Visible Body Modifications and Future Employment

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Abstract
It is important to investigate male and female college students’ perceptions on visible body modifications (VBM) in relation to future employment given the uncertain economy and how VBM can be a risk factor in obtaining employment (Kramer, 2006). This nonrandom pilot study examined the perceptions of 79 college students regarding VBM and the effect those modifications have on future employment. It was hypothesized that female college students would report considering VBM to a greater extent regarding future employment. Data was analyzed using: frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, independent t-tests, along with Cronbach’s Alpha reliability analysis. The results indicated one significant gender difference in support of the hypothesis. College career specialists need to focus on male college students who consider the employment consequences of VBM less than females. Implications for future research would include a larger, random, and more diverse sample to be able to generalize to the larger population of college students.

Introduction
Current research supports that there is a connection between individuals with visible body modifications (such
as tattoos and piercings) and societal and familial views (Firmin, Tse, Foster, & Angelini, 2008; Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008; Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007; Kramer, 2006). Within the existing literature, researchers agreed that those individuals with visible body modifications (VBM) were viewed differently from those individuals without visible body modifications (Horne et al., 2007). Specific views that society attributes to individuals with VBM are highly noticed in the workplace (Kramer, 2006). Research suggested that employers target employees with VBM for their VBM, perhaps even telling employees to cover their modifications in the workplace. However, individuals viewed their modifications as self expression, self identity, and/or religiously significant (Kramer, 2006). Is there enough evidence among researchers to claim that VBM could affect future employment and are there gender differences to take into account? Do individuals refrain from VBM because of the difficulty in finding employment during these uncertain economic times? After the researchers reviewed the current literature on this contemporary issue of the relationship between VBM and future employment, male and female college students were surveyed, at a small Midwestern University. The students were surveyed concerning their views regarding the affects that VBM could have on future employment, and if they think about future employment when getting a VBM.

**Literature Review**

The researchers analyzed the existing literature on the subject matter of college students’ perspectives on VBM and how it impacts future employment in their field. Regarding college students’ perspectives on body modifications, it was difficult to acquire findings about their attitudes towards the affects that tattoos and piercings have on future employment. Of the literature that was reviewed, the primary focus was
on the attitudes of college students with body modifications and societal views toward those candidates. However, one study focused on behaviors, attitudes, and elucidations of college students with body modifications and the differences between male and female views. All four studies examined found a relationship between VBM and the effects they have on familial, societal, or individual perceptions. The literature attempted to discern how VBM were perceived by employers, familial relations, and friendships. The studies focused on variables such as meanings, religious or personal, of VBM, how modifications impair judgment, and the intensity of the affects that body modifications (Firmin et al., 2008; Resenhoeft et. al., 2008; Horne et al., 2007; Kramer, 2006).

Firmin et al. (2008) examined Christian college students’ perceptions of VBM. The study reviewed the correlation between individuals with VBM and societal views. The authors stated the importance of Biblical meaning behind a participant’s VBM. This study found that individuals with VBM demonstrated significant meaning and purpose in their life. The findings of this study also showed that participants had received both encouragement and discouragement about their VBM from family and friends.

Resenhoeft et al. (2008) examined the connections between individuals with tattoos and how tattoos ultimately harm a person’s perceptions. This included looking at two specific experiments; both showing college students a photograph of a woman with either a visible tattoo or no tattoo at all. The experiments that were performed examined how individuals with tattoos correlated to the perceptions of others. In both experiments, participants were asked to rate the women based on 13 personality characteristics; fashion ability, athleticism, attractiveness, caring ability, creativity, determination, motivation, honestly, generosity, mysteriousness, religiousness, intelligence, and artistic ability. This type of experiment was used to test college
students’ views on the women with the visible tattoos and the correlation they have on their personal perceptions. The authors found that after the first experiment was conducted, the participants viewed a woman with a dragon tattoo as less physically attractive, as well as having negative personality traits, whereas the model without the tattoo was viewed as more physically attractive and intelligent. The authors also found that after the second experiment was conducted, the participants viewed a woman with a smaller and less visible tattoo of a dolphin to have had no significant multivariate differences compared to the model without the tattoo. Overall, the model without the tattoo was viewed as being more religious while demonstrating more honesty. The study found that after both experiments were performed, it was evident that people with tattoos were viewed differently from those individuals without tattoos, and often perceived negatively.

Horne et al. (2007) examined college students’ behaviors, perceptions, and interpretations towards VBM. This study reviewed the correlation between VBM and the participants’ self-expression and identity. This study also showed, in great depth, how female participants were objective targets for piercings compared to male participants who were viewed as irregularities to visible piercings. The authors affirmed the magnitude of the participants’ view on their VBM, and how the views of VBM varied from both male and female participants. Overall, the findings in this study showed that both male and female participants received both unconstructive and affirmative criticism from their VBM.

Kramer (2006) examined the experiences between employees with VBM and employers’ perspectives. The study reviewed previous cases of employers’ reactions to an employee’s body modifications and also examined the correlation between VBM and negative perceptions from their employers. The study also observed that employees
displaying piercings and tattoos are impacted by public employers and what they prohibit in the workplace, regardless of employee’s personal taste or right to individual expression. In regard to freedom of speech, expression, and religion, individuals have the right to what they portray visibly on their body; however, there is an effect on an employer’s prohibition policies of VBM. Employers’ prohibition policies must follow federal and state laws in terms of what they deem to be unsuitable for their company. Conclusively, this study found that employers must beware of employees with VBM in terms of religious meaning, individual expression, and the right to free speech.

Overall, this research topic was lacking on general information in regards to what college students perceive about VBM, and if they have contemplated how body modifications impact future employment. Research has found a relationship between attitudes of college students with body modifications and societal and familial views (Firmin et al., 2008; Resenhoeft et al., 2008; Horne et al., 2007; Kramer, 2006). Also, previous researchers have found that employees with VBM are affected by employer’s prohibitions in the workplace (Kramer, 2006). Very little research has gathered specific data pertaining to college students’ attitudes towards being a visible body modified individual or a non-visible modified individual and the overall effects that VBM have on future employment as well as gender differences. This is the gap that the present study will begin to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to inform this study was the Exchange Theory framework (DeGenova & Rice, 2002). The Exchange Theory assumes that individuals choose behaviors based maximizing rewards and minimizing costs. An individual seeks relationships for friendship, marriage, or other personal benefits, which will ultimately be rewarding.
On the contrary, individuals tend to stray from relationships with minimal benefits and maximum costs.

As applied to this study, the theory would predict that college students who choose VBM could experience negative consequences for future employment but move forward with the modifications for personal rewards that outweigh the costs. The theory would also predict that college students have the propensity to maximize their rewards by recognizing the impact that VBM could have on employer views of them and subsequent future employment.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to examine the attitudes of college students regarding VBM and future employment, investigating whether there will be gender differences; (2) to develop a reliable survey instrument to measure these attitudes, and, (3) for the findings from this study to increase awareness for future investigation on the perceptions of college students with VBM and future employment. The authors found a similar study by Horne et al. (2007) who examined college students’ attitudes, behaviors, and interpretations of VBM. Horne et al. found that both male and female participants received both constructive and unconstructive criticism from family, friends, and co-workers regarding their VBM.

The central research question in this study was, “What is the gendered college student perspective on VBM and future employment in their field?” The authors predicted that there would be a difference between female and male students’ perceptions of VBM and future employment. It was hypothesized that females would consider future employment more when considering a VBM because females tend to be more concerned with others’ views. The authors’ hypothesis was informed by the literature.
Method

Participants

The location of this study was a Midwestern University. The participants were 79 undergraduate, male and female students, in construction classes and Human Development and Family Study classes. Of these 79 students, 29 were male and 50 were female. There were 16 participants between the ages of 18 and 19, 38 participants between the ages of 20 and 21, 17 participants between the ages of 22 and 23, four participants between the ages of 24 and 25, and the remaining were 26 or older.

Research Design

The purpose of this survey research was to be able to generalize to a similar, larger population so that some assumptions could be made about the attitudes of this group towards VBM and future employment (Babbie, 1990). The survey design type is best described as a cross-sectional study design in that it was used to capture knowledge, or attitudes, from male and female college students at one point. The form of data collection was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly on campus due to the fast pace of our research course, convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. The population was the Midwestern university student population. The sample was male and female college students in Construction and Human Development and Family Studies classes. The researchers went into Construction and Human Development and Family Studies classes specifically to obtain an equitable number of male and female students. The study used a non-random purposive design, because the purpose was to gather data on attitudes of male and female college students in Construction and Human Development and Family Studies classes. Randomization was not used in order to be inclusive in the
classroom. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; this study has been approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

A survey was designed to identify the attitudes of college students regarding VBM and their impacts on future employment. The survey included a brief description of the study with an implied consent, definition of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor as well as instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of two demographic questions regarding gender and age. Participants were then given five closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents’ attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were created by reviewing literature and theory concerning VBM and future employment.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. Because the questions and concepts in the survey were inspired by literature, it was determined that they connected the relationship between VBM and future employment. Content validity refers to the instrument statements’ coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions addressed a broad range of issues regarding VBM and future employment. The survey was not piloted prior to distribution.
Procedure

The survey process began with an email to the professors of the Human Development and Family Studies and Construction courses stating the purpose for the study and asking permission to survey their students. Data for this study was then collected when the researchers received permission to enter these classrooms to survey the students in November 2009. The researchers used the purposive sampling design which led them into classes where there were an equitable number of male and female students. The first two Human Development classes that were surveyed students were informed by the professor that two researchers were there to ask for participation with completing a survey. As one researcher introduced them, the other researcher handed out the surveys. Randomization was not used in order to be inclusive in the classroom. The implied consent was read aloud to the college students as they followed along. The college students were then informed that they could keep the first two pages of the survey. They were told that they could start the surveys as soon as the researchers and the professor left the room, however the professors did not leave the room. When the researchers were finished explaining the surveys, they placed an envelope on a table, in the front of the class, where the completed surveys would be placed. Then the researchers informed the students that the envelope would be sealed. When all the college students were finished completing the survey, the professor went outside of the classroom and informed the researchers. The researchers then sealed the envelope to maintain confidentiality. The Construction class that was surveyed followed the above procedure. When all the surveys were completed, the researchers took the sealed envelopes and placed them in their professor’s locked office.
Data Analysis Plan

The data was first cleaned and checked for any missing data. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. The first two questions on the survey were demographic variables: age and gender. Each survey question was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about my future employment (FRE); While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the location on my body and if visible to an employer (LOB); While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the design and if it would be offensive to an employer (TPC); While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about how a future employer may perceive me (WOT); While considering a tattoo/piercing, I take into consideration that I may not get hired (AOE).

To analyze the data, the data-analyzing computer program called the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), was used. The individual was used as the level of analysis. Given that groups were being compared based on gender, data analysis included: frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and independent t-tests. A Cronbach’s Alpha reliability analysis was also conducted.

Results

The computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyze the data collected. The analyses variables were subjected to include: frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, independent t-tests, and a reliability analysis.

The first analysis run was a frequency distribution analysis. This analysis indicated that there was no data missing from the surveys. The self-identity gender category was deleted because of the low number of participants.

Cross-tabulations were run with the independent variable, GEN. For FRE and LOB, there does not appear
to be a large difference between the gender groups in that majorities in both agreed or strongly agreed with the survey statements. For TPC, WOT, and AOE, there appeared to be a difference between males and females with more females agreeing to the statements (refer to Table 1 for Cross-Tabulations and Table 2 for Mean Comparisons).

Table 1
Cross Tabulations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FRE</th>
<th></th>
<th>LOB</th>
<th></th>
<th>TPC</th>
<th></th>
<th>WOT</th>
<th></th>
<th>AOE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GEN</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. (GEN)=Gender of participant; (FRE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about my future employment; (LOB)= While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the location on my body and if visible to an employer; (TPC) = While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the design and if it would be offensive to an employer; (WOT)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about how a future employer may perceive me; (AOE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing, I take into consideration that I may not get hired.
Table 2

**Compare Means**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>FRE</th>
<th>LOB</th>
<th>TPC</th>
<th>WOT</th>
<th>AOE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* (GEN)=Gender; (FRE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about my future employment; (LOB)= While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the location on my body and if visible to an employer; (TPC) = While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the design and if it would be offensive to an employer; (WOT)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about how a future employer may perceive me; (AOE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing, I take into consideration that I may not get hired.

An independent samples t-test was run to compare mean scores for males and females. There was one significant mean difference in variable AOE (refer to Table 3).

Table 3

**Independent T-tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRE</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>0.186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.11)</td>
<td>(0.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOT</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0/37</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>0.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPC</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOT</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>0.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOE</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>*0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* (FRE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about my future employment; (LOB)= While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the location on my body and if visible to an employer; (TPC) = While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the design and if it would be offensive to an employer; (WOT)=While considering a tattoo/piercing I think about how a future employer may perceive me; (AOE)=While considering a tattoo/piercing, I take into consideration that I may not get hired. *significant @p<=0.01, two tailed. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.
A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the variables were a reliable index to measure the major concept: college students’ attitudes on the affects of VBM on future employment. Cronbach’s Alpha is a measure of reliability and was 0.819. This value indicated that the survey items were a reliable measure of the major concept. Qualitative comments were received at the end of numerous surveys. These comments will be analyzed and determined in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Overall, results supported the hypothesis that female college students would consider VBM in relation to future employment more than males; a significant mean difference was found. This finding was supported in the literature (Horne et al., 2007). Each dependent variable will be discussed in terms of how the results compared to the literature and/or through the theoretical framework. Thereafter, limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and concluding remarks will be discussed.

Results showed that a majority of respondents agreed that VBM impact future employment which is supported in the literature (Kramer, 2006). The results showed that females considered VBM more than males in terms of future employment. This finding specifically relates to the literature which states that female participants were viewed as objective targets compared to males (Horne et al., 2007). According to Kramer, employers had negative perceptions or reactions to their employees with body modifications (2006). The next survey statement: while considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the design and if it would be offensive to an employer; the majority of respondents agreed and this connection was supported in literature. According to Firmin et al., Christian college students that were interviewed stated that their tattoos were not visible unless articles of clothing were removed (2008). For the survey
statement: while considering a tattoo/piercing I think about the location on my body and if visible to an employer, the majority of respondents agreed; this finding is supported in the literature which states that visibility and locations are crucial in terms of judgment to society (Resenhoeft et al, 2008). For the survey statement: while considering a tattoo/piercing I think about my future employment, both males and females agreed. This finding is supported in the literature which states that males and females consider VBM while thinking about future employment (Horne et al., 2007).

Regarding the survey statement: while considering a tattoo/piercing I take into consideration that I may not get hired, roughly half of female participants agreed; a greater number than the males. Over half of females agreed that when considering VBM they consider that they may not get hired, whereas only 24% of males agree that while they consider a VBM, they take into account the fact that they may not get hired. This statement relates back to the literature which states that female participants were viewed as objective targets by employers, compared to males; therefore females are more concerned regarding employer perspectives and the connection that those perspectives have on getting hired (Horne et al., 2007).

Two participants offered qualitative comments which relate to the hypothesis. One theme that was found in the comments was that female participants consider VBM and the location on their body when considering future employment. The female participants both commented that they preferably got tattoos/piercings in places that can be hidden when wearing business attire which relates back to the literature that states that females are viewed negatively with VBM (Resenhoeft et al., 2008). Another theme that was found was participants stating that they simply did not consider future employment, or employer’s perceptions, when getting VBM due to self expression and forms of identifying themselves which relates back to the literature
stating that VBM are forms of self expression and identity (Horne et al., 2007).

**Limitations**

This study used a small and non-random sample and therefore it was difficult to generalize to a larger student population. There also were inequitable numbers of male to female students which made for a skewed sample.

**Implications for Practitioners**

The results showed that female college students consider their VBM more than males when thinking about future employment. Career counselors in college can increase awareness to all students that given the uncertain economy it is important to take into account VBM and the possible negative consequences from the perspective of employers. Male college students in particular need to have their awareness increased.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future researchers should use to a larger, more diverse, and random sample in order to be able to generalize to a larger population of female and male college students regarding VBM and future employment. To gain more knowledge on the subject matter, employers and job counselors should be surveyed to gather their perspectives on VBM and future employment. Conducting qualitative interviews with a larger population of graduating college students and their potential employers may also be helpful in understanding perceptions of VBM.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study have added to previous research which supports the connection between VBM and future employment (Firmin et al., 2008; Resenhoeft et
al., 2008; Horne et al., 2007; Kramer, 2006). As previous research has suggested, it is important for college career specialists to engage students in the conversation about their perceptions on visible body modifications (VBM) in relation to future employment. Given the uncertain economy, students need to be empowered to make the best decisions for themselves which includes how VBM may influence obtaining employment.

References


