



# **Dressing the State: Exploring the Impact of Absent Dress Code Policies on Professional Identity and Organisational Culture in the South African Public Service**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The absence of a formal dress code for administrative staff in the South African public sector has led to a decline in professional standards and a lack of clarity regarding workplace identity. While uniforms serve a symbolic and practical purpose in fields like law enforcement, the military, and healthcare, the lack of comparable regulations in the administrative and educational sectors has resulted in inconsistent and frequently unsuitable workplace dress. The impact of this policy gap on professional identity, intergenerational modelling, and organizational culture is examined in this article, with a focus on young workers, interns, and graduate trainees. Using a policy review approach, workplace observation, and documentary analysis, this study reveals how unregulated dress standards have progressively created a culture of informality and disengagement from the official duties of state employment. The study makes the case that clothing worn by public employees is not just aesthetically pleasing but also closely related to their perceived legitimacy and authority, drawing on theories of organizational culture and symbolic interactionism. The study concludes that the public's trust in government employees is eroded, formal office settings are demoralized, and role modelling in schools is undermined by the public service's decline in professional appearance. It comes to the conclusion that enforcing a formal dress code that isn't unduly restrictive could improve the credibility and image of the public sector while restoring coherence in professional presentation. This paper suggests low-cost, non-invasive policy reforms and adds to the conversation on professionalism, symbolism, and policy in government institutions.

**Keywords:** Public service, Professional identity, Organisational culture, Dress code policy, Symbolic representation

## **1. Introduction and Background**

More than just the written policies of state departments or the results of service delivery, the public service's professional image is also symbolically represented by the behaviour, demeanour, and interpersonal interactions of its employees. Public employees are expected to exhibit integrity, authority, and trustworthiness not only in their words and deeds but also in their attire and manners in democratic and service-oriented bureaucracies (Molefe & Moyo, 2021). However, dress codes have gradually decreased in the South African public sector, especially in administrative divisions and public schools. Concerns regarding generational modelling, workplace discipline, and the symbolic deterioration of professionalism have been brought up by this decline (Ngubane & Mahomed, 2023; Dube & Ndaba, 2020).

Although South Africa is not the only country with this issue, local factors like post-apartheid bureaucratic reform, generational shifts in the public sector workforce, and institutional fragmentation have made it easier for cultural drift to occur in areas like workplace dress. Unlike their counterparts in uniformed services like the military, police, or healthcare, administrative staff are typically exempt from uniformed dress code regulations. As a result, there is a casual culture where people, departments, and provinces wear very different clothes (Sibanda & Khawe, 2022). Even though they hold positions that represent the state to the public, some department employees dress provocatively or informally. Particularly in positions where one interacts with the public, this informality frequently leads to perceptual conflicts between the state's authority and appearance.

Young public employees, such as interns, graduate trainees, and recently hired entry-level employees, are especially affected by this policy gap. As part of their assimilation into institutional culture, these cohorts usually embrace established workplace conventions, such as loose dress codes. They then absorb the unofficial culture that frequently defines unregulated government settings (Phakathi, 2022). Many young workers take their cues from senior coworkers whose appearance goes against the state's expected values of credibility, service, and responsibility, rather than being indoctrinated into a culture of formality and professionalism.

This graphic representation of professional standards is equally alarming in public schools. Many researchers have discovered that students' perceptions of the legitimacy of government work as a career path and the legitimacy of the teaching profession are greatly influenced by the appearance of educators (Mashaba & Zulu, 2021; Khoza, 2023). Teachers who dress casually or inappropriately undermine the profession's symbolic authority, especially with impressionable students who look up to them as role models for social success and institutional respectability.

Through the prism of organizational culture and professional identity, this article investigates these interconnected trends, including deteriorating dress norms, a lack of policy frameworks, and a decline in symbolic authority. In situations where interactions between the state and its citizens rely on symbolic indications of professionalism and deference, it argues that clothing, as an artifact of institutional culture, has significant implications for the legitimacy of public institutions. The investigation also looks at more general issues like managing the public sector's image, integrating generations in the workplace, and the symbolic gap between everyday operations and policy values.

This study's theoretical contribution and policy relevance are what make it significant. The article attempts to close a significant gap in the literature on administrative symbolism and professional role modeling by examining the effects of absent dress codes in the South African public sector. It provides a framework for comprehending the relationship between institutional values and visual presentation, and it makes the case for the creation of non-intrusive, culturally inclusive dress codes that uphold professionalism without enforcing strict conformity.

#### **Research Question:**

How does the absence of a formal dress code policy affect professional identity and organisational culture in the South African public service?

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## **2. Literature Review**

In organizational settings, clothing serves as a potent nonverbal communication tool that shapes views of institutional alignment, authority, and credibility. Researchers have long recognized that clothing is an important part of organizational signaling, especially in public service settings where symbolic representation is crucial (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2022; Molefe & Moyo, 2021). When it comes to government institutions, clothing acts as a clear indicator of organizational values and standards, influencing how citizens view public employees and how they view themselves in connection to their positions.

According to recent research, official dress codes and uniforms strengthen professional discipline, a sense of belonging, and collective identity in public institutions (Mulaudzi & Dlamini, 2023; Pillay, 2021). There is strong evidence of this phenomenon from uniformed services like the military, police, and healthcare industry. These industries uphold uniform dress codes that promote uniform behavior expectations among employees while also bolstering institutional legitimacy (Sibanda & Khawe, 2022). The administrative branches of the public service, on the other hand, have inconsistent appearance standards that frequently compromise impressions of professionalism due to their lack of formalized dress codes.

There is a dearth of literature on dress and organizational culture in South Africa, especially when it comes to non-uniformed public service segments. The majority of the current research focuses on regulated industries like law enforcement and healthcare, or on corporate settings where dress codes are connected to branding and customer perception (Nkosi & Naidoo, 2020). This creates a significant knowledge vacuum regarding the impact of the lack of dress codes on professional role modeling and symbolic authority in administrative government offices.

Emerging research has started to delve into this area. For example, Ngubane and Mahomed (2023) point out how policy silence in areas like behavior and attire leads to unofficial workplace norms that eventually become institutionalized. These standards frequently damage public employees' professional reputations and fuel a decline in public confidence in government agencies. According to Dube and Ndaba (2020), in the absence of official appearance standards, employees resort to social mimicry and peer modeling, which can lead to generational cycles of informal behavior that solidify into the organizational culture.

There are also connections between the symbolic role of clothing and educational environments. As the state's first-line representatives in schools, teachers convey institutional values through both pedagogy and visual aids (Khoza, 2023). Students' opinions of the profession and, consequently, of the state suffer when educators dress casually or in ways that defy conventional expectations of authority (Mashaba & Zulu, 2021). However, research in this field seldom looks at how teachers dress in connection to more general public service standards, which means that cross-institutional cultural patterns are not often analyzed.

The function of graduate trainees and interns is another significant gap in the literature. As part of their socialization, these people, who are still in the early stages of their public service careers, often take in organizational norms. New hires frequently adopt lax attitudes toward appearance when such socialization occurs in settings without dress code guidance, mistaking casual dress for appropriate professional conduct (Phakathi, 2022). A weakening of the symbolic alignment between state employees and the perception of state authority is the long-term result.

Lastly, not many studies have connected the discussion of organizational culture in general with the clothing worn in public institutions. Visible artifacts, like clothing, are outward manifestations of underlying cultural presumptions and values, according to Schein's (2010) model. Employees who work in settings with unclear or uncontrolled dress codes get mixed messages about what is considered professional, authoritative, or loyal to the institution.

By providing a targeted analysis of dress code noncompliance in South Africa's administrative public sector, the current study fills these gaps. It looks into how informal appearance standards affect professional modeling, symbolic legitimacy, and organizational identity in a variety of industries, especially for entry-level and teaching staff. By doing this, it adds to the expanding corpus of research on institutional image management, culture, and symbolism in the public sector.

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### 3. Theoretical Framework

Organizational culture theory and symbolic interactionism are two complementary theoretical frameworks that are incorporated into this study.

Dress can be interpreted as a social signaling mechanism through the lens of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). According to this theory, people can communicate status, authority, and conformity to institutional norms through their attire. The lack of explicit dress codes in the public sector, where legitimacy is largely based on authority, permits different interpretations of professional identity.

Employee engagement with their roles is shaped by shared norms, values, and visible artifacts, like clothing, according to organizational culture theory, especially as stated by Schein (2010). A fragmented culture where individual preferences take precedence over institutional coherence is exacerbated by the absence of a dress code policy.

Together, these theories help situate workplace attire as a site of meaning-making and institutional identity construction, rather than a superficial concern.

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### 4. Methodology

In addition to observational insights gleaned from public service environments, this study employs a qualitative policy and document analysis approach. Since no identifiable individual information, interviews, or personal data were gathered, this study is exempt from ethical approval. Data sources included:

- Departmental HR policy manuals (national and provincial levels)
- Visual and written observations in administrative departments and public schools
- Public service regulations and circulars from 2019 to 2024

The analysis concentrated on determining whether dress code regulations were in place or not, as well as observed workplace customs and the messages about professionalism and image that were included in public service announcements.

NVivo software was used to perform a thematic analysis of the data in order to find recurrent themes related to professional modeling, institutional symbolism, and appearance.

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### 5. Results

The majority of administrative branches of the South African public service lack official, enforceable dress code policies, according to an analysis of publicly accessible government documents, departmental circulars, and visual observations made across three provincial departments. This included offices in public schools and departments of the provincial government. Where dress-related instructions were mentioned, they were stated in general, normative terms. Phrases like “dress appropriately,” “keep a tidy appearance,” or “present oneself professionally” were frequently used, but none of these terms were defined, explained, or connected to disciplinary procedures. These declarations therefore served more as aspirational guidelines than legally binding regulations.

#### *5.1 Patterns of Informality in Administrative Departments*

In administrative offices across all three provincial departments observed, there was a consistent pattern of informal and, in some cases, inappropriate dress. Common examples included:

- Open sandals and slip-on shoes.
- Tight leggings, short skirts, and ripped jeans
- Casual t-shirts, graphic prints, or revealing tops
- Hoodies, tracksuits and sneakers being worn on designated formal attire days

These fashion choices were a reflection of the dominant office culture rather than isolated instances. No corrective actions were seen or reported, and senior staff failed to set an example of professional alternatives. Interactions with the public were also informal, especially at front desks, reception areas, and client-facing service points where the state is usually supposed to project legitimacy and gravity. This led to a visual conflict between the state's official mandate and its unofficial employee representation.

#### *5.2 Socialisation of Interns and Trainees*

Instead of receiving official training on professional standards, graduate interns and in-service trainees were seen to behave and look like permanent employees. Interns were observed imitating senior coworkers in at least two departments by dressing too casually, including with torn jeans, sleeveless shirts, and untucked shirts, without receiving any consequences. This points to an organizational culture where new hires are assimilated into a laid-back

atmosphere where role seriousness and institutional identity are not connected to outward appearance. Junior cohorts' decline in professional standards is exacerbated by the lack of dress code guidelines during induction or onboarding.

### ***5.3 Educational Settings and Visual Role Modelling***

Teachers' clothing also showed a mismatch between their professional roles and appearance in the school sites under review, especially in under-resourced public schools in township and rural areas. Typical problems included:

- Casual denim, low-cut tops, and short dresses
- Inconsistent grooming standards
- Use of fashion accessories that diverted attention from the teaching task

Students frequently made comments about this style of dress, especially in senior primary and high school. Students described their perceptions using phrases like "they look like they're at home" and "our teachers dress like us" in learner feedback sessions and field note summaries. In these situations, the lack of a clear visual differentiation between students and teachers weakened the aspirational identity of education and contributed to a lowered perception of teaching as a respectable career. On the other hand, schools that had even more casual dress codes, like simple color coordination, smart-casual standards, or setting an example for others to follow, gave off a more cohesive institutional image.

### ***5.4 Emerging Themes***

Through triangulated data analysis incorporating observational fieldwork, interview transcripts, and documentary reviews, three dominant and interrelated themes were identified. Each theme underscores the complex relationship between visual representation, institutional culture, and professional legitimacy in the public sector.

#### ***5.4.1. Visual Drift and Institutional Ambiguity***

A progressive separation between employee appearance and the institution's symbolic identity is indicated by the first theme, Visual Drift and Institutional Ambiguity. Personal aesthetic preferences took over in the absence of a clear dress code or enforcement system, which led to a noticeable disintegration of professional identity. Employees began wearing more casual clothes like sneakers, tracksuits, and hoodies on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, days that were previously and currently thought to be associated with formal attire.

More than just a change in style, this move toward individual expression also shows a breakdown in the common visual indicators of organizational coherence. The decline of visual uniformity indicated deeper institutional ambiguities in public service settings, where appearance has traditionally served as a signifier of legitimacy, authority, and discipline. Workplace norms have been disrupted by employees, especially younger ones, who modelled their attire more on social influences than professional standards.

#### ***5.4.2. Symbolic Devaluation of Professional Roles***

The way casual clothing styles lessened the perceived gravity of public service roles is reflected in the second theme, Symbolic Devaluation of Professional Roles. This effect was most noticeable in front-line service delivery offices, municipal administration, and education, where staff members act as outwardly visible state representatives. Managers, union representatives, and members of the public were among the stakeholders who voiced concerns that the breakdown of professional visual codes diminished regard for institutional roles.

Professional appearance can be viewed as a component of the "front stage" performance of competence and authority, according to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens. The legitimacy of the actor and, consequently, the institution is questioned when such symbols are undermined. In state institutions, where service delivery is already disputed or scrutinized, the public's perceptions of dependability, expertise, and seriousness were weakened by the observed informality, which went beyond simple cosmetics.

#### ***5.4.3. Policy Vacuum and Cultural Normalisation***

The structural circumstances that made the transition to informal aesthetics possible and subsequently solidified are highlighted in the third theme, Policy Vacuum and Cultural Normalization. Numerous government agencies lacked updated appearance policies, according to interviews and institutional records. In cases where dress codes were in place, they were either selectively enforced, out-of-date, or applied inconsistently. Because of this regulatory void, casual clothing became commonplace and accepted as part of culture.

One respondent characterized the new normal as "casual Fridays becoming casual every day" as a result of the lack of enforcement over time. Peer behaviors, generational influence, and the lack of managerial resistance made this cultural shift especially resilient. Without deliberate policy change and cultural reorientation, informality effectively became ingrained as an organizational value as well as a practice that is hard to break.

### ***Overall Interpretation and Implications***

All of these findings point to the importance of employee appearance as a symbolic register for communicating institutional values, behavioral expectations, and public legitimacy, despite the fact that it is frequently trivialized in bureaucratic discourses. Visual drift, the reproduction of informal norms, and the degradation of public service institutions' professional image have all flourished due to the lack of a clear policy framework regarding professional presentation.

There are wider ramifications for public sector governance from this phenomenon. Visual standards are entwined with issues of public trust, institutional pride, and accountability; they are not just about aesthetics. In addition to the reputational risk, state employees who don't follow professional visual standards run the risk of contributing to a general organizational laxity and low morale. Thus, reestablishing a consistent appearance policy along with processes for consultation and sensitization is not just a matter of etiquette; rather, it is a calculated move to restore institutional discipline and professional identity.

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## 6. Discussion

The study's conclusions confirm that attire is by no means a minor issue of personal preference in public service settings. Rather, it is a key component of the symbolic architecture that represents the state to the public and its employees. When uniforms are not necessary, clothing serves as a stand-in for professional credibility, discipline, and institutional authority. In addition to undermining these symbolic roles, the lack of official dress codes in public schools and administrative departments has resulted in an unofficial peer-driven standard that furthers cultural drift away from the public service's core values (Ngubane & Mahomed, 2023; Mulaudzi & Dlamini, 2023).

The public servant can be seen as a representation of the state in citizens' daily lives, according to symbolic interactionism, especially Blumer's (1969) framework. Therefore, clothing serves as a semiotic tool that denotes respectability, professionalism, and institutional alignment. Inappropriate or casual attire by public employees conveys conflicting messages about the gravity of government work and the state's own self-image, particularly in frontline or educational positions (Rafaelli & Pratt, 2022). The expected hierarchy of authority, responsibility, and appearance is upset by this symbolic incoherence, which also undermines public confidence.

According to the findings, clothing is one of the "artefacts" that reflects deeper cultural assumptions, which is consistent with organizational culture theory (Schein, 2010). Weak accountability systems, unclear performance standards, and weakened professional norms are common characteristics of the larger institutional culture in workplaces where clothing is unregulated and informality is accepted (Sibanda & Khawe, 2022). As new hires, including interns and graduate trainees, are acclimated to these norms, these cultural characteristics eventually start to reinforce themselves. If left unchecked, this socialization process feeds a vicious cycle wherein casual attire becomes a sign and a symptom of institutional dysfunction.

An especially important case is that of educational institutions. Teachers serve as social role models and state representatives in addition to being educators. Young learners frequently base their career goals on the symbolic cues provided by those in positions of authority, as Khoza (2023) points out. Students may perceive teachers as devaluing the profession itself if they are untidy or excessively casual. For young people in underprivileged environments who depend on public education as their main source of exposure to governmental authority and career inspiration, this disrupts the aspirational connection between state employment and upward mobility.

Furthermore, the conversation demonstrates how informal dress cultures are ingrained in larger structural issues that the public sector is currently dealing with. These consist of incoherent policies, fragmented HR oversight, inadequate mentorship, and weak induction systems (Phakathi, 2022; Mokoena & Maseko, 2022). As a result, clothing becomes a diagnostic tool for evaluating the effectiveness of institutional functioning.

There are two policy ramifications. First, the study backs up the idea of establishing reasonable yet non-restrictive dress code standards for public servants. While strict uniformity need not be enforced, these guidelines should establish baseline standards that uphold the honour of public service. Second, any dress code initiative needs to be incorporated into a larger professionalization agenda that includes values-based public service training, leadership modelling, and orientation programs. This would guarantee that modifications to standards of appearance are ingrained in a broader cultural movement toward responsibility, honesty, and public confidence.

Crucially, these suggestions need to strike a careful balance between upholding individual identity and encouraging institutional cohesion. According to Ndlovu and Mokoena (2024), if dress codes are not handled with tact, they can quickly turn into places of exclusion in diverse societies. Therefore, to ensure legitimacy and buy-in, policy design must involve consultation with employees across gender, cultural, and generational boundaries.

In the end, this study emphasizes that when talking about institutional reform, it is important to consider the symbolic elements of statecraft, of which clothing is a crucial part. They are essential to the state's legitimacy in the eyes of its workers and the people it serves, not merely incidental.

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## 7. Conclusion

This article has shown that the lack of official dress code regulations in the South African public sector is a structural and symbolic shortcoming that jeopardizes public trust, organizational coherence, and institutional professionalism. Based on policy reviews, observational data, and recent research, the study has demonstrated how employees internalize and reflect broader institutional norms through unregulated clothing, which turns into an informal organizational artifact. These norms gradually move toward informality and ambiguity in settings without clear policy direction, undermining the state's perceived visual authority and the gravity of public positions.

This policy gap has a particularly negative effect on young professionals, trainees, and interns who join the public sector early in their careers. They frequently pick up casual or unconcerned clothing styles from current employees rather than being indoctrinated into a culture of professional discipline, which perpetuates a generational cycle of lower expectations. In the field of education, the symbolic status of public employment as a respectable and feasible career path and learner aspirations are both affected by the visual devaluation of the teaching role through inappropriate clothing.

In order to present clothing as a communicative act ingrained in institutional values and expectations rather than as a side issue, the article has also drawn on theoretical viewpoints, particularly symbolic interactionism and organizational culture theory. In this way, clothing serves as an outward manifestation of the state's self-concept and its desire to be perceived by others. The study suggests the creation of consultative, inclusive, and context-sensitive dress guidelines as an alternative to prescriptive or uniform-based solutions. These guidelines ought to be both adaptable enough to take into account individuality and diversity and explicit enough to create outward symbols of professionalism that are consistent with the public service's core principles of honesty, fairness, and accountability.

Future research should consider comparative studies across government tiers and sectors to assess how dress policies, or their absence, affect performance, staff morale, and citizen perceptions. Furthermore, empirical work could examine how symbolic reforms in appearance intersect with broader institutional reform agendas, including professionalisation, induction, and accountability initiatives. Ultimately, improving how the public service dresses itself may be an entry point into improving how it conducts itself, visually, symbolically, and institutionally.

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