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Article

Image Discrepancies: Motivators for Sustainable Practices in the Hairdressing Industry

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Abstract This study explores image discrepancies as motivators for sustainable practice adoption in the hairdressing industry. Textual responses from open-ended surveys ($n = 166$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 14$) of UK hairdressers revealed discrepancies between their perceptions of the occupation's current image and desired image and between how they viewed their occupation and how it was seen by their clients. These arose from the perception that hairdressing was undervalued and partially stigmatized and currently failed to live up to sustainable, professional ideals. Our analysis showed that by engaging with sustainability concerns hairdressers could present themselves as experts helping to address societal issues through haircare, thus claiming a more prestigious occupational status/image. In doing so, we shed light on image discrepancies as motivating factors towards sustainable practice. This study also has practical implications for how to motivate ethical and sustainable practices in small and medium-sized enterprises, with implications for individuals, businesses, and broader society.

Keywords image motivation; occupational image discrepancies; sustainable, small and medium-sized enterprises; hair

1. Introduction

As environmental issues such as climate change and sustainable development become increasingly urgent, interest in how to motivate more sustainable business practices appears ever more crucial [1–3]. Researchers have acknowledged that our understanding of the motivators and drivers of sustainable practices within organizations is limited and that “additional empirical studies on sustainability drivers are hence needed” [4]. Past literature on sustainability adoption has tended to focus on the actions of emerging occupations or individuals in job roles that are dedicated to sustainable practice, such as sustainability managers or corporate social responsibility (CSR) consultants [5–7]. Yet, to adequately respond to the scale of the climate change crisis in a concerted way, it is vital to understand how traditional occupations and typical employees can be encouraged to adopt sustainable practices.

Within this context, understanding how to support sustainable practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) appears to be an especially pressing concern given SMEs’ “high environmental footprint” and estimates suggesting they are responsible for 60–70% of industrial pollution within Europe ([8], p. 19), see also [9]. In this study, we contribute to this discussion by shedding light on the motives and behaviors that shape sustainability adoption in SMEs operating in a traditional industry, namely hairdressing.

Various psychological models have been developed aimed at understanding the factors that motivate sustainability adoption [10]. Broadly speaking, this research has focused on two types of factors—intrinsic and extrinsic [4,11–13], with extrinsic or instrumental causes often being the dominant focus [1,14]. Yet, when identifying the origins of prosocial behavior, Ariely et al. [15] contend that alongside intrinsic and extrinsic factors, a third category of factors may be relevant in motivating action, namely image motivation factors. Image motivation pertains to the motive to invest in behavior in order to fulfill one’s desire to be liked and respected both by oneself and by others. Research examining consumer motivations for green behavior has testified to the importance of image as a motivator for environmentally friendly purchases [16,17]. However, to

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the best of our knowledge, the extant literature provides scant insights into how image concerns may drive employees of SMEs to adopt sustainable business practices.

This paper aims to advance research on motives for sustainability by examining this overlooked third dimension as a driver of sustainability adoption. Specifically, we explore how hairdressers' perceptions of image discrepancies between "how clients currently see us" and "how we would like to be perceived" motivate sustainable behaviors as hairdressers attempt to claim more prestigious identities as sustainable, high-status professionals. While much of the literature has found that the adoption of sustainable behavior is fraught with tensions and struggles for adopters and their organizations alike [5–7], we find that adopting sustainable practices may be a way to elevate the image of hairdressers—allowing them to claim more prestigious and aspirational identities in their communities.

By revealing the key role of image discrepancies in motivating sustainable behavior, we contribute to a small but growing body of research on the impact of identity and image discrepancies in driving positive work-related change [18–21]. Furthermore, we move beyond these initial insights on motivations for sustainability adoption by examining the ways in which hairdressers initiate and establish sustainability-related change efforts within their businesses. As addressing grand challenges, such as climate change, becomes an ever-pressing concern, understanding how organizational members can "mobilize and act on these challenges" is increasingly critical ([22], p. 552). We offer this perspective by showing why and how hairdressers are motivated to establish new sustainability practices within (and beyond) their businesses that contribute in positive and concrete ways to the climate crisis response.

The following sections begin by exploring common motives for sustainability adoption. We then examine the literature on image discrepancies and their role in shaping workplace behavior, before introducing our specific context of the hairdressing sector. Our focus then moves to our qualitative study, which explores UK hairdressers' motives to invest in sustainable behavior, as well as the methods they use to establish sustainable practices in their salons. Finally, we position our findings within the extant literature and outline the contributions of this study for research and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motivations for Sustainable Practice (Extrinsic, Intrinsic, Image)

Sustainability literature has primarily focused on intrinsic and extrinsic motives for sustainability adoption. Extrinsic motivations to invest in sustainable behavior include the desire to receive material benefits and rewards or to avoid external penalties [15]. The main reported external driver towards environmental sustainability is government regulation and economic support [23–25]. However, despite a desire to be compliant, small businesses in particular are often unaware of their obligations, which limits the effectiveness of regulation, and means that, in reality, many businesses are predominantly driven by commercial factors [26,27]. Other drivers of sustainable practices reported in the literature are cost savings linked to rising commodities and raw material prices, competitive advantage, and customer and supply chain pressure to adopt green practices or risk losing business [25,28].

As well as examining extrinsic motivations, research has also focused on intrinsic motivators of sustainable actions—that is the intrinsic values and preferences that drive such behavior. This research highlights that top managers' or owners' values are critical in motivating sustainable practice adoption [29–31], and that pro-environmental organizational cultures and corporate climates are crucial in encouraging sustainable action [32]. Santana (2015) [33] adopts an institutional perspective, proposing that firms' adoption of social practices (an umbrella term that includes sustainable practices) is motivated by four mechanisms: commitment (normative dimension), calculation (self-interest), conformance (accepted practices, habits), and caring (prosocial emotions). Schaefer et al. (2020) [34] adopt a more individualistic psychological perspective to suggest that different value sets of SME managers require different strategies to engage them in sustainable practices. In particular, they suggest that appealing to win-win outcomes and self-interest by emphasizing competitiveness and cost savings remains an effective approach for a significant subset of managers. For managers with values relating to benevolence, effective motivations include the protection of families, friends, community, and co-workers. A smaller subset of SMEs was motivated by universal values such as social justice and environmental protection.

Yet, while the sustainability literature has developed a rich understanding of the role of intrinsic and (especially) extrinsic factors in motivating sustainable employee behavior, the impact of image as a motivator for sustainable practice within organizations has been largely overlooked. As highlighted above, image motives relate to the motivation to enact behavior, not because one will receive external rewards for doing so (i.e., extrinsic factors) or because one is driven by an internal desire to “do the right thing” (intrinsic factors), but because by doing so, an individual can fulfill their need to be liked and respected by others and themselves [15]. While there is evidence that image concerns may be relevant in motivating citizens’ green behaviors [35], such as their tendency to recycle [36] and to purchase green products [16,17], we currently know little about how and when image motives trigger sustainable practices within organizations. In this study, we explore how image discrepancies motivate hairdressers to invest in sustainable practices as they seek to enhance feelings of respect within their organizations, as well as among the clients and communities they serve. We next turn our attention to the identity literature to examine the nature of identity and image discrepancies and why they are expected to play such a consequential role in the focal context.

2.2. Identity/Image Discrepancies

Workplace identities have been defined as “the collection of meanings attached to the self by the individual and others in a work domain” ([37], p. 2). Given the amount of time we typically spend at work, it is perhaps unsurprising that the workplace provides an especially critical basis for self-definition [38]. Our workplace identities can include organizational, leader, career, and team identities [39,40]. However, in this study, we focus on occupational identity which is defined as individuals’ answers to the questions “Who are we?” and “What do we do?” (as members of this occupation) [41], ([42], p. 893). Occupational identity thus encapsulates the stereotypic traits that characterize a specific occupation, as well as the idealized fantasies and images that shape members’ beliefs about their occupational role [43].

Developing positive identities by virtue of the groups we belong to is critical in maintaining positive self-worth and self-esteem [44]. According to social identity theory, we thus place great importance on how our groups are perceived or the status of our groups relative to others [45,46]. These perceptions of status rely not only on our internal perceptions of the characteristics of our group (identity) but also on our understanding of its “construed external image”, that is, our perceptions of how outsiders view the groups to which we belong [47,48]. Specifically, we tend to identify more strongly with occupations or groups that have an attractive construed external image or are perceived as high-status by others [47].

Williams & Murphy (2022) [49] argue that research on occupations and professions has largely centered on inward-focusing questions concerning individuals’ self-definitions and constructions of professional identity while overlooking how beliefs regarding others’ perceptions of the self (construed external image) affect individuals’ behavior. Yet, how others view one’s occupational or professional role (occupational image) is known to have an important influence on our self-views and behavior [50].

Notably, occupational members may experience image discrepancies when how they view their own occupational role is misaligned with how they perceive others view it. For instance, Vough et al. (2013) [51] found that role-based image discrepancies were common in a range of occupations including accounting, nursing, law, and architecture, and that these discrepancies came with emotional and productivity costs that were detrimental to employee-client relations. As we discuss next, we expect image discrepancies to be critical motivators of sustainable actions in low-status occupations like hairdressing as individuals attempt to claim more positive, prestigious identities as sustainable professionals.

2.3. Identity/Image Discrepancies as Drivers of Sustainable Behavior in Low-status Occupations

Occupations vary in terms of their prestige [52]. Service occupations (to be distinguished from the broader service sector) are typically low-education occupations such as food service workers, hairdressers, call workers, etc., and tend to offer low pay, limited career prospects, and have low occupational prestige [53]. Despite the hairdressing sector being significant in terms of GDP, jobs, and turnover [54], Overell (2006) ([55], p. 17) in his analysis of 21st-century trades, claims that hairdressing is “deemed to be too insubstantial to be associated with having a sense of vocation. Nurses, teachers, and clerics may be said to have a vocation; hairdressers may not”.

Whereas some occupations are clearly stigmatized, hairdressing is only partially so, with much depending upon the location and salon type. For example, Gimlin (1996) [56] distinguishes stylists in upmarket city salons who are considered “artists” from those in the more typical salons in residential areas where stylists are often of lower social status than their clients and have to work harder to construct more prestigious identities. Gimlin further reports that attempts to raise the status of hairdressing are common and include strategies such as demonstrating expertise in the realm of hair and beauty, and performing “emotion work”, such as engaging with higher status clients as friends and equals. Gimlin also describes how the salon environment is constructed to present a sense of stylists’ professionalism, with receptionists and assistants expected to do the mundane jobs, while the stylists (professionals) attend to the job of hairdressing. However, she contends that these attempts to boost occupational status are only partially successful, largely because the education and incomes of employed stylists are not commensurate with such claims.

Workers in occupations with low prestige are likely to face heightened identity and image discrepancies as the low-status nature of the work undermines the social validation processes that support a positive occupational image [57–59]. In essence, the gaps in members’ beliefs about “*who we are now*” (i.e., occupational identity), “*how we believe we are perceived by others*” (i.e., occupational image), “*who we would like to be*” (i.e., desired occupational identity), and “*how we would like to be perceived by others*” (i.e., desired occupational image) are likely to be particularly stark in low-status occupations, such as hairdressing [48,60].

Research suggests that image discrepancies are a source of tension, and individuals are therefore motivated to take steps to reduce their feelings of misalignment [61]. Yet, responses to situations of image discrepancy have often been reported to be psychological/cognitive or emotional in nature [51,57]. For instance, individuals who perceive that their occupation has a negative image or are involved in so-called “dirty work” have been found to psychologically disengage from their situation, make selective social comparisons that position their occupation in a more positive light [58], devalue or dismiss the negative evaluations of others [59,62] or simply conceal the nature of their stigmatized occupation from others [63]. In other situations, negative responses to image discrepancies have been reported [51,64]. For example, in their study of police officers, Patil & Lebel (2019) [65] found that officers were less proactive in acting on their prosocial motivations when they perceived an image discrepancy, believing that the public misunderstood or failed to appreciate their roles.

Yet, while inactive and negative responses have primarily been reported, more positive strategies may be envisaged in which occupational members try to reduce discrepancies and counter stigma by trying to raise the status of their occupation. Indeed, recent theory has suggested that identity and image discrepancies may provide a key stimulus for positive action as individuals seek to (re)align their current image with a desired future image [20,21]. As Markus & Nurius ([66], p. 954) write, desired possible selves or notions of who one would like to become in the future “function as incentives for future behavior” because they allow individuals to draw comparisons between their current identity/image and a desired future state, motivating them to take the proactive steps required to pave the way for this sought-after future.

For members of low-status occupations, the desire to advance towards a more prestigious “professional” identity (with all the connotations of status, autonomy, and prestige this entails) [67,68], may be expected to be common. Organizational scholars refer to the “professionalization project” [69,70], which encompasses the various strategies engaged in by specific occupations to professionalize. The notion of professionalism encompasses ideas of altruism [71], professional ethics [72,73], and playing a positive role in society [74]. This raises the possibility that one way to achieve a more aspirational “professional” identity and reduce image discrepancies may be to pursue ethical and sustainable practices that enhance the profile of the occupation and allow members to be seen as ethical operators, committed to the greater good. Consistent with this suggestion, Costas & Kärreman (2013) [14] showed that the implementation of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) program allowed employees to move towards a more idealized “aspirational” identity, also giving them the tools to live out this ideal of an ethically responsible professional. In a similar vein, it may be expected that by embracing sustainable practices, hairdressers may be able to minimize the prevalent image discrepancies associated with their roles and claim more prestigious identities as members of an ecologically and socially responsible occupation that lives up to its “professional” and ethical ideals.

Against this backdrop, and in the context of contradictory findings on the role of image discrepancies in driving or inhibiting positive change, we sought to understand how image discrepancies shape sustainable practice adoption in hairdressing¹. In particular, we aimed to address two key questions: 1) How do image discrepancies motivate sustainable practice adoption in hairdressing organizations? 2) What kinds of within-occupational and client-oriented sustainable practices do hairdressers initiate in response to any perceived discrepancy?

3. Context to Study

Hairdressing as a sector comprises five percent of the UK GDP and produces a high carbon footprint due to the high amount of energy, water, and chemicals used [54]. Hairdressers also talk to more people than most workers, so are well-positioned to advise clients on sustainable practices. This means that interventions to enable hairdressers to adopt more sustainable practices have the potential to reduce the environmental impacts of haircare, not just in the hairdressing sector, but for the population as a whole. On this basis, we obtained funds from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for a study using hairdressers as catalytic individuals to spread pro-environmental haircare practices to their clients. The study involved holding Green Salon Makeover events where hairdressers were invited to explore how to be more sustainable in their own practices and promote said practices to their clients. In some of the discussions, the question of how hairdressers saw themselves played a role in their willingness to adopt sustainable practices. Those who saw themselves as professional haircare consultants appeared most eager to learn about sustainable practices and share them with their clients.

A follow-up project funded by the ESRC worked with trainers to embed sustainability across the hairdressing curriculum (see <https://ecohairandbeauty.com>). This project involved holding workshops at hairdressing colleges and showing trainers how to integrate issues of sustainability into their teaching. We noticed that referring to hairdressing as a profession seemed to trigger greater interest in issues of sustainability. At this point, we decided to test our intuition about a hitherto hidden motivator for sustainable practice: the desire for hairdressing to progress towards a more aspirational “professional” status.

A further grant in 2016 enabled us to promote the “virtual salon”—a training tool for sustainable hairdressing which encompassed the same information as the workshops in a different format. We also launched a sustainable stylist certification based on the successful completion of the training program. In a previous study as part of this project [75], we conducted a survey with hairdressers who had completed training on sustainable hairdressing practice. Findings from this survey (participants $n = 847$) indicated the top motivators for sustainable practice were “cost savings”, “desire to hold high professional standards”, and “reputation”. Of particular interest were factors that were most motivating for the segment of the population who do not hold pro-environmental values. Analysis examining those who scored below the median on pre-existing pro-environmental attitudes found that the “desire to hold high professional standards” was the top-ranked motivator. Results from this previous study provided the context for the current qualitative study, which aimed to explore the psychological processes that underlie these findings.

4. Methodology

Data for the current study comprise textual data from open-ended survey questions (sample $n = 166$) from hairdressers at all levels (trainee to salon owners) and interviews ($n = 14$) with salon owners and senior hairdressers who attended the sustainable salon workshop events. Our respondents were asked to respond to two (open-ended) questions, namely:

- 1) *Our research has shown that the desire to be seen as a professional is an important motivator for being a sustainable stylist. If this was important to you, we'd love to know why. Please let us know your thoughts on this ($n = 166$).*

¹ Please note: In the field of sustainable business, numerous terms abound, and distinctions between concepts become blurred, for example many definitions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) make reference to environmental responsibilities, and most definitions of sustainability include social and financial aspects as well as environmental aspects [76]. Similarly, there has been a shift by some scholars from the term “pro-environmental behavior” to the more general term “sustainable practice”. As we asked our respondents about sustainable “practice”, and our sample were those who had chosen to engage in sustainability training, we will use the terms “sustainable practice” or “sustainability adoption” when referring to our findings.

- 2) *Following on from the last question, we'd love to know your thoughts on the status of the hairdressing profession. For example, how do you think hairdressers are perceived? Are you happy with how hairdressers are perceived? Do you see it as a job or profession? Do you think obtaining sustainable stylist/salon certification might raise the status of the hairdressing profession? Any thoughts around this area are welcomed (n = 64).*

The sample that provided textual data comprised 166 respondents, including 64 trainee hairdressers, 52 trainers, 15 experienced hairdressers, 14 salon owners, six newly qualified hairdressers, and 15 other/didn't specify. Of these, 154 were hairdressers and nine were barbers (three didn't specify). In addition, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with six salon owners and eight experienced hairdressers, five males and nine females. Participants were selected at random during a hairdressing event in the UK.

5. Qualitative Data Analysis

The data analysis explored image discrepancies as motivators for sustainable practice, and the specific tactics or actions hairdressers took to implement and establish sustainable behaviors in their occupation. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data, using Braun & Clarke's (2006) [77] six-stage process. We began by immersing ourselves in the textual and interview data, familiarizing ourselves with hairdressers' perceptions and common themes. We then systematically coded the data and looked for initial codes of interest, before collating these codes into broader themes. Nvivo 12 software was used to organize the data and facilitate this coding process. Despite being alert to the potential for variation among sub-groups (such as salon owners, trainees, trainers, etc.), the analysis identified little variation in perspective.

At this stage, key themes identified in our data included "image discrepancies", "motives for sustainable practice", and "sustainable practice: actions and strategies". Sub-themes were also clear within these over-arching themes. For example, within the broader theme of "motives for sustainable practice", we observed both intrinsic and extrinsic motives for behavior. Our analysis was informed by both existing theory and emerging themes, meaning that codes were defined and refined at this stage, according to both empirical and theoretical insights. For instance, we observed that alongside the commonly reported intrinsic and extrinsic motives, respondents' sustainability adoption was also driven by their desire to be respected by themselves and others, in accordance with Ariely et al.' (2009) [15] definition of "image motives".

When reviewing the themes, it became clear that further refinement was necessary as we had not sufficiently discriminated between discrete themes in our data. For example, we observed that a distinction should be made between "within-occupational practices" (directed at changing sustainable practices within the occupation) and "external (client)-directed practices" (directed at changing clients' views). It is important to acknowledge that themes did not just emerge from the data, the researchers played an active role in identifying themes and selecting those of explanatory value [77]. Themes were checked in relation to the coded extracts and against the entire data set. Examples of divergence from the main themes are acknowledged below to provide a holistic picture of the data. Once we had developed a satisfactory thematic map of our data, we turned to describing and labeling the themes and selecting exemplar quotes that offered a representative account of our respondents' perspectives and experiences.

6. Findings

Three major findings emerged from our analysis. First, we found that hairdressers showed discrepancies between their perceptions of the occupation's current and desired occupational image. Second, we found they reported intrinsic, extrinsic, and image motives for pursuing sustainable practices. Third, we found they exhibited within-occupational actions and strategies—aimed at adopting sustainable practices to claim a more aspirational occupational image, and external (client)-directed practices—aimed at changing the perceptions of their clients through sustainability adoption.

We next present the survey responses (#SR) and interviews (#I) that shed light on these three themes (see Table 1 for further supporting statements), before discussing our findings in relation to the wider literature on identity and image discrepancies and sustainability motivations and actions.

Table 1. Exemplary quotes: Examples of verbatim interview (I) and survey responses (SR).

Concept	Example Quotes
Image Discrepancies	
Image discrepancies	<p>Current (<i>low-status/low-skilled</i>)—Desired (<i>high-status/professional</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>People think hairdressers aren't intelligent [...] I would like people to think more of us, we do a lot of training on different levels that deserve to be appreciated. It means a lot to me that people think more of us (#I13).</i> • <i>(We're) not really respected by many people. They see it as a low-level profession (#I6, experienced hairdresser).</i> • <i>I think hairdressers are and always have been seen as less in comparison to other skilled industries, like say motor mechanic or electricians...I feel it's important for employed salons to strive to be seen as professional as they can be in order to stop the industry looking like a joke (#SR571, salon owner).</i> • <i>I would like it to be seen as more of a profession as I know how hard I have worked towards obtaining my qualifications, knowing also that as a hairstylist we never stop learning (#SR248, trainer).</i>
	<p>Current (<i>wasteful/unsustainable</i>)—Desired (<i>sustainable/ethical</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Hairdressing is one of the industries which has a great responsibility for its carbon footprint (#SR717, trainer).</i> • <i>Hairdressers have a long way to go to make themselves more environmentally aware (#SR685, trainer).</i> • <i>(I) think we are perceived (as) wrong and bad for the environment (#SR950, trainee).</i>
Motives for Sustainable Practice	
Intrinsic motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We all need to save money and time these days, but I have a genuine concern regarding the destruction of this planet (#SR407, trainee).</i> • <i>I am concerned about saving the planet (#SR932, trainer).</i> • <i>I care about my carbon footprint (#SR612, experienced hairdresser).</i>
Extrinsic motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It's a handy thing to know because it saves a lot of money all in all (#SR982, trainee).</i> • <i>You are saving money for your business and for your clients = good customer service (#SR389, experienced hairdresser).</i> • <i>Being professional is aligned with working 'smart', i.e., cost savings and tapping into the industry ethos and client expectations of sustainability (#SR291, trainer).</i>
Image motives	<p>Aimed at enhancing status/respect <i>within</i> the occupation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It is another string to our bow [...] we want that link to sustainability that hairdressers can be proud of (#I13).</i> • <i>Being seen as a professional is very important to me and knowing how to practice in a sustainable manner is part of that professionalism (#SR114, experienced hairdresser).</i> • <i>It is important as a professional to be seen as eco-friendly and practicing what we teach on a daily basis (#SR005, trainer).</i>
	<p>Aimed at enhancing the respect of others <i>outside</i> the occupation (e.g., clients)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I think that people may take us more seriously if we are seen to be doing our bit for the environment as it is currently a very important topic that a lot of people have taken very seriously (#SR053, trainee).</i> • <i>Reputation is key to success, looking professional and doing your best for the environment come hand in hand (#SR639, trainee).</i> • <i>It will change the image of hairdressers by practicing sustainably (I#1).</i> • <i>Hairdressers have had a bad professional image for so long—it is lovely to be in the front of new challenges in the world (#SR281, experienced hairdresser).</i>
Sustainable Practices: Actions and Strategies	
Within-occupational practices (<i>Addressing image discrepancies within the occupation</i>)	<p>Educating colleagues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More needs to be made aware of how hairdressers can make a change—this resource is an excellent start (#SR108, trainer).</i> • <i>I would love to educate others in this way and roll your course out into salons and inspire others to create change (#SR275, trainer).</i> • <i>By adapting the principles, you are leading by example and in doing so educating others (#SR466, salon owner).</i> • <i>Education is key if we are to change the situation (#SR717, trainer).</i> • <i>We try to promote this (sustainable practices) whenever possible as part of our training, but it is always good to have facts and figures to back up your claims (#SR567, trainer).</i> • <i>I have been in the hairdressing industry for over 26 years, and I am now passionate about teaching barbering. As I am in the college surroundings now, I feel I can help make the learners aware of the environment (#SR385, trainer).</i>
	<p>Establishing sustainable practice habits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I believe sustainable practices should be trained from the beginning because habits are difficult to change (#I3).</i> • <i>If sustainability can increase by “setting it as a trend” it should be pushed in that way (#I4).</i> • <i>What you know, you can transfer it to others and hopefully that would make a difference as well (#I7).</i> • <i>As an educator we are left to give the knowledge and understanding of working practices, and this has just shown me how important and what impact these could have on the future (#SR249, trainer).</i>
	<p>Gaining accreditation/certification (<i>Enhances status of hairdressing as a high-skilled/high-status occupation</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I definitely think the certification will raise the status of the hairdressing profession (#SR518, salon owner).</i> • <i>I think obtaining sustainable stylist/salon certificate raises the awareness of how people can be more ecological with their haircare and products (#SR801, salon owner).</i> • <i>(The) image of the profession needs to be changed and become more legitimate = a certification requirement (#I7).</i> • <i>I see hairdressing as a profession that I enjoy and hav(ing) the certificate shows how we care about our planet and our clients (#SR955, trainee).</i>

Table 1. (Continued)

External (Client)-directed practices (Addressing image discrepancies outside the occupation)	Gaining accreditation/certification (Enhancing occupational image among the public)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think the more certificates and qualifications you have are important in your role as it shows your clients that you have worked hard to get to where you are (#SR164, trainee hairdresser). • Obtaining a sustainable stylist/salon certificate is very important and it helps on your CV, it makes other people see how caring you are about the environment and making actions that help the world. It also shows people the knowledge you have (#SR887, trainee hairdresser).
	Building relationships and legitimacy with clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's good too for clients to feel confident and trust in us—to take on board our advice and enjoy their experience with us. This is why it is important for me to be seen as a professional (#SR801, salon owner). • I think some clients really take on board what the hairdresser says, and we are someone that they can trust (#SR729, experienced hairdresser).
	Educating/influencing clients to act more sustainably	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to give advice to customers they might not be aware of which could make an impact to the way they do their hair when they go home (#SR849, trainer). • I can advise people and they are interested in what information hairdressers have (#SR781, newly qualified). • I think I can help teach customers (#SR664, newly qualified).

6.1. Image Discrepancies

Discrepancies between hairdressers’ current and desired occupational image were routinely reported by respondents, who stressed that the public’s negative perception of the occupation diverged widely from their own perception of a high-status occupation, akin to a traditional profession. One salon owner commented, “I see ourselves as professional. I’m upset that the consumer doesn’t, and we are looked at as just a go-to job for people who don’t have anything better to do” (#SR438, salon owner). While another explained: “I believe hairdressers are underrated by the general public. It is a profession like a doctor, they are essentially a hair doctor” (#SR524, salon owner).

The metaphor of a “hair doctor” is revealing as doctors are the prototypical professional, with high occupational prestige. The implication is that a hairdresser’s role extends beyond that of providing a hair service, to providing professional consultation for their clients, prescribing advice in the same way that a doctor would make a health prescription. Although the term “hair doctor” was only described by one survey response, a range of perspectives from both interview and survey responses emphasized their role as educators and influencers and underlined the image discrepancy that existed between how hairdressers saw their own role (as highly skilled and trusted professionals) and their perceptions of how it was typically viewed by their clients. One interviewee remarked, “Some clients just see us as cutting hair, but many of us see it as a profession—there’s always something new to learn” (#I5).

In terms of respondents’ beliefs about the likelihood of changing these negative perceptions, some were hopeful that things might change, with one experienced hairdresser explaining: “People think hairdressers aren’t intelligent, but things are slowly changing... We are forward-thinking, and people’s opinions are getting better” (#I13). However, most respondents described how entrenched this negative image of the occupation appeared to be, with one explaining: “Until people experience the amount of knowledge required to do the job, we will sadly always be perceived as bimbos and as a dropout course for students. It will be really hard to change this” (#SR014, trainer).

In addition to these discrepancies between perceptions of their current and desired image among clients, our respondents acknowledged hairdressers were “quite bad offenders in terms of sustainability” (#I1), and often enacted practices that failed to live up to the ideal of a “sustainable” occupation. This created an additional discrepancy between how the occupation was currently perceived in relation to the environment (as wasteful, profligate, and unserious) and how respondents would like it to be seen as a sustainable, ethical occupation that contributed to society in positive ways. One salon owner explained, “I feel hairdressing is an underestimated trade/profession and seen to use a lot of energy which is bad for the environment (with use of hairdryers, etc.)” (#SR518, salon owner). Similarly, a trainer commented, “It is not a good feeling to think that we are part of a wasteful industry” (#SR549 trainer).

Respondents therefore saw a need to develop more sustainable practices in order to progress towards a more positive occupational image in which sustainability was a defining feature. One interviewee commented, “Sustainability should be in focus for the future and the next generation” (#I2), while another respondent noted, “Ensuring I promote being a sustainable hairdresser is now my goal” (SR389, experienced hairdresser).

6.2. Motives for Pursuing Sustainable Practices

As may be expected based on past research [4,11,12], intrinsic and extrinsic motives for sustainable practices were clearly evident in our findings. Many respondents explained that their

desire to act sustainably stemmed from a deep concern about the future of the planet and a desire to protect the environment. Describing her intrinsic motive for sustainability adoption, one trainee explained: *“This is important to me because it helps the environment, and I would like to help in every way I can. It is important to help the environment as we all have our own part (in) the community and every way we can all participate is helpful”* (#SR241, trainee). Expressing similar sentiments, another respondent noted: *“This (Green Salon event) was important to me as I care about the earth and what happens to it. So, I want to do everything I can to help keep it in a good condition”* (#SR206, trainee).

Extrinsic motives such as the financial benefits and rewards accrued through sustainable practice were also mentioned by several respondents, with one simply stating, *“Cost is always the main driver and the environment comes second”* (#I6). Another interviewee similarly explained, *“Sustainability is interesting for many hairdressers but mainly as a cost driver (...). I implemented sustainable practices for energy and cost savings (...) and we have installed solar panels and water heater, water saving water taps”* (#I1).

However, alongside intrinsic and extrinsic motives, we were interested in unpacking the role of image as a potential driver of sustainability adoption. It is important to note that not all respondents saw image considerations as important motivators of their behavior. Indeed, underlining the point that hairdressers would always be in demand regardless of any perceived stigma, one interviewee commented, *“I don’t think it is necessary to improve the image as everyone needs a haircut”* (#I8).

Yet, our analysis showed that hairdressers’ desire to enhance their image or in Ariely et al.’s (2009) ([15], p. 544) words, to be “liked and respected by others and by one’s self” was a powerful motive in driving sustainable practices for the majority of individuals in our sample. In particular, respondents perceived that by investing in sustainable actions they could minimize the image discrepancies described above, and claim a more positive, aspirational identity as a sustainable, high-status professional. Engaging in sustainable practices was thus seen as a way to enhance respect and, in doing so, reduce the perceived discrepancy between “who we are as an occupation” and “who we would like to be”. Expressing this hope, a newly qualified hairdresser commented:

“Hairdressing as a profession is often seen as rather trivial. The idea that we can help the planet through the advice we give and also help people do the best for their hair makes me feel more important. Being part of the solution of sustainability I think raises the status of the profession which is a good thing” (#SR809, newly qualified).

Similarly, an experienced hairdresser explained:

“I feel like hairdressing is not always seen as an important occupation, but I feel it is very important. How we do our job really affects people’s lives. I think if we can demonstrate that we take global challenges like climate change seriously by including these considerations in our practice and our discussions with clients, this raises the status of our profession” (#SR114, experienced hairdresser).

The status benefits that may come from adopting more sustainable and innovative business practices were thus widely acknowledged across our sample, with one trainer commenting, *“I feel that being more eco-friendly in general is modern and moving with the times. This will help to raise the status”* (#SR549, trainer). At the same time, adopting sustainable practices was seen as a way to improve clients’ perceptions of the occupation—thus addressing the image discrepancy between clients’ current perceptions and how hairdressers would like it to be seen. Illustrating how adopting sustainable practices may enhance hairdressings’ external image, one interviewee commented:

“I think being sustainable is important for the reputation because customers start demanding more sustainable and eco practices...It will raise hairdressers’ professionalism if they’re applying sustainable practices” (#I4).

While another stated:

“As a professional, it’s important to be seen to have an awareness on things affecting the world in general—be it environmental or political. It impresses your clients too when one is equipped with such information” (#SR338, salon owner).

In this sense, the image discrepancies outlined above stimulated sustainability adoption, as hairdressers sought to reconcile the discrepancy between how their occupation was currently seen (by themselves and others) and how they would like it to be seen, through sustainable practices. Research has shown that employees may regard CSR programs as consistent with the development of idealized or aspirational professional identities [14]. Similarly, we found that

through sustainable practice adoption, hairdressers could enhance the image of the occupation and advance towards more positive aspirational identities.

6.3. Sustainable Practices: Actions and Strategies in Response to Identity Discrepancies

As well as examining the motives for sustainable behavior, we also explored the specific actions and strategies hairdressers enacted to advance a more positive occupational image through sustainable practice adoption. Past research suggests that image discrepancies often lead to negative outcomes, including high levels of turnover, as individuals feel the need to leave their occupation or organization to resolve the perceived discrepancy [21,78]. Such responses were documented in our study, with one interviewee reporting that: “A lot of [hairdressers] leave for that reason, they leave for a different profession. They want to be taken more seriously and be more recognized” (#I1, experienced hairdresser). However, we also found that image discrepancies provided an important stimulus for sustainable action as hairdressers sought more positive, aspirational identities as sustainable ethical professionals. These actions took two forms: 1) Actions within the occupation aimed at improving hairdressing’s sustainability credentials and habits and practices among their staff and 2) Actions directed outside the occupation aimed at changing clients’ perceptions and improving their occupational image.

6.3.1. Within-occupational Practices

First, we found that hairdressers sought to address the negative perception that their occupation was “wasteful, unsustainable and/or unprofessional” and claim a more positive identity through the education and socialization of young trainees. One interviewee explained:

“There is a clear link between the profession and the industry and becoming sustainable. I think it is really important that we get educated about sustainability, which is obviously the main reason why I decided in my salon to achieve the Green Salon certificate. We promoted it and launched it and got involved in it. So, I think it is really important that we are educated in that way. Because we can make a difference [...] Historically, hairdressing was not about being sustainable. It was less information and knowledge available. But now it has become much bigger. Probably because of the changing planet and all industries have to look at what impact they are making. We have (to) not miss out on that... We use packaging and chemicals... Now we have to integrate that into our lessons. As a training academy we teach people hairdressing. Part of the qualification is learning and understanding the principle of sustainability” (#I7).

Through education, this salon owner sought to influence future generations of hairdressers, encouraging them to embody sustainable values and progress towards a more aspirational identity as an ethical and sustainable occupation. Similarly, when describing the value of sustainability training for her role as a senior stylist, another informant commented, “It is important to me as I am in a position where I can influence the next generation of hairdressers” (#SR486, experienced hairdresser), while a trainer explained that she saw value in “educating others to make them aware of the potential dangers of not being eco-friendly, (so) they then will have the chance to help” (#SR933, trainer).

By teaching other hairdressers, our respondents hoped to create long-lasting change in the occupation, ensuring that sustainable practices increasingly became taken-for-granted “habits” among stylists. Discussing her vision for the establishment and development of sustainability norms, one interviewee explained, “I do trainings at salons and advise everyone what is best and how they can advise clients. (...) I try to get everyone on the same level (...) I see (my) salon as a movement (...) If we get new people in, more and more people will adopt this behavior and if they leave, they will pass it on in other salons” (#I10).

At the same time, promotional campaigns and active publicity of “green” practices were seen as important in establishing sustainability adoption across the occupation, while informal mechanisms, such as role-modeling were highlighted as crucial in altering practices/routines within the field. One interviewee commented: “Sustainability should be driven by more campaigns and promotions because if people (hairdressers) are confronted by it every day, habits may change” (#I2). Another trainer agreed: “If we lead by example, and practice what we state to learners, they will see this as normal practice throughout their careers and adopt it into their personal lives as should our clients” (#SR590, trainer). These findings resonate with Howard-Grenville et al.’ (2017) [22] observations regarding how occupational members can institute new practices by changing how their peers think about and carry out their work.

Gaining accreditations and certification of their professional/sustainable qualifications was

also regarded as an important way to move away from prevailing stereotypes of a low-status and low-skilled occupation and embrace a more expert and respected occupational identity as qualified, “sustainable” stylists. One salon owner commented, “*I think salons should be certificated to raise the standards. Hairdressing is always perceived as a low job rather than a good profession*” (#SR066, salon owner). Likewise, a trainer explained, “*(Certification) proves that we are not just hairdressers. I feel that we are branded as ‘stupid’ that we ‘do not need grades’ to be a hairdresser (and this proves otherwise)*” (#SR780, trainer). In addition, it was recognized that by gaining qualifications and attending courses, hairdressers could develop the skills and knowledge they needed to live up to their ideals as members of an ethical, environmentally friendly occupation. Acknowledging this, a trainer commented, “*The new technical qualifications will hopefully raise the standard of the qualifying stylists each year*” (#SR014, trainer).

6.3.2. External (Client)-directed Practices

As well as changing internal perceptions about sustainable practices within their organizations, our respondents highlighted that gaining green credentials could change clients’ views of the occupation, enabling them to foster a higher-status occupational image among the public. One trainer explained:

“To be honest, I believe hairstylists still have a stigma of being ‘just a hairdresser’, I do not feel the profession is looked on as a profession. I think with more education on the matter in time it will change. Yes, having a certificate stating that we are a sustainable stylist/salon will help towards changing people’s views” (#SR248, trainer).

Expressing similar sentiments, an interviewee added:

“I think it (the sustainable salon certification) would give people something to hang their hat on that takes a certain amount of research and knowledge that you can impart to your customers, which would lend people to think more professionally about hairdressers” (#I11).

Moreover, we found that the opportunity to obtain knowledge on sustainability that could be shared with others provided an additional boost to hairdressers’ sense of legitimacy and helped them to develop more trustful relationships with their clients. Training and certification equipped and certified hairdressers with additional expert knowledge, which empowered them in their interactions with clients and boosted their status as credible trusted advisors. One respondent commented: “*Customers have more confidence in the salon when the salon is trying to be more environmentally friendly*” (#SR518, salon owner), while an experienced hairdresser added, “*Often clients will have questions about products, chemicals and techniques and their environmental impact. We as professionals need to be able to advise our clients on facts in order to gain trust*” (#SR579, experienced).

Finally, as stylists are often central figures in their communities, our respondents recognized their potential to play a pivotal role in influencing others’ attitudes towards sustainability and shaping sustainable haircare practices among their clients and wider society. As one trainer explained: “*(The) majority of salons do promote eco-friendly ways and have great pride in passing this information onto clients*” (#SR005, trainer), while a new trainee shared similar hopes of influencing other’s practices: “*In the future, I hope I am able to influence others into caring more about the world we live in and how human actions effect the environment...most clients will relate*” (#SR546, trainee).

7. Discussion

7.1. Theoretical, Practical and Policy Contributions

In a qualitative analysis of 180 UK hairdressers, we found that individuals perceived a discrepancy between how their occupation was currently perceived (as low-status, unsustainable, and unserious) and how they would like it to be seen (as a highly-skilled, sustainable, and high-status “profession”). This disconnect between their perceived and desired image of hairdressing was found to create a powerful motive to engage in sustainability adoption in order to advance toward a more prestigious identity. By examining hairdressers’ sustainability motives and practices, we offer three key theoretical contributions to the extant literature.

First, past research has reported mixed findings on the impact of image discrepancies on outcomes, with some studies finding that discrepancies have a detrimental impact on performance, productivity, and proactivity [51,64,65] and others indicating that such discrepancies may be valuable in driving positive change [18,79]. There have thus been calls for “future

scholars to continue examining the effects of misaligned perceptions on critical employee behaviors” ([65], p. 44). Addressing this call, we found that hairdressers’ responses to identity and image discrepancies were largely positive, proactive, and behavioral in nature [51]. Specifically, we found that hairdressers actively attempted to reconcile perceived discrepancies and claim more aspirational identities by adopting sustainable practices. These actions enabled our respondents to challenge and counter occupational stigma by engaging in green practices that were more typical of high-status occupations and that were seen to contribute to society in positive ways. By uncovering these effects, this paper contributes to the small but growing literature on the positive role that image discrepancies may play in driving workplace change [19–21,79]. In particular, it shows that when employees perceive a discrepancy between how they are seen and how they would like to be seen as occupational members they may be motivated to take proactive steps to minimize this gap and move towards a more aspirational “professional” identity through the adoption of sustainable practices.

Second, while the extant sustainability literature has overwhelmingly focused on the role of extrinsic and (to a lesser degree) intrinsic motivations for sustainability adoption [3,12,80], we examined a much less studied factor, namely the role that image motives play in facilitating sustainable behavior. Unexpected results from an earlier study [75] suggested that the desire to live up to higher “professional standards” may be a key motivator for sustainable practices, especially for those hairdressers who did not already hold pro-environmental values. In this study, we unpacked this motivation and delved deeper into how and why the desire to be liked and respected by oneself and others drives sustainable action. We found that, in the focal context, image was a potent motivator of sustainability adoption. This implies that, alongside intrinsic and extrinsic factors, researchers should consider the role of image motives more seriously in future analyses of sustainability drivers.

Third, we shed light on the specific behaviors and strategies that hairdressers enact to implement and establish sustainable practices within (and beyond) their occupation. We found that our respondents aimed to change habits and perceptions within their occupation by educating colleagues, role-modeling sustainable behavior, and empowering themselves through learning about and gaining accreditation in sustainability/green topics. These practices were vital in helping hairdressers to claim a more positive (aspirational) occupational identity and gain respect within the occupation. At the same time, we found that our respondents actively sought to enhance their occupation’s image through sustainable behaviors aimed at changing their clients’ perceptions. Specifically, hairdressers attempted to educate their clients about the importance of acting more sustainably, build relationships with clients to enhance trust and understanding about sustainable practices, and demonstrate their expertise through green certificates and credentials.

Much of the research on sustainable practices has focused on individuals working in dedicated CSR/sustainability positions or emerging occupations that are at the forefront of sustainable action [5–7]. In a departure from this research, we examined a traditional occupation (hairdressing), in an industry that (even its own members acknowledge) is “quite (a) bad offender in terms of sustainability” (#111). This study is thus important because it offers novel insights into how members of traditional industries, who do not already hold pro-environmental values, may be encouraged to disrupt taken-for-granted practices to adopt more environmentally friendly actions. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of how and why typical employees of SMEs may initiate changes to their (sustainability) practices in the absence of external triggers that require them to do so [22].

Another theme emerging from our qualitative analysis was the role of hairdressers in educating and influencing their clients. Our findings suggest that by adopting sustainable practices, gaining expertise in sustainable solutions, and advising clients on sustainable haircare, hairdressers could signal their expert status as educators, influencers, and even “hair doctors”, thus improving their image among clients. However, beyond this surface-level impact, hairdressers also sought to shape sustainability practices in their communities by encouraging clients to adopt sustainable products and practices in their own haircare routines. Crucially, as hairdressers are often at the center of their communities, their example extends beyond the boundaries of their occupation—shaping the behavior and attitudes of their clients in their own homes and communities. Hairdressers’ impact on sustainability goals may thus not be limited to their salons. Instead, their practices may have ripple effects that benefit the wider climate change response.

Integrating sustainable practices within occupational standards and vocational training is

hence likely to be worthwhile. However, acknowledging the stubborn nature of existing habits and time restraints, the requirement for a holistic range of green initiatives in hairdressing should be considered and may require industry regulation to ensure continued and strengthening standards.

7.2. Limitations and Further Research

One limitation of the research is that the data we presented was, for the most part, gathered immediately after hairdressers had completed the sustainable salon training program. This means that, although we can verify a certain level of effort in that we know that those who completed the survey have committed to the sustainability training, we can make no claims relating to the extent to which more sustainable practices were adopted and maintained over time.

The questions that gave rise to the qualitative data prompted hairdressers to reflect on issues of identity, the status of their occupation, and sustainable practice. These were leading questions which gave rise to quotes that may not have spontaneously emerged if we had asked more open-ended questions. In other words, issues of identity, image, and status may have been especially salient for hairdressers within the context of the focal study. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that we did not prompt the 847 hairdressers who took part in the original survey regarding their motivations to adopt sustainable practices [75]. The finding that “desire to hold professional standards” ranked at the top was unexpected but also un-primed, so we felt it was acceptable to steer the respondents in this follow-up study to reflect on this aspect to help us understand the reasons behind the survey results.

The sample was predominantly from the UK, and it is possible that results may differ in other countries. For example, some interviewees commented that hairdressers were seen as having higher status in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. It would be of interest to investigate whether hairdressers in such countries would be less motivated to engage in sustainable practices if identity and image discrepancies are less salient there. In addition, future research could explore whether the results are generalizable to other sectors including occupations that have higher occupational status. We would expect our findings to be relevant to a broad range of occupations where image discrepancies exist and where the adoption of sustainable practices may serve to enhance members’ ethical and professional status. While our findings may be particularly relevant to members of low-status occupations (refuse collectors, prison guards, etc.), they may also be applicable to higher-status roles—where incumbents believe others have a negative image of their role or see the occupation/profession as tainted in some way, i.e., so-called high-status “dirty work” occupations such as police officers, personal injury lawyers, etc., (see [57,59]). Further research is, nevertheless, needed in order to verify this assumption.

In conclusion, we found that image discrepancies were a potent motivator for sustainable practice in hairdressing SMEs. We believe that this study has important theoretical and practical implications concerning how we can encourage and promote positive, ethical, and sustainable behaviors among members of traditional occupations, and in doing so, bolster businesses’ contributions to the climate change response.

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Data Availability

Data supporting this study cannot be made available due to confidentiality agreements made in respect to this research.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization: D.A.B., & K.E.H.; Formal analysis: K.E.H., & J.D.P.; Funding acquisition: D.A.B.; Investigation: D.A.B., & J.D.P.; Methodology: D.A.B., & J.D.P.; Project

administration: D.A.B.; Resources: D.A.B.; Visualization: K.E.H.; Writing – original draft: D.A.B., & K.E.H.; Writing – review & editing: D.A.B., K.E.H., & J.D.P.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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