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## Hiring Perceptions of Visible Body Modifications: The Effect of Tattoos and Piercings

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**Hiring Perceptions of Visible Body Modifications:  
The Effect of Tattoos and Piercings**

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**Abstract**

This study will examine the main effects of tattoos, piercings, and the interaction effect between them on the likelihood of a job applicant's ability to be hired. A short online survey using Qualtrics was administered with a total of 49 responses from across the United States.

Participants were asked to view the resume of a hypothetical applicant and answer several questions regarding what they had just seen and the perceived qualifications of the applicant. The analyses conducted demonstrated there were no significant main effects of tattoos or piercings on hireability, nor any interaction effect between tattoos and piercings on hireability. Drawing from previous research, the lack of findings further illustrates the complex nature of first impressions concerning hiring practices.

*Keywords:* hiring perception, visible body modifications, tattoos, piercings

### **Hiring Perceptions of Visible Body Modifications: The Effect of Tattoos and Piercings**

How we, as humans, present ourselves is crucial. Physical appearance is one of the first aspects a person notices during social interaction and a large factor that helps to inform an initial impression (McElroy, Summers, & Moore, 2014; Swanger, 2006). Whether it is clothes or body modifications, what we wear or do to our bodies speaks to our identity and what we value. It is not a secret that tattoos and piercings are often stigmatized in the workplace (Brallier, Maguire, Smith, & Palm, 2011). As two primary forms of body modifications, there is an increasing number of young people who are drawn to these as forms of outward self-expression and intend to enter the workforce. Although body modifications have been adorned throughout history, due to their current rise in popularity, it is worthwhile to explore whether attitudes on tattoos and piercings can negatively affect the chances that someone with tattoos, piercings, or both get hired.

Many studies have examined the impact of having piercings as a prospective job applicant. One study sought to investigate the social judgments of people with visible piercings from students on a college campus (Martino, 2008). Researchers showed undergraduate student participants ( $n = 105$ ) two almost identical black-and-white photographs of a female with a neutral expression and had them fill out a rating scale of specific attributes the photo evoked (e.g. religious). The purpose of this rating scale was to examine if there was a pattern of negative or positive attitudes towards piercings based on their presence or absence in the context of cultural norms. The only difference between the photos was the visibility of the facial piercings, as the first photograph depicted all facial piercings while the second was depicted as piercing-free. Results showed that the general perception of the model without visible piercings was more

religious while the general perception of the same model with piercings was described as ‘creative’, ‘mysterious’, and ‘artistic’ respectively. While this did not pertain to the relationship between piercings and hireability, Martino (2008) found that overall, the undergraduate student sample believed facial piercings *were* within cultural norms and perceived the piercings in a neutral or positive light. Extended beyond a college demographic, it can be hypothesized that if an employer believes that body piercings are within the cultural norm (i.e., piercings viewed positively or neutrally) - he will be less likely dissuaded by a competent applicant solely because she has a piercing. Contrarily, an employer that deems body piercings as outside the cultural norm (i.e., piercing viewed negatively) would be more likely deterred from hiring a competent applicant simply because she has a piercing (Martino, 2008; McElroy et al., 2014; Miroński & Rao, 2019). Further, McElroy et al. (2014) studied how having piercings affected one’s perceived job suitability and found that those with facial piercings were viewed as less suitable than those without facial piercings. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that cultural norms are a silent but powerful source of regulating the acceptability of piercings on a societal level, and within the workplace on outward appearance.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to explore the impact of tattoos on hireability. Brallier et al. (2011) studied how likely restaurant managers would hire qualified applicants for a waiter position based on their gender and whether or not they had a tattoo (visible). Conducted over four semesters, the researchers replicated their own study by showing restaurant managers ( $n = 158$ ) a randomly assigned resume of a hypothetical female (during the first two semesters) or male applicant (during the second two semesters) in addition to a photograph of each applicant with or without tattoos. All information aside from the first name and color of the shirt worn by the applicant remained the same to serve as controls. Subsequently, each manager was asked to

fill out a quick survey that asked whether they would hire the hypothetical applicant or not. Results showed that applicants with a tattoo would not be hired as often as applicants without a tattoo. The data revealed that employers are most willing to hire men and women without tattoos and that women without tattoos have the overall highest chance of being hired, which shows a clear preference towards non-tattooed applicants. In addition, research by Antonellis and Silsbee (2018) examined the impact of facial and neck tattoos on the hireability of a job applicant and found that 20% of participants rated those with tattoos as lower in hireability than those without tattoos. Surprisingly, 50% of participants rated those with tattoos as acceptable for hireability compared to those without tattoos, but hireability was dependent on the specific position within the industry. Although this study found an increase in the acceptability of visual body modifications (VBM), it still ultimately supports the idea that between two equally qualified job candidates, the one without a tattoo will always be favored over the one with a tattoo.

Finally, there has been some research considering both tattoos and piercings on the likelihood of being hired. Swanger (2006) conducted a qualitative study on the perceptions of hiring applicants with tattoos and/or piercings by sending out a single-question survey with a free-written response option to a series of human resource managers and college recruiters for the hospitality industry ( $n = 37$ ). In a hypothetical situation, Swanger (2006) illustrates a scenario of bias against a waitress with visible body modifications (VBM) via tattoos and piercings. As the restaurant industry is part of the larger hospitality industry, Swanger (2006) wanted to get a primary account from the employer's perspective on how impactful one's appearance is to secure a job. Results showed that overwhelmingly managers and recruiters held a negative attitude towards applicants with tattoos and/or piercings. The few dissenting participants endorsed hiring applicants with tattoos and/or piercings with neutral or positive regard, indicating that the service

industry has a preference for applicants without VBM likely due to the emphasis on face-to-face contact. Future research should build upon this study by considering the interaction between tattoos and piercings.

Based on prior literature, it is evident that people with tattoos and body piercings remain stigmatized despite the growing popularity and acceptance of VBM. Explored in the context of hiring practices, there are modest indications that there is a preference for job applicants without tattoos over applicants with a tattoo and a preference for job applicants without piercings over applicants with a piercing (Swanger, 2006; Brallier, 2011). This was further supported by Timming, Nickson, Re, and Perett (2015), who examined the effect of body art (tattoos and piercings) on a person's rating of job hireability and similarly found that those with body piercings and tattoos were rated lower in hireability than those without. However, these studies are limited to the service industries, and there remains minimal research directly focused on the interaction of tattoos and piercings on hireability (Hopf, 2018; Timming et al., 2015). Therefore, we intend to investigate if the presence of tattoos and body piercings on a job applicant has an interactive effect on his ability to be hired. The research conducted by Martino (2008) had the largest implications due to the introduction of cultural norms and the hypothesized effects they have on employment decisions, which is consistent with research by Efthymiou (2018) linking consumer behavior/culture to a hospitality company's acceptance of visible tattoos and/or piercings.

H<sub>1</sub>: We hypothesized a main effect of tattoos. Specifically, we expected that applicants without tattoos would always be favored over applicants with tattoos.

H<sub>2</sub>: We hypothesized a main effect of piercings. Specifically, we expected that applicants without piercings would always be favored over applicants with piercings.

H<sub>3</sub>: We hypothesized an interaction effect between tattoos and piercings. Specifically, we expected that applicants judged without piercings would always be favored over those judged with piercings, but that they would be even more favored when they also do not have tattoos compared to if they had both piercings and tattoos.

## Methods

### Sample

49 participants were voluntarily recruited using social media outreach from the extended Clark University community. All data was collected anonymously from adults aged 18 and over who lived in the United States during the recruiting period. The gender distribution of the sample was 61.2% female, 30.6% male, and 8.2% gender non-conforming. The majority of the sample (73.5%) identified as White/European American, 10.2% of participants were Latino(a), 6.1% were of African descent, 4.1% were of Asian or Pacific Islander descent, 4.1% identified as other (e.g. multi-racial), and one participant chose not to answer. The age of participants ranged from 18-61 ( $M = 27.24$ ,  $SD = 11.46$ ). The majority of the sample (30.6% ) had some college background, 28.6% of participants received a bachelor's degree, 20.4% of participants received a graduate degree, 14.3% of participants received a high school degree, and 6.1% received an associate degree. Almost half of the participants (40.8%) disclosed they had a tattoo while 53.1% of the participants disclosed they had at least one piercing. However, a significant number of participant responses were excluded ( $n = 108$ ) due to the incompleteness of the survey tasks.



**Design**

The study featured a 2 (presence vs. no presence of tattoos) x 2 (presence vs. no presence of piercings) factorial between-subjects experimental design.

**Materials**

Participants viewed a digital resume and photograph of a job applicant for an office position. All resumes and photographs were subject to the same conditions, except for the presence of tattoos and/or piercings (e.g. visually in the photograph or self-proclaimed in the resume). The distinction of photographs of the applicant with and without tattoos and/or piercings and disclosure in the resume was used to operationalize the presence of these visible body modifications (VBM). Participants were randomly assigned to either view the control (applicant has no tattoos or piercings) or experimental conditions (applicant has tattoos and/or piercings). After reviewing the applicant, participants completed a multi-item measure of the hireability which consisted of three questions and utilized a Likert scale from 1 (not very likely) to 7 (very likely). To determine the reliability of the hireability measure, an analysis of reliability was conducted of the three measures and Cronbach's alpha showed acceptable reliability,  $\alpha = 0.96$ . The specific hireability measures from the survey included: How likely would you be to hire this person for a job in the business industry? How likely would you be to give this person a promotion for such a job? How likely would you be to give this person an interview?

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited online using social media and directed to a Qualtrics survey where they were prompted with a consent form detailing the basic aspects of the study and had the option to contact the head researcher with any questions or concerns. No incentives were given to any participants, and participation was on a volunteer basis. Participants were also given

the option to skip questions, if desired, but were warned that it would not be possible for them to go back to a previous page once pressing the 'next' button. Irrespective of the randomly assigned condition, participants who consented to complete the survey continued to the next page and filled out demographic information, followed by viewing the job applicant's resume and photograph, answering questions to test for attention, and rating the competence and likelihood of hiring the applicant using a Likert scale. Upon completion, participants were sent to a debriefing page that thanked them for their time and explained any manipulations used and other necessary information. The study took about 10-15 minutes to complete.

## Results

### Main Analyses

There was no significant main effect of tattoos,  $F(1, 45) = .01, p = .95$ , such that specifically, there was no difference in how likely participants were to report that they would hire applicants without tattoos ( $M = 4.74, SD = 1.18$ ) and applicants with tattoos ( $M = 4.90, SD = 1.47$ ). In other words, there was no difference in the likelihood that participants would hire applicants without tattoos over applicants with a tattoo or vice versa. Likewise, there was no significant main effect of piercings,  $F(1, 45) = .77, p = .39$ , such that specifically, there was no difference in how likely participants were to report that they would hire applicants without piercings ( $M = 4.71, SD = 1.22$ ) and applicants with piercings ( $M = 5.12, SD = 1.51$ ). Put simply, the data illustrated that there was no difference in the likelihood that the participants would hire applicants without piercings over applicants with piercings or vice versa.

Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no significant interaction effect of tattoos and piercings,  $F(1, 45) = .13, p = .72$ . Specifically, when the applicant had no tattoos, applicants with no piercings ( $M = 4.67, SD = 1.13$ ) and applicants with piercings ( $M = 5.25, SD = 1.52$ )

were approximately equally likely to be hired in this fictional scenario, whereas when the applicant had tattoos, applicants without piercings were approximately equally likely to be hired ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) as applicants with piercings ( $M = 5.05$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) (See Figure 1).

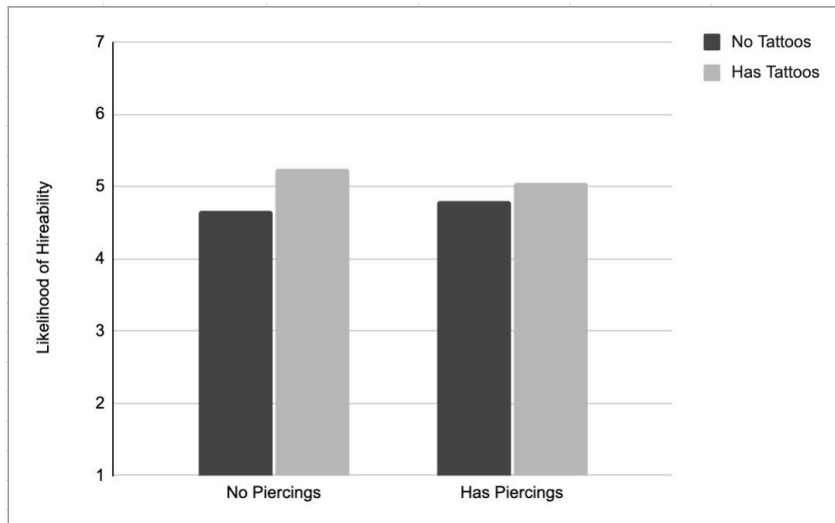


Figure 1. Interaction effect between tattoos and piercings on hireability

### Discussion

This study explored whether or not the presence of tattoos and/or piercings influence a job applicant's ability to get hired. Utilizing an online survey program, participants were asked to answer several questions about whether or not a hypothetical job applicant would be suitable for an entry-level position in the business sector. Previous research on this subject has provided mixed results regarding any significant impact of tattoos and piercings on the prospect of hireability. Swanger (2016) and Brailier et al. (2011) found that the presence of VBM negatively impacted the likelihood of a prospective job applicant being hired, whereas Hopf (2018) and Efthymiou (2018) found inconclusive results on the prospect of an applicant's ability to be hired based on the presence of VBM. We hypothesized that those with tattoos and piercings would be less hireable than those without. We also hypothesized that the presence of tattoos and piercings would interact, such as those without tattoos would always be favored over those with tattoos,

and this effect would be even stronger when those without tattoos had no piercings in comparison to having piercings. However, in this present study, there was no support for the hypothesized outcome that the presence of tattoos, piercings, both forms, or neither forms of VBM *would* be influential to the likelihood that a job applicant would be hired. This finding was unexpected but is fairly reasonable based on various methodological obstacles.

Previous research found that those without tattoos and piercings are more likely to get hired than those with tattoos and piercings. This demonstrated that one's physical appearance could heavily influence perceptions of job suitability. The current study did not support these findings. Former studies examined the effects of VBM and hireability within the service industries while the current study examined the effects within the corporate industry. A significant number of prior studies also had variations in their participant pool that yielded different results such as larger sample sizes or drawing exclusively from college students at a specific institution – which may explain why the current study did not find significant results.

This study had several strengths. The strongest factor was the reliability of the dependent variable (hireability) as demonstrated by the value of Cronbach's alpha (See Methods Section). The use of gender-neutral attributes (e.g. a gender-neutral job, a gender-neutral name, etc.) was an advantageous departure from former studies to minimize implicit biases based on gender stereotypes. This study also served as a newer continuation of older research by Swanger (2006) and Timming et al. (2015) in evaluating the interaction effect between tattoos and piercings on hireability.

The current study was met with numerous limitations involving the methodology which have severely impacted the reliability of the results found. Primarily, the main limitation was the final sample size due to the operationalization of the chosen manipulations of the independent

variables (tattoos and piercings) (See Appendix B-E). As stated, there has been strong evidence that manipulated photographs are a good choice for operationalizing VBM to avoid the use of humans as direct subjects. But the nuances to manipulating the photographs proved to be more challenging to execute than initially expected. Since the balance between realism and visibility was key to a successful manipulation, the struggle to find the correct sizing of the VBM and orientation on the body greatly impacted the elicited response from participants. This was proven by the minimal final sample size ( $n = 49$ ) that resulted because a large number of participants failed the manipulation checks. It indicated that the manipulations themselves were too subtle to be correctly identified. Secondly, the use of convenience sampling led to a lack of diversity amongst the participants. The largest discrepancy was the distribution of race/ethnicity, as 73.5% of all respondents were White/European American, followed by the distribution of gender as 61.2% of all participants identified as female compared to males (30.6%) and gender non-conforming (8.2%) individuals.

To further the research on the effects of VBM on hireability, it is very important that the operationalization of the independent variables is substantial enough to generate a quantifiable response. This means that the method of operationalization must be clearly identifiable to the target participant-audience. Another area of interest is to expand the study to a wider demographic than adults living in the United States. This could both increase the sample size to a more desirable threshold and enable the investigation of hiring perceptions cross-culturally.

Based on the insignificant findings of this study, the question of whether or not the presence of tattoos and/or piercings negatively affects a job applicant's ability to be hired requires further research. Drawing from the data, the main implication from this small sample size is that there is a growing acceptance of VBM on potential job applicants. Although this

study bears little effect on any societal changes, it serves as a continuation of previous work and illustrates how complex the interactions of culture and societal norms are in our everyday lives. It is important that an individual's choice to engage in VBM does not negatively impact the ability to secure a job, as it is not an indicator of intelligence (Martino). Working towards a more accepting society of individual expression is crucial as the world continues to advance and the diverse ways that people choose to present themselves are not going away.

This study looked at the effect of having tattoos and piercings on the likelihood of being hired. Contrary to previous research findings, the results did not support the conclusion that those with tattoos and/or piercings would be less favored than those without tattoos and/or piercings. As this study suggested there is a growing acceptance of VBM, future research should focus on examining the effects using a larger sample size and wider demographic to confirm these findings with greater representation.

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