
BODY ADORNMENT: A COMPARISON OF THE ATTITUDES OF BUSINESSPEOPLE AND STUDENTS IN THREE STATES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of 1,412 students and 581 business persons from Arkansas, Ohio and California, regarding visible tattoos and body piercings, called body adornment, in order to develop recommendations for faculty and students. Using a correlation, the dependent variables that proved significant and positive at the .01 level of testing for both students and businesses included: whether the respondent had visible tattoos or body piercings, whether the respondent would cover up a visible tattoo or piercings for a job interview, the extent to which the respondent used drugs and alcohol, and dealings with the public. The factors that were not significant for students were their gender, school, race, major, GPA, and age. Among business people, minorities and men, particularly older men, tended to be significantly less favorable to body adornment than Caucasians, women and younger business people even though all were negative. Students need to understand that business perceptions about such adornment could hurt their chances of getting a good job. Recommendations are provided for students as well as faculty who are interested in helping students prepare for their careers.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s and 1980s, many changes took place in the typical office, but at least one thing was easy: when people went for job interviews prepared for careers in business, they felt comfortable in their conservative business attire. Then came the 1990s, and corporate dress codes began to relax (Zielinski, 2005). Before long, this trend toward casual dress in business offices spread across the country. Originally, companies instituted “casual Fridays” on which employees could dress down. Over the next decade, business attire became more casual every day of the week. Interestingly, one of the things that had increased during this time is the number of people with body adornment (e.g., tattoos and/or piercings) (Smith, 2003, Zielinski, 2005).

Ironically, as the use of body adornment has increased, the return to a more conservative dress code, particularly with employees required to meet the public, has occurred (Drew 2000). Employers want potential employees to “...look professional on interview” (Needleman, 2007). Employees had become too casual.

What began as a day that meant slacks and a blazer rather than a suit had too often morphed into employees who wore jeans with holes, sandals, and t-shirts.

Unfortunately, the younger employees had never known anything but a casual work environment. What would these young people—and other employees—think about the newer, more formal business atmosphere? While changing their manner of dress is one thing, how will they feel about covering their tattoos if they have them or getting tattoos if they don't yet have them? More important is what do employers think about such body adornment? Is there a generation gap with respect to attire? What other factors determine attitudes toward body adornment and dress between students and employers? For example, will attitudes vary among traditionally liberal California, largely rural Arkansas, and Ohio, home of the largest university in the United States? We wished to explore all of these issues and more in this research in order to help us understand if there is a difference in attitude to help our students find work in an ever-tightening job market.

PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes or perceptions of students and businesspeople regarding visible tattoos and body piercings relative to employment. For the purposes of this study, body adornment includes *visible* tattoos and body piercings defined as “tattoos and body piercings—other than one earring per ear for women—that are visible when dressed for work.” Another purpose of the study is to develop recommendations for faculty and students regarding tattoos and body piercings in the workplace.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

Students in selected but varied classes at nine universities in Ohio, California and Arkansas, as well as businesspeople from those same states, were asked to anonymously complete a survey pertaining to visible tattoos and piercings. Of these nine schools, seven were accredited by AACSB and two were not. A total of 1,412 surveys were completed. Schools participating in the survey ranged from Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, with slightly over 3,000 undergraduate students, to Ohio State University, which boasts the highest enrollment in the United States at almost 52,000 students.

In Arkansas, the two schools included Arkansas State University-Jonesboro, with 187 respondents, and Henderson State University, with 155 respondents, which yielded a total of 342 students from 12 different classes. The four California schools were Allan Hancock Community College (with 216 respondents), Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo (223 respondents), Cal Poly-Pomona (221 respondents), and UCLA (157 respondents); these schools yielded a total of 817 student responders from 33 different classes. The three schools in Ohio were Ohio State (79 respondents), The Ohio State University-Athens (43 respondents), and the University of Akron (177 respondents); these schools yielded a total of 253 students from 7 different classes. Of the classes involved, 6 (11.53%) were in history, 1 (1.92%) sociology, 2 (3.84%) nursing, 10 (19.23%) education and 33 (63.46%) business including 4 (7.69%) accounting, 10 (19.23%) economics, and the other 3 (5.76%) in a variety of business courses. Interestingly, based on their responses, the business students did not appear to be any less in favor of tattoos and piercings than the students in non-business classes; however, the number of liberal arts majors was rather small.

The responses to survey questions “What is your attitude toward visible tattoos in the workplace?” and “What is your attitude toward visible body piercings, other than pierced ears on women, in the workplace?” served as the independent Y variable. Most of our survey opinion questions utilized a five-point Likert scale, which became our dummy variable for research purposes.

The business surveys were conducted through lists provided by local Chambers of Commerce in these same cities. The random selection of businesspeople yielded results from 581 individuals representing 501 different business organizations ranging in size from a small restaurant with 12 employees to a manufacturing company in Ohio with 2,000 employees. A total of 188 (32.35% of business respondents) came from California; Ohio yielded 267 (or 45.96%) respondents, and Arkansas had 126 (21.68%) respondents. The average size of the businesses was 272 employees. The businesspeople self-described their businesses as 38.34% retail service; 21.24% manufacturing- Fortune 500 companies; 22.45% manufacturing from smaller companies; and service businesses at 17.97%. Service businesses were slightly more negative than manufacturers which is possibly due to the fact that most of their employees have direct contact with the customers, however, but the difference was not significant at the .01 level of testing.

The 1,412 students were surveyed along with 223 non-students from all three states in the same age group of 19-40 acting as a control group. A regression analysis was conducted to determine which of the dependent variables were significant at the .01 level of testing among the student and business responders. We also looked to see if the null hypothesis was rejected that there would be a difference in attitude between the business people and students from the three states. The responses to survey questions “What is your attitude toward visible tattoos in the workplace?” and “What is your attitude toward visible body piercings, other than pierced ears on women?” served as the independent Y variable. We utilized a regression analysis on the 15 factors and determined that of the dependent variables, 12 proved significant at the .01 level of testing. The dependent variables that proved to be significant and positive at the .01 level of testing for business respondents included the respondent’s gender, age, race, whether the respondent had visible tattoos or body piercings, whether the respondent thought it was legal not to hire someone because of body adornment, whether the respondent believed people with body adornment are more impulsive, whether the respondent would cover up a visible tattoo or piercings for a job interview, the extent to which the respondent used drugs and alcohol, whether they would hire someone with body adornment, the state in which the business is located, the type of business, and whether the employee has direct contact with the public. The factors that were not significant for business respondents were whether the company had a policy concerning body adornment and whether having body adornment would hinder a person’s chance of getting a job. Using a Likert scale for 15 questions, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with selected questions. On two questions, the students were asked simply Yes or No, and on two other questions they had a selection of three choices which were treated as two or three response dummy variables. The dependent variables that proved to be significant and positive at the .01 level of testing for student respondents included whether the respondent had visible tattoos or body piercings, whether the respondent would cover up a visible tattoo or piercings for a job interview, the extent to which the respondent used drugs and alcohol, whether having body adornment would hinder a person’s chance of getting a job, and whether the employee has direct contact with the public. The factors that were not significant for students were the student’s race, major, GPA, age, gender, the school they were attending, whether the respondent thought it was legal not to hire someone because of body adornment, whether the respondent believed people with body adornment are more

impulsive, whether the company had a policy concerning body adornment, whether they would hire someone with body adornment, and the state in which the school they were attending is located.

The only true differences between the two groups of respondents were in race, gender, and age. Businesspeople from minority groups (93.21%) were twice as likely as minority students (51.71%) to have negative attitudes toward body adornment. Women in the business community tended to be significantly less negative at 43% negative than were men at 51% negative. That may be somewhat misleading since women were a smaller part of the business survey at 22% compared to 41% for the student survey. Age was also significant with older workers more negative than younger ones, but it may indicate a more sympathetic “mothering attitude” on the part of the women. The fact that the age of business people was significant, the older were more negative, may be due in part to the “generation gap”. There was a wider age spread among business respondents than students. Business people ranged in age from 19 to 57 and averaged 51.71 years of age compared to students who ranged in age from 18 to 47 with an average age of 19.88, a more than 30 year difference. The businesspeople in all three states were more likely to have a negative attitude toward body piercings by over 25% with 67.25% expressing negative attitudes toward most body adornment compared to 41.28% of students. Californians were significantly less negative than the business people in either Ohio or Arkansas by 18.99%. All business people had a negative attitude toward body adornment.

Many of the same factors were significant for both students and businesspeople. There was a significant difference, the null hypothesis was rejected, between businesspeople and students on this issue with 56.68% of the students and 81.92% of businesspeople expressing negative attitudes toward visible tattoos in the workplace.

It is not surprising that people with body adornment were significantly more favorable to the use of such items in the workplace. Also people who thought that prejudice toward people with body adornment was illegal were more favorable to the use of body adornment.

Students and businesspeople alike who believed that people with body adornment were more impulsive were negative toward body adornment. Also if the company had a policy against the use of tattoos and body adornment, the attitude toward body adornment was more negative.

It is also interesting to note that among students and business people the use of drugs and alcohol tended to create a significantly more positive attitude toward body adornment. This fact is born out in other studies including (Carroll, et al., 2002) (Armstrong, 2002) and (Drews, et al., 2000).

The students were asked the extent to which they believe visible tattoos and/or body piercings would affect an applicant’s chances of being offered a job. Among the students we surveyed, 32.51% responded that they did think visible tattoos and body piercings would hinder a person’s chance of getting a job while 20.01% had no opinion. Compared to a national survey, our student responders appeared to be less conservative or concerned about body adornment and their getting a job. Unfortunately for them both employees and our employers disagree with them on this point. Cho (2007) quotes a survey by a career website, Vault.com, as finding that “85 percent of workers believe that tattoos and body piercings hinder a job seeker’s chances of finding employment” (p.1). Our business respondents also had a very different opinion from our students with 81.92% saying that would not hire anyone with visible tattoos or body piercings - even if the job did not require contact with the public. This is supported by similar research conducted by others (Mayers, 2003).

Of the 1,412 respondents, almost nine percent stated that they had at least one visible tattoo, and slightly less than fourteen percent indicated that they had body piercings other than the women who had each

ear pierced one time. Less than one percent of the business people had earrings and only 2.23 percent had tattoos. This group had an obvious positive attitude toward body adornment even though they still stated overwhelmingly that they would keep their body adornment covered at work and in interviews if possible.

Students need to realize that employers from different states who participated in our random survey were all very negative about body adornment of any kind. Seventy percent of the California business people questioned had some negative feelings about body adornment in general. The difference between California and the more conservative states of Arkansas and Ohio was significant at the .01 level of testing.

Businessmen and minority businesspeople were also more negative than women and younger employers.

On the question of whether or not they would hire someone with tattoos and piercings, the business group was more negative than students. That may be due to the fact that several stated that it was not against company policy (24%) nor personal hiring practices (31.1%) as long as it remained hidden at office. A relatively small number (15%) of business persons were concerned about the legality of refusing to hire someone with body adornment. That group tended to be significantly less negative than the group not concerned about legal issues. The significance of all factors tested is shown in Table 3. There appears to be a big gap between the opinions of students and business people. Among the states, Arkansas had the greatest number of students who found it either unacceptable to have body adornment on the jobs where there was public contact (59.40%) and California students had the least (50.93%) giving a negative response to this question. Business people in all states averaged 92.41 percent negative opinions about piercings and a 68.25 percent negative attitudes about tattoos in the workplace. This is compared to an average rating among students with 56.68 percent expressing negative attitudes toward tattoos, a more than ten percent difference between the two groups. The difference in negative attitude toward piercings was even stronger with business by almost fifty percent.

California had the highest percentage of students reporting tattoos at 16.45 percent while Ohio and Arkansas were considerably less at 4.56 percent and 3.83 percent respectively.

The students were asked to indicate the types of body piercing they had. Table 2 shows the responses by states. Arkansas reported the highest percentage of students with body piercings at 9.57 percent with California and Ohio being very close at 7.77 percent and 7.62 percent respectively.

The only variables that were not significant at the .01 level concerning the students' perceptions of body adornment in any of the three states were the school the respondents attended, the respondents' major and GPA. Perhaps the major was not significant due to a lack of a wide assortment of majors. It was not surprising to find that the students with majors in the College of Business were more sympathetic to the rights of the employers regarding body adornment than non-business majors. Obviously, we would encourage further research into this area with a larger population from a broader range of schools.

Freshmen were more likely to have tattoos and piercings than any other classification of students by approximately five percent. These freshmen had an average of 2.71 piercings and 2.26 tattoos per person. The control group was the least likely to have either body piercings or tattoos; this may indicate that there is some pressure to conform to body adornment in college life. Our findings were in line with a national study conducted in 2004 by Dr. Anne E. Lurmann, a dermatologist and associate at the University of Chicago. Dr. Lurmann's study was reported by Guttman (2006). In Dr. Lurmann's study, two-thirds of the respondents had their first tattoos by the age of 24.

Another interesting finding is that a positive attitude toward body adornment was significant among students who reported having used drugs and alcohol recreationally compared to those who did not use either. The percentage of those who reported having used drugs (42%) versus the percentage of those who reported not having used drugs (31%) was significant at the .01 level. These findings match the findings of Dr. Lurmann in her national survey in 2004. Dr. Lurmann found that “drinking status and recreational drug use correlated significantly with tattoo prevalence” and that “ex-drinkers were most likely to have tattoos (38%) followed by current drinkers (25%) and those who never drank (14%)” (Guttmann, 2006, p. 28). On a side note, whether the students had used drugs or alcohol recreationally did not seem to affect their opinions on whether an employer had the right not to hire someone because of body adornment. This group was almost evenly divided over the issue of an employer’s right not to hire someone at 35.29 percent versus 35.87 percent.

Of the students responding who had tattoos, 73 percent indicated that they plan to cover their tattoos when going for a job interview.

Regarding gender, females were more supportive toward body piercings while males were more supportive of tattoos. The respondents who were the least tolerant of body adornment were also those who indicated that they viewed people with tattoos as more impulsive than the general population.

Finally, the students were asked whether their current employers (if they had worked in the past three years) had a policy concerning visible tattoos or piercings. Twenty percent of the students reported that there was a policy on tattoos or body piercings while 43 percent said there was no policy and the rest, 37 percent, did not know whether there was a policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey of 1,412 students indicated that almost nine percent had at least one visible tattoo and fourteen percent had visible body piercings. Of the students surveyed, 47.48 percent did not think visible tattoos and body piercings would hinder a person’s chance of getting a job (compared with 85% of the respondents in a national survey). Almost 23 percent of the students we surveyed plan to cover up their tattoos and body piercings before going for an interview.

California had the highest percentage of students reporting tattoos at 16.45 percent while Ohio and Arkansas were considerably less at 4.56 percent and 3.83 percent respectively. Arkansas reported the highest percentage of students having body piercings at 9.57 percent with California and Ohio being very close at 7.77 percent and 7.62 percent respectively. This was especially true among minority students who averaged 3 percent more piercings in all states. There was a strong correlation between the use of drug and alcohol use and body adornment as confirmed by other research.

Finally, students appear to be about evenly divided relative to the acceptability of body adornment. Furthermore, there seems to be some disagreement over the rights of employers in such matters with the responses being almost evenly divided between those who think discrimination against those who have body adornment is legal or illegal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Additional research with a larger population of businesspeople and students from more states is suggested to ensure that our results accurately reflect the most current opinions on this topic.
2. Efforts should be made to ensure that today's students understand the current perceptions of body adornment, specifically as it relates to employment practices. Students should have the knowledge they need to make an informed decision concerning body adornment. Tattoos in particular are very difficult to remove after the fact.
3. Students should also understand the medical implications of body adornment. HIV, Hepatitis and other health issues may result from receiving tattoos and body adornment. Many of the health issues actually result during the healing process due to lack of appropriate care.
4. Employers may rethink hiring practices and dress codes that strictly prohibit tattoos and body piercings. As body adornment becomes more mainstream, good potential applicants may be overlooked with policies that automatically rule out these candidates.

| Table 1 | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Response to the question "Which of the following best describes your feelings about visible tattoos in the workplace?"* | | | | | |
| | Unacceptable in any workplace | Unacceptable in areas with public contact | No opinion | Acceptable no conflict policy | Personal choice |
| Students | | | | | |
| Arkansas | 29.04 | 21.13 | 22.51 | 22.28 | 5.04 |
| California | 20.18 | 33.66 | 19.03 | 21.02 | 6.10 |
| Ohio | 24.43 | 41.01 | 14.04 | 15.21 | 5.31 |
| Average | 24.15 | 32.53 | 18.66 | 19.52 | 5.14 |
| Business | | | | | |
| Arkansas | 70.04 | 16.13 | 2.51 | 6.28 | 5.04 |
| California | 50.19 | 23.67 | 9.02 | 11.02 | 6.10 |
| Ohio | 64.46 | 21.02 | 4.01 | 5.11 | 5.39 |
| Average | 61.46 | 20.27 | 5.58 | 7.48 | 5.21 |
| * Expressed as a percentage of respondents | | | | | |

| Table 2 | | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Response to question "Which of the following best describes your feelings about visible piercings in the workplace, other than pierced ears on women?"* | | | | | |
| | Unacceptable in any workplace | Unacceptable in areas with public contact | No opinion | Acceptable no conflict policy | Personal choice |
| Students | | | | | |
| Arkansas | 29.02 | 10.38 | 25.86 | 22.60 | 12.24 |
| California | 18.41 | 22.52 | 25.67 | 22.81 | 10.29 |
| Ohio | 27.31 | 16.11 | 32.54 | 12.98 | 11.06 |
| Average | 24.91 | 16.37 | 28.04 | 19.46 | 11.22 |
| Business | | | | | |
| Arkansas | 47.02 | 20.38 | 4.76 | 12.60 | 12.24 |
| California | 48.41 | 22.52 | 5.67 | 12.81 | 10.59 |
| Ohio | 37.31 | 26.11 | 3.04 | 18.48 | 15.06 |
| Average | 44.24 | 23.01 | 4.59 | 14.63 | 13.53 |
| * Expressed as a percentage of respondents | | | | | |

| Table 3 | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Business and Student R2 results on each of 15 different factors | | |
| Factor | Business Response | Student Response |
| X1 Gender | .9982 * Women significant | .2921 * |
| X2 Age | .9918* | .3345 |
| X3 Race | .9777* | .7322 |
| X4 Use - Did they have body art | .9991* | .9989* |
| X5 Legality - Is it legal to deny job based on body art? | .9969* | .6552 |
| X6 Impulsiveness - Perception that people with body adornment are more impulsive | .9299* | .7712 |
| X7 Company policy - Was there a company policy concerning body adornment? | .8989* | .5643 |
| X8 Disguised - Whether the students would cover up their body adornment for job interviews? | .9919* | .9929* |
| X9 Alcohol use, drug use | .9887* | .9923* |

Table 3
Business and Student R2 results on each of 15 different factors

| Factor | Business Response | Student Response |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| X10 Deny job - Whether they would hire someone with body adornment? | .9912* | .8988* |
| X11 School | Not applicable | .6234 |
| X12 State | .9881* | .8991* |
| X13 Type of business | .9812* | Not Applicable |
| X14 Hinder job | .8881* | .9917* |
| X15 Customer dealings | .9992* | .9934 |

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