

Hiring and Tattoos: An Analysis of Generational Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between age of employers and attitude towards individuals with visible tattoos during the hiring process. There has been little consideration given to the relationship between the workforce and body art (Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones, 2009). Negative attitudes towards tattoos were, in the past, much more common, while current attitudes are much more accepting. Given the shift in perceptions, it is likely that age is related to attitude towards visible tattoos. Therefore, the assumption is that there is a significant difference among age with regard to attitude towards tattoos at work. For this study, 241 participants were conveniently sampled, and were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their perspectives toward hiring employees with visible tattoos. In the sample collected, there was a larger number of female participants (158 females and 83 males), and the average age was 40.45 with a median age of 38. Results revealed there is a significant difference between age and attitude toward hiring individuals with tattoos. Specifically, older people may be more hesitant to hire these individuals. These findings suggest that the age of the decision maker may be a substantial factor in predicting hiring outcomes, and are useful in understanding attitudes concerning body art in the workforce.

Keywords: age, discrimination, employment, hiring, visible tattoos.

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Since the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination in the workforce has decreased considerably, however there are many issues involving prejudice towards certain groups of people (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). One group that may be discriminated against is people with various forms of body modification art, such as tattoos and piercings. Although tattoos are much more accepted now than they were in the past, many job seeking individuals are consistently being turned down because of their visible body art (Timming, 2014). This may be due in part to some employers' idea that tattooed people have low self-image, behave in deviant ways, and are self-destructive (Brallier, Maguire, Smith, & Palm, 2011). Are differences in attitude regarding body art by age of employer a reason some are not getting hired? Given the recent popularity of tattoos, it is imperative that more is known about the relationship between visible tattoos and job discrimination. Further, since it is now common to see people with at least one tattoo, it is essential to address and understand how tattooed individuals are viewed. Hence, the purpose of this research study is to provide insight into the relationship between age of employers and their outlook on hiring individuals with visible tattoos.

Contrary to popular belief, tattoos have been in existence for thousands of years (Jones & Hobbs, 2015). In ancient times, tattoo designs were much more elementary and people were at risk of infection due to lack of technology and inadequate knowledge of proper hygiene (Kerner, 2013). Throughout history, tattooing has been used for many different purposes, and has had numerous functions (Swanger, 2006). It has been discovered that some 5000 years ago, acupunctural regions of the body had been inked (Schmid, 2013), suggesting that tattoos may have been used in medicinal and healing rituals. Although tattoos may have been used for healing and/or protection, it is unclear whether they were voluntary or mandated. Permanent tattoos have also been used as a means of identifying an individual as part of a group, including involuntary branding by a superior member of a class (Schmid, 2013), and cutting or pricking with a sharp object (Kerner, 2013).

Despite the long history of obligatory tattoos, the popularity of voluntary tattoos used for aesthetic purposes considerably increased in the early twentieth century, with European aristocrats acquiring interest (Schmid, 2013). Up until this time, tattoos were primarily associated with individuals in the lower class, immigrants, and members of the armed forces (Kerner, 2013). In the early twentieth century, tattooing began to be regarded as an art form, and was a period during which many people who received tattoos were able to feel a sense of freedom and independence (Schmid, 2013). Although tattooing became more prevalent during this time, the number of individuals who have them in the modern world has drastically risen. A survey conducted in 2010 revealed 38 percent of 18 - 29 old Americans have at least one tattoo, 30 percent of those being visible (Timming, 2014).

In modern society, reasons for obtaining body art vary just as they did in previous centuries (Swanger, 2006). One of the central reasons individuals have body art is to convey a sense of who they are and to visually express themselves (Brallier et al., 2011). Today's tattoos may play a role in one's devotion to some kind of relationship, object or belief, or may play a role in pure aesthetics (Swanger, 2006). Tattoos have become increasingly popular, and modern tattoos no longer have the same social connotation they did in previous years. Nevertheless, they are still disapproved by some (Brallier et al., 2011), including employers who view body modification as unprofessional.

People make decisions regarding where on their body they should place a tattoo, and this may have a significant impact on their employability, particularly if a tattoo is visible. A visible tattoo is defined as art on one's body that is either difficult to cover or is uncovered as a personal choice, such as on the neck, hands, arms, and face (Timming, 2014). It is important to study the attitudes towards individuals with tattoos, particularly visible tattoos, as the population of young people that have them is growing rapidly (Arndt & Glassman, 2012). Whereas tattoos used to be primarily worn by bikers, musicians, and sailors (Bible, 2010), they can now be seen on professors, soccer moms, and many other groups of people (Brallier et al., 2011), which would have been uncommon and almost inconceivable years ago. In 1936, it was estimated that just 10 percent of Americans had a tattoo (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). Now, they are especially popular among the younger generations, more specifically women between the ages of 17 and 25 (Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones, 2009).

Although tattoos have recently become an increasingly popular fad, there are legal issues in the workforce that come along with them (Jones & Hobbs, 2015). Discrimination claims have increased, as some employers are still avoiding both hiring and promoting individuals with visible tattoos. (Kramer, 2006). For example, in *EEOC v Red Robin Gourmet Burgers* (2005), an employee refused to cover a tattoo on his wrist, and as a consequence, was fired due to the policy of the company, which stated tattoos and piercings must not be visible. The employee claimed the tattoo was on behalf of his religion, and it would be a sin to cover it. Claiming the company had violated religious rights due to Title VII, the court favored the employee, stating there was enough evidence he had displayed true religious belief (Kramer, 2006). Why does this prejudice occur in the workforce? Some managers/employers, even those with positive stances towards the visibly tattooed, are still biased because they believe their customers have negative attitudes towards visible tattoos (Timming, 2014).

Regardless of their personal feelings towards tattoos, if an employer feels his or her customers or clients will view tattoos as unprofessional, the employer will likely not want to hire an individual with tattoos that are visible. This concept is demonstrated by a study conducted by Nancy Swanger (2006) in which human resource managers and recruiters commented on their company's policies regarding visible tattoos. Most of the respondents had negative statements regarding tattoos and voiced their concerns, such as what the guests will think of their staff's appearance (Swanger, 2006). Again, while some employers may have a general positive stance on tattoos, they may be concerned with how their customers will view them. This is additionally illustrated by a specific study conducted in which 242 employers in eight different industries were surveyed over the phone assessing their opinion towards individuals with visible tattoos (Bekhor, Bekhor, & Gandrabur, 1995). The results indicated that the hospitality industry, the beauty industry, and retail were the least likely to employ a person with observable tattoos (Bekhor, Bekhor, & Gandrabur, 1995); these industries consist of employees who are in constant contact with customers.

Because of the increase in discrimination claims, employers must be aware that discrimination in employment based on tattoos is not illegal, *except* when there is a claim that the tattoo is part of the individual's affiliation with a protected class (Kramer, 2006). Some examples of the protected groups that cannot be targeted for discrimination include those based on race, sex, national origin, age, religion, and disability (Levit, 2012). *Riggs v City of Fort Worth* (2002) was a case in which a police officer who was told he must cover his tattoos, claimed the department discriminated against him because of his race (white), sex (male), and origin (Celtic). The court favored the city, however, because the officer did not possess evidence he was discriminated against

under any of the circumstances mentioned, as many other white, male police officers were also required to cover their tattoos (Bible, 2010). In this case, the tattoo was not part of the individual's affiliation with a protected class, and according to the court, equal protection rights were not infringed upon. Notably, 1 in every 10 Americans has at least one tattoo, as opposed to 30 years ago, 1 in every 100 (Swanger, 2006), therefore it is important that employees review their policies and laws regarding discrimination when it comes to dress code. It is unlikely that there will be any serious changes to Title VII in the near future (Levit, 2012), despite the transformation in workforce demographics. Nevertheless, focusing on the change in demographics and the cultural differences between generations is crucial in predicting the future of hiring practices.

Most managers who are making hiring decisions are older, and there are major cultural differences based on generational group membership. Since many young individuals are getting tattoos, there may be a different outlook in the future regarding hiring practices. The young people of today, Generation X and Y, will be the ones carrying out the hiring in the future (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). Therefore, employers' perspectives on individuals with visible tattoos today, could very well be different than the perspectives of employers ten and twenty years from now. Despite all that is currently known about how personal beliefs and values influence hiring decisions, best practice dictates that hiring is based exclusively upon objective criteria. Therefore, it is important to address the gap in the literature regarding the relationship between age and perceptions of visible tattoos, and to document that the stigma associated with body art is gradually diminishing. This leads to the hypothesis that there will be a significant difference in perceptions of tattoos in hiring between age groups.

Method

Participants

Participants all living in the United States were conveniently sampled ($N= 241$), and collected via Internet, specifically SurveyMonkey – an online customizable and anonymous survey tool. Participation was entirely voluntary, as well as anonymous. Data was collected by emailing adults over the age of 18. Ages ranged from 16-77 years, however the 16 year old was dropped from the study due to inclusion criteria. Further, there were 158 females to 83 males, with an average age of 40.45, and a median age of 38.

Instrumentation

A researcher-developed survey of 28 questions was filled out to determine participants' perceptions on tattoos in the workplace. Half of the questions were based on personal and demographic attributes of the participant (e.g., level of education, gender, years in current profession). The other half of the questions were based on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These Likert Scale items on the survey were developed in order to measure individuals' attitudes on hiring employees with tattoos, for example "I would never hire someone with visible tattoos." Four of these items were reverse scored, to reduce response bias and enhance validity of the measure.

Procedure

A recruitment email was sent to individuals known to the primary investigator with a request to follow a link to SurveyMonkey where the informed consent and survey were found. In addition, email recipients were asked to forward the link to other professionals in the field who were willing to participate. Lastly, a link to the consent form and survey were placed on the researcher's social media pages (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), which also requested participation and led to a link for

Age * "I would never hire someone with visible tattoos" Crosstabulation

the informed consent form that gave detailed information about the study. As soon as participants read the informed consent and agreed to participate, they were able to take the survey. The expected time to complete the questionnaire was roughly 10-15 minutes.

Results

Results show that there is significance for the statement "I would never hire someone with visible tattoos." The chi-square test table below shows a Sig. (p) value of .018, which is less than the specified .05 alpha level, revealing that there is a statistically significant difference between age and attitudes towards hiring individuals with tattoos.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.090 ^a	2	.018
Likelihood Ratio	8.337	2	.015
N of Valid Cases	238		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.92.

More specifically, to determine if age is associated with attitudes towards people with tattoos during the hiring process, 238 participants (118 participants under the age of 38 and 120 participants 38 and older) were individually asked to identify if they would never hire someone with visible tattoos. Of the group under the age of 38, 98 disagreed with the statement, and 5 agreed. Of the group 38 and older, 82 disagreed, and 15 agreed. Out of the total 241 participants that took the survey, 3 did not respond to this particular statement. The chi-square findings reveal there is a statistically significant difference in attitude with respect to age ($p=.018$, $\alpha=.05$). These results support the initial hypothesis.

Count

		"I would never hire someone with visible tattoos"			Total
		DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	
Age	UNDER 38	98	15	5	118
	38 AND OVER	82	23	15	120
Total		180	38	20	238

Discussion

Since face-to-face interviews are still one of the most predominant measures used in selection, it is important to understand perceptions of employers when faced with hiring decisions. Therefore, is it meaningful to conclude these findings suggest that age may be a substantial factor in predicting the hiring of applicants with visible tattoos. Although the data shows there is a relationship between age and attitudes towards hiring individuals with tattoos, the chi square analysis does not allow for a direction of difference; it is not known whether negative attitudes increase with age or decrease with age. In addition, the survey instrument, which was created by the researcher, cannot be validated, adding limitation to the study. That said, these findings can be explained by Andrew Timming (2014), who conducted a study concluding the majority of hiring managers in his sample had unfavorable prejudices about hiring visibly tattooed individuals. Alternatively, a study was presented in which 257 college students, most likely a younger generation of participants than the previous study, had favorable attitudes towards tattoos, while only 68 had unfavorable (Totten et al., 2009).

One of the main concerns for employers and hiring managers is how customers perceive their organization; this includes wanting to display a sense of professionalism. The question is whether or not tattoos will have less of a negative connotation in the future, and whether hiring individuals with tattoos will be seen in the same light as hiring individuals without tattoos. Recent literature has shown that society has become much more accepting of tattoos and other forms of visible body art, however there are still many questions concerning employee/employer discrimination. Therefore, future research should consider factors such as training managers in appropriate hiring practices. In addition, research should look at how customer behavior is altered when an employee has visible tattoos. Although this study does not consider gender, future research may explore differences in men and women employees with tattoos, and employers' perceptions of each.

Regardless of gender or any other demographics, many people with tattoos and other forms of body art such as facial piercings often feel as though they are judged, and at times feel rejected despite how well they qualify for a particular position (Ellis, 2014). Therefore, employers should be more careful about their own biases in hiring potential candidates, since there are still discriminatory attitudes towards those with visible tattoos. The changing demographics and the rapid increase in visible tattoos may result in a significant decrease in these negative attitudes in the

near future. Hence, the millennials of today who are the main cohort responsible for the growth in tattoos will, in time, be the ones hiring, challenging current discriminatory attitudes. Like-me bias (hiring employees that are more similar to the interviewer/hiring manager) will most likely be a driving factor in the probable decrease in this prejudice. Since many young people of today have tattoos, it is probable they are more likely to hire someone with tattoos than are people of older generations.

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