Piercings: Are They Considered Professional?

Introduction

Piercings are something that we are exposed to every day. They are an art form utilized to create and shape our identities. Piercings and other body modification is usually visual, as is the clothing and hair styles we choose to give ourselves from day to day. We have the right to freedom of expression, so what is the problem behind piercing any body part that we choose? Some people may not realize that there is a problem at all. Despite the option to obtain virtually any piercing and buy tasteful jewelry to go with it, these adornments can have serious repercussions to one’s future career. This is a crucial issue we should be aware of, especially during the given economic state. The problem that I have found is that there is no evident research, which states employers’ perceptions on which specific types (like gauges, studs, hoops) and locations of piercings are considered professional. Therefore, the purpose of my research is to discover employers’ perceptions of different types of piercings as professional and how their perceptions may vary depending on an individual’s sex.

This communication phenomenon will focus on piercings as a sign of nonverbal communication and to understand the perceptions that are formed on men and women [with visible piercings]. I will ground my research in the significance that piercings have in creating perceptions from a professional point of view. Specifically, I will survey Farmville area employers from a variety of organizational contexts. This study will focus on previous research on the perceptions of piercings and how it is related to professionalism, theoretical grounding that informs my research, a review of literature, and methodology necessary to study employers’ perceptions.
Historical basis; modern day repercussions

The idea of body modification by piercing has been around for thousands of years. It may seem like a newer, more modern trend in today’s society; but it has cultural significance rooted to prehistoric origins. Anthropologists have found earrings that date back to 2,500 BC.

Human bodies can be pierced in over 200 places. In fact, Guinness World Record holder Elaine Davidson has over 6,000 body piercings - the most recorded amount of piercings for anyone in their lifetime. Among the options to get pierced, the most unique are: tongue, upper and lower lip, genitals, nipples, dermals (see attached picture), bridge of the nose, back, finger, wrist, cheek, neck, and lastly, the butt crack. In addition to the many places body piercings can exist, there are also a variety of different types of jewelry/ piercings that individuals can buy. Spikes, studs, and hoops are common amongst pierced individuals; however, the more eccentric jewelry features barbells, bull rings, gauges (which stretch out the ear lobes), spikes, and even mustache-shaped jewelry exists (see attached picture). Over time, piercings and related artifacts have adapted to meet the interests of a wide array of persons. Accordingly, the perceptions of this body modification have also changed over time. Some of the most common attributes to pierced individuals are negative; for example, deviant, rebellious, or a misfit. Despite the off putting appearance of visible piercings, it is important to realize that there is a different significance behind it and to not “judge a book by its cover.”

Amidst the excitement of getting a new piercing, we may not realize the immensity of the problem that it could create for our future careers. Many news sources have reported on the issues that arise when an individual has visible body art; this includes tattoos because it is also a related form of body art and modification that is used to form an identity. While the acceptance
of visible piercings may be an easy topic to face with friends and family members, it cannot be confronted in the same way with an employer or professional. Often times, organizations have dress codes that prohibit “unusual” appearance (i.e. unnaturally colored hair, tattoos, and visible facial piercings). It may come off as pretentious, but dress codes do not violate any anti-discrimination laws and employers have the right to put them in tact.

Why does this matter?

Even though employers may observe piercings on men and women and make assumptions, they cannot conclude that they ‘know’ that person’s work ethic, characteristics, and abilities. A New York Times (2006) article stated that piercings and tattoos are a continually growing trend; about one in five adults in the United States has a tattoo and that ratio is even higher for piercings.

It is essential to know what connotations piercings and other body art have in professional settings; as it is equally as important to gain an understanding of an individual before making false accusations. My research has found that clothing, hair styles, jewelry and tattoos that are visible can impact what employers believe to be true about a person’s character. Writer for the Wyoming Tribune Eagle online, Michelle Dynes (2010) stated that “job seekers’ qualifications and skills are what secure a new position, but experience could be overshadowed by visible signs of self-expression” (para. 2).

Theoretical Grounding

When examining piercings and the meanings that they create, the theory of nonverbal communication and one of its constructs, artifacts, show to be guiding theories in the discussion.
They are influential in understanding the logic and reasoning behind why individuals get piercings and helps individuals who do not have piercings to recognize the purpose that they serve, instead of simply placing a label or stigma to the artifacts.

Nonverbal Communication

In her book *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday encounters*, Julia T. Wood (2010) defined nonverbal communication as ambiguous, arbitrary, and often unintentional. In other words, nonverbal communication can be interpreted in many different ways and change over time. It includes all aspects of communication other than words (p.122). Without realizing it, people interpret more significant meaning in nonverbal versus verbal communication (p.124). Nonverbal communication accounts for 65 to 93% of the total meaning of communication (Wood, 2010, p.124). As a result, it is more believable because a person’s body language can display emotions more than their words (p.124). This theory informs my research and understanding of piercings in a professional context because it encompasses how appearance (as well as posture, eye contact, and other nonverbals, etc.) is equally, if not more, important as an individual’s capabilities and experiences.

Artifacts

Artifacts are a component of nonverbal communication that signifies all objects that people use for self-expression (Wood, 2010, p. 75). This can refer to any decoration, religious article, picture, tattoo or piercing that a person gets to represent who they are and further mold their identity. Artifacts convey different messages, such as group affiliation and relationships. In this case, piercings signify different messages depending on the placement and type. Photographs and decorations may diffuse an illusion of an individual’s personality, hobbies, and
values. Each artifact is carefully chosen by an individual and attributes a specific meaning to it, although it is not always apparent. It takes effort and explanation to understand the significance behind piercings [and body modifications].

In *Communication, Gender, and Culture*, Julia T. Wood (2003) stated “beyond childhood, artifactual communication continues to manifest and promote cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity” (p.136). Traditionally, American society has assigned piercings and jewelry with being feminine. Males were never part of the trend to obtain piercings, which has led to the belief that males should also not have piercings. This is background evidence for some differences in dress codes between males and females in regards to the acceptance of piercings.

**Warning: think about sex, organization, and location before piercing**

There are three main points of discussion that are evident based on extensive research on this particular topic: objective reasoning for obtaining a piercing, [positive and negative] perceptions applied to pierced individuals, and what types of piercings are regarded to as professional. The first examines the personal preferences and logic behind body modification, the second explains a professional and societal outlook on piercings, and the third describes research on the correlation between the location and type of piercing to a professional context.

**Why piercings?**

Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, (2007) surveyed 400 undergraduate students at a southeastern university to examine what social connotations tattoos and piercings have, the reasoning for having a tattoo or piercing, the attitudes towards and the attractiveness of tattoos and piercings associated with each sex and their results explained that piercings and tattoos are
obtained to make a decorative statement, for self-expression, and for aesthetic appearance, “despite their controversial nature”. Fenske (2007) composed an essay that is based on research of tattoo culture and analysis of tattoo conventions, which found that the ability of the body as material or able to be tattooed and pierced is another alluring factor for both sexes (p.60).

Research found that women are more likely to get a tattoo or piercing for body decoration and men to communicate messages that portray relationships, group affiliation, or social organizations (Fenske, 2007, p. 60). However, Horne, et. al. (2007) said men were less likely to obtain piercings because they believed that their parents and future friends would not approve (p.1012). This implied that the interpretations of artifacts can vary depending on sex.

Conclusion: Historically, tattoos and piercings have been present in societies across the globe. Although there was a shady view of persons with piercings and tattoos, they are rising in popularity and also becoming more accepted by some in society. Piercings are obtained for a variety of reasoning. The most common are for decoration, self-expression, and aesthetic appearance, although they can be obtained to symbolize a relationship or affiliation with a group or organization. Piercings used to be more common among stereotypically “deviant” groups, but are not associated to any specific groups or persons now in society.

Perceptions of piercings

People in society stereotype individuals with visible piercings. Totten, Lipscomb, and Jones’ (2009) surveyed 496 college students from 14 different universities to discover the attitudes about persons with body art stated that the majority (over 80%) of society is believed to stereotype, or associate negative characteristics like aggressiveness, an overall “bad” image, a “partying” lifestyle and sexual promiscuity. Despite Totten, Lipscomb, and Jones’ (2009)
findings of the stigma associated with body art, Kosut (2006) analyzed commercial marketing and the cultural prevalence of tattoos and piercings in American popular culture and stated that over the past few decades, tattoos and piercings have become a trend globally, culturally, politically, and economically.

Seiter & Sandry (2003) surveyed 93 undergraduate students and 101 recruiters, managers, or supervisors about their perceptions of body piercings by showing photographs of individuals with and without piercings. The researchers discovered that a variety of characteristics were assigned (such as credibility, hirability, attractiveness, competence, and extroversion) based on the amount and location of piercings a person has (p.288). Respondents believed that a person with visible piercings is significantly more outgoing and social when compared to someone without any visible piercings (p.289). However, respondents believed a person with no visible piercings as more welcoming, agreeable, and competent (p.289). This means that the results suggest that the respondents believed visible facial piercings made someone seem less likely to comply and to be less skilled.

The results yielded a notably higher rating of trustworthiness when no visible facial piercings were present (p.289). Persons without any visible facial piercings were therefore viewed as more trustworthy. When it comes to the types of piercings that the respondents analyzed, they specified that a nose ring(s) made a candidate less hirable (p.289). Overall, a person’s overall attractiveness rating was not affected by the presence or absence of visible piercings (p.290). This is interesting to note because of the stark comparison of negative connotations with piercings in an organizational context, although piercings do not affect the attractiveness of the candidates.
In a study by Doss & Ebesu Hubbard (2009), they surveyed 401 tattoo shop patrons and undergraduate students (all of which had at least one tattoo) at a university from Hawaii to discover how much communication results from having a tattoo(s) and found tattooed individuals being labeled as deviant, rebellious and having other negative characteristics.

According to Fenske’s (2007) research on tattoo culture and how it has become a worldwide phenomenon, the results yielded tattoos to be a sign of a resistance to be “normal” because a tattooed body suggests a different identity when thinking of a “typical” individual, much like pierced individuals. Tattoos became a symbol of deviance in American culture in the late nineteenth century, thus associating tattoos with rebellion and other trouble (p.52). Horne, et. al. (2007) stated that, historically, attitudes and behaviors about tattoos and piercings have been negative and also deemed someone as “improper”.

Contrary to Doss & Ebesu Hubbard’s (2009), Fenske’s (2007), and Horne et. al. (2007) results associating a stigma to pierced and tattooed individuals, Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones (2009) found that piercings and tattoos are believed to be appropriate for any age.

**Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.**

A candidate’s sex and location of piercings plays a role in an organization’s perception of it being more or less acceptable (p.1013). For example, piercings are more likely to be viewed negatively in males than in females. According to Horne, et. al. (2007), piercings are viewed as more attractive on women than on men; as long as the piercings are not “overdone” or excessive, while women viewed piercings on men as “freaky” or a set back to their future job (p.1011).
Relevant to the results of Horne et. al (2007), Seiter & Sandry (2003) stated that dress codes vary for males and females when it comes to piercings in organizations. Often times, “males who wear jewelry may be perceived negatively” since “…dress codes are generally based on old-fashioned stereotyping, and are often applied differently to males and females” (p.293).

Conclusion: Depending on the type of piercing, perceptions that peers and employers have of a pierced individual could be negative. The research that I found yielded negative, neutral, and a few positive connotations that are associated with piercings. Overall, people create meanings about an individual’s personality and abilities from their piercings (and tattoos) without getting to know an individual; this finding stresses the importance of knowing how piercings (and appearance) can alter employers’ perceptions.

**What forms of body modification are professional?!**

Seiter & Sandry (2003) stated that tattoos and piercings were not deemed as acceptable in American society until recent years. This background information supports another point that stated piercings can be an issue in some organizations more than others and that leads some managers in different organizational contexts to enforce new policies regarding the ways in which employees adorn themselves (p. 290). For example, a doctor with piercings may pose a sanitary or health threat in their work environment if they have piercings; compared to an employee at a fast-food restaurant.

It is up to an organization’s discretion to allow employees to have visible piercings. It does not violate discrimination laws if an organization wishes to prohibit their employees from having any sort of body art (p.293). “The concern is what the body art might express,” meaning the significance behind a person’s artifacts can easily be lost in translation and misinterpreted,
causing reason for apprehension about pierced and tattooed individuals (Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones, 2009, p.79). This is an example of how employers may view piercings in a negative way when they see the outside appearance of a person and are unaware of the intended meaning behind it.

Previous research dictated that companies view employee attire as a large factor in the success of their company (p.287); which stresses the importance of employee appearance, despite their overall qualities and capabilities. Candidates with no visible piercings were not viewed as any more likely to get the job done compared to candidates with visible piercings (p.288). This is an important result to note that if a candidate has piercings, it does not mean that they will be a poor employee. Appearance may deter an employer’s perception, but research supports the fact that piercings do not affect the candidate’s abilities to get the job done. A quote that sums this up is:

Students who wish to enter the business world have been in an environment without dress regulations and may be unfamiliar with the conservative image that recruiters desire... In order to gain a competitive edge, it is important for students to understand appropriate dress for interview situations. (Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones, 2009, p.290).

This is a perfect example of how vast employers and businesses’ opinions on appearance and piercings differ, and why being aware of this is important. “They [piercings] can put a candidate at a disadvantage because of the potential that they will offend customers or be a safety concern,” (p.288).
Conclusion: There is contrasting evidence that decipheres whether or not piercings are acceptable on men and women in a professional setting. Some research listed that a person with visible piercings can have positive qualities associated with them, while others supported the belief that piercings and other body art are stigmatic in professional settings. The research also stated that some organizations may be fonder of piercings than others. In essence, it is suggested to ask the employer or research the companies’ policies involving piercings and other forms of body art.

**Methodology**

In reaction to all analyzed scholarly articles, research, and relevant literature, this study is rooted in the perceptions that are formed about men and women with visible piercings depending on the type and location [of the piercings] in relation to the organizational context and how that affects employers’ beliefs [about the individuals]. Therefore, a quantitative approach will be utilized to examine the frequency, types, causes, effects, and intensity of opinions among employers (personal communication, November 15, 2012). The following hypotheses will guide my study of employers’ perceptions on which specific types and locations of piercings are considered professional and how their perceptions may vary depending on an individuals’ sex.

- **H1:** The location and type of piercings on a candidate will affect employers’ judgments and perceptions differently.

This hypothesis will directly analyze the basic beliefs of employers and how [in a positive, negative or neutral way] the location and types of piercings affect their perceptions of a candidate.

- **H2:** The sex of a candidate with visible piercings will affect employer’s judgments and perceptions.
The purpose of this hypothesis is to examine the basic beliefs about employers and piercings on a male or female. It will either support or contradict my following hypotheses.

- **H3**: *Men who have visible piercings will be assigned negative characteristics by employers.*

From previous studies, males with visible piercings are viewed more negatively than women. This hypothesis exists to inform me of perceptions about pierced males and to discover any differences [in perceptions] among organizational contexts.

- **H4**: *Women who have visible piercings will be assigned negative characteristics by employers.*

This hypothesis will describe employers’ beliefs of piercings on women. It will be interesting to compare these results to males and to see if it supports previous research that stated piercings on women are generally more accepted in the workplace. Comparatively, it will lead to insight about the different types of piercings.

**Sampling Selection**

In this study I will be examining Farmville area employers. This selection of participants will best answer my research problem because it will provide direct and concise responses [attitudes, opinions] about the professionalism of piercings on males and females. The employers will have the option to answer honestly, without the presence of others [compared to a focus group] around to possibly interfere with their answers. Employers will also be able to assign specific characteristics to males and females based on the type and location of their
piercings. My survey demographics need to cover employers from array of organizations in order to identify patterns and differences about perceptions.

Procedure

In order to gather data for my future quantitative research, I will use a survey as my methodological approach. In her book *Communication Research: Asking Questions, Finding Answers*, Joann Keyton (2011) defined a survey as a means for collecting information by selecting participants to answer questions in order to produce information which can be generalized from a selected sample across many people (p. 161). Online surveys will be distributed for convenience of the participants. I want the survey to identify characteristics associated with males and females that have visible piercings; and to provide insight on the different types of piercings and locations that individuals can get piercings to see how it affects the professionalism, opinions of capabilities, deviance, and “hirability”. I plan to include pictures of males and females [one male and one female] that have a variety of visible facial and/or body piercings [or none at all]. A survey program, such as Surveymonkey, would be ideal to utilize and send out. The employers will be contacted by telephone and by e-mail to ensure their responses. It would be interesting to send the survey to professors and other faculty members at Longwood to see and compare their perceptions. In order to guarantee an array of participants, I will have help from the Academic Career & Advising Center to contact as many employers as possible.

The general topics of my survey will focus on: location of piercings, types [i.e. studs, hoops, gauges] of piercings, perceptions of professionalism on males and females, as well as other perceptions and characteristics that are applied, and how organizational context affects perceptions.
For my hypothesis, H: The location and type of piercings on a candidate will affect employers’ judgment and perceptions differently, the independent variable is the location and type of piercings and the dependent variable is employers’ judgments and perceptions. In order to operationalize the independent variable, I will state that any visible body piercing regards to more than two piercings on the ear lobes (one on each ear lobe). Thus, locations of piercings can be on the skin of any part of the body that is visible to the eye, including: eyebrow, wrist, nose (cartilage, bridge, or septum), ear (conch, helix, rook, snug, orbital, industrial, dermal punch, tragus), neck (front of back), hand, lip (top, bottom, or middle), chin, and eye. The type of piercing is measured by the design of the jewelry. Therefore, some basic examples are studs, hoops, gauges, and spikes.

The use of the ANOVA (analysis of variance) statistical test will be utilized for my study. Keyton (2011) stated that the ANOVA test compares the influence two or more independent variables on the dependent variable. This fits into my study since I will be able to measure the type and location of piercings (IVs) on employers’ judgments and/or perceptions (DV). My survey questions (see Appendix A) will ask questions that intertwine the components of the independent variables and how it influences to the dependent variable.

This ANOVA quantitative test will be appropriate for my research gap to specifically identify the professionalism [if any] that employers associate with visible piercings [and which ones] on men and women. The survey will help find data on piercings on men and women, the perceptions of piercings in different organizational contexts, and specific analyses of piercings.

Conclusion

After an intricate literature review and research on scholarly articles, there is no direct answer from employers about which types of piercings are professional. However, appearance is
vital and seriously considered by organizations in terms of success for their company. In an
economy that is hurting for jobs, it is crucial to understand the implications that freedom of
expression can have. Over 80% of Americans have tattoos, and even more have piercings. Body
modification is an immensely common phenomenon. I hope to benefit many by my research
which will specifically identify what perceptions employers have on [types and locations of]
piercings and if they are considered professional. My future research will be insightful to
understanding how artifacts that we use to express our identities can hinder our careers.
Works Cited

http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,223178,00.html.


Appendix A: Research Questions

1. How likely are you to perceive candidates differently depending on the location and types of visible piercings that they possess? (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely). This question serves to understand the basis of piercings and having an effect on candidates’ perceptions.

2. How likely are you to perceive a candidates’ visible piercings differently depending on that person being a male or female? (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely). This question serves to further explore studies of previous researchers that have found a stark difference in perceptual identities associates with males and females.

3. How likely are you to consider a woman with visible facial piercings [other than two ear piercings] as professional? (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely). The purpose of this question is to examine how facial piercings on women are perceived on a professional level; if a higher likelihood compared to males, it could support previous research that states jewelry is perceived as more feminine and therefore less acceptable on males.

4. How likely are you to consider a man with visible facial piercings as professional? (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely). Previous research indicates that males are less likely to be viewed as having an “acceptable” appearance with visible piercings, so this question serves to further inquire that result.

5. Are you male or female?
6. What type of organizational setting do you work in?

7. What is your job title? (involved in hiring of new employees, conduct interviews, managerial, general employee, etc.)

8. Questions 5, 6, 7, and 8 serve as demographic questions so I can sort my participants.


