



## INFLUENCE OF A MALE EARLOBE PIERCING ON JUDGMENT OF SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL GROUP MEMBERSHIP ATTRIBUTION

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### Abstract:

Several studies have indicated that men photographed wearing earlobe piercings were perceived negatively. This study, conducted in France, tried to replicate this finding using a forced-choice situation. Participants aged 20 to 50 viewed a photograph of a male target wearing or not wearing an earlobe piercing and were instructed to estimate the target's socio-professional group using a well-known group list. Findings showed that the target with an earlobe piercing was more frequently associated with a low socio-professional group rather than with a high socio-professional group. These results confirmed that a common cue of facial appearance was sufficient to activate stereotypes of social group membership.

**Keywords:** piercing, judgment, socio-professional group, stereotype

### Résumé :

Plusieurs études ont montré que les hommes photographiés avec un piercing au lobe de l'oreille étaient perçus négativement. Cette étude, menée en France, a cherché à reproduire ce résultat à l'aide d'une situation de choix forcé. Des participants âgés de 20 à 50 ans ont observé la photo d'un homme portant ou non un piercing au lobe de l'oreille

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et ont été invités à estimer le groupe socioprofessionnel de cette personne à l'aide d'une liste de groupes bien connue. Les résultats ont montré que le sujet portant un piercing au lobe de l'oreille était plus fréquemment associé à un groupe socioprofessionnel bas qu'à un groupe socioprofessionnel élevé. Ces résultats ont confirmé qu'un indice courant lié à l'apparence faciale suffisait à activer des stéréotypes d'appartenance à un groupe social.

**Mots-clés :** piercing, jugement, groupe socioprofessionnel, stéréotype

## 1. Introduction

Physical appearance plays an important role in social interactions, particularly in forming first impressions and judgements about others. To do this, people consider visible characteristics such as clothing, hairstyle or other physical features to infer personality traits and/or membership of a social group.

Tattoos and piercings have become increasingly common in Western societies. However, their social interpretation remains a sensitive issue. Whilst they can be seen as a means of individual expression and creativity, they can also be associated with negative stereotypes, particularly in the workplace. Previous research has shown that visible piercings can influence perceptions of physical attractiveness, intelligence and employability, although the results are not always consistent.

Whilst body modifications have been the subject of growing interest, few studies have examined their influence on the attribution of membership to a socio-professional group. The present study addresses this issue by examining whether the presence of an earlobe piercing in a man influences the socio-professional category to which he is assigned.

## 2. Literature Review

Previous research conducted in Western countries has indicated that body modifications such as tattoos or piercings can be associated with changes in person perception. Ligos (2001) reported that more than three out of four managers believed that sales representatives with visible tattoos and piercings would have a more difficult time making sales than those without visible tattoos and piercings. Several studies have shown that managers in the hospitality industry and sales are reluctant to hire employees possessing visible body modifications (Brallier, Maguire & Smith, 2011; Swanger, 2006). Seiter and Sandry (2003) examined the evaluations of photographs of a male potential job candidate and found that the candidate's score of credibility decreased when he was wearing an earring or nose ring. McElroy, Summers and Moore (2014) found that a male or a female target with piercings was viewed as a less suitable job applicant and as possessing more negative characteristics than the same target with no piercings. Swami et al. (2012) reported that facial piercings resulted in more negative ratings of physical

attractiveness and intelligence for both male and female targets. The authors also found that the negative judgment increased when the number of facial piercings increased.

However, other studies have reported mixed results. Martino (2008) asked male and female undergraduate students to rate a photograph of a woman with or without piercings on her eyebrow, ear, lip, and nose on 13 characteristics. The author found that the model with visible piercings was rated as less religious but more creative, artistic, and mysterious. In a second study using male and female targets, a pierced target was perceived as less intelligent, caring, generous, honest, and religious but more artistic and mysterious (Martino & Lester, 2011).

Despite these few divergent results regarding the traits attributed to targets wearing facial piercings, most studies have shown that facial piercings were strongly associated with a lower score of perceived intelligence. The objective of this study was to examine whether further traits related to perceived intelligence were also associated with piercings. In France, the effect of facial piercings has never been studied. We asked participants to associate a socio-professional group with a male target wearing or not an earlobe piercing. As intelligence is necessary to reach a high socio-professional group, we hypothesized that a target wearing an earlobe piercing would be more frequently associated with membership of a low socio-professional group.

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants were 100 men and 100 women between approximately 20 and 50 years of age. The participants were chosen at random while they were standing alone or walking alone in a shopping mall or in a train station of a town (between 60-70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany in France.

#### **3.2 Procedure**

Four 19-20-year-old female confederates asked passers-by for their help to participate in a survey about the judgment of someone based on their photograph. The clothing appearance of each of the confederates was nearly identical: black trousers and a black long-sleeved T-shirt worn under a white T-shirt. To avoid possible variations in the confederates' behavior according to the experimental conditions, the confederates were not informed of the experimental hypothesis.

Participants were selected after counting the passage of 3 individuals in a defined zone. If the individual was a child, a teenager, an elderly man/woman or a group, the confederate approached the person coming just after so that he/she corresponded to the expected profile (a man or a woman approximately between 20 and 50 years of age). The confederate then displayed to participants a 20 × 15 cm color photograph of the face of a 35-year-old man. The photograph was printed on a 21 × 15 cm sheet of white paper. According to the experimental condition, the male target wore or did not wear an earlobe piercing. The piercing was added with the help of graphic software in order to maintain

the same facial expression in the two experimental conditions. The participants were instructed to look carefully at the photograph and to estimate which socio-professional group the target belonged to. The seven categories of socio-professional groups used in France by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Information (called in French INSEE: Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques) were presented to the participants: farmer, artisan and merchant, executive and highly intellectual occupations, middle executive, office worker, worker, and non-working individual. These seven categories are well-known in France and used in many surveys to qualify the socio-professional group of an individual. The confederate waited for the participants' response, noted it on a form and thanked the participant.

#### 4. Results

The number of the socio-professional groups selected by the participants was the dependent variable used in this experiment, and the data are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Number of Socio-Professional Groups Selected in the Two Experimental Conditions

|                                             | Earlobe piercing | No earlobe piercing |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Farmer                                      | 6                | 7                   |
| Artisan and merchant                        | 21               | 25                  |
| Executive and high intellectual occupations | 4                | 28                  |
| Middle executive                            | 22               | 20                  |
| Office worker                               | 24               | 9                   |
| Worker                                      | 18               | 8                   |
| Non-working individuals                     | 5                | 3                   |

**Note:** N = 100 in each group

An independent chi-square test was performed and revealed a significant difference between the two conditions ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 29.7, p < .001, r = .38$ ). Further analysis revealed that significantly fewer participants selected the higher socio-professional group (executive and high intellectual occupations) in the piercing condition than in the no piercing condition ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 21.4, p < .001, r = .32$ ) whereas participants selected more frequently the lower socio-professional groups (worker, office worker, non-working individual) in the piercing condition than in the no piercing condition ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 16.4, p < .001, r = .29$ ).

#### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present findings showed that participants attributed low socio-professional categories more frequently to the target wearing an earlobe piercing. Previous findings showed that male and female targets wearing facial piercings were associated with a lower score of perceived intelligence (Martino & Lester, 2011; Swami et al., 2012).

High intelligence and intellectual abilities are important traits to hold a job in the socio-professional category designated as "executive and high intellectual occupations."

In France, where this study was carried out, members of this socio-professional category occupy, on average, higher income levels. A male target wearing an earlobe piercing was thus perceived not to have a sufficient intelligence level to reach the executive and high intellectual occupations group.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

By the following, we declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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