

## Do visible body modifications influence job applicants' perceived employability in Ghana? A quasi-experimental study

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### Abstract

This study examined the effects of visible body modifications on the perceived employability of job applicants, and whether the type of body modification, applicant's gender, and job type influence these perceptions. Results from a mixed analysis of variance indicate that applicants with tattoos, piercings, and both tattoos and piercings were rated significantly lower on employability than applicants with no form of visible body modification. The type of visible body modification, however, made no significant difference in the employability ratings of job applicants. The negative effect on employability was lower for pierced female job applicants, tattooed male job applicants, and applicants seeking non-customer-facing jobs. These findings underscore the importance of appearance in employment selection and call for more attention to the potential consequences of visible body modifications.

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## Introduction

Visible body modification (VBM), which includes practices that modify the appearance and form of the body, has existed for several decades. Among these practices, tattooing and body piercing have gained popularity, particularly among young people. For example, Borkenhagen (2019) reported that 20 per cent of individuals aged 14 and above have at least one tattoo. Heywood et al. (2012) reported that approximately 15 per cent of men and women in Australia have had tattoos, while Swami et al. (2015) reported that nearly 26 per cent of their sample in the UK had one form of a tattoo. Among a student sample in South Africa, Naude et al. (2019) reported that about 22 per cent had at least one tattoo. In Ghana, a study by Van-Ess (2013) on HIV/AIDs among prisoners showed that about 20 per cent had body art before their imprisonment whereas 0.5 per cent had theirs during their custodial term.

Extant research on the impact of VBM on individuals focuses predominantly on health outcomes. For example, studies have associated VBM with problems such as allergic contact dermatitis, scarring and keloid formation, bleeding, skin destruction, and infections (e.g., Høgsberg et al., 2013; Kirchhof & Wong, 2019; Mortensen et al., 2019). Only recently have researchers begun to explore the potential impact of visible body modification on individuals' labour market outcomes, particularly its effects on employability. The impetus for this line of research stems from changes in the processes of recruiting new employees, which have become considerably extensive and rigorous due to increased competition in the labour market. Indeed, employees' physical appearance has been found to play a crucial role in the impression customers may have about the services they receive from organisations (Karl et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017). Consequently, physical appearance has been noted to have an important influence on individuals' employment chances, such that the likelihood of being offered a job may be lower if an applicant is perceived to be physically unattractive and inappropriately dressed (Baumann et al., 2016; French et al., 2016; Timming, 2015). Since body modification ultimately alters physical appearance, it can be surmised that VBM has the potential to influence individuals' employment chances though empirical evidence on this relationship is inconclusive.

Although extant research has contributed to understanding the effects of VBM on employment outcomes, previous studies have several limitations. First, most studies on the effects of VBM focused on tattoos (e.g., French et al., 2016, 2018; Henle et al., 2022; Tews & Stafford, 2019; Timming, 2015). Relatively few studies have examined the effects of other forms of VBM such as nose piercing on ratings of job applicants. Secondly, most studies examined the effect of one kind of VBM (e.g., either tattoos or piercings). Thus, little is known about the relative and combined effects of different forms of VBM on the perceived employability of job applicants. Third, only a few studies have directly examined gender differences in the effects of VBM on job applicants. Moreover, previous studies linking VBM to employability were conducted mostly in Western countries. Little

is known about the effects of body modification in non-Western societies such as Ghana. Differences in cultural values and norms suggest that the acceptability of body art in the work context may vary across different cultures (Larsen et al., 2014). Consequently, findings of previous studies on the effect of body art on employability may not be readily applicable to non-Western societies. Studies from non-Western contexts would contribute to knowledge on contextual similarities and differences in the influence of body modifications on employability across contexts.

Drawing on an adult sample from Ghana, the present study addresses the aforementioned gaps in the literature by assessing the effects of different forms and combinations of VBM on the employability of both male and female job applicants. Specifically, the study assesses differences in employability ratings of job applicants with tattoos only, piercings only, or both tattoos and piercings, and those without any form of VBM. The study examines whether the effect of each type of VBM on perceived employability depends on the applicant's gender and job type.

## **Theoretical background and hypotheses**

The theory of social stigma (Goffman, 1963) provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the potential influence of VBM on perceived employability. Goffman (1963, p. 3) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting". According to Goffman (1963) stigmatization involves the devaluation of an individual because he or she possesses an attribute that is considered to be at variance with societal norms. Thus, stigmatized individuals are believed to possess a spoiled social identity, and are assumed to be unfit for participation in social interactions and are consequently excluded from such interactions (McElroy et al., 2014). Goffman (1963) suggests that physical appearance provides an important clue about people's social identity, which in turn fuels others' expectations about them in terms of good or bad behaviour. From stigma theory, body modification signifies the social identity of the bearer as deviant, which exposes the bearer to prejudicial attitudes and discrimination (Kurzban & Leary, 2001).

Indeed, a growing body of research has shown that persons with VBM are a stigmatised group seen as having traits that may be less appealing to society (Henle et al., 2022; McElroy et al., 2014; Swami & Furnham, 2007). For instance, Zestcott et al. (2018) reported negative implicit and explicit attitudes towards persons with VBM. Specifically, individuals with VBM were perceived as incompetent, having less warmth, and potentially violent. In the organizational context, there is evidence that stigma has an impact on organizational processes including hiring decisions, recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion (Arndt & Glassman, 2012; McElroy et al., 2014; Miller, Nicols, & Eure, 2009). Characteristics considered stigmatizing may result in unequal access to opportunities within organizations (Summers et al., 2018), due to the perceived lack of fit between the individual with such characteristics and job requirements (McElroy et al., 2014).

Previous studies suggest that individuals with VBM such as tattoos and piercings may be perceived negatively in the organizational context, and therefore considered less suitable candidates for jobs. Drawing on two different samples (students and working adults), McElroy et al. (2014) found that job candidates with facial piercings were rated significantly lower on suitability for employment compared with candidates without facial piercings. Similarly, Arndt et al. (2017) reported that dentists were less likely to employ hygienists with tattoos because of the perception that tattoos would hurt the image of their profession. Some studies suggest that the intensity of prejudice and stigma depends on the nature and location of the VBM. For example, Timming and Perrett (2017) showed that body modifications depicting nudity and violence were associated with lower levels of trustworthiness, whereas those depicting floral and tribal genres had the highest level of trustworthiness and neutral stance on trustworthiness respectively. Together, these studies highlight the deleterious effects of VBM on employability. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

***Hypothesis 1.*** Job applicants with a tattoo, piercing, and both tattoo and piercing will be perceived as less employable than job applicants without any VBM.

It has been argued that the presence of multiple body modifications on an individual is more reflective of the person's identity compared to a single body modification (Tews & Stafford, 2019). Thus, multiple body modifications may represent a stronger deviation from societal norms. Accordingly, Tews and Stafford (2019) found a positive relationship between the number of tattoos on employees and organizational deviance. Likewise, the stigmatizing effect of VBM may also depend on the type of modification. Timming et al. (2015) noted that body piercing might attract less stigma than tattoos due to "the prevalence and normalization of earrings, the transient nature of most piercings, and their wider social acceptability" (p. 139). However, little is known about the relative influence of different kinds of VBM on perceived employability and whether the effect is more detrimental with a combination of different kinds of VBM. One study that directly compared the relative effects of tattoos and piercings (Timming et al., 2015) found that visibly tattooed job candidates were rated lower on hireability than visibly pierced candidates. In another study (Swami et al., 2012), targets with multiple facial piercings were rated significantly lower on attractiveness and intelligence than targets with single facial piercings. Thus, it is expected that the combination of both tattoos and piercings would elicit more negative judgement than either tattoo or piercing. We, therefore, hypothesize that:

***Hypothesis 2.*** Job applicants with both tattoo and piercing will be perceived as less employable than applicants with tattoo only or piercing only

Some scholars have suggested that the acceptance or rejection of VBM in the work setting depends on the proximity to customers in the execution of job responsibilities

(Ozanne et al., 2019; Timming, 2017; Timming et al., 2015). In this regard, a distinction has been made between customer-facing roles and non-customer-facing jobs with the former requiring face-to-face interactions with customers and the latter requiring less proximity to customers (Timming et al., 2015). There is evidence that the negative effect of VBM is reduced for individuals seeking jobs that require less contact with customers. For example, Timming et al. (2015) reported that job applicants with tattoos and piercings received lower hireability ratings for customer-facing roles than for non-customer-facing roles. Hireability ratings for customer-facing roles were found to be lower for tattoos than piercings. These findings suggest that the stigmatizing effect of VBM is stronger in customer-facing jobs than in non-customer-facing jobs.

**Hypothesis 3.** Job applicants with VBM (i.e., tattoo, piercing, and both tattoo and piercing) will obtain lower employability ratings for customer-facing jobs than for non-customer-facing jobs.

Studies on the effect of VBM in the workplace rarely examine the extent to which the stigma associated with VBM may be gendered. Generally, studies focusing only on women suggest that women with tattoos tend to be evaluated more negatively than women without tattoos (e.g., Guéguen, 2013; Hawkes et al., 2004; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Findings from the few studies that directly compared men and women on the effects of VBM on employability suggest that visible tattoos and piercings elicit greater prejudice for men than women. For example, Swami et al. (2012) found that men with facial piercings were rated lower on attractiveness and intelligence compared to women with piercings. Likewise, Bauman et al. (2016) found that participants demonstrated less negative attitudes toward women with tattoos than men with tattoos. Another study (Timming et al., 2015) also found that tattoos and piercings had a greater negative effect on employability for men than for women. Brousard and Harton (2018) found that tattooed women were rated less negatively than tattooed men. However, in an earlier study on the effect of facial piercings, McElroy et al. (2014) reported no significant differences in the employability ratings of male and female job applicants.

**Hypothesis 4:** Male job applicants with VBM (tattoos, piercings, and both tattoos and piercings) will be rated lower on employability than female job applicants with VBM.

## Methods

### Design

The study was a quasi-experiment, and a 2×2×2×4 mixed factorial design was employed. There were four independent variables: gender of the respondent, gender of the photo (applicant gender), type of job, and type of VBM. Respondent gender and

type of VBM were between-participants variables, whereas applicant gender and type of job were within-participants variables. Respondent gender (male vs. female), applicant gender (male vs. female), and type of job (customer-facing vs. non-customer-facing) each had two levels, whereas the type of VBM (control, tattoo, piercing, and both tattoo & piercing) had four levels.

### *Instruments/materials*

For data collection, an instrument was developed to assess the ratings of persons with VBM. In the instrument, a scenario was created in which a male and a female job applicant who both meet the requirements of a vacant position were rated. Participants were instructed to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely they are to employ the applicant for both customer-facing and non-customer-facing roles, with 1 being the lowest rating and 10 the highest rating. Colour photographs (3.51 cm width × 4.50cm length) of a woman and a man who are in their late 20s were used. Two photographs (male and female) were taken and used for the experiment. Each face was photographed with a neutral expression at a 0° angle under similar lighting for both sexes. The photos were manipulated using photoshop to design the tattoo of a dragon-like image retrieved from the internet. The tattoo image was placed on the right side of the neck. For the nose piercing, a ring was stuck into the nose before the photos were taken. In all, eight faces were created for the study: four faces for the male and four for the female. These consisted of photographs depicting a control face (no tattoo or piercing), a tattoo-only face, a piercing-only face, and both tattoo and piercing face for each of the male and female applicants.

The photographs were pre-tested in a pilot study to ascertain the extent to which the tattoo and piercing were visible and to establish whether there exists any difference in the ratings of male and female photographs. A total of 80 undergraduate students from the University of Ghana (40 males, 40 females) were assigned to eight different conditions and were asked to rate the photographs on a 13-item adjective scale. The results of the pilot study indicated that photographs with VBM were rated more negatively than the photograph without VBM, while no significant differences were observed in the ratings of the male and female photographs.

### *Participants and data collection procedures*

The research received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee for Humanities at the University of Ghana (Protocol number: ECH 037/ 17-18) before data collection. The sample for the study consisted of 240 Master of Business Administration (MBA) students from three public universities in Ghana. The participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling approaches, as we needed individuals who had some working experience to volunteer as raters in the study. There was an equal number of males and females, and the majority (91.7%) were Christians. The age range of participants was from 22 to 57 years ( $M = 32.57$ ,  $SD = 7.25$ ) and their working experience ranged from

1 to 30 years ( $M = 8.07$ ,  $SD = 5.96$ ). In terms of job level, 94 participants were at the middle-managerial level, 91 participants held junior ranks, and 55 participants were at the senior level in their careers. In terms of the level of education, all the participants had at least a bachelor's degree.

In a briefing, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were allowed to ask questions concerning the study for clarification. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before his or her participation in the study. The experiment was conducted in a classroom setting at the campuses of the selected universities. Participants were assigned to one of four groups. In each group, each participant rated four photographs depicting a male applicant for a customer-facing role, a male applicant for a non-customer facing role, a female applicant for customer-facing role, and a female applicant for a non-customer-facing role. With the help of three research assistants, questionnaires were distributed in a predetermined order of conditions to reduce or eliminate the possibility that participants sitting next to each other would view different photographs.

## Analysis

We conducted a mixed analysis of variance (Mixed-ANOVA) to analyse the data using SPSS (21.0). As stated earlier, the type of VBM (control, tattoo, piercing, and both tattoo and piercing) and gender of the rater (male, female) were between-subject factors and the gender of the applicant (male, female), and type of job (customer-facing, non-customer-facing) were within-subject factors.

## Results

### *Main effects of visible body modification, applicant gender, and type of job*

Table 1 reports the main effects of the study's independent variables. The main effect of the type of VBM on employability rating was statistically significant,  $F(1, 649.81) = 48.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .39$ ). The mean comparisons showed that participants rated applicants without VBM ( $M = 7.49$ ,  $SE = .24$ ) significantly higher than applicants with tattoo ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SE = .24$ ), piercing ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SE = .24$ ) and both tattoo and piercing ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SE = .24$ ). These results provide support for Hypothesis 1, which stated that applicants with tattoos, piercings, and both tattoos and piercings would be rated as less employable than applicants without VBM. However, no significant differences were found in the mean employability ratings of applicants with tattoo only, piercing only, and both tattoo and piercing. Therefore, Hypothesis 2, which stated that employability ratings would be significantly lower for applicants with both tattoo and piercing than those with tattoo only or piercing only, was not supported.

Although not hypothesized, there was a significant main effect of applicant gender on employability,  $F(1, 108.53) = 45.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$ ). Specifically, participants

rated female applicants ( $M = 5.38, SE = .13$ ) significantly higher than male applicants ( $M = 4.71, SE = .13$ ). However, respondents' gender had no significant main effect on applicant's employability ratings  $F(1, 14.54) = 1.11, p > .001, \eta p^2 = .01$ . Thus, male ( $M = 5.17, SE = .17$ ) and female ( $M = 4.92, SE = .17$ ) participants did not differ significantly in their ratings of job applicants. Again, although not hypothesized, there was a significant main effect of type of job on employability ratings  $F(1, 899.14) = 286.71, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .55$ . Specifically, participants rated the applicants higher for non-customer-facing jobs ( $M = 6.01, SE = .13$ ) than for customer-facing jobs ( $M = 4.08, SE = .13$ ).

**Table 1:** Main effects of visible body modification, type of job, applicant gender, and rater gender on employability ratings

Variables	Effect type	Mean rating (SE)	Mean rating difference	F-ratio	$\eta p^2$
VBM type	Between- subjects	Control: 7.49 (.24) Tattoo: 4.43 (.24) Piercing: 4.37 (.24) T & P: 3.89 (.24)	Control vs. Tattoo = 3.06*** Control vs. Piercing = 3.12*** Control vs. T & P = 3.54*** Tattoo vs. Piercing = 0.54 Tattoo vs. T & P = 0.48 Piercing vs. T & P = 0.48	48.92***	.39
Job type	Within- subjects	Customer-facing: 4.08 (.13) Non-customer-facing: 6.01 (.13)	1.93	286.71***	.55
Applicant gender	Within-subjects	Male: 4.71 (.13) Female: 5.38 (.13)	0.67	45.47***	.16
Rater gender	Between-subjects	Male: 5.17 (.17) Female: 4.92 (.17)	0.25	1.11 <sup>ns</sup>	.01

Notes:

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;

SE = standard error;  $\eta p^2$  = partial eta squared; T & P = both tattoo and piercing

### **Interaction between visible body modification and applicant's gender**

There was a significant interaction between the type of VBM and applicant gender,  $F(3, 50.25) = 21.05, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .21$ , as shown in Table 2. The mean rating of the male job applicant was highest in the control condition (without VBM;  $M = 6.97, SE = .25$ ), followed by the tattoo condition ( $M = 4.69, SE = .25$ ), both tattoo and piercing condition ( $M = 3.63, SE = .25$ ), and then piercing condition ( $M = 3.54, SE = .25$ ). Similarly, the mean rating of the female job applicant was highest in the control condition ( $M = 8.01, SE = .26$ ), followed by the piercing condition ( $M = 5.19, SE = .26$ ), and then both tattoo and piercing condition ( $M = 4.15, SE = .26$ ).

Figure 1 shows that the different types of VBM were rated differently for male and female applicants. We conducted four separate paired-samples  $t$ -tests to probe the nature of the interaction effect. A  $p$ -value of .01 was used to control for familywise error ( $0.05/4$ ). The results showed that female applicants with piercing and both tattoo and piercing were rated significantly higher than their male counterparts. In contrast, male



applicants with tattoos were rated significantly higher on employability than their female counterparts. These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4, which suggested that male applicants with VBM would be rated lower on employability than female applicants with VBM.

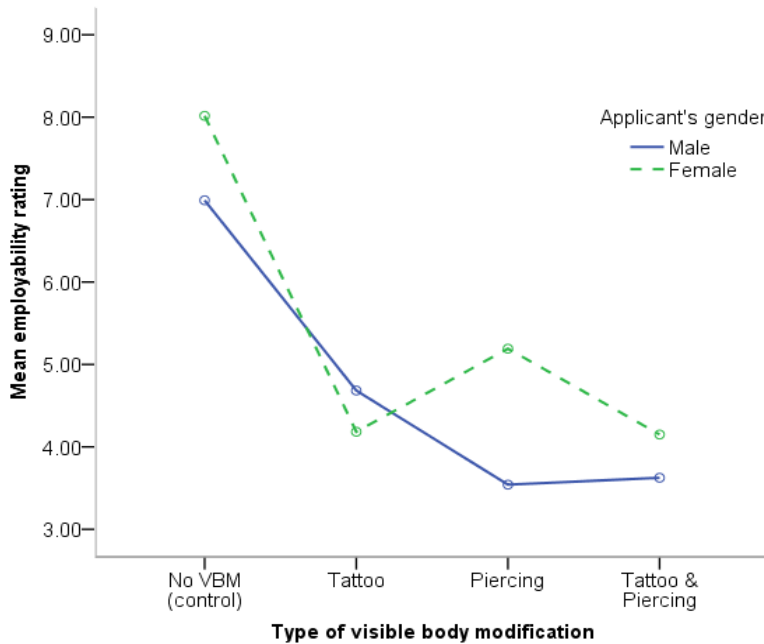
**Table 2:** Two-way interaction effect between visible body modification and applicant gender

	Mean rating (SE)	Mean difference	F-ratio	$\eta p^2$
Male	Control: 6.97(.25) Tattoo: 4.69 (0.25) Piercing: 3.54 (0.25) Both tattoo & Piercing: 3.63 (0.25)	Control vs. Tattoo = 2.31*** Control vs. Piercing = 3.45*** Control vs. T & P = 3.35*** Tattoo vs. Piercing = 1.15** Tattoo vs. T & P = 1.06* Piercing vs. T & P = 0.09	21.05***	.214
Female	Control: 8.01 (.26) Tattoo: 4.18 (0.26) Piercing: 5.19 (0.26) Both tattoo & Piercing: 4.15 (0.26)	Control vs. Tattoo = 3.83*** Control vs. Piercing = 2.83*** Control vs. T & P = 3.37*** Tattoo vs. Piercing = 1.01** Tattoo vs. T & P = 0.03 Piercing vs. T & P = 1.04*		

Notes:

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;

SE = standard error;  $\eta p^2$  = partial eta squared; T & P = both tattoo and piercing

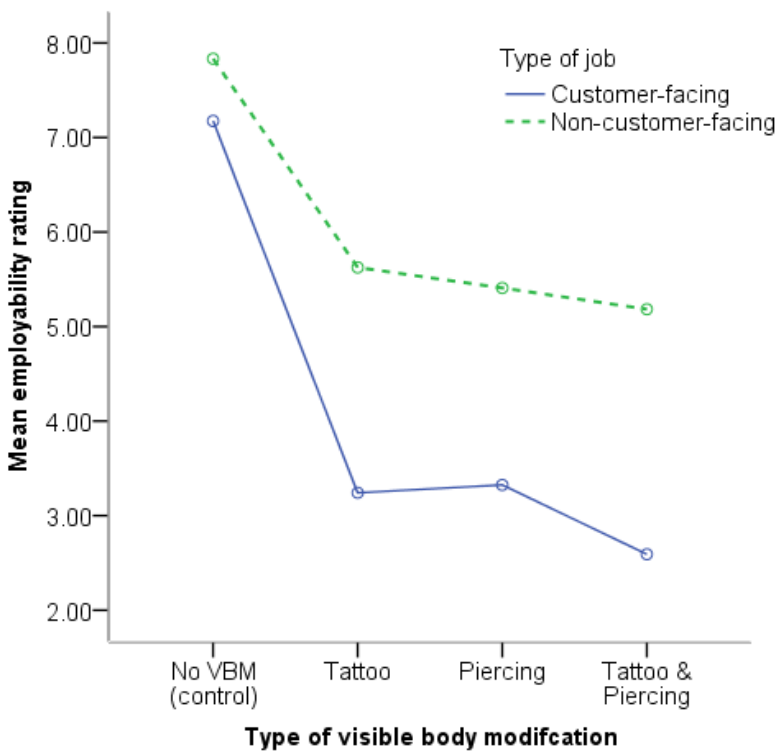


**Figure 1:** Interaction between type of visible body modification and applicant's gender

### *Interaction between visible body modification and type of job*

There was also a significant interaction between VBM and the type of job,  $F(3, 45.06) = 14.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ , as shown in Table 3. For customer-facing roles, job applicants without VBM had the highest rating ( $M = 7.15, SE = .26$ ), followed by applicants with piercing only ( $M = 3.33, SE = .26$ ), applicants with tattoo only ( $M = 3.23, SE = .26$ ), and applicants with both tattoo and piercing ( $M = 2.59, SE = .26$ ). For non-customer-facing roles, job applicants without VBM had the highest rating ( $M = 7.83, SE = .27$ ), followed by applicants with tattoo only ( $M = 5.64, SE = .27$ ), applicants with piercing only ( $M = 5.41, SE = .27$ ), and applicants with both tattoo and piercing ( $M = 5.18, SE = .27$ ).

Separate pair-sample  $t$ -tests showed that applicants without VBM were rated marginally, albeit significantly, higher for non-customer-facing roles than for customer-facing roles. A comparison of applicants with tattoo only, piercing only, and both tattoo and piercing showed marked differences in employability ratings, with applicants with both types of VBM rated significantly lower for customer-facing roles than for non-customer-facing roles. Therefore, Hypothesis 3, which stated that job applicants with VBM would obtain higher ratings on employability for customer-facing jobs than for non-customer-facing jobs, was also supported. These results are further illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Interaction between type of visible body modification and type of job

## Discussion

The objective of the study was to examine the effects of VBM (i.e., tattoos and piercings) on perceived employability in the Ghanaian context. Findings from the study suggest that VBM has a negative impact on the employability of job applicants. Photos of job applicants with tattoo, piercing, and both tattoo and piercing were rated significantly lower on employability compared to photos of applicants without VBM. This finding corroborates previous studies suggesting visible tattoos and piercings are associated with diminished chances of employment (McElroy et al., 2014; Timming, 2017; Timming et al., 2015). Consistent with the theory of stigma (Goffman, 1963), negative evaluation of applications with tattoos and piercings emanates from the perceived or real association of such body modifications with negative attributes and deviant behaviours (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Dickson et al., 2014; Timming & Perrett, 2017; Zestcott et al., 2018). In the organizational context, the presence of visible tattoos or piercings on a job applicant elicits negative attributions about the individual and thereby projects a negative impression to recruiters about his or her suitability for employment (McElroy et al., 2014). In this case, stereotypes about visible tattoos and piercings serve as heuristics for making instant judgements about the fitness of individuals with such body art in the work context (Larsen et al., 2014).

**Table 3:** Two-way interaction effect between visible body modification and type of job

	Mean rating (SE)	Mean difference	F	$\eta p^2$
Customer facing	Control: 7.15 (.26) Tattoo: 3.23 (0.26) Piercing: 3.23 (0.26) Both tattoo & Piercing: 2.59 (.26)	Control vs. Tattoo = 3.92*** Control vs. Piercing = 3.92*** Control vs. T & P = 4.56*** Tattoo vs. Piercing = 0.00 Tattoo vs. T & P = 0.64 Piercing vs. T & P = 0.64	14.37***	.157
Non-customer-facing	Control: 7.83 (.27) Tattoo: 5.64 (0.27) Piercing: 5.41 (0.27) Both tattoo & Piercing: 5.18 (0.27)	Control vs. Tattoo = 2.19*** Control vs. Piercing = 2.42*** Control vs. T & P = 2.65*** Tattoo vs. Piercing = 0.23 Tattoo vs. T & P = 0.46 Piercing vs. T & P = 0.23		

Notes:

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; T & P = both tattoo and piercing

Contrary to expectation, the type of VBM or the presence of more than one kind of VBM did not make any difference in how job applicants were rated. Thus, our hypothesis that job applicants with both tattoos and piercings would be rated lower than applicants with only tattoo or piercing was not supported. We believed that a combination of both tattoo and piercing would be perceived as representing a greater deviation from social norms, and would result in lower employability ratings. This finding is thus, at variance with a previous study by Swami et al. (2012), which found that models with multiple

piercings were rated more negatively than models with single piercing. It is important to note, however, that Swami et al. examined the effect of multiple piercings whereas our study focused on a combination of a tattoo and a piercing. Our result also fails to corroborate that of a previous study (Timming et al., 2015), which suggested candidates with tattoos were rated lower than those with piercings.

Our results suggest that the stigmatizing effect of VBM is gendered, with tattoos considered more acceptable for men and piercing considered more acceptable for women. Specifically, tattooed male applicants were rated higher on employability than tattooed female applicants, whereas female applicants with piercing were rated higher than their male counterparts. Although female applicants with both tattoos and piercings were rated slightly higher than their male counterparts, the disadvantage associated with having both types of VBM as compared with having none was similar for male and female applicants. The present study's findings also provide support for that of Swami et al. (2012), which showed that males with facial piercings were rated less negatively. This finding also partially supports that of Timming et al. (2015), which reported that tattoos and piercings were more disadvantageous for men than women. Our results are, however, at variance with those of other studies suggesting that attitudes towards tattoos are less negative for women than men (e.g., Baumann et al., 2016; Broussard & Harton, 2018).

Differences in employability ratings of male and female applicants with tattoos and piercings may be explained by differential gender norms underpinning perceptions of body modifications. On the one hand, it would seem that tattoos are more congruent with perceptions of masculinity and thus, more acceptable for males. On the other hand, piercing, particularly the use of nose rings may be consistent with notions of femininity. Although wearing nose rings is unpopular in Ghana, the practice of nose piercing is found among women in some sub-cultures in the country. Also, the nose ring worn in the piercing condition may be considered similar to earrings, which is a relatively common and culturally acceptable practice among women in Ghana. Thus, the wearing of a nose ring may be considered as representing less deviation from societal expectations among women. In contrast, men wearing nose rings may be perceived more negatively in social and job-seeking contexts.

The study also showed that employability ratings were significantly higher for candidates applying for non-customer-facing roles than candidates applying for customer-facing roles regardless of the type of VBM. Thus, the negative effect of VBM is lessened in noncustomer-facing jobs. These results are consistent with those of previous studies showing that the stigmatizing effect of tattoos and piercing is reduced for individuals seeking non-customer-facing jobs (e.g., Baumann et al., 2016; Timming et al., 2015). The present study's findings underscore the importance of spatial distance between potential employees and customers as an important influence on the perception of VBM in the workplace. Past research has shown that employee appearance constitutes an important facet of customer satisfaction (Karl et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Westerfield et al., 2012).

Consequently, restrictions on body art such as tattoos and piercings in customer-facing jobs may form a part of enhancing organizations' appeal to customers. It is plausible that discrimination against individuals with tattoos and piercings is driven more by customer expectations than recruiters' prejudice (Timming & Perrett, 2017).

## **Limitations and directions for future research**

The present study has some limitations that need to be highlighted. First, as noted earlier, the study involved MBA students. Thus, the perceptions of participants in the study may not necessarily represent those of managers involved in recruitment and placement in organizations. It is important to note, however, that the universities from which the participants were selected normally require considerable working experience as a requirement for admission into their MBA programmes. Thus, most of the participants had worked in various capacities in different organizations.

In addition, the study was based on a hypothetical scenario, which assumed that applicants' levels of experience and qualification were uniform across all experimental conditions. Although this was necessary to enhance experimental control, knowledge, skills, abilities, and qualification are never constant in employee recruitment. Thus, the effect of visible tattoos and piercings on employability may be more nuanced than suggested by the present study. Future research could adopt qualitative approaches to explore the perceptions of recruiters and managers about VBM and their experiences in dealing with individuals with VBM.

Furthermore, although customer concerns seemed to be an important influence on recruiters' attitudes towards VBM, the perspectives of customers were not captured in the present study. Indeed, past research (Karl et al., 2016) suggests that preference or abhorrence for VBM is to a great extent driven by customers' desires. Future research should consider customers' attitudes towards VBM and the factors that shape their perception of VBM. In addition, future studies could take a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of persons with VBM as well as recruiters.

Finally, our study examined the effect of one type of tattoo and piercing located on the neck and nose respectively. There is evidence that the genre of body art and its location can influence its perception (e.g., Timming et al., 2017). Moreover, the stigma of body modification may be influenced by the extent to which the bearer could exercise discretion in having the body art. For example, body art such as tribal marks, which are often given at birth, may attract less or no stigma because it is assumed that the individual could not exercise any discretion in the process. It is suggested that future research, particularly in the African context, compare such 'indigenous' forms of body art and 'non-indigenous' forms of body art on their impact on labour market outcomes.

## Implications for research and practice

Despite its limitations, our study contributes to the growing body of research on the effects of visible body art on labour market outcomes. First, this is the only study we know of that examines the effect of visible body art on employment chances in the Ghanaian and African contexts. To date, research on body art in the work setting has been largely Western-centred. Our study underscores the importance of physical appearance in recruitment and selection. Corroborating Western-based research on the effects of visible body art (e.g., McElroy et al., 2014; Summers et al., 2018; Timming et al., 2015), the present study suggests that recruitment and selection decisions are influenced not only by such factors as individuals' skills, knowledge, and experience but also by aesthetic considerations. In this regard, the study further suggests that body art such as visible tattoos and piercings constitute a potential source of employment discrimination. Secondly, our study contributes to understanding the gendered nature of the stigma associated with body art within the context of employment. Although gender discrimination in the labour market has received considerable attention globally, little is known about the extent to which gender discrimination in employment intersects with body art. This study advances previous research by comparing the employability ratings of male and female job applicants with different kinds of visible body art. Finally, this is the only study we know of that compared the effects of tattoos and piercing and the combination of both types of body art on perceived employability. Our study suggests that, at least within the Ghanaian context, the mere presence of a tattoo or piercing on an individual elicits prejudicial attitudes against them.

This study also has implications for potential job seekers and particularly the youth. Although Ghana's *Labour Act (Act 651), 2003* proscribes employment discrimination, the present study suggests that discrimination against persons with visible body art (e.g., tattoos and piercings) is likely taking place in organisations. The study points to the need for individuals contemplating having visible tattoos or piercings to reflect on the potential consequences of their decisions on labour market outcomes. Our findings suggest that visible body art is not only socially stigmatized but can also limit individuals' chances of being employed. In so far as visible tattoos and piercing are considered incompatible with job roles that require regular contact with customers, job seekers with VBM would maximize their employment chances by considering roles that involve less contact with customers. To reduce prejudice associated with body modification, job seekers and employees should consider concealing visible tattoos and piercings at the workplace.

## Conclusion

The present study has shown that visible tattoos and piercings have significant adverse effects on the employment chances of job seekers, which may be attributed to negative stereotypes associated with visible body art. Persons with VBM are often seen as less credible, less attractive, unprofessional, and less qualified as compared to their

counterparts without VBM (Timming, 2015; Timming & Perrett, 2017). The study also underscores the gendered nature of the stigma associated with visible body art with both men and women experiencing differential adverse outcomes depending on the kind of body art. Although body art may have aesthetic appeal and serve as a means of self-expression, particularly among young people, our study draws attention to the potential labour market cost associated with the practice.


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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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