

**Stigma hurts: exploring employer and employee perceptions of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria**

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

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**Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information**

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

Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis			
Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative Quotations	Implications
Manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings	Religious values	Would I have tattoos on my skin? No, it is against the principles of decency and my religious beliefs (Shade).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious sentiments and prejudice</li> </ul>
	Sociocultural values	<p>It is not acceptable here ...it depicts a negative appearance (Usman).</p> <p>People frown upon it because it portrays immorality and irresponsibility (Ayo)</p> <p>This is not Europe or the US ...this is Nigeria and our culture does not tolerate it ...wearing visible tattoos is a big stigma (Tobi).</p> <p>For me, people with tattoos and body piercings are hooligans (Kunle).</p> <p>I think it's not proper ...it shows disregard for culture and lack of manners (Monday).</p> <p>I chose to have it, and I do not regret my decision even if the society is unaccepting of it (Silvester).</p> <p>The dove head on my tattoo only means peace and nothing that should be regarded as evil (Mariam).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prejudice based on appearance and lookism</li> <li>Prejudice based on morality</li> <li>Body art as an imported practice</li> <li>Criminalising body art</li> <li>Body art and its derogation</li> <li>Body art as a personal choice</li> <li>Body art as self-expression</li> </ul>
	Corporate values	<p>Our customers will perceive us as being unprofessional (Usman).</p> <p>It is not just my personal belief but the society beliefs about wearing tattoos or body piercings, which is negative (Amina).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prejudice based on first impressions</li> <li>Constrained societal prejudice</li> </ul>
Discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market	Discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market	<p>We can't recruit someone with visible body arts except if they are concealed (Moyo).</p> <p>I may have to resign soon because the discrimination is unbearable here (Akpan).</p> <p>My manager is really upset with my tattoo, and it has affected my relationship with her and some of my colleagues (Ruth).</p> <p>It has caused me so much trouble...I can't tell you if I will be getting promoted next year because I'm awaiting disciplinary action (Silvester).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment and selection prejudice</li> <li>Employee turnover issues</li> <li>Tainted employment relationships</li> <li>Restraint on career progression</li> </ul>

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

### Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Introduction

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

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

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

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3 discrimination. In the context of Nigeria, however, we found the phenomenon to be particularly  
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5 difficult and challenging. This makes sense when considering Nigeria's traditional values with  
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7 respect to its people's religious, cultural and moral beliefs, which ascribe negative connotations  
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9 to people with tattoos or body piercings and view them as being irresponsible, uncultured, ill-  
10  
11 mannered, antisocial, and immoral (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). Similarly, Van Hoover et al. (2017)  
12  
13 argued that body piercing has now developed from a behaviour once considered extreme to an  
14  
15 accepted choice among the general population. Can we argue this same point for non-Western  
16  
17 countries such as Nigeria? The central purpose of this article is to enhance our understanding  
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19 of manager and employee perceptions of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria.  
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24 In particular, this study investigates (1) the perceptions of the participants concerning tattoos  
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26 and body piercings; (2) how tattoos and body piercings influence recruitment and selection  
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28 decisions, and (3) whether having tattoos and/or body piercings could lead to the summary  
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30 dismissal of an employee. To effectively address these questions, twenty managers and twenty-  
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32 three employees were interviewed in the city of Lagos, Nigeria. This article, and the empirical  
33  
34 study upon which it is based makes two important contributions to contemporary scholarship  
35  
36 and practice. First, it demonstrates the importance of physical appearance in job retention and  
37  
38 employee selection in the global South. Second, it contributes to the extant literature on stigma  
39  
40 and the social psychology of workplace prejudice by revealing employer and employee  
41  
42 attitudes and perceptions of body art in the context of employment relations in Africa, as well  
43  
44 as the underlying reasons for these attitudes and perceptions. It is hoped that this study will  
45  
46 stimulate further research into visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings in Nigeria and  
47  
48 other African countries. Please note that the phrase 'unconventional body piercings' has been  
49  
50 used in this study to mean a male piercing his earlobes or nose or a female having any part(s)  
51  
52 of her body pierced other than the two earlobes. The article is structured as follows. We first  
53  
54 briefly discuss the concept of tattoos and body piercings and present the study's theoretical  
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3 background. After discussing the research method, we present the data, followed by a  
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5 discussion of the study's findings and its theoretical and practical implications.  
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### 8 **Tattoos and Body Piercings in Context**

9  
10 The word 'tattau', which means 'to strike' or 'the result of tapping', metamorphosed into what  
11  
12 is now known as 'tattoo'. This word 'tattau' was used by a British captain, James Cook, in his  
13  
14 eighteenth-century expedition to Tahiti and the South Pacific Islands (Braverman, 2006;  
15  
16 Lineberry, 2007). It is a form of body modification through inserting indelible ink into the  
17  
18 dermis to change the skin pigment (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). A tattoo is a form of body art that  
19  
20 is marked on the skin by making small holes with a needle and filling them with coloured ink,  
21  
22 resulting in relatively permanent forms of body modification (Durkin, 2012). Body piercing,  
23  
24 on the other hand, is the cosmetic piercing of any part of the body for the purpose of insertion  
25  
26 of objects such as rings, studs, or pins (Holbrook et al., 2012). Traditionally, body piercings  
27  
28 are mainly found in the soft part of the earlobes, predominantly in women (Elzweig and  
29  
30 Peeples, 2011). The preference for, and popularity of, other body parts for piercings varies  
31  
32 according to gender, with the navel being the most common site for women and the face being  
33  
34 most common for men (Carmen et al., 2012). Van Hoover et al. (2017) argues that virtually no  
35  
36 part of the human body is excluded from ornamental piercing.  
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43 Body modification takes different shapes and forms, ranging from the simplest wearing make-  
44  
45 up, hair styling, and body toning to complex and extreme forms of tattooing and body piercing  
46  
47 (Dillingh et al., 2020). Like tattooing, the act of body piercing has also become increasingly  
48  
49 acceptable and indeed prevalent among adolescents and young adults in Western society  
50  
51 (Timming et al., 2017). For example, The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) (2019) found  
52  
53 that about 12% of European citizens were tattooed, while three in ten Americans (30%) have  
54  
55 at least one tattoo, an increase from 21% in 2012 (Ipsos, 2019). Likewise, in 2017, over 35%  
56  
57 of Americans were reported to have at least one body piercing (Statista, 2020). Contemporary  
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3 research on body modification suggests that tattoos and body piercings have become the  
4 trademark of Generation X and Millennial cohorts (Kluger, 2015; Farley et al., 2019). Although  
5 the scarcity of statistics on tattoos and body piercings in modern Nigeria make it difficult to  
6 ascertain how prevalent they are, a few studies have emphasised that they are a growing trend  
7 among adolescents and young adults (Ayanlowo et al., 2017; Mensah et al., 2018; Umoh,  
8 2015).

9  
10  
11 Generally, body art such as tattooing and body piercings are used for different purposes,  
12 ranging from symbolising ownership to denoting nobility (Durkin, 2012). Nowadays, tattoos  
13 are often associated with uniqueness (Dillingh et al., 2020) and are often personalised to reflect  
14 a person's narrative and self-expression as well as the individual's aesthetic and cultural values  
15 (Farley et al., 2019). Creativity and innovation have motivated some to use tattoos as permanent  
16 medical alerts instead of using bracelets displaying the wearer's medical condition, such as  
17 diabetes or epilepsy (Clinical Rounds, 2009). In addition, although previous studies have  
18 argued that women are more likely to have tattoos and body piercings than men, this gap is fast  
19 becoming insignificant (French et al., 2016). Likewise, tattoos and body piercings are more  
20 prevalent among young adults, with the younger generation subscribing to either having more  
21 tattoos or body piercings or both (Kluger, 2015).

22  
23  
24 People with visible tattoos or body piercings may be viewed in different ways. From a social  
25 perspective, people with tattoos are perceived as a disadvantaged and loosely social group  
26 (French et al., 2019). They experience similar stigma to that of people who have scars, port-  
27 wine stains, or birthmarks (French et al., 2016; Madera and Hebl, 2012). This finding reinforces  
28 the historical view that associates tattooed people with counter-cultural delinquents of the  
29 lower classes (Burgess and Clark, 2010). To those who do not have tattoos, the sight of tattooed  
30 individuals usually creates social stigmatisation (Baumann et al., 2016). However, it is  
31 important to note that in some industries (such as marketing and technology), tattoos and body  
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3 piercings may not cause stigmatisation (Timming, 2015). Having visible tattoos and body  
4  
5 piercings could mean conformity to, or the defying of cultural norms (French et al., 2019). This  
6  
7 is perhaps the reason why attitudes toward those who have them are closely related to the  
8  
9 residual stigma associated with historical and cultural beliefs (Farley et al., 2019). For instance,  
10  
11 tattoos and body piercings are associated with sex traffic, women, antisocial cults,  
12  
13 physiological illness, and criminal delinquency (French et al., 2016). It is little wonder that  
14  
15 physical appearance significantly impacts people's judgements and perceptions (Dillingh et al.,  
16  
17 2020). This may be the reason why some human resource (HR) managers and recruiters prefer  
18  
19 to employ people without visible tattoos (Brallier et al., 2011; Timming et al., 2017). In other  
20  
21 words, the location and visibility of tattoos on the body play a significant role in explaining  
22  
23 employer prejudice against tattoos and/or body piercings (Timming, 2015). Similarly,  
24  
25 researchers have found that some customers do not like being served or attended to by people  
26  
27 with tattoos. For example, Arndt and Glassman (2012) suggest that some consumers might be  
28  
29 antagonistic towards women with masculine tattoos. Moreover, Doleac and Stein (2013)  
30  
31 suggest that some consumers are reluctant to buy goods from a tattooed vendor. Similarly,  
32  
33 Arndt et al. (2016) and Larsen et al. (2014) suggest that customers may have a negative attitude  
34  
35 towards sellers with body art. It is therefore safe to say that body art is likely to affect  
36  
37 consumers' decision making and attitudes (Baumann et al., 2016), thereby raising concerns for  
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39 managers about their organisation's image (Timming, 2017).  
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47 Furthermore, researchers have found that having tattoos and body piercings impacts people's  
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49 health and general wellbeing. For example, Stirn et al. (2006) argued that tattoos and body  
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51 piercings were related to lower perceived mental health and lower social integration. In another  
52  
53 recent study, Farley et al. (2019) also found that as result of having tattoos, individuals may  
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55 suffer from health problems such as persistent discomfort, hypersensitivity, chronic infections  
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57 and many other health-related issues. In addition, some studies have reported a link between  
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3 having tattoos and/or body piercings and risk-taking behaviour, such as the use of psychotropic  
4 substances, unhealthy diet habits and self-harm (Breuner et al., 2017). Others have associated  
5 externalised risk behaviours with having tattoos and/or body piercings (Heywood et al., 2012).  
6  
7 Many of these health and wellbeing-related issues presumably have implications for HRM in  
8 managers' decision-making processes concerning employees with visible tattoos and body  
9 piercings (Broussard and Harton, 2018; French et al., 2016; French et al., 2019).

10  
11 This study focuses on employees with visible tattoos and body piercings in a business  
12 environment, where physical contact exists between employers, employees and clients.  
13  
14 Elzweig and Peebles (2011) offered a legal discussion of justifiable discrimination against  
15 tattooed job applicants; however, unlike the present study, their research is non-empirical and  
16 was undertaken in the US. There have been a number of previous studies that focused on the  
17 negative effects of tattoos on employment opportunities (Bekhor et al., 1995; Timming, 2015;  
18 Timming et al., 2015). However, Timming (2017) claimed that having visible body art  
19 promotes relationship building and has a positive effect on employment opportunities. This  
20 study seeks to understand whether this assertion also applies in the global South, specifically  
21 Nigeria.

### 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 **Social Stigma and Prejudice**

42 Every society is an embodiment of social and cultural norms that often dictate what is perceived  
43 as acceptable in human social interaction and what is not (French et al., 2016). The construction  
44 of values sometimes leads to stereotypical conclusions regarding the characteristics of a  
45 person's personality vis-à-vis how they are expected to behave and the actual behaviour they  
46 exhibit, thus translating into stigma (Goffman, 1963; Timming et al., 2017). Stigma is a social  
47 construct that devalues an individual's social identity as a result of their attributes or  
48 characteristics that are deemed undesirable within a particular social group (Larsen et al.,  
49 2014). Stigmatised people have an ascribed identity that makes them different to others,  
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3 causing them to be seen and treated differently. Poister and Thomas (2011) argue that stigma  
4 can be associated with a person's appearance (e.g. tattoos or body piercings), behaviour (e.g.  
5 antisocial), or group membership. They also found that the cause of stigma may not always be  
6 visible and controllable; however, it leads to stereotypical conclusions and negative evaluations  
7 (accurate or otherwise) of the stigmatised person. Prejudice, on the other hand, refers to an  
8 affective feeling towards an individual that is predicated on their membership in a particular  
9 stigmatised group (Miller et al., 2009). Often used synonymously with discrimination,  
10 prejudice is formed by a preconceived judgement or opinion about a person due to their group  
11 membership, which may be considered undesirable due to the visible outcomes of their  
12 attitudes (Brown, 2010).  
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27 Both stigma and prejudice are linked to the stereotypical evaluations or overgeneralised social  
28 and cultural beliefs that constitute grounds for excluding or avoiding the stigmatised (Larsen  
29 et al., 2014). Stereotyping is a psychological process that simplifies information about people  
30 to form a behavioural category that enables judgements to be made as a result of their perceived  
31 departure from normalcy in behaviour or attitude (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010). As such,  
32 the perceptions about individuals with tattoos or body piercings lead to stereotypical  
33 conclusions regarding their attitudes, especially in a society in which physical appearance is  
34 viewed as a reflection of one's morality and character (Larsen et al., 2014). Visible tattoos and  
35 body piercings are regarded as a stigma that society attaches to cultural norms – recognising  
36 the bearers' negative attitudes while ignoring their positive characteristics (Timming, 2017).  
37 Therefore, when stigmatised people confirm the flawed negative preconceptions by behaving  
38 in the expected manner, it further reinforces these perceptions and may lead to prejudice against  
39 the stigmatised (Grimmelikhuijsen and Porumbescu, 2017). These perceptions often depend on  
40 the location of the tattoo and the message that it conveys to others (Baumann et al., 2016).  
41 Furthermore, stigma is related to social cognition, which relates to the impact of mental  
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3 representations on how information about stereotyped people is stored and processed. For  
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5 instance, the stigmatised person may be classified in a cognitive schema, leading to tattooed or  
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7 body-pierced job applicants being associated with social deviancy (Larsen et al., 2014). In  
8  
9 addition, cultural and social norms may cause managers and members of society to discriminate  
10  
11 against those with tattoos and body piercings, thereby promoting ‘lookism’ that is predicated  
12  
13 on the society’s sociocultural values (Warhurst et al., 2012).  
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16  
17 In Africa, specifically Nigeria, the social stigma and prejudice associated with people with  
18  
19 tattoos and body piercings are exacerbated by religious, cultural, moral and corporate values  
20  
21 and beliefs (Mensah et al., 2018). This accounts for the surface-level characteristics associated  
22  
23 with people with tattoos and body piercings and promotes the creation of ‘in-groups’ (us) and  
24  
25 ‘out-groups’ (them), which further triggers biased behaviours and attitudes (Casper et al.,  
26  
27 2013). The stigma associated with people with tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria comes  
28  
29 from assumptions made about their identities (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). For instance, adherents  
30  
31 of the religious belief systems in Nigeria – predominantly Islam and Christianity – point to the  
32  
33 Bible and Quran as forbidding these practices (Umoh, 2015). Furthermore, cultural and moral  
34  
35 beliefs/values within Nigerian society regard tattoos and body piercings as taboo due to the  
36  
37 assumption that such practices are associated with people who participate in antisocial  
38  
39 activities (Ayanlowo et al., 2017). Such stigma generates negative perceptions and puts the  
40  
41 stigmatised person at risk of experiencing threats to their social identity (Larsen et al., 2014;  
42  
43 Timming, 2015). For instance, in Nigeria, people with tattoos and body piercings are liable to  
44  
45 be arrested by the security agencies on suspicion of criminal activity and other forms of  
46  
47 antisocial behaviour (Ayomide, 2017b). This form of stigma has negative consequences for  
48  
49 employment opportunities (Mensah et al., 2018). This study therefore uses social stigma and  
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51 prejudice as a theoretical lens to examine the attitudes and perceptions of managers/employees  
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3 towards tattoos and body piercings, using the contemporary workplace in Nigeria as a research  
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5 context. The underlying reasons for these attitudes and perceptions are also explored.  
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## 8 **Research Methods**

### 9 ***Research Approach***

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11 The epistemological basis for this study is social constructionism, which assumes that  
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13 knowledge is socially constructed. In this regard the study seeks to understand social reality  
14  
15 and how knowledge is socially constructed (Saunders et al., 2016). We also applied Creswell  
16  
17 and Creswell's (2018) interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which helps us to understand the  
18  
19 participants' subjective meanings and experiences of visible tattoos and body piercings. To  
20  
21 collect the data, we used a qualitative approach, allowing for an in-depth investigation of  
22  
23 manager and employee perceptions of visible tattoos and body piercings. Qualitative research  
24  
25 is valuable for investigating real-life situations in detail and providing an in-depth  
26  
27 understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, something that may be difficult to  
28  
29 achieve using quantitative methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This approach enables the  
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31 participants (people with and without visible tattoos or body piercings as well as the hiring  
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33 managers who encounter them) to explain their lived experiences and perceptions.  
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### 41 ***The Sample***

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43 Purposive and snowball sampling was used to select the study's participants. The purposive  
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45 sampling technique was used to access a particular subset of people (employees with and  
46  
47 without tattoos and/or body piercings and hiring managers who encounter such employees)  
48  
49 who would enable the researchers to understand the phenomenon and answer the research  
50  
51 questions (Patton, 2002). The snowball sampling technique, on the other hand, was used to  
52  
53 recruit subsequent participants from the initial participants who were recruited, given the  
54  
55 difficulty in reaching this specific population (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The research  
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57 sample consisted of 43 participants (20 managers and 23 employees) who work in banks and  
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3 insurance companies. In total, there were 24 male and 19 female participants. Twelve  
4  
5 participants had tattoos, while 8 participants had unconventional body piercings (see Table 1).  
6  
7 The participants were aged between 23 and 51 years old. They also varied in terms of their  
8  
9 gender, age, job title, and number of tattoos and body piercings. The number of body piercings  
10  
11 recorded does not include the normal piercings of the two earlobes for females. All but one of  
12  
13 the tattooed participants are in their twenties, which confirms Ayanlowo et al.'s (2017) finding  
14  
15 that the trend of tattooing in Nigeria is growing among the youth. This group was chosen  
16  
17 because its members work in corporate organisations and represent a distinct and highly  
18  
19 respected section of the workforce. Nevertheless, the researchers understand that perceptions  
20  
21 of people with tattoos and body piercings may vary in different work environments.  
22  
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### 26 27 **Data Collection**

28 This study was conducted in Lagos, Nigeria. The importance of Nigeria as a research context  
29  
30 for this study lies in the facts that Nigeria's economy is the largest in Africa (World Economic  
31  
32 Forum, 2019) and that one in every seven black people on the planet is a Nigerian (Urban,  
33  
34 2014), highlighting Nigeria's importance as a financial hub in Africa and to the black race in  
35  
36 general. The final sample included 20 managers and 23 employees. We considered employees  
37  
38 without tattoos and/or body piercings, asking them to share their perceptions and lived  
39  
40 experiences with colleagues who do have tattoos and/or body piercings. After having been  
41  
42 contacted by email and given a thorough explanation of the purpose of the study and the  
43  
44 procedures that would be involved, the participants gave their formal, informed consent to  
45  
46 participate in the research.  
47  
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50

### 51 52 **Insert Table 1 about here**

53  
54 Forty-three personal, semi-structured interviews were conducted in private and convenient  
55  
56 settings chosen by the participants. The interviews with the managers took place in their offices  
57  
58 at their preferred times, while the employees elected for venues out of the workplace. The semi-  
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1  
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3 structured interviews were guided by a list of topics relating to the broader research problem.  
4  
5 The topic list was based on a review of the literature and focused on tattoos and body piercings:  
6  
7 whether tattoos and body piercings influence recruitment and selection decisions; whether  
8  
9 managers allow visible tattoos and/or body piercings at work; whether having them is grounds  
10  
11 for dismissal, and the perceptions of managers and employees about the phenomenon. The list  
12  
13 was not exhaustive, and certain perspectives and ideas that were raised by the participants that  
14  
15 had not previously been anticipated were investigated and used to refine the topic list for the  
16  
17 remaining interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted for around 90  
18  
19 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of the  
20  
21 data collection. In the cases of five participants (two managers and three employees) who did  
22  
23 not wish to be recorded, extensive handwritten notes were taken. To guarantee the  
24  
25 confidentiality of all participants and maintain standard research ethics, interviewees were  
26  
27 assigned pseudonyms (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).  
28  
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### 34 **Data Analysis and Procedure**

35 The interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after they had taken place, and the  
36  
37 transcriptions were analysed interpretatively. The researchers employed a data-driven thematic  
38  
39 analytical method for analysing the interview data based on the recommendations of Braun and  
40  
41 Clarke (2006), Boeije (2005), and Corbin and Strauss (2008). This resulted in the emergence  
42  
43 of broad patterns of meanings that were repeatedly highlighted by the participants. Theory  
44  
45 guided our analysis throughout. A key strategy was inductive analysis, followed by ‘mapping’  
46  
47 onto stigma and prejudice’s conceptualisation of the interplay between manager and employee  
48  
49 perceptions (of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings) discrimination and prejudice  
50  
51 in the Nigerian labour market. Familiarisation – by reading and re-reading the transcripts –  
52  
53 preceded the initial coding, which summarised the ‘surface meanings’ of the data, organised  
54  
55 initially according to the main interview topics listed above. For reliability and in order to  
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3 corroborate the study findings, the researchers independently coded the data. Thus, informed  
4 by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, themes were revisited and refined in an iterative  
5 manner as the analysis progressed in order to check for clarity and coherence as organising  
6 concepts. The coding and themes are summarised in Table 2 below.  
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12  
13 Our analysis led to the identification of two key themes: manager and employee perceptions of  
14 visible tattoos and body piercings, and discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour  
15 market. It also led to three sub-themes: religious values, sociocultural values and corporate  
16 values. The analysis revealed corporate rejection of visible tattoos and unconventional body  
17 piercings. In the lens of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, this enabled us to theorise that  
18 contextual conditions inform manager and employee perceptions of body art, in contrast with  
19 claims of researchers that having tattoos is not associated with, or significantly related to,  
20 employment discrimination (French et al., 2016) and that body piercing has now been generally  
21 accepted as a norm rather than a unique or rare social practice (Van Hoover et al., 2017).  
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### 34 **Research Findings**

35  
36 The findings revealed manager and employee beliefs and perceptions regarding visible tattoos  
37 and body piercings. It also revealed the underlying implications of tattoos and body piercings  
38 in promoting discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour market and labour force.  
39 Hence, two key themes emerged from the data: (1) manager and employee perceptions of  
40 visible tattoos and body piercings, and (2) discrimination and prejudice in the Nigerian labour  
41 market. The key themes and sub-themes are also presented in Table 2.  
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51 **Insert Table 2 about here**

### 52 **Manager and Employee Perceptions of Visible Tattoos and Body Piercings**

53  
54 In light of the nature of the stigma associated with having tattoos and body piercings, this study  
55 found that perceptions were based on three primary factors: religious values, sociocultural  
56 values and corporate values. Participants drew on their understanding and experience of having  
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3 visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings, which is often predicated on these three  
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5 factors.  
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7

### 8 *Religious Values*

9  
10 Manager perceptions reveal an overt discrimination against people with visible tattoos or body  
11  
12 piercings which is deeply rooted in religious belief. All but one manager expressed a distinct  
13  
14 dislike for visible tattoos and body piercings and forbade their employees from having them.  
15  
16 The condemnation, which appears to be strong reveals managers' disapproval of individuals  
17  
18 with visible tattoos and body piercings, and is clearly based on religious sentiments. For  
19  
20 example, Alima, a bank manager, described the act of tattooing and body piercing as defying  
21  
22 her religious values:  
23  
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25  
26  
27 I cannot condone it, because it is against my religion. My staff must not have  
28  
29 tattoos (Alima, aged 42).  
30

31 Some managers supported their disapproval of visible tattoos and unconventional body  
32  
33 piercing by quoting verses from the Bible and Quran. For example, Johnson, a hotel manager,  
34  
35 commented on the Biblical condemnation of body art:  
36  
37

38  
39 Personally, as a Christian, my belief is against the practice of wearing tattoos  
40  
41 or unconventional body piercings. The Bible, in Leviticus chapter 19 and  
42  
43 verse 28, prohibits cuts and tattoos on the body...so for me, it is unacceptable  
44  
45 (Johnson, aged 47).  
46

47 Similarly, another participant gave a compelling argument against body art based on a  
48  
49 quotation from the Quran:  
50

51  
52 Tattoos and unconventional body piercings are not allowed in Islam. The  
53  
54 Quran, chapter 4 verse 119, describes tattoos and unconventional body  
55  
56 piercings as an alteration of God's creation...so it is unacceptable (Amina,  
57  
58 aged 47).  
59  
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3 Likewise, some employees without tattoos and body piercings shared the same religious  
4 sentiments as the managers and cited the above verses from the Bible and Quran. Some of them  
5  
6 also made reference to speeches and sermons of their religious leaders. One participant  
7  
8 considered body arts to be a ‘big sin’:  
9

10  
11  
12  
13 It is a big sin. How could you do that to the body that is not yours? Our soul  
14 and body belong to God, so no one has a right to mutilate it (Fella, aged 39).  
15  
16

17 These findings are consistent with Umoh’s (2015) study, which maintains that religious  
18 sentiments form one of the primary reasons for the stigma and prejudice against people with  
19 visible tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. In contrast to these negative religious perceptions,  
20 however, were the views of the participants with tattoos (one manager and eleven employees).  
21 This group referred to those who condemn tattoos and body piercings based on religion as  
22 ‘religious fanatics’ (Oyin, aged 27), ‘religious bigots’ (Lazarus, aged 28) and ‘overly spiritual’  
23 (Jummy, aged 32). According to this group, the perception towards body art has been shifted  
24 over time, particularly in the last decade. Jummy, a tax adviser, claimed:  
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36 The world has changed and it is still changing...and I think religious  
37 teachings have to change with time. How can you say tattoo and body  
38 piercings are a sin in the twenty-first century? (Jummy, aged 32).  
39  
40  
41

42 For Jummy and other likeminded participants, globalisation has allowed for a readjustment of  
43 values, in which many of the ancient and traditional values have become less relevant,  
44 particularly those associated with body modification. For example, Silvestre, a procurement  
45 officer commented:  
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52 Things have changed...so many of the records in the Bible or Quran were  
53 probably meant for the people in those times not the present people (Silvestre,  
54 aged 27).  
55  
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58 Previous studies, such as the research of Timming and Perrett (2016), have argued that religious  
59 values sometimes engender cognitive dissonance, especially for tattooed individuals. They aver  
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3 that signalling problems (e.g. distrust) could affect the within-group trustworthiness when  
4  
5 individuals' expectations and attitudes deviate from shared values and spiritual faith.  
6  
7 Therefore, being a '*fanatic*' about religious doctrines and values can instigate prejudice as a  
8  
9 result of the body art stigma formed by the shared religious beliefs and spiritual faithfulness.  
10  
11

### 12 13 ***Sociocultural Values***

14  
15 Our data also suggests that sociocultural values formed part of the basis of people's perceptions  
16  
17 of visible tattoos and body piercings in Nigerian society. All but one of the managers and  
18  
19 employees without tattoos and body piercings claimed that having body art is aberrant to  
20  
21 cultural beliefs, ideologies and acceptable social behaviour. Our findings suggest several  
22  
23 reasons for this perspective. First, since people often assess and judge people based on their  
24  
25 appearance, the physical appearance of individuals with body art was deemed a cause for great  
26  
27 concern. For example, Chidinma, a receptionist stated:  
28  
29

30  
31  
32 In Nigeria, we are cultured, and appearance matters because it speaks a lot  
33  
34 about you. People judge you first based on your looks...it's part of the culture  
35  
36 to appear responsible at all times and not display tattoos, or a man wearing  
37  
38 earrings...such is considered irresponsible and uncultured (Chidinma, aged  
39  
40 40).

41  
42 Chidinma's perception of people with tattoos and body piercings confirms that making  
43  
44 prejudgements could affect people's perceptions of others in society (Fiske, 2018). Another  
45  
46 participant commented:

47  
48  
49 I really don't care if you have tattoos, big or small, whatever it may be...as  
50  
51 long as I don't see it. Displaying it will be a serious problem because it's not  
52  
53 decent and not part of our culture (Mary, aged 42).

54  
55 These excerpts show that appearance or – what Warhurst et al. (2012) described as 'lookism'  
56  
57 – is a significant element of Nigerian culture. This finding supports those of previous studies  
58  
59 (e.g. Timming, 2015) that point specifically to the location and visibility of tattoos or body  
60

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3 piercings as a predictor of the extent of prejudice or disapproval. Nigerian culture seems to  
4 disapprove of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings because they conflict with  
5 acceptable cultural value. The key insight here is that sociocultural values may consider the act  
6 of body modification in and of itself as unattractive, regardless of the appearance of the bearer.  
7  
8 Such perceptions often affect the bearer's employment opportunities (Warhurst et al., 2012).  
9

10  
11 Furthermore, the issue of morality (which **behaviour** is considered right/good or wrong/bad)  
12 reinforces sociocultural values in Nigerian society. Having visible tattoos and body piercings  
13 is deemed 'not moral' (Remy, aged 51) and defies the Nigerian sociocultural value system. For  
14 example, one participant commented:  
15

16  
17 For me, having tattoos is not moral and is not in line with our culture here in  
18 Nigeria. I think it is the highest level of immorality, and people will treat you  
19 as an immoral person (Remy, aged 51).  
20  
21

22  
23 Many participants who demonstrate social biases against tattoos and body piercings harbour  
24 the sentiment that such practices are foreign and have no place in Nigerian culture. One  
25 participant commented on how it violates the sociocultural norms and the status quo:  
26

27  
28 It is a Western thing...I don't like it. It does not only suggest immorality and  
29 criminality but it is against who we are as a people, and I won't have any  
30 member of my staff have it (Moshood, aged 40).  
31  
32

33  
34 Here, Moshood tends to regard tattooing and body piercing as indicative of criminal activity.  
35 This perception may be because tattoos are historically linked with prisons and criminality (see  
36 Etter, 1995; Jones, 2000; Sanders, 1989). The finding is also consistent with Ayomide's  
37 (2017b) study, which shows evidence of bias among Nigerian security agencies in their search  
38 for perpetrators of criminal activity, in which individuals with body art are considered to be  
39 prime suspects. All participants who shared similar sentiments against visible tattoos and body  
40 piercings used several derogatory adjectives and names (e.g. 'irresponsible', 'uncultured', 'ill-  
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3 mannered', 'immoral', 'touts' and 'hooligans') to describe the bearers. Such derogatory words  
4  
5 point to the presence of stigma and prejudice associated with visible tattoos and body piercings.  
6  
7

8 Rejecting these prejudicial attitudes, some participants with tattoos and body piercings  
9  
10 explained that whether to have body art was matter of their personal decision and self-  
11  
12 expression and should therefore be respected:  
13  
14

15  
16 Having tattoos is my choice and should not be linked with my behaviour or  
17  
18 what I represent...and I think people should understand and respect that  
19  
20 (Christiana, aged 29).  
21

22 Another participant commented:  
23  
24

25 I don't see a problem with having a tattoo or body piercing. I have tattoos [an  
26  
27 inscription of my partner's name], and for me, it is for love, fashion, and  
28  
29 civility...it is a free world, people should just respect what I choose to do  
30  
31 (Oyin, aged 27).  
32

33 The only manager in the study that had tattoos also commented, lifting her arms to show the  
34  
35 body art:  
36  
37

38 Why should anybody be uncomfortable with my tattoo? It is my body and  
39  
40 not anybody else's...I don't regret having them; in fact, I am thinking of  
41  
42 having my partner's name tattooed on my neck to show him some love. It is  
43  
44 my choice and has nothing to do with my character or behaviour (Shola, aged  
45  
46 39).  
47

48 On the other hand, two participants with visible tattoos and body piercings expressed their  
49  
50 regret for their body modifications. One of them commented:  
51  
52

53 I think I shouldn't have done it [looking disappointed]. I think I made a  
54  
55 mistake...sometimes, I feel bad and ashamed, especially when I don't cover  
56  
57 the tattoos (Mariam, aged 25).  
58  
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3 Bolu also commented on her regrets and the psychological implications:  
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5

6 Thinking about the way others look at me because of my pierced earlobe is  
7 heart-breaking...that moment when you walk into the office room, and all  
8 eyes are on my pierced earlobe is really sickening, and mood dampens.  
9  
10 Maybe I should not have done it in the first place (Bolu, aged 28).  
11  
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13 This finding demonstrates the psychological implications associated with individuals who  
14 experience prejudice, which has also been echoed by Kotzur and Wagner (2020).  
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### 18 19 *Corporate Values*

20 Our data suggests that corporate values influence the way in which employers or managers  
21 treat their employees with tattoos and body piercings. It tends to signal the negative  
22 consequences associated with having visible tattoos and body piercings. Managers frown upon  
23 visible body art, concerned about how their customers will react to it and the impact of that  
24 first impression on their corporate image. A manager commented:  
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32 It is not good for our corporate image and integrity. In fact, our customers  
33 will doubt our validity as a corporate entity (Alli, aged 51).  
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37 Another manager also commented on the implications of visible body art among employees  
38 for the company's perceived corporate values and indeed its continued existence:  
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41

42 As a financial institution, our staff's appearance is very important.  
43 Appearance is part of our values, because it reveals who we are. What do you  
44 think our customers who keep their money with us will do when they see our  
45 staff with tattoos and unconventional body piercings? We will just look like  
46 fraudsters...they will leave us, and the bank will eventually collapse (Alima,  
47 aged 42).  
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53 These findings illustrate the link between people's perceptions of tattoos and unconventional  
54 body piercings and antisocial behaviour, such as fraud. The findings support previous research  
55 that found that consumers often ascribe a negative connotation to visible body art (Dean, 2010).  
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3 For the managers and some employees, tattoos and unconventional body piercings are  
4 perceived as unprofessional and unsuitable for a corporate environment.  
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### 8 **Discrimination and Prejudice in the Nigerian Labour Market**

9  
10 Discrimination (prejudice) in the Nigerian labour market is based on many features, including  
11 what can be referred to as '*body art features*' or what Warhurst et al. (2009) described as  
12 'lookism', especially in the recruitment process of many organisations. We recorded the  
13 opinions and experiences of both employers and employees regarding discrimination and  
14 prejudice in the Nigerian labour market, specifically concerning the stigmatisation of  
15 employees and job applicants with tattoos and/or body piercings. We found that most managers  
16 shared similarly negative views about such applicants or employees. One manager commented:  
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26  
27 No. I will not recruit anyone with visible tattoos and unconventional body  
28 piercings. In fact, such applicants will be asked to immediately leave if the  
29 body art is spotted...they are not the kind of people we want to employ here.  
30 I have ordered an applicant out of an interview room before because she had  
31 a big visible tattoo. You could call it discrimination, but it is about our values  
32 and our corporate and societal culture (Samson, aged 49).  
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38 In the Nigerian labour market, stereotypical impressions of body art negatively affect people's  
39 employment opportunities as well as straining employment relationships. Negative perceptions  
40 about tattoos and unconventional body piercings render the bearers unfit for many jobs (Skoda,  
41 2020). This is reflected in the employment decision-making process, as was revealed by our  
42 study participants. For example, Usman explicitly commented:  
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50 The recruitment process is very strict and does not condone employing  
51 people with visible tattoos or body piercings...in fact, such applicants will  
52 not scale through after the first interview because if the body art is spotted,  
53 that's the end of the road for them (Usman, aged 43).  
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58 This finding is in line with Dillingh et al.'s (2020) study, which argued that individuals with  
59 visible tattoos are more likely to be unemployed. Our findings also found the same prejudice  
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3 against individuals with body art. Other participants (employees) recounted their experiences,  
4 which reveal that having tattoos and/or body piercings threatened their ability to secure  
5 employment, particularly in the banking and insurance industries, which are known for their  
6 high levels of professionalism. One participant commented:  
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12  
13 The recruitment manager said to me, ‘This is a job interview, not an audition  
14 for a prostitute...how could you have a tattoo and perforate your nose? I am  
15 sorry, we don’t want people like you in our bank’. I was really embarrassed  
16 (Christiana, aged 29).  
17  
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21 Another participant commented:  
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23  
24 I had previously attended two unsuccessful job interviews with two different  
25 insurance companies before I eventually got my present job. I was surprised  
26 I didn’t get those jobs, because I got feedback that I did well in both the  
27 written and oral tests. However, the recruitment manager for the last one I  
28 attended did me a favour by telling me that my earring was the reason the  
29 panel did not offer me the job. So, I did not wear it to the interview for my  
30 present job – and I got it (John, aged 26).  
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36  
37 The key insight arising from these findings is that in Nigeria, visible tattoos and unconventional  
38 body piercings have an impact on success, both for jobseekers in the labour market and for  
39 existing employees who may have had their tattoos or body piercings after their employment. Our  
40 findings reveal the stigmatisation, prejudice and discrimination against individuals with visible  
41 tattoos and unconventional body piercings within the Nigerian labour market. The issue of  
42 employee turnover also emerged from our data, following the finding that employees with body  
43 art are vulnerable to losing their jobs or being forced to resign. A manager said:  
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53 Any of my staff who turns up at work with either tattoos or unconventional  
54 body piercings will lose their job ...look elsewhere for a job, that is the  
55 consequence (Ayo, aged 48).  
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3 Furthermore, stigmatised employees expressed their concerns about the discrimination they  
4 face and how it impacts their relationship with their managers. For instance, Bolu recalled his  
5 manager's sudden change of attitude upon finding out about his pierced earlobe:  
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9  
10 I really did not know that it was prohibited in my workplace. I just pierced  
11 my left earlobe for fashion and civilisation. My manager found out about it  
12 and suddenly changed her attitude towards me. At first, I thought it was about  
13 my job performance, but I later found out it was due to my pierced earlobe.  
14 She asked me to forget about my impending promotion and advised me never  
15 to wear a ring in my ear. 'Find all possible ways to get it blocked; otherwise  
16 it may cost you your job. I used to think you were a good boy!' she angrily  
17 retorted. Sadly, I lost that job (Bolu, aged 28).  
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25 The reaction of Bolu's manager and her comment 'I used to think you were a good boy!'  
26 reinforce the historical view that individuals with body art are 'bad'. For many participants, a  
27 visible display of tattoos and unconventional body piercings suggest socially unacceptable  
28 behaviour on the part of the bearer. All the managers that participated in this study apart from  
29 one, who has a tattoo, admitted to being prejudiced and discriminating against people with  
30 tattoos and unconventional body piercings. For example, Uzo commented:  
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39 I can't pretend that I like tattoos – I don't. And my staff knows that they can't  
40 have them. I once sacked an employee because she had tattoos ...I don't care  
41 if that is called discrimination (Uzo, aged 40).  
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46 Another participant expressed a similar view:

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48 You can call it discrimination, but to the organisation, it's a violation of our  
49 values and beliefs to have visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings.  
50 If anyone has it, that person may be asked to leave ...even society frowns  
51 against, not to talk of a corporate organisation (Deborah, aged 42).  
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3 Interestingly, a few of the participants with tattoos and unconventional body piercings were  
4  
5 unsure if they would employ individuals with body art if they themselves were in a hiring  
6  
7 position. For example, Ruth said:

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9  
10 I don't think I would employ someone with visible tattoos. Society frowns  
11  
12 upon them, customers don't like them, and they will affect business in terms  
13  
14 of losing customers ...your company may even be stigmatised (Ruth, aged  
15  
16 28).  
17

18 The key insight arising from these findings is that in Nigeria, both the success of jobseekers in  
19  
20 the labour market and the fate of workers already employed are significantly determined by  
21  
22 whether they have visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. The findings do not  
23  
24 support Van Hoover et al.'s (2017) assertion that body piercing is an acceptable choice among  
25  
26 the general population and French et al.'s (2016) argument that having tattoos is not associated  
27  
28 with or significantly related to employment discrimination.  
29  
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31

### 32 **Discussion and Conclusions**

34 Tattoos and body piercings have been widely researched in the global North (French et al.,  
35  
36 2016; Timming, 2015; Timming et al., 2015), but this study is one of the very few that have  
37  
38 been undertaken in the global South, specifically Nigeria. This article has indicated that there  
39  
40 is a tendency towards stigmatisation in Nigeria where those with tattoos and body piercings  
41  
42 may be subjected to employment prejudice and discrimination. People with tattoos and body  
43  
44 piercings suffer from negative stereotypes and prejudice, which often harm their employment  
45  
46 relationships. Our data revealed that visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings are not  
47  
48 viewed as socially acceptable in Nigerian society. However, these practices are beginning to  
49  
50 become more prevalent among some youths, who consider them fashionable and a socially  
51  
52 acceptable way of expressing emotions (e.g. love). The manager interviews revealed how  
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54 employers are unapologetically discriminating against people with visible tattoos and  
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56 unconventional body art. Their sentiments are predicated on religious, sociocultural, and  
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3 corporate values. Previous studies have found that visible tattoos have some corporate benefits,  
4 whether to the 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992), the 'tangibility' factor for frontline staff  
5 (Parasuraman et al., 1991) and brand personality (Aaker, 1997). In this study, however, the  
6 managers fundamentally disapproved of visible tattoos on the premise that visible body art is  
7 incompatible with their corporate values. These participants illustrated how significant  
8 physical appearance is in portraying their image and what they represent as a company.  
9 Interestingly, most employees also shared this sentiment.

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

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23 The varying perceptions that point to the unacceptability of body art in Nigeria are consistent  
24 with both historical practices and the literature on body modification and its associated stigma.  
25 Like previous studies (Broussard and Harton, 2018; Timming et al., 2017), this study has  
26 uncovered a growing divide in the perception of tattoos and body piercings. It shows a gradual  
27 shift in values and perceptions, particularly among the youth. However, this shift is still  
28 overshadowed by a society of strong religious ethics and sociocultural standards. Having  
29 visible body art in Nigeria may thus be classified as a symbol of defiance against religious and  
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3 sociocultural norms – a major reason why it is still not popular in the global South. This  
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5 research contributes to the debate on visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings by  
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7 highlighting the impact of religious, sociocultural and corporate values on employer and  
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9 employee perceptions towards body art in Nigeria, as well as the extent to which these  
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11 perceptions shape attitudes towards people who display such art. Despite the fact that  
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13 individuals may decide to have body art for a diverse range of reasons, our findings reveal that  
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15 some people in Nigeria have stereotypical assumptions that individuals with visible body art  
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17 are ‘wayward’, ‘uncultured’, ‘morally flawed’, and ‘hooligans’. This finding thus adds  
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19 conceptual thoughts and empirical evidence to the debate. Theoretically, our study indicates  
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21 that notwithstanding the discourse about the increasing impact of agency and individual  
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23 influences on career opportunities and experiences, societal influences and structures still have  
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25 an important role to play. This draws our attention to the continued impact of societal and  
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27 cultural structures/norms and values on career opportunities and experiences.  
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34 Perhaps the most interesting finding in our study is that a few of the participants who were  
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36 themselves stigmatised and discriminated against because of their tattoos and body piercings  
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38 were unsure if they would employ someone with visible body art due to the wider corporate  
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40 and societal rejection. Additionally, hiring managers admitted to discriminating against people  
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42 with visible body art in job interviews. Aside from the religious and sociocultural disapproval  
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44 of visible body art, most managers were motivated by the crucial need to make positive first  
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46 impressions on consumers — many of whom disapprove of body art. These findings raise  
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48 questions about ‘lookism’ and employment relations in the study context and highlight the  
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50 extent of the disapproval of tattoos and body piercings in Nigeria. Our study corroborates other  
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52 studies that suggest significant negative implications of visible body modifications in  
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54 employment relationships and HRM functions (Career Builder 2011; Nath et al., 2016;  
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56 Timmings, 2015). However, we found no relationship between visible body art and earnings  
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3 discrimination in the study context. It is important to note that the only positive aspect of body  
4 art noted by the participants – that they use tattoos to express emotions such as love – is  
5 unrelated to the workplace and employment relations.  
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10 In summary, this study has provided nuanced insights into the salient reasons underlying the  
11 stigmatisation, prejudice, and stereotypical classification of people with visible tattoos and  
12 unconventional body piercings in Nigeria – a country that has not caught up with Western  
13 societies in terms of collectively legitimatising and accepting people with visible body art. It  
14 also strengthens the theoretical standpoint on social stigma and prejudice as a strong predictor  
15 of negative attitudes and behaviours; structural and interpersonal experiences of discrimination  
16 or unfair treatment, and violence perpetrated against individuals who belong to disadvantaged  
17 social groups (Stuber et al., 2008). Although the act is slowly gaining ground among young  
18 adults as a form of fashion or display of honour for loved ones (Ayanlowo et al., 2017), the  
19 vast majority of Nigerians still frown upon it. It is therefore difficult to make a global statement  
20 about the acceptability of visible tattoos and unconventional body piercings. Clearly, the  
21 challenges and difficulties confronted by people with visible body art in Nigeria are huge and  
22 specific, and they are not the same as those in the developed Western world.  
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### 41 **Implications, Limitations, and Agenda for Future Research**

42 Our analysis has important implications for HRM. The stigma, prejudice, and discrimination  
43 against people with visible body art could prevent organisations from hiring and keeping  
44 talented employees who might have suffered body art-related prejudice during job interviews  
45 or in the workplace. Such prejudice may even lead to termination of employment of the best  
46 workers. Furthermore, employees with tattoos and unconventional body piercings may also  
47 suffer anxiety and loss of confidence, attacking their identity and limiting their capacity for  
48 social expression and interactions. This, in turn, could hinder organisational productivity and  
49 growth. Based on the findings of this study, it is also important to mention that employees with  
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3 visible body art in Nigeria can be negatively affected by the related prejudice and discrimination  
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5 in terms of their career progression, experiences and opportunities. Many countries (primarily  
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7 in the global North) have enacted anti-discrimination laws to protect employees with visible  
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9 body art from discrimination; in Nigeria, however, such laws have yet to be enacted. The result  
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11 of this is that in Nigeria, discrimination against people with unconventional body piercings  
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13 and/or visible tattoos is lawful and very prevalent. Meanwhile, employers' justifications are  
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15 entrenched in religious, sociocultural and corporate values, as well as companies' appearance  
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17 policies. We therefore suggest that there can be a general tolerance of individual preference for  
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19 body art and physical appearance, which should be incorporated into organisational policies  
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21 and supported by relevant laws. This will protect employees from stigmatisation and prejudice  
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23 in the workplace and the general labour market; it will also accord them a right to self-  
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25 expression.

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

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55 For future research, we recommend that the psychological and sociological impacts of societal  
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57 perceptions of people with visible tattoos and body piercings are examined. This can be done  
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59 using different research methods (quantitative and observational) in either the same context or  
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3 a different one. Future research could also employ a quantitative research approach with a  
4 larger sample in another research environment. It may also be interesting to consider consumer  
5 perceptions of visible body art in a similar environment to Nigeria. The researchers hope that  
6 this study will stimulate further research on this topic in the global South – especially in Africa.  
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