Hiring and Workplace Employment:
Perceived Aesthetic Biases by Individuals with Physical Disabilities

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Abstract

This study examines experiences with aesthetic bias as perceived by individuals with physical disabilities (i.e., vision, hearing, orthopedic/mobility). We used the concept of aesthetic bias to guide our quantitative and qualitative data analysis. A quantitative Needs Assessment Survey (NAS) gathered demographic information, degree of appearance management behavior and assessed participants' perspectives on their experience with aesthetic bias during the interviewing process and in the workplace environment. In addition, we conducted interviews with 12 participants that assessed their experiences with aesthetic biases. The results revealed four themes: appearance creditability, concealing or revealing the disability, inconsistent feedback from others, and disability awareness. The findings add value to the extant research and the community and can be incorporated into workshops and education sessions on aesthetic bias and disability.

Keywords: aesthetic bias; individuals with physical disabilities, workplace, appearance

Overview and Introduction

Data from the U.S. Department of Labor (2021) demonstrates that barriers exist for people with disabilities seeking and maintaining employment. According to the National Disability Institute (2021), a smaller percentage of individuals with disabilities nationally were hired than those without disabilities. In Indiana, only 36.9% (170, 900) of the working-age adults with a disability were employed compared with 81.2% (2,651,300) of the working-aged adults without a disability (Institute of Employment and Disability, 2016). The mean earnings of the population with a disability were only $22,047 compared to $32,470 for those without a disability (Huber et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2018).

Within the workplace, individuals with disabilities face many stressors, including discrimination, workload stress, and unwelcoming environments (Purc-Stephenson et al., 2017; Tsai, 2016). Ysasi et al. (2018) identified "aesthetic bias" as when others encounter a person with a disability who is visibly different, followed by an adverse uncomfortable feeling. This study examines aesthetic bias perceived by individuals with disabilities during hiring and in the workplace.

Literature Review

The following literature review summarizes research on general biases against individuals with disabilities, employers' aesthetic bias with employees with disabilities, employees with disabilities' perceptions of aesthetic biases, and concepts related to aesthetic bias.

General Biases Against Individuals with Disabilities

Studies have found biases toward individuals with disabilities, particularly during hiring (Kaye et al., 2011; Stone & Wright, 2013). These biases can sometimes be positive. For instance, Brecher et al. (2006) found a "leniency bias" through which individuals with disabilities were perceived more positively when compared with individuals without disabilities. This leniency bias was related to more positive ratings by supervisors and managers during the employment hiring practices.

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Most biases, however, are negative. Ameri et al. (2018) sent employers over 6,000 applications, with two-thirds disclosing having either Asperger's Syndrome or a spinal cord injury. The results demonstrated that individuals with disabilities received fewer responses (-26%) from employers than those without a disability, with the type of disability influencing the degree of employer hiring decisions. For example, there is perceived bias toward individuals who use a wheelchair, which can stem from a lack of understanding of how to accommodate them, believing accommodations will be a financial burden to the organization and lead to legal conflicts (Kaye et al., 2011; Stone & Write, 2013). Financial burdens have shown to be one of the most common issues. Bonaccio et al. (2020) explored 11 standard reservations employers have when considering applicants with disabilities, the authors found that cost was the most significant concern. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that employers cover the cost of reasonable accommodations. However, as Bonaccia et al. (2020) show, upwards of 59% of employers are non-compliant and pay nothing for accommodations. Aichner (2021) proposes that hiring individuals with disabilities provides a mutual benefit for both parties (employers and individuals with disabilities). By being non-compliant, they are not only doing a disservice to clients and constituents by overlooking proper representation, but also discriminating against an entire group of people (Aichner, 2021).

According to Bonaccio et al. (2020), employers claim that it is challenging to find qualified employees with disabilities despite being legally prohibited from creating additional barriers throughout their hiring processes to ensure people with disabilities can apply. Employers often question how qualified people with disabilities are suitable for positions or cite physical demands the person with a disability cannot perform as a reason for not hiring (Bonaccio et al., 2020). After conducting an in-depth analysis of published research in related fields (e.g., human resources management and public health), Bonaccio et al. (2020) found that employers often dismissed qualified professionals before considering the practical limitations they would have in the position.

Part of the issue could be due to a lack of diversity initiatives focused on hiring people with disabilities. Ball et al. (2005) found, for instance, that until recently, many companies did not even include people with disabilities in their diversity statements. More recently, companies have become cognizant of embedding inclusive language related to disability in diversity statements (Gasper et al., 2020). The absence of discussion of this minority group in company diversity statements can make those with disabilities feel unwelcome. Inclusivity is a broad term, and employers need to continue to develop policies and provide training that reflects this (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Kulkarni & Kote, 2014).

Employers' Aesthetic Bias Against Employees with Disabilities

Research has found that employers are significantly biased toward people based on their overall appearance (Ameri et al., 2018; Stone & Wright, 2013), which can have important implications for people with disabilities. Even though candidates could meet job expectations, employers have consciously or subconsciously exhibited bias by not hiring individuals with disabilities based on their appearance. Despite no direct correlation between appearance and competence, some individuals with disabilities still struggle to find adequate employment for this reason. In working with 144 employers, Stone and Wright (2013) found the existence of "aesthetic" bias, where individuals with facial disfigurement and those who use wheelchairs were not hired as often as the control group. Stevenage and McKay (2010) also determined that bias in hiring practices was most severe towards individuals with visible facial disfigurement.

After summarizing the literature on "aesthetic bias" related to individuals with a disability, Ysasi et al. (2018) found that individuals without a visible disability were perceived more positively (e.g., intelligent, capable) than others by their employers. On the contrary, individuals with visible disabilities faced stigmatism that impacted their employment due to their lack of self-confidence (e.g., nervousness and uncertainty about how others would perceive them). Other researchers noted that individuals with the "wrong look" might even be punished (Warhurst et al., 2009). However, attaining the "right look" can be challenging for people with disabilities. For instance, Mcbee-Black and Ha-Brookshire (2018) found that professional clothing designed for individuals with various disabilities is more challenging to find.

Results examining divergent employment industries (e.g., education, hospitality, and healthcare) revealed differences in the perceptions of individuals with disabilities. In higher education, Churgay et al. (2015) found that slight differences existed in the treatment of disabled faculty by their peers. Researchers in the business fields (e.g., accounting) have found biases in hiring individuals with disabilities (Ameri, 2018). In the hospitality industry, where greater customer interactions with the general public are warranted, the work performance of individuals with disabilities was rated much lower by consumers

than others, particularly when the service provided was subpar or did not meet their expectations (Madera et al., 2020). When Galli et al. (2015) showed groups of individuals in the general population and the health field (physical therapists) pictures of people using wheelchairs, individuals without disabilities rated the competencies of wheelchair users low and preferred able-bodied individuals. Interestingly, physical therapists who had extensive experience with individuals with disabilities (e.g., using a wheelchair) did not exhibit any type of preference.

Employees with Disabilities and their Perceived Aesthetic Biases

Limited studies have examined appearance biases as perceived by individuals with disabilities. Lamb (2001) noted, despite stories of discrimination, that studies on the social realities of individuals with disabilities and appearances have been neglected. More recently, Thomas et al. (2019) interviewed women ($N = 15$; 21-53 years) with visible physical disabilities about body image. The participants were asked how they conceptualized body image, the ability of the body to perform various functions (either positive or negative), displaying visual appeal, and how these contributed to their mental and physical health. As part of function and aesthetics, two participants discussed appearance while eating as a concern. They used clothing to distract from various body differences (i.e., body weight, physical appearance, and size of clothing).

Spiegel et al. (2016) conducted qualitative interviews with participants who reported having a degenerative eye condition. They reported that their medical condition had been an obstacle throughout their careers. Results from 36 middle-aged individuals (40 years) demonstrated that the more participants tried to conceal their disability, the more likely they exhibited stress levels. Additionally, those with very early signs of degeneration of their eyes who concealed their conditions had lower self-esteem and more stress. In other words, people who face an internal battle when contemplating revealing their disability related to their degenerative eye condition may not have the support they need to succeed as they continue their careers.

Theoretical Concepts Related to Aesthetic Bias

Aesthetics is the study of visual beauty and involves the viewer's emotional reaction to an object or person either as a whole, a combination of parts, or specific parts such as color, texture, line, balance, or shape (Menninghaus, 2019). It has been noted that, as work in developed countries has become more information and customer-oriented, aesthetics or appearances of the workforce have become important (Adkins & Lury, 2012). To meet expectations of appearance, known as "aesthetic labor," employees must look and act in a particular manner to fit the company brand and their role within the company (Bourdieu, 1984). Warhurst and Nickson (2020) identified "aesthetic capital," or the employer's dress, body language, and speech expectations. Dress includes all the elements of appearance, including body modifications, changes to the body, body supplements or additions to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Body modifications are changes to the body due to exercise, diet, skincare, and hairstyle. Body supplements are additions to the body, including clothing, shoes, accessories, and handbags. Certain expectations of appearance in the workplace can lead to aesthetic bias, which occurs when uncomfortable feelings arise in the viewer against those who do not fit appearance expectations. It can lead to unfair treatment of the individual based on appearance or visual information (Ysasi et al., 2018).

The present study focuses on the perception of individuals with a physical and apparent disability. Therefore, concepts related to appearance management are pertinent. A concept of symbolic interaction theory asserts that meaning is established through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015). According to Stone (1962), identity is established through interaction with others due to their aesthetic appearance. Individuals use dress to claim or reject the identity depending on others' responses to them. When aesthetic bias occurs, the individuals being judged might internalize an adverse reaction toward them. According to Goffman (1959), the pioneer of impression management theory, individuals attempt to influence the perceptions of others by changing their appearance cues. Many authors claim that impression management is critical to job interviews (e.g., Roulin, 2015). Jones and Pitman (1982) proposed a taxonomy of five strategies that individuals employ when managing their impression: integration or to be likable, self-promotion or to be perceived as competent, exemplification or to appear dedicated, intimidation or to be seen as powerful and threatening, and supplication or to appear needy. Integration and self-promotion are also noted to be used in job interviews (Bolingo et al., 2016).

Purpose and Research Questions

According to the National Disability Institute (2021), a smaller proportion of people with disabilities were employed in 2020 (17.9%) compared to those without a disability (61.8%). The U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics (2020) further revealed that, among college graduates with and without disabilities, these numbers were significantly higher, representing 25.7% and 72%, respectively. In Indiana, geographical location impacted the employment rates of working-age people with disabilities, ranging from 20.8% (rural areas) to 49.7% (urban areas) (Research and Training Center, 2020). The literature demonstrates that biases exist in the workplace towards individuals with disabilities, particularly those with visible disabilities that may hinder employment (Ameri et al., 2018; Stone & Wright, 2013).

In the recent past, research has focused on employers' perceptions and aesthetic biases against individuals with disabilities. To combat aesthetic biases during the hiring process, initiatives have been undertaken by employers, which have included the development of policies and procedures and the use of diversity and equity-inclusive language (e.g., Gasper et al., 2020; Bonaccio et al., 2020). However, since the integration of inclusive policies, to the best of the investigators' knowledge, there has been very limited recent research on the perceptions and aesthetic biases experienced by individuals with disabilities during the hiring process and workplace employment.

Therefore, this study aimed to interview individuals with physical (i.e., mobility/orthopedic and visual) disabilities about their experiences with "aesthetic bias." The following research questions were explored:

Research Questions
1. What types of appearance management behaviors do individuals with physical disabilities exhibit?
2. Do participants with physical disabilities perceive or report appearance-related bias during the hiring process and in the workplace environment?
3. How do perceived aesthetic biases impact individuals with physical disabilities during the hiring process and in the workplace environment?

Method

Research has demonstrated poor response rates to surveys among college students with disabilities (O'Shea, 2016). Although there are several contributing factors, the National Center for Education Statistics revealed in April 2022 that many students attending both 2- and 4-year institutions do not report their disability when in higher education (https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/4_26_2022.asp).

Based on previous evidence and the scope of the research, after seeking IRB approval, the researchers partnered with The Gregory S. Fehribach Center at Eskenazi Health, Indianapolis, to recruit participants.

Participants

The Fehribach Center was chosen because of its mission and outstanding commitment to the educational and career advancement of students with physical disabilities. The Center recruits students with physical disabilities for internships related to the student's academic majors. Students at colleges and universities across Indiana are eligible to participate after completing their first year of college and one year after graduation. The authors collaborated with the director and the program manager of the Center, both of whom sent a recruitment email to all 40 eligible participants who were involved in the summer 2022 internship program. Criteria for participation were that the participants should be 18 years of age and have one of the diagnosed physical (mobility/orthopedic or visual) disabilities.

In the initial recruitment email, participants were provided a link sharing information about the research goals, purposes, and research details. They were informed that the research encompassed two parts. Before the start of the study, participants were assured of the maintenance of their confidentiality. Information about the incentives associated with the project and research benefits was also mentioned. Also, participants were notified that their involvement in the study was voluntary and emphasized that they could avoid any questions during the interview. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any given time. An additional email was sent out to the participants after one week to encourage further participation in the study.

Instrument and Procedure

Part 1 of the research was a quantitative instrument entitled Needs Assessment Survey (NAS) and Part 2 was a one-on-one interview session. Participants completed the brief 15-minute NAS survey via Qualtrics. The NAS was used as a screening tool to select participants who experienced or had perceived aesthetic biases during the interviewing process and/or in the workplace. This survey asked 11 questions related to demographic information and 22 multiple-choice questions assessing their experience with aesthetic bias during the hiring process and after employment. For the aesthetic bias section, participants were asked to select from one of the five responses: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. If they met the criteria for Part 1 (i.e., they

had experienced aesthetic bias or perceived aesthetic bias in the workplace), participants were invited to participate in Part 2, which was a one-hour qualitative one-to-one interview with the investigators via Zoom. Participants were informed that the interview generally intended to ascertain their experiences with aesthetic bias during the hiring process and in the workplace environment.

For Part 1 of the study (NAS), besides demographics, examples of questions that addressed aesthetic bias during the hiring and after employment included: "I am self-conscious of my overall appearance in public"; "I am anxious about eating in social settings – e.g., work functions, parties, and restaurants"; "My style of dress and appearance affects people's perception of me."

After defining aesthetic bias (see Harris, 2019), participants were asked 19 open-ended questions during the interview. Seven questions were related to perceptions of aesthetic bias during the hiring process, ten were associated with perceptions of aesthetic bias in the workplace, and one was about how they would like the researchers to advocate for individuals with disabilities with future employers and hiring facilities. To ensure consistency and accuracy of data collection, the first author was responsible for asking open-ended questions while the second author took notes and recorded the interview sessions with the participants. All interviews were audio- and videotaped on Zoom. To maintain confidentiality, any names used in the recordings were changed to pseudonyms when the recordings were transcribed. Each e-transcript was sent to the respective participant for further review to reaffirm reliability and accuracy. Participants who completed both parts of the research were given a $25 Tango gift card. To maintain confidentiality, the participants' responses to Part 1 and 2 of the research were coded using the last five digits of their telephone numbers.

There were seven questions related to aesthetic bias during the hiring process (e.g., "How has your disability influenced interviewing for employment?"; "Have you experienced or observed aesthetic bias when applying for employment? If so, how?"). Ten questions were associated with aesthetic bias in the workplace (e.g., "Discuss how you dress for work including clothing, shoes, accessories, hair, make-up, etc."; "Discuss how you consider the types of food to take or eat at work?"; "Have you experienced or observed bias in the workplace as a result of your behavior? If so, how? Please describe the incident/s in detail.") and one was about how they would like the researchers to advocate for individuals with disabilities with future employers and hiring facilities (i.e.,

"How would you like me to be an advocate for you in the field when working with professionals, in assisting you in finding a job, making sure you are equitably interviewed, hired, trained, and promoted?"). Throughout the one-to-one interview session, the first author prompted all interviewees to expand and provide further information to their questions.

Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using means, frequencies, and percentages. Responses to the larger initial sample were calculated. Next, the qualitative data were analyzed line-by-line for themes using van Manen's (1998) method. Each interview was subsequently analyzed separately by both researchers. Each researcher reviewed the transcripts for themes.

As stated above, participants substantiated the interview content by reviewing the transcript. In addition, interrater reliability was determined by two researchers who analyzed one transcript independently for themes. They reconvened to compare themes to ensure that the interrater reliability, meaning agreement on the themes by both researchers, was above 90%. These themes were used as categories for the research. Once this process was completed, both researchers analyzed the interview transcripts. Further, these themes were confirmed by three additional researchers at the institution. The three researchers were formally trained by scholars with extensive experience in qualitative research.

Results

Part 1: NAS Results

Twenty-five participants completed the NAS. There were 13 (52%) females, 10 (40%) males, and two (8%) non-binary/third gender. For the demographic question related to age, only 21 participants responded. Most participants (*n*=18; 85.7%) were 19 to 23 years. When questioned about the participants' level of education, a vast majority responded (*n*=24; 96%). Levels of education included six (25.0%) sophomores, eight (33%) juniors, three (13%) seniors, and seven (29%) graduate students. We received responses about participants' employment status responses from 21 participants (*n*=21; 84%). Most of them (*n*=17; 81%) worked full-time on their internship, which was 40 hours per week. The majority of the full group were Caucasian (*n*=18; 72%), and were studying in nine major areas, including finance and human services.

RQ1: What types of appearance management behaviors do individuals with physical disabilities exhibit?

As noted in Table 1, the NAS screening tool had 20 statements on appearance management and two statements on aesthetic bias. Based on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) participants were asked to rate the applicability of the statements to them. The NAS screening tool was effective in demonstrating that these individuals with disabilities did engage in appearance management behaviors. As observed, the mean scores for the NAS screening tool ranged from 2.46 to 4.25. Only two statements on the NAS screening tool tended to gravitate toward the disagree statements. These were "I dislike my physique," with a mean of 2.42, and "I am anxious about eating in social settings," with a mean of 2.46.

RQ2: Do participants with physical disabilities perceive or report appearance-related bias during hiring and in the workplace environment?

From a pool of 25 participants, 23 who had experienced, perceived, or witnessed aesthetic biases responded to the statement, "I have experienced 'aesthetic bias' related to my disability when interviewing for a job." One individual (4.3%) strongly agreed, four (17.4%) agreed, seven (30.4%) neither agreed nor disagreed, eight (34.8%) disagreed, and three (13%) strongly disagreed with the statement. About the statement "I have experienced 'aesthetic bias' related to my disability at my workplace, two (8.7%) strongly agreed, four (17.4%) agreed, six (26.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed, six (26.1%) disagreed, and five (21.7%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, when participants were questioned if they perceived or witnessed aesthetic bias in the workplace, only five (21;7%) responded, with two (8.7%) indicating that while they did not personally experience it, they had witnessed it. A speculative observation as to why there was a lower rating for this research question could be due to several compounding factors such as (a) participants' reluctance to acknowledge this sensitive topic, (b) they were unaware of appearance-related biases during the hiring and in the workplace environment, and (c) the employment settings where the students interned were not only sensitive to but also inclusive of this population.

Part 2: Interview Results

Twelve of 24 participants who completed the NAS (six females, five males, and one non-binary/third gender) indicated perceiving aesthetic bias in the workplace and thus were also interviewed. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the interview partic-ipants, including their gender, age, major in college, year in school, ethnicity, employment status, and type of disability. To note, half of the participants are mobility impaired, and half are visually impaired.

RQ3: How does perceived aesthetic biases impact individuals with physical disabilities during the hiring and in the workplace environment?

Four primary themes emerged from the one-on-one interviews. These themes included appearance credibility, concealing or revealing the disability, inconsistent feedback from others, and disability awareness.

Appearance credibility

Appearance credibility refers to the desire to appear credible (see Figure 1). Participants' dress selection was described as mainly professional, including dress shirt, tie, and slacks, professional or business casual, khakis, dress shoes, heels or flats, groomed hair, jewelry, minimal makeup, and glasses. This theme supported the concepts of symbolic interaction in that participants changed their dressing style in response to feedback from others. An example of this was demonstrated when a participant reported wearing a green shirt that complemented her black slacks and a blazer:

> And then I always make sure to wear my favorite business outfit that makes me feel the most confident. So I have a nice Ann Taylor green shirt that I just love. It's so pretty and I always get compliments on it and it makes me feel really confident. So I always wear that and then just a pair of black slacks. Also a blazer, a black blazer that I feel makes me look sharp and respectable. (KP5)

Online interactions allowed participants to dress informally where they were not seen on camera. One participant (SW2) shared candidly that she dressed nicely above her waist when interviewing via Zoom:

> I'm going to start being completely candid with my Zoom answer. The top of me, which currently just bears a t-shirt, would usually have some sort of dress or frilly [dressed nicely]... While I did have a nice frilly top on doing Zoom, my pants were usually sweatpants. I'm going to be honest. If they ever asked me to stand up, would've been a little awkward. But from what you could see on camera was very frilly, very girly. (SW2)

As discussed by participants, appearing neat was important to the professional look. Participant JS6 discussed combing his hair and the importance of looking "neat."

Table 1

Means of Statements Related to Appearance Management from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree

Item	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD
I always notice how I look.	24	1	3.75	1.11
I like my looks just the way they are.	24	1	3.71	.91
I check my appearance in a mirror whenever I can.	24	1	3.25	1.45
Before going out, I usually spend a lot of time getting ready.	24	1	2.88	1.26
Most people would consider me good looking.	24	1	3.50	.78
It is important that I always look good.	24	1	3.50	1.02
I am self-conscious if my grooming isn't right.	24	1	3.58	1.24
I usually wear whatever is handy without caring how it looks.	23	2	2.96	1.10
I like the way my clothes fit me.	23	2	3.43	.99
I don't care what people think about my appearance.	24	1	3.08	1.10
I dislike my physique.	24	1	2.42	.97
I am physically unattractive.	24	1	2.67	.96
Food is important to me.	24	1	3.96	1.04
My table manners affect people's perception of me.	23	2	3.09	1.27
Eating a healthy diet is important to me.	24	1	3.75	.79
I am anxious about eating in social settings (e.g., restaurants, parties, work functions, etc.).	24	1	2.46	1.31
I have access to appropriate clothing for work.	24	1	4.25	.73
I have access to appropriate clothing for a job interview.	24	1	4.21	.72
My style of dress and appearance affect people's perception of me.	24	1	4.00	1.06
I am self-conscious of my overall appearance in public.	24	1	3.50	1.14

The general rule when I'm applying for a job, I often think, "Okay, I look kind of goofy." And so in a sort of sense, I think I try to proactively pre-empt it with brushing my hair, doing nice picture, nice shot. I feel like my approach is to kind of... I have a sense I might look funny, so instead of something that I'm like, "I know I can kind of basically look like what they want." (JS6)

Appearing neat influenced the foods they ate at a job interview and the foods they brought to work. The participants discussed eating "easy, non-messy foods." They also drank water because it is not visible when spilled. They brought "simple" foods that were easy to make or eat, like finger foods (e.g., fruit, vegetable, and sandwiches). A participant explained:

I would not order something that you would eat with your hand. I would instead order something that you would use silverware to eat. I would not order spaghetti or something very messy... I would order something small and something that I could eat with silverware just to keep everything simple. (EL9)

Participants discussed the importance of appearing credible in the interview and at the workplace. They noted that their disability could hinder their ability to appear credible. A participant noted "…I feel people assume I can't do a lot of things that I can do as a result of my disability." (LS3) Another participant noted that in order to be taken more seriously he had to dress up and appear self-confident:

Again, appearance-wise, I try to come in professional. I do want to seem like I'm there for a specific reason, I'm there to work. I'm there to be serious. I'm not there to waste time. Don't want to seem as lazy or not put together. (IM7)

Table 2

Demographical Information About Interviewees

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Major	School Level	Ethnicity	Work	Disability
UKP5	--	20	Finance	Junior	Caucasian	--	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
SW2	Female	20	English	Sophomore	Caucasian	Full-Time	Visual impaired or blind
IS8	Female	20	Public Health	Junior	Other		Visual impaired or blind
JL1	Non-Binary	20	Psych/Education	Sophomore	Caucasian	Full-Time	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
AHG12	Male	--	Finance	Sophomore	Latino	Full-Time	Visual impaired or blind
NB10	Female	22	Social Work	Graduate	Asian/White	Full-Time	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
SB4	Male	31	Adult/Community Education	--	Asian	Full-Time	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
IM7	Male	23	Cyber Security	Sophomore	Caucasian	Part-Time	Visual impaired or blind
JS6	Male	21	Political Science	Junior	Caucasian	Full-Time	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
LS3	Male	--	Econ/French	Junior	Caucasian	Part-Time	Visual impaired or blind
KL11	Female	22	Human Services	Graduate	Black/African-American	--	Mobility or orthopedic impaired
EL9	Female	--	Public Relations	Senior	Caucasian	Full-Time	Mobility or orthopedic impaired

The participants were able to use their visible disability to communicate credibility. A participant explained, "But I also think that when they consider hiring someone that is visually impaired, having gone through a disability like that built a lot of grit and resilience in that person" (AHG12). Another participant similarly noted that, even though the disability may make her seem less credible, it also demonstrated her strength to overcome this bias:

I definitely think that people do perceive me as less until I kind of mention my credibility as a professional and as a student and then their eyes start to widen. They're like, "Oh, wow, maybe she is a lot more capable than she looks." (KP5)

Hide or Reveal the Disability?
Ten of the twelve participants responded in a binary manner in that they either actively hid their disability or were on the other end of the spectrum (See Figure
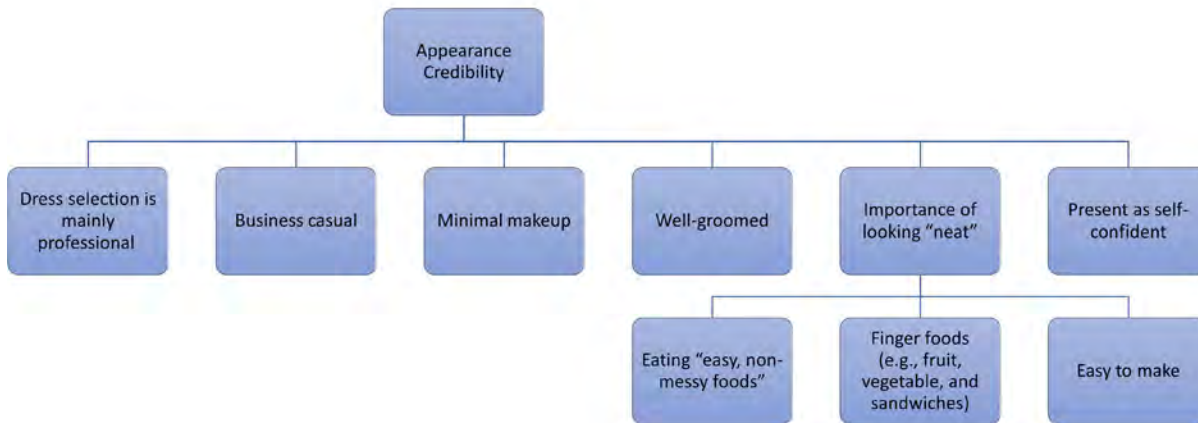
Figure 1

Coding Trees Representing Appearance Credibility

Figure 2

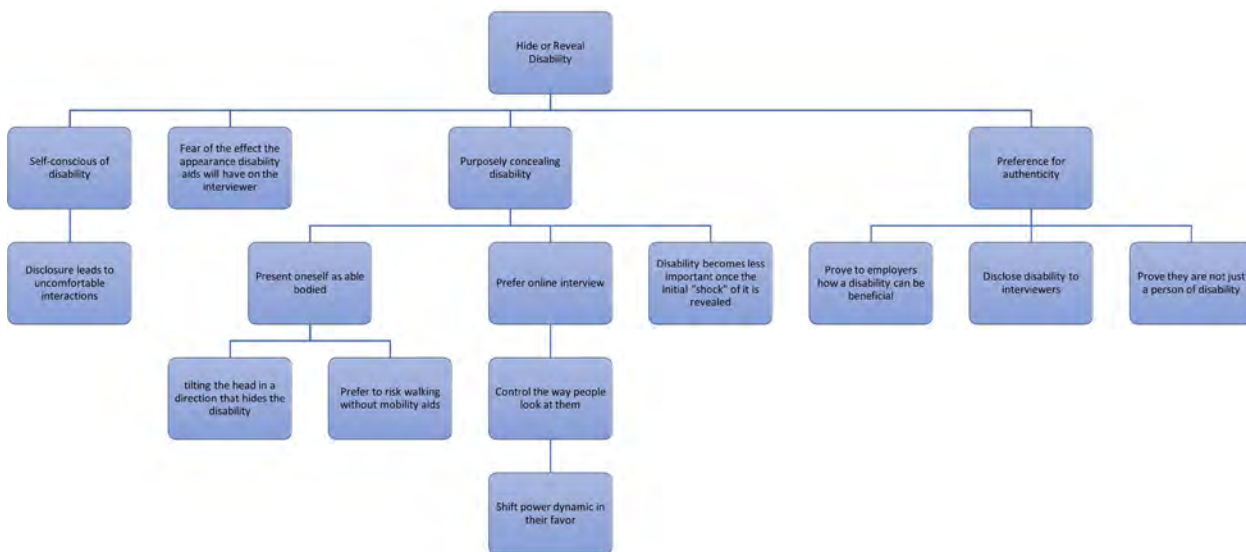*Coding Trees Representing Hide or Reveal the Disability*

Figure 3

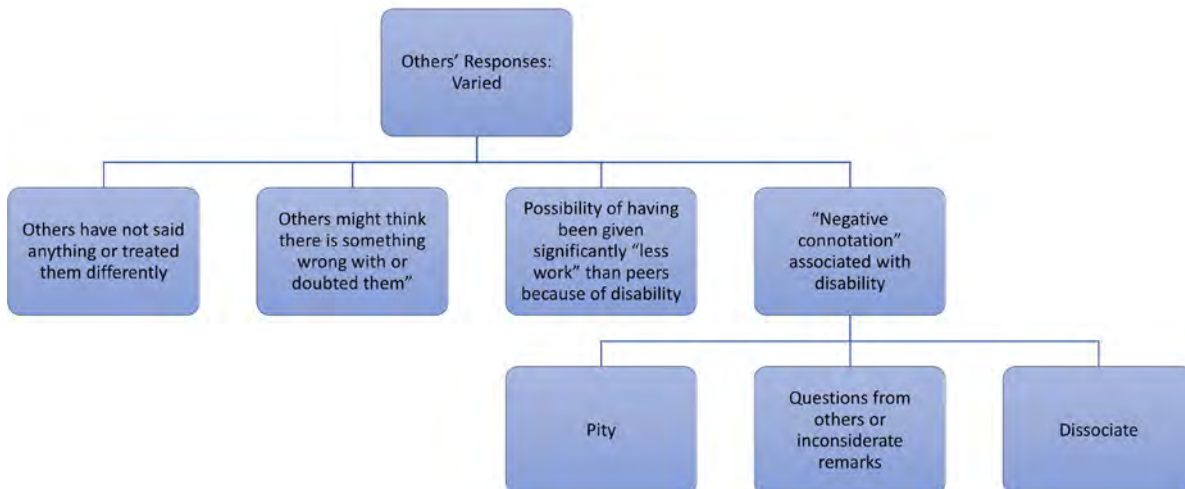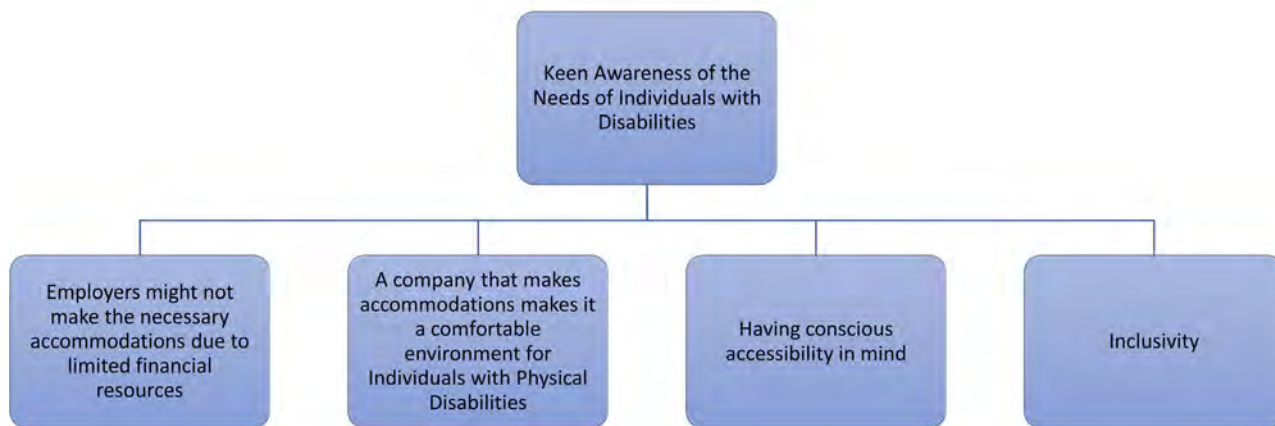*Coding Trees Representing Others' Responses: Varied*

Figure 4

Coding Trees Representing Keen Awareness of the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities

2). Those on the other end of the spectrum overtly talked about their disability. Four participants described their concerted efforts to hide their disability, which seemed to add interactions with others that were uncomfortable. They reported being self-conscious about their disability. A participant (LS3) shared:

> Going into an interview, obviously, everyone's going to be looking at every aspect of you, which includes your body. I definitely say I'm a pretty conscious person of other people's perceptions of me. Whether it was just nerves or I was genuinely afraid for the interview, I don't know." (LS3).

The participants reported purposefully concealing their disability. A participant discussed when they chose to wear mobility aids:

> With my mobility aids, with my braces, I don't have to wear them all the time, and I can take that risk for an interview. I will sometimes choose not to wear it just for the fear of what that appearance of seeing that brace is going to have on the interviewer. (JL1)

Another participant (EL9) similarly noted:

> Yes. I think I definitely have, given the fact that I literally hide my mobility aids. I know that some people will see those and not want to hire me, so I try to basically make myself appear able bodied so that I know in my head that the employment decision hopefully is not based on that. (EL9)

Participants reported preferring online interviews more frequently so that they could "control the way people look at [them] a bit more" (LS3) by tilting

their head in a direction that hides the disability or by not having to walk with mobility aids. While the participants hid their disability, they also disclosed it to others. Participant SW2 discussed disclosing a disability visually:

> I don't bother going into interviews wearing my contacts because I believe that putting forth my authentic self is the best way to go about things, whether it be in person or Zoom, because that's how I would show up in the workplace. This is how I'm most comfortable, and I want to be hired for me, for how I'm going to show up. (SW2)

Some participants verbally disclosed their disability via Zoom. One intern mentioned,

> I disclose because, when I don't, I feel like I'm hiding something from them, and I always feel worse when I don't, because it's happened before that. Maybe not for interviews, but in other scenarios when I meet people or employers, when I don't disclose it at first, it becomes more difficult as time goes on. (AHG12)

Six participants discussed overcompensating for their disability. A participant described proving to others that he can do a "good job." He stated having a particularly positive attitude and "showing them" how a disability can be "beneficial."

> I usually come in an interview saying like, 'I'm going to prove to them that I'm just not a person of disability. I'm just a person that's interested in a job,' and that my disability doesn't impair me to do a good job. (IM7)

A participant noted that the disability becomes less important once its initial "shock" is revealed.

> Because once people got over the shock of my glasses, I am somebody that...The mobility part of my disability is invisible. I was lucky enough to be able to blend in. I really did enjoy that for a long part of my life. I hated sharing that side of me. Once you got to know me past my glasses, people stopped thinking about it. But now that I'm older, I feel like I have a very different mindset. I love sharing that part of me. It's something that I'm extremely proud of (SW2)

The other two participants did not either hide or reveal their disability. They stated that "disability was not a factor" in the interview or work environment. A participant described that others could ask, but it does not become important to the interview or workplace:

> I don't think I've encountered any bias towards me. Nobody would really ask questions about vision, nor what kind of... They may ask what kind of visual problems you have, but other than that, I don't really encounter that much bias towards any disability... when I'm applying for an interview. (JS6)

Others' Responses: Varied

Participants discussed a wide range of reactions and perceived different assumptions others had about individuals with a disability (See Figure 3). Some noted that others had not really said anything to them or treated them differently. Other participants discussed more subtle responses to them that perhaps might be due to their disability but might be a result of past experiences of facing doubts from others. Based on the varied responses, it appears that people had mixed reactions toward individuals with disabilities. Some were comfortable and treated individuals with disabilities as their traditional counterparts, while others avoided or perhaps were overly tenacious. This finding aligns with symbolic interaction in that individuals might be reacting to others by either concealing or revealing their disability. One participant said,

> Some discussed that others might think there is something wrong with or doubted them. A part of me really wants to believe that the reason why I have been given significantly "less work" than my peer interns is because of my disability. Although there are a number of other factors that could have influenced that because we all have different bosses, so it could just be that my boss

wasn't sure what to give any intern in general. But it's just because I've been in so many situations in life where people did doubt me because of my arm.... that's just sitting in the back of my head every day. (KP5)

Another individual discussed a "negative connotation" that was associated with disability: "...because I do believe that when people hear the word 'disability,' it immediately has a negative connotation, like, 'These people... They have hard lives. I pity them. They can't do this, but it's fine'" (AHG12).

Participants also discussed that others tended to avoid and ignore them. For example, one participant mentioned a manager who would avoid eye contact with him:

> So she already knew of my disability, but the one that's second in command, she was a little hesitant at first, I feel like. She wasn't giving me direct eye contact. She'd talk to me, but her eyes would be darting off to a different direction sometimes because she doesn't want to look me straight in the eye. So yeah, I feel like people can be a little standoffish at first, don't want to be the people that like to judge from far away. (IM7)

On the other hand, participants also said that when a disability is noticed, others will ask about it. "Sometimes, I do get questions, or people say things that comes out wrong towards my disability" (KL11).

Keen Awareness of the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed a keen awareness of the needs of individuals with physical disabilities (See Figure 4). They understood that employers might not make the necessary accommodations due to limited financial resources. A participant discussed this issue, pointing out that making accommodations to the physical work environment confirms their needs:

> And so I think the goal shouldn't be, legally, to be clear. It should actually be accessibility. And I know that takes money, and I know that costs time, but if you want those groups to succeed, if you want those groups to feel seen, you have to actually make them be actually able to be at the place you want them to be at. (Jl1)

An individual added that a company that makes accommodations makes it a comfortable environment

for individuals with physical disabilities. This individual suggested that including people with physical disabilities in the planning of the work environment was important because these individuals are "conscious" of their needs.

> So it's like reaching out to people. If you want to check if your place is accessible, ask a disabled person. Because we can probably walk through there once and point out most of the accessibility issues, especially the ones connected to our disabilities, but probably some that are connected to other disabilities as well. It's just having that conscious accessibility in mind with almost anything you do helps it be more inclusive for people [with] disabilities, but just everyone in general. (JL1)

Discussion

The results reveal the perceptions of aesthetic bias that individuals with physical disabilities experienced in the workplace setting. Participants sought to appear credible, reported that they attempted to either conceal or reveal their disability, reported a range of reactions by others from ignoring to asking about their disability, and had a keen awareness of how others might respond to their disability. The results from the pre-interview NAS survey showed that a majority participants (*n*=18/20) engaged in appearance management behaviors (e.g., checking their appearance in the mirror, awareness of a healthy diet, and having appropriate clothing for work). Participants knew how they looked and managed their appearance through dress choices and food intake. They also felt their style of dressing and appearance affected people's perception of them. However, they felt they had access to appropriate clothing and eating in public (e.g., restaurants) did not make them anxious.

Questions about the credibility of individuals with physical disabilities were noted in previous research exploring employer perceptions (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Participants in the present study were aware that their credibility might be questioned; therefore, they purposely maintained a professional, neat appearance. In addition, the current study supported previous research by Thomas et al. (2019) that found clothing was used to distract from physical differences. For example, these participants might hide their disability by not using their walkers.

Participants noticed that employers and co-workers tended to either ignore their disability or openly ask about it. A potential explanation for this could be that others were either sensitive and purposely ignored or accepted the disability. Another view could

be employers' and co-workers' desire to understand and learn about the disability, which resulted in openly discussing the disability. As observed by previous researchers, the range in responses to individuals with physical disabilities might be due to a lack of understanding how to accommodate these individuals (Kaye et al., 2011; Stone & White, 2013). In the present study, individuals with physical disabilities understood that employers might perceive or see them as a financial burden and potential legal liability. Additionally, individuals with physical disabilities reported that they would be overcompensated by providing them extra responsibilities and being asked to work more hours.

In light of these findings, it is vital to highlight the positive message participants received from their employers related to their physical disability. The fact that they either openly conversed, inquired, or even ignored the participant's disability should not be seen as unfavorable, but it could be a result of embracing the diversity-equity policies implemented in the workplace.

The results support previous concepts related to aesthetic bias. Participants reported they needed to "look and act in a certain manner" at a job interview and in the workplace (Bourdieu, 1984). Participants used dress cues, body supplements (e.g., blazers, dress shoes, dress pants, button-up shirt, jewelry, etc..), and body modifications (e.g., neat hair, subtle make-up, less visible body piercings) to meet these appearance standards in a workplace environment (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). The present study used food as a body modification (e.g., food on the face) or body supplement (stain on the clothing). Therefore, concepts related to appearance management are pertinent.

The results of the present study also support symbolic interaction, which establishes dress meaning through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015). The participants discussed reactions from others that influenced their appearances. As observed from the appearance credibility theme, this included dress selection as mainly being professional, the importance of looking neat, and presenting oneself as being confident (e.g., dressing up). For example, participants noted that employers might not always see them as capable, and, in response, they described wearing "credible" clothing. The results also support Jones and Pitman's (1982) taxonomy of five strategies individuals employ when managing their impressions. They specifically discussed self-promotion and competency.

In the current research, symbolic interaction was further supported in that participants reported incon-

sistent feedback from others related to their disability. While some employers doubted their ability to perform, others completely ignored their disability or reacted negatively (e.g., dissociated, showed pity, condescending, asking inappropriate questions about the disability). This resulted in participants not only being self-conscious but also concealing (e.g., presenting themselves as able-bodied individuals, preference for Zoom interviews) or revealing their disability (e.g., openly disclosing the disability, proving work competence was unhindered by the disability).

Limitations

A few limitations existed in this research, namely, (a) the study population focused on select types of physical disabilities (i.e., mobility/ orthopedic and visual), (b) participants were from Indiana, (c) the sample size was small related to quantitative analysis, and (d) generally all job applicants seek to make a good impression (e.g., dressing, appearance, and behavior) during hiring and in the workplace. In this research, it was difficult to discern if the influence of the participants' disability differed from the others and did indeed have a significant role in their appearance management.

Implications for Practice

Despite the limitations, results from the present study provide valuable practical implications. Feedback from the one-to-one interviews revealed that there is a greater need for employers to receive training (e.g., appearance biases and availability of varied food choices in the workplace) that focuses on understanding perceived aesthetic biases faced by individuals with physical disabilities. Employers need to be sensitive and cognizant of the additional challenges and stressors individuals with physical disabilities face during the hiring process and upon employment. These could range from employers acknowledging the disability positively; appreciating individuals with physical disabilities for their expertise and not commenting or implying that their physical disability poses a financial burden to the organization; seeking direct and honest information from individuals with physical disabilities about their limitations including appropriate work accommodations (e.g., office space and workspace, location to the elevators); and, most importantly, treating those with physical disabilities as competent colleagues.

Based on the results of this study, students with physical disabilities can receive training related to aesthetic bias and how appearance management can be utilized to enhance and support their careers. These could be in the form of formal (e.g., individual and group consultations, development of formal programs related to professional dressing, eating out; embedding professional etiquette into university academic curriculums) and informal (e.g., social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, and peer awareness facilitated through open discussions). Participants with physical disabilities should have the liberty to use their skillsets to explore ways of handling their disability beyond the binary spectrum of hiding or openly revealing their disability. Examples include focusing on enhancing their professional competencies, identifying strategies to educate employers, and perhaps hosting focus groups for individuals with disabilities to think about creative ways to disclose their disabilities to employers and colleagues.

College campuses serving students with disabilities can use these findings to enrich their work by collaborating with career services. Such collaborations could address increasing awareness of aesthetic biases as it relates to employer-employee relationships, developing culturally sensitive educational materials, providing support to individuals with disabilities during the interview process by hosting Zoom meetings that focus more on their competency rather than the physical disability, and offering appealing healthy finger foods and clear beverages (e.g., water, sandwiches, snack bars, etc.) at work and during professional meetings that would aid in sustaining the credible aesthetic appearance.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research revealed that individuals with physical disabilities experience aesthetic bias during the hiring process and in the workplace. Aesthetic bias prompted participants to manage their appearances to maintain credibility. Furthermore, participants noticed various reactions to their disability, from ignoring them to questions indicating others were unsure of how to respond to their disability. These participants were sensitive to the physical needs of individuals with physical disabilities. They can be an excellent resource to assist researchers and practitioners in developing educational materials related to strategies to address aesthetic bias in the workplace. This research also appears to demonstrate the adoption of the recent equity and inclusivity policies. Finally, the current investigation supported related theoretical concepts such as Appearance Management and Symbolic Interaction.

Following the individual interviews, participants stated that the researchers' interest in conducting and disseminating (e.g., refereed presentations, publications) these findings would help advocate for individuals with disabilities by increasing employers'

awareness and improving social interactions related to aesthetic biases. Repeated comments were heard after the one-to-one interview from individuals with disabilities, saying that they liked that the researchers were mindful of the language used in the NAS and during the one-to-one interviews. They appreciated the researchers' honesty and openness to learning about individuals with physical disabilities and respected them as professionals. Besides advocating for individuals with physical disabilities, this research has several strengths. Although previous research has focused on aesthetic bias from employers' perspectives, this is the first study of its kind to focus on aesthetic bias from the employees' perspective. Recommendations for future research would be to investigate a larger cohort of individuals with physical disabilities, compare and contrast the hiring and workplace environment of individuals with physical disabilities from other organizations, examine the adoption and effectiveness of inclusive policies on employers' attitudes and hiring of individuals with disability over varied time frames, and study other people with more diverse disabilities from varied geographical locations for a deeper understanding of trends, consistencies, and discrepancies.

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