Visible Tattoos and Employment in the Restaurant Service Industry

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to assess restaurant managers' decision to hire servers as a function of the applicants' tattoo status and gender. Managers are shown a resume and a photograph of a potential job applicant. The photograph depicts either a man or woman, with or without visible tattoos. Based on past research, Alternative Hypothesis One predicts that tattooed applicants will be less likely to be hired than non-tattooed applicants. Additionally, Alternative Hypothesis Two predicts that tattooed female applicants will be less likely to be hired than tattooed male applicants. One hundred ninety-two managers employed at restaurants located in the Grand Strand region of South Carolina participate in the study. The results of this study suggest that employers still view visible tattoos negatively with respect to employment in the food service industry. This study demonstrates a preference for restaurant managers to hire individuals without visible tattoos. Additional analysis reveals no significant difference exists between genders within the same category of tattoo/non-tattoo status. However, employers consider non-tattooed females more employable than both tattooed males and females, while non-tattooed males show no such significant difference.

Keywords: Visible body modification, tattoos, employment, labor market discrimination.

Introduction

For most of the 20th Century, tattoos were identified with "fringe" personalities and groups, such as outlaw bikers, sailors, circus freaks, gang-members, convicts, and punks (Swanger, 2006). These individuals and groups used tattoos to signify their outsider status in and rejection of mainstream society (Wohlrab, Stahl, Rammsayer, and Kappeler, 2007). However, over the past two decades, tattoos have become more acceptable to mainstream society (Swanger, 2006). Approximately 36% of Americans between 18 and 25 have at least one tattoo and 40% of Americans age 26 to 40 have one or more tattoos (Pew Research Center, 2007). In today's society, tattoos are sported by college professors, soccer moms, and sorority girls. Recent studies document the trend, especially among younger generations, to use tattoos as a form of self-expression. Atkinson and Young (2001) and Jefferys (2000) describe the use of tattoos to express their individuality and chronicle their life experiences. Others use tattoos to express control or ownership of their body in a world they perceive as over-commercialized and alienating (Forbes, 2001; Jefferys, 2000). Still others use body modification as a means of affiliating with a group, such as a fraternity or sorority, a branch of the military, or a religious organization (Forbes, 2001; Gilbert, 2001).

In spite of the increase in the number of people wearing tattoos and the changes in the motivations for acquiring tattoos, certain stigmas and stereotypes about tattooed people exist. Some individuals perceive those with tattoos as being deviant, lacking good judgment, possessing low self-worth, sexually promiscuous, self-destructive, heavy drinkers, and/or dangerous (Forbes, 2001; Jefferys, 2000; Martin, 1997, Swami & Furnham, 2007). Women with tattoos are perceived more negatively than tattooed men (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). In addition to research investigating the sociological implications of the current popularity of tattoos, several studies investigate the implications of having visible tattoos on an individual's employability.

Ligos (2001) finds that 77% of managers report that they feel sales representatives with visible tattoos and piercings have a more difficult time making sales compared to sales representatives without visible tattoos and piercings. Swanger (2006) finds employers in the hospitality industry reluctant to hire employees possessing tattoos and other visible body modifications (VBMs), such as piercings. Approximately 87% of the human resource managers in the hospitality industry surveyed say that visible body modification is viewed negatively. Miller, Nicols, and Eure (2009) report that employees view peer-level coworkers with a facial tattoo and piercings as less acceptable for jobs which require direct contact with customers. Additionally, an online survey by Vault.com, a career intelligence website, demonstrates that employees feel that co-workers and employees are hindered by having tattoos and/or body piercings. In Vault.com's 2001 survey, 81% of employees feel that opinions are "hindered" by tattoos and body piercings. In Vault.com's 2007 survey, only 64% of employees have the same opinion (Vault 2007).

In a comparable study of labor market discrimination, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) address employability and the perception of race. The authors find that resumes responding to help wanted ads in Boston and Chicago that are assigned White-sounding names receive 50 percent more callbacks than identical resumes with African-American sounding names. The present study is designed to assess restaurant managers' decision to hire servers as a function of the applicants' tattoo status and gender. Managers are shown a resume and a photograph of a potential job applicant. The photograph depicts either a man or woman, with or without visible tattoos. Based on past research, H1 predicts that tattooed applicants are less likely to be hired than non-tattooed applicants. H2 predicts that tattooed female applicants are less likely to be hired than tattooed male applicants.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-two managers employed at restaurants located in the Grand Strand region of South Carolina participate in the study. Of the 158 managers who report their gender, 95 are men and 58 are women. The mean experience level for the 155 managers who report the length of time in their current managerial position is 5.46 years (SD = 6.58).

Materials

The materials for the study consist of applicant resumes, applicant photographs, and a survey. Two resumes are utilized; one describing a female applicant (Jennifer Jones) and one describing a male applicant (Jason Jones). With the exception of the applicant's name, each resume describes a college business major seeking a restaurant service position. The resume indicates that the applicant is a President's List student who has a lengthy record of experience in the service industry. A male and a female sociology major agreed to pose for photographs as the job applicants. Two photographs were taken of each student wearing a short-sleeved shirt. For each gender, one photo shows extensive tattoos on the arms of the applicant (achieved by wearing a removable tattoo sleeve) and the other photo shows no tattoos on the applicant's arms.

Figure 1: VBM/non-VBM applicant photographs, female and male

These photographs are presented in Figure 1. The survey form has a space to record the name of the restaurant and a series of questions about the job applicant, including the question "Would you hire this person as a server?" Two additional items are included for the manager to record gender and length of time in the current position.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a junior-level sociology research methods course collected data for this field experiment over four semesters. Students were instructed to visit casual dining restaurants which served low to moderately priced meals and to ask the host/hostess if they could speak to the manager of the restaurant. Students introduced themselves and informed the managers that their research methods class was conducting a study examining qualifications for employment in the restaurant service industry. Students told managers they would be asked to look at a resume and photo of a hypothetical applicant and to complete a short survey. If a manager agreed to participate in the study, the student gave the manager the materials and then stepped away from the manager while the manager completed the survey. Students then thanked the manager for participation and provided the manager with the business card of the research method's course instructor to obtain the results of the study.

During two of the four semesters, managers were shown the resume and photograph of a female applicant and during the other two semesters the managers were shown the resume and photograph of a male applicant. Within each semester students were instructed to randomly select a tattooed or non-tattooed photograph before entering each restaurant. Ninety-one managers viewed a photo of a female applicant (60 managers saw the tattooed female photo and 31 saw the non-tattooed female photo) and 101 managers were viewed a photo of a male applicant (58 managers saw the tattooed male photo and 43 saw the non-tattooed male photo).

Results

Table 1 presents theresults from the field experiment. The data from the experiment is analyzed using a Chi-square to estimate the significance in the difference in employment opportunities between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals. The results show significant differences in the willingness of managers to hire tattooed and non-tattooed individuals ($p < 0.05$) with 87.8% of employers stating they would hire a non-tattooed individual, whereas only 70.2% state they would grant employment to individuals possessing visible tattoos. Since a significant difference exists in restaurant employer willingness to hire VBM versus non-VBM individuals, H1 receives support.

Table 1: Chi-square analysis of employer willingness to hire VBM/non-VBM individual

	Tattoo Status				
	Tattooed		Non-Tattooed		
Employeer Response	*n*	%	*n*	%	X^2
Would Hire	83	70.3	65	87.8	7.884[a]
Would Not Hire	35	29.7	9	12.2	

a. Fisher's Exact Test: 1-sided $p = 0.003$, 2-sided $p = 0.005$

The data from the field experiment is divided by gender and Chi-square analysis is used on the two sample groups (see Table 2). The results show a significant difference between the female sample groups; however, the male groups only achieve a probability below $p=0.05$ for one-sided significance. H2 receives limited support.

Table 2: Chi-square analysis of employer willingness to hire VBM/non-VBM individual, divided by gender

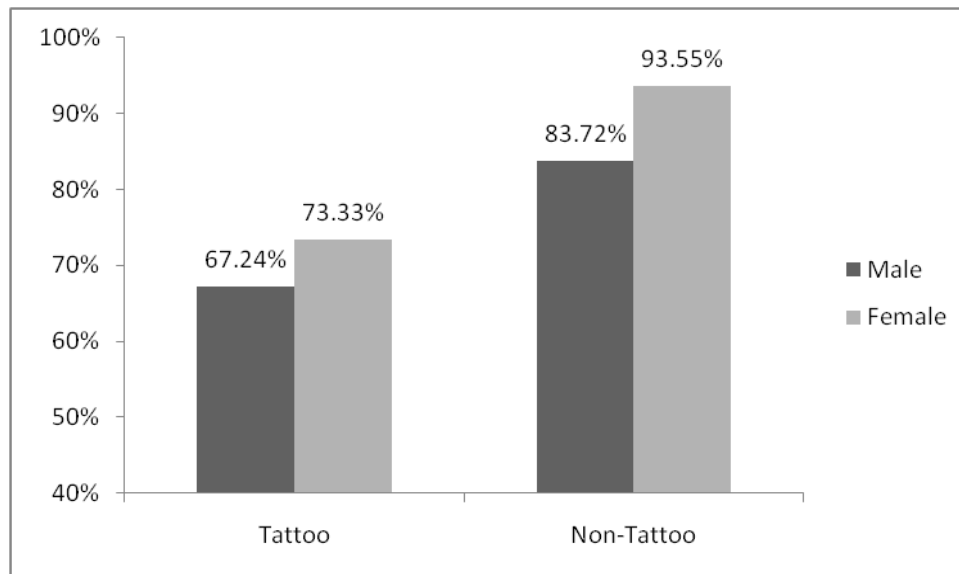|		Tattoo Status				
		Tattooed		Non-Tattooed		
	Employeer Response	*n*	%	*n*	%	X^2
Male	Would Hire	39	67.2	36	83.7	3.508[a]
	Would Not Hire	19	32.2	7	16.3	
Female	Would Hire	44	73.3	29	93.5	5.264[b]
	Would Not Hire	16	26.7	2	6.5	

a. Fisher's Exact Test: 1-sided $p = 0.049$, 2-sided $p = 0.079$
b. Fisher's Exact Test: 1-sided $p = 0.017$, 2-sided $p = 0.026$

Sensitivity Analysis

Separating the potential employees into four groups (tattooed/non-tattooed, male/female) and using ANOVA shows a significant difference between the means of the sample groups ($p = 0.023$). However, the variances of the sample groups are not homogenous. Therefore, the use of robust tests of equality of means is required. The two tests used also show significant differences between sample means (Welsh [$p = 0.004$] and Brown-Forsythe [$p = 0.013$]).The non-homogeneity of the sample groups' variances also requires the use of specialized post-hoc analysis. Tamhane's T2 post-hoc analysis reveals managers will hire non-tattooed females at a significantly greater rate than either tattooed males ($p = 0.006$) or tattooed females ($p = 0.040$). Willingness to hire non-tattooed males is not significantly different from any other sample group. Figure 2 shows the different willingness to hire percentages by gender and VBM.

Figure 2: Employer willingness to hire potential employee given gender and VBM

The significant difference present between gender/tattooed sample groups demonstrated in Chi-square analysis is reinforced by the ANOVA results. Post-hoc analysis reveals this significance stems from restaurant managers' increased willingness to hire non-tattooed females, suggesting acceptance of H2.

Discussion

Although body modification has gained acceptance among the general public, the results of this study suggest that visible tattoos are still viewed negatively with respect to employment in the food service industry. This study demonstrates a preference for restaurant managers to hire individuals without visible tattoos. These findings reinforce the results of Gibbons (2003) and Swanger (2006) indicating employers are more likely to hire non-tattooed individuals. Additional analysis reveals no significant difference exists between genders within the same category of tattoo/non-tattoo status. However, non-tattooed females are considered significantly more employable than both tattooed males and females, while non-tattooed males show no such significant difference. Possibly the most interesting result of this field study is the significant increase in managers' willingness to hire non-tattooed females over both tattooed males and females. Because the managers demonstrate no similar preference toward non-tattooed males, this suggests females sacrifice a competitive advantage for employment by obtaining a visible tattoo.

Alternatively, just as Swami and Furnham (2007) find perceptions of tattooed females are negatively biased, such views from restaurant managers could be indicative of increased bias against females possessing visible tattoos over males with similar body modification. Moving forward, additional research concerning restaurant perception of visible tattoos on customer-facing restaurant employees could add further insight into managers' apparent preference for non-tattooed employees. Furthermore, a study could examine the positive and negative preconceptions managers form concerning a female tattooed/non-tattooed potential applicant. This would assist in addressing whether the significance in non-tattooed females derives from positive perceptions about non-tattooed females or negative perceptions regarding tattooed females. Next, these positive and negative preconceptions could be examined from the perspective of the gender and tattoo status of the managers making hiring decisions. Lastly, perceptions and hiring practices could be examined further by showing managers pictures of multiple applicants that vary by gender and tattoo status.

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