appearance includes immutable characteristics such as hair, facial traits, weight, and height, as well as mutable characteristics such as body art such as piercings, tattoos (Huggins, 2015). As with other jurisdictions that have introduced such legislation, the number of complaints and convictions is low (Rhode, 2010); however, the legislation in some countries (e.g. France) appear to have raised broader awareness about appearance-based discrimination, resulting in a social shift in people's perceptions in the workplace and society as a whole (Barth & Wagner, 2017; Huggins, 2015).

While we argue that legislation may be necessary in Nigeria to start addressing the widespread discrimination faced by people with tribal markings; we recognize, in reality, that the introduction of appropriate legislation is likely to be some way off. Instead, the onus for addressing appearance-based discrimination should be placed on organisations to educate managers and co-workers about the de-humanising effects of stigmatising and discriminating against people with tribal marks. As we noted earlier with the recognition of the inherent natural biases within the similarity attraction hypothesis (Abbasi et al., 2023) many organisations have sought to negate these biases by creating a more inclusive environment by creating rules and regulations that protect those

disadvantaged in this manner. Within the context of the research reported here though we would argue that this push for inclusion needs to encompass and address prejudice and discrimination based on tribal markings. As aestheticism and lookism will almost certainly result in penalties, such as employee dismissal, organisations should work to ensure that everyone, regardless of their appearance, is treated with respect and dignity. Such education could seek to present counter-stereotypic information to tackle discrimination and stigmatization, and in so doing, encourage managers and co-workers to recognise the impact that their behaviour may have on those with tribal markings (for an example of such an approach, see Smith et al. (2016) discussion of efforts in the hospitality industry to promote a positive images of overweight and obese employees as capable and competent employees worthy of respect).

### **Limitations and areas for future research**

Although our study has shed new light on a critical but underexplored aspect of workplace discrimination in Nigeria, we acknowledge the limitations of our findings and the need for further work in this area. Our study has a relatively small sample size, consisting primarily of individuals aged between 31 and 40 years. Given the growing obscurity of tribal markings in Nigeria, it can be challenging to recruit a larger number of individuals who are willing to discuss their experiences of stigmatization and discrimination in the workplace. Nonetheless, we recognize this as a study limitation and recommend that future research use larger samples to ensure that the results are more generalizable. Furthermore, future research may include older participants to determine if their mental health and behavioural experiences are comparable to those of younger people. This would further enhance our understanding of aesthetic labour in relation to tribal marks in Nigeria. Additionally, future research may employ a quantitative rather than qualitative research approach to examine the impacts of 'tribal marks lookism' in Nigeria and other African contexts. While the present study has shown how the presence of tribal marks could result in negative outcomes for those who bear them, there is a need to consider the experiences of those with other body art forms such as tattoos and gain deeper insights into the workplace consequences. For example, research might explore why it appears to be more acceptable for individuals in the workplace to have a visible tattoo than it is to have tribal marks.

### **Conclusion**

Aesthetic labour, with its emphasis on employee appearance, is becoming a more global phenomenon, though much of this research has been

conducted in Western contexts. Emerging research in non-Western contexts has thrown some light on the interplay between aesthetic labour and various national discourses or cultural norms that influence localised views about what constitutes the 'right' look. Focusing on Nigeria, the present study makes an important and original contribution to debates about lookism, taking into account the experiences of people with tribal marks. These visible, non-concealable facial markings are increasingly viewed as anachronistic in Nigeria, and, as demonstrated by our findings, may result in stigma, discrimination, and other negative consequences for those who bear them. The severity of these outcomes, particularly in terms of the victims' emotional and mental well-being, highlight the need for much greater societal and workplace attention to this issue. In this regard, our research is an important first step in shedding new light on how the stigma and discrimination linked to tribal markings can negatively affect people's personal and professional lives.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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