

Personnel Selection And Body Art. A Mix-Method Study On Tattooed Job Candidates

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Abstract: The present research aims at deepen the influence of body art during the selection process. In details, we considered tattoos as a specific kind of body art and their relation with prejudice. According to literature tattoos can significantly affect the interview process and future work life. We implemented a triangulated methodology conducting 2 series of focus group interviews with a sample of tattooed and not-tattooed job seekers and online interviews with recruiters; in addition, a sample of 360 students in economics and psychology, who could probably become recruiters in the next future, were invited to fill in a questionnaire where they were asked to evaluate a job candidate resume where we had manipulated the picture (with and without tattoo). On the side of future recruiters, the results suggest that visible body art can potentially be a real impediment to employment, even if this effect is reduced for job applicants seeking non-customer-facing roles. Some relevant implications concern the tattoos' social perception in the workplace and self-management of tattooed candidates. The novelty of the present study resides in the still partly unexplored job candidates' point of view and in the Italian dataset: this is the first study to investigate this issue in Italy.

Index Terms: Personnel Selection, job candidates, mix-methods, focus group, tattoos, prejudice, employability

1 INTRODUCTION

The various forms of body art are considered as the outcome of the functioning of different domain of human beings, including among others, anthropological, physiological, psychological and biological aspects of our life. Briefly, from the biological perspective, researchers stated that body art, such as tattoos and piercing, ensure a biological and anthropological necessity of humans, for example to prove the biological quality of an individual [1]. Many studies have taken the moves from the results of past researches that demonstrated the correlations between physical attractiveness and longevity or physical strength, with resistance to pathogens in men and fertility in women. Based on these line of research, two models were suggested for the explanation of human tendency "to paint or hole" the skin: on the one hand, for the "approximate models" the scarification of the body serves as a symbolic "social highlighter", so to differentiate one individual from the rest of undefined population [2]. On the other hand, the "ultimate model" [3] proposed two different keys to reading body art phenomenon, namely non-adaptive sexual selection and adaptive pathogen-driven sexual selection. Both hypotheses suggest that body art can increase individual's physical attractiveness by attracting partners' attention or by signaling a high biological quality. Nevertheless, said that biological and anthropological functions play certainly an important role in the body art phenomenon, many of these researches have just supposed the correlation between perceived attractiveness and high biological qualities, rather than demonstrate it empirically, especially in the consideration that physical perceived attractiveness is "a function of many factors" [1]. With a specific concern to the Italian context, it is worth to note that in ancient times the tattoos were associated to religious issues as a sign of the Christianity. Tattoos could also have a therapeutic or a magical-healthy function; suddenly tattoo was meant a symbol of power among kings and queens. It was during the XIX century that the first negative stereotype was associated to tattoos: the anthropologist Lombroso [4] defined a tattooed person as a deviant and savage. It was the American hippy culture that started to convey a renewal positive meaning of the tattoo as a symbol of freedom and counterculture but at the same time in Italy there was a strong diffusion of tattoos among sailors and mafias associations or in prisons; they represented a way to impress a memory or a

message of membership. Thus, tattoos were often seen as a symbol of membership or affiliation to gangs, symbol of rebellion, deviance or violence; nowadays there are some cultures where the negative stereotype is still alive and the scientific literature confirm this assumption. The psychological literature has largely demonstrated that physical aspect affect the other's people perception and, in particular, in the personnel selection context the obesity [5], a bad looking [6], a visible disability [7] also the gender and the ethnic group, considerably reduce the hiring probability, and, according to the literature, tattoos do not make exception. However, as Timming argued in a recent work on the influence of visible tattoos in the workplace [8], the first researches on these topics born under the sign of the social stigma and prejudice. Prejudice was conceptualised in different theoretical ways during the last years; for example, Allport defined this construct as "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" [9]. Accordingly with a long tradition of definitions, this one implies that prejudice (in all of its possible forms) is based on an "imputed behaviour stereotype" [8]. That's so, tattoos and piercing fall into the realm of stereotyping aesthetic characteristics that influence (negatively, according to the literature) individuals and social representations (and behaviour) towards tattooed population. Ruetzler and colleagues [10], in a study that investigated seven attributes associated with favourable interview presentation involving 108 participants, demonstrated that having visible tattoos and non-conventional piercing are both undesirable attributes of job candidates but they also demonstrated that the most powerful marker of professionalism are grooming and dress attired, followed by visible tattoos and unconventional piercing. In similar way, the theories and the researches on social stigma have focused on the definition of the construct of stigma as well as on its influence in several social contexts, among others in the workplace. Stigma has been defined as a gap between an individual's virtual social identities (what is expected about physical aspects, personality traits etc.) and the individual's actual identities (a representation of how the person is actually perceived by observers) [11]. Thus, stigma is that inferred characteristic that elicits the perception that the stigmatised individual is deviant, abnormal, strange. In the workplace stigmatised individuals encounter many problems respect his/her treatment by the colleagues, the amount of wage, the

possibility to get access to a better-rates job position [12]. In a recent full-factorial two-by-two scenario-based experiment [13], three important hypotheses have been demonstrated. The first one suggests that persons working with body art wearers, in a relationship in which they share the profit equally, will rate this kind of situation negatively, indicating it as “unacceptable”. So, the authors claimed that (second hypothesis): “employees with a facial tattoo and facial piercings are more acceptable to their co-workers in jobs that do not require face-to-face contact with customers than in jobs that require such contact” ([13], p. 627). However, the most important findings of this experiment concern the statistical relevance of the correlation between the two hypotheses just mentioned. Namely, data analyses suggest that the least desirable situation for someone who work in partnership with a body art wearer, is when it is implied a face-to-face interaction with customer and when the pay is shared. However, as the results are not based on a real situation of daily life, but they are scenario-based, its main limitation concerns the focus on the outcome of the process of prejudice, rather than on the process in itself. In contrast, Timming [8] suggested to approach this issue through a qualitative method, trying to “uncovering how, and in what context hiring managers exhibit prejudice” ([8], p. 3). This method allows to deepen the nature of prejudice in recruitment context, and results suggest that there is an “industry effect” in the recruitment process, so that the hiring manager actively seeks out tattooed employer, maybe to reflect some in-group demographic characteristics. Moreover, results confirm the relevance of spatial distance from customers, suggesting that a candidate for a “backstage” work suffer less the injury of prejudice dynamics. Finally, Timming [8] suggested that location on the body and the genre of the tattoo represent one of the more complex aspects of this phenomenon: obviously, a flower tattooed on the wrist is more acceptable than a visible swastika tattooed on the neck but, interestingly, 2 of the 15 hiring managers who take part of the interview selected a candidate with a visible swastika. These results were confirmed in a later mixed-method research by Timming [14]. Most of these researches tried to understand what kind of characteristics are more often objects of stigmatizing behaviour and how these behaviours born and disrupt in all its possible forms but there is still too much to understand on the tattoo influence on recruitment selection, considering also that the most recent researches seems to discredit the work so far [14]. Our paper aims to reverse the focus of approaching to the comprehension of the relevance of visible tattoos and body art in the selection context, through a mixed-method design based on the candidate’s prospective, hoping to enrich existent literature. This research considers also the self-perception of tattooed candidates with regard to the prejudice toward them. Three studies have been conducted within the framework of mix method in applied psychology [15, 16, 17, 18]:

1. Two focus groups with a group of tattooed participants and a group of non-tattooed; they were all potential candidates for a job interview.
2. Online structured interview to a group of professional recruiters.
3. 360 Questionnaires were administered to potential future job recruiters, they were asked to evaluate a resume, where some candidates were visibly tattooed and others were not.

2 Premise

According to our literature review, this is the first study to deepen this issue in a sample of Italian people. As prejudice is strictly cultural related, it seemed to us mandatory to investigate this specific aspect only on Italian job candidates, also because from an historical point of view the tattoo in Italy has been subjected to an interchanging of positive and negative prejudices, as already stressed.

3. Qualitative evidences

3.1 Research questions

As the prejudice is strictly cultural related, our first explorative research questions were related to the cultural context: nowadays, what do tattoos mean in Italy? Are they still perceived as associated to deviance and stigma? Is there a prejudice toward tattooed people? What is the point of view of recruiters? In order to gain relevant observations from different points of view, we organized the qualitative part of the research as follow: two focus groups and an online interview.

3.2 Data collection

Two different focus groups were conducted with two moderators, the first with six tattooed young persons and the second with seven non-tattooed persons; they took about one hour each. All participants signed the informed consent; all interviews were audio taped and transcribed to facilitate data analysis and all the analysis were run on transcribed material. The number of participants was decided in line with methodological literature on focus group and sensitive topics (see, for example, [19]).

3.3 Results

A qualitative analysis was performed: a content analysis inspired to the grounded theory’s perspective [20]. According to the grounded theory, raw data obtained from participants represent the main source of theories and hypotheses for the researcher, who has to adopt a sort of complete openness to data. The bottom-up analysis makes possible the creation of frequent cluster or categories relevant for the aim of the research; in line with this approach some key patterns were identified, as they were frequent in several participants’ comments and it was possible to create a categorical tree in order to organize and interpret our qualitative results.

3.3.1 Focus groups results

For what concern the focus group with tattooed participants three parental nodes have been detected: stereotype, psychological violence and generational differences. Tattooed persons are aware of some negative prejudices, in particular they refer to some perceptions:

ex. 1 «they looked at me as a drug addicted»;

ex. 2 «people usually imagine you as more evil».

They also denote some situations perceived as a violence, meant as psychological violence:

ex.3 «...as I had a disease»;

ex.4 «(an employer) told me that I should cover my tattoos, but they are part of me, I will not accept this».

In particular from these latter 2 example (3, 4), it is clear that tattoos contribute to the sense of identity of a given person so that covering them may be experienced as a deep violence. Tattooed participants confirmed the Timming assumption [8]

related to the generational differences, so that past generations difficulty appreciate a tattoo.

Ex.5 «in this changing world our parents' ideas are more ancient than ours».

There is a great awareness of the prejudice toward tattooed people and it is also recognized by the participants, but at the same time they want to affirm their identity as tattooed person in the society. In terms of employability perception, they express an ambivalent attitude: they state that the right procedure is to be judged on the basis of their competences, but they also affirm that the physical aspect is very often evaluated and a tattoo can do the difference. It depends on the employer's point of view, indeed, according to some participants, having an employer or a job recruiter with tattoos can make them more comfortable and confident not to be discriminated. For what concerns the focus group with non-tattooed persons, there was one main cluster related to the outgroup definition (tattooed persons) with three parental nodes: the tattoo's motivation, the tattoo's numerosity and the prejudice toward them. Participants were particularly focused on the motivation that drives people to have a tattoo: they talked about conformism and the need for appearance, they seemed to appreciate the free-choice of a tattooed person and the private meaning or the history of a tattoo.

Ex.6 «There is a difference between a tattoo with a meaning and an aesthetic tattoo...the private meaning is linked to an experience that you lived»

Ex.7 «I don't like a person with a lot of tattoos, for me is a kind of dirty person».

With regard to the prejudice toward tattooed persons, there are three main frequent adjectives: dirty, shabby, rebel, untrustworthy, troublemaker. These adjectives are, sometimes, also referred to the tattooed person in a job context as it is clear in the following examples:

Ex.8 «an organization takes care of the imagine that employees communicate, so they look for well-balanced persons».

Ex. 9 «If I had to choose between a tattooed and a non-tattooed candidate, I will choose the latter because he/she expresses more self-confidence».

A sort of ambivalent attitude arose: they seem to appreciate tattoos in some way, but at the same time they are aware and scared of prejudice.

3.3.2 Interview results

The sample was constituted by 34 recruiters, 25 female and 9 male, with a mean age of 31,94 years; 16 of them have at least one tattoo. They were invited to fill in a structured online interview that aimed at deepen attitudes and opinions towards candidates with tattoos in a selection process. Above all, the main dimensions of the stereotype were confirmed: several participants stated that job context, position of the tattoo on the body, generational differences, genre, tattoo meaning, customers' contact, they all have an impact on the candidate's perception.

Ex.10 «A candidate with a tattoo on his/her hands would not have any problems to work in my organization; there will be probably some problems if tattoos were on face and neck».

Ex.11 «A tattoo would be unpleasant for jobs with customers' contact».

Ex.12 «having a tattoo would be not appropriate for some roles».

A more interesting and still unexplored aspect that arose by interviews concerns the presence of corporate policies about tattoo and piercing: recruiters state that sometime there are explicit policies, other times the policies are implicit (ex. 13).

Ex.13 «There is not a policy but in an unofficial way we evaluate every aspects, the aesthetic ones as well».

Ex.14 «My organization does not clearly express any conditions or limitations for tattoos».

As already underlined elsewhere concerning blog policies [21, 22], the explicit reference to shared rules is very important in terms of psychological contracts. Said in different terms, if a tattooed candidate knows in advance that tattoos are not well evaluated will perceive more fairness in comparison to situations where superficially any prejudice seem to exist but actually and in reality tattooed candidates are discriminated.

4 Quantitative results

The recruiters' point of view has been partly investigated also with an ad hoc questionnaire: our sample is constituted by students who could probably become recruiters in the next future, as they are attending organizational psychology and management courses. They were asked to evaluate a job candidate resume with tattoo or not. The sample is constituted by 360 participants, 240 female and 120 male, mean age: 23, standard deviation 2,72. They were asked to imagine being a job recruiter and to evaluate a job candidate resume with a photo; there were different conditions:

- a male or female job candidate with a visible tattoo for the role of computer programmer;
- a male or female job candidate without tattoo for the role of computer programmer;
- a male or female job candidate with a visible tattoo for the role of cashier;
- a male or female job candidate without tattoo for the role of cashier.

4.1 Measures

An ad hoc questionnaire has been developed; we provided the same resume for all the candidate, the only changing variables were the genre of the candidate, the role (cashier or computer programmer) and the presence or not of the tattoo. The choice of the two different roles has been driven by the existent literature: there are evidences that stereotype toward tattooed workers is stronger for a front office role rather than a back office one [23]; so we expect that a tattooed candidate for the role of cashier will be evaluated worse than tattooed candidate for the role of computer programmer. The literature also suggested that the choice of the type of tattoo may play a role [24]; for such a reason we decided to use a neutral tattoo, namely a date tattooed on the neck and written in Romanic style. We decided to adopt a very short questionnaire with few items. Along with a sociodemographic paragraph, we had 2 different main dependent variables, evaluation and

employability. Job candidate evaluation is made up by a semantic differential composed by 9 items (for example, how the candidate is perceived as being trustworthy and competent). Employability is composed by 2 items concerning the possibility to pass the phase of cv screening and the possibility to get a job in the next future. We hypothesized as it follows

H1 Tattooed job candidates are evaluated worst than not tattooed ones.

In particular, we expect an interaction effect with job type, with candidates for cashier receiving the worst evaluation

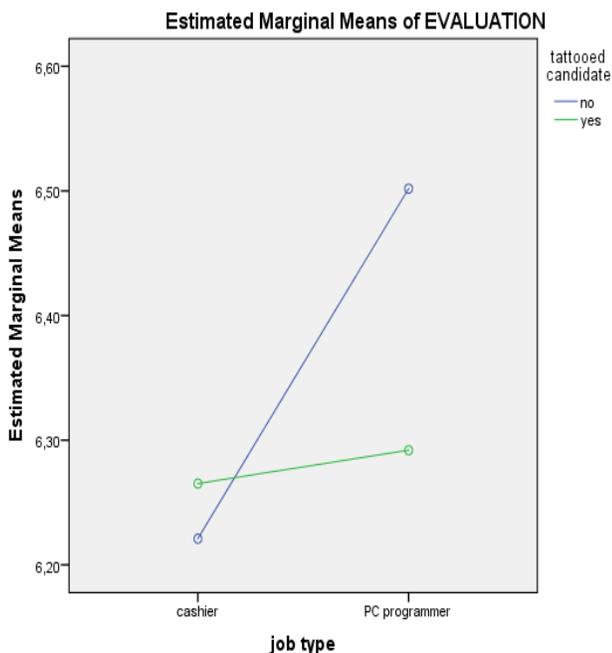
H2 Tattooed job candidates have less probabilities in comparison to not tattooed ones to pass cv screening.

In particular, we expect an interaction effect with job type, with candidates for cashier receiving the less probabilities.

4.2 Results

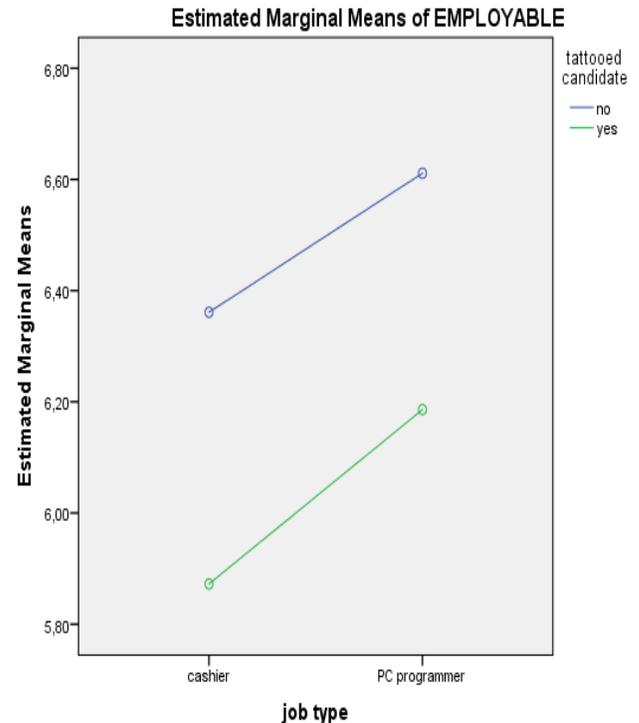
Before commenting on the main results, a very brief note on the distributive qualities of our variables. We have run descriptive statistics, showing good properties for both the scales, in terms of skewness and kurtosis. Also the reliability is good, having for the Evaluation scale: Cronbach α .930 (mean 6,31 and standard deviation 1,28) and for the Employability scale: Cronbach α .81 (mean 6,25, and standard deviation 1,50). We have proceeded to test our hypothesis, with a series of factorial ANOVAs, with the following results. First of all, the mixed ANOVA for the presence of tattoo and job type (fig.1) showed no significant main effects nor interaction ones, even if there is a trend according to which for pc programmers it doesn't matter the presence or not of tattoo, while for cashiers, who have a direct contact with consumers, the presence of tattoo corresponds to the lower evaluation of cv, not supporting in statistical terms the first hypothesis.

Fig. 1 ANOVA job type x tattoo on cv evaluation



For what concerns the second hypothesis, results of the mixed ANOVA job type x tattoo on employability of candidates (2) showed the main effects of tattoo on the employability [$F_{(1, 359)} = 8.49, p = 0.004, \eta^2 = 0.23$].

Fig. 2 ANOVA job type x tattoo on employability



Finally, we run a factorial ANOVA having as predictors gender and tattoo. Even if results are not statistically significant, it is worthy to note that female candidates are evaluated worst than male ones, as well as they receive less probabilities to pass the cv screening. Such a result is worrying and calls for additional research.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The qualitative data confirmed some already known dimensions: the job context, the number of tattoos and the position of tattoo make a difference in the social acceptability. We observed a difference between the two groups of focus group participants, in particular for what concern the belongings to their in-group: the tattooed persons seem to have an inner need of belonging, perhaps because they feel to be in some way threatened. According to our sample there is still a strong prejudice toward tattooed job candidates, both self-perceived and expressed. The most worrying result is the strong gender discrimination, which emerges, even if as a trend and not in statistically significant terms, in the quantitative results. This latter result, along with the results on tattooed candidates, calls for specific training for actual and future recruiters in order to control possible effects of discrimination. In terms of future research agenda and in more general terms, since tattoos have been investigated only in personnel selection contexts, it would be very interesting to test the role and power of tattoos in influencing HR management and evaluations, once that a candidate has been selected, especially comparing aging and job identity [2015]. In

addition, it would be definitely interesting to test the role played by tattooed recruiters; according to our qualitative results, tattooed people form an in-group and we may expect a buffering role in such a sense. Last but not least, it would be interesting to test different type of job in search of some contexts where, as supposed by Timming [25], having a tattoo may be a plus to be valorized. In other words, there may be contexts or time (the next future) showing discrimination of non-tattooed candidates. In terms of limits, our research is cross-sectional, having the primary limit of the non-generalization of our results. On the other side, in applicative terms, there are practical implications for those organizations interested in non-discriminatory corporate policies and training programmes, as already underlined.

Author Contributions

M.C. contributed to study conception and design. M.C., S.F. and R.B. performed the literature search. S.F. and R. B. collected data. M.C. and S.F. analysed data. M.C., R.B. and S.F. drafted the manuscript. M.C. and S.F. provided critical revisions and editing.

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