Negotiable bodies: employer perceptions of visible body modifications.

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This study investigates the relationship between tourism and hospitality manager’s perceptions of visible body modification (VBM) and recruitment and operational practices. It examines how managers evaluate, recruit and manage the appearance of employees with VBM. Qualitative research was undertaken, consisting of fourteen semi-structured interviews with tourism managers in the North East of England. The interviews were thematically coded and analysed. It is demonstrated that managers recognise VBM as expressions of socio-cultural trends, however their personal experiences, values, expectations, knowledge, and attitudes towards VBM may influence hiring practices. Organisations must continue to review their recruitment and operational policies to reflect the evolving socio-cultural values in contemporary society to be more inclusive and provide guidance and clarity concerning VBM. This study offers some important insights into the phenomena by developing an understanding of employees with VBM from the employer’s lens, exploring employers’ perceptions through their personal emotions, assumptions, misconceptions and societal expectations of the modern world.

Keywords:aesthetic labour, recruitment, tattoos, United Kingdom, visible body modification.

# Introduction

In the recent proliferation of fashionable, chic or trendy tourism and hospitality establishments such as boutique hotels, gastro pubs, cocktail bars and bistros, there has been significant changes to employee dress codes, uniform standards and overall appearance (Wu et al., 2019). In particular, body art including tattoos, piercings and other body modifications have become more visible. Certainly, the ‘display’ and ‘performance’ of bodily properties and styles are more commonplace and increasingly expected in contemporary consumer culture (Klesse, 1999).

Timming (2017) suggests that tattoos and tattooed people were previously associated with negative perceptions and prejudice; however, tattoos are becoming more ubiquitous in western societies**.**  For example, Grogan (2008) contends that body piercing and tattoos are less associated with rebellion and alternative sub-cultures and are increasingly mainstream and widespread. As a consequence of this, organisations targeting a younger, ‘edgier’ demographic of consumers have started to embrace employees’ body art to deliver their own brand messages (Timming, 2017).

However, it is argued that tourism and hospitality employers regulate and control the body image of employees with written and unwritten rules and policies, enforcing what is considered to be an ‘appropriate’ physical appearance (Kim & Cha, 2002). Much of the literature examining human resources and service delivery have investigated the roles and performance of employees in both tourism and hospitality industries together (Anderson, 2006; Garcia Lillo et al., 2018; Nickson, 2007; Sharma, 2019), due to the inter-related and overlapping nature of these sectors (BHA, 2015, p.4; WTTC, 2019, p.2). Despite the differences in their commercial practices, there is an integral relationship between tourism and hospitality which is the social interaction and encounters between ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’, who are most often ‘strangers’ to each other (Bell, 2009, p.20). Some roles, such as receptionist, concierge clerk, host, or food and beverage servers involve regular interactions with customers and as such must display professionalism in both their appearance and behaviour. Yet, what constitutes a ‘professional appearance’ within the tourism sector is not always clear, especially in relation to whether body modifications are preferred or avoided within establishments.

There are few studies that have investigated the perceptions of visible body modifications (VBM), including tattoos and piercings. Whilst some have explored consumer perspectives (see for example Timming, 2017), the examination of employer perceptions is more limited, especially within tourism and hospitality environments. More specifically, there is little understanding of the influence of VBM within recruitment policies and processes.

Therefore, through semi-structured interviews with tourism and hospitality employers, this research aims to investigate the relationship between manager’s perceptions of VBM and recruitment, hiring and operational practices. Respectively, it examines how managers evaluate, recruit and manage the appearance of employees with VBM. In doing so, this study addresses a notable gap in literature and provides an original contribution to knowledge by exploring employers’ perceptions of employees with VBM. In particular it offers some important insights into the phenomena by developing an understanding of employees with VBM from the lens of employers, exploring their perceptions through personal emotions, assumptions, misconceptions and societal expectations of the modern world. This will result in practical implications for tourism and hospitality managers to review their recruitment, hiring and operational practices and policies regarding VBM.

# Background

## Body Image

Many authors challenge the idea of body image as only consisting of physical appearance or physical self (Grogan, 2008). According to Schilder (1950) body image refers to the mental picture of the body that individuals form in their minds based on personal, environmental and temporal factors. These observations suggest that body image differs from the physical form, appearance or function and also relates to psychological and social experiences, feelings and attitudes. It is a complex psychological experience of embodiment which includes one’s body-related self-perceptions and attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours (Cash, 2004). According to Kolb (1959) each individual holds a mental picture of their body which they consider as the ideal. Furthermore, many spend time, money and effort in order to achieve the so-called ‘ideal’ body.

Nasser (2005) states that individuals change and re-create their bodies in order to challenge the monocultural ethos of the multicultural world that we live in. However, literature surrounding body image presents a wider range of correlational factors such as gender (Calogero & Thompson, 2010), personality (Cash, 2004), health and wellbeing (Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016), social and economic status (Berry, 2016), fashion and cosmetics (Strubel et al., 2018), sports or media (Arroyo, 2015) which highlights their implications on body image. Thus, it is unsurprising that research has also revealed that individual’s motives for changing their body image are far from simple. But despite these motivations, from a broader perspective within today’s society, the body is now considered a changeable individual structure, a project which can be altered (Turner, 1996).

## Visible Body Modifications

Even though there are predefined types of body modifications, it is problematic to categorise each and all due to limitless possibilities and variations. Although, broadly speaking, VBM concerns the manipulation and alteration of body image by marking, inserting, stretching, resizing and cutting. Proponents of body modification describe the phenomena as ruling their own bodies and articulating their individual identities (Pitts, 2003) through piercing, tattooing, stretching, branding, implants, scarification, and more. Individuals often implement VBM for various reasons including fashion, aesthetics, health, status and recognition, spiritual growth, sexual and arousal enhancements. Society, state and social relationships are considered as regulators of the physical body, setting societal boundaries for the aesthetics of beauty (Foucault, 1979), where bodies no longer ruled by society are regarded as ‘grotesque’ (Bakhtin, 1984; Langman, 2008; Langman & Cangemi, 2003).

In terms of tattoos, through the insertion of colour pigment into the skin with needles or other tools, individuals attempt to aesthetically and permanently decorate their bodies. For some individuals, tattoos articulate their association with sub-cultures, memberships, affiliations, social status or alternative and resistant lifestyles (Cakmak et al., 2019; Roberts, 2015).

Early research indicates that alteration of body image does not only have physical significance but also emotional, perceptual and psychosocial consequences (Kolb, 1959). In many societies, VBM was initially perceived as a challenge to the norms of the society, a rejection symbol of accepted behaviours and expected appearance, a form of voluntary deviance and stigma (Pitts, 2003; Sanders & Vail, 2008) or an indicator of substance abuse, antisocial behaviour and even suicide (Dhossche et al., 2000).

However, more recently, authors such as Kosut (2014; 2006) challenge the widely held opinion of tattoos belonging to sub-cultures, low and middle-classes or underground and deviant individuals by highlighting the relationship between tattoos and mainstream consumer culture, identifying their new status as a trendy consumer item. Tattoos have continued to increase in popularity (Ozanne et al., 2019; Tews & Stafford, 2019). In fact, in 2015, Statista reported that 30% of adults between 25-39 years old in the UK had a tattoo, whilst more recently they found that 40% of UK adults have at least one tattoo (Statista, 2018). The most recent study on body piercings in the UK was in 2008, which recorded that 10% of UK adults had a piercing on their body at a site other than the earlobe (Bone et al., 2008). Body piercings at sites other than the earlobe were most prevalent amongst 16-24 year olds, whilst almost half of women in that age bracket reported having a piercing (Bone et al., 2008). Meanwhile, a more recent study conducted on body piercing in France found that 12% of respondents reported at least one body piercing (Kluger et al., 2019).

## Physical Appearance in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

For many years, the tourism and hospitality industry has established a series of conforming behaviours and appearance through enforcing dress codes, and a polished and well-groomed body image. The beauty in each employee’s appearance is a valuable characteristic in service fields due to the frequent interactions between employees and customers (Chiang & Saw, 2018). In fact, numerous tourism and hospitality organisations have policies around the physical appearance of their employees (Kim & Cha, 2002). In fact, staff appearance is one of the quality assessment criteria for hotels, stating that 1 and 2 star hotel staff must be ‘tidily dressed and well-groomed’ whilst in 5 star hotels they must be ‘impeccably presented and in a uniform way’ (AA Hotel Services, 2011). Employers collectively and individually have imposed written and unwritten rules on staff members regulating, controlling, and homogenising their physical appearance. But as noted by Caven et al. (2013) the control of dress and appearance of employees not only imposes surface appearances but suggests control over an individual’s embodied dispositions and idiosyncrasies. In more conventional terms, employees’ body image including clothes, hair, skin, make-up and accessories have always been a key issue for many organisations.

Multiple studies suggest that in the tourism and hospitality industry, technical competencies are overshadowed by behavioural and attitudinal requirements during the hiring process. Nickson (2007), for example, argues that beyond job descriptions and specifications, at its most abstract, employers seek employees with the ‘right’ attitude and appearance. In fact, Nickson et al. (2005) found appearance to be critical to retail and hospitality employers. A study by Li et al. (2019) revealed that the physical attractiveness of a service provider had a positive effect on customer behaviour, whilst Genc and Kozac (2020) also highlight the importance of employee appearance in tourism services. Furthermore, Ren’s (2017) study exposes the exploitation of women’s aesthetic labour in the Chinese airline industry. Recruitment, selection and performance appraisals are key employment interactions where managers make employment-related decisions or judgements about their employees. In these situations, desirable or undesirable physical attributes or apparel can influence the outcome of the selection process.

While an organisation is seeking to recruit the ‘right’ person, handicaps in interpersonal understanding, stereotypical assumptions and prejudice could influence the validity and accuracy of the judgement process. Evidence shows that our perception of others can be impaired by various biases and distortions (McElroy et al., 2014), which may also create further negative consequences through discrimination and inequality. Regardless of any known issues, during recruitment many employers have displayed a tendency towards candidates that appear to have a ‘good appearance’, ‘good manners’ or ‘well-turned’ (Jackson et al., 2005). This can be explained by the ‘halo and horns effect’ which can distort our views of a person's objective qualities (Forgas & Laham, 2016). The halo and horns effect refers to the tendency of people to presume that any desirable or undesirable characteristics presented in an individual means that they must also possess further desirable or undesirable characteristics. Previous studies reveal that physical appearance and attractiveness can have a significant influence on impressions on other unrelated but favourable characteristics such as perceived social and intellectual competence, happiness, success (Eagly et al., 1991), friendliness, likeability and sociability (Reis et al., 1980). Whilst there is no evidence of correlation between the right appearance and future job performance; this ‘halo effect’ may influence the hiring process (McElroy et al., 2014). Subsequently, managers who are unable to observe the candidate’s work competence and ability, may predict a candidate’s future job performance based on directly observed attributes during the hiring process including appearance, manners and other visible characteristics.

## Aesthetic Labour and VBM

Research suggests that, regardless of what limited policy guidance and legalities state, employers in the service industries are often concerned with the physical appearance of employees that extend beyond dress codes and enters the area of ‘aesthetic labour’ (Nath et al., 2016; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). The tourism service sector have a strong focus on appearance management (Genc & Kozac, 2020; Li et al., 2019; Ren, 2017) in order to engender their customer’s positively (Tsaur et al., 2015), build rapport between customers and employees (Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2011) and achieve customer satisfaction through providing attractive and desirable tangible dimensions.

With the recent growth in trendy boutique hotels, gastro pubs, cocktail bars and the like, there has been a visible change in employee’s dress codes and overall appearance. In fact, more individual styles are increasingly acceptable and arguably expected. In terms of body modifications, piercings and tattoos have increased in popularity and are losing their association with rebellious and alternative subcultures (Grogan, 2008). Now, it is even suggested that organisations use their employees body art to support their branding and marketing efforts (Timming, 2017).

Despite these distinctions, the literature also suggests that VBM and tattoos are viewed negatively (Brallier et al., 2011; Karl et al., 2016; Resenhoeft et al., 2008), are less acceptable (Miller et al., 2009) and undesirable for professionalism (Ruetzler et al., 2011). Furthermore, Swanger (2006a) states that 86.67% of the hospitality industry’s human resource managers and recruiters express negative feelings about interviewees’ with visible tattoos and piercings. This is substantiated by research by Timming (2015) who indicates that hiring managers have predominantly negative impressions about visible tattoos in recruitment and selection as applicants with visible tattoos trigger perceptions of somewhat ‘questionable behaviour’, and leads managers to make judgements on the personality of applicants based on their visible tattoos. Research conducted by Antonellis Jr and Silsbee (2018) found that only 30% of employers would hire a candidate with a visible face or neck tattoo, whilst 50% declared that it would depend on the job position.

Whilst many suggest that VBM are more acceptable in society, there are conflicting views on their position in the tourism workplace. Furthermore, it is not known how employer perceptions of VBM influence recruitment practice within this industry. Therefore, this research aims to address this knowledge gap and seeks to examine the relationship between manager’s perceptions of VBM, and recruitment, hiring and operational practices.

# Methods

Qualitative research was adopted in this study as it is oriented to collect data that provide contextual information and contribute towards creating a deeper understanding of a phenomena in its natural setting (Sanders et al., 2013). It is interested in understanding how people make sense of the world and how they experience events (Wilson et al., 2020). This method of research enabled the exploration of the complexity of the tourism employer’s perceptions of VBM and how this may build into recruitment, hiring and employment practices. Considering the industry comprises of numerous unique establishments and service providers with different approaches to management, qualitative interviews were pivotal in the research to capture anticipated or significant differences in perceptions, attitudes, impacts and behaviours (Picken, 2018). It was especially beneficial because it permitted managers to express what was important, meaningful or insignificant to them about VBM in their own words.

## Profile of Participants

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen tourism and hospitality managers in the North East of England, specifically Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Sunderland and Northumberland. Interviews were conducted between January and June 2018 at the interviewee’s places of work, in offices and function rooms away from subordinates and customers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as position level and type of organisation were pre-selected to ensure a variety of establishments were included for transferability (see Table 1.). Participants were aged between 25 and 56 and held a managerial position with active involvement in the recruitment and selection process.

*[Table 1. Near here please]*

## Interview Process and Mode of Analysis

The interview guide was developed and adapted from previous research. Participants were generally asked about their perceptions of VBM, discussing personal views, significance and meaning, and physical size, type and location (Ruetzler et al., 2011). They were then asked about their employment practices, policies and processes surrounding VBM including pre-defined managerial or personal boundaries (McElroy et al., 2014; Swanger, 2006a; 2006b; Timming, 2015). Finally, they were asked to discuss compatibility of employees VBM and the organisations brand, image and target market (Timming, 2017). Interview questions were designed and conveyed in a neutral manner and avoided using negatively or positively loaded words to eliminate the possibility of biased answers.

All interviews were voice recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically coded and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive process on the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. This process included familiarisation with the data, both pre-determined and open emerging coding, theme generation and review. The analysis was completed by two researchers for confirmability and credibility, whilst member-checking was also employed.

# Findings

Managers’ consciousness of VBM displayed a multi-faceted predicament formed by the tourism and hospitality sector’s traditional roots, changing popular culture and ever diverse customers. The aim was not to identify a uniformity of understanding between confreres, but rather to comprehend and recognise the diversity in practice. Although the company expectations or past experiences in recruiting staff members with VBM assisted managers in recruitment decisions, when questioned, many of them were unable to immediately relate to their company policy or guidance in acceptance and rejection of candidates with VBM. Due to various reasons such as bygone uniform policies, frequently changed policies, or not having a clear policy or written guidance covering this matter empowered but also perplexed the managers. In analysing the interview data, three significant themes emerged: (1) uniform policy and compliance, (2) recruitment, (3) conformity and resistance.

## Uniform Policy and Compliance

In many tourism organisations, there is a clear distinction between front and back of house. This conventional division of labour provides the possibility for groups to be treated differently in terms of compliance and appearance management. Previous research suggests that in service sector organisations, customer facing roles are commonly scrutinised in terms of appearance (Timming et al., 2017; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Many establishments consider customer facing staff as representations of the company’s image; therefore, the front of house staff must embody the company’s brand through their appearance. This may be through branded uniforms containing logos, symbols, or names, common colour schemes, or agreed variations of unified apparels.

All managers interviewed indicated that they have a company uniform policy or guidelines that include front and back of house. 13 out of the 14 managers stated that their company uniform policy is a written document or a part of the employment contract. As several managers indicated, the hospitality industry still relies on a traditional sense of staff look which is consistent, coherent and rather regular. P2 explained their uniform policy:

Housekeeping has a uniform. The front of house, reception has a uniform and the restaurant has a uniform… For the back of house like sales, reservations, etc., we have a dress code not a policy. Smart shirts, jackets and trousers. Or smart dresses. Kitchen staff has usual chef whites.

Two interviewees showed their company uniform guidelines which were available in the back office with the photographs of expected or acceptable standards. P8 provided a precise explanation:

The front of house would be black trousers with white shirt, press ironed, black shoes and black socks. For back of house, it would be chef trousers and shoes although we do allow trainers, clean white pressed chef jacket and blue apron.

In contrast to the hotel and restaurant managers, the owner and manager of an independent coffee shop (P1) had a more liberal approach:

I have no written policy, just verbal guidelines. I just ask my staff to be mindful of things like health and safety risks... I am against high heels or just anything would flag as a slipping hazard or possibly not sturdy enough. I am also not keen on hoodies or sleeves that come over the hands, because of food hygiene. I always ask staff to roll their sleeves up. And not wear a hooded jacket, because I think they lack formality. And slogan T-shirts, I try to stay clear of them.

When participants were asked about their company policy or guidance concerning VBM for staff, four managers stated that the company policy does not permit VBM except for standard earrings in women.

It is evident that the tourism sector in general continues to maintain policies or guidelines regarding employee image, despite diversity amongst company types, structures, products and services. In broad terms, the industry is still concerned with physical appearance of staff members and continues to create policies and enforce guidelines.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for some managers to be wary and maybe overly attentive about staff appearance that stretches beyond written policies and guidelines (Nath et al., 2016). P9 stressed that the uniform policy is applicable everywhere whether an employee is physically at work or not;

I think you represent the company when you are [working] here. And then when you are in that uniform walking to your car or things like that you are [still] representing the company. You need to always have that sort of mind set in place.

Nevertheless, the managers interviewed also recognised a set of changed beliefs, cognitions or apparent willingness to adapt day-to-day work practices to allow staff to display their VBM. It is evident that the industry has moved with the changing social landscape and has become more inclusive. P7 provided an insightful summary of this idea:

[The uniform policy on] customer facing roles… that's changed quite a lot over the last 10 years. Going back, there are a lot of things that would have been unacceptable like tattoos on hands or necks that are visible. But now, it’s a lot more relaxed as long as it's not ridiculous or over the top. As long as it's not political messages tattooed here [showing his face and hands].

Overall, ten out of fourteen establishments permit staff members to have tattoos and body modifications. P1 stated ‘*In terms of tattoos and piercings. I am happy for anyone to have those on display as long as they are not offensive’*. Most of the participants were very positive about how organisations have evolved their policies to adapt to a rapidly changing society and labour, similarly highlighted by Flanagan and Lewis (2019). P12 responded enthusiastically:

I think we have to be aware that in today's modern society and our culture, I would say it's becoming the norm and very accepted and I think if the art has been done tastefully it can work very well. Personally I fully support it and as an organization, if it's done correctly, absolutely there's no problem... Gone are the days of, maybe, having a tattoo on your forearm or on your upper arm and having it covered with the long sleeved shirt. You see tattoos now on forearms, hands, fingers, necks...

Though the answers derived from interviews were shown as a positive shift towards a more inclusive employment environment, it was acknowledged that their acceptance was also in alignment with the individual manager’s beliefs about what constitutes appropriate in one’s physical appearance.

Whilst this research demonstrated a positive approach and acceptance of employees with VBM, it did not determine what type of tattoos or other body modifications were compliant in different positions within the industry. However, there were important commonalities that were identified across participants’ recollections of their experiences with staff members with VBM, which are represented by the following separate but inter-related sub-theme.

## Perception of VBM during recruitment and selection

Common knowledge and beliefs suggest that VBM can restrict an individual’s employment opportunities (Brallier et al., 2011). To develop a deeper understanding of the fine line between acceptance and exclusion, a series of questions were asked concerning the location, size and style of the tattoos, style and type of the body modifications and how managers judge and interpret the meaning of VBM.

All participants agreed that VBM that were regarded to be ‘extreme’, such as ‘large face tattoos’, ‘split ears or tongues’, ‘voluntary scars’, ‘large implants and spikes’ and ‘large gauges’ were detrimental to securing employment within the sector. For example, P9 commented: ‘*Ear stretchers I don’t think they look particularly smart and I think if it is taken out, it still does not look smart*.’However, five of the managers stated that ‘multiple earrings’ or ‘nose, eyebrow and lip piercings’, and ‘non-offensive arm tattoos’ were acceptable and that these modifications would not negatively impact on selection.

Whilst some managers stated that extreme body modifications and large tattoos were less of a concern for staff in the back of house, others stated that they would substantially reduce one’s success in an interview regardless of the position. P11 stressed the importance of the quality of the VBM. When asked about the location of tattoos on an employee’s body, they simply explained that the ‘taste’ and ‘quality’ of the tattoos were more concerning than size or placement.

I don’t have any employees with face tattoos. Neck definitely. Hands too… I probably would employ them but it will be more the quality of it. If someone had a really badly done tattoo over their face, I would be like “Ohh No”. If someone has a teardrop, some star or heart or something, I will be like “ohh that’s cool, trendy”. They look cool so that’s not a problem. But if someone has a dodgy Mike Tyson knockoff across their face then I will be like: “Ohh! No, No, No…”

In regard to the placement of tattoos P2 admits that they found face tattoos ‘borderline extreme’ by explaining ‘*I like to see your face. Even a small tribal line [is not acceptable]. I think there is a stigma attached to face tattoos’*. These findings confirm Miller et al.’s (2019), Antonellis Jr and Silsbee (2018) and Karl et al’s (2016) study indicating that VBM are less acceptable when face-to-face contact is necessary for the job role.

Where there is an objective display of body image, there will be also be a subjective sense of understanding and interpretation. Simply put by Armstrong (1983, p.2) ‘…*the reality of the body is only established by the observing eye that reads it*’. Thus, to understand how VBM might influence recruitment and selection practices, it was also important to understand how managers interpret candidate’s VBM. Almost all participants agreed that they ‘interpret’, ‘judge’ or ‘predict’ the meaning of potential employees’ VBM during interviews, relying on their own recall and self-definition.

Amongst participants, three reported that they would attempt to ask the meaning of a tattoo if they felt unsure, whilst the others simply found asking about someone’s tattoo to be too ‘uncomfortable’, ‘personal’ or ‘inappropriate’. The results demonstrated here, and previous research has indicated that potential employees can be judged based on their VBM and appearance (Timming, 2015) and as such are susceptible to the interpretations of the recruiting manager. The meaning associated to any VBM is thus determined by the manager, based on their perceptions, rather than the actual meaning assigned by the individual. The drawback of this approach is that managers may erroneously think that certain VBM are good, acceptable, undesirable, or even hostile based on their individual interpretation. Previous studies (Baumann et al., 2015; Li et al., 2019; Timming, 2017) have also demonstrated similar findings suggesting that VBM could be a significant liability for service employees.

Another aspect that was explored was VBM and branded labour. According to Timming (2015, p.71) ‘*where customers are demographically more likely to be tattooed, employees will tend to be selected to reflect that in-group demographic’*. However, this was not supported in this research. During the interviews, all participants stated that having VBM would not provide any advantage in the recruitment or selection process. Even though many of the managers employed staff with VBM, and indeed attracted a target market that were more likely to have VBM, the managers confirmed that this was not considered ‘favourable’ during the selection process. Although this does not necessarily mean that a positive discrimination does not exist, and this may still occur in certain establishments where there is a more definitive clientele and group social identity formation such as tattoo parlours.

## Conformity and Resistance

In view of changing societal norms and their reflection on the tourism industry and employment, many of the managers expressed concern towards the relevance of ‘old-school’ uniform policies. The interviewees demonstrated that their organisations were accepting towards staff with VBM, however they continued to monitor and enforce standards regarding the physical appearance of their employees.

Although this may simply be explained by societies changing perception of VBM, it does highlight some interesting issues, including the removal of former restrictions via recently changed policies, or managers’ resistance towards existing conventional policies which may be juxtaposed with liberal movements. As P3 points out:

When I first started 10 years ago, [VBM] was sort of an issue which was very much looked upon negatively almost. I think within 10 years I have been involved, we have moved with the times, sort of progressed… Policy has changed. It was originally no tattoos at all but we updated it. Now, there isn't anything to say ‘no tattoos and body piercings, facial piercings etc.’ or it has to been taken out. So that's far more accepted now.

Perhaps popularisation of VBM and the media’s major role in representation of trendy body image has neutralised the perception of body alterations, and as such is thereby forcing employers to eliminate former tensions and create conditions for coexistence. While updated organisational policies allow managers to recruit staff and manage their appearance more flexibly, likewise faced with unchanged conventional uniform policies, managers may occasionally attempt to resolve frustration themselves by bending or breaking the rules as a convenient option. Dorwart et al. (2010) reported comparable observations in their research within the healthcare sector, indicating that uniform policy statements for VBM ranged from not addressing at all to open-ended statements referencing terms such as ‘good taste’, ‘offensive’ and ‘inappropriate’.

In similar fashion, P2 argues for the acceptance of VBM at the workplace:

Body modification and tattoos are not allowed if you are dealing with customers but personally, I'm fine with it. I have a tattoo and I've had an ear piercing…. I am quite relaxed about having tattoos and piercings, as long as you look professional…. I've seen people with full tattoos and still look smart in what they're wearing and they conduct themselves professionally.

This, however, might lead to a broader question still, are all VBM treated in the same way within tourism employment, or is what we are actually discussing a new form of unwritten obligations purely based on managers’ discretions and point of view? If this proposition is correct then all VBM should receive the same level of acceptance. Instead what is observed, is a new set of ‘normative’ body image which is negotiable in favour of trendiness, consumerism, and popular culture.

Ten participants, who allow staff members to display their VBM reported that they are cautious towards religious or political symbols which can be patently offensive or potentially criminal such as a Nazi insignia. On the other hand, the participants were not able to completely normalise or marginalise the body art that portrays sexuality or sexual conduct due to its subjective, literary, artistic or prurient context. This leads to the discussion to a concept of ‘negotiable bodies’.

# Discussion: Negotiable Bodies

The findings suggest that personal and organisational factors intersect resulting in a paradox that influences the hiring practices and day-to-day work life of employees with VBM. For example, it was once not uncommon for organisations to have strict policies regarding VBM and staff appearance. However, as its popularity has continued to increase, it has gained wider acceptance (Kosut, 2006, 2014; Roberts, 2015). As indicated previously, many organisations have altered their policies and widened the norms in defining their staff appearance standards.

Often, however, uniform policies or appearance guidance provide limited information about the display or acceptance of VBM with no criteria indicating the range of expectations or margins of acceptance (Swanger, 2006b). As sources of information and reference, such documents can be quite valuable in staff recruitment and day-to-day operations, particularly when they are detailed in their description of acceptable VBM. However, the policies frequently offer imprecise portrayal in the very areas being observed, evaluated, and judged by managers in the hiring process. Even though the benefits of being receptive to the change in popular trends such as body art were emphasised by all interview participants, it was also highlighted that, given the wide array of available tattoos and modifications, it is often challenging for them to know and understand all possible variations of VBM. Many participants concluded that they are responsible for drawing their own conclusions in terms of staff appearance within recruitment, selection or operations. Furthermore, two participants stated the industry requires a degree of flexibility besides written dress codes and uniform guidelines.

Drawing conclusions from the interviews and considering how some managers approached the phenomena practically and socially in the face of uncertainty, it might be possible to begin unravelling a new concept. Equipped with a nuanced understanding of the tourism workforce with VBM, managers’ opinions, practices and boundaries in employment, the conceptualization of ‘negotiable bodies’ is offered.

In negotiable bodies, a border is not clearly defined by the line of acceptance or exclusion, but the display of the employee body image is entwined in multiple and overlapping everyday relations of people (managers, staff members, and customers) based on association, commerce and cultural politics. Acceptance or rejection during the hiring process, or permanent or temporary appearance adaptation within the workplace required and indeed revolved around a dynamic between the managers and employees. Negotiation of another individual’s body image such as allowing them to wear multiple earrings and to display tattoos, or discussing what or how much is acceptable where legislation or company policies fail to address complexities, requires all parties to leave rigid positions and take alternative steps toward an interpersonal resolution and negotiation of the employment relationship. Negotiable bodies materialise where an individual’s body image is negotiated with another individual through permission and obligation concessions to create reciprocity.

## Managerial Implications

Without dwelling on ethical business discourse, it is evident that a moral encounter exists in many managers’ approach in persuading employees to adopt a certain appearance on the basis of unproven reasoning about customers’ attitudes and expectations or acceptance of VBM. However, without any official business guidance that can be known by all stakeholders, one might wonder what basis exists for arguing that VBM are acceptable within the tourism industry. Therefore, this research highlights the need for tourism managers to review their hiring practices surrounding VBM to ensure that clear guidance is provided, and that policies and procedures are regularly adapted to reflect the changing perceptions of organisations and society.

# Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between tourism and hospitality manager’s perceptions of VBM and recruitment and operational practices. The results demonstrate that managers recognise VBM as expressions reflecting new socio-cultural trends. This was borne out in the collective responses weighted towards commonality of the modifications, trendiness or fashion statement in the perceptions of employees with VBM. It is also evident that managers’ personal experience, values, expectations, knowledge, and attitudes towards VBM may influence hiring practices. As a result, the concept of negotiable bodies is proposed. This research highlights that employees’ bodies have become treated as an area of ‘negotiable’ matter. Even though Western society is argued to be more inclusive, research indicates that there is still a subjective stigma. That is, managers are not necessarily opposed to the presence of VBM per say, but employment may be dictated by the style of VBM and the managers personal preference.

Although not exactly proven via the research, it can be deduced that many ‘trendy’ establishments choose to follow overly-stereotypical ‘hipster’ culture in product, and perhaps people design, thus the tourism and hospitality environment and staff matched the abstract expectations of this popular culture or their clientele. Despite this, the workforce with VBM can be considered an exemplary case of changing understanding of aesthetic labour. However, given this subjective outlook, it is entirely unclear what status would be given to employees with VBM in establishing a consensus on the fine line between acceptance and exclusion. It is rather impossible to develop appearance policies that consist of harmonised rules according to relevant legislation due to the many types, sizes and styles of VBM that are available, and how they may be perceived by numerous stakeholders. Even though there is increasing acceptance of alternatives to traditional norms of employee body image, there are still some VBM that are regarded to be ‘risky’ in securing a position within the sector, such as tattoos on the back of the hand, face or upper neck and ear stretchers, gauges, implants and spikes.

This research has demonstrated that policies and guidance are often outdated and not inclusive, or provide little to no guidance for tourism managers, which has created a subjective treatment of employees and potential candidates based entirely on the managers pre-conceived perceptions of suitable body image. Moreover, prospective employees may be unable to clarify what is or is not acceptable due to the lack of clarity in policies. The fashion, hospitality trends, legislation and more importantly public tolerance to nonconformity will continue to change, and further research is needed to analyse the evolving context of the employment of individuals with VBM, not just for tourism but for other services and industries. Under these circumstances, managers require a new, clear and unified approach to appearance standards around VBM.

Whilst this research has examined manager’s perceptions of employee’s visible body modifications in recruitment and operations, this study is limited to fourteen tourism and hospitality establishments in the North East of England and may not represent the VBM phenomenon on a global context due to diverse cultural practices, industry and national policies and legislation. Therefore, further research on an international scale is required to provide a deeper understanding.

 Moreover, exploring the relationship of negotiable bodies across different industries would provide further insight in understanding the influence of VBM not only in hiring practices but also in relation to customer experiences, perceptions, and future behaviour. Finally, it is important to note that the research was conducted in 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not known how or if the perceptions of tattoos and VBM of tourism employees may change in the future following the global pandemic, and as such future research in this area is recommended.

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| Table 1. Interview Participants |
| Interviewee | **Job Title** | **Organisation** | **Years of Experience** | **Gender** |
| P1 | Owner | Café/Coffeeshop | 10 | M |
| P2 | Sales Manager | Hotel | 6 | M |
| P3 | Rest. Manager | Restaurant | 10 | M |
| P4 | Rest. Manager | Restaurant | 6 | M |
| P5 | Front Office Manager | Hotel | 1 | F |
| P6 | Manager | Café/Coffeeshop | 8 | M |
| P7 | Rest. Manager | Restaurant | 5 | M |
| P8 | Rest. Manager | Restaurant | 2 | M |
| P9 | Sales Manager | Hotel | 3 | F |
| P10 | Bar Manager | Bistro/Bar | 5 | F |
| P11 | Bar Manager | Bistro/Bar | 9 | M |
| P12 | Guest Services Manager | Holiday Park  | 12 | M |
| P13 | Bar Manager | Bistro/Bar | 9 | M |
| P14 | Rest. Manager | Restaurant | 6 | F |