Stigma Hurts: Exploring Employer and Employee Perceptions of Tattoos and Body Piercings in Nigeria

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Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Positions	Job roles	No of tattoo(s)	No of body piercing(s)
Oyin	27	Female	Employee	Accounting officer	2	1(in the nose)
Christiana	29	Male	Employee	Insurance broker	1	1 (in the nose)
Ruth	28	Female	Employee	Bank clerk	1	1(in the nose)
Johnson	47	Male	Manager	Hotel manager	0	0
Fella	39	Male	Employee	Digital marketing officer	0	0
Samuel	49	Male	Manager	Retail manager	0	0
Tobi	27	Male	Employee	Customer relationship officer	0	0
Alima	42	Female	Manager	Bank manager	0	0
Chidinma	40	Female	Employee	Receptionist	0	0
Alli	51	Male	Manager	Marketing director	0	0
Lazarus	28	Male	Employee	Office secretary	1	0
Shade	32	Female	Employee	Personal assistant to company director	0	0
John	26	Male	Employee	Underwriter	0	1(earlobe)
Deborah	42	Female	Manager	Bank manager	0	0
James	46	Male	Manager	Insurance operations manager	0	0
Rose	29	Female	Employee	Credit control officer	1	0
Mariam	25	Female	Employee	Administrator	1	0
Shina	43	Male	Manager	Customer relations manager	0	0
Shola	39	Female	Manager	Digital project manager	1	1 (in the nose)
Gbenga	27	Male	Employee	Senior accountant	1	0
Kunle	44	Male	Manager	HR manager	0	0
Lesley	43	Female	Manager	Sales & delivery manager	0	0
Tunde	29	Male	Employee	Customer relationship officer	0	0
Mary	42	Female	Manager	Operations manager	0	0
Adama	29	Female	Employee	Logistics officer	0	1(in the nose)
Monday	45	Male	Employee	Finance officer	0	0
Bolu	28	Male	Employee	Bank clerk	0	1 (earlobe)
Moshood	40	Male	Manager	Office manager	0	0
Ajoke	29	Female	Employee	Credit control officer	0	0
Chris	40	Male	Employee	Insurance broker	0	0
Silvestre	27	Male	Employee	Procurement officer	1	0
Amina	47	Female	Manager	Service manager	0	0
Samson	49	Male	Manager	HR manager	0	0
Jackie	32	Female	Manager	Marketing manager	0	0
Karimah	24	Female	Employee	Research officer	0	1 (in the nose)
Nafisat	28	Female	Employee	Sales officer	1	0
Akpan	45	Male	Employee	Office clerk	0	0
Ayo	48	Male	Manager	Design manager	0	0
Usman	43	Male	Manager	HR manager	0	0
Uzo	40	Male	Manager	Audit manager	0	0
Moyo	37	Female	Manager	Brand manager	0	0
Jummy	32	Female	Employee	Tax adviser	1	0
Remy	51	Male	Manager	Sales manager	0	0

Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative Quotations	Implications
Manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings	Religious values	Would I have tattoos on my skin? No, it is against the principles of decency and my religious beliefs (Shade).	• Religious sentiments and prejudice
	Sociocultural values	It is not acceptable here …it depicts a negative appearance (Usman). People frown upon it because it portrays immorality and irresponsibility (Ayo) This is not Europe or the US …this is Nigeria and our culture does not tolerate it …wearing visible tattoos is a big stigma (Tobi). For me, people with tattoos and body piercings are hooligans (Kunle). I think it's not proper …it shows disregard for culture and lack of manners (Monday). I chose to have it, and I do not regret my decision even if the society is unaccepting of it (Silvester). The dove head on my tattoo only means peace and nothing that should be regarded as evil (Mariam).	- Prejudice based on appearance and lookism - Prejudice based on morality - Body art as an imported practice - Criminalising body art - Body art and its derogation - Body art as a personal choice - Body art as self-expression
	Corporate values	Our customers will perceive us as being unprofessional (Usman). It is not just my personal belief but the society beliefs about wearing tattoos or body piercings, which is negative (Amina).	Prejudice based on first impressions Constrained societal prejudice
Discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market	Discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market	We can't recruit someone with visible body arts except if they are concealed (Moyo). I may have to resign soon because the discrimination is unbearable here (Akpan). My manager is really upset with my tattoo, and it has affected my relationship with her and some of my colleagues (Ruth). It has caused me so much trouble…I can't tell you if I will be getting promoted next year because I'm awaiting disciplinary action (Silvester).	Recruitment and selection prejudice Employee turnover issues Tainted employment relationships Restraint on career progression

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Abstract

Purpose – This study draws on social stigma and prejudice to examine the perceptions and beliefs of managers and employees regarding visible tattoos and body piercings, as well as the impact they have on potential employment and human resource management in the global South, using Nigeria as the research context.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a qualitative research approach, drawing on data from forty-three semi-structured interviews with managers and employees in Nigeria.

Findings – Contrary to the popular opinion that tattoos and body piercings are becoming more accepted and mainstream in society, this study finds that some Nigerian employers and employees may stigmatise and discriminate against people with visible tattoos and body piercings. The findings of this study suggest that beliefs about tattoos are predicated on ideologies as well as religious and sociocultural values, which then influence corporate values.

Practical Implications – Religious and sociocultural preconceptions about people with visible tattoos and body piercings have negative implications for the recruitment and employment of such people and could prevent organisations from hiring and keeping talented employees. This implies that talented employees might experience prejudice at job interviews, preventing them from gaining employment. Furthermore, stigmatising and discriminating against people with visible tattoos and body piercings may lead to the termination of employment of talented employees, which could negatively affect organisational productivity and growth.

Originality/value – This study provides an insight into employment relations with regards to tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. It also makes some contributions to the social psychology of workplace prejudice and highlights the reasons for the stigma and prejudice against individuals with visible tattoos and body piercings.

Keywords: tattoos, body piercings, stigma, prejudice, discrimination, Nigeria

Introduction

There is an extensive body of research on tattoos and body piercings, especially in the global North (Brallier et al., 2011; French et al., 2016, 2019). However, studies on visible tattoos and body piercings in the global South, especially in Africa, are rare. Hence, this study examines manager and employee perceptions of tattoos and body piercings, using Nigeria as a research context. It should be noted that extant studies on tattoos and body piercings undertaken in developed Western countries do not offer insights into the implications of tattoos and body piercings on human resource management (HRM) in Africa. This is especially true in Nigeria, where visible tattoos and body piercings are perceived to be an imitation of Western culture (Romanienko, 2011; Timming, 2015). Further research is therefore required to clarify manager and employee perceptions of the phenomenon in the Nigerian context.

This research is important and timely due to the increased prevalence of tattoos and body piercings among young adults in Nigerian society (Ayomide, 2017a). Although visible tattoos and body piercings appear unpopular in contemporary Nigerian society, they are not an entirely new phenomenon; in earlier times, natives did perform some form of body modification called skin scarification (Tapon, 2019). However, these are not tattoos and are often concealed inside the body in the form of names and birthdates (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). In addition, it is important to distinguish between tattoos and tribal or facial marks, which are also common in Nigeria. Unlike tattoos, which are willingly inscribed by the bearers, tribal or facial marks are given to the bearers without their consent when they are infants, usually by their parents (Murdock, 2012). Modern tattoos and body piercings are considered Western ideas (Romanienko, 2011) and are frowned upon in Nigeria (Ayanlowo et al., 2017).

The increasing number of people with tattoos may have significant implications for human resource managers and other organisational decision makers. French et al. (2016) have argued that having tattoos is not associated with, or significantly related to, employment

discrimination. In the context of Nigeria, however, we found the phenomenon to be particularly difficult and challenging. This makes sense when considering Nigeria's traditional values with respect to its people's religious, cultural and moral beliefs, which ascribe negative connotations to people with tattoos or body piercings and view them as being irresponsible, uncultured, ill-mannered, antisocial, and immoral (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). Similarly, Van Hoover et al. (2017) argued that body piercing has now developed from a behaviour once considered extreme to an accepted choice among the general population. Can we argue this same point for non-Western countries such as Nigeria? The central purpose of this article is to enhance our understanding of manager and employee perceptions of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria.

In particular, this study investigates (1) the perceptions of the participants concerning tattoos and body piercings; (2) how tattoos and body piercings influence recruitment and selection decisions, and (3) whether having tattoos and/or body piercings could lead to the summary dismissal of an employee. To effectively address these questions, twenty managers and twenty-three employees were interviewed in the city of Lagos, Nigeria. This article, and the empirical study upon which it is based makes two important contributions to contemporary scholarship and practice. First, it demonstrates the importance of physical appearance in job retention and employee selection in the global South. Second, it contributes to the extant literature on stigma and the social psychology of workplace prejudice by revealing employer and employee attitudes and perceptions of body art in the context of employment relations in Africa, as well as the underlying reasons for these attitudes and perceptions. It is hoped that this study will stimulate further research into visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings in Nigeria and other African countries. Please note that the phrase 'unconventional body piercings' has been used in this study to mean a male piercing his earlobes or nose or a female having any part(s) of her body pierced other than the two earlobes. The article is structured as follows. We first briefly discuss the concept of tattoos and body piercings and present the study's theoretical

background. After discussing the research method, we present the data, followed by a discussion of the study's findings and its theoretical and practical implications.

Tattoos and Body Piercings in Context

The word 'tattau', which means 'to strike' or 'the result of tapping', metamorphosed into what is now known as 'tattoo'. This word 'tattau' was used by a British captain, James Cook, in his eighteenth-century expedition to Tahiti and the South Pacific Islands (Braverman, 2006; Lineberry, 2007). It is a form of body modification through inserting indelible ink into the dermis to change the skin pigment (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). A tattoo is a form of body art that is marked on the skin by making small holes with a needle and filling them with coloured ink, resulting in relatively permanent forms of body modification (Durkin, 2012). Body piercing, on the other hand, is the cosmetic piercing of any part of the body for the purpose of insertion of objects such as rings, studs, or pins (Holbrook et al., 2012). Traditionally, body piercings are mainly found in the soft part of the earlobes, predominantly in women (Elzweig and Peeples, 2011). The preference for, and popularity of, other body parts for piercings varies according to gender, with the navel being the most common site for women and the face being most common for men (Carmen et al., 2012). Van Hoover et al. (2017) argues that virtually no part of the human body is excluded from ornamental piercing.

Body modification takes different shapes and forms, ranging from the simplest wearing make-up, hair styling, and body toning to complex and extreme forms of tattooing and body piercing (Dillingh et al., 2020). Like tattooing, the act of body piercing has also become increasingly acceptable and indeed prevalent among adolescents and young adults in Western society (Timming et al., 2017). For example, The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) (2019) found that about 12% of European citizens were tattooed, while three in ten Americans (30%) have at least one tattoo, an increase from 21% in 2012 (Ipsos, 2019). Likewise, in 2017, over 35% of Americans were reported to have at least one body piercing (Statista, 2020). Contemporary

research on body modification suggests that tattoos and body piercings have become the trademark of Generation X and Millenial cohorts (Kluger, 2015; Farley et al., 2019). Although the scarcity of statistics on tattoos and body piercings in modern Nigeria make it difficult to ascertain how prevalent they are, a few studies have emphasised that they are a growing trend among adolescents and young adults (Ayanlowo et al., 2017; Mensah et al., 2018; Umoh, 2015).

Generally, body art such as tattooing and body piercings are used for different purposes, ranging from symbolising ownership to denoting nobility (Durkin, 2012). Nowadays, tattoos are often associated with uniqueness (Dillingh et al., 2020) and are often personalised to reflect a person's narrative and self-expression as well as the individual's aesthetic and cultural values (Farley et al., 2019). Creativity and innovation have motivated some to use tattoos as permanent medical alerts instead of using bracelets displaying the wearer's medical condition, such as diabetes or epilepsy (Clinical Rounds, 2009). In addition, although previous studies have argued that women are more likely to have tattoos and body piercings than men, this gap is fast becoming insignificant (French et al., 2016). Likewise, tattoos and body piercings are more prevalent among young adults, with the younger generation subscribing to either having more tattoos or body piercings or both (Kluger, 2015).

People with visible tattoos or body piercings may be viewed in different ways. From a social perspective, people with tattoos are perceived as a disadvantaged and loosely social group (French et al., 2019). They experience similar stigma to that of people who have scars, port-wine stains, or birthmarks (French et al., 2016; Madera and Hebl, 2012). This finding reinforces the historical view that associates tattooed people with counter-cultural delinquents of the lower classes (Burgess and Clark, 2010). To those who do not have tattoos, the sight of tattooed individuals usually creates social stigmatisation (Baumann et al., 2016). However, it is important to note that in some industries (such as marketing and technology), tattoos and body

piercings may not cause stigmatisation (Timming, 2015). Having visible tattoos and body piercings could mean conformity to, or the defying of cultural norms (French et al., 2019). This is perhaps the reason why attitudes toward those who have them are closely related to the residual stigma associated with historical and cultural beliefs (Farley et al., 2019). For instance, tattoos and body piercings are associated with sex traffic, women, antisocial cults, physiological illness, and criminal delinquency (French et al., 2016). It is little wonder that physical appearance significantly impacts people's judgements and perceptions (Dillingh et al., 2020). This may be the reason why some human resource (HR) managers and recruiters prefer to employ people without visible tattoos (Brallier et al., 2011; Timming et al., 2017). In other words, the location and visibility of tattoos on the body play a significant role in explaining employer prejudice against tattoos and/or body piercings (Timming, 2015). Similarly, researchers have found that some customers do not like being served or attended to by people with tattoos. For example, Arndt and Glassman (2012) suggest that some consumers might be antagonistic towards women with masculine tattoos. Moreover, Doleac and Stein (2013) suggest that some consumers are reluctant to buy goods from a tattooed vendor. Similarly, Arndt et al. (2016) and Larsen et al. (2014) suggest that customers may have a negative attitude towards sellers with body art. It is therefore safe to say that body art is likely to affect consumers' decision making and attitudes (Baumann et al., 2016), thereby raising concerns for managers about their organisation's image (Timming, 2017).

Furthermore, researchers have found that having tattoos and body piercings impacts people's health and general wellbeing. For example, Stirn et al. (2006) argued that tattoos and body piercings were related to lower perceived mental health and lower social integration. In another recent study, Farley et al. (2019) also found that as result of having tattoos, individuals may suffer from health problems such as persistent discomfort, hypersensitivity, chronic infections and many other health-related issues. In addition, some studies have reported a link between

having tattoos and/or body piercings and risk-taking behaviour, such as the use of psychotropic substances, unhealthy diet habits and self-harm (Breuner et al., 2017). Others have associated externalised risk behaviours with having tattoos and/or body piercings (Heywood et al., 2012). Many of these health and wellbeing-related issues presumably have implications for HRM in managers' decision-making processes concerning employees with visible tattoos and body piercings (Broussard and Harton, 2018; French et al., 2016; French et al., 2019).

This study focuses on employees with visible tattoos and body piercings in a business environment, where physical contact exists between employers, employees and clients. Elzweig and Peeples (2011) offered a legal discussion of justifiable discrimination against tattooed job applicants; however, unlike the present study, their research is non-empirical and was undertaken in the US. There have been a number of previous studies that focused on the negative effects of tattoos on employment opportunities (Bekhor et al., 1995; Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2015). However, Timming (2017) claimed that having visible body art promotes relationship building and has a positive effect on employment opportunities. This study seeks to understand whether this assertion also applies in the global South, specifically Nigeria.

Social Stigma and Prejudice

Every society is an embodiment of social and cultural norms that often dictate what is perceived as acceptable in human social interaction and what is not (French et al., 2016). The construction of values sometimes leads to stereotypical conclusions regarding the characteristics of a person's personality vis-à-vis how they are expected to behave and the actual behaviour they exhibit, thus translating into stigma (Goffman, 1963; Timming et al., 2017). Stigma is a social construct that devalues an individual's social identity as a result of their attributes or characteristics that are deemed undesirable within a particular social group (Larsen et al., 2014). Stigmatised people have an ascribed identity that makes them different to others,

causing them to be seen and treated differently. Poister and Thomas (2011) argue that stigma can be associated with a person's appearance (e.g. tattoos or body piercings), behaviour (e.g. antisocial), or group membership. They also found that the cause of stigma may not always be visible and controllable; however, it leads to stereotypical conclusions and negative evaluations (accurate or otherwise) of the stigmatised person. Prejudice, on the other hand, refers to an affective feeling towards an individual that is predicated on their membership in a particular stigmatised group (Miller et al., 2009). Often used synonymously with discrimination, prejudice is formed by a preconceived judgement or opinion about a person due to their group membership, which may be considered undesirable due to the visible outcomes of their attitudes (Brown, 2010).

Both stigma and prejudice are linked to the stereotypical evaluations or overgeneralised social and cultural beliefs that constitute grounds for excluding or avoiding the stigmatised (Larsen et al., 2014). Stereotyping is a psychological process that simplifies information about people to form a behavioural category that enables judgements to be made as a result of their perceived departure from normalcy in behaviour or attitude (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). As such, the perceptions about individuals with tattoos or body piercings lead to stereotypical conclusions regarding their attitudes, especially in a society in which physical appearance is viewed as a reflection of one's morality and character (Larsen et al., 2014). Visible tattoos and body piercings are regarded as a stigma that society attaches to cultural norms – recognising the bearers' negative attitudes while ignoring their positive characteristics (Timming, 2017). Therefore, when stigmatised people confirm the flawed negative preconceptions by behaving in the expected manner, it further reinforces these perceptions and may lead to prejudice against the stigmatised (Grimmelikhuijsen and Porumbescu, 2017). These perceptions often depend on the location of the tattoo and the message that it conveys to others (Baumann et al., 2016). Furthermore, stigma is related to social cognition, which relates to the impact of mental

representations on how information about stereotyped people is stored and processed. For instance, the stigmatised person may be classified in a cognitive schema, leading to tattooed or body-pierced job applicants being associated with social deviancy (Larsen et al., 2014). In addition, cultural and social norms may cause managers and members of society to discriminate against those with tattoos and body piercings, thereby promoting 'lookism' that is predicated on the society's sociocultural values (Warhurst et al., 2012).

In Africa, specifically Nigeria, the social stigma and prejudice associated with people with tattoos and body piercings are exacerbated by religious, cultural, moral and corporate values and beliefs (Mensah et al., 2018). This accounts for the surface-level characteristics associated with people with tattoos and body piercings and promotes the creation of 'in-groups' (us) and 'out-groups' (them), which further triggers biased behaviours and attitudes (Casper et al., 2013). The stigma associated with people with tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria comes from assumptions made about their identities (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). For instance, adherents of the religious belief systems in Nigeria – predominantly Islam and Christianity – point to the Bible and Quran as forbidding these practices (Umoh, 2015). Furthermore, cultural and moral beliefs/values within Nigerian society regard tattoos and body piercings as taboo due to the assumption that such practices are associated with people who participate in antisocial activities (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). Such stigma generates negative perceptions and puts the stigmatised person at risk of experiencing threats to their social identity (Larsen et al., 2014; Timming, 2015). For instance, in Nigeria, people with tattoos and body piercings are liable to be arrested by the security agencies on suspicion of criminal activity and other forms of antisocial behaviour (Ayomide, 2017b). This form of stigma has negative consequences for employment opportunities (Mensah et al., 2018). This study therefore uses social stigma and prejudice as a theoretical lens to examine the attitudes and perceptions of managers/employees

towards tattoos and body piercings, using the contemporary workplace in Nigeria as a research context. The underlying reasons for these attitudes and perceptions are also explored.

Research Methods

Research Approach

The epistemological basis for this study is social constructionism, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed. In this regard the study seeks to understand social reality and how knowledge is socially constructed (Saunders et al., 2016). We also applied Creswell and Creswell's (2018) interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which helps us to understand the participants' subjective meanings and experiences of visible tattoos and body piercings. To collect the data, we used a qualitative approach, allowing for an in-depth investigation of manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings. Qualitative research is valuable for investigating real-life situations in detail and providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, something that may be difficult to achieve using quantitative methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This approach enables the participants (people with and without visible tattoos or body piercings as well as the hiring managers who encounter them) to explain their lived experiences and perceptions.

The Sample

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to select the study's participants. The purposive sampling technique was used to access a particular subset of people (employees with and without tattoos and/or body piercings and hiring managers who encounter such employees) who would enable the researchers to understand the phenomenon and answer the research questions (Patton, 2002). The snowball sampling technique, on the other hand, was used to recruit subsequent participants from the initial participants who were recruited, given the difficulty in reaching this specific population (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The research sample consisted of 43 participants (20 managers and 23 employees) who work in banks and

insurance companies. In total, there were 24 male and 19 female participants. Twelve participants had tattoos, while 8 participants had unconventional body piercings (see Table 1). The participants were aged between 23 and 51 years old. They also varied in terms of their gender, age, job title, and number of tattoos and body piercings. The number of body piercings recorded does not include the normal piercings of the two earlobes for females. All but one of the tattooed participants are in their twenties, which confirms Ayanlowo et al.'s (2017) finding that the trend of tattooing in Nigeria is growing among the youth. This group was chosen because its members work in corporate organisations and represent a distinct and highly respected section of the workforce. Nevertheless, the researchers understand that perceptions of people with tattoos and body piercings may vary in different work environments.

Data Collection

This study was conducted in Lagos, Nigeria. The importance of Nigeria as a research context for this study lies in the facts that Nigeria's economy is the largest in Africa (World Economic Forum, 2019) and that one in every seven black people on the planet is a Nigerian (Urban, 2014), highlighting Nigeria's importance as a financial hub in Africa and to the black race in general. The final sample included 20 managers and 23 employees. We considered employees without tattoos and/or body piercings, asking them to share their perceptions and lived experiences with colleagues who do have tattoos and/or body piercings. After having been contacted by email and given a thorough explanation of the purpose of the study and the procedures that would be involved, the participants gave their formal, informed consent to participate in the research.

Insert Table 1 about here

Forty-three personal, semi-structured interviews were conducted in private and convenient settings chosen by the participants. The interviews with the managers took place in their offices at their preferred times, while the employees elected for venues out of the workplace. The semi-

structured interviews were guided by a list of topics relating to the broader research problem. The topic list was based on a review of the literature and focused on tattoos and body piercings: whether tattoos and body piercings influence recruitment and selection decisions; whether managers allow visible tattoos and/or body piercings at work; whether having them is grounds for dismissal, and the perceptions of managers and employees about the phenomenon. The list was not exhaustive, and certain perspectives and ideas that were raised by the participants that had not previously been anticipated were investigated and used to refine the topic list for the remaining interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted for around 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of the data collection. In the cases of five participants (two managers and three employees) who did not wish to be recorded, extensive handwritten notes were taken. To guarantee the confidentiality of all participants and maintain standard research ethics, interviewees were assigned pseudonyms (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis and Procedure

The interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after they had taken place, and the transcriptions were analysed interpretatively. The researchers employed a data-driven thematic analytical method for analysing the interview data based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), Boeije (2005), and Corbin and Strauss (2008). This resulted in the emergence of broad patterns of meanings that were repeatedly highlighted by the participants. Theory guided our analysis throughout. A key strategy was inductive analysis, followed by 'mapping' onto stigma and prejudice's conceptualisation of the interplay between manager and employee perceptions (of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings) discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market. Familiarisation – by reading and re-reading the transcripts – preceded the initial coding, which summarised the 'surface meanings' of the data, organised initially according to the main interview topics listed above. For reliability and in order to

corroborate the study findings, the researchers independently coded the data. Thus, informed by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, themes were revisited and refined in an iterative manner as the analysis progressed in order to check for clarity and coherence as organising concepts. The coding and themes are summarised in Table 2 below.

Our analysis led to the identification of two key themes: manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings, and discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market. It aso led to three sub-themes: religious values, sociocultural values and corporate values. The analysis revealed corporate rejection of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. In the lens of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, this enabled us to theorise that contextual conditions inform manager and employee perceptions of body art, in contrast with claims of researchers that having tattoos is not associated with, or significantly related to, employment discrimination (French et al., 2016) and that body piercing has now been generally accepted as a norm rather than a unique or rare social practice (Van Hoover et al., 2017).

Research Findings

The findings revealed manager and employee beliefs and perceptions regarding visible tattoos and body piercings. It also revealed the underlying implications of tattoos and body piercings in promoting discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market and labour force. Hence, two key themes emerged from the data: (1) manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings, and (2) discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market. The key themes and sub-themes are also presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Manager and Employee Perceptions of Visible Tattoos and Body Piercings

In light of the nature of the stigma associated with having tattoos and body piercings, this study found that perceptions were based on three primary factors: religious values, sociocultural values and corporate values. Participants drew on their understanding and experience of having

visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings, which is often predicated on these three factors.

Religious Values

Manager perceptions reveal an overt discrimination against people with visible tattoos or body piercings which is deeply rooted in religious belief. All but one manager expressed a distinct dislike for visible tattoos and body piercings and forbade their employees from having them. The condemnation, which appears to be strong reveals managers' disapproval of individuals with visible tattoos and body piercings, and is clearly based on religious sentiments. For example, Alima, a bank manager, described the act of tattooing and body piercing as defying her religious values:

> I cannot condone it, because it is against my religion. My staff must not have tattoos (Alima, aged 42).

Some managers supported their disapproval of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercing by quoting verses from the Bible and Quran. For example, Johnson, a hotel manager, commented on the Biblical condemnation of body art:

> Personally, as a Christian, my belief is against the practice of wearing tattoos or unconventional body piercings. The Bible, in Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 28, prohibits cuts and tattoos on the body…so for me, it is unacceptable (Johnson, aged 47).

Similarly, another participant gave a compelling argument against body art based on a quotation from the Quran:

> Tattoos and unconventional body piercings are not allowed in Islam. The Quran, chapter 4 verse 119, describes tattoos and unconventional body piercings as an alteration of God's creation…so it is unacceptable (Amina, aged 47).

Likewise, some employees without tattoos and body piercings shared the same religious sentiments as the managers and cited the above verses from the Bible and Quran. Some of them also made reference to speeches and sermons of their religious leaders. One participant considered body arts to be a 'big sin':

> It is a big sin. How could you do that to the body that is not yours? Our soul and body belong to God, so no one has a right to mutilate it (Fella, aged 39).

These findings are consistent with Umoh's (2015) study, which maintains that religious sentiments form one of the primary reasons for the stigma and prejudice against people with visible tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. In contrast to these negative religious perceptions, however, were the views of the participants with tattoos (one manager and eleven employees). This group referred to those who condemn tattoos and body piercings based on religion as 'religious fanatics' (Oyin, aged 27), 'religious bigots' (Lazarus, aged 28) and 'overly spiritual' (Jummy, aged 32). According to this group, the perception towards body art has been shifted over time, particularly in the last decade. Jummy, a tax adviser, claimed:

> The world has changed and it is still changing…and I think religious teachings have to change with time. How can you say tattoo and body piercings are a sin in the twenty-first century? (Jummy, aged 32).

For Jummy and other likeminded participants, globalisation has allowed for a readjustment of values, in which many of the ancient and traditional values have become less relevant, particularly those associated with body modification. For example, Silvestre, a procurement officer commented:

> Things have changed…so many of the records in the Bible or Quran were probably meant for the people in those times not the present people (Silvestre, aged 27).

Previous studies, such as the research of Timming and Perrett (2016), have argued that religious values sometimes engender cognitive dissonance, especially for tattooed individuals. They aver

that signalling problems (e.g. distrust) could affect the within-group trustworthiness when individuals' expectations and attitudes deviate from shared values and spiritual faith. Therefore, being a '*fanatic*' about religious doctrines and values can instigate prejudice as a result of the body art stigma formed by the shared religious beliefs and spiritual faithfulness.

Sociocultural Values

Our data also suggests that sociocultural values formed part of the basis of people's perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings in Nigerian society. All but one of the managers and employees without tattoos and body piercings claimed that having body art is aberrant to cultural beliefs, ideologies and acceptable social behaviour. Our findings suggest several reasons for this perspective. First, since people often assess and judge people based on their appearance, the physical appearance of individuals with body art was deemed a cause for great concern. For example, Chidinma, a receptionist stated:

> In Nigeria, we are cultured, and appearance matters because it speaks a lot about you. People judge you first based on your looks…it's part of the culture to appear responsible at all times and not display tattoos, or a man wearing earrings…such is considered irresponsible and uncultured (Chidinma, aged 40).

Chidinma's perception of people with tattoos and body piercings confirms that making prejudgements could affect people's perceptions of others in society (Fiske, 2018). Another participant commented:

> I really don't care if you have tattoos, big or small, whatever it may be…as long as I don't see it. Displaying it will be a serious problem because it's not decent and not part of our culture (Mary, aged 42).

These excerpts show that appearance or – what Warhurst et al. (2012) described as 'lookism' – is a significant element of Nigerian culture. This finding supports those of previous studies (e.g. Timming, 2015) that point specifically to the location and visibility of tattoos or body

piercings as a predictor of the extent of prejudice or disapproval. Nigerian culture seems to disapprove of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings because they conflict with acceptable cultural value. The key insight here is that sociocultural values may consider the act of body modification in and of itself as unattractive, regardless of the appearance of the bearer. Such perceptions often affect the bearer's employment opportunities (Warhurst et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the issue of morality (which behaviour is considered right/good or wrong/bad) reinforces sociocultural values in Nigerian society. Having visible tattoos and body piercings is deemed 'not moral' (Remy, aged 51) and defies the Nigerian sociocultural value system. For example, one participant commented:

> For me, having tattoos is not moral and is not in line with our culture here in Nigeria. I think it is the highest level of immorality, and people will treat you as an immoral person (Remy, aged 51).

Many participants who demonstrate social biases against tattoos and body piercings harbour the sentiment that such practices are foreign and have no place in Nigerian culture. One participant commented on how it violates the sociocultural norms and the status quo:

> It is a Western thing...I don't like it. It does not only suggest immorality and criminality but it is against who we are as a people, and I won't have any member of my staff have it (Moshood, aged 40).

Here, Moshood tends to regard tattooing and body piercing as indicative of criminal activity. This perception may be because tattoos are historically linked with prisons and criminality (see Etter, 1995; Jones, 2000; Sanders, 1989). The finding is also consistent with Ayomide's (2017b) study, which shows evidence of bias among Nigerian security agencies in their search for perpetrators of criminal activity, in which individuals with body art are considered to be prime suspects. All participants who shared similar sentiments against visible tattoos and body piercings used several derogatory adjectives and names (e.g. 'irresponsible', 'uncultured', 'ill-

mannered', 'immoral', 'touts' and 'hooligans') to describe the bearers. Such derogatory words point to the presence of stigma and prejudice associated with visible tattoos and body piercings.

Rejecting these prejudicial attitudes, some participants with tattoos and body piercings explained that whether to have body art was matter of their personal decision and self-expression and should therefore be respected:

> Having tattoos is my choice and should not be linked with my behaviour or what I represent…and I think people should understand and respect that (Christiana, aged 29).

Another participant commented:

> I don't see a problem with having a tattoo or body piercing. I have tattoos [an inscription of my partner's name], and for me, it is for love, fashion, and civility…it is a free world, people should just respect what I choose to do (Oyin, aged 27).

The only manager in the study that had tattoos also commented, lifting her arms to show the body art:

> Why should anybody be uncomfortable with my tattoo? It is my body and not anybody else's…I don't regret having them; in fact, I am thinking of having my partner's name tattooed on my neck to show him some love. It is my choice and has nothing to do with my character or behaviour (Shola, aged 39).

On the other hand, two participants with visible tattoos and body piercings expressed their regret for their body modifications. One of them commented:

> I think I shouldn't have done it [looking disappointed]. I think I made a mistake…sometimes, I feel bad and ashamed, especially when I don't cover the tattoos (Mariam, aged 25).

Bolu also commented on her regrets and the psychological implications:

> Thinking about the way others look at me because of my pierced earlobe is heart-breaking…that moment when you walk into the office room, and all eyes are on my pierced earlobe is really sickening, and mood dampens. Maybe I should not have done it in the first place (Bolu, aged 28).

This finding demonstrates the psychological implications associated with individuals who experience prejudice, which has also been echoed by Kotzur and Wagner (2020).

Corporate Values

Our data suggests that corporate values influence the way in which employers or managers treat their employees with tattoos and body piercings. It tends to signal the negative consequences associated with having visible tattoos and body piercings. Managers frown upon visible body art, concerned about how their customers will react to it and the impact of that first impression on their corporate image. A manager commented:

> It is not good for our corporate image and integrity. In fact, our customers will doubt our validity as a corporate entity (Alli, aged 51).

Another manager also commented on the implications of visible body art among employees for the company's perceived corporate values and indeed its continued existence:

> As a financial institution, our staff's appearance is very important. Appearance is part of our values, because it reveals who we are. What do you think our customers who keep their money with us will do when they see our staff with tattoos and unconventional body piercings? We will just look like fraudsters…they will leave us, and the bank will eventually collapse (Alima, aged 42).

These findings illustrate the link between people's perceptions of tattoos and unconventional body piercings and antisocial behaviour, such as fraud. The findings support previous research that found that consumers often ascribe a negative connotation to visible body art (Dean, 2010).

For the managers and some employees, tattoos and unconventional body piercings are perceived as unprofessional and unsuitable for a corporate environment.

Discrimination and Prejudice in the Nigerian Labour Market

Discrimination (prejudice) in the Nigerian labour market is based on many features, including what can be referred to as '*body art features*' or what Warhurst et al. (2009) described as 'lookism', especially in the recruitment process of many organisations. We recorded the opinions and experiences of both employers and employees regarding discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market, specifically concerning the stigmatisation of employees and job applicants with tattoos and/or body piercings. We found that most managers shared similarly negative views about such applicants or employees. One manager commented:

> No. I will not recruit anyone with visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. In fact, such applicants will be asked to immediately leave if the body art is spotted…they are not the kind of people we want to employ here. I have ordered an applicant out of an interview room before because she had a big visible tattoo. You could call it discrimination, but it is about our values and our corporate and societal culture (Samson, aged 49).

In the Nigerian labour market, stereotypical impressions of body art negatively affect people's employment opportunities as well as straining employment relationships. Negative perceptions about tattoos and unconventional body piercings render the bearers unfit for many jobs (Skoda, 2020). This is reflected in the employment decision-making process, as was revealed by our study participants. For example, Usman explicitly commented:

> The recruitment process is very strict and does not condone employing people with visible tattoos or body piercings…in fact, such applicants will not scale through after the first interview because if the body art is spotted, that's the end of the road for them (Usman, aged 43).

This finding is in line with Dillingh et al.'s (2020) study, which argued that individuals with visible tattoos are more likely to be unemployed. Our findings also found the same prejudice

against individuals with body art. Other participants (employees) recounted their experiences, which reveal that having tattoos and/or body piercings threatened their ability to secure employment, particularly in the banking and insurance industries, which are known for their high levels of professionalism. One participant commented:

> The recruitment manager said to me, 'This is a job interview, not an audition for a prostitute…how could you have a tattoo and perforate your nose? I am sorry, we don't want people like you in our bank'. I was really embarrassed (Christiana, aged 29).

Another participant commented:

> I had previously attended two unsuccessful job interviews with two different insurance companies before I eventually got my present job. I was surprised I didn't get those jobs, because I got feedback that I did well in both the written and oral tests. However, the recruitment manager for the last one I attended did me a favour by telling me that my earring was the reason the panel did not offer me the job. So, I did not wear it to the interview for my present job – and I got it (John, aged 26).

The key insight arising from these findings is that in Nigeria, visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings have an impact on success, both for jobseekers in the labour market and for existing employees who may had their tattoos or body piercings after their employment. Our findings reveal the stigmatisation, prejudice and discrimination against individuals with visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings within the Nigerian labour market. The issue of employee turnover also emerged from our data, following the finding that employees with body art are vulnerable to losing their jobs or being forced to resign. A manager said:

> Any of my staff who turns up at work with either tattoos or unconventional body piercings will lose their job …look elsewhere for a job, that is the consequence (Ayo, aged 48).

Furthermore, stigmatised employees expressed their concerns about the discrimination they face and how it impacts their relationship with their managers. For instance, Bolu recalled his manager's sudden change of attitude upon finding out about his pierced earlobe:

> I really did not know that it was prohibited in my workplace. I just pierced my left earlobe for fashion and civilisation. My manager found out about it and suddenly changed her attitude towards me. At first, I thought it was about my job performance, but I later found out it was due to my pierced earlobe. She asked me to forget about my impending promotion and advised me never to wear a ring in my ear. 'Find all possible ways to get it blocked; otherwise it may cost you your job. I used to think you were a good boy!' she angrily retorted. Sadly, I lost that job (Bolu, aged 28).

The reaction of Bolu's manager and her comment 'I used to think you were a good boy!' reinforce the historical view that individuals with body art are 'bad'. For many participants, a visible display of tattoos and unconventional body piercings suggest socially unacceptable behaviour on the part of the bearer. All the managers that participated in this study apart from one, who has a tattoo, admitted to being prejudiced and discriminating against people with tattoos and unconventional body piercings. For example, Uzo commented:

> I can't pretend that I like tattoos – I don't. And my staff knows that they can't have them. I once sacked an employee because she had tattoos …I don't care if that is called discrimination (Uzo, aged 40).

Another participant expressed a similar view:

> You can call it discrimination, but to the organisation, it's a violation of our values and beliefs to have visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. If anyone has it, that person may be asked to leave …even society frowns against, not to talk of a corporate organisation (Deborah, aged 42).

Interestingly, a few of the participants with tattoos and unconventional body piercings were unsure if they would employ individuals with body art if they themselves were in a hiring position. For example, Ruth said:

> I don't think I would employ someone with visible tattoos. Society frowns upon them, customers don't like them, and they will affect business in terms of losing customers …your company may even be stigmatised (Ruth, aged 28).

The key insight arising from these findings is that in Nigeria, both the success of jobseekers in the labour market and the fate of workers already employed are significantly determined by whether they have visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. The findings do not support Van Hoover et al.'s (2017) assertion that body piercing is an acceptable choice among the general population and French et al.'s (2016) argument that having tattoos is not associated with or significantly related to employment discrimination.

Discussion and Conclusions

Tattoos and body piercings have been widely researched in the global North (French et al., 2016; Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2015), but this study is one of the very few that have been undertaken in the global South, specifically Nigeria. This article has indicated that there is a tendency towards stigmatisation in Nigeria where those with tattoos and body piercings may be subjected to employment prejudice and discrimination. People with tattoos and body piercings suffer from negative stereotypes and prejudice, which often harm their employment relationships. Our data revealed that visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings are not viewed as socially acceptable in Nigerian society. However, these practices are beginning to become more prevalent among some youths, who consider them fashionable and a socially acceptable way of expressing emotions (e.g. love). The manager interviews revealed how employers are unapologetically discriminating against people with visible tattoos and unconventional body art. Their sentiments are predicated on religious, sociocultural, and

corporate values. Previous studies have found that visible tattoos have some corporate benefits, whether to the 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992), the 'tangibility' factor for frontline staff (Parasuraman et al., 1991) and brand personality (Aaker, 1997). In this study, however, the managers fundamentally disaaproved of visible tattoos on the premise that visible body art is incompatible with their corporate values. These participants illustrated how significant physical appearance is in portraying their image and what they represent as a company. Interestingly, most employees also shared this sentiment.

Furthermore, this study found that the participants' perceptions of visible body art are predicated on religious and sociocultural values, which not only promote disapproval in the labour market and workplace but also result in social stigma and employment discrimination. The participants' religious views appeared to be the ruler against which the dos and don'ts of society are measured, and clearly (based on the participants' accounts), both Islam and Christianity disapprove of body art. On this basis, the majority of the participants frown upon body art and tend to stigmatise and discriminate against people with them. This finding is in contrast with French et al.'s (2016, p. 1240) assertion that 'in modern-day societies, the decision to get tattooed no longer involves the strong social stigma it once carried'. In fact, the social stigma seems to be so strong that a few participants with tattoos and unconventional body piercings in our study regretted having them.

The varying perceptions that point to the unacceptability of body art in Nigeria are consistent with both historical practices and the literature on body modification and its associated stigma. Like previous studies (Broussard and Harton, 2018; Timming et al., 2017), this study has uncovered a growing divide in the perception of tattoos and body piercings. It shows a gradual shift in values and perceptions, particularly among the youth. However, this shift is still overshadowed by a society of strong religious ethics and sociocultural standards. Having visible body art in Nigeria may thus be classified as a symbol of defiance against religious and

sociocultural norms – a major reason why it is still not popular in the global South. This research contributes to the debate on visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings by highlighting the impact of religious, sociocultural and corporate values on employer and employee perceptions towards body art in Nigeria, as well as the extent to which these perceptions shape attitudes towards people who display such art. Despite the fact that individuals may decide to have body art for a diverse range of reasons, our findings reveal that some people in Nigeria have stereotypical assumptions that individuals with visible body art are 'wayward', 'uncultured', 'morally flawed', and 'hooligans'. This finding thus adds conceptual thoughts and empirical evidence to the debate. Theoretically, our study indicates that notwithstanding the discourse about the increasing impact of agency and individual influences on career opportunities and experiences, societal influences and structures still have an important role to play. This draws our attention to the continued impact of societal and cultural structures/norms and values on career opportunities and experiences.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in our study is that a few of the participants who were themselves stigmatised and discriminated against because of their tattoos and body piercings were unsure if they would employ someone with visible body art due to the wider corporate and societal rejection. Additionally, hiring managers admitted to discriminating against people with visible body art in job interviews. Aside from the religious and sociocultural disapproval of visible body art, most managers were motivated by the crucial need to make positive first impressions on consumers — many of whom disapprove of body art. These findings raise questions about 'lookism' and employment relations in the study context and highlight the extent of the disapproval of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. Our study corroborates other studies that suggest significant negative implications of visible body modifications in employment relationships and HRM functions (Career Builder 2011; Nath et al., 2016; Timmings, 2015). However, we found no relationship between visible body art and earnings

discrimination in the study context. It is important to note that the only positive aspect of body art noted by the participants – that they use tattoos to express emotions such as love – is unrelated to the workplace and employment relations.

In summary, this study has provided nuanced insights into the salient reasons underlying the stigmatisation, prejudice, and stereotypical classification of people with visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings in Nigeria – a country that has not caught up with Western societies in terms of collectively legitimatising and accepting people with visible body art. It also strengthens the theoretical standpoint on social stigma and prejudice as a strong predictor of negative attitudes and behaviours; structural and interpersonal experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment, and violence perpetrated against individuals who belong to disadvantaged social groups (Stuber et al., 2008). Although the act is slowly gaining ground among young adults as a form of fashion or display of honour for loved ones (Ayanlowo et al., 2017), the vast majority of Nigerians still frown upon it. It is therefore difficult to make a global statement about the acceptability of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. Clearly, the challenges and difficulties confronted by people with visible body art in Nigeria are huge and specific, and they are not the same as those in the developed Western world.

Implications, Limitations, and Agenda for Future Research

Our analysis has important implications for HRM. The stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against people with visible body art could prevent organisations from hiring and keeping talented employees who might have suffered body art-related prejudice during job interviews or in the workplace. Such prejudice may even lead to termination of employment of the best workers. Furthermore, employees with tattoos and unconventional body piercings may also suffer anxiety and loss of confidence, attacking their identity and limiting their capacity for social expression and interactions. This, in turn, could hinder organisational productivity and growth. Based on the findings of this study, it is also important to mention that employees with

visible body art in Nigeria can be negatively affected by the related prejudiceand discrimination in terms of their career progression, experiences and opportunities. Many countries (primarily in the global North) have enacted anti-discrimination laws to protect employees with visible body art from discrimination; in Nigeria, however, such laws have yet to be enacted. The result of this is that in Nigeria, discrimination against people with unconventional body piercings and/or visible tattoos is lawful and very prevalent. Meanwhile, employers' justifications are entrenched in religious, sociocultural and corporate values, as well as companies' appearance policies. We therefore suggest that there can be a general tolerance of individual preference for body art and physical appearance, which should be incorporated into organisational policies and supported by relevant laws. This will protect employees from stigmatisation and prejudice in the workplace and the general labour market; it will also accord them a right to self-expression.

This study has some limitations. First, the interpretative paradigm employed within qualitative research requires the researchers to interpret their social environment, which may sometimes be challenging due to the subjective meanings ascribed to knowledge and social reality. Furthermore, using qualitative research can be challenging when it comes to interpreting the emotions and feelings of the study participants. However, by contacting the participants to conduct member checks, we were able to confirm if the interpretations given resonated with their intended meanings. In terms of the generalisation of the study's results, aside from the small samples, we also combined male and female participants – both tattooed and non-tattooed. This meant that we did not compare prejudice experienced by tattooed male participants against that experienced by their female counterparts.

For future research, we recommend that the psychological and sociological impacts of societal perceptions of people with visible tattoos and body piercings are examined. This can be done using different research methods (quantitative and observational) in either the same context or

a different one. Future research could also employ a quantitative research approach with a larger sample in another research environment. It may also be interesting to consider consumer perceptions of visible body art in a similar environment to Nigeria. The researchers hope that this study will stimulate further research on this topic in the global South – especially in Africa.

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