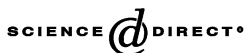




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Research note

Visible body modification (VBM): evidence from human resource managers and recruiters and the effects on employment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to measure the perceptions of hospitality industry human resource managers and recruiters of interviewees with visible tattoos and body piercings. A questionnaire was sent via e-mail to 37 human resource managers and college recruiters, which contained a single open-ended question regarding tattoos and piercing, for the purpose of obtaining some baseline data on their impact on employment. Thirty (81.08%) of the human resource managers and recruiters responded with the majority (86.67%) saying that visible tattoos and body piercings on an interviewee would be viewed negatively by their organization.

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Picture this very common scenario: A young family approaches the counter of their favorite quick service restaurant to grab a bite to eat on the way to their eldest son's baseball game. Waiting to take their order is a young lady they have not seen in the restaurant before. Along with the standard-issue company uniform, she is wearing tattoos across each set of knuckles—one hand spells love, the other spells

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hate—and a nose ring that is connected to her ear via a small chain. The young woman is nice and takes the family's order as she is trained. However, the youngest child in the family is having a hard time getting her order out because she can not stop staring at the "hardware" on the order taker's face. In fact, it is a very awkward situation for the other family members who are trying to hurry the process along to avoid any kind of unpleasantness. Once the family is seated at their table with their food, the topic of conversation centers on the appearance of the restaurant's order taker.

What were once considered identifying marks for those who were in the military, prison, or part of the biker crowd, tattoos have become very popular in American society. Along with tattoos, body piercings—particularly on the face—have also risen in popularity in the last several years. Men and women of all ages are participating in the current tattoo/body-piercing trend. While there are many issues involved in this trend (including raising the concern for safety and sanitation standards for "artists" who supply these services and determining the reasons some choose to "self-mutilate"), the focus of this research was on the effects of having visible tattoos and body piercings on a person's possible selection for employment.

The purpose of this preliminary research was to examine the perceptions held by hospitality industry human resource managers and recruiters of interviewees with visible body modification (VBM) such as tattoos and body piercings. The contributions lie in the clarification of the importance of appearance on hiring in the hospitality industry.

While several articles have been written on tattooing and piercing from the perspectives of art, medicine, anthropology, history, and ethnology, research regarding VBM and its effect on employment in the business literature are very limited. Most articles addressing the issue, from a business perspective, were found in newspapers or trade magazines.

"Everybody does something to their bodies to communicate who they are. Even if just to comb their hair" (Adler, 1999). According to Selekman (2003), body decoration is made up of three types: painting, adornment, and modification. While some of these are temporary, some are permanent and could be considered mutilation. Body painting is temporary and includes such practices as putting on make-up on a daily basis or face painting for children. Body adornment includes such practices as cutting/styling hair or wearing jewelry. Body modification is the most extreme and the most permanent of the three classifications of body decoration. These modifications include breast implants, cosmetic surgery, tattoos, and piercing (although pierced holes can eventually grow back together, there may be visible scars). Branding and scarification are the practices that some may view as mutilation.

"Although relatively rare in Western culture, body piercing with needles, rings, metal posts, bones, and other adornments predates human history. The literature of anthropology is replete with examples of exotic decorative and ritual practices involving piercing, scarification, and tattooing" (Stewart, 2000). From around the world, Stewart (2000) provides examples of piercing among Egyptian royalty; Greek and Roman slaves; men and women in ancient Persia and Babylon; Spanish women; the French and English; the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Incas; those in India, Tibet,



and Nepal; African and Middle Eastern puberty rituals; and American Nez Perce Indians. Painting the body with henna has been used for over 5000 years in Asia and Africa (Selekman, 2003).

Depending on the part of the world, the reasons for the tattoos and piercing vary greatly, including cultural, tribal, religious, assorted rituals, identification, markings for warriors, and others. Today, in modern Western society, the reasons for getting tattooed and pierced vary, as well. “Motivations include aesthetics; sensual pleasure or play; a symbol of commitment to a relationship, possession, or a rite of passage; or a sign of reclamation (survival of abuse, for example)” (Stewart, 2000). With many high-profile athletes and entertainers sporting tattoos and piercing, part of the attraction to “be like Mike” may influence young people to adopt similar looks. In addition, for some, VBM represents their desire to be nonconformists or rebels—just the opposite reason for those where such practices originated such as in New Guinea, Amazonia, and Sudan (Gardner, 2000). Regardless of the reason for getting the tattoo or piercing, those that are visible attract attention—and not all of the attention is positive.

As the old saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This holds especially true during an employment interview. “One in every 10 Americans have tattoos, up from one out of every hundred three decades ago. Upper middle-class women between the ages of 20 and 40...fuel most of the growth” (Org, 2003). While VBM appears to be growing in popularity among the general population, service-oriented businesses do not appear to be allowing the look while on the job. The retail giant, Wal-Mart, does not allow facial piercing and requires that tattoos be covered. Quick service restaurant leaders, Subway and McDonald’s also limit piercing and tattoos; however, dictating the grooming standard for employees among franchised units is a bit more difficult. While corporate offices can specify the look for employees in their franchised operations through the operations manual, enforcement can be challenging. Starbucks, whose units are all company owned, allows no piercings other than the ears and does not allow visible tattoos or unnatural-looking hair colors (Girion, 2000).

According to a survey by Vault.com, a career information web site (Gibbons, 2003),

Fifty eight percent of managers would be less likely to offer a job to an applicant with tattoos or piercings. Employers have a pretty wide latitude in what goes into their hiring and promoting decisions, and they are within their legal rights to take tattoos or piercings into consideration. That doesn’t mean they’ll necessarily make a big deal about it.

From the same survey (Mallory, 2001), “...inked and pierced workers who responded to the survey reported a decided lack of equal opportunity: some 18% of employees and nearly a quarter of the managers surveyed said such body modifications have hindered their careers and dulled their prospects.” While people may have the option to remove piercings or cover visible tattoos while trying to get a job, that becomes very difficult if the tattoos are on the hands, face, or neck.



“In a Sales and Marketing Management survey of 651 executives, an overwhelming majority said they would avoid hiring sales representative who were sloppily or unfashionably dressed, or those who had visible body piercings or tattoos” (Ligos, 2001). Those who are pierced and visibly tattooed will generally admit they are always being judged based on their appearance. Some people are afraid when they encounter someone with tattoos and piercings. While VBM has gained in popularity, it is still not common enough to not draw attention and remains controversial.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent acts, protect classes of individuals from being discriminated against based on race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age, and disability. Nowhere in the legislation is there specific protection from discrimination for those whose appearance is out of the business norm, except those associated with certain races or religious beliefs. However, even those practices may be called into question. According to Vanitzian (2001), when establishing dress codes, “employers are allowed to consider two factors: the safety or hygiene in the performance of the job and the image that is required to operate profitably.” While foodservice operations have a very real concern for safety and hygiene, the hospitality industry, as a whole, needs to concern itself with how employees are representing their respective companies.

What do hospitality industry recruiters and human resources managers have to say about visible tattoos and body piercing on interviewees? Is there an adverse impact upon hiring? How can employers best convey their grooming standards?

A self-administered, on-line survey questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was sent to 37 industry professionals who recruit on college campuses for hospitality program interns and graduates. The e-mail containing the questionnaire was sent only one time. The question asked was, “What view does your organization take of interviewees, regardless of gender, who have visible tattoos and/or piercings (nose, tongue, eye brows, single or multiple piercings of the ears, etc.)?”

Recruiters or human resources managers from 19 companies—including 9 hotels, 6 restaurants, 2 managed services companies, 1 theme park, and 1 recreation area—answered the question.

Of the 30 responses, 26 (86.67%) conveyed a negative feeling toward the appearance of tattoos and piercing on interviewees, 3 (10.00%) responses were neutral, and 1 (3.33%) response was positive regarding tattoos/piercing.

Advertising agencies, technology companies, and the sports and entertainment fields have countless participants who are pierced and tattooed. While there are similar examples in the hospitality industry—such as W Hotels and Hard Rock Cafes, to name a couple—where visible tattoos and body piercing are allowed and may be even encouraged, the majority of the hospitality industry remains somewhat conservative. However, will the tightness of the labor market have an effect on the company grooming standards for current and future hospitality employees?

The findings of this research are somewhat limited due to the sample size. However, the study does provide some baseline information about the effects of VBM on employment, as there are few, if any, studies that have explored the topic



from a hospitality industry perspective. Replication of this research using a larger sample is needed to validate the findings for generalizability purposes.

Another area for future research is in determining if hospitality companies in different geographic locations (in the United States and around the world) have differing levels of tolerance for employees with visible tattoos and piercings. Also, if there is more tolerance for VBM in certain areas, what is the effect in those areas of attracting employees who do not have visible tattoos and piercings? Are prospective employees without tattoos and piercings “intimidated” by the thought of working with those who have them, and thus, choose not to apply?

The risk environment in which hospitality businesses operate can be rather large due to the number of employees required to get the job done. Have there been legal challenges to company dress codes, specifically any regarding visible tattoos and piercings?

Perhaps the most important research to be conducted on VBM needs to include customers/guests and their willingness to be served by employees with visible tattoos and piercings or their perceptions after having been served by such employees. Does VBM by a company’s employees affect consumers’ decisions to patronize certain hospitality businesses?

While there are a few exceptions, the hospitality industry overall tends to remain conservative in its approach to employee grooming. The law says that operators may impose a dress code when safety is an issue or the company image is at stake. As visible tattoos and piercings become more mainstream in the United States, hospitality companies who wish to maintain the “all-American boy and girl” look may need to reexamine their grooming standards. It is one thing to have a desired professional appearance in mind; it is quite another to try and enforce such a standard without defining it and making it very clear to potential employees—perhaps even before the candidate shows up for the interview with a recruiter or human resource manager.

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