



# What does job applicants' body art signal to employers?

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we present a state-of-the-art scenario experiment which, for the first time in the literature, directly measures the stigmas surrounding job candidates with tattoos and piercings using real recruiters. We find that job candidates with body art are perceived as less pleasant to work with, less honest, less emotionally stable, less agreeable, less conscientious and less manageable. This goes hand in hand with lower hireability for men with body art but not for women. Compared to candidates who reveal obesity, a characteristic we also randomise, those with body art score better overall in terms of hireability and rated personality, similar in terms of rated taste for collaboration but worse in terms of rated direct productivity drivers.

## 1. Introduction

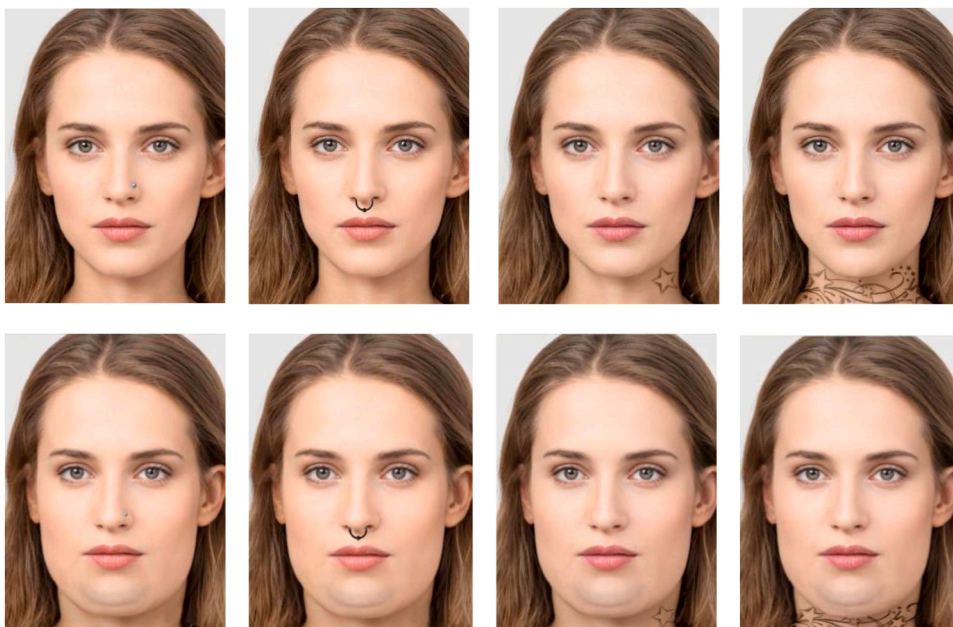
A recent worldwide meta-analysis of correspondence experiments exploring recruitment discrimination using fictitious job applications shows that physical appearance is, together with age and disability, one of the three main grounds for discrimination standing in the way of a job interview (Lippens et al., 2023). In terms of the effect of physical appearance on hiring opportunities, previous research has mainly focused on characteristics that are largely out of applicants' control, such as low attractiveness and facial disfigurement (Baert, 2018; Lippens et al., 2023; López Bóo et al., 2013; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006; Ruffle & Shtudiner, 2015; Stone & Wright, 2013). However, recent studies have also focused on a potentially significant stigmas-inducing physical feature that does constitute self-choice: visible body art, namely tattoos and piercings. For example, recent research indicates that a visible tattoo results in a 35.1% reduction in job interview invitations in the German banking sector (Jibuti, 2018). Regarding piercings, we are unaware of an objective measure of discrimination via correspondence experiments, the gold standard of such research. Nonetheless, survey and observational research indicate the possibility of hiring stigmas related to piercings (McElroy et al., 2014), although to a lesser degree than that for tattoos (Timming et al., 2017).

In addition to the lack of studies directly measuring the effect of body art on recruitment opportunities, let alone its relative direct effect, this literature is limited in that it does not provide a clear picture of why unfavourable treatment occurs. That is, it fails to ask precisely what stigmas visible body art evokes within the recruitment context. However, indirect evidence exists in the form of stigmas identified in related contexts and the self-reported suspicions of workers with body art. More concretely, first, findings indicate that

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**Fig. 1.** Examples of the pictures used.

Note. This is one of two female photos used, with the first row showing the non-obese version and the second row showing the obese version, and with both rows from left to right showing the following levels of the vignette factor body art: (i) small piercing, (ii) large piercing, (iii) small tattoo and (iv) large tattoo.

others, clients in particular, would be less willing to work with individuals with visible body art (Dean, 2010, 2011; Doleac & Stein, 2013; Ruggs, 2013; Timming, 2014), which may give employers a reason not to hire them. Second, individuals with visible body art are attributed negative personality traits, in particular lower conscientiousness (Dean, 2011; Jennings et al., 2014; McElroy et al., 2014; Ruggs, 2013; Seiter & Sandry, 2003), a trait shown to lower labour market success (Baert, 2018; Baert & Decuyper, 2014; Mueller & Plug, 2006). Third, additional perceptions of individuals with visible body art – specifically lower autonomy, lower manageability and lower intelligence – are negatively associated with productivity (Dean, 2011; McElroy et al., 2014; Ruggs, 2013; Seiter & Sandry, 2003; Timming et al., 2017). However, to our knowledge, no research has directly and jointly examined these stigmas.

Apart from these limitations on whether and why visible body art limits job candidates' opportunities, the existing research also offers limited insight into the contexts in which body art, in particular, evokes stigmas – that is, for which job candidates, in which occupations and with which recruiters? Previous research suggests that tattoos evoke greater stigmas when worn by women, partly because with them this would be seen more as a signal of promiscuity (Broussard & Harton, 2017; Hawkes et al., 2004). In line with the above mechanism related to the distaste for collaborating with job candidates with body art, these stigmas are expected to be greater in jobs with high customer contact – just like earlier research found a higher 'beauty premium' in these jobs (Baumann et al., 2016; Deryugina & Shurchkov, 2015; Timming, 2014; Timming et al., 2017). Finally, individuals who do not wear body art themselves (Arndt & Glassman, 2012; Chen, 2017; Timming, 2014) – and men in general (Baumann et al., 2016; Burgess & Clark, 2010) – have also sometimes been found to disfavour people with body art. However, direct evidence within the recruitment context is lacking.

In this study, we push the boundaries of this literature through a state-of-the-art scenario experiment in which participants with recent recruiting experience in the US evaluate fictitious job candidates who randomly differ in body art in terms of hireability, taste for collaboration, personality and direct productivity drivers. In this way, we directly identify the stigmas surrounding job candidates with body art. We distinguish between the effects of piercings and tattoos, large and small expressions of body art and male and female wearers. We also study heterogeneous effects by job and recruiter characteristics.

Moreover, to avoid giving away the purpose of our experiment, we also randomise whether or not the candidates are obese; thus, we can benchmark the effect of body art with that of obesity. This also allows us to take the logical next step within the scientific literature on the effect of weight on labour market outcomes (Agerström & Rooth, 2011; Böckerman et al., 2019; Busetta et al., 2020; Campos-Vazquez & Gonzalez, 2020; Goulão et al., 2023; Rooth, 2009) by exposing the underlying stigmas of unequal treatment based on obesity.

In addition to its scientific added value, this study offers a guide for body art wearers (and overweight persons) and those accompanying them in the labour market (such as public employment agency officers) on the stigmas they should anticipate when applying for a job and the contexts in which they should expect more important barriers standing in the way of success.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Experiment

We conducted a state-of-the-art scenario experiment in the tradition of [Auspurg and Hinz \(2014\)](#), more specifically leaning towards the recent application of this approach described in [Van Borm et al. \(2021\)](#).

Participants were asked to put themselves in the recruiter role at a fictitious company. They were then shown job descriptions, in line with those in O\*NET, of one of the following eight job groups for which a vacancy had to be filled: (i) mine shuttle car operators; (ii) travel agents; (iii) poets, lyricists and creative writers; (iv) locomotive firers; (v) geological sample test technicians; (vi) archivists; (vii) software developers and (viii) cytogenetic technologists. We chose these job groups because they varied across four different requirements: (a) educational level, (b) customer contact, (c) creativity and (d) reliability. This gave our experiment greater external validity than similar experiments, which often focus on a single occupation or sector ([Sterkens et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, this choice allowed us to examine the extent to which the effect of body art on job applicants' recruitment probabilities is heterogeneous according to these characteristics. [Table A1](#) presents the descriptions of the occupations and their variation by the above job characteristics according to O\*NET. This table also shows how the experimental participants rated the customer contact, creativity and reliability required in these occupations on a scale from 0 (extremely unimportant) to 10 (extremely important).

Participants were then given four graduate applicants with the desired diploma to assess based on a short description that, according to the scenario, had been prepared by a colleague. This consisted of a picture and a table, which varied according to seven vignette factors with varying numbers of vignette levels. These are explained below and summarised in [Table A2](#).

Each participant was shown, in varying order, photos of the same four people: two men and two women. The images, generated by AI using the Generated Photos website, depicted male and female white young adults looking straight into the camera, who had been scored similarly in terms of attractiveness by a test panel. They had neutral expressions and brown hair.

We then experimentally varied these pictures based on two initial vignette factors: (1) body art (none, small piercing, large piercing, small tattoo, large tattoo); and (2) weight (not obese, obese). As [Auspurg and Hinz \(2014\)](#) recommended, we added this last dimension to vary the experiment on enough factors to avoid giving away the research aim. This also allowed us to test the interaction between body art and obesity, a more frequently studied classical dimension of physical appearance. [Fig. 1](#) shows an example of a generated profile with and without obesity, varying on the body art factor. Including a photo with an application is common in Flanders (Belgium), where we ran the experiment ([Baert, 2018](#)).

The table shown to the participants in their role of recruiter varied experimentally on five additional factors: (3) gender (male, female); (4) experience from a student job (none, related to degree, unrelated to degree); (5) study delay (none, delay); (6) school results (lowest 25%, top 50%, top 25%) and (7) stated hobbies (artistic, intellectual, sports, social). Again, these factors aimed to increase the experiment's ecological validity and to allow us to identify interactions with wearing body art. We were particularly interested in interaction with the candidate's gender, given the abovementioned evidence suggesting that body art would have a more significant negative impact on females. Participants evaluated the candidates based on the 14 items summarised in [Table A3](#), using an 11-point Likert scale (0 to 10) to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a statement.

First, participants assessed the presented candidates' hireability via two items in line with [Van Belle et al.'s \(2018\)](#) seminal vignette aimed at uncovering stigmas towards long-term job seekers, namely, 'I will invite the candidate for an interview' and 'There is a high probability that the candidate will be effectively recruited'. In what follows, we refer to the participants' scores for these items as 'interview appropriateness' and 'hiring appropriateness'. We also take them together via their mean as a 'hireability scale', given their good internal consistency based on the scores for both items (see [Table A3](#) for Cronbach's alpha).

Second, in line with the theory of taste-based discrimination ([Becker, 1957](#)), and as operationalised by [Van Belle et al. \(2018\)](#), we probed taste for collaboration via three items that captured 'taste for collaboration as employer', 'taste for collaboration as colleague' and 'taste for collaboration as customer' via statements such as 'I think customers would enjoy collaborating with this person'. The average score for these items became the 'taste for collaboration scale'.

We added a third and fourth set of judgements in line with the theory of statistical discrimination ([Arrow, 1973](#)) – the primary counterpart of the taste-based discrimination theory – and in line with signalling theory ([Spence, 1973](#)). Both of these theories share the core idea that when people must make decisions without access to all the relevant information, they will use the information they do have to indicate factors that cannot be observed. In this respect, in line with the suggestive evidence mentioned in the introduction, personality and drivers of personality, which cannot be inferred directly from a CV, may be estimated differently when someone is visibly wearing body art in the photograph accompanying the CV. We estimated perceived personality through the six dimensions of the HEXACO model ([Ashton & Lee, 2008](#)): 'perceived honesty', 'perceived emotional stability', 'perceived extraversion', 'perceived agreeableness', 'perceived conscientiousness' and 'perceived openness to new experiences'. Here, we refer to the mean score for these items as the 'perceived beneficial personality scale'. Finally, we used the 'perceived productivity drivers scale', consisting of the items 'perceived autonomy', 'perceived manageability' and 'perceived intelligence', formulated in line with the items related to statistical discrimination in [Van Belle et al. \(2018\)](#), as seen in [Table A3](#).

Finally, we gave the participants a post-experimental questionnaire consisting of four components. First, we asked them whether they had body art (yes, no) since, based on the suggestive evidence in the introduction, we would expect this to interact with their judgment of job candidates with body art. Second, we collected information on three socio-demographic factors: gender (male, female), age and level of education (no tertiary education, tertiary education). Third, we checked participants' level of experience: the frequency with which they make hiring decisions (monthly, less than monthly) and the amount of experience they have in their jobs (less than five years, five years or more) to examine, in line with [Van Belle et al. \(2018\)](#), whether any stigmas attenuate with maturity. Finally, we presented them with the Marlowe-Crowne scale on the tendency towards socially desirable responses ([Reynolds, 1982](#)),

**Table 1**  
Body art among job applicants and hireability: Main regression analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	Dependent variable: interview appropriateness				Dependent variable: hiring appropriateness				Dependent variable: hireability scale			
Body art	−0.162 (0.150)	−0.166 (0.234)	−0.499 (0.271)		−0.175 (0.144)	−0.216 (0.235)	−0.564** (0.276)		−0.168 (0.143)	−0.191 (0.228)	−0.531** (0.263)	
Body art x Tattoo		0.118 (0.225)	0.047 (0.233)			0.192 (0.223)	0.117 (0.230)			0.155 (0.220)	0.082 (0.227)	
Body art x Large version		−0.079 (0.216)	−0.104 (0.216)			−0.074 (0.221)	−0.099 (0.219)			−0.076 (0.211)	−0.101 (0.210)	
Body art x Female			0.723** (0.335)				0.756** (0.325)				0.739** (0.319)	
Male with body art				−0.542** (0.226)				−0.579*** (0.220)				−0.560*** (0.215)
Female with body art				0.181 (0.217)				0.190 (0.209)				0.185 (0.207)
Obese	−0.283** (0.132)	−0.288** (0.132)	−0.269** (0.132)	−0.269** (0.132)	−0.280** (0.132)	−0.288** (0.133)	−0.269** (0.133)	−0.264** (0.132)	−0.282** (0.128)	−0.288** (0.129)	−0.269** (0.129)	−0.267** (0.128)
Female	0.462** (0.130)	0.452** (0.133)	0.096 (0.212)	0.098 (0.212)	0.412** (0.134)	0.394** (0.135)	0.022 (0.211)	0.025 (0.211)	0.437** (0.129)	0.423** (0.131)	0.059 (0.206)	0.062 (0.206)
Study results: 1st quartile	3.699*** (0.208)	3.711*** (0.209)	3.729*** (0.208)	3.725*** (0.207)	3.349*** (0.199)	3.370*** (0.201)	3.389*** (0.199)	3.377*** (0.197)	3.524*** (0.199)	3.541*** (0.201)	3.559*** (0.199)	3.551*** (0.198)
Study results: 2nd quartile	2.632*** (0.178)	2.621*** (0.180)	2.596*** (0.179)	2.602*** (0.178)	2.497*** (0.174)	2.480*** (0.175)	2.454*** (0.173)	2.465*** (0.172)	2.564*** (0.172)	2.551*** (0.173)	2.524*** (0.172)	2.533*** (0.171)
Grade retention	−0.633*** (0.138)	−0.635*** (0.139)	−0.642*** (0.138)	−0.640*** (0.138)	−0.637*** (0.138)	−0.639*** (0.139)	−0.646*** (0.138)	−0.644*** (0.138)	−0.635*** (0.135)	−0.637*** (0.135)	−0.644*** (0.135)	−0.642*** (0.134)
Student job: related to studies	0.844*** (0.176)	0.866*** (0.183)	0.913*** (0.183)	0.905*** (0.177)	0.888*** (0.181)	0.924*** (0.186)	0.973*** (0.187)	0.953*** (0.182)	0.866*** (0.174)	0.895*** (0.180)	0.943*** (0.180)	0.929*** (0.175)
Student job: unrelated to studies	−0.184 (0.168)	−0.170 (0.175)	−0.179 (0.173)	−0.180 (0.166)	−0.274* (0.163)	−0.249 (0.170)	−0.258 (0.180)	−0.270* (0.160)	−0.229 (0.161)	−0.210 (0.167)	−0.218 (0.165)	−0.225 (0.158)
Hobbies: intellectual	0.051 (0.180)	0.050 (0.181)	−0.029 (0.185)	−0.029 (0.184)	0.199 (0.181)	0.198 (0.181)	0.115 (0.186)	0.115 (0.185)	0.125 (0.175)	0.124 (0.176)	0.043 (0.180)	0.043 (0.179)
Hobbies: sports	−0.251 (0.178)	−0.257 (0.181)	−0.318* (0.181)	−0.309* (0.177)	−0.135 (0.178)	−0.140 (0.180)	−0.203 (0.178)	−0.197 (0.178)	−0.193 (0.173)	−0.198 (0.175)	−0.260 (0.175)	−0.253 (0.173)
Hobbies: social	0.025 (0.202)	0.051 (0.210)	−0.010 (0.212)	−0.021 (0.202)	0.150 (0.199)	0.190 (0.207)	0.127 (0.210)	0.101 (0.199)	0.088 (0.196)	0.121 (0.204)	0.058 (0.206)	0.040 (0.196)
Job characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	5.248*** (1.208)	5.261*** (1.220)	5.460*** (1.232)	5.433*** (1.219)	4.783*** (1.369)	4.788*** (1.378)	4.995*** (1.378)	4.979*** (1.370)	5.015*** (1.234)	5.024*** (1.244)	5.227*** (1.251)	5.206*** (1.242)
Observations	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848

Note. The presented statistics are linear regression estimates with their standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for clustering of the observations at the participant level. \*\*\* (\*\*) (\*) indicate significance at the 1% (5%) (10%) significance level.

**Table 2**

Body art among job applicants and hireability: Extended regression analysis with more interactions.

	(1) Dependent variable: interview appropriateness	(2) Dependent variable: hiring appropriateness	(3) Dependent variable: hireability scale
Body art	-0.104 (1.798)	-0.897 (1.680)	-0.500 (1.670)
Body art x Tattoo	0.084 (0.281)	0.142 (0.275)	0.113 (0.273)
Body art x Large version	-0.146 (0.220)	-0.115 (0.226)	-0.130 (0.216)
Body art x Obese	-0.529 (0.360)	-0.559 (0.366)	-0.544 (0.354)
Body art x Female	0.694** (0.336)	0.697** (0.323)	0.696** (0.318)
Body art x Study results: 1 <sup>st</sup> quartile	-0.054 (0.361)	0.129 (0.362)	0.038 (0.350)
Body art x Study results: 2 <sup>nd</sup> quartile	0.054 (0.440)	-0.343 (0.432)	-0.144 (0.424)
Body art x Grade retention	0.151 (0.355)	0.048 (0.364)	0.099 (0.350)
Body art x Student job: related to studies	0.147 (0.453)	0.331 (0.445)	0.239 (0.433)
Body art x Student job: unrelated to studies	-0.259 (0.381)	0.047 (0.392)	-0.106 (0.375)
Body art x Hobbies: intellectual	-0.550 (0.509)	-0.444 (0.512)	-0.497 (0.497)
Body art x Hobbies: sports	-0.326 (0.484)	-0.404 (0.466)	-0.365 (0.464)
Body art x Hobbies: social	0.065 (0.509)	0.072 (0.498)	0.068 (0.490)
Body art x Job: perceived level of customer contact	-0.022 (0.056)	-0.035 (0.049)	-0.028 (0.052)
Body art x Job: perceived level of required creativity	-0.031 (0.056)	-0.012 (0.050)	-0.021 (0.052)
Body art x Job: perceived level of required reliability	0.021 (0.143)	0.022 (0.130)	0.021 (0.132)
Body art x Participant: body art	-0.117 (0.228)	0.068 (0.241)	-0.024 (0.229)
Body art x Participant: female	0.151 (0.315)	0.178 (0.302)	0.164 (0.300)
Body art x Participant: age	0.001 (0.016)	0.003 (0.016)	0.002 (0.016)
Body art x Participant: tertiary education	0.124 (0.344)	0.329 (0.335)	0.226 (0.329)
Body art x Participant: ≥ monthly hiring decision	0.351 (0.297)	0.249 (0.279)	0.300 (0.279)
Body art x Participant: ≥ 5 years of experience in job	-0.042 (0.357)	0.050 (0.328)	0.004 (0.334)
Body art x Participant: social desirability bias	-0.019 (0.088)	0.018 (0.089)	-0.000 (0.087)
Obese	-0.008 (0.217)	0.004 (0.224)	-0.002 (0.215)
Female	0.129 (0.222)	0.059 (0.220)	0.094 (0.215)
Study results: 1st quartile	3.622*** (0.311)	3.487*** (0.302)	3.555*** (0.300)
Study results: 2nd quartile	2.474*** (0.270)	2.404*** (0.267)	2.439*** (0.261)
Grade retention	-0.705*** (0.219)	-0.809*** (0.226)	-0.757*** (0.218)
Student job: related to studies	0.785** (0.316)	0.754** (0.312)	0.769** (0.305)
Student job: unrelated to studies	-0.063 (0.221)	-0.264 (0.227)	-0.163 (0.217)
Hobbies: intellectual	0.212 (0.315)	0.326 (0.318)	0.269 (0.308)
Hobbies: sports	-0.125 (0.324)	0.055 (0.309)	-0.035 (0.308)
Hobbies: social	-0.025 (0.330)	0.109 (0.325)	0.042 (0.319)
Job characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	5.296*** (1.603)	5.160*** (1.549)	5.228*** (1.536)
Observations	848	848	848

Note. The presented statistics are linear regression estimates with their standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for clustering of the observations at the participant level. \*\*\* (\*\*) (\*) indicates significance at 1% (5%) (10 %) significance level.

with a maximum score of 13 (the higher the score, the greater the propensity for socially desirable responses). This scale allowed us, in line with [Van Belle et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Sterkens et al. \(2023\)](#), to check the robustness of the propensity score.

## 2.2. Sample

We formatted the experimental survey in Qualtrics, after which we administered it via the online platform Academic Prolific. We chose this platform because of its diverse respondents ([Peer et al., 2017](#)). In addition, the respondents on Academic Prolific produce high-quality data, of even better quality than those on CrowdFlower according to [Peer et al. \(2017\)](#). Academic Prolific is a paying platform; only respondents who completed the survey fully and accurately were paid. This ensured the optimisation of the data quality. Moreover, survey respondents had to have recruitment experience, which was indicated as a requirement on the online platform. Upon preregistration to the panel, members complete multiple, extensive pre-screening batteries on, among others, demographics, lifestyle and professional activity. Consequently, it is unlikely that participants provided incorrect information regarding their recruitment experience to be eligible for specifically this study – and its compensation.

At the start of the survey, the informed consent clearly communicated that completing the survey was voluntary. We assured participants of their anonymity and the protection of their personal data. Furthermore, the informed consent clearly described how the data would be processed.

**Table 3**  
Body art among job applicants and taste for collaboration: Main regression analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Dependent variable: taste for collaboration as employer		Dependent variable: taste for collaboration as colleague		Dependent variable: taste for collaboration as customer		Dependent variable: taste for collaboration scale	
Body art	−0.300*** (0.097)	−0.309 (0.210)	−0.245** (0.102)	−0.281 (0.206)	−0.326*** (0.104)	−0.532** (0.213)	−0.290*** (0.089)	−0.374** (0.188)
Body art x Tattoo		−0.091 (0.202)		0.031 (0.204)		−0.001 (0.205)		−0.020 (0.186)
Body art x Large version		0.084 (0.170)		0.151 (0.169)		0.080 (0.165)		0.105 (0.150)
Body art x Female		−0.005 (0.271)		−0.136 (0.255)		0.299 (0.264)		0.053 (0.237)
Obese	−0.331*** (0.107)	−0.328*** (0.109)	−0.257** (0.103)	−0.265*** (0.102)	−0.270** (0.107)	−0.266** (0.106)	−0.286*** (0.095)	−0.286*** (0.094)
Female	0.446*** (0.107)	0.455** (0.176)	0.237** (0.107)	0.298* (0.155)	0.300** (0.115)	0.147 (0.164)	0.328*** (0.100)	0.300** (0.149)
Study results: 1st quartile	1.522*** (0.149)	1.513*** (0.150)	1.496*** (0.151)	1.497*** (0.154)	1.215*** (0.156)	1.228*** (0.157)	1.411*** (0.137)	1.413*** (0.139)
Study results: 2nd quartile	1.171*** (0.149)	1.180*** (0.152)	1.157*** (0.150)	1.163*** (0.153)	0.994*** (0.150)	0.983*** (0.154)	1.107*** (0.136)	1.109*** (0.140)
Grade retention	−0.291*** (0.111)	−0.289*** (0.111)	−0.326*** (0.104)	−0.323*** (0.104)	−0.367*** (0.108)	−0.369*** (0.108)	−0.328*** (0.097)	−0.327*** (0.097)
Student job: related to studies	0.429*** (0.129)	0.412*** (0.133)	0.464*** (0.133)	0.460*** (0.137)	0.299** (0.148)	0.325** (0.149)	0.397*** (0.125)	0.399*** (0.127)
Student job: unrelated to studies	−0.054 (0.125)	−0.063 (0.134)	0.142 (0.128)	0.154 (0.135)	0.079 (0.128)	0.084 (0.137)	0.056 (0.110)	0.058 (0.120)
Hobbies: intellectual	0.108 (0.154)	0.109 (0.157)	−0.094 (0.145)	−0.078 (0.150)	−0.099 (0.150)	−0.131 (0.154)	−0.028 (0.136)	−0.033 (0.139)
Hobbies: sports	−0.184 (0.138)	−0.178 (0.143)	−0.064 (0.133)	−0.039 (0.134)	−0.080 (0.140)	−0.097 (0.144)	−0.109 (0.115)	−0.104 (0.118)
Hobbies: social	−0.031 (0.149)	−0.051 (0.159)	0.095 (0.135)	0.108 (0.148)	0.041 (0.145)	0.021 (0.153)	0.035 (0.125)	0.026 (0.133)
Job characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	4.986*** (0.989)	4.967*** (0.993)	5.820*** (0.914)	5.738*** (0.922)	4.978*** (0.993)	5.030*** (1.000)	5.261*** (0.910)	5.245*** (0.917)
Observations	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848

Note. The presented statistics are linear regression estimates with their standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for clustering of the observations at the participant level. \*\*\* (\*\*\*) (\*\*) indicates significance at 1% (5%) (10 %) significance level.

A total of 212 people participated in the experiment. About a third of our participants (35.8%) reported having body art themselves. Women comprised 45.8% of our sample, 82.1% of whom have a tertiary education degree. The average age of our participants was 41.8 years. Regarding experience, 49.1% of our participants had been in their position for five years or more, and 34.9% were involved in recruitment decisions at least monthly. To check whether our sample represents real-world American HR professionals, in line with Van Born et al. (2022), we compared these statistics with a sample of HR professionals in the American Community Survey (ACS). That is, we conducted binomial tests (for the binary variables) and one one-sample t-test (to compare the mean age between the two samples). This shows that our sample contains more males than the ACS sample (45.8% females versus 67.0%;  $p = 0.000$ ) and is slightly younger (41.8 years old versus 45.4 years old;  $p = 0.000$ ). Somewhat reassuring in that respect is that the effects found in our analyses do not appear heterogeneous to these participant traits.

We refer to Table A4 for summary statistics concerning all candidate, job and participant characteristics included in the analyses.

### 2.3. Analytical framework

We analysed the experimental data, on 848 assessed vignettes (as 212 participants assessed 4 candidates each) as follows. Our dependent variables are the various items and scales that capture hireability, taste for collaboration, perceived beneficial personality and perceived productivity drivers, as discussed in Section 2.1. We regressed these dependent variables on the presence or absence of body art in the candidate's photo as an independent variable and on the other candidate characteristics (the categorical variables in line with the vignette specifications in Table A2), job characteristics (participants' perceptions of required customer contact, creativity and reliability) and the participant characteristics discussed at the end of the previous section.

In our primary analyses, we operationalised our independent variable as a simple indicator of whether or not the photo reveals body art. In further models, we split this variable by type of body art and by size. Then, we added interactions with the other candidate characteristics, job characteristics and participant characteristics. Here, we used a linear regression model with clustered standard errors at the participant level. Alternative models, particularly ordered logistic models, led to the same conclusions.

Since they were experimentally manipulated, we can offer a causal interpretation of the effects of candidate characteristics, job characteristics and their interaction effects. This is not the case for participant characteristics, as they may correlate with other

**Table 4**  
Body art among job applicants and perceived personality: Main regression analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
	Dependent variable: perceived honesty		Dependent variable: perceived emotional stability		Dependent variable: perceived extraversion		Dependent variable: perceived agreeableness		Dependent variable: perceived conscientiousness		Dependent variable: perceived openness to new experiences		Dependent variable: perceived beneficial personality	
Body art	−0.227** (0.099)	−0.129 (0.214)	−0.251** (0.104)	−0.517** (0.204)	0.271** (0.128)	−0.149 (0.225)	−0.327*** (0.096)	−0.302 (0.189)	−0.249** (0.109)	−0.305 (0.227)	0.173* (0.104)	0.065 (0.205)	−0.102 (0.071)	−0.223 (0.156)
Body art x Tattoo		−0.234 (0.195)		−0.216 (0.185)		0.030 (0.212)		−0.115 (0.185)		−0.007 (0.203)		−0.186 (0.195)		−0.121 (0.151)
Body art x Large version		−0.038 (0.169)		0.161 (0.172)		0.303 (0.184)		0.042 (0.157)		0.075 (0.187)		0.244 (0.176)		0.131 (0.134)
Body art x Female		0.060 (0.252)		0.500** (0.231)		0.415 (0.266)		0.001 (0.239)		0.023 (0.270)		0.077 (0.243)		0.180 (0.194)
Obese	−0.075 (0.095)	−0.061 (0.095)	−0.096 (0.103)	−0.078 (0.104)	−0.312*** (0.113)	−0.311*** (0.114)	−0.094 (0.101)	−0.089 (0.100)	−0.203* (0.109)	−0.204* (0.111)	−0.306*** (0.098)	−0.300*** (0.097)	−0.181** (0.069)	−0.174** (0.070)
Female	0.200** (0.094)	0.195 (0.157)	0.083 (0.103)	−0.151 (0.155)	−0.025 (0.111)	−0.246 (0.175)	0.168* (0.100)	0.178 (0.157)	0.279*** (0.105)	0.266 (0.170)	−0.031 (0.102)	−0.058 (0.152)	0.112 (0.072)	0.031 (0.120)
Study results: 1st quartile	0.936*** (0.137)	0.909*** (0.138)	1.128*** (0.149)	1.124*** (0.149)	0.767*** (0.148)	0.792*** (0.149)	1.009*** (0.134)	0.996*** (0.137)	2.410*** (0.160)	2.412*** (0.163)	0.926*** (0.134)	0.911*** (0.132)	1.196*** (0.103)	1.191*** (0.104)
Study results: 2nd quartile	0.660*** (0.136)	0.675*** (0.140)	0.826*** (0.141)	0.826*** (0.145)	0.412*** (0.156)	0.398** (0.159)	0.764*** (0.132)	0.774*** (0.134)	1.645*** (0.150)	1.646*** (0.153)	0.509*** (0.134)	0.525*** (0.140)	0.803*** (0.106)	0.807*** (0.109)
Grade retention	−0.256*** (0.091)	−0.255*** (0.091)	−0.178* (0.103)	−0.179* (0.102)	−0.185 (0.114)	−0.185 (0.115)	−0.080 (0.103)	−0.079 (0.103)	−0.251** (0.107)	−0.250** (0.107)	−0.236** (0.104)	−0.232** (0.104)	−0.198*** (0.073)	−0.197*** (0.073)
Student job: related to studies	0.386*** (0.119)	0.346*** (0.124)	0.296** (0.138)	0.299** (0.137)	0.039 (0.154)	0.082 (0.162)	0.259** (0.123)	0.238* (0.129)	0.380*** (0.134)	0.381*** (0.136)	0.263** (0.130)	0.237* (0.138)	0.271*** (0.096)	0.264** (0.101)
Student job: unrelated to studies	0.156 (0.121)	0.120 (0.131)	0.162 (0.113)	0.141 (0.116)	−0.234 (0.143)	−0.213 (0.150)	0.149 (0.115)	0.134 (0.126)	0.048 (0.132)	0.051 (0.138)	0.152 (0.134)	0.137 (0.141)	0.072 (0.091)	0.062 (0.099)
Hobbies: intellectual	−0.014 (0.139)	−0.020 (0.147)	0.113 (0.148)	0.060 (0.150)	−0.175 (0.177)	−0.219 (0.176)	0.026 (0.133)	0.026 (0.138)	0.176 (0.156)	0.174 (0.160)	−0.309** (0.143)	−0.315** (0.146)	−0.031 (0.104)	−0.049 (0.107)
Hobbies: sports	−0.154 (0.125)	−0.165 (0.132)	0.066 (0.136)	0.038 (0.142)	0.220 (0.159)	0.214 (0.158)	−0.121 (0.129)	−0.119 (0.136)	−0.160 (0.146)	−0.155 (0.150)	−0.336*** (0.127)	−0.323** (0.131)	−0.081 (0.094)	−0.085 (0.098)
Hobbies: social	0.056 (0.128)	0.005 (0.140)	0.314** (0.140)	0.236 (0.148)	0.576*** (0.159)	0.551*** (0.167)	0.073 (0.129)	0.049 (0.135)	0.054 (0.157)	0.050 (0.167)	−0.070 (0.137)	−0.116 (0.148)	0.167 (0.101)	0.129 (0.111)
Job characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.989*** (1.094)	4.037*** (1.111)	4.485*** (0.993)	4.584*** (1.007)	6.238*** (1.078)	6.251*** (1.086)	5.074*** (0.981)	5.072*** (0.989)	3.181*** (1.023)	3.165*** (1.034)	5.681*** (1.122)	5.644*** (1.111)	4.775*** (0.917)	4.792*** (0.923)
Observations	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848

Note. The presented statistics are linear regression estimates with their standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for clustering of the observations at the participant level. \*\*\* (\*\*) (\*) indicates significance at 1% (5%) (10 %) significance level.

unobserved participant characteristics.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Body art and hireability

The study’s insights into the effect of body art on job applicants and their hireability fall into several categories. On the one hand, as seen in columns (1), (5) and (9) of Table 1, applicants with body art in the experiment do not have lower odds of being invited to an interview overall ( $p = 0.283$ ). Moreover, they do not have a lower probability of being hired ( $p = 0.227$ ) and do not score lower on the overall hireability scale ( $p = 0.242$ ) than candidates without body art after controlling for the other variables included in the regression models.

When we split these effects by type of body art (by including an indicator for tattoos) and by size of body art (by including an indicator for large body art) in columns (2), (5) and (8), we find no evidence of heterogeneous effects in this dimension. As an alternative way of identifying heterogeneity by type of body art, we replicated the analyses from Table 1 on subsamples with pairs of male or female applicants by participant where the treated applicant had either a piercing (first subsample) or a tattoo (second subsample). The results are perfectly consistent with the conclusions based on Table 1, albeit with higher standard errors and therefore lower levels of significance. So also on the basis of this robustness analysis, we find no clear heterogeneity by type of body art.

On the other hand, as seen in Table 2, when we include interaction effects between body art among applicants and all other candidate, job and participant characteristics, we find evidence for a robust, significant interaction between body art and applicants’ gender. More specifically, contrary to exploratory evidence in previous studies (see Section 1), we get a positive interaction with the female gender for each of the three outcomes related to hireability.

We find no robust evidence for other interactions. In particular, it is noteworthy that we find no interaction between wearing body art as a job candidate, on the one hand, and the degree of customer contact in the job applied for and whether or not the participant wears body art, on the other, although such interactions had been consistent with previous study work mentioned in Section 1.

Moreover, there is no significant interaction with the propensity for socially desirable responses. Thus, the finding across all candidates that body art does not affect hireability does not seem to be an underestimation due to socially desirable answers. Other

**Table 5**  
Body art among job applicants and perceived productivity drivers: Main regression analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Dependent variable: perceived autonomy		Dependent variable: perceived manageability		Dependent variable: perceived intelligence		Dependent variable: perceived productivity drivers scale	
Body art	-0.215*	-0.487**	-0.299***	-0.210	-0.181*	-0.358*	-0.232**	-0.352*
	(0.127)	(0.237)	(0.111)	(0.212)	(0.102)	(0.209)	(0.096)	(0.186)
Body art x Tattoo		0.028		-0.320		0.044		-0.082
		(0.219)		(0.195)		(0.202)		(0.180)
Body art x Large version		0.314*		-0.094		0.057		0.092
		(0.175)		(0.168)		(0.179)		(0.148)
Body art x Female		0.122		0.219		0.231		0.191
		(0.267)		(0.247)		(0.287)		(0.232)
Obese	-0.082	-0.087	-0.109	-0.086	-0.139	-0.138	-0.110	-0.104
	(0.115)	(0.117)	(0.102)	(0.103)	(0.109)	(0.112)	(0.091)	(0.093)
Female	0.153	0.080	0.325***	0.251	0.118	-0.004	0.199**	0.109
	(0.119)	(0.175)	(0.105)	(0.161)	(0.105)	(0.187)	(0.092)	(0.151)
Study results: 1st quartile	2.063***	2.078***	1.918***	1.886***	3.083***	3.098***	2.355***	2.354***
	(0.162)	(0.166)	(0.162)	(0.162)	(0.162)	(0.164)	(0.139)	(0.141)
Study results: 2nd quartile	1.512***	1.512***	1.542***	1.555***	2.191***	2.179***	1.748***	1.749***
	(0.152)	(0.153)	(0.143)	(0.147)	(0.139)	(0.142)	(0.125)	(0.129)
Grade retention	-0.256**	-0.254**	-0.373***	-0.374***	-0.213*	-0.215*	-0.281***	-0.281***
	(0.129)	(0.128)	(0.110)	(0.111)	(0.115)	(0.114)	(0.102)	(0.101)
Student job: related to studies	0.636***	0.655***	0.509***	0.466***	0.612***	0.641***	0.586***	0.587***
	(0.141)	(0.145)	(0.140)	(0.142)	(0.128)	(0.132)	(0.116)	(0.119)
Student job: unrelated to studies	0.039	0.059	0.011	-0.039	0.200	0.210	0.083	0.077
	(0.141)	(0.147)	(0.133)	(0.141)	(0.124)	(0.129)	(0.113)	(0.120)
Hobbies: intellectual	0.066	0.054	0.171	0.148	0.081	0.056	0.106	0.086
	(0.152)	(0.158)	(0.156)	(0.156)	(0.155)	(0.159)	(0.133)	(0.135)
Hobbies: sports	-0.044	-0.026	-0.117	-0.147	-0.186	-0.199	-0.116	-0.124
	(0.152)	(0.155)	(0.140)	(0.142)	(0.143)	(0.142)	(0.120)	(0.122)
Hobbies: social	0.162	0.156	0.131	0.052	0.272*	0.266	0.188	0.158
	(0.159)	(0.170)	(0.155)	(0.163)	(0.157)	(0.166)	(0.135)	(0.143)
Job characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.950***	3.884***	4.822***	4.935***	2.894**	2.932**	3.889***	3.917***
	(1.026)	(1.034)	(0.846)	(0.845)	(1.146)	(1.150)	(0.930)	(0.933)
Observations	848	848	848	848	848	848	848	848

Note. The presented statistics are linear regression estimates with their standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for clustering of the observations at the participant level. \*\*\* (\*\*) (\*) indicates significance at 1% (5%) (10 %) significance level.



tests, in the spirit of [Sterkens et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Tomasetti et al. \(2016\)](#), also indicate the same. First, we get the same results when we repeat the analyses with subsamples with a low propensity for socially desirable answers only. Second, the propensity for socially desirable responses does not correlate significantly with interview appropriateness ( $r = 0.036$ ;  $p = 0.297$ ), hiring appropriateness ( $r = 0.019$ ;  $p = 0.573$ ) and the hiring scale ( $r = 0.055$ ;  $p = 0.110$ ).

Given the strong interaction between a candidate's gender and whether or not they have visible body art, in the following (summary) analysis tables, we include (only) this interaction, in line with columns (3), (6) and (9) of [Table 1](#). When more extensive analyses provide evidence for additional interactions, we list them in the following subsections (with the full results available on request).

Finally, columns (4), (8) and (12) of [Table 1](#) divide the effect of body art in the baseline model into an effect for males ('male with body art') and an effect for females ('female with body art'). We find that the overall probability of being invited to a job interview decreases by 5.4 percentage points (coefficient  $-0.542$  on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10;  $p = 0.018$ ) when men with body art apply for a job (versus men without body art). Their hiring appropriateness score falls by 5.7 percentage points ( $p = 0.009$ ), and their score on the full hireability scale falls by 5.6 percentage points ( $p = 0.010$ ). This gender-interaction is remarkably given that aforementioned earlier research provided (suggestive) evidence for at least tattoos evoking greater stigmas when worn by women. On the other hand, it is in line with the overall higher impact of facial attractiveness among male labour market outcomes, as reported in the systematic literature review of [Sierminska and Singhal \(2023\)](#).

Strikingly, among the other candidate characteristics, in line with the experimental field evidence presented in Section 1, revealed obesity also significantly lowers hireability. For instance, as seen in columns (3) and (6), revealed obesity lowers both the probability of being invited to a job interview and the probability of eventually being hired by a significant 2.7 percentage points.

Furthermore, the effects of candidate characteristics align with the literature. We find significantly higher probabilities for better study results ([Baert & Verhaest, 2021](#); [Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017](#)), lower probabilities after repeating a grade ([Baert & Picchio, 2021](#); [DiStasio, 2014](#)) and higher probabilities when listing a student job in line with one's studies ([Van Belle et al., 2020](#)). Interestingly, the effect of a man revealing body art via his CV is of the same order as that of experiencing grade retention. That no effect is found for the included hobbies may be explained by the reference category, that is, artistic hobbies.

### 3.2. Body art and taste for collaboration

[Table 3](#) presents the results of the main regression models with taste for collaboration as the outcome. We find that both one's taste for collaboration with candidates with body art ( $\beta = -0.300$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) and the estimation of this taste among other employees ( $\beta = -0.245$ ;  $p = 0.018$ ) as well as that among customers ( $\beta = -0.326$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) are significantly more negative when job candidates insert a photo with visible body art. No significant interactions with gender or type of body art are found here.

This finding is somewhat at odds with the fact that in [Table 2](#), we found no significant interactions between the effect of revealed body art and the estimated required customer contact in the profession concerning hireability. However, it corroborates the evidence in Section 1 suggesting a high penalty for visible body art in environments with many interpersonal interactions.

Interestingly, the effect of revealing body art via the photograph on taste for collaboration is of the same order as that of revealing obesity, both regarding the participant's own estimated taste ( $\beta = -0.331$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) as well as the estimated taste among employees ( $\beta = -0.257$ ;  $p = 0.013$ ) and that among customers ( $\beta = -0.270$ ;  $p = 0.012$ ).

### 3.3. Body art and perceived personality

Concerning perceived personality, [Table 4](#) indicates that, abstracting from interactions with the type of body art and gender of the wearer, candidates with body art are generally rated as less honest ( $\beta = -0.227$ ;  $p = 0.023$ ), less emotionally stable ( $\beta = -0.251$ ;  $p = 0.016$ ), less agreeable ( $\beta = -0.327$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ) and less conscientious ( $\beta = -0.249$ ;  $p = 0.023$ ). Given the links mentioned in Section 1 between conscientiousness and productivity, the fact that visibly wearing body art decreases estimated conscientiousness by about 2.5 percentage points (i.e. 11.6 of the item's standard deviation of 2.140) appears to be an important finding. At the same time, those who reveal body art are also perceived to be more extroverted ( $\beta = -0.271$ ;  $p = 0.128$ ) and – in a weakly significant way – more open to new experiences ( $\beta = -0.173$ ;  $p = 0.099$ ).

The perception of lower emotional stability appears to be a stigma only among male body art wearers, which helps to explain why the hireability of male body art wearers, but not female body art wearers, is estimated to be lower than those without body art (see Section 3.1). This finding is remarkably consistent with the evidence of [Ruffle and Wilson \(2019\)](#) for men with only hidden tattoos being more short-sighted than non-tattooed males, whereas the same does not hold for women with only hidden tattoos.

As a secondary finding, obese candidates are perceived as less extroverted ( $\beta = -0.312$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ), less open to new experiences ( $\beta = -0.306$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ) and – in a weakly significant way – as less conscientious ( $\beta = -0.203$ ;  $p = 0.065$ ). However, they are not seen differently from non-obese candidates regarding perceived honesty, emotional stability or agreeableness.

### 3.4. Body art and productivity drivers

Regarding further productivity drivers, [Table 5](#) indicates that participants estimate job candidates with visible body art to be less manageable ( $\beta = -0.299$ ;  $p = 0.008$ ). This appears to align with a lower estimated taste for collaboration by employers and peers, as observed in Section 2.2. Furthermore, weakly significant evidence emerges of a lower appraisal of job candidates with body art regarding autonomy ( $\beta = -0.215$ ;  $p = 0.092$ ) and intelligence ( $\beta = -0.181$ ;  $p = 0.076$ ). Taken together, the score on the perceived productivity drivers scale is 2.3 percentage points lower for these candidates than for those without body art ( $\beta = -0.232$ ;  $p = 0.017$ ).

We find further that the effect of body art in this regard is homogeneous by gender and type of body art.

Overall, revealed obesity does not affect these perceived productivity drivers. However, the interaction between body art and obesity is close to weak significance for many other outcome variables, and it is close to significance at the 5% level ( $p = 0.052$ ) with regard to intelligence. Thus, these stigmas tend to reinforce each other regarding this outcome.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this study, we explored the stigmas surrounding job candidates with tattoos and piercings in the context of recruitment. Scientifically, we distinguished ourselves from previous studies both in terms of internal validity, through the experimental randomisation of tattoos and piercings across fictitious job candidates, and in terms of external validity, through the broader scope of our study, measuring the effect of body art on hireability and a wide range of possible stigmas, in various occupations, and studying heterogeneous effects in a structured way. Moreover, randomising the fictitious candidates' obesity allowed us to compare the relative impact of different dimensions of physical appearance and to take steps forward in the study of hiring stigmas around obesity.

Our findings suggest that job candidates with body art are perceived as less pleasant to collaborate with, both when it comes to recruiters' ratings in our experiment of their own taste for collaboration and the tastes of other employees and clients to collaborate. Regarding personality, candidates with body art are seen as less honest, less emotionally stable, less agreeable and less conscientious overall. The stigma of lower emotional stability applies only to men with body art. On the other hand, job candidates with body art are also seen as more extroverted and open to new experiences. In terms of direct productivity drivers, candidates with body art are seen as less manageable. All of this translates into lower hireability for men with body art but not for women. Candidates who reveal obesity when applying to a job score worse overall in terms of hireability and rated personality, similar in terms of rated taste for collaboration and better in terms of rated direct productivity drivers compared to candidates with body art.

This study exhibits the classical limitations of a scenario experiment. First, unlike field experiments, data collection in this kind of experiment does not occur under real-life circumstances, and participants know they are participating in an experiment. This presents an advantage from an ethical standpoint, since there is no deception other than the one known in lab experiments with random and blind assignment of subjects to a treated and a control group. Moreover, the chances of real job candidates in the field are not impacted as our fictitious candidates do not compete with them. On the other hand, participants may respond in a socially desirable manner when not confronted with the urgency of real-life decision-making (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; Charness et al., 2013; Van Belle et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the widespread use of this type of experiment in the social and behavioural sciences is justified by the strong correlation between self-reported measures of perceptions and actual behaviour (Hainmueller et al., 2015; Oude Mulders et al., 2014; Sterkens et al., 2023; Tomasetti et al., 2016; Van Belle et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in our experiment, each participant was only exposed to a limited number of vignettes, varying in multiple factors, making it highly improbable for participants to discern the socially desirable response (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; Liechi et al., 2017; Sterkens et al., in press; Van Belle et al., 2018). Moreover, an advantage of our sampling via Prolific introduced an 'intermediary' further guaranteeing anonymity and increasing the distance with the researcher, so the temptation for socially desirable answers should be even lower. From an empirical point of view, we reported checks to account for participants' inclination to provide such responses. Finally, it is important to stress that we did find negative perceptions related to wearing body art, which is clearly not socially desirable ('moralistic') anyway. Hence, we suspect that any bias can only be limited and be 'quantitative' rather than 'qualitative' in nature. That is, participants 'dared' to rate profiles negatively so that there can be only bias in gradation (where at worst highly negative was distorted to moderately negative).

Nevertheless, we advocate for experimental field research that, despite providing less insight into the 'why' question addressed in this study, can more precisely uncover the costs of wearing body art in terms of employment prospects.

A second limitation related to the choices to be made within the context of an experiment, is that no direct signals of productivity, like the candidate's performance evaluation score in the recent scenario experiment focussed on promotion outcomes by Sterkens et al. (2023), were provided to the participants. It is thus important to see the findings in what follows as effects and signals of body art in job candidates insofar as such information is unavailable, especially since Deryugina and Shurchkov (2015), in line with the aforementioned theory of statistical discrimination, provided evidence for a decrease in acting on beauty of candidates when it is available.

Third, we had to opt for forms of body art that are visible in portrait photos that are usually added to the CV. It goes without saying that neck tattoos, for example, score a lot higher in terms of conspicuousness than other forms of body art. Although our empirical findings indicate that, within the spectrum of body art around the face adopted by us, there are no significant differences in effect between the larger and smaller body art, it is not obvious to simply extend our findings to body art other than the one used. Future research would ideally cover a broader spectrum and thus provide more external validity.

Finally, while we were able to link the robust and substantial finding on higher stigma towards male (versus female) body art wearers to similar trends in research on the beauty premium in the labour market and on genuine short-sightedness among male and female body art wearers, based on previous literature, we cannot provide direct theoretical or empirical explanations for this heterogeneity by gender. We are therefore calling for follow-up research, possibly interview-based, that could do so, in addition to replication research that could test whether these gender differences are equally pronounced within other contexts.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Appendix: Additional tables

**Table A1**

Used jobs and their (perceived) characteristics.

Job	Description in O*NET	Required education level O*NET	Level of customer contact		Level of creativity required		Level of required reliability	
			O*NET	Sample of participants	O*NET	Sample of participants	O*NET	Sample of participants
Mine shuttle car operators	Operates a diesel or electric-powered shuttle car in an underground mine to transport materials from working face to mine cars or conveyors. The most important tasks of the mine shuttle car operator are to drive, control and guide mine shuttle cars and repair or replace parts if needed.	Low	Low	1.556	Low	2.593	Low	9.148
Travel agents	Plans and sells transportation and accommodations for travel agency customers. The agent may also assist in resolving clients' travel problems. The most important tasks of the travel agent are to determine destination, modes of transportation, travel dates, costs and accommodations required.	Low	High	9.333	Low	6.519	Low	9.222
Poets, lyricists and creative writers	Creates original written works, such as scripts, essays, prose, poetry or song lyrics, for publication or performance. The most important tasks of the creative writer are to write fiction or non-fiction, revise written material and prepare works in an appropriate format for publication.	Low	Low	2.630	High	9.000	Low	8.444
Locomotive firers	Monitors locomotive instruments and watches for dragging equipment, obstacles on rights-of-way, and train signals during run. The most important tasks of the locomotive engineer are to observe and monitor train signals and verify their meanings for engineers and to operate the locomotive in emergency situations.	Low	Low	1.500	Low	2.423	High	9.692
Geological sample test technicians	Tests or analyses geological samples, crude oil or minerals to detect the presence of petroleum, gas or mineral deposits indicating potential for exploration or production or to determine physical or chemical properties to ensure that products meet quality standards. The most important tasks of the quality control technician are to test and analyse samples and to collect or prepare samples for analysis.	High	Low	1.880	Low	3.600	Low	9.520
Archivists	Appraises, edits and directs safekeeping of permanent records and historically valuable documents. The most important tasks of the archivist are to participate in research activities based on archival materials, organise archival records and develop classification systems.	High	High	3.259	Low	5.556	Low	9.296
Software developers	Analyses user needs and develops software solutions. The most important	High	Low	3.308	High	7.731	Low	9.038

(continued on next page)

**Table A1** (continued)

Job	Description in O*NET	Required education level	Level of customer contact		Level of creativity required		Level of required reliability	
		O*NET	O*NET	Sample of participants	O*NET	Sample of participants	O*NET	Sample of participants
Cytogenetic technologists	tasks of the software developer are to develop, create and modify general computer applications software or specialised utility programs. Analyses chromosomes found in biological specimens such as amniotic fluids, bone marrow and blood to aid in the study, diagnosis or treatment of genetic diseases. The most important tasks of the clinical laboratory specialist in cytogenetics are to analyse chromosomes, identify structural abnormalities and create images of the chromosomes using computer imaging systems.	High	Low	1.444	Low	4.852	High	9.481

Note. Job descriptions are based on those in O\*NET, as described in Section 2.1. An occupation scores low (high) on a given dimension according to O\*NET when it belongs to the lowest (highest) quartile of all O\*NET occupations. The scores for the sample of participants in our experiment were given on a scale from 0 to 10, as described in Section 2.1.

**Table A2**  
Vignette factors and levels.

Vignette factors	Vignette levels
Body art	{None, Small piercing, Large piercing, Small tattoo, Large tattoo}
Obese	{No, Yes}
Gender	{Male, Female}
Student job	{None, Unrelated to studies, Related to studies}
Grade retention	{No, Yes}
School results	{Third or fourth quartile, Second quartile, First Quartile}
Hobby	{Artistic, Intellectual, Sports, Social}

**Table A3**  
Statements used for outcome variables.

Cluster	Cronbach's alpha of corresponding scale	Item	Statement
Hireability	0.960	Interview appropriateness	I will invite the candidate for a job interview.
		Hiring appropriateness	There is a high probability that this candidate will be effectively recruited.
Taste for collaboration	0.914	Taste for collaboration as an employer	I think I would enjoy collaborating with this person.
		Taste for collaboration as a colleague	I think other employees would enjoy collaborating with this person.
		Taste for collaboration as a customer	I think customers would enjoy collaborating with this person.
Perceived beneficial personality	0.886	Perceived honesty	I think this person is honest (i.e. telling the truth, to be trusted).
		Perceived emotional stability	I think this person is emotionally stable (i.e. seldom worried or nervous).
		Perceived extraversion	I think this person is extroverted (i.e. energetic, enjoys being with other people).
		Perceived agreeableness	I think this person is agreeable (i.e. friendly, pleasant).
		Perceived conscientiousness	I think this person is conscientious (i.e. hard-working, careful).
Perceived productivity drivers	0.888	Perceived openness to new experiences	I think this person is open to new experiences.
		Perceived autonomy	I think this person is autonomous enough to perform well in this job.
		Perceived manageability	I think this person is manageable enough to perform well in this job.
		Perceived intelligence	I think this person is intelligent enough to perform well in this job.

**Table A4**  
Summary statistics.

	Fraction or mean	Standard deviation
<b>A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
Body art	0.500	
Tattoo	0.212	
Large body art	0.310	
Obese	0.496	
Female	0.500	
Study results: 1st quartile	0.324	
Study results: 2nd quartile	0.343	
Grade retention	0.495	
Student job: related to studies	0.347	
Student job: unrelated to studies	0.320	
Hobbies: intellectual	0.244	
Hobbies: sports	0.241	
Hobbies: social	0.267	
<b>B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
Perceived level of customer contact	3.132	3.290
Perceived level of required creativity	5.302	3.278
Perceived level of required reliability	9.226	1.152
<b>C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
Body art	0.358	
Female	0.458	
Age	41.774	11.519
Tertiary education	0.821	
≥ monthly hiring decision	0.349	
≥ 5 years of experience in job	0.491	
Social desirability bias	6.410	1.710

Note. No standard deviation is displayed for binary variables.

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