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Perception of Tattoos and Piercings in the Service Industry

Abstract: This paper attempts to examine how people with visible body art, specifically tattoos and piercings, are perceived in today's society. Two main research questions were addressed: (i) Is there prejudice towards visible body art in the service industry? (ii) Does visible body art affect career opportunities in the service industry? In order to answer these questions, three groups of respondents were approached: employers, employees, and customers. The research project took into consideration the views of 12 service organisations and their managers to gain an insight into their opinions, existing regulations and recruitment policies. Eight tattooed and pierced professionals were interviewed to find out more about their life experiences with visible body art. Lastly, a group of 188 respondents was also surveyed to gauge their reactions. The study exposes latent stereotyping and stigma that exists among some respondents, albeit to a small extent. It also shows that, barring a few organisations, many companies hired employees with visible body art while declaring a strong focus on hygiene and aesthetics. The survey reveals some positive views of body art and shows that stereotypes are slowly changing to acceptance.

Keywords: career opportunities, service industry, tattoos, piercings, prejudice

JEL classification codes: M12, M51

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Introduction

This paper attempts to examine how people with visible body art, specifically tattoos and piercings, are perceived in today's society and how they are viewed in the service industry. Two main research questions were addressed: (i) Is there prejudice towards visible body art in the service industry? (ii) Does visible body art affect career opportunities in the service industry? In order to answer these questions, three groups of respondents were approached: employers, employees, and customers. The research project took into consideration the views of 12 service organisations and their managers to gain an insight into their opinions, existing regulations and recruitment policies. Eight tattooed and pierced professionals were interviewed to find out more about their life experiences with visible body art. Lastly, a group of 188 respondents was also surveyed to gauge their reactions. The study exposes latent stereotyping and stigma that exists among some respondents. It also shows that, barring a few organisations, many companies hired people with visible body art while declaring a strong focus on hygiene and aesthetics. The survey reveals some positive views of body art and shows that stereotypes are slowly changing to acceptance.

Tattoos and piercing as body modification

Tattoos and piercings are the most popular and known types of body modification. They have been defined and redefined over the years but the most used definition is by Greif, Hewitt and Armstrong [1999], who state that the word "tattoo" derives from the Tahitian term *tatu*, as an indelible mark or figure fixed upon the body by the insertion of pigment under the skin or by the production of scars. Meanwhile, body piercing has been defined by them as follows: "Piercing involves the insertion of a needle into various areas of the body to create an opening through which decorative instruments such as jewellery may be worn [Greif, Hewitt, Armstrong, 1999]". Furthermore, piercings can be "stretched". Williams and Majumdar [2010] state: "At present there is a fashion for 'tunnel and plug' ear piercings. The initial piercing is performed as with any normal ear piercing, creating a hole approximately 1 mm in diameter in the lobe of the ear. Clients are advised to allow the ear to heal for a period of 6 weeks with a stud in place. Gradually increasing sizes of ear plugs are then placed into the lobe, increasing by 0.2–0.6 mm every 2–3 weeks as tolerated. It is advised that once a 10 mm piercing is in place that the dilated hole will remain stretched despite the piercing being removed". All piercings can be stretched and many people have stretched their piercings all over their body (including lip, nose, cheeks and nipples) way beyond conventional norms.

Fact and figures about body modification

An online survey conducted in the United States has found that 29% of respondents had at least one tattoo. It also showed that 47% of respondents in the 18–35 age group were tattooed [Shannon-Missal, 2015]. Gender-specific data in the survey revealed a higher percentage of women than men among those who had one or more tattoos. This was also the case in another study conducted in Australia, which showed that more women than men in the 16–29 age group had tattoos [Heywood et al., 2012]. Similar statistics for Europe show that 12% of citizens have a tattoo. As in the United States, body modification is more popular among young Europeans. For example, in Austria 19% of the population has one or more tattoos, while the figure for the 16–29 age group is 29% [Piccinini et al., 2016]. One can conclude that body modification is in evidence in most societies and applies to a substantial percentage of both potential and current employees.

Reasons for body modification

Watson [1998] discovered through his research that people tended to be general rather than specific in their motivations to get tattooed. He distinguished four major reasons: “1. The tattoo connects the person getting tattooed to significant others who have similar tattoos; 2. Having the tattoo makes this person unique by differentiating himself from the untattooed mainstream; 3. The tattoo symbolises self-control in that person’s life; 4. The tattoo has aesthetic value as art or decoration of the person’s body”. Meanwhile, Teeter [2008] suggests that the motivations for body art can be classified into nine broad categories: commemoration, expressing emotions within oneself, bonding with other people, rebellion, impulse, addiction, cover up of previous tattoos, identity formation, and fashion. Obviously, the reasons are not limited to the above. Wohlrab et al. [2007] claim even more potential motives. While there are several overlaps between them and other cited authors, they go further by including other motives such as group affiliations, sexual motivations, physical endurance, spiritual and religious reasons, and, finally, no apparent reason.

Perception of and attitudes towards body art

There are many studies which indicate negative perception of people with body modification. In one such study, the participants were exposed to images of Microsoft Paint line drawings of women with tattoos. Based simply on these drawings, the results suggested a predominantly negative perception, with the drawings with tattoos being considered less physically attractive, more promiscuous and heavier drinkers compared to drawings without tattoos [Swami, Furnham, 2007]. Another study inferred that visible tattoos on white-collar workers were regarded as inappropriate, while similar tattoos

on blue-collar workers were viewed as appropriate. There was an assumption that people with tattoos were less honest and less intelligent than those without tattoos [Dwane, 2010].

Despite the negative stereotypes, tattooed participants of one study had significantly higher scores on extraversion, experience-seeking, and need for uniqueness than non-tattooed individuals [Swami, Pietsching, 2012]. Furthermore, McLeod [2014] noted in his study that while tattoos are perceived as marks worn by social misfits and others living on the fringes of legality or blue-collar workers, much progress has been made since the 1990s and that “these antiquated silos for tattoo wearers have mostly faded”.

Unfortunately, stereotyping influences people with visible tattoos and piercings in a professional setting, i.e. their chances in the labour market and their acceptance within the workplace. McLeod [2014] points out that “stereotypes of ability and intelligence run deep”. He also states that during the course of his study “the most prevalent manifestation of stigma was the perception that heavily tattooed individuals may not have the ability or intelligence to perform their professional roles”. Once again, the class connotation rears its head due to the negative perception of people with tattoos through history as people from the lower classes. Some of the heavily tattooed interviewees in his study complained about how some people they encountered would be shocked when they learnt about their (high) education level. He also notes that some of these professionals chose to combat the stigma they carried through positive action on their part, “creating a higher work standard as part of their identity management”. So, by challenging the stigma and thereby also the existing stereotypes, they successfully change perceptions [McLeod, 2014].

There have been plenty of documented cases of discrimination of people with body modification in the workplace. Studies have pointed out that prospective employers are less likely to hire when faced with digitally altered photos of people showing body modification. There is also the issue of what type of tattoo it is. A flower or star would create a completely different impression than a swastika or guns. Similarly, a small nose piercing conveys a different meaning than a large septum piercing through the nose [Timming et al., 2017].

Research methods

This research was conducted in 2017 as a three-point study designed to gather various points of view. Managers, customers who patronise establishments such as hotels, airlines and retailers, and visibly tattooed or pierced professionals were approached. The methods employed for these were a mix of qualitative and quantitative ones. Data collection with HR managers was done through interviews. The same method was employed to interview professionals who had some form of visible body art. An online survey was used to understand the attitudes of people who could be patronising establishments such as hotels, airlines and retail outlets. This part of the study was conducted as a quantitative analysis.

In total, 12 interviews with managers were conducted. The research sample was chosen based on a purposeful selection. The managers were mainly from the HR or training departments with one from sales and marketing. All the companies were from the service industry: seven hotels, one airline, three retail companies, and one tour operator. The respondents were between the ages of 26 and 55. There were seven males and five females. The identities of the respondents were coded: males from hotels: MH1, MH2, MH4, MH6, MH7; females from hotels: FH3, FH5; female from the airline: FA1; male from the tour operator: MT1; males from retail: MR1, MR3; female from retail: FR2. Interviews were conducted in two different ways. With six organisations, the purpose and subject of the study was clearly and openly communicated during initial email correspondence, an interview with the manager and an outlined set of questions; data was collected and recorded based on their responses. The companies that were interviewed in this manner were: hotels H2, H4 and H5, airline A1, and retail organisations R1 and R3. For the remaining six organizations, eight fictitious CVs of prospective job applicants with fictitious names, details and photographs were prepared. Half of these applicants had some form of body art visible in the photographs and half were without any kind of body art. During initial contact with these organisations over email, it was communicated to the respondents that the CVs were sent to them to see which of the applicants they would invite for an interview and who they would reject. During the interview they were expected to explain the reasons behind their decisions. Once the initial reaction of the respondents to the CVs were captured, the real subject of the study was revealed, and the same set of questions used for all the companies was then applied to gather data. All interviews lasted approximately an hour and were recorded using a laptop running QuickTime in mp4 format. The fictitious CVs were sent to hotels H1, H3, H6 and H7, tour operator T1, and retail organisation R2.

The second group of respondents consisted of eight professionals with visible tattoos or visible body piercings who either currently work or have worked previously in a service industry job. As one of the authors is tattooed himself and has been working in the service industry, respondents were chosen from the pool of his acquaintances or approached by recommendation. Care was taken that various service industries, ages and genders were represented. Like all the previous interviews, these also lasted approximately an hour and were recorded using a laptop running QuickTime in mp4 format. The respondents were between the ages of 23 and 44. They came from various occupations: advertising, fitness, hospitality, fashion and education. The respondents' details were coded in the same manner as the managers'. For example, M27 represented a 27-year-old male and F23 denoted a 23-year-old female.

General public opinion on the subject was collected through an online survey. The survey was advertised through four different Facebook groups: Foreigners in Vienna, Ex-Emirates Airlines Crew, Modul University Vienna Community, and Modul University MBA. The general public often uses the services of such organisations in the capacity of a customer. The rationale

behind such a survey is to understand the prevailing attitudes of these “customers” when they interact with service providers with visible body art. The survey was conducted using an online survey website called Surveyplanet. A set of 21 survey questions was prepared. Twenty questions were prepared with a multiple-choice response while one required a scoring response. The scoring response question consisted of seven statements with responses set on a five-point scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “strongly agree”, 2 was “agree”, 3 stood for “neither agree nor disagree”, 4 denoted “disagree”, and 5 was “strongly disagree”. Before being made live online, the survey was debugged twice. The survey was advertised through the MBA cohort members and also on three different Facebook groups. A total of 188 responses were received. The results were downloaded from the website in Excel format, which was then modified to be analysed using SPSS Statistics.

The age of the respondents ranged from 16 to 55. There were more female than male respondents, 79.8% vs. 20.2%. The nationality distribution of the respondents showed that the largest proportion, 26.6%, came from Austria, while 16.5% were from the UAE, 9.6% from the UK, and 5.9% from Australia. Each of the remaining countries had too few respondents to be statistically significant. These countries were consolidated together as the “rest of the world” to represent 41% of the respondents. The largest group of respondents work in the airline sector (22%), followed by educational institutions (15%), hospitality (12%), sales and marketing (10%), and the health sector (4%); 3% of respondents worked in some sort of creative field. Retail and banks each accounted for 2%. A large chunk of respondents did not fit into any of the categories and were combined to form “others” at 26% of the total number of respondents; 4% stated they were currently unemployed.

Data analysis and findings – interviews with managers

Among the six managers who were presented with the fictitious CVs, some noticed the tattoos and some did not. Manager MH1 did not discuss the tattoos and piercings. He was one of the few managers who focused exclusively on the qualifications of the applicants and did not look much at the photographs. Meanwhile, MH7’s response to an applicant’s visible tattoo was: “Maybe he would have to cover this. Personally, I think it (the visible tattoo) shouldn’t be an issue. I think legally also it must not be an issue”. FR2 noticed the tattoos and piercings in the applicant’s pictures. She brought it up during the conversation: “To be honest with you, if you are in customer contact, the tattoos and the earrings, it is an issue. It is not an issue, but if we are being very conservative, then I think for many people, I mean it’s a given, tattoos and earrings and piercings are usually something which makes you take a step backwards. For me it *would* make a difference”. FH3, while studying the résumé of an applicant with a visible tattoo, stated: “I would invite him for a position in finance. As you know, we are a five-star hotel and in the picture, you see he

has a tattoo; so, for us it would be really difficult to put him at the front desk because of the grooming standards that we have”.

The interviews yielded mixed results when it came to the views the respondents had on body art. With the total number of comments at 51, twenty-five respondents voiced positive views about visible body art, while 26 were negative. FH3 had some good things to say about people with tattoos: “They can be more creative; more outgoing”. MH4 was also quite positive: “Yes, it can reveal a bit about the person, and not necessarily negative: open-minded, trendy”. FR2 noted the change over time, stating: “Before it was more like ‘Oh my God, tattoos’, and now it is ‘Hey, cool tattoos!’”. MT1 remarked: “There are still plenty of stereotypes where they consider that tattoos are drug addicts or criminals or something like that”. FA1, herself profusely tattooed, agreed with the negative stereotyping: “Visible body art can look freaky or too rough”.

When it comes to official policy on visible body art in our study, two hotels (H1 and H3) and one airline (A1) had an official “Not Allowed” policy for visible tattoos for all customer-facing positions. Manager FH3 stated: “Although visible tattoos are not allowed on service and front-office staff, kitchen staff who have tattoos in visible areas of the body and sometimes need to work in public areas like open kitchens of the hotel are an exception to this rule”. Managers from these organisations also said that visible tattoos were all allowed only if they could be covered by either clothes or a plaster. Managers from eight companies, four hotels (H4, H5, H6 and H7), one tour operator (T1), and three retail companies (R1, R2, R3), stated that there was no official policy in place, and that all visible tattoos on staff were dealt with on a case-by-case basis depending on factors such as size, location and genre. Manager FH5 said there was no policy in place because they explicitly allowed tattoos everywhere on the body except when these were political or religious. The manager added: “We always tell our applicants during the interview process: if you have tattoos and piercings, we would like you to show them to us, tell us more about them”.

Policy with regards to visible piercings was slightly different. Most establishments where food was handled had a policy disallowing visible piercings while on duty. Health and safety concerns were cited as the primary reason behind such a policy being adopted, e.g. the possibility of piercings falling into food. Four hotels, H1, H2, H3, and H7, stated that all piercings would need to be removed while on duty. Hotel H5 said that this rule applied only to kitchen staff. Hotel H6 stated that stretched ear plugs could be worn provided they were skin coloured and maximum 10 mm in diameter. Nose piercings and septum piercings were not allowed. The rest of the six stated that they had no policy on piercings in place and that decisions were always taken on a case-by-case basis.

Since most places of work require people to look “professional”, it is important to understand what that term actually refers to. Here we ask service industry professionals what their perception of looking “professional” is and how that relates to our subject matter, i.e. how visible tattoos and piercings compare

when it comes to someone looking “professional”. Most of the responses state that looking professional depends less on tattoos and piercings but rather on the whole persona. Some of the phrases used to explain the same were: how the person is dressed; neatly groomed; neat hairstyle; being “polished”; how one makes the first impression with his body language and communication skills. MH1 said: “It depends on the profession; it doesn’t depend on looking conservative; it depends on where one works. Depending on the industry it could look weird. Tattoos and piercings are a bit out of place/incongruent with the look (of a suit and tie). If you see a woman in a business suit and tattoos and piercings you would think something is not ok”. In contrast, FH3 said: “So many people like football players are tattooed and sometimes are required to wear a suit and it looks kind of sexy. I like to see people in suits who are tattooed. (For me) looking professional is about having your hair done, wearing a suit, looking neat. For me it is about the overall picture”.

There is an agreement among the managers that the decision to accept tattoos and piercings depends on the brand image the organisations are trying to project to their customers. Seven of the 12 companies pointed out that visible tattoos and piercings could well be accepted if they were part of the “brand promise” of the organisation in question. MH2 said: “Professions are bound by stereotypes of how an employee should look. Therefore, an employee must represent the brand in terms of appearance”. MH4 added: “Old-fashioned brands have a different brand promise and the look must be in accordance with it”. MH1 said: “The staff should fit into the environment they work in and here the environment is very traditional, very classic”. FA1 stated: “Visible body art is not congruent with the image of airline staff being friendly”. MR1 voiced a contrasting view: “The person should not only look professional but also cool. Especially at the airport it’s a different environment; they don’t expect professional people; they expect dynamic young people and people from other cultural backgrounds. The salesperson should represent liberal thinking”.

Data analysis and findings – interviews with professionals with visible body art

Most of our respondents have had interesting and generally positive experiences during their job interviews. Some like M44 felt that as long as one was confident and self-assured even with visible body art, it would lead to success. He spoke of his experience of an interview for a senior position (general manager for three countries): “I went through six rounds. In the 3rd round it was very important to me that they see more of me, and so I rolled up my sleeves. And it showed these people that I am secure of who I am; and that matters more than anything else. If at that stage someone felt that I don’t fit the bill because of the tattoos or the piercings, then it would be their loss. There were a few looks but there weren’t any comments”. M32 was slightly less confident in the first few interviews of his career: “When I applied for my job at BW,

no one asked me about the tattoo on my neck, but later I found out that they indeed did notice that. I had done a bad job of trying to cover up my tattoo: I'd worn a jacket which I could button up all the way up to the chin, which I did. I did this because I was really in need of a job and I thought the first impression they should get should be based upon my words and not on what I look like. So, for the first round I wanted to give them a very neutral perception of me. So yes, at that point in my career I did worry about how the tattoo might seem to them. In my next job interviews, I didn't bother because by then I was more secure about my career and believed people need to take me the way I am". M31 had this to say: "I never had any issues with not finding jobs because of my tattoos. I also never searched for jobs where I knew I could have problems with my body art. So, yes, you could say I avoided looking for such jobs". This clearly goes to show that while most interview experiences were positive for our respondents, many of those we surveyed were not part of the service industry. For the few who were in such jobs, they either met the challenge by being honest and totally self-confident or had left themselves the option of covering up the tattoos for the interview.

Our respondents came from a variety of professions and from varied age groups. This has given them abundant experiences when it comes to how they have been perceived by their colleagues and higher-ups. M24, who works as a tutor in an educational institution, regularly liaises with professors and students of architecture. He previously worked at an architecture studio in Vienna where he was never perceived any different: "I think Vienna is tolerant of such things and it's pretty normal here. I got most of my visible tattoos while I worked in an architecture studio and nothing changed in the dynamics between me and my colleagues or seniors. I mostly cover my tattoos up even though I have visible ones because they are more a very personal thing for me and I don't like to show people I have them. I generally always wear long-sleeve shirts and long trousers, because I really don't like the attention of the people so much. People ask about the tattoos all the time, which really annoys me after some time". M32 works with mainly middle-aged and senior people in his job: "At RC, my colleagues are very old school. The average age is 40-ish. They make jokes sometimes. I remember once something got stolen and they were joking that perhaps it was the guy with the tattoos (me), but there was nobody taking it seriously". F23, who works in hospitality, said: "I never had any judging glances anywhere, at least not that I know of. Maybe I'm ignoring them or not noticing them. People are really cool here at the hotel. I've had no reactions other than positive. Maybe I'm really lucky or just still very young". F27, who works in the same hotel as F23, agreed that her colleagues and seniors never had any problems with her body art: "It's totally okay with my managers". She comments about her customers: "Some people, when they see the hidden septum in my nose, go 'what is in your nose?' and when I say it's a piercing, I get, 'Wow, awesome!', but sometimes also 'Why ever did you do this?'. Most of the guests are very open but there are

also guests who are not so open. They don't say anything, but you can see it from their eyes and their face".

There was a range of opinions from the tattooed professionals when it came to the policies of employers on visible body art. M44 said: "It's totally okay. If someone comes along and he doesn't fit the bill of your business, then you don't hire them. You are hiring for the business which you are and what type of business it is. I completely understand if someone looks at me and says, 'I like you, but I don't like the way you look (for my business) '". M24 agreed: "Of course it is okay. The owners created the company and they present themselves in a way *they* think is right. If they sell certain things, they have a business model for a certain market segment. So it should be kind of match, e.g. a rock-and-roll shop would be fine for someone with tattoos. But in a fancy place, then probably not, because it doesn't conform with the image". Meanwhile, F27 felt differently: "It's not fair. If I'm ever asked in an interview about my tattoos, I say it doesn't affect how I work. And it does not make another person out of me". M31 had yet a different take on this: "It doesn't matter if the person is tattooed. He has to prove himself if he is worth the job. How would an employer even know whether a non-tattooed person is a good employee or not? The fact that a person is tattooed—that already tells me a good bit about their life choices. Good tattoos are expensive, and most people have to save money for them, which means they are most of the time working hard for their money".

While some of the interviewed professionals acknowledge that such policies are not fair, some older respondents understand that the employer is to decide when it comes to setting requirements for what their employees should look like for their business needs.

Data analysis and findings – survey on general public

The online survey was the quantitative part of the research study. The responses from 188 individuals were analysed using SPSS Statistics software. Thirty-five percent of the respondents were themselves tattooed, while 65% said they did not have tattoos. Only 1.6% stated they did not know people with tattoos. Meanwhile, 21.8% said they knew of only one to four people with tattoos, and finally 76.6% said they knew of at least five people with tattoos.

The majority of the respondents stated they did not view people with tattoos and piercings as different from anyone else (71.3%), while 21.3% viewed them negatively. Only 7.4% viewed them positively. The respondents were asked if they felt that piercings and tattoos reflected what kind of a person someone was. In answering this question, 62.8% of respondents argued that body art was indeed a reflection of a person's character while 37.2% stated otherwise. Respondents had both negative and positive views of people with body art. Negative views included:

- "they have a don't-care attitude" – 31%,
- "those who seldom respect authority" – 13%,

- “criminals/prisoners” – 13%,
- “into pain” – 7%,
- “low in intelligence” – 6%,
- “blue-collar workers” – 6%.

Meanwhile, positive comments made by respondents included:

- “artsy types” – 53%,
- “cool” – 32%,
- “I love them” – 18%,
- “pleasure seeking/hedonistic” – 17%,
- “committed to the cause/determined” – 7%.

The investigation went on further exploration of potential negative attributes of people with body art in the workplace. Respondents were confronted with several statements. Only 13.3% agreed that “people with visible tattoos are intimidating”. Meanwhile, 66.5% disagreed. The statement “Tattoos and piercings look freakish or unprofessional in a work environment” rang true for 29.8% of respondents, while 45.2% thought otherwise. At the same time, 12.2% said they “would feel uncomfortable receiving a service from someone with visible tattoos”, while 78.7% disagreed with this statement. According to 23.4% of the respondents, “piercings can affect health and safety in the workplace”, while 57.5% disagreed with that statement. For 81.9% of those surveyed, it is not true that “people with visible tattoos have a wrong attitude towards work”. Only 9.6% agreed with the claim. Moreover, 54.2% of the respondents felt that “for professional reasons, people should choose wisely where they should get their tattoos”, while 26.6% disagreed with the statement.

Subsequently, respondents were placed in the role of customers potentially served by employees with body art. From this point of view, 10.6% thought that a tattooed doctor would make them uncomfortable, while 45.2% said they wouldn’t feel uncomfortable. Meanwhile, 44.1% said that would depend on what tattoo it is and where it is placed. Despite the general acceptability of body art in the workplace, 50.5% of respondents felt that, specifically in front-line service jobs, tattoos should only be accepted if they could be completely covered up, while 43.6% said they should be allowed regardless. The remaining 5.9% said tattoos should not be allowed at all.

Finally, the respondents were asked if it was fair that some employers did not want to hire tattooed and pierced people. To this question, 56.4% responded that such a practice was unfair, while 43.6% said that it was fair for employers not to hire people with visible body art. Opinions about tattoos and piercings vary among age groups and nationalities. A cross-tabulation between the age of the respondents and their general view on body art revealed that there were no major differences among the 16–25, 26–35 and 36–45 age groups. From 18% to 22% of respondents in those groups viewed people with tattoos negatively, while 70%–76% were neutral and 3%–9% were positive. In the case of respondents aged 46 to 55, more than 33% gave negative responses about people with tattoos. Meanwhile, 6.7% were positive and 60% were neutral.

The largest groups of respondents came from Austria, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and Australia. The distribution of general views on body art shows that Australia has the highest percentage of respondents who viewed tattoos and piercings negatively, at 36.4%, followed by the UK (22.2%) and the UAE (19.4%). Austria has the lowest ratio of respondents who view body art negatively (14%). The country also has the largest percentage of respondents who view people with tattoos and piercings as no different from anyone else, at 80%, compared with 72.2% in the UK, 71% in the UAE and 45.5% in Australia. Surprisingly, Australia had the highest percentage of people perceiving tattoos positively (18.2%), whereas in the three other countries the figure did not exceed 10%. The country-wise analysis of reactions to the question "Is it fair that employers don't want to hire people with body art?" revealed that 72% of Austrian respondents and only 27.3% of those in Australia felt that such a practice was unfair. The proportion for the remaining countries hovered around 50%.

Discussion

The above findings shed some light on the research questions:

- Is there prejudice towards visible body art in the service industry?
- Does visible body art affect career opportunities in the service industry?

Each of the three groups of respondents provided their own views on the subject, either corroborating or invalidating well accepted claims about people with tattoos and piercings. The first group of managers and recruiters provide an insight into company policies, how CVs are screened and how visible body art is perceived when encountered. The second group of tattooed and pierced professionals speak of their experiences with jobs in the service industry, how they are perceived by their colleagues, their interview experiences, and how they cope with the stigma on a day-to-day basis. Finally, the general public provides their views on how they perceive people with body art in general and in service industry professions in particular.

The survey revealed that the general public harbour certain stereotypes about people with body art. As seen in the results of the survey, the general attitude of the public is in favour of visible body art on others. But the survey revealed plenty of negative associations as well. These are consistent with those found by Porcella [2009] and McLeod [2014]. Moreover, it is interesting to see an age group breakdown on responses. At 33.3%, the oldest age group of 46–55-year-olds have the largest percentage of negative views about body art. This is not surprising because, given the historical associations of body art with criminals, older generations are more likely to view them negatively. The second-largest group is surprisingly the 26–35-year age group at 22.4%. This is the millennial generation; it not only tends to have liberal views on body art, but possesses more body art than other generations [Shannon-Missal, 2015]. Even more surprising is our next age group, the 16 to 25-year-olds

(the post-millennials or Generation Z), who voted negatively at 20%. The age group with the least number of negative votes on body art was the 36–45-year-olds, at 18.8%. This tells us that there will be a significant percentage of the population who view body art negatively. This prejudice could be a result of various factors: religious beliefs, upbringing, pre-conceived notions of what men and women should look like, and an inability to accept different ideas and attitudes. This has been confirmed to an extent by Porcella [2009].

A tattoo or piercing, when viewed by someone, is always subject to a perceptual process: some sort of interpretation based on the past experiences or knowledge of that individual [McShane, Von Glinow, 2018]. Tattooed professionals obviously have a lot of experience with body art in general, so theirs is an almost involuntary reaction to such stimuli. Most of our tattooed professionals talked of how they look at workmanship, aesthetics and meanings when they observe others' tattoos. Based on that there is some profiling of the person carried out. Fading colours, incorrect placement of body jewellery, rough drawing styles, swear words and sometimes even bad location choices can cause them to interpret body art in a way that makes them unconsciously analyse a person's psychological and behavioural characteristics. Depending on what their previous experiences are, these can either make a positive or negative impact on the observer. There were plenty of such instances during our interviews. Needless to say this approach was also often reflected in the interviews with managers. Most managers did not notice the workmanship quality of body art. However, aesthetics, design choices, piercing locations and tattoo locations were issues that made themselves apparent during such chats. Most interviewees believed that tattoos signify creativity, trendiness, and expressiveness—mostly positive stereotypes. But then contradictorily, body art also evoked negative stereotypes, when the subject of locations, designs and aesthetics was brought up.

Although prejudice may be a strong word in this context, it can be confirmed that a certain stigma still exists within the service industry. The stigma is not so big as previously assumed, but it is distinctly higher in some industry professions than others. From a management perspective, it can be affirmed that the industry is slowly moving forward and changing their regulations to be more inclusive. In this regard, retail organisations are leading the way with more acceptance and leeway given to this kind of self-expression. Some hotels and tour operators are also changing long-standing grooming and recruitment policies to allow employees with visible body art in.

An approach towards hiring candidates with visible body art has to do with the brand positioning of particular chains. More classical, traditional companies wish to retain their strict regulations to preserve their successful brand image. Newer chains or businesses such as boutique hotels or even traditional chains with new dining concepts are modifying regulations to include some forms of body art with certain provisions. Airlines seem to be the only industry where almost no progress has been made in this area. The only allowance some airlines have made so far is that they have allowed studs in the ears of

men. It can be assumed that the glamour of travelling the globe and seeing new destinations, combined with the extensive range of benefits that an airline employee enjoys, remains the biggest motivator for many prospective job seekers. As a result, airlines probably do not bother changing their grooming regulations and their recruitment guidelines for visible body art. They know that the pool of applicants for these jobs will never decrease to a point where they are struggling to find skilled people to work for them. Another reason could be that this helps eliminate a lot of applications.

The managers themselves were quite liberal and open minded. However, some did believe that they are unable to control the reactions of their patrons, who could be more conservative in their outlook. Tattooed professionals can also confirm the occasional occurrence of prejudice. This is true for some of these professionals in job situations as well as in personal life.

When it comes to career limitations, even for the organisations that did not allow visible tattoos and piercings, the suggestion to cover them with a plaster depended on how big the tattoo was. Long-sleeved shirts were also an option when the tattoos or piercings were on the forearms. Regarding promotional opportunities, if a person was applying for a promotion within his or her department and their future role would be customer-facing, then the same regulations would apply. If the role is not customer-facing, then these regulations would not apply.

Other than the places which have strict regulations, all recruitment processes screen applicants and their respective body art on a case-by-case basis. The overall look is what is of the utmost importance and if a person presents themselves well, he or she will be successful in interviews notwithstanding their visible body art. When it comes to promotional opportunities in management, it would be prudent to cover up the tattoos if possible because they could be offensive to some high-profile clients who are more traditional and conservative than the regulations of the organisation where the employee works. With a marked increase in the number of people choosing body art at a relatively young age, many organisations seem to take these individual qualities of extraversion, uniqueness and need for self-expression into account in their recruitment strategies.

There was another theme that seemed to stand out in the research. People who want a tattoo should wait until they are a bit older. Tattooed professionals did indeed display some form of regret with their body art later in life. That could be because of boredom, a need for change, or simply because their life has taken a different direction. Respondents spoke of their experiences of people they knew and about how those people got their partners' names tattooed on themselves only to break up with them later. Clearly, there is no correct age to determine when someone will be totally and completely satisfied with their choice of tattoo. That could vary from person to person. It also depends on what kind of design is chosen, whether it has a deep significance in one's life. Tattoo genres such as names of partners or verses of poetry can be extremely significant and meaningful when they are first chosen, but their

significance can shift or diminish as a person matures. It is important to reach an age where someone feels “settled” in life before “going in for something permanent”. There is another option that many of the tattooed professionals have gone for: to have their tattoo covered up with another larger tattoo or choose another design to surround it and transform it into something else.

Limitations and future research

Although having three distinctive groups of respondents provided comprehensive perspectives on the subject, the research approach also had some shortcomings. The fictitious CVs were created mainly for frontline positions in the hospitality industry. However, they lacked a specific role or position they would be applying for other than being for a general front-line customer-facing role. This created confusion and delays. The selection of the survey respondents was based on self-application and snowball procedures. Therefore, the research sample does not meet the conditions of statistical representativeness, which limits the reliability of the results obtained. Also, the initial pool of managers and professionals came mainly from among the authors’ acquaintances. Some others were approached through recommendations. This resulted in overrepresentation of hotels among employers participating in the research.

Future investigations could further explore the employers’ perspective by designing quantitative research based on a representative sample. This may include cross-cultural and cross-industry comparisons. Further, periodic research on all three groups (employers, employees, customers) could capture existing trends in terms of changing stereotypes and prejudice about visible body art as well as organisational policies and procedures in this area.

Conclusions

Body modification is becoming a popular form of self-expression today. Almost a third of the US population has at least one tattoo. Among the young generation, nearly one in two people are tattooed [Shannon-Missal, 2015]. The fashion is less widespread in Europe, but in countries such as Austria a third of the young people have one or more tattoos [Piccinini et al., 2016]. Therefore, the trend applies to a substantial part of most societies, including both existing and potential service industry employees. Despite its popularity, visible body art is still burdened with stereotypes and prejudice, though positive associations can be found as well. Both the literature review and the authors’ own research support this claim. However, people with tattoos are still often perceived negatively and are viewed as different than others. This creates favourable conditions for discrimination also in the service industry. Regulations and special policies apply to potential employees with visible body art. Interviewed professionals reported examples of bias but mostly

cited neutral and positive memories. Both managers and the general public tend to lean towards acceptance of visible body art, which may suggest liberal and open-minded attitudes when it comes to tattoos and piercings. However, another interpretation of the findings may be that some social groups have simply accepted body decoration as a social fact and become reconciled with its existence. Visible body art seems to be here to stay, so both researchers and practitioners should consider it as an important aspect of today's reality and accommodate to it.

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Postrzeżenie tatuaży i kolczyków w branży usługowej

Streszczenie: W artykule podjęto próbę zbadania, w jaki sposób osoby z widocznymi tatuażami i kolczykami są postrzegane w społeczeństwie. Postawiono dwa główne pytania badawcze: 1. Czy istnieją uprzedzenia wobec osób z tatuażami i kolczykami w branży usługowej? 2. Czy posiadanie tatuaży i kolczyków wpływa na przebieg kariery w branży usługowej? Aby odpowiedzieć na te pytania, zwrócono się do trzech grup respondentów: pracodawców, pracowników i klientów. W projekcie badawczym uwzględniono poglądy dwunastu organizacji usługowych i ich menedżerów, aby uzyskać wgląd w ich opinie, istniejące przepisy i praktyki rekrutacyjne. Przeprowadzono wywiady z ośmioma specjalistami z ozdobami ciała, aby dowiedzieć się więcej o ich doświadczeniach życiowych i zawodowych. Wreszcie grupa stu osiemdziesięciu ośmiu respondentów została również zbadana, aby ocenić ich reakcje na ten temat. Badanie ujawnia ukryte stereotypy i uprzedzenia, które istnieją wśród respondentów, choć w stosunkowo niewielkim stopniu. Pokazuje również, że z wyjątkiem kilku organizacji, wiele firm zatrudniało pracowników z widocznymi ozdobami ciała, przy uwzględnieniu zasad higieny i estetyki. Badanie pokazuje także pozytywne opinie na temat tatuaży i kolczyków oraz że uprzedzenia powoli zmieniają się w akceptację.

Słowa kluczowe: tatuaże, branża usługowa, kolczyki, uprzedzenia, kariera

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: M12, M51

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