



THE UNIFORM OF LABOR: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CLASS IDENTITY AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The Uniform of Labor: An Ethnography of Class Identity and Social Stratification in the Service Industry examines the social and cultural significance of workplace uniforms in shaping occupational identity, class identity, and social relations among service-sector workers. Uniforms are commonly understood as functional clothing used for employee identification, organisational discipline, and professional presentation. However, they also serve as visible symbols of occupational status, workplace hierarchy, social recognition, and class position. This study adopts an ethnographic perspective to explore how service workers experience, interpret, and negotiate the meanings attached to their uniforms in everyday working life. It focuses on differences in occupational roles, authority, income, working conditions, dignity, and interactions between workers and customers. The study further examines how variations in uniform design, appearance, and organisational expectations may reflect existing social and occupational hierarchies. At the same time, uniforms may create a sense of belonging, professional identity, solidarity, and recognition among workers. The research highlights the relationship between material culture and labour relations and demonstrates how an ordinary workplace garment can become a significant marker of social identity and inequality. By placing workers' everyday experiences at the centre of analysis, the study contributes to a broader understanding of class formation, occupational identity, organisational power, and social stratification in the contemporary service industry.



KEYWORDS: Uniform, Labour, Class Identity, Social Stratification, Occupational Identity, Service Industry, Ethnography, Workplace.

INTRODUCTION

The service industry has become one of the most significant components of the contemporary global economy. Over the last few decades, structural transformations in production, employment, technology, urbanisation, and consumer culture have contributed to the rapid expansion of service-sector employment. Workers in hotels, restaurants, retail stores, hospitals, security services, transportation, banking, beauty and wellness, call centres, delivery platforms, tourism, and other service-oriented occupations increasingly constitute a large and visible part of the urban labour force. Unlike traditional industrial employment, where workers were often identified primarily through their relationship with factories, machines, and physical production, service-sector workers frequently perform their labour through direct interaction with customers and clients. In this context, appearance, communication, behaviour, bodily presentation, and dress become important components of work itself.

In contemporary service economies, workers are often expected to represent the organisation through their bodies and appearance. A hotel employee wearing a formal uniform, a restaurant worker wearing a branded shirt, a security guard wearing an identifiable outfit, a hospital worker wearing a prescribed uniform, or a delivery worker displaying a company logo is not simply wearing clothing. The worker is also performing an institutional identity. The organisation becomes visible through the worker's body, and the worker becomes associated with the organisation's brand and social image. This process illustrates how labour has increasingly become intertwined with the management of appearance and emotions. Employees may be required not only to complete specific tasks but also to smile, speak politely, maintain particular body postures, control emotions, and present themselves according to organisational expectations.

The uniform consequently operates at the intersection of individual identity and institutional control. It may create a sense of belonging among workers by establishing a shared occupational identity. At the same time, it may reduce individual differences and impose standardised expectations concerning appearance and behaviour. Workers who occupy different positions within the same organisation may receive different uniforms, accessories, colours, badges, or forms of identification. These distinctions can make organisational hierarchy visible. Managers, supervisors, receptionists, housekeeping staff, security personnel, kitchen workers, drivers, and delivery workers may all be employed within the same service organisation while occupying significantly different social and economic positions. Their clothing may therefore function as a visual representation of the internal structure of labour.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the role of workplace uniforms in shaping the occupational identity and self-perception of service-sector workers.
2. To analyze how uniforms reflect and communicate class identity, occupational status, and hierarchical positions among workers in the service industry.
3. To examine the link between uniforms and social stratification in the service industry.

Role of Workplace Uniforms in Shaping Occupational Identity

Workplace uniforms play an important role in shaping the occupational identity of employees, particularly in the service industry. A uniform is not merely a piece of clothing worn for practical or organisational purposes; it is also a visible symbol of a worker's occupation, professional role, and organisational affiliation. In hotels, hospitals, restaurants, retail stores, security services, transportation, and other service-sector organisations, uniforms help identify employees and distinguish them from customers and other occupational groups. Through their design, colour, logo, badges, and style, uniforms communicate information about the employee's position and responsibilities within the organisation.

Occupational identity refers to the way individuals understand and define themselves in relation to their work and profession. Workplace uniforms can contribute to this identity by creating a sense of belonging, professionalism, and recognition. When employees wear a common uniform, they may develop a stronger feeling of being part of a particular occupational group or organisation. The uniform can also provide workers with a sense of pride and dignity by giving their occupation a distinct and socially recognisable identity. For new employees, wearing the uniform may become an important part of adapting to the workplace and learning the expected standards of professional behaviour.

Uniforms also influence how employees are perceived by customers and colleagues. A well-defined uniform can communicate professionalism, discipline, reliability, and authority. For example, the uniform of a security worker communicates a different occupational role from that of a hotel receptionist or hospital employee. Thus, uniforms create visible distinctions between different occupations and positions within the service industry. In this way, clothing becomes part of the communication process between workers and the people they serve.

Uniforms, Class Identity and Occupational Status

Workplace uniforms are important symbols through which class identity and occupational status are expressed and communicated in the service industry. Although uniforms are primarily designed to identify employees and maintain organisational standards, they also convey information about a worker's position, responsibilities, authority, and social status. The design, colour, quality, accessories, and style of a uniform can create visible distinctions between different occupational groups and hierarchical positions within an organisation.

Class identity refers to the ways individuals and groups understand and express their position within the social and economic structure. In the workplace, class identity may be reflected through occupation, income, authority, education, lifestyle, and patterns of interaction. Uniforms contribute to this process by making occupational differences visible. For example, the clothing worn by managers, reception staff, security personnel, housekeeping workers, kitchen staff, and delivery workers may differ considerably, even when they work within the same service organisation. Such differences can communicate variations in occupational status and organisational authority.

Uniforms also influence how workers are perceived by customers and society. A formal and well-designed uniform may be associated with professionalism, expertise, and higher occupational status, while certain other uniforms may be associated with manual, routine, or lower-status forms of service work. These perceptions are not necessarily determined by the actual importance of the work being performed. Consequently, uniforms can contribute to the symbolic classification of occupations and workers. Within organisations, uniforms can also reinforce hierarchical relationships. Differences in badges, colours, accessories, or uniform designs may distinguish supervisors from frontline employees or managerial staff from support workers. In this sense, uniforms become visual markers of organisational position. They help workers and customers identify who has particular responsibilities and authority. Thus, clothing becomes part of the everyday communication of workplace hierarchy.

Uniforms and Social Stratification in the Service Industry

The service industry is characterised by diverse occupations, hierarchical positions, and differences in income, authority, working conditions, and social prestige. Within this environment, workplace uniforms play an important role in making occupational and social differences visible. A uniform is not simply clothing required for practical purposes; it can also function as a symbol of occupational position, organisational hierarchy, and social status. The study of uniforms therefore provides an important way to understand the relationship between labour and social stratification in the service industry.

Social stratification refers to the structured inequalities that exist between individuals and groups in society. In the service sector, workers occupy different positions based on their skills, education, income, responsibilities, and authority. For example, managers, supervisors, receptionists, sales staff, security personnel, housekeeping workers, kitchen staff, drivers, and delivery workers may work within the same organisation but experience different levels of remuneration, recognition, and workplace authority. Uniforms can make some of these differences immediately visible through variations in design, colour, badges, accessories, and overall appearance.

Uniforms also influence the way workers are perceived by customers and colleagues. Certain uniforms may be associated with professionalism, authority, expertise, or higher occupational status, while others may be associated with routine, manual, or lower-status service work. These perceptions can contribute to social boundaries between different occupational groups. In this way, uniforms may become part of the symbolic structure through which workers are classified and treated in everyday interactions.

At the same time, uniforms can create a common identity among workers. Employees wearing the same uniform may develop a sense of belonging, solidarity, and professional identity. A uniform can provide recognition and dignity by making an occupation socially visible. Thus, uniforms can have both integrative and differentiating effects: they can unite workers within an occupational group while simultaneously distinguishing one occupational group from another.

The relationship between uniforms and social stratification is also connected with power and organisational control. Employers may establish specific standards regarding clothing, grooming, cleanliness, and appearance. Workers are expected to follow these standards as part of their employment. Such requirements demonstrate how organisations regulate not only the work performed by employees but also their physical presentation. However, workers may interpret and negotiate these requirements differently depending on their experiences, social backgrounds, and workplace conditions.

CONCLUSION

The study “The Uniform of Labor: An Ethnography of Class Identity and Social Stratification in the Service Industry” demonstrates that workplace uniforms are much more than functional clothing. They are important social and cultural symbols that connect workers with their occupation, organisation, class identity, and workplace hierarchy. In the service industry, where employees frequently interact directly with customers, appearance and presentation form an important part of the labour process. The uniform therefore becomes a visible representation of the worker and the organisation.

The study highlights that uniforms play a significant role in shaping occupational identity. Wearing a common uniform can create a sense of belonging, professional identity, discipline, and organisational membership. Workers may associate their uniforms with pride, dignity, recognition, and the responsibilities attached to their occupation. At the same time, some workers may experience uniforms as a form of organisational control because employers establish specific requirements regarding dress, grooming, appearance, and behaviour.

Uniforms also communicate occupational status and class identity. Differences in uniform design, colour, badges, accessories, and quality may reflect distinctions between managerial, supervisory, professional, and support-level occupations. Such differences make organisational hierarchies visible in everyday workplace interactions. However, the uniform itself does not create these inequalities; rather, it can make existing differences in income, authority, prestige, and working conditions more visible and socially meaningful.

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