



Taboo tattoos? A study of the gendered effects of body art on consumers' attitudes toward visibly tattooed front line staff



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this experiment is to examine the gendered effects of body art on consumers' attitudes toward visibly tattooed employees. We analyse the reaction of 262 respondents with exposure to male and female front line staff in two distinct job contexts: a surgeon and an automobile mechanic. The results demonstrate differences on three dimensions: (a) job context, (b) sex of face and (c) stimulus (i.e., tattooed or not). We demonstrate significant interaction effects on those three dimensions, and our findings point to the intersectionality of gender-based and tattoo-based discrimination. Consumers have a negative reaction to body art, but perceptions of tattoos on male and female front line staff differ significantly. A key marketing challenge is how to balance employees' individual rights to self-expression and at the same time cater to consumers' expectations regarding appearance of staff. Our study forms the basis for this debate that is only just emerging.

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1. Introduction

Gender discrimination in the workplace has been explored extensively (Darity and Mason, 1998; Pailhe, 2000; Black and Brainerd, 2004; Pettinger, 2005). Much of this body of literature focuses on gender as a standalone category, but there has been an increasing emphasis on intersectionality, especially pertaining to gender vis-à-vis physical characteristics that are equally subject to prejudice, such as race (Grün, 2004). Our research examines the relative weight of stigma (in this case, the presence of a visible tattoo) in forming consumer perceptions towards male and female employees in two different service sector job roles (a surgeon and an automobile mechanic) from a relationship marketing perspective. We depart from the traditional intersectionality research that focuses on gender and race (McBride et al., 2015) by instead shifting our attention toward the unique and under-researched intersectionality between gender and body art. We also build on a small, but emerging, literature on tattoos in the workplace (Miller et al., 2009; Timming, 2011, 2015; Timming et al., 2015).

Using experimental research methods, we look at consumer preferences in relation to front line employees, but we focus the

study on the appearance of service sector staff from the point of view of the interaction of gender and body art, the latter of which is captured by using Photoshop to place a visible tattoo on the front line staff who are presented to the consumer respondents. Our study does not look at the effects of body art and gender on recruitment and selection outcomes since this topic has already been exhaustively researched (Timming et al., 2015). Instead, we look at the interaction of gender-based and tattoo-based discrimination against service sector employees by potential consumers, and that is a new and previously overlooked angle. The effects we establish in our study may, however, not be a case of 'pure' discrimination, but rather a more innocuous consumer preference, as evidenced by Baumann and Setogawa (2015).

From a marketing perspective, the importance of our study relates to the concern of 'delivering' a consistent brand image at the front line of interactive services (Pettinger, 2004). Indeed, the 'actions' of frontline employees are a manifestation of the organisation's product offering, which in turn forms a distinct brand image (Nickson et al., 2001). The performance of front line employees at the moment of interaction with the consumer is key in driving perceived service quality (Bitner, 1990), with personal appearance (grooming, cleanliness), dress/uniform, department and behaviour of the employee being crucial factors in addition to the actual 'product' itself. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) explain that front line employees are the 'boundary spanners', establishing the link between the customer, the environment and the organisation.

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Indeed, an interpersonal element in the interaction between customers and employees is a major determinant of customer satisfaction (Adelman et al., 1994). Martin and Lundberg (1991), for example, found in a study of a US restaurant chain that 15 per cent of customers stopped dining as a result of product dissatisfaction, but in contrast 67 per cent stopped dining because of 'an indifferent attitude' of front line employees. Most customers who defect from a service business blame indifferent or unhelpful employees (Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991, p. 74). At the end of the day, consumers' perception of front line employees often determine the formation of positive and negative emotional responses towards the individual employee, but crucially, also towards the organisation overall (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995).

The interaction between front line employees and customers would likely be influenced by the impact a tattoo makes on the overall appearance of the employee in the eyes of customers. A study on tattoos is therefore important from a marketing perspective, not least since the latest statistics on tattoo prevalence show how the sheer number of tattooed people is too large for marketing scholars to ignore. The most recent statistics on tattoo prevalence in America show that, while in 1999, 21 per cent of respondents indicated someone in their household had a tattoo, the figure had doubled to 40 per cent in.¹ This also means that more and more tattooed staff are now in front line positions where they have interaction with customers, and this inevitably impacts on consumer reactions. Research on that interface and the impact of tattoos is now emerging given that: (a) the number of 'encounters' with tattooed front line staff is increasing, but (b) the effect of tattoos is not yet well understood.

The limited literature reports, for instance, cases where employees do not convey a consistent image when a tattoo is visible during a service encounter (Pettinger, 2005; Doleac and Stein, 2013), with potentially weakening effects on brand image. The literature further demonstrates mainstream attitudes are negative towards body art (Hawkes et al., 2004), yet big companies such as Boeing and Ford claim that non-offensive tattoos and piercings can enhance a company's image (Org, 2005). Among other contemporary companies, tattoos are becoming increasingly unproblematic across the board (Hennessey, 2013). One factor is also whether or not customers have a tattoo themselves since it has been found that people with tattoos trust tattooed salespeople more than people without tattoos (Arndt and Glassman, 2012). (Dean, 2010, 2011) further explored negative consumer perceptions of visible tattoos on service personnel alongside the effect of age, i.e. young adult perceptions of visible tattoos.

Still, in the light of all this literature, there is an unexplored question of how companies can seek to balance employees' rights to self-expression with customers' expectations in respect to the aesthetics and appearance of front line staff. The present study makes a real contribution to that debate.

2. Literature review

In the light of the present study's unique focus on intersectionality, two bodies of literature are reviewed herein. The first review looks at gender discrimination in the workplace, specifically as it pertains to the disadvantage that many women face in the labour market. The second review draws largely from the literature on stigma to illustrate how body art can result in a negative evaluation on the part of consumers in a service encounter.

2.1. Gender discrimination

Many, but not all, studies on gender discrimination focus on the workplace, and that has been intensively discussed in the literature (e.g., Gibelman, 2000; Darity and Mason, 1998; Meng and Miller, 1995; Petersen and Morgan, 1995; Knights and Richards, 2003; Pettinger, 2005; Riach and Rich, 2006). Gender discrimination occurs in relation to the difficulty women face in accessing favourable working conditions, e.g., securing employment, promotion or improved remuneration. In general, women are found to have more unfavourable employment situations than men across a range of workplaces and outcomes (Berik et al., 2004; Blau and Kahn, 2007), although gender discrimination can occasionally apply to men, depending on the nature of the job. Customer-service work is largely gendered as female, often due to the demands of emotion management (Pettinger, 2005). Gender discrimination also differs across country of origin (Pailhe, 2000), e.g. where certain cultural groups are more popular than others, and that effect can be magnified when gender is taken into account. Furthermore, gender discrimination may impact not only on employee selection, promotion and pay outcomes, but also on organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Foley et al., 2005).

Employers sometimes discriminate among employees based on the interaction of gender and other physical attributes such as race and the presence of a stigma. The interaction between gender and other unfavourable attributes led Crenshaw (1989) to introduce the term 'intersectionality', which was originally used in relation to black women's employment in the US (Crenshaw, 1991). The scope of intersectionality research has shifted from the original understanding, however. Rather than referring just to the intersection of racism and sexism (or race and gender), and thus creating a focus on the experience of black and minority ethnic women, later interpretations have emphasised its potential to refer to the intersection of a much broader range of oppressions (e.g. ageism and class) or social groupings (e.g. age, sexuality, disability) (see McBride et al. (2015)). This extended interpretation of intersectionality allows for a wider discussion of gender discrimination and how it interacts with other physical attributes that are equally subject to prejudicial views. Intersectional analysis of social divisions has thus come to occupy central spaces in both sociology, along with analyses of stratification as well as in feminist and other legal, political and policy discourses surrounding, for example, international human rights (Yuval-Davis, 2006). On this basis, it seems sensible to extend the analysis of intersectionality into other areas such as marketing, where gender discrimination may be compounded by the presence or absence of a stigma. Furthermore, whereas most of the extant literature focuses on gender discrimination at the hands of employers, the present study looks specifically at gender discrimination perpetrated by both male and female consumers.

2.2. Stigma discrimination

Stigma is a sociological concept (Goffman, 1963; Gray, 2002) which derives from the Greek word, fittingly, meaning 'to pierce or to tattoo' (Herek, 2002). Sociologists often break the concept down into two sub-concepts: religious stigmata, which has a positive meaning, and stigma, which has a negative connotation (Herek, 2002). Much discussion nowadays refers to stigma in a more negative connotation. Stigma in this sense creates social distance (Compton et al., 2006), being a marking of an individual either physically or non-physically that distinguishes him or her from normativity as defined by the rest of society.

The domain of stigma has evolved not merely about those who have a physical tattoo, referring to early meaning of the concept (Herek, 2002), but also includes those who experience

¹ <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/infographic-americas-love-tattoos-grows-n95486>

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