

# The Impact of Employee Uniforms on Job Satisfaction in the Hospitality Industry

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## Abstract

Uniforms play a major role during any service encounter and can impact stakeholder experience. The authors review current literature in the field of uniform provision in the hotel industry and present a comparative study from two different cultural settings: Hong Kong SAR, China and Tyrol, Austria. The research gathered quantitative data from those that wear business attire or uniforms and are engaged in the provision of services and or products alike. The data presents six factors, which describe uniform wear influences on customer contact employees. The overall result shows, that in the three highest scores, contact staff considered their job pleasant; uniforms communicate to others that one belongs to the organization, and they were very satisfied with their current job. On the other spectrum, the lowest scores were collected for wearing a uniform towards improving the job satisfaction, and the lack of involved in uniform design process.

**Keywords:** Employees; Uniform; Service encounter; Job satisfaction; Hospitality industry

## Introduction

Uniforms in service industries fulfil a variety of needs at different levels. At the strategic level Daniel, et al., and Heide, et al., [1,2] suggest, that service management needs to create a desirable atmosphere within the tangible service encounter variables (e.g. restaurant environment) to optimize social interactions, and on the design of the intangible the interpersonal exchanges (atmosphere/service), or the so-called 'moment of truth' [3-5] between service employees and their customers. Kandampully, et al., and Quinn [6,7] underline that corporate images within the business environment represent the distinct organizations' culture, and Earle [8] adds, that this creates a likely positive impact on staff behaviour and their performance that can influence customer experiences alike.

At the operational level, another purpose of uniform management is the increase of design elements to their functionality and appropriateness, and health and safety especially within the hotel catering environment [9,10]. Furthermore, for many hotel organizations, uniforms are part of employee benefit packages and therefore can contribute to work commitment, organizational identification, and higher staff satisfaction [11-13].

Within service organizations, for customers and employees uniforms are an essential part of many service expectations [14,15]. However, those that wear them might experience uniforms differently; hence this research was aimed to identify service encounter implications from the frontline staff perspective in the hotel industry in two different business travel and tourism environments.

First, this research aims to provide an overview of the literature in uniform usage in the hospitality/hotel industry. Second, it examines whether uniform features and employees' perceptions of uniform-wear influence overall job satisfaction. The authors conducted primary research using structured, close-ended questionnaires that were distributed in Hong Kong, SAR and Tyrol, Austria.

After the theoretical discussion the empirical results are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with managerial implications and research recommendations.

## Literature Review

Hospitality services are characterized by numerous aspects of service production and service marketing [4]: Intangibility of services and the associated quality uncertainty of customers; simultaneity of production and consumption of services; non-storability of services and the labour intensity of services production are also mentioned. The main stakeholders who primarily manage and stage the service encounter phase are the contact personnel and customers, but also the service organization itself [16]. At a strategic level, Heide, et al., Gronhaug, et al., and Miller [1,2,17,18] suggested that service management needs to create a desirable atmosphere within the tangible service encounter variables (e.g. restaurant environment) to optimize social interactions. Earlier Gardner, et al., [19] highlighted that the style of uniform and colours are important aspects when setting up the stage for 'theatrical food service encounters'. Employee uniforms are recognized as an important tangible service aspect and can also reduce uncertainty for consumers as uniforms can inform customers about service contact staffs job sphere [20].

## Uniform features

On the design of the intangible interpersonal exchanges (atmosphere/service), uniforms can enhance the so-called 'moment of truth' [3] between staff and their customer, where front line staffs are the only direct contact throughout the service encounter between the customer and the organization [14]. This is echoed by Kandampully, et al., and Quinn [6,7], who showed that such corporate images within the environment represent the organizations culture and organizations image.

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Work environments including uniforms can create positive impacts on staff behavior and performance that can influence customer experiences alike [8]. Employee satisfaction research shows that uniform design features (e.g. function, appropriateness to job task, function, fit, and comfort) are important to the wearer, as those contribute to service employees' attitudes towards their job and the organization [13]. Adomaitis, et al., [21] highlight that formal or informal wear impact staffs behaviour as well as customers actions/reactions. Solomon, [22] points out, that uniforms may contribute to productivity and moral busting, yet Wang [23] suggests, that a uniform can influence customer expectations about performance quality.

In the literature a number of benefits of uniforms for staff are described: Uniforms can protect the user, and support standardization in the service encounter process [24,25]. Other emerging purposes of uniform management and design are the increased needs to the functionality, health and safety, especially within the hotel catering environment [10,13]. Management can use uniforms as visual symbols to continuously transfer firm values to and among their employees [26,27] and uniforms have communicative power in both, the external and internal spheres of a corporation. Furthermore, for many hotel organizations, uniforms have been part of an employee benefit package for some time now and therefore can contribute to staff satisfaction and commitment [11,12]. In summary, uniform features in the service industries include attributes such as functionality, comfort, materials, appropriateness to job task, style, colour and overall fit [13].

### Uniform influence on service personnel

Several authors identified influences of uniform usage on employees that include the employee's roles and firm values, and when employees wear uniforms, they are engaged in a certain role in the business [14]. The provisions of uniforms support business cultures and therefore serve as firm internal symbol for certain attitudes towards firm imperatives [20,26,28]. Uniforms can create a sense of belonging and can aid to a certain feeling, expressing that individuals belong to a group or a business unit, according to Craik [29], such as in sports, a team spirit can be further developed with the help of uniforms [30,31]. Authority and legitimization can also be expressed through the provision of uniform for a certain role [1] as it is the case for other professions, e.g. airline industry, police, and medical doctors [31]. The same holds true for the hospitality industries where uniforms communicate legitimization of the right to perform a specific job duty to service employees. Rafaeli [14] points out, that possible improvements in the service encounter can increase satisfaction for customers and employees. On the contrary, individuals may perceive a loss of own personality whilst on duty [21,32,33].

### Job satisfaction and uniforms

Uniforms are often one part of the employee benefits/condition and can contribute to job satisfaction. Watson, et al., [34] argue, that job satisfaction is not a singular facet but a multiple construct, that includes numerous internal (own personality and work experience), and external variables (factors surrounding environment and job) [35]. This is supported by Spector [36] who develops nine factors that make up his survey tool to measure overall job satisfaction. Those are: pay, promotion, supervision, operating conditions, contingency rewards, co-workers, nature of work, communications; operating conditions, nature of work, and communication can be linked to the research by Nelson, et al., Lurie and Dutton, et al., [13,26-27]. Hence, uniforms may impact performance, behavior and overall job satisfaction (OJS). Wanous, et al., [37] suggest that research measures towards OJS should

be followed the traditional norms for 'self-reported facts' (age, gender, etc.) and single-measure for psychological (complicated) constructs (factors that make up the job, e.g. nature of job, communications, treatment, motivation, pleasure etc.) are to be avoided due to their 'unacceptable low reliability'. Overall job satisfaction is a construct of multiple measures.

Based on the literature cited above, the authors postulate influences of uniform features (such as: function and fit) and employees' perceptions about uniform influences (such as: belongingness to the organization) on overall job satisfaction.

## The Study

### Research design

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do employees perceive wearing uniforms in hotels?
2. What are the main factors describing uniform wear in the hospitality industry?
3. Do the wearing and features of uniforms influence overall job satisfaction in the two different business environments – Hong Kong and Tyrol?

Drawing on Karch, et al., [38] a questionnaire was developed attempting to measure the demographics, uniform influences on performance, organizational identification, other job related data, and job satisfaction as well as several uniform features (such as style, appropriateness, functionality, material, colour, comfort, etc.). The operationalization of the items measuring uniform influences on performance was based on the earlier work of Nelson, et al., [13] and used a 7-point-Likert-scale. The overall job satisfaction was measured with three statements regarding employees' job satisfaction, pleasure and enthusiasm [39].

To support the questionnaire development and operationalization process, eight qualitative interviews with hotel executives and clothing designers were carried out [38]. In addition to the variables used in the research of Nelson, et al., [13] employees were also asked to evaluate "cleanliness and maintenance", "name badges" and "appropriateness to job role".

For each tourist region, the questionnaire was designed by reverse translations, tested and piloted on a group of both German/English and English/Chinese speaking/reading industry associates. Several minor adjustments were made. The sample hotels were approached based on existing hotel association listings in both jurisdictions. The questionnaires were distributed after approvals were received from the Executive Office in 18 from 72 approached hotels in Tyrol tourist destinations (Austria; in the German language) and 4 from 124 approached hotels in Hong Kong, SAR (English and Chinese language). Additionally, each hotel was briefed to distribute the survey tool (enveloped, numbered and coded for each establishment) to uniformed customer contact employees at random. Those questionnaires were left with the Human Resource Departments and collected after a two-week period. The researchers acknowledge that the hotel operations differ in terms of their customer segments, cultural difference and hence in the form and design of uniforms worn by employees. While the Hong Kong hotels are large (on average of approx. 420 room) and both holiday and business customer-oriented, hotels in Austria are smaller (on average 50 rooms) and typical individual holiday hotels for families, recreation- and relaxation-oriented but also winter sports seeking guests.

### Sample and descriptive results

Data collected in this research comprised of a total of 196 associates (service encounter employees) with 93 from Hong Kong, SAR, and 103 associates from Tyrol, Austria. Overall, the majority of respondents were female employees (106) and 90 male employees; their average age were 32 years, and an approximate 10-year work experience. Table 1 describes the sample of the Hong Kong and Tyrolean hotels. Reflecting on the regional-specific differences the Tyrolean/Austrian sample covers very small or micro-businesses, while the Hong Kong sample is larger and often chain-operated.

In order to answer the first research question, they were asked to respond to 28 statements, which described their perception of uniform-related issues. These statements could be evaluated on a 7-point-Likert-scale (1=I totally disagree-7=I totally agree). Table 2 below, gives an overview of these statements and its evaluation through the two different destination samples.

The following items score highest for the overall sample: “I consider my job pleasant” (5.81), “The uniform communicates to others, that

Variable	Hong Kong	Austria
Respondents No.	93	103
Hotel Size (beds, mean)	448	56
Staff no. (mean)	249	28
Staff Age (mean)	34	30
Single household (%)	48	61
Job experience (years)	10	10

Table 1: Listing of variables of the Hong Kong and Tyrolean hotel operations.

I’m part of this organization” (5.70), and “I am very satisfied with my job” (5.67). Lowest scores occur for “Wearing a uniform improves my job satisfaction” (4.44), and “I was involved in uniform design process” (3.65). Further in the Tyrolean data set items like “Whilst wearing a uniform, I focus more a higher quality performance” (4.20), “Whilst wearing a uniform I perform my job duties more efficiently” (3.62), “A uniform fosters my motivation” (4.26), and “I can contribute towards uniform improvements” (4.36), are scoring relatively low. In Hong Kong’s data set, the items “Uniform supports me to focus on job tasks”, “When wearing my uniform others show me more respect” (4.90), and “I can contribute to the design process” (4.42), also score very low.

When looking at the combined positive scores indications are that the uniform’s facilitation is important to all stakeholders, as it supports the service encounter activities of service providers in their role, highlights their belonging to their organization, enthusiasm and high job satisfaction.

Negative responses from both countries confirmed uniform management or the provision of uniforms to staffs been rated negatively high towards: (see statement no. 26) no involvement with the uniform design or (no. 28) towards uniform improvement to staff, (no. 14) uniforms did not increase job satisfaction rates, nor (no. 18) they communicate professional competencies to others, or (no. 13) impacts towards a higher performance.

Respondents were also asked what features they interpret as important and whether they are satisfied with these features. No

Item	Statement	Hong Kong	Tyrol	Total (Mean value)
1	The uniform supports my job role	5.55	5.36	5.45
2	The uniform supports me to focus on job tasks I have to achieve.	5.13	3.46	4.25
3	By wearing a uniform I feel closely connected to the organization.	5.26	4.8	5.02
4	Wearing my uniform influences my behavior positively	5.16	4.67	4.9
5	Wearing my uniform effect my overall attitude towards my job.	5.11	4.57	4.83
6	When interacting with guests, I enjoy wearing my uniform.	5.27	4.95	5.1
7	The uniform communicates to others, that I’m part of this organization	5.77	5.64	5.7
8	Because of my uniform my personality is pushed into the background	5.19	3.86	4.49
9	A uniform strengthened the corporate spirit amongst my colleagues.	5.12	5.07	5.09
10	Uniforms make me feel being part of the team.	5.48	4.92	5.19
11	My uniform supports my identification with the organization.	5.51	5.12	5.3
12	Whilst wearing a uniform I perform my job duties more efficiently	5	3.62	4.28
13	Whilst wearing a uniform, I focus more a higher quality performance.	4.89	4.2	4.53
14	Wearing a uniform increases my job satisfaction.	4.78	4.13	4.44
15	A more informal style gives me a higher satisfaction for performing my job duties.	5.01	4.65	4.82
16	When wearing a uniform, I feel more professional.	5.01	4.65	4.96
17	When wearing a uniform, our customers perceive me as more professional.	5.38	5.12	5.24
18	My uniform communicates competence to others.	4.88	5.09	4.99
19	My uniform communicates my influence within the organization	4.92	4.59	4.75
20	With my uniform I feel good about my appearance when at work.	5.2	5.06	5.13
21	When wearing my uniform others show me more respect.	4.9	4.47	4.67
22	My uniform communicates clearly my job duties to others.	5.18	5.44	5.32
23	I consider my job pleasant.	5.31	6.25	5.81
24	A uniform fosters my motivation.	4.98	4.26	4.6
25	Most days I am enthusiastic about my job.	5.39	5.82	5.61
26	I was involved in the uniform design process.	3.6	3.69	3.65
27	I am very satisfied with my job.	5.18	6.12	5.67
28	I can contribute towards uniform improvements.	4.42	4.36	4.39

Note: 7-point-Likert Scale was used from: 1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree

Table 2: Statements evaluated in the two samples, Hong Kong and Tyrol.

significant differences between the two countries occur, but Table 3 shows differences of the perceived gap between importance and satisfaction for each item.

The results indicate, that employees responses to the uniform features linked to a level of importance and likelihood to impact on job satisfaction, the five most highest rated combinations (with the narrowest gap margins) are the: (no. 7) Comfort, (no. 9) Overall fit, (no. 6) Clean and Maintenance, (no. 2) Appropriate to job role, and (no. 8) functionality.

### Factors describing uniform wear

Due to the large number of variables included in the survey the authors decided to conduct a factors analysis to see which variables load on certain factors. Six factors could be extracted using 21 items. All those items referring to uniform's influence on work or attitude towards work have been included. However, those items not referring to the uniform in its wording (e.g. such as statement 15, 23, 25, and

27) were excluded as well as those items referring to the co-creation of uniforms (statement 26 and 28). Finally, the reversed coded item 8 was not used for factor analysis calculation.

The data showed a high suitability for factors analysis. Besides a high value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Criteria of 0.946, the inverse correlation matrix did not show any difficulties regarding a factor analysis. The analysis identified six factors explaining 83.33 % of the cumulated variance in the data (Cronbach Alpha = 0.97).

The six factors can be labelled as follows: Factor 1 "Communication" bundles those items referring to the communication effects of uniforms to customers but also to colleagues within the organization. Factor 2 "Performance" covers those items focusing on job efficiency and quality but also the influence of uniforms on motivation and job satisfaction. Factor 3 is labelled "Organizational Identification" as it bundles those items addressing belonging to the team, the connection to the organization and the corporate spirit. Factor 4 labelled "Service Encounter" as these items address the influences service personnel when interacting with customers with a positive behavior and attitude toward their job. Factor 5 is labelled "Orientation" as these items address the role of uniforms in giving an orientation in the organization communicating job duties. Finally, factor 6 "Job Support" includes those two items which address the role of uniforms in supporting the job role and job task achievement (Table 4).

### Uniforms influences on overall job satisfaction

The paper aimed at testing the influence of uniforms on the "overall job satisfaction" or pleasure while working in the hotel (see research question 3).

In a next step the authors seek to test whether job satisfaction is depending on the above extracted factors. Therefore one regression analysis for each sample region was carried out with "Overall Job

No.	Uniform features	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
1	Style	5.62	5.26	-0.36
2	Appropriate to job role	5.91	5.53	-0.38
3	Material	5.89	5.41	-0.48
4	Color	5.48	5.41	-0.47
5	Name Badge	5.01	4.76	-0.25
6	Clean and Maintenance	6.06	5.65	-0.41
7	Comfort	6.07	5.48	-0.59
8	Functionality	5.9	5.48	-0.42
9	Overall Fit	6.07	5.6	-0.47

Note: 7-point-Likert Scale used from: 1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree

Table 3: Importance and Satisfaction with certain uniform features.

Item*	Statement	Factor 1: Communication	Factor 2: Performance	Factor 3: Organizational identification	Factor 4: Service encounter	Factor 5: Orientation	Factor 6: Job support
17	When wearing a uniform, our customers perceive me as more professional.	0.805					
16	When wearing a uniform, I feel more professional.	0.705					
18	My uniform communicates competence to others.	0.651					
19	My uniform communicates my influence within the organization.	0.643					
21	When wearing my uniform others show me more respect.	0.556					
13	Whilst wearing a uniform, I focus more a higher quality performance.		0.781				
12	Whilst wearing a uniform I perform my job duties more efficiently.		0.756				
24	A uniform fosters my motivation.		0.749				
14	Wearing a uniform increases my job satisfaction.		0.709				
10	Uniforms make me feel being part of the team.			0.796			
11	My uniform supports my identification with the organization.			0.713			
9	A uniform strengthened the corporate spirit amongst my colleagues.			0.711			
3	By wearing a uniform I feel closely connected to the organization.			0.647			
6	When interacting with guests, I enjoy wearing my uniform.				0.7		
4	Wearing my uniform influences my behavior positively.				0.662		
20	With my uniform I feel good about my appearance when at work.				0.652		
5	Wearing my uniform effect my overall attitude towards my job.				0.558		
7	The uniform communicates to others, that I'm part of this organization.					0.705	
22	My uniform communicates clearly my job duties to others.					0.699	
1	The uniform supports my job role.						0.745
2	The uniform supports me to focus on job tasks I have to achieve.						0.681

KMO=0.946, Varimax Rotation, Variance explained 83,33%, Bartlett-Test of Sphericity=0.00, Cronbach-Alpha: 0.971  
\*Item sequence as asked in the questionnaire

Table 4: Factors and factors loadings identified by factors analysis (source: own illustration).

Satisfaction” (OJS) being the dependent variable. The construct of “Overall Job Satisfaction” comprises from the calculated mean of three single variables: “Job Satisfaction” (the question was “I am very satisfied with my job”), “Job Enthusiasm” (the question was: most days I am enthusiastic about my job”), and “Job Pleasure” (the question was: I consider my job pleasant”) which were all measured using a 7-point-Likert-scale with 1=totally disagree and 7=totally agree) and using the uniform features (Table 3).

Independent variables are the derived factors (Table 4) and the uniform features (Table 3). Stepwise regressions show that in Hong Kong one uniform feature (appropriateness) as well as three factors influence “overall job satisfaction”. In Tyrol the regression model reveals two uniform features – the material and style as the most influential uniform variables on overall job satisfaction (Table 5).

### Discussion

The descriptive analysis showed that in both countries statements regarding uniform wear influences were evaluated very highly. Nevertheless, we could identify some cross-cultural differences between the two countries [40]. Mainly the scores in the field of organizational influence, communication, and performance are lower for Tyrol: Uniforms in the Austrian hotels very often are traditional (e.g. like dirndl dresses) showing local motives and using traditional local symbols while in Hong Kong many hotel uniforms are formal and business-segment oriented [19]. In addition, uniforms in Austria’s small hospitality businesses play a minor role. In many of these small units, hotel policies formulate dress codes (e.g. waiter/waitress needs to wear black and white) but the employee buys individual wear instead of using a standardized uniforms. In addition, in many small businesses uniforms are not needed as orientation as it is quite easy for consumers to orientate themselves. Furthermore, in many small hotel businesses one individual is responsible for various functional areas and division of labor is more prevalent in Hong Kong [41,42].

Very important uniform features for employees are comfort, overall fit and the ease of maintenance and cleaning [13,43,44]. However, when asked about their satisfaction, many uniform elements are not rated as satisfying: especially these elements (e.g. comfort) need to be improved by uniform designers [13].

Interestingly, uniform influences can best be explained by the factors “communication”, “performance”, “organizational identification”, “service encounter”, “orientation”, and “job support”. These features are often discussed in the literature [13,21,45] and especially the internal influences and impacts of uniforms should be in the focus of human resource management or hotel leaders. When using these factors as independent variables to explain the overall job satisfaction we find that employees’ OJS in Hong Kong is much

more influenced by the factors “communication”, “performance” and “organizational identification” [20,46]. These factor play an important role as they impact customer contact employees OJS. In Tyrol, only uniform features have strong influences on OJS, such as style and material of the uniform [13,21].

### Implications and Conclusion

Although more than 190 hotels in both tourism destinations were approached, 22 agreed to take part. Others abstain from this research due to their busy business period (December/January in Hong Kong and Tyrol), with the majority ignored or never replied to our enquiries (e.g. Hong Kong). In Tyrol, many hoteliers mainly those in budget or low-tier hotels refrained from answering the questionnaire. Hence this study segment related to the impact of employee uniforms on job satisfaction is limited to the sample size of 196 employees. The data shows that uniform wear only does influence overall job satisfaction; however some factors such as the orientation function of uniforms, the support of the service encounter situation through uniforms or the support of the job through uniforms do not play an important role for OJS. However, there are regional- or culture-specific differences that should be explored in future studies.

It is recommended for general/executive managers to focus on uniform elements such as material, appropriateness, style and functionality when they consider to positively influencing job satisfaction or employee motivation. Uniforms are only one minor part of the overall complex general management function – but in some cultures uniforms might play a more important role: for instance, well-designed uniforms contribute significantly to overall job satisfaction in Tyrol (Austria).

The issue of co-creation of uniforms does not have such an important effect on job satisfaction or job enthusiasm. However, there is a positive relationship between the option to contribute to incremental uniform improvements and the evaluation of uniforms functionality, style, and appropriateness to job role. Consequently, it can be assumed that at least a certain degree of co-creation has positive influences on employees’ commitment.

The data also supported the assumption that OJS is influenced by employee’s identification with the organization; therefore more research is needed to test this relationship.

Uniforms need to be functional for employees, especially for customer contact employees who want to enjoy wearing the uniforms when interacting with the guest. It can be postulated that employee’s perceived appearance in the service encounter has strong impacts on their attitude in serving guests. In addition, it can be assumed that some uniform features or elements can be interpreted as hygiene factors, not

Region	Model	Regression coefficient	Standard deviation	Beta	Sig
Hong Kong, SAR	Constant	3.948	0.293		.000
	Appropriateness	0.256	0.057	0.331	.000
	Factor 1 Communication	0.839	0.142	0.434	.000
	Factor 2 Performance	0.375	0.101	0.27	.000
	Factor 3 Organizational Identification	0.513	0.113	0.312	.000
Tyrol, Austria	Constant	3.227	0.379		.000
	Style	0.273	0.075	0.403	.000
	Material	0.213	0.086	0.272	.000

\*dependent variable: Overall Job Satisfaction (Note: 7-point-Likert Scale used from: 1=totally disagree to 7=totally agree),  $R^2_{Tyrol} = 0.391$ ,  $R^2_{Hong Kong} = 0.656$ .

Table 5: Factors Influencing Overall Job Satisfaction.

giving positive satisfaction but leading to dissatisfaction when they are absent. However, it needs more research to test the relevance and relationships of these variables in the service encounter situation.

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