

[rh] What Do You Think Of My Ink?

**What Do You Think of My Ink?
Assessing the Effects of Body Art on Employment Chances**

Human Resource Management

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Abstract

Using mixed design analysis of variance, this paper examines the effect of body art on job applicant hireability ratings. It employs the literatures on the social psychologies of stigma and prejudice, as well as aesthetic labor, to frame the argument. The results indicate that photos of tattooed and pierced job applicants result in lower hireability ratings compared to the control faces. The negative effect of body art on employment chances is, however, reduced for job applicants seeking non-customer-facing roles. In customer-facing roles, the tattoo is associated with lower hireability ratings than the piercing. The results suggest that visible body art can potentially be a real impediment to employment.

Keywords: selection, recruitment, impression management, diversity, decision making

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It is well established that corporeal and aesthetic attributes influence one's chances of success in a job interview. The probability of being offered a position is generally reduced if an applicant presents as: obese (Rudolph, Wells, Weller, & Baltes, 2008), physically unattractive (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003), facially disfigured (Stevenage & McKay, 1999), unfashionably or inappropriately dressed (Christman & Branson, 1990), visibly disabled (Jenkins & Rigg, 2004), or even, simply, female or non-white, as widely reported in the workplace discrimination literature. One attribute that has not received much attention in this literature is body art, including tattoos and piercings. Using facial perception methods, this paper examines the effects of

body art on employment chances. Unlike previous qualitative research analyzing the impact of body art on employee selection (Timming, 2014a), the present study pinpoints the magnitude of the effects via statistical analyses and offers the respondents (N=120) visual cues that are embedded into the survey instrument.

This research is important because of the increasing prevalence of tattoos and body piercings, particularly in Western societies. For example, dermatological investigations by Laumann and Derick (2006) reveal that around one-quarter of the US adult population has a tattoo and 14 percent a body piercing. Similarly, the Pew Research Center (2010) reports that 38 percent of 18-29 year old Americans has a tattoo, of which 30 percent are described as visible. Laumann and Derick (2006) estimate that, in total, 30 percent of the US adult population has a tattoo, a body piercing, or some combination of the two. This block presents a major demographic challenge to recruitment and selection, and therefore cannot be ignored by HR managers.

The present study can be situated in a small, albeit emerging, literature on body art in the workplace. Much of this literature examines body art from the point of view of relationship marketing, primarily emphasizing consumer perceptions. For example, Dean (2010, 2011) offers two studies, both of which examine customers' expectations regarding body art in the workplace. The former study found that tattoos are inappropriate for white-collar employees; the latter that consumers have less confidence in tattooed employees and are less satisfied with the service experience. Pentina and Spears (2011) deconstruct sociologically the reasons for body art consumption, but conclude with recommendations on how best to "place" tattoos in commercials and advertisements. Arndt and Glassman (2012) report that most consumers are more

accepting of feminine tattoos than traditionally masculine ones. Taken together, these studies examine body art from the perspective of relationship marketing, whereas the present study is concerned more specifically with the HR function of employee selection.

Only a handful of studies has investigated the recruitment and selection of visibly tattooed job applicants. Elzweig and Peeples (2011) examine body art from the viewpoint of employment law; they explain how tattoos, in themselves, are not legally protected characteristics. Timming (2011) looks at recruitment and selection practices in tattoo studios, but his study has little or no relevance to the wider service sector. Swanger (2006) conducted a small (N=30) statistical study of employer attitudes towards visible body art, finding that 87 percent of respondents perceived tattoos negatively. Similarly, Bekhor, Bekhor, & Gandrabur's (1995) quantitative study found that less than 30 percent of employers in hospitality, beauty, retail, and office settings would hire an applicant with visible tattoos. But their research was based on telephone interviews, so respondents had to "imagine" hypothetical tattoos; in contrast, the present study uses color photographs as a stimulus. Timming (2014a) also examined the impact of body art on employment chances, but he employed qualitative interviews to answer this research question, and only looked at the impact of tattoos. The present study goes beyond his research not only in that it quantifies the effects of tattoos, but also incorporates the relative impact of body piercings on employee selection decision-making.

Even fewer studies have investigated the relationship between body piercings and hireability, although it is well documented that facial piercings carry significant stigma (Swami et al., 2012), generally speaking. Seiter and Sandry (2003), like the present study, employed a visual methodology in order to evaluate perceptions of job candidates with

facial piercings. They conclude that an applicant's credibility and hireability ratings are significantly lower with a nose ring in place. McElroy, Summer, & Moore, (2014) similarly found that facial piercings had a negative effect on employability, largely as a result of the fact that they communicate a set of disagreeable personality characteristics. These two studies, however, were confined to body piercings only, whereas the present study design also allows for a comparative evaluation to be made between piercings and tattoos concomitantly.

The relative liability of a body piercing vis-à-vis a tattoo has not been explored previously, so there is no theoretical basis for a specific hypothesis on this matter. One might, however, expect the former to elicit less prejudice than the latter in employee selection. The logic underlying this loose expectation is twofold. First, although there is a socially acceptable and "normalized" form of piercing (the proverbial earring), the same is not true of tattoos in that no single image has ever gained widespread acceptance. Second, body piercings, unlike the more permanent tattoo, are removable, so the stigma is generally transient.

In short, this study makes an original contribution to the extant literature on body art in the workplace. Going beyond relationship marketing (Dean, 2010, 2011; Pentina & Spears, 2011; Arndt & Glassman, 2012), we examine the impact of body art on selection decision-making. Unlike other studies in which respondents are asked to imagine hypothetically how they would react to a job applicant with visible body art (Bekhor et al., 1995; Swanger, 2006; Timming, 2014a), the present study design presents subjects with a visual prompt in order to standardize the stimulus. Without this visual prompt, there is no way of knowing what types of images the respondents are visualizing when

asked to reflect on how they might react to a job applicant with body art on display. Another strength of the present research is that it incorporates both tattoos and piercings on standardized faces, allowing us not only to parcel out the pure effects of these two forms of body art, but also to evaluate the comparative impact of one vis-à-vis the other.

In the next section, we articulate how the extant literature can enrich our understanding of the impact of visible body art on one's employment chances. The frameworks that we employ are the social psychologies of stigma and prejudice, and aesthetic labor. We then describe the methods by which the data were collected and analyzed. After that, the results of the research are reported. The paper concludes with a discussion of its implications for theory and practice, limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical Development

The Social Psychologies of Stigma and Prejudice

The social psychology of stigma was developed in large part by Goffman (1963) and later expanded upon by Heatherton, Klek, Hebl, & Hull (2000), among others. In the context of the present study, stigma can be situated in the broader literature on impression management. Within this framework, DuBrin (2011) draws a useful distinction between what he calls substantive (i.e., things that we say) and surface-level (i.e., how we appear) approaches to self-presentation, with stigma often, though not always (Letkemann, 2002; Hinshaw, 2007), falling into the latter category. Body art is obviously a surface-level characteristic, so this section will focus exclusively on the literature surrounding visible stigma and its relationship to the social psychology of prejudice (Brown, 2010).

The relevance and usefulness of Goffman (1963) as a theoretical lens through which to view prejudicial attitudes towards body art are readily apparent. His framework effectively divides society into two distinct groups. The “stigmatized” are defined as those who are discredited (or discreditable), tainted, handicapped, flawed, or otherwise deficient in some way, thus failing to achieve “acceptance” (p. 8) by society at large. “Normals” (p. 5) are defined as everyone else. The focus of his analysis is the study of the point of “mixed contact” (p. 12) between the two actors. In the context of this paper, the respondent plays the role of the “normal” interviewer, the visibly tattooed or pierced job applicant plays the role of the “stigmatized,” and the job interview context serves as the point of mixed contact (see Hebl, Tickle, & Heatherton, 2000).

Stigma has been shown to have a dramatically negative effect on one’s material life chances (Link & Phelan, 2001), and, more specifically, on one’s employment chances. For example, King and Ahmad (2010) illustrate how wearing traditional Muslim attire to a job interview can result in a negative evaluation by a recruiter. Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, & Spring (1994) and Finkelstein, Frautschy Demuth, & Sweeney (2007) report that overweight job applicants suffer from recruiter bias in job interviews. Madera and Hebl (2012) reveal that facially stigmatized job applicants receive lower hireability ratings than non-disfigured applicants. In similar vein, Stone and Wright (2013) provide evidence of discrimination against job candidates with facial disfigurements, but especially for customer-facing roles. Taken together, all of these studies reveal a common trend: that physical, aesthetic, or corporeal attributes can be real obstacles to a successful job interview, most often as a result of prejudicial attitudes on the part of the recruiter.

Prejudice can be defined as “a negative evaluation of a group or of an individual on the basis of group membership” (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002: 359). Typically, although not always, the subjects of prejudice display a stigma that is used to identify them as members of a marginalized out-group. Phelan, Link, & Dovidio (2008) have even gone so far as to argue that stigma and prejudice share so much in common that they are essentially one “animal.” Both involve a normative imputation of negative behaviors onto a set of individuals sharing some objectionable characteristic. Moreover, both are largely predicated on an unequal power relationship based on exploitation. In short, stigma and prejudice almost always walk hand-in-hand.

It is easy to see how these two literatures relate to the impact of tattoos and piercings on employment chances. Tattoos are a signifier of stigma and a subject of prejudice (Miller, McGlashan Nicols, & Eure, 2009) because they are associated empirically with a great many anti-social behaviors and unhealthy traits, including, among others: carrying a weapon (Thurnherr, Michaud, Berchtold, Akre, & Suris, 2009); increased sexual behavior (Skegg, Nada-Raja, Paul, & Skegg, 2007); suffering from reduced mental health (Stirn, Hinz, & Brähler, 2006)—including anti-social, sadistic, negativistic, and borderline personality disorders (Manuel and Retzlaff, 2002); an increased risk of recidivism and disciplinary infractions among prisoners (Rozycki Lozano, Morgan, Murray, & Varghese, 2011); anger management problems (Carroll and Anderson, 2002); substance abuse (Brooks, Woods, Knight, & Shrier, 2003); hepatitis C (Stein and Nyamathi, 2004); and what Deschesnes, Finès & Demers (2006: 389) refer to broadly as “externalized risk behaviours.” These established empirical associations, in turn, have given rise to a plethora of overwhelmingly negative perceptions toward body

modification in general (Jeffreys, 2000; Durkin and Houghton, 2000; Hawkes, Senn & Thorn, 2004; Resenhoef, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008; Wholrab et al., 2009b).

Like tattoos, body piercings are also indicative of stigma (Swami et al., 2012). Studies have shown that visible piercings (excluding earrings) are generally perceived negatively both within and beyond the workplace. For example, Newman, Wright, Wrenn, & Bernard (2005) found that physicians with facial piercings were perceived to be less competent and trustworthy by patients and colleagues. McElroy et al.'s (2014) study points to a body of research demonstrating that piercings are statistically significantly associated with perceptions of negative personality traits such as disagreeableness (Wohlrab, Stahl, Rammsayer, & Kappeler, 2007) and lack of conscientiousness (Tate and Shelton, 2008). In this light, McElroy et al.'s paper (2014) is similar to the present study, but the former is comparatively more focused on the perceived psychology of facial piercings. Roberts, Auinger, & Ryan (2004) further show how body piercings are linked to many of the same "high risk behaviors" that are also associated with tattoos. On the question of the relative effect of visible piercings and tattoos on hireability, one might expect the former to be less stigmatic than the latter in light of the normalization of earrings and transient nature of most facial piercings, as discussed above.

In short, the social psychologies of stigma and prejudice cast a useful light on the present study, but two qualifications are in order before proceeding. First, it is difficult to assess the extent to which "body art," in general, is stigmatic and a source of prejudice because different tattoos represent different genres, some of which are less palatable than others (Timming, 2014a). For example, a swastika or a skull can be expected to convey

more stigma than a rose or a butterfly. Thus, we have designed our experiment in light of this limitation. Specifically, we selected a visual stimulus that would provoke relatively little stigma in order to evaluate the impact of body art, generally speaking, on employment chances. By branding the stimulus group with a small, innocuous star (as opposed to, say, a marijuana leaf), we are better able to ascertain whether it is the tattoo in general, rather than the controversial image, that is the obstacle to employment. The same can be said of our piercing stimulus. Instead of using, for example, a large septum ring on our test faces, we placed a smaller, subtler stud on the lower lip. By using less stigmatized manifestations of body art as stimuli, our research can more confidently establish that there is something about visible body modification, beyond its extreme forms, that has a deleterious impact on employee selection. In this way, the literatures on stigma and prejudice have informed our research design.

The second qualification worth mentioning is that body art is not intrinsically stigmatic. Accordingly, visible tattoos and body piercings on job applicants should not be assumed to be undesirable characteristics for all employers, even though the prevailing views of body art tend to be negative. For example, it is easy to conceive of the possibility that, for some organizations, especially those targeting a younger, more non-conformist demographic of customer, a visibly tattooed or pierced employee may contribute positively to the firm's branding strategy (Pettinger, 2004). In this light, in some workplaces, body art can be considered an asset (Timming, 2014b), rather than a liability as it is conceptualized in this study. We return to this point in the discussion section where we articulate areas of future research.

Aesthetic Labor

The seminal contribution of Whyte (1948) to our understanding of the nature of interactive service workplaces highlights the importance of front stage and back-of-house work. His research on the Chicago restaurant industry recognizes that there is a clear distinction between what is often referred to as “front-of-house” work—for example, working as a waitress or a hostess—and “back-of-house” work—for example, working as a kitchen porter or a chef “behind-the-scenes,” as it were. A further important theme of his research is the recognition of what type of employee is likely to be considered appropriate for employment in either front- or back-of-house.

Indeed, from Whyte (1948) onwards, much of the research that has sought to consider jobs in interactive service industries, like hospitality and retail, has recognized that certain people are deemed to be appropriate for front-of-house jobs and others more suited for back-of-house jobs. For example, reporting research on a large international hotel in London, McDowell, Batnitsky, & Dyer (2007) recognize how both front- and back-of-house jobs are often “typed” by characteristics such as nationality, gender, race, and class. Particularly implicit in much of this research is a sense that aesthetically appropriate employees are especially important for undertaking front-line interactive service work. For example, Chuang and Liao (2010) note how front-of-house employees—who are directly responsible for service delivery through their interaction with customers—play a pivotal role in enhancing the performance of the workplace in industries such as retail and hospitality.

Often the research focus of this interaction with customers has been on employees’ behavior in relation to how they shape the service interaction with the customer; and, in turn, how this affects customers’ perceptions of service quality. Much

of the work in this area has drawn on Hochschild's (1983) seminal concept of emotional labor. Emotional labor highlights how front line employees are expected to draw on their interpersonal and social skills in order to demonstrate the "right" attitude in their interactions with customers; for example, being responsive and courteous. However, it is not just the attitude of front-line service workers that is important. More recent research has focused on employees' appearance as well, or on their "aesthetic labour" (Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, & Cullen, 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).

The term aesthetic labor is analytically complex and a full working definition can be found in Nickson et al. (2001). Here, it is enough to note that companies employ people with certain capacities and physical attributes that favorably appeal to customers' visual or aural senses. Once employed, these capacities and attributes are further developed through training and / or monitoring. In effect, employees become "walking billboards" (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003: 318) for the company and, resultantly, service sector companies pro-actively seek to recruit and select employees who best "fit" with their brand image (Pettinger, 2004).

The initial research of Nickson et al. (2001) focused on what they termed the "style labour market," for example, up-market retailers or boutique hotels, but even in their pilot study, it was apparent that the success of companies drawing on this style labor market was creating "demonstration effects" for other, more prosaic, high street retailers and hospitality outlets. These companies, too, were beginning to use employees' physical capacities and attributes to appeal to customers' sensibilities; in short, such companies use their employees' corporeality to create a "look" that can help to establish a brand image. Importantly, as MacDonald and Merrill (2009: 123) note in considering customer-

facing interactive service jobs, “race, gender, class and age coalesce in different job settings to create a norm of the worker who will ‘look the part’ given a particular service.” As we have argued above, a further key aspect of “looking the part” in service work is likely to include perceptions around visible tattoos and piercings on employees.

Within this context, a key theme of the emergent research on aesthetic labor is the importance of the visual impact of body art in the recruitment and selection process in particular. In this sense, organizations have the opportunity to filter in and out potential employees based largely on visual attributes. In considering recruitment in retail and hospitality, there is much evidence that potential employees must “match” with a particular brand image (Williams and Connell, 2010). Job interviews in the service sector are often geared towards assessing recruits’ social skills and aesthetic attributes (Nickson Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). For example, Gatta (2011) recounts how, whilst a student, she was recruited to work as a “Besty’s Girl” in the eponymous dress boutique because she “fitted” with the company’s ideal image: a young, white, middle class girl who was friendly, energetic, and would “look good” in the clothes sold in the shop. She argues that employers in interactive services make instantaneous “blink” decisions based on their first impressions of prospective workers.

It is easy to see how the concept of aesthetic labor relates to the recruitment and selection of visibly tattooed or pierced job applicants. According to Nickson et al.’s (2005) survey, when retail and hospitality employers were asked to assess the centrality of appearance to the success of the business, 53 percent felt it was critical, 40 percent felt it was important, and six percent somewhat important. Only one respondent felt that appearance of customer-facing staff had no importance to business success.

Unsurprisingly then, 90 percent of surveyed companies had appearance standards, with nearly one-third reporting that visible tattoos were not allowed on customer-facing staff. This finding is similar to results of a study of Australian retailers (Hall and Van der Broek, 2012). Another recent high profile example includes UK retailer HMV's attempts to get staff to cover up their visible ink (BBC, 2012). In short, on the whole, body art does not often "fit" the aesthetic image that many service sector organizations seek to project[1].

The importance of "fit" is therefore clear and, within service organizations, an interesting issue arises concerning the nature of fit and its relationship to recruitment and selection. As Kristof-Brown (2000) argues, traditionally the emphasis in selecting employees has centered around person-job (PJ) fit, wherein the organization seeks applicants with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities to fill vacant positions. Over time, though, there has also been an increasing interest in the broader idea of person-organization (PO) fit, which is more concerned with the fit between the individual and the organization. What is important to note is that, particularly with PO fit, the extant research points to the importance of congruence in deep-level, unobservable attributes like values and goals during recruitment and selection (Kristof-Brown, 2000; see also Yu, 2014). However, what the work on aesthetic labor, and the research reported in this paper, suggests is that surface-level attributes are important, too, and recruiters are potentially making decisions based largely, or even solely, on these surface-level characteristics, particularly for front-line, customer-facing employees.

Clearly, much of the preceding discussion raises a number of ethical, legal, and wider employee engagement issues in terms of the extent to which companies can

legitimately involve themselves in policing an individual's appearance in front-of-house roles. For example, there is a strong ethical dimension with regard to the extent to which employers can legitimately brand their employees to "fit" the corporate image (Edwards, 2005). Harquail (2005: 173) suggests that "employees who feel pressurised by the organization to present themselves in a way that is at odds with their self-definition may react negatively." At the heart of this issue is the manner in which employees have to subvert their own identity and style for the organizational good, even if this means refraining from, or covering up, body art. Rafaeli (1993), writing in the context of organizational dress, writes about how imposing appearance standards can lead to a process of "de-individualisation." Similarly, the imposition of appearance standards around visible tattoos and piercings has the potential to create a sense of invasiveness on the part of employees who feel that such standards impact upon who they are as individuals. Arguably, this could create a sense of "aesthetic dissonance" similar to the "emotive dissonance" often reported by those employees who constantly have to demonstrate the "right" kind of emotional labor in interactions with demanding customers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Thus, tight prescriptions on how employees should look and behave on the front-line can lead to them becoming alienated from their true selves and their feelings.

The discussion above points to the tension and stress that employees are likely to experience when organizational prescriptions on their appearance force them to negate what they may see as their "true selves," in this case being forced to cover up tattoos or remove piercings. Constraints on an employee's ability to self-express who they are can mean that there is not, according to Heider (1958), a "balanced state" between the

organization and its employees. In his classic work on the psychology of inter-personal relations, Heider argues that, in inter-personal relations, a “balanced state” creates harmony and that, generally speaking, states of balance are preferred over and above disharmony, which is likely to generate feelings of stress.

Similarly, more recent work on the importance of self-verification theory in a workplace context highlights the importance of how individuals seek to present themselves in a manner that truly reflects their personal attributes and seeks to ensure that others see them as they see themselves (Cable and Kay, 2012). As Grant, Berg, & Cable (2014) note, though, employees’ ability to self-express is increasingly challenged “against a growing backdrop of standardized, depersonalized work” (p. 1202), in which the employee “is at risk of losing the ‘me’ within the ‘we’” (p. 1217) of the organization. Indeed, the same authors’ case study of the use of self-reflective job titles as a means to lessen emotional exhaustion in a charitable organization provides a template as to how organizations can potentially manage the “tension between their objectives of social control and employees’ desire for self-expression” (p. 1217). We return to this point later in the discussion of the practical implications surrounding how organizations prescribe expectations around tattoos and visible piercings.

All this said, it is important to recognize that despite such concerns, employers do have a legal right to regulate their employees’ appearance, as long as it is in the company’s business interests and non-discriminatory with regard to legally protected characteristics such as gender and ethnicity (Hay and Middlemiss, 2003). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, it should also be noted that, in the research reported by Nickson et al. (2001) and Warhurst and Nickson (2007), employees largely accepted the idea of

employers imposing appearance standards for customer-facing roles as part of maintaining an appropriate organizational image, including on the specific issue of tattoos and piercings. This acceptance by employees of appearance standards in front-of-house jobs was despite several of the interviewees in both studies reporting instances where the imposition of such standards had led to several of their colleagues leaving the organization for failure to adhere to the appropriate brand image. For example, one of the interviewees in Warhurst and Nickson (2007) described how a colleague, who was heavily pierced, was, without explanation, moved from a customer-facing role in a restaurant to a behind-the-scenes kitchen porter role so that customers would not see him. This example would seem to highlight the potential for employees whose self-expression is restricted to feel dissatisfied and less committed to an organization and ultimately leave if their ability to strive for self-verification is jeopardized (Cable and Kay, 2012).

Indeed, instead of resistance towards potential “aesthetic dissonance,” there was evidence that some of the employees interviewed by Nickson et al. (2001) and Warhurst and Nickson (2007) got enjoyment through aesthetic laboring by being the embodied representative of the organization, in much the same way as employees may enjoy the feeling of offering good customer service through emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Ultimately, the discussion above would also seem to point to a degree of self-selection on the part of applicants seeking a job in a service organization. This self-selection would take into account organizational prescriptions of the required appearance for customer-facing staff, especially with regard to tattoos and piercings, a point we return to in our conclusion. For now, it is important to note that, consistent with Timming (2014a), the aesthetic labor framework suggests that spatial distance to

customers, as evidenced in the distinction between “front stage” and “back of house” roles (Whyte, 1948), is a presumably important factor in terms of the employability of visibly tattooed and pierced job applicants.

Hypotheses

In light of the literatures reviewed in the previous sections, three overarching hypotheses are presented. First, the literature on the social psychologies of stigma and prejudice implies that visible body art can reduce one’s life chances (Link and Phelan, 2001). Specifically, it would appear that visibly tattooed and pierced job applicants, in consequence of the stigma that they present to the world, are likely to be subjected to prejudice in a job interview. Thus:

H1: Having a visible tattoo or piercing results in lower hireability ratings than not having a visible tattoo or piercing.

Second, the literature on aesthetic labor, which actively links employee selection to organizational branding, suggests that proximity to customers is an important factor that influences acceptance (or not) of tattoos and piercings. Specifically, the nearer an employee is to customers, the more unfavorably their visible body art will be judged. Thus:

H2: Visibly tattooed or pierced job candidates applying for customer-facing roles have lower hireability ratings than visibly tattooed or pierced job candidates applying for back-of-house roles.

Finally, it was also suggested, tentatively, that body piercings might be somewhat less stigmatizing than tattoos because of the prevalence and normalization of earrings, the transient nature of most piercings, and their wider social acceptability. Thus:

H3: Hireability ratings for visibly pierced job applicants are higher than corresponding ratings for visibly tattooed applicants.

Methods

Stimuli

The experimental “control” faces were photographed with neutral expressions at a 0° angle. Each image was obtained from a commercially available database (www.3d.sk). All subjects had their hair pulled back and were photographed under constant lighting and camera set-up. The images were standardized for inter-pupillary distance, as is common in facial perception research. In total, four male and four female test faces were selected for inclusion in the experiment. These eight faces serve as the “control” group.

The “stimulus” groups were created by digitally adding, via Photoshop, the tattoos and piercings to the control faces. One tattoo image, a star, was selected for the tattoo condition. The tattoo image was placed to appear on the lower left side of the neck. It was strategically placed so as to be noticeable, but not overtly obvious. The piercing condition was created using a silver “stud” style, placed to appear on the lower left-hand side of the lip. Each of the four male and four female faces was thus manipulated to appear to have the tattoo and piercing, separately, creating 24 images overall (eight control, eight tattooed, and eight pierced faces). Figure 1 illustrates an original “control” face alongside corresponding images with the tattoo and piercing stimuli. A preliminary manipulation check of ten participants was conducted. The results of the check confirmed that the stimuli were readily noticeable.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In order to conceal from the respondents the fact that this experiment was “about” tattoos and piercings, we added two further transformations to the line-up of faces. Using Psychomorph (Tiddeman, Burt, & Perrett, 2001), a customized face processing software,

we created an adiposity transformation of our control faces in order to create eight “overweight” versions. We effected this adiposity transform by using prototype “high BMI” faces as models to add the appearance of weight. We also carried out a racial transformation in order to create another eight “black” versions of the control faces. This transform was effected by adjusting skin color and modifying hair appearance. Both transforms appear life-like and realistic. By including these two diversionary transformations of the control faces, we were thus able to prevent the respondents from figuring out the study’s intent.

Data Collection

In total, 121 women and 61 men completed the experiment over the course of several months across 2013. The sampling frame from which participants were drawn included visitors to the University of St Andrews Perception Lab. In order to guarantee the anonymity of respondents, the only identifying information that we collected from the sample included IP addresses. From the 182 valid respondents, we used a random number table to select 60 males (from 61 total male respondents) and 60 females (from 121 total female respondents) for inclusion in the final sample (N=120). The reason that we stratified the sample equally along the lines of participant sex was to promote homoscedasticity (that is, equal variances) across this between-subjects variable, thus complying with one of the fundamental assumptions of mixed design ANOVA. After stratification along the lines of participant sex, we can report that the final sample was: 50 percent female, 89.17 percent white, and characterized by an average age of 25.67 years with a standard deviation of 10.47.

Participants completed the study in an online laboratory. All research subjects provided informed consent prior to completing the instrument. The participants were instructed to assume that they are recruiters who need to hire someone from a pool of job applicants. Participants were then asked to view each facial image and rate how likely they would be to hire the person depicted on a 7-point scale (1 = “*extremely unlikely*” and 7 = “*extremely likely*”). All control and stimulus faces were presented to participants twice in two separate conditions. The first block asked them to rate how likely they would be to hire the applicant for a *customer-facing job* (“for example, a cashier, a waiter or waitress, a teacher, etc”). The second block then asked participants to rate how likely they would be to hire the same faces for a *non-customer-facing job* (“i.e., a behind-the-scenes job like a chef, a factory worker, or a night time janitor”). We presented the respondents with these two generalized job contexts (as opposed to a pair of specific industries) for two reasons. First, selecting two industries at random would have been arbitrary and not guided by the literature. Secondly, our hypotheses were not oriented towards a set of specific industries or jobs anyway, but rather toward the general distinction between roles that are customer-facing and roles that are not customer-facing.

Within each of the two experimental blocks, the order of presentation of the facial images was randomized, primarily in order to prevent the respondents from identifying a pattern in the instrument. In other words, in each of the two job contexts, the stimulus, control, and diversionary images appeared in a different sequence for each respondent. It is also worth noting that the presentation of the two experimental blocks was not randomized. The customer-facing block was presented first, followed by the non-customer-facing block. However, because there are only two blocks and because the

instructions so heavily emphasized the job context in each block, order effects are unlikely to have impacted the results.

Finally, because we are interested in unpacking the pure effects of the visual stimuli on employability ratings, in both of the conditions participants were instructed to assume that all job applicants presented to them were equally qualified. Had we allowed qualifications to vary, we would not have been able to attribute clearly the hypothesized drop in hireability ratings to the tattoos or piercings.

Study Design Limitations

This study is not exempt from the same limitations that virtually all studies in laboratory-based psychology face. The biggest challenge is approximating “real-life” conditions in the experiment. Obviously, skills and qualifications are never constant in employee selection. Furthermore, our respondents are not hiring managers, but rather individuals playing the role of hiring managers. Whilst surveying practitioners would have been an alternative possibility with some advantages over the present experimental design, in the event, we would have had no scope for manipulating “real-life” job interviews in the sense of holding factors constant or standardizing the stimuli, so ultimately the experimental design made more sense given our hypotheses. We also note that Timming (2014a) has already conducted qualitative interviews with practicing recruiters in relation to their views of body art.

The arguments surrounding the value of experimental research vis-à-vis field research are well trodden. For example, Dipboye (1990: 25) argues that, “in the debate over alternative research strategies and settings, the problems of the laboratory are exaggerated, whereas many of the problems of field research are de-emphasized or

completed ignored.” He concludes that lab and field studies are complementary, with each addressing the other’s limitations. More recently, Falk and Heckman (2009) leveled a devastating critique against those who argue that laboratory experiments lack generalizability. They argue that the real value of experiments lies in their ability to establish internal, as opposed to external, validity. On top of these arguments, Bernstein, Hakel, & Harlan (1975) carried out validation checks, concluding that, when it comes to employee selection decisions, the ratings of non-hiring managers are “comparable” to the ratings of hiring managers anyway. These days, of course, hiring managers are generally well trained to recognize their biases, and this needs to be recognized as a limitation of the study design. But experimental research, like the present study, can still add value to extant field studies that have already investigated the effects of body art on employment chances (Timming, 2014a).

Another limitation worth noting pertains to the nature of the sample. The fact that it was non-randomly drawn in an online context is not, in itself, a serious problem since it has already been established that the results of web-based studies such as this one are, in general, comparable to those derived from more traditional sampling methods (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). This limitation should be explicitly recognized, but is also tempered by the fact that we are less concerned with the generalizability of our findings than with evaluating internal validity.

Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether hireability ratings were affected by job type (*customer-facing, non-customer-facing*), sex of face (*male, female*), image type (*original face, tattoo, piercing*), as well as participant sex (*man, woman*).

Thus, a 2x2x3x2 mixed design analysis of variance was conducted to test for effects, with participant sex entered into the model as a between-subjects variable.

Results

[Insert Table I about here]

Table I reports the results of the research. The mixed design ANOVA revealed a main effect of job type, with participants giving higher hireability scores for non-customer-facing jobs ($M=4.81$, $SD=1.27$) than customer-facing jobs ($M=3.88$, $SD=0.93$; $F(1, 118)=87.06$, $p<.01$, $\eta_p^2=.43$). There was a main effect of sex of face, with male faces ($M=4.53$, $SD=1.01$) receiving higher hireability ratings than female faces ($M=4.16$, $SD=1.06$; $F(1, 118)=33.80$, $p<.01$, $\eta_p^2=.22$). There was also a main effect of image type ($F(2, 236)=62.42$, $p<.01$, $\eta_p^2=.35$), with original faces ($M=4.84$, $SD=.97$) receiving higher ratings than the images with piercings ($M=4.17$, $SD=1.13$), which in turn were rated higher than the images with tattoos ($M=4.03$, $SD=1.15$). Figure 2 displays the key results graphically. Interestingly, there was no between-subjects main effect of participant sex ($F(1, 118)=1.48$, $p=.23$, $\eta_p^2=.01$).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

There was a further interaction between job type and image type ($F(2, 236)=13.71$, $p<.01$, $\eta_p^2=.10$). Separate repeated-measures ANOVAs were therefore conducted to test for differences in hireability ratings between image types within each job type. There was a main effect of image type for non-customer-facing jobs ($F(2, 238)=22.41$, $p<.01$, $\eta_p^2=.16$), with pairwise comparisons revealing that control faces ($M=5.16$, $SD=1.21$) received higher ratings than images with piercings ($M=4.67$, $SD=1.43$) and images with tattoos ($M=4.59$, $SD=1.52$) (both $p<.01$). However, pairwise

comparisons revealed no difference between images with piercings and images with tattoos ($p=.19$) in non-customer facing jobs. A similar ANOVA was conducted for customer-facing jobs. There was a main effect of image type on hireability ratings ($F(2, 238)=78.16, p<.01, \eta_p^2=.40$), with pairwise comparisons revealing that control faces ($M=4.51, SD=.95$) received higher ratings than images with piercings ($M=3.67, SD=1.12$) and images with tattoos ($M=3.46, SD=1.19$) (both $p<.01$). Furthermore, images with piercings received higher ratings than images with tattoos in the customer-facing job condition ($p<.01$). See Table II for a summary of the statistics for these pairwise comparisons.

[Insert Table II about here]

There was also an interaction between sex of face and image type ($F(2, 236)=10.50, p<.01, \eta_p^2=.08$). Thus, we conducted repeated-measures ANOVAs to test for differences between images types within each sex of face. For male faces, there was a main effect of image type ($F(2, 238)=63.23, p<.01, \eta_p^2=.35$), with pairwise comparisons revealing higher ratings for the control faces ($M=5.10, SD=1.02$) than the images with piercings ($M=4.32, SD=1.21$) and images with tattoos ($M=4.16, SD=1.23$) (both $p<.01$). Images with piercings also received higher ratings than images with tattoos ($p=.01$) for male faces. A similar ANOVA was conducted for female faces. There was a main effect of image type on hireability ratings for female faces ($F(2, 238)=44.68, p<.01, \eta_p^2=.27$), with pairwise comparisons revealing higher ratings for control faces ($M=4.57, SD=1.12$) than images with piercings ($M=4.02, SD=1.20$) and images with tattoos ($M=3.89, SD=1.17$) (both $p<.01$). Images with piercings also received higher ratings than images with tattoos ($p=.01$) for female faces. Further pairwise comparisons revealed that the

difference in ratings between original faces and images with piercings and tattoos were greater for male faces than female faces (both $t \geq 3.69$, both $p < .01$). Differences between images with piercings and images with tattoos were the same between male and female faces ($t = .42$, $p = .68$). Table III reports the summary statistics for these pairwise comparisons.

[Insert Table III about here]

Discussion

In line with previous research (Bekhor et al., 1995; Seiter and Sandry, 2003; Swanger, 2006; Timming, 2014a), it would seem that body art prejudice can have a potentially negative impact on one's employment chances, as evidenced in Figure 2. The tattooed faces and the pierced faces were rated lower than the control faces across both customer-facing and non-customer-facing roles, thus confirming H1. But the hireability ratings depicted in Figure 2 are considerably lower for tattooed and pierced subjects applying for customer-facing jobs. That is to say, the negative effect of body art was lessened in the context of a non-customer-facing role, thus confirming H2. This finding suggests that spatial distance to the customer is an important factor in relation to the aesthetic suitability of an employee (Nickson et al., 2001; McDowell et al., 2007; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; MacDonald and Merrill, 2009; Williams and Connell, 2010; Timming, 2014a). On the final question of the relative effect of the tattoo and body piercing, there was no statistically significant difference between the two forms of body art in a non-customer-facing job, but in a customer-facing role, where appearance matters the most, the tattoo was rated statistically significantly lower than the piercing. Thus, H3 is only partially confirmed.

Interestingly, tattoos and piercings appear to have a greater negative impact on hiring ratings for men's faces than women's faces. These findings suggest that body modification carries a greater stigma among men in comparison to women, regardless of the gender of the rater. One might speculate that tattoos and piercings are perceived as more threatening on men than women, thus accounting for the reduced hireability ratings of tattooed and pierced men. But sex differences were not theorized *a priori*, so this gendered explanation is only tentative, *post hoc*, and in need of further development. On the issue of gender, there is some literature showing that tattooed women are perceived more negatively than non-tattooed women (Hawkes et al, 2004; Swami and Furnham, 2007), but there is a surprising lacuna in terms of comparing the perceptions of tattooed women with tattooed men. Arndt and Glassman (2012) come close to exploring the gendered dimension of tattoos, but their study still only looks at "masculine" and "feminine" genres of tattoos on men and women. They conclude that masculine looking tattoos are viewed more negatively on both men and women than feminine looking tattoos, a finding that does not explain the results of the present study. In short, the extent to which men and women with tattoos are perceived differently cannot be determined without further research, as we propose below.

Research Implications

It would not be very remarkable to conclude from this study that visible body art has a negative impact on hireability. That much may have been expected prior to this research project, at least anecdotally. Instead, we wish to draw attention to the previously unexplored dimensions of this research, especially the increased hireability of both tattooed and pierced job candidates in non-customer-facing jobs relative to customer-

facing jobs, and the relative stigma of the tattoo vis-à-vis the piercing. It is on these points that we move the literature forward.

The present study makes an original contribution to ongoing debates in at least three ways. First, using body art, it demonstrates the primacy of physical appearance in relation to employee selection. Recruitment and selection is often thought of in terms of the skills, knowledge, personality, and experiences that job applicants bring to the table, but this research shows that corporeal and aesthetic attributes (Nickson et al., 2001) also play an important role in determining whether or not one will be offered a job. In this sense, the present research builds upon previous studies which demonstrate that unattractiveness (Hosoda et al., 2003), obesity (Rudolph et al., 2008), and ethnicity (King and Ahmad, 2010), among other surface-level (DuBrin, 2011) manifestations of stigma, negatively impact one's chances of success in a job interview. To this list can now be added tattoos and facial piercings.

Secondly, the present study contributes to the literature on prejudice and stigma in an important way. Specifically, the research demonstrates that prejudice should not be homogenized, that is, assumed to be constant across the social world. We were able to test the effects of stigmatization of the same faces across different contexts to show that the relationship between the prejudiced and the subject of prejudice appears to vary from situation to situation. It has been argued previously that prejudicial stereotypes are an automatic response to a particular social cue, and are thus largely outside the control of the individual (Devine, 1989). But the present study strongly corroborates Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park's (2001) counter-claim that prejudice is not a "fixed" response to a

stimulus, and is clearly moderated by contextual factors, in this case, spatial distance to customers.

Thirdly, this research makes an important contribution to the extant literature on the stigma surrounding body art, especially in the context of the employment relationship. Although previous research has examined the effect of body art on employee selection (Bekhor, et al., 1995; Selter and Sandry, 2003; Swanger, 2006; Timming, 2014a), the present study is unique in at least three ways: (i) it employs facial perception methods, thus standardizing the stimuli and avoiding the pitfalls of asking respondents to “imagine” what a tattoo or piercing might look like; (ii) it quantifies the effect of body art across different employment contexts; and (iii) it speaks to the relative effect of tattoos vis-à-vis piercings, concluding that the former is more deleterious than the latter, but only in customer-facing roles.

Practical Implications

This research has clear implications for job seekers. Obviously, it can help them to make an informed decision, not so much about whether or not to get a tattoo or piercing, but rather about where on the body it should be located. Visible body art, defined as tattoos or piercings displayed on the hands, neck, or face, poses a potential threat to one’s employment chances. Conversely, body art that is readily concealed under clothing is usually non-threatening. Already visibly tattooed job seekers can also use this research to make an informed decision about what types of jobs they should apply for in order to maximize their chances of success. To this end, they should pro-actively seek out “behind-the-scenes” roles with little or no customer interaction. Job applicants with visible body piercings are in the relatively enviable position of being able to remove studs

during the interview (provided that there has been no excessive stretching of the skin), but they should be aware that they have no recourse to employment protection for their body art once on the job. This point serves as a good segue into the implications for the management of human resources in organizations.

Elzweig and Peeples (2011) show that, at least in the United States, body art is not a legally protected category, so employers are generally free to discriminate against job applicants with tattoos or piercings[2]. But the absence of a legal sanction does not imply that there are no moral hazards associated with body art discrimination. This research suggests that discrimination against tattooed and pierced job candidates is likely taking place. As a rule of thumb, it is always “best practice” for organizations to reflect on potential employee selection biases, legal or otherwise. Furthermore, there may even be a business case for such reflection. As the younger, more tattooed, demographics of society age, they will go on to represent a major consumer block that has different expectations regarding the physical and corporeal attributes of those who serve them in the workplace. Perhaps in the very near future, prejudice against body art will largely be an anachronism.

Until then, though, research on self-verification theory in the workplace, discussed above, would seem to offer a potential way forward for organizations to manage the potential tensions between appearance standards and employees’ desire for self-expression. Grant et al. (2014) suggest that it is important, both theoretically and practically, to understand how organizations can conceivably work together with employees to best facilitate “identity expression.” Such an approach could potentially lessen feelings of tension and stress for employees with tattoos and piercings who work in front-line, customer-facing roles.

In light of what is described as the “‘dark side’ of the identity tug of war” (Grant et al., 2014: 1217), organizations could potentially increase the satisfaction and commitment of workers insofar as the right appearance policies are in place. Indeed, although not necessarily fully reflecting the process of “co-construction” between the organization and employees described in the Grant et al. case study, Starbucks’ recent announcement, following consultation with employees, that they are reversing a ban on tattoos, marks a significant shift in the company’s thinking (Solomon, 2014). They will now allow employees to show non-offensive visible tattoos, as long as they are not situated on the face. The announcement by Starbucks that they are relaxing their policy on visible body art was, in part, prompted by the question posed to employees on the company’s Facebook page: “How do you suggest we strike the right balance between self-expression and professionalism?” (CNN, 2014).

Future Research

Future research should obviously speak to the limitations of the experimental study design. Specifically, we would like to see the spirit of this study extended outside the laboratory. Of course, the challenges of naturalistic research along these lines are severe in light of the fact that researchers would be unable to manipulate the stimuli as we have. Ideally, observational research should be undertaken in the context of real-time service sector job interviews, with follow up interviews conducted with hiring managers and visibly tattooed or pierced job applicants. Another alternative for future research would be to replicate the present study design, but using different types of tattoos and piercings located in different areas of the body. This would allow us to evaluate the effect of the location of body art and the genre of the image on hireability ratings.

The results reported in this paper highlight that, with regard to debates about person-organization fit, whilst much of the research focuses on the importance of congruence in deep-level, unobservable attributes such as values and goals during recruitment and selection (Kristof-Brown, 2000; Yu, 2014), surface-level attributes are equally, and arguably even more, important in the recruitment process of many customer-facing roles. Indeed, whilst a potential employee may conceivably have the required knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to enact appropriate emotional labor in front-line, customer-facing positions, thus evidencing an appropriate person-job fit, these KSAs may be overlooked by recruiters who feel that an applicant's appearance is incommensurate with the desired person-organization fit. Decisions about person-organization fit are, therefore, often reached on the basis of these surface-level initial impressions. Consequently, we would suggest that the results from our research point to the need to expand thinking in debates on person-organization fit in order to take more account of this point.

A further area in which to develop this research agenda involves the analysis of organizations where tattoos and piercings could be viewed by employers as an asset, rather than the traditional liability (Timming, 2014b). This type of research could examine recruitment and selection in firms that seek to target, for example, a youthful demographic of customer. Such research could draw, for example, from Avery, McKay, Tonidandel, Volpone and Morris (2012), who argue that employee "representativeness" of the customer can positively influence consumer behaviors and attitudes. Thus, tattooed customers could potentially identify with tattooed employees, resulting in overall increased customer satisfaction.

The results of this research also suggest that there are gender differences at play when it comes to perceptions of body art. Male faces were rated higher than the female faces on average, but body art had a greater negative impact on hiring ratings for men than women. With only four male and four female faces, however, these data are perhaps not sufficient to make definitive conclusions about whether tattooed and pierced men are perceived differently than tattooed and pierced women in the context of a job interview. As noted above, further research should seek to explore further this gendered dimension. Interestingly, it is worth noting that no significant differences were found between male and female respondents in terms of their hiring ratings. Thus, it appears that any effects of gender would be constrained to the stimuli.

Finally, the present study should be taken as a call for future research examining not only tattoos and piercings, but also other forms of stigma (e.g., obesity, facial symmetry, or physical defects, among others) in the context of customer-facing and non-customer-facing roles. The importance of spatial distance to the customer emerged as a core theme in this research.

Conclusions

Tattoos and piercings have a significant negative effect on hireability ratings. This study has demonstrated empirically that employment chances are reduced if a job applicant displays visible body art. The negative effect of body art on employability, however, is attenuated for job applicants seeking back-of-house, non-customer-facing roles. Moreover, in such “behind-the-scenes” jobs without customer interaction, there does not appear to be any significant differences between tattoos and piercings. In customer-facing jobs, though, tattoos result in lower hireability ratings than piercings. All

of this evidence suggests that body art carries a stigma that results in negative evaluations that are ultimately rooted in prejudice. But the aesthetic labor literature suggests that the extent of prejudice against body art varies by the proximity of the employee to customers.

[1] Of course, as we noted earlier in the paper, within that context there may be certain service settings where visible tattoos and piercings are accepted or even desired, for example, outlets that are seeking to create a certain aesthetic that cater to customers who are likely to be pierced and tattooed and want their employees to appear similar to their clientele. In general, though, most service organizations' attempts to recruit a certain "look" and then further mold that look are likely to be premised on a view of body art that should be discreet or, in some cases, invisible altogether.

[2] There are some gray areas here. For example, if a tattoo had religious connotations, a job applicant could potentially win a lawsuit in the light of the fact that religion is a protected category in discrimination law.

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FIGURE 1: Example of an original face (left), with the corresponding pierced face (middle) and tattooed face (right).



FIGURE 2: Average hiring ratings for non-customer-facing (solid lines) and customer-facing (dotted lines) for the original faces and images with piercings and tattoos, with standard error bars.

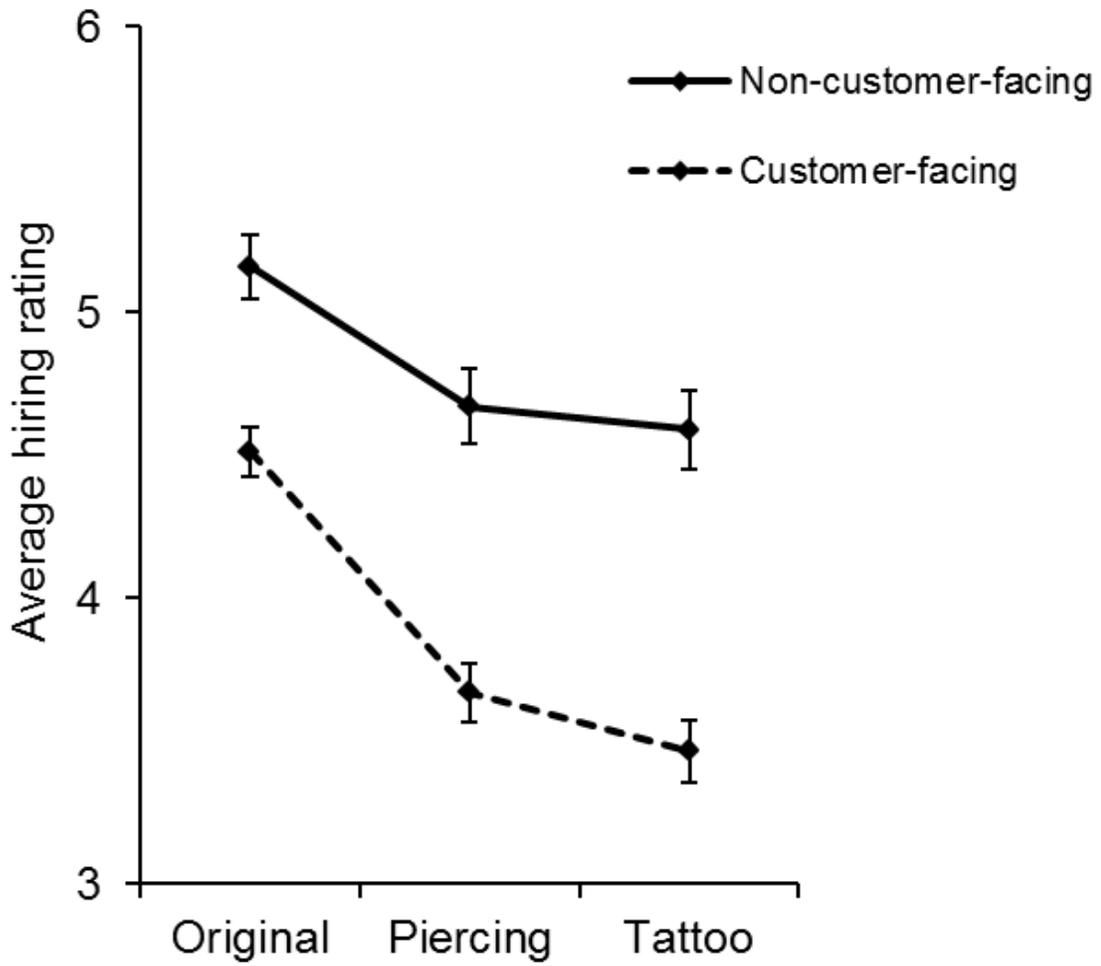


TABLE I. Summary of results of the 2x2x3x2 mixed design ANOVA.

	Effect type	Mean rating (SD)	Mean rating difference	F	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Job type (non-customer-facing; customer-facing)	Within-subjects	Non-customer-facing: 4.81 (1.27) Customer-facing: 3.88 (0.93)	0.93	87.06	<.01	.43
Sex of face (male; female)	Within-subjects	Male: 4.53 (1.01) Female: 4.16 (1.06)	0.37	33.80	<.01	.22
Image type (original face; piercing; tattoo)	Within-subjects	Original: 4.84 (0.97) Piercings: 4.17 (1.13) Tattoos: 4.03 (1.15)	Original – piercing: 0.67 Original – tattoo: 0.81 Piercing – tattoo: 0.14	62.42	<.01	.35
Participant sex (men, women)	Between-subjects	Women: 4.45 (.88) Men: 4.24 (1.05)	0.22	1.48	.23	.01

TABLE II. Summary of the interaction between job type and image type, including pairwise comparison statistics for differences in ratings between original faces, piercings, and tattoos for non-customer-facing and customer-facing jobs.

	Mean rating (SD)			Original - piercing			Original - tattoo			Piercing - tattoo		
	Original face	Piercing	Tattoo	Mean difference	t	p	Mean difference	t	p	Mean difference	t	p
Non-customer-facing	5.16 (1.21)	4.67 (1.43)	4.59 (1.52)	0.49	5.26	<.01	0.57	5.01	<.01	0.08	1.31	.19
Customer-facing	4.51 (0.95)	3.67 (1.12)	3.46 (1.19)	0.85	9.15	<.01	1.05	9.82	<.01	0.21	3.32	<.01

TABLE III. Summary of the interaction between sex of face and image type, including pairwise comparison statistics for differences in ratings between original faces, piercings, and tattoos for men’s and women’s faces, as well as the how these differences vary between sex of face.

	Mean rating (SD)			Original - piercing			Original - tattoo			Piercing – tattoo		
	Original faces	Piercing	Tattoo	Mean difference	t	p	Mean difference	t	p	Mean difference	t	p
Men	5.10 (1.02)	4.32 (1.21)	4.16 (1.23)	0.78	8.39	<.01	0.94	8.68	<.01	0.16	2.59	.01
Women	4.57 (1.12)	4.02 (1.20)	3.89 (1.17)	0.55	6.86	<.01	0.68	7.36	<.01	0.13	2.61	.01
Men-Women	0.53 (0.93)	0.30 (0.80)	0.28 (0.68)	0.24	3.95	<.01	0.26	3.69	<.01	0.02	0.42	.68